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# Chapter One

“Hello? Do I have the right number for Sarah Bradley?”

“Yes, you do.”

“Could I speak to her?”

“Not at the moment.”

“It’s rather important that I do. If I ring back in a few minutes?”

“Afraid not – she won’t be back until tomorrow afternoon. Who is this?”

“Irene Miller, from Rosemary House. That’s Mr Bradley, isn’t it?”

“Hello Miss Miller – yes, Tony Bradley. Has she had another fall? What’s she broken this time?”

There was a pause and he wondered whether he had sounded a little too irritated, a little too offhand.

“It’s not that, Mr Bradley. I … should really speak to Sarah. She’s the named person and I… Does she have a mobile?”

“She’s at a show in London.” He glanced down at his watch – almost half past nine. “And I expect she’ll have the thing turned off as usual. What’s this about?”

“Well, in the absence of your wife, Mr Bradley, I should tell you then – Joan has passed away this evening. I’m sorry to be the bearer of such dreadful news. And I’m sorry to pass on to you the responsibility of telling Sarah. It’s come as a shock to us all here.”

Tony Bradley held the phone away from his ear for a moment and looked at it as if it had developed a fault. Eventually he heard a tinny, disembodied voice asking him if he was alright.

“Passed away? How? We only came to see her this morning. She looked right as rain. What happened?”

“We don’t know, Mr Bradley. It wasn’t a fall. One of the carers found her sitting in her chair and thought she had fallen asleep but… The doctor is on her way, and the police are here already.”

“The police?”

“It’s the procedure with any sudden death, Mr Bradley. Don’t read anything into-”

“It’s sudden alright. If anything she seemed better this morning. God knows what Sarah will say. If she’d had another fall… Was it her heart, then?”

“I really can’t say. She was 78, with various conditions. I’m very sorry, Mr Bradley. We will all miss her. I don’t know what else I can say. It’s up to the doctor now to tell us how this happened.”

Another pause. He had not drawn the blinds across the back window. The small, cold garden beyond it was invisible; he could see only the streaks of rain across his own dark reflection.

“Yes, I’m sorry to ask stupid questions. It’s the shock, isn’t it – you don’t know what to say. I’ll send a text and a voice-mail to Sarah, tell her to ring me as soon as possible. She’ll get a train or a taxi or something… They went on a coach. Pantomime – ‘Puss in Boots’. And I’ll call her brother, Geoff. He’ll have to drive from Wrexham.”

“Will you be alright, Mr Bradley? I know she wasn’t your mother but we get close to people, don’t we? Is there anyone you can call on?”

He pulled the blinds and then sat down at the desk they used to sort out the bills and VAT receipts.

“No, I’ll be fine, Miss Miller. It just comes as a shock when you hear it – but as you say, she was getting on and not in the best of health, I suppose. You must have a hundred things to do. Can I just ask what happens next, I mean tonight?”

“Of course. Dr Tremewan will be here shortly. She will examine Joan’s – examine Joan. I’ve no doubt that she will have a few questions for us, and then she will probably sign a death certificate, all being well. She will arrange for Joan to be taken somewhere to be looked after properly.”

“Probably sign it? I don’t really know anything about all this.”

“Well, it’s not my field either – but if she thinks it is plainly natural causes and related to Joan’s medical history, she can complete the certificate. On the other hand, it is a sudden death. I don’t know Dr Tremewan well, she hasn’t been at the practice long but she’s been in several times recently, and she did see Joan. In fact…”

Bradley heard her turn away from the phone. As he waited, he pulled open the file drawer of the desk.

“Yes, she was here only yesterday. She saw three of our ladies, and Joan was one of them. Isn’t that ironic? I suppose it might help her decide.”

“What will happen to the body – to Joan? In case Sarah asks.”

“Oh, I’m sure she will be taken to Kings Lake General some time tonight. I can give you a number.”

“No, we’ll manage. You’ve been very patient, Miss Miller, and very thoughtful. I’ll let you get on – these things must be a nightmare for you. Thank you.”

“It isn’t the nicest part of my job, Mr Bradley. If there is anything else, just ring me.”

Bradley repeated his thanks and put down the phone. He leaned back into the swivel chair and raised his eyebrows in mild surprise, as he might have done if he had won ten pounds on a lottery ticket. Then he looked down into the drawer. It was the first box file he saw, marked on the back in black felt-tip pen with his wife’s small, square capitals – ‘Mum’s Stuff’. He knew what the house had been sold for, to pay for the care, and he knew that she had been at Rosemary House for not quite two years. Not the cheapest place by a long way, he’d pointed that out at the time, but he had a rough idea what would be left. To look at it now would be a bit ghoulish, though. It would come round soon enough. The will wasn’t going anywhere now.

Irene Miller put down the phone and looked up as the young uniformed policeman came back into the office. Neither of them spoke for a moment, and both were thinking that a long night now lay ahead of them.

“I’m sorry, constable, I didn’t catch your name in all the confusion.”

“PC Richard Ford, Kings Lake central.”

As he answered, he took out a small tablet device from one of the numerous pockets and pouches that were situated all over his jacket and waistcoat.

“You’re local then?”

“Yes – Lake born and bred.”

“Have you been to one of these before?”

“Yes, a couple. Would you mind if I got some of the routine out of the way before the next lot arrive?”

“No, not at all. Go ahead. When you went up just now, the room was locked, wasn’t it? It should have been – they all know what to do.”

“Yes, locked up, with someone sitting outside.”

“Kipras. He was close to her, to Joan. They always have their favourites.”

“You mean the carers?”

“I meant the residents but the carers do it too – form attachments. It can cause complications.”

PC Ford tapped on the screen, waiting for the appropriate pages to load; these new tablets probably were the way forward but it didn’t take this long to find a new page in a notebook. Still, there wouldn’t be much typing up to do, just plug it in and press ‘print’. His eyes looked past the screen to the manager of the care home. For her, apparently, close relationships between the carers and their – what, patients, customers, clients? – were a cause of complications. It seemed an odd thing to say, but the desk was tidy, and the filing cabinets around the room were new, clearly labelled and dust-free. He glanced back at the woman herself; late thirties, trim, short dark hair, no wedding ring.

“Here we go then – sorry for the wait. The lady was found at what time?”

Irene Miller looked down at the A4 pad on her desk.

“Eight minutes past nine – 21.08.”

“Thanks. And it’s the 6th of the twelth…”

She watched him as he tapped away.

“Found by?”

“Kayleigh Greene, with an ‘e’.”

“One of your carers?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve got all their details here if someone needs to speak to any of them?”

He pointed around the room at the filing cabinets and shelves of manuals, and she nodded.

“The body hasn’t been moved or touched at all?”

“Not as far as I know.”

The constable looked up and frowned.

“Well, there would have been a fuss as soon as she was discovered. Other carers would have gone into the room. Someone might have touched her, felt for a pulse or something – but she was found in her chair and that’s where she still is. As far as I know.”

There was no box on the screen into which Ford could type the phrase ‘a little defensive’. He held the manager’s gaze for a little longer, flipped the cover over the tablet and held out a hand towards the office door.

“No telling how long this doctor will be on a Saturday night. I’ll go up and take a look inside myself. If you’d like to accompany me…”

Irene Miller stood up. He might be young but he didn’t lack confidence. Did his eyes glance down and follow her as she passed him and went by the door he was holding open for her? He might have confidence, then, but he lacked some sort of experience. It hardly mattered.

Kipras Kazlauskas unlocked the door and then handed the key to Miss Miller – it would not be right for him to hold onto it with the manager and the uniformed officer of the law present, though he would have had difficulty explaining how he knew that to be the case. Then he stood just inside the doorway, uncertain of his part now that the room he had been guarding was open once more.

Someone had forgotten to draw the curtains. As a result, the old woman’s right side was faintly illuminated by the orange glow from a security lamp out in the car park. The profile of her face was outlined by that lurid light. Kipras wanted to step in and close off the window, it seemed to him a little indecent, but then the manager turned on the light-switch that someone else must have turned off as a mark of respect.

Joan Riley had been kind to him – he muttered the name silently to himself a couple of times. Joan Riley had been kind to him and now she was dead. Some of the others teased him, some of the others resented him and his foreignness, and made little attempt to hide the fact, but this old lady had been kind. She had asked about his family back in Lithuania. He had sat on her bed and shown her the photographs on his phone. Then he had brought in more old photographs, real ones, and she had asked about his grandparents. In time he had ventured questions about her own people, and after that, whenever he was on duty, he would pop into her room and they would laugh and inquire after each other’s relatives as if they had lived on the same street all of their lives. Sometimes she would seek him out as he worked in someone else’s room and in time he had been accepted by more of them – in time the little group that always sat at the same window table in the day room began to call him ‘Kip’ and he liked that.

The policeman looked around the room and said nothing for at least one minute. Kipras followed his gaze and wondered what there was to see. Everything was tidy, as it always was in this room. The only thing out of place was the glass over on its side by the chair in which the old woman was sitting. There was no stain on the carpet – the glass must have been empty when it tipped over – but he wanted to go in and pick it up, wanted to place it the right way up on her bedside table where it belonged.

The policeman stepped over to the body of Joan Riley, turned and spoke to the manager. It was a new and unfamiliar voice – Kipras didn’t catch all that was said but it was something about whether this was her usual chair, her usual position. The manager answered yes, but she didn’t know, not as well as Kipras, who was here almost every day, sometimes ten or twelve hours a day. They never asked him, hardly knew he was there but he could have told them that the chair had been moved to face the window; yes, this was her favourite but it was always at the end of her bed, not there by the window.

Bending down, the policeman looked into Joan Riley’s face. The eyes were closed. The policeman might think that she died like that but Kipras was the second person into the room, after he heard Kayleigh’s call for help, and Mrs Riley’s eyes had been open then. Someone had closed them, had touched the face in order to close them. He did not know whether this mattered but if he spoke up there might be questions – who touched her? Did you touch her? What else did you do in this room? What have you taken? It is often better to say nothing, he thought, in such situations.

Richard Ford looked around the room and tried to imagine that he was not in uniform. What might he be wearing in a situation like this in future? He had been told by Detective Inspector Reeve that his application for CID was a good one, that for someone with his record it was only a matter of time – but the cuts and the reorganization had slowed things up for everybody, not just him.

He noticed the glass on the floor immediately but if it had been on the arm of the chair, she might have knocked it off at any point, whether or not she was having a heart attack. The manager told him that this was where Mrs Riley sat of an evening, if she wasn’t down in the day room. When he examined the face more closely, he could see no trace of fluids from the mouth or nostrils – he had been to enough crime scenes now to have an idea of what to look for, and he was rather proud of the fact that bodies didn’t bother him much at all, unlike others he could name.

Straightening up, he looked around the rest of the room. The bed was made, slippers and shoes tucked neatly under the table that was against the back wall. Built-in wardrobes that he was tempted to open and inspect but that might be going too far. The room was en suite and had its own small kitchen; Ford knew that Rosemary House was one of the more comfortable, and probably more expensive, homes in Kings Lake. He sniffed but there was not the smell of age that he had noticed in one or two other places. It was all clean and light, with pictures on the walls, some commercial but one or two looked like originals, naïve and colourful portraits probably done by grandchildren. Hopefully it was a long way off, but if it came to it, he wouldn’t mind his own parents coming to a place like this.

There wasn’t much more that he could do, and a somewhat awkward silence grew in the room. He walked over the window as if the view from it might be important, and tried to remember the code, the sequence of events after any sudden death. He had secured access to the body, had ensured that a medical practitioner was sent for, had collected some factual information about the deceased…

That was it, really. He was about to ask that the room be locked again when steps outside in the corridor caught his attention. They all turned towards the doorway. Irene Miller gesticulated towards the carer that he should push the door to, obviously fearing that another resident might wander in and see the body, but before he could do so a woman had appeared, a woman in a green tracksuit, carrying a doctor’s black bag.

She was flushed and a little breathless, knew that there would be colour in her cheeks – she had hurried even though her return phone call to Rosemary House had made it perfectly clear that her patient was already dead.

The manager said to the policeman, “This is Dr Tremewan,” and the policeman nodded and waited.

The doctor went across to the body of the old woman and put down her bag.

“So it is Mrs Riley. How odd. I spoke to her only yesterday.”

“And did you examine her?”

The policeman’s voice seemed abrupt and left behind it another awkward silence. The doctor and the manager exchanged a glance.

“Not fully. It was a routine visit, part of a new approach to the work we do in care homes. We just drop in more socially, have a quick chat and do any checks that seem appropriate. It’s less threatening for some of the residents, less intrusive than formal visits.”

She could have just said no. The policeman sensed that he had stepped on someone’s professional toes but he could not let it end quite yet.

“And she seemed well?”

“I made notes, as always. You are welcome to a copy of them.”

And then she turned away from him to the manager.

“It’s Irene, isn’t it? Phew! Just about got my breath back – we were playing badminton at the school. Right – let’s have a look at the poor thing.”

She had done this a number of times now but it still felt odd having an audience, as if she was back on her training ward. She did the basic vital signs checks, and they might think that absurd, but there was a protocol for everything, and she knew them by heart. She noticed the blood beginning to pool at the extremities but not heavily – a lay person would not see it. The jaw was relaxed and she could feel inside the mouth – no obstructions or fluids. Tilting the head back and using her torch, she looked into the mouth but could see no signs of trauma, no bitten tongue. The body wasn’t cold yet, either.

She took a thermometer and placed it inside the mouth, holding the lower jaw closed a little.

“I know this looks odd but it can sometimes help to calculate the time of death. Especially if they do another reading at the hospital later on.”

The care assistant standing in the doorway looked upset and she tried to smile at him reassuringly as she waited for the reading. Overhead, the light bulb was beginning to buzz, and out in the corridor there were voices. An old woman’s voice said “Why not?” and then came the sound of her being led away by others. Several times the “Why not” was repeated, each fainter than the last until the corridor was quiet once more.

Miriam Tremewan had to think quickly, and she left the thermometer in a little longer than was necessary, to give herself time. Mrs Riley had seemed well yesterday afternoon. They had chatted briefly in her room, the doctor listening and smiling and then bringing the subject around again to the various health issues of her patient, until she was satisfied. And she had been completely satisfied that Mrs Riley was doing as well as she was ever likely to. Of course, she had not listened to the heart but there were no signs here of a catastrophic heart event. Quite the reverse, in fact – Joan Riley appeared to have died the most peaceful of deaths.

She looked at the thermometer and wrote down the number on a pad from her bag – one of those promotional things from a drug company. She despised them and told herself to get rid of the lot. Surely the practice could afford a few notepads to show its independence? She would raise it again at the next meeting. Distractions, distractions – what was she going to do here? Her visit yesterday made things a little awkward, made this death appear distinctly sudden; it reminded her of another a few months ago, but that one had been found cold in her bed in the morning… On the other hand, Joan Riley had been frail for some time, there was a heart murmur, significant osteoporosis, some worsening kidney problems. She was aware of the policeman behind her, and of the question that he had asked – “And did you examine her?”

They all seemed to be waiting for an answer, a verdict even. She knelt on the floor by the chair and put away her things. Then she picked up the glass and held it out towards the constable. He took it and placed it on the bedside table.

“I’m going to call for a non-emergency ambulance to take her to Kings Lake General. I cannot be sure of the cause of death. I will contact the coroner’s office - I assume that there is always an actual person available at weekends rather than an answering service?”

She looked the question towards the policeman but he only shrugged it away. In Manchester, where she had trained, she knew the answer; out here, in the east, things were sometimes done quite differently.

“So there will be a post-mortem? I’d better tell the family. I’m afraid I gave the impression that…”

The manager looked disappointed as her voice trailed away.

“I’ll do that as well. It’s up to you. If they call back, you can tell them or refer them to me. You have my mobile number.”

One by one, they filed out of the room. The light remained on this time. If he had been left the keys, Kipras Kazlauskas would have gone back in and switched it off, but Ms Miller took them away with her. She asked him to sit outside the door again, just in case any of the residents tried to get into the room. She told him that it wouldn’t be long this time.

By leaving his door ajar a few inches, turning off his lights and sitting on the end of his bed, Ralph Greenwood could watch the comings and goings. He knew all the signs, of course, after three years in the place, and he spent a few minutes trying to tot up how many had gone out feet first in that time. It was a good few. They liked to hush it up. The place would go into a sort of lock-down while the officials busied themselves in and around the room in question. All this was, presumably, to avoid upsetting the remaining residents – those who had been missed by the scythe this time. Ralph thought that doing completely the opposite might be better; let them all come in and see the body, hold a coffee morning in the room with the corpse still present – it might stop some of their moaning. They might start appreciating how lucky they were to be still alive.

A uniformed copper was a bonus, though. He didn’t see one of those every time, even though he knew that the police always turned up. Normally they stayed downstairs, a nice cup of tea in the manager’s office, a nice break from fighting crime on the streets of Kings Lake. Where he was from, he’d seen crime up close and personal; this lot had no idea.

He would miss Joan, though. When they wheeled her by on the trolley a bit later on, he felt that quite strongly. She was a woman of some principle. Even though the past few months had weakened her, she stood up for herself, right to the end. When they tried to move her downstairs into the real nutters’ ward, just because there was a vacancy and there was always more demand for upstairs beds, she had dug her heels in. They had all rallied around her, and somehow the family had got to hear of it, too, via an anonymous call – Ralph couldn’t imagine how that had happened. When the management backed off, they held a party in the day room and even some of the carers knew what it was all about and joined in. That was quite an afternoon. You had to keep fighting or your independence and your dignity were gone in a moment and forever. Ralph had made some of them understand that.

It was all over by midnight, and he got up, pushed his door shut and then wedged the piece of cardboard into the safety handle so that it could only be turned from the outside with difficulty. His laptop was still on, the green light blinking away in the darkness. He flicked the mouse back and forth, bringing the screen to life. He was glad that he didn’t need much sleep these days. Let the others do that – he would watch the world for them from here, and be their conscience and their guide.

Chapter Two

Douglas Waters stood at the window of the snooker room and looked down the drive towards the Dereham road. Headlamps illuminated the trees for a moment but then passed on into the night. Behind him, only the light above the table was switched on, leaving a rectangle of shadow around the edges of the room; the game that he had been playing by himself a few minutes earlier lay unfinished on the table, the balls scattered like irresolute atoms, bearing no apparent relationship to each other now that all movement had ceased.

He glanced down at the watch, a present – another new and expensive watch to go with the others that were accumulating slowly in his bedside drawer. He ought to move them, put them somewhere safer, an easy target if a burglar ever managed to make it past the security system – heaven knows what they all added up to now… Still ten minutes to go, which meant that he would be here in less than that because he was never late. It was a winding country road, though, and not the easiest place to find. Those lights a couple of minutes ago might have been someone driving past, missing the turning, going right on into the village before they realized their mistake. That would add at least another ten minutes to anyone’s journey. He looked down at the watch again and found that another minute had passed.

The door behind him opened, letting more light into the room.

“Here you are. Are we boring you that much?”

He looked over his shoulder as his wife crossed the room towards him, smiling to show that she didn’t mean it.

“I’m sorry. Is Marcia much offended?”

“No. There’s something interesting on the financial news, I think she’s taking notes. She never stops, does she?”

His gaze returned to the window as he answered.

“No, that’s why I employ her. Career woman to the end.”

Jane Waters stood beside her husband and took his arm. For a moment she too stared down the drive through the ash trees towards the road.

“So that’s what you really like, is it? The career woman – smart, driven, efficient. I’m not sure what it says about me.”

He clamped his arm to his side, squeezing her hand.

“It says you are my salvation.”

There was a mutual silence; they both knew that he meant every word of that. Eventually, still without taking her eyes off the dark, wintry night in front of them, she spoke again.

“I suppose this brings it all back in a way, him coming here tonight.”

“We never fell out, never argued. In fact, it was him that told me to go, if that’s what I needed to do. I don’t know why we never stayed in touch.”

“You needed the complete end to it, a complete separation from everything.”

He smiled.

“Ten years is a long time, a hell of a break, though! Ten years!”

“And now it just seems like yesterday?”

“Today, tonight, has brought things back, things that I’d not thought about in a long time. We’ve all changed, haven’t we? If we’ve all changed that much, this evening might be embarrassing.”

“You said that from what Chris has told you, he hasn’t altered much at all.”

“True. I just thought I’d warn you, even though you are the perfect hostess. It might all be over by nine o’clock.”

“What’s the time now?”

“Five to seven. That actually makes him late because he was always early – if that makes sense.”

“Do you like the watch?”

“I love it.”

She poked him in the ribs.

“Come back to the lounge, talk to Marcia while I go into the kitchen. He’ll be here soon.”

“And you’re still OK with what I’m planning to say to him? Assuming that everything is still OK, that he hasn’t… Or I haven’t… You know what I mean.”

She turned him away from the window and looked up at him.

“Dougie, it’s just dinner with an old friend. Relax. Play it by ear, that’s what you always say. See how it goes. He’s just someone that you used to know, someone that you used to work with. Isn’t he?”

Waters glanced out of the window and then looked back at her. In the sideways light from the table, she looked different, younger.

“I hope so.”

Smith reversed carefully into the field entrance, hoping that he had left the front wheels with enough purchase on solid ground to pull out again. He opened the new phone and tapped on maps – he’d had this phone for some months now but it would still be ‘new’, he supposed, until he had to think about replacing it some years into the future, though he somehow doubted that this new one would last as long as the old one – too much to go wrong in it. But just as Chris Waters had said, the pin thing was sort of pinging away, showing him his location. He enlarged the image by reverse pinching the screen, as he had been instructed, and now he could see the narrow road that he was on, and enlarging it again showed the turning that he had missed. And there was Dougie’s house, large enough and important enough to appear on this satellite image. Remarkable.

It even had its own drive, he discovered three minutes later, winding through the trees that hid it from the road. Dougie must have installed a good security system, living out here in the wilds. Smith smiled to himself as he pulled into the parking space to the left of the double-fronted house, all lit up by spotlights. Four cars already there but room for several more, as if this was one of those discreet country places where you could hold small conferences for influential people. For a moment, he panicked; had he misunderstood what Dougie had said on the phone? Was this a major dinner party with local dignitaries? Surely not…

He debated for a moment and then took the bottle of wine with him to the front door. It was a good one, the off-licence manager who owed him a favour had promised him that, but he still felt like a teenager going to a party with some cheap plonk, just to get through the door. The door which opened before he had a chance to push the brass button below the little engraved plate that said ‘Ash House’.

“DC.”

“Dougie.”

They shook hands in the open doorway, the brightly lit hallway stretching in one direction and the black, chilly night in the other, but in reality both were for a moment back in the lounge bar of The Blue Boar. That was not their last meeting – there had been the leaving do and the speeches, the crowded late-night celebration afterwards in some other pub – but it was in The Blue Boar that they had been open about what the Andretti case had done to them both. It was there that their ways had parted a decade ago – and now, somehow, they had caught sight of each other once more.

“DC, my wife, Jane. You’ve met before, a long time ago. And this is Marcia, my accountant, as well as our friend! Ladies, DC Smith.”

Dougie was good at this, a proper businessman now, arranging introductions and drinks simultaneously, and everyone was smiling. Both women shook his outstretched hand, Jane a little demurely and Marcia not all so, but strongly, looking him directly in the eye as she said, inevitably, “DC?”

“I know not everyone’s into initials. I don’t know how it all started though – some terrible joke in a police station, I expect. David, DC, it’s all the same to me. Whatever you prefer.”

“I’m going with David.”

“Blimey –we’ve only known each other thirty seconds!”

She wasn’t too stuck up to laugh aloud at that, and he thought that the evening would be OK after all. It had been a while though, and it felt a little odd. When Chris Waters had said to him a week ago, ‘You ought to get out more’ before springing the surprise invitation, he had been closer to the truth than he realized.

“It’s a Moroccan dish, a tagine with lamb and apricots.”

Smith took another forkful from his plate and chewed it, savouring the combination of sweet dried fruit and spicy meat.

“It’s absolutely delicious, just like that starter – lovely.”

“Thank you.”

“But it’s time to own up now. You’ve got a couple of chefs in that kitchen, beavering away. You’re only in there a couple of minutes each time and then food like this appears.”

Jane Waters pulled a serious face.

“I would never lie to you, DC. Dougie has told me how pointless that would be.”

“So you’re not prepared to own up? I could get a warrant with no trouble and turn the place over.”

Dougie was smiling as he reached over with the bottle of red, the one that Smith had brought.

“DC, don’t hide your own light under a bushel – this is a great Shiraz, and the perfect accompaniment to a tagine.”

Smith accepted a little more in his glass before holding up his hand.

“Driving, Dougie. Can you imagine uniform’s delight if they pulled me over? I don’t know much about wine, but I know a man who does, thank goodness. As for your wife, I’m going to take her word for it, as long as she’s prepared to sign a sworn statement. That’ll do. I don’t know how I’d explain to Christopher why I’d taken his mother in for questioning.”

Jane was laughing, and she glanced across at Marcia as she said, “Well, if you do take me in, I’d want the handcuffs and everything!”

Now the laughter ran all around the table.

“So, do you take them with you wherever you go, DC? The handcuffs, I mean.”

“As it happens…”

He made a gesture of reaching into his pocket and the laughter grew louder. It wasn’t the first flirtatious remark that Marcia had made to him since they had sat down to eat – all very tasteful, just a twinkle of naughtiness, and he imagined that she was playing her part, a lady brought in to entertain a male guest at an intimate dinner party. But it was fun – he hadn’t enjoyed company this much for a while.

And so it was no surprise when they had finished their first cup of coffee that Jane ordered the two of them back into the lounge while she and Dougie cleared the table. The armchairs were luxurious – deep, soft and supportive – and Smith thought again about just how well Dougie must have done to afford all this. The lady sitting opposite him, of course, would know to the penny just how well Argus Investigations was doing. Strange, isn’t it, how life turns about; ten years ago he was Dougie’s senior officer, advising him about how to deal with a professional and personal crisis, and now here he was having dinner with Dougie’s accountant.

The thought must have left a trace of itself on his face.

“What are you smiling about?”

“Oh, just old times. When you haven’t seen someone for a while, things come back with a bit of a rush, I suppose.”

“Ten years, Jane tells me. And then you bumped into Chris, and here we are.”

Smith remembered her being introduced as a friend – she was clearly on good terms with the family, referring to Chris by his first name quite naturally.

“Yes. It’s a winding old road, especially when you’ve got plenty of it to look back on.”

Marcia was a good ten years younger than him, perhaps fifteen – he might as well make that clear from the start – not that he saw this as the start of anything but it was as well to be prepared.

“And you’ve never thought of getting out of the force yourself? Using all that experience, building something up for yourself? Being your own boss?”

“Yes, about once a week for the last twenty years. But then a case comes up, months go by sometimes, you get involved. It has its compensations. And I doubt if I’m any sort of businessman, to be honest.”

“Neither was Dougie when he started.”

“Fair point.”

Clearing the table seemed to be taking some time. He listened and could hear no other sound in the house – perhaps Jane and Dougie were doing the same. Marcia eased off her shoes, tucked her legs under herself and then began to talk quite informally about how the company had developed since its beginning eight years ago. She knew staff numbers, annual surpluses, and projections into the future for profits and new premises. Argus was approaching the critical point at which it could become a major player in the rapidly expanding business of surveillance and information security. These were exciting times – and Smith could see that she meant it, that she was passionate about the project. He found it almost disconcerting – and then he remembered how Sheila would say to him, when a case was taking him over, ‘You’ve got that look on your face!’ Marcia had that look on her face.

But Smith realized too that she was briefing him – this time together in the lounge had been planned before he came through the front door of Ash House. It wasn’t too difficult to see where things were heading.

“And he thinks very highly of you…”

Smith had to catch up a little, her last words having taken him unawares.

“Well, thanks for that. The feeling’s mutual, and I’m sorry that we’ve been out of touch for so long.”

“Who knows what-’

She stopped when the door opened and Jane entered with fresh coffee, followed by Dougie, carrying a tea towel as if he needed to convince them that he really had been busy in the kitchen. They sat, and the four of them chatted about families and old friends. It was Dougie who said that they were sorry to hear about Sheila, and Marcia asked a couple of questions about her, sensible, sensitive questions, because she wanted to know and because she wanted to show that she was not afraid to ask them. Then it was on to children and grandchildren, and some photographs, and Smith glanced at the fine antique clock on the mantelpiece and wondered how long it would be.

At half past nine exactly, as if that too had been prearranged, Dougie said, “Do you fancy a game of snooker, DC?”

They used to play, several of them, down at the force’s social club – for a while it was a regular Friday night thing. As he watched Dougie setting up the table, Smith remembered all the names, and then, inevitably, he remembered some of the cases that they had worked on together. He could see the faces, see the information boards, see even the names and addresses of people who had been questioned and eliminated, never mind the villains themselves. And at home, on the shelves of his study, were the little black Alwych notebooks that held all that information and much more besides – he could go home tonight and check all the details that he was remembering now, as if his memory itself was being put on trial tomorrow. Those notebooks and these memories – was that what he had to show for three decades of work? How did they compare with what Dougie had managed to put together in the past few years?

Dougie had finished. He rolled the white towards Smith and invited him to break.

“It’s been a while, Dougie. In fact, the last game I played might have been with you down at the old social. I reckon I’m in for a caning.”

He pushed firmly through the cue ball and clipped the inverted pyramid of reds midway down; some stayed together while others flew off towards both sides of the table. Dougie studied the position, one hand resting on the edge, as if this was the opening game of an important match, but Smith had already noticed that the table, though first class, was little used; there were no chalk marks either on the baize or the balls, not even the white, and the tip of his cue was brand new.

Dougie missed his first attempt at a red, and so did Smith – they both laughed then and the tension had gone out of the game.

“Are you sure that Jane doesn’t mind us getting away? She’d gone to a lot of trouble, Dougie – fantastic meal.”

“No, DC. She’s always telling me to use it more – but I don’t know many people who play, to be honest. Chris and I have a game sometimes, and one of the sons-in-law is pretty good. He murdered me at Christmas!”

Dougie’s first red had gone in, and he lined up on the blue.

“That’s an easy one to solve then! How does it feel to be a granddad?”

The blue went in and Dougie walked around, choosing his next red.

“It’s a bigger deal than I expected. First of all it was just the usual worries, you know – will she be alright, will the baby be alright? But once it’s here… You remember doing it all the first time, but it’s different, different perspective on it, you notice more, how amazing it all is. My grandson, Marcus, only two but sharp as a razor! He…”

He looked up at Smith and missed the red.

“Sorry. Grandparents are among the world’s biggest bores to anyone who – well, you know what I mean.”

But even that wasn’t the right thing to say, of course, and Smith sensed his embarrassment. To save him any more, Smith turned the conversation again.

“When I got your invitation, Dougie, I didn’t think it was for a game of snooker. I thought it might be more of a boxing match. I thought you might want to land one on my nose.”

Dougie laughed, shook his head and pushed the idea away with the hand that wasn’t holding the cue. The game had come to a temporary halt.

“If that’s the worst Chris has to suffer while he’s on the job, I’ll be bloody grateful, DC. He hasn’t told me everything, I’m pleased to say, but that thug was carrying, wasn’t he? It could have been a hundred times worse than a broken nose.”

“There was a bit of a cock-up – I felt sort of responsible. I wanted you to know that.”

“Forget it – seriously. I was pleased he was working with you, even though it was a bit strange, to say the least. But how’s he doing? Tell me straight.”

Smith moved round to size up a long pink after his first red had gone down.

“I’m impressed with him, Dougie. He’s obviously got his mother’s brains – I must tell her that before I go – but he’s got instincts as well. He’s got the instinct that tells you when something isn’t right. You know exactly what I’m talking about. He’s a quick learner, and he’s got some bottle, too – trying to stop a gang of ex-marines entering that house on his own! He’s a good lad.”

He didn’t need to say any more. Dougie’s face was hidden in the shadow as Smith bent forward to take the shot but he could sense the fatherly pride, perhaps even the lump in the throat. The pink went down without touching the sides.

“Oh – I can see you’re out of practice, DC. Thanks for what you said. Obviously I tried to talk him out of it, but, well, you know…”

For their next few shots, it seemed they couldn’t miss, and Dougie kept the score on the wall-mounted, old-style sliding board with its ornate gold lettering. The conversation died away while they played that well but it wasn’t awkward, it wasn’t as if they had not spoken for ten years. Smith wondered how they had managed to waste all that time.

“The case comes up soon, doesn’t it? What’s his name? Subic or something?”

“Yes – Petar Subic.”

“What will he get?”

Smith missed a straightforward red, muttered a mild swearword, stood up and reached for his last cigarette of the day.

“No, here you are, DC. I got these in for tonight.”

Dougie held out a pair of cigars.

“No, thanks all the same. I’ll have a head like a block of concrete tomorrow if I smoke one of those – don’t know why. Probably allergic to the high life. I don’t like champagne, either. You go ahead.”

“How about a brandy?”

“Still driving tonight…”

Dougie lit the cigar, and perhaps shook his head a little as he shook out the match – still there after all these years, the self-discipline, the self-control, the self-contained nature.

“Anyway, the CPS are still buggering around with the charge. I’d say I can’t believe it but I can. We put some hard-faced, nasty piece of work in front of them with a case tighter than a duck’s you-know-what and they go for manslaughter; we put up Petar Subic who accidentally clonks someone and then tries to save his life, and some suit thinks it must be murder, at least.”

“What’s the plea situation?”

“Hah! The lad is so full of remorse – genuinely – he’d plead guilty to anything. They could probably get him to own up to a couple of The Ripper’s jobs. Anyway, he’ll be alright in the end – for once I’m not sorry to see Mrs Gloria Butterfield on the case.”

“Never heard the name.”

“His barrister. She makes our life a misery sometimes but she’s dead straight. She’ll have the charge down to manslaughter and argue provocation until they don’t know where they are. He’ll plead to that and she’ll mitigate brilliantly.”

“You involved – or Chris, come to that?”

Smith nodded and bent forward to take another shot at a red.

“Informally approached to see if I’d confirm his demeanour at the arrest and in interview, which I would. Even with one good arm, I reckon he could have chucked both of us out of the window if he’d wanted to. It was a bit of a sad story.”

“What will he get?”

“He’ll go inside but if Glorious Gloria is on form, not for long.”

The red had gone down. Smith glanced up at the scoreboard; for the first time he was just ahead in the game. Dougie looked too and pulled a face.

“I suppose I could sell this and get table tennis instead. You still enjoy it? All that rough and tumble in the courts, all the nonsense? All the politics at the station? Getting worse, isn’t it?”

Chris might have told him something but it was just as likely that Dougie still had a few contacts on the force; in his line of work he would not have lost touch with everyone. Anyway, they were coming round to it at last.

“It’s not what it was, Dougie, but nothing else is, either. We get older, things move on until eventually they’re out of sight almost, disappearing over the horizon. Then we sit down by the side of the road and wait for a hearse to come along.”

“Nice!”

Smith played a very slow, soft shot along the cushion and watched the first black of the game trickle into the pocket. Then he straightened up and chalked the tip of the cue, his eyes fixing on Dougie’s, eyebrows slightly raised, saying nothing.

“OK, DC, OK. Talking to Chris, hearing about the case, it took me back a bit, made me think. I could tell that you weren’t – what did you say? Sitting by the side of the road? That was the old DC Smith that I used to work for. Whatever it is, you’ve still got it. I reckon it still gives you a buzz.”

If that was a question, it wasn’t the sort that he was likely to answer – Smith moved to the end of the table to sight his next red.

“That night in The Blue Boar, if you’d given me different advice… If you’d said, stick it out, stay in the force, I’d have done that. God knows what it would have done to my head after Andretti but I would.”

The red wobbled in the jaws of the pocket but refused to go down.

“I always said that Andretti murdered a lot more than four girls.”

“Meaning?”

“Innocence? Hope? I reckon you could add them to the list of victims.”

Dougie sank the red that Smith had left over the pocket and the scores were level.

“Anyway, you can see I’ve done alright. I’ve done a lot better than alright, and some of it is thanks to you.”

“And you’d like the number of my Swiss bank account.”

“I’m serious, DC.”

The game had come to a halt again. Smith drew on the cigarette and then stubbed it out only half-smoked – in a glass ashtray with the golden eye symbol that he recognized as Dougie’s company logo.

“Sorry Dougie. I know you’ll find it hard to believe but I’ve grown a little more cynical since we last met. What exactly are you on about, though?”

“Who wouldn’t be cynical? Budget cuts once a fortnight, endless reorganizations as a result, which are just another way of saying staffing cuts because of budget cuts. I hear they’re shutting down Frosty Winters’ divers?”

Smith nodded – “Yes, another good bloke peed off forever.”

“Well, that’s what I’m on about. As it becomes more about targets and budgets – and I know something about that now, God bless Marcia – the politicians take over. It’s less and less about the policing on the ground, it’s all about spreadsheets and the multi-media interface.”

“I’m not sure about that last one but it all sounds vaguely familiar. So?”

Dougie was working to a script, or at least a list.

“And you mentioned the CPS fiascos. If you get past them, you’ve got left-wing judges systematically reducing average tariffs year by year, and a government that claims to be tough on crime closing prisons and putting ankle bracelets on rapists!”

“Yes… But apart from all that things aren’t too bad.”

Dougie smiled and sat down in one of the chairs in front of the fireplace at the far end of the room. Smith followed suit and watched as Dougie waved a hand over the gas fire – it clicked and flickered automatically into life, giving out instant heat.

“Cut to the chase, DC?”

“It’s always later than you think, Dougie.”

“You’ve got your full pension now. Get out of it and start picking your own cases, start choosing how many days a week you want to work, and how many holidays a year you’d like, when you like. Talking of which, Chris tells me you still play a bit.”

“I didn’t mean to embarrass the young folk.”

“He’s still talking about it, couldn’t believe his ears. It reminded me of that night some of us came down to hear you in that band in the docks – I can’t remember the name, some sort of club.”

“The old Western Star club.”

“Something like that. Well, do some more of that with your free time.”

Smith had forgotten about the Western Star. For a moment he could see Sheila sitting at the bar with her sister, waving to him across the crowded tables, and Buddy Walters on the drums behind him, good old Buddy Walters, also long gone now.

“You’re offering me a job then?”

Dougie leaned forward, ready for that.

“No, absolutely not. Pay all that tax? Work for Argus as a freelance, be self-employed. Some of the lads take the employed route but you’d be daft to do that. Effectively, you could be your own boss.”

“What sort of cases?”

He had to be wary of sounding too interested but something in what Dougie had said had caught his attention. He would decide later what it was.

“Your kind.”

“Well, I never did get divorced, so-’

“Everyone assumes that, DC. It’s a cliché now. Yes, we do a few, for the well off – I won’t hide that, it helps to pay the way. But the future is in information security, intellectual property rights, staff screening and commercial surveillance. Don’t laugh, I’m no more tech-savvy than you are, but I can pay for people who are. But they don’t understand investigation – we do.”

“I still don’t see why you’d need someone like me.”

“Two reasons. The workload really wants to grow – we’re turning stuff away that we shouldn’t because there’s only Murphy and me – yes, he’s Irish – who can manage the investigation side of bigger accounts. Second, I need to ease off a bit, see more of the kids and their kids, and, well, some doctor’s orders in there as well.”

Smith raised an eyebrow and stared into the artificial flames; so clever that, you’d hardly know they were not the real thing.

“You’d be a – a consultant, DC. You could have first look over new prospects and choose what you wanted to work on, manage a couple of interesting cases, all on a part-time basis. Look nice on one of our cards - ‘Consultant Detective’.”

“I wouldn’t have to do any of that sales training, would I?”

Dougie frowned for a moment before he picked it up.

“Sorry! Force of habit now – we sometimes have to bid for the most lucrative contracts. None of that would come your way, DC. I just need someone else I can trust around the place. It’s as simple as that, but some of the work is interesting, really challenging. I think you’d enjoy it.”

“Well, it’s a thought.”

“That’ll do for me, DC. Give it some thought, no pressure.”

Smith could hear a chirping noise somewhere in the room – must be a cricket in here and the fire had warmed it up. Very Dickensian but surely the house was not that old. He looked up at Dougie and saw him pointing back and smiling.

“I think it’s your phone!”

“Eh? Oh bugger, the ringtone keeps changing itself, I swear it isn’t me doing it.”

He slid his finger across the screen and looked at the number.

“Sorry Dougie – it’s work.”

He stood up and walked over towards the heavy curtains that concealed patio doors and a view of the floodlit garden beyond; Dougie sat quietly smoking, hearing one side of the conversation.

“Should be in at two o’clock, ma’am – why?”

There was an indistinct shout on the line, a woman’s voice, and Smith smiled briefly. Then he looked across at Dougie and raised his eyebrows as he listened to the answer.

“OK, eight. No, not a problem. Hold on – before you go, just give me a clue, one sentence, what’s it about?”

He listened again for half a minute or so – it must have been a long sentence – and then gave a name, “Maggie Henderson, definitely”, before saying goodbye to whoever was on the end of the line. He walked back to the seat, a half-apologetic look on his face.

“Emergency budget cut meeting? First reorganisation of the week?”

But this time Smith didn’t respond in kind; the apologetic look was already history and its place had been taken a by a half-frown that might puzzlement or concentration or a blend of both.

“No, it’s a case by the sound of it.”

“A good one?”

Smith was fiddling with his phone now, abstractedly, trying to find out where the cricket had come from, and how to send it back there.

“Quite the opposite, I’m guessing.”

“Why?”

“Routine autopsy throws up very un-routine result.”

“How long ago?”

“About a month as far as I can make out.”

Dougie sat in silence for a moment, remembering the odd mingled feelings of apprehension and excitement.

“That’s a pretty cold trail, then. I don’t envy you that one, DC”

Smith closed the phone – as far as he could tell he was back on wind-chimes but only the next call would make it certain.

“Dougie, I’m going to have to leave, early start and all that now. Sorry about that. I’ll just go and make my apologies to your Mrs and your accountant.”

The other man was already on his feet, having anticipated what was coming, hand outstretched.

“Think about what I said, DC – your own cases, your own hours, your own boss. There wouldn’t be anything like this any more.”

Smith took the hand and said, “No Dougie, I don’t suppose there would.”

Chapter Three

Superintendent Allen looked out across the assembled ranks of officers, all five of them, and wondered whether he should stand when he addressed them. Normally he would do so but with such a tiny group, it might look rather foolish, even a little pompous. After due consideration, he decided to remain in his seat.

“Thank you for coming in – I know that some of you have altered your hours to make this briefing. Let me tell you straight away that Detective Inspector Reeve will be the senior investigating officer in this matter, and I will be handing over the rest of the briefing to her in just a moment.”

Smith glanced around but no-one else seemed to notice the significance of that. It would normally be at least a Detective Chief Inspector in any case of a suspicious death, and from the little that he already knew, this was certainly one of those. Superintendent Allen must have a golfing holiday booked, or maybe the salmon fishing season was about to start… either way, this was an important moment for DI Reeve. Success here might bring forward her own Chief Inspector’s interview by months if not years.

“Before that, I want you to hear from Dr Robinson. The body of Mrs Joan Riley was brought to the police mortuary on the night of the 6th of December last year, the mortuary at Kings Lake General being full. The cold spell then and the flu outbreak meant that business had been rather brisk.”

He paused and looked for a response to his bon mot but none seemed to be forthcoming. Perhaps it was rather early in the morning for humour, and he pressed on.

“You all know Dr Robinson, I’m sure, and he will be explaining the test results to you himself. This is an opportunity for different elements of the service to show closely they can work together for the common good.”

Smith wondered whether Allen viewed even his private moments in his private loo, en suite to his private office, as a political opportunity too. On balance, he probably did – or at the very least, he used those moments to compose political speeches.

“There are a number of sensitive aspects to this case, as DI Reeve will explain, and it will therefore require some – er…”; Smith could see that Allen was struggling for a word here but he could not guess which word was either being sought or avoided – he awaited the outcome with some interest.

“Will require some sensitive investigation.”

That was it, he had tried to avoid the repetition – the perils of high office know no bounds.

“That is why we have, initially, assembled such a small team of people, handpicked, I might say, by Detective Inspector Reeve.”

Smith noted the little sideways glance to Reeve, the movement of the mouth that might have been a smile on another face, and realized that Allen was, in giving her that credit, simultaneously distancing himself from any future catastrophes. Allen nodded to Dr Robinson.

The good doctor was either half-asleep or only half-interested. He managed to pick up a document, just a couple of sheets stapled together, and waved it about at no-one in particular before he began to speak in a vaguely Welsh accent.

“The deceased was 78 years of age. On the night of the 6th of December, her body was brought into the police mortuary. Detective Superintendent Allen has explained why but it has little bearing on the matter. After consulting with Lake General, the post mortem examination was carried out by us in exactly the same way that it would have been done at the hospital. This has happened occasionally in the past, when we don’t have enough corpses of our own. You could try harder so that we are not shut down. Anyway, you have a summary of the results in your files…”

He stopped briefly, as if considering that that would surely be enough – most policemen being able to read these days.

“But I will summarise that summary for you. We could find no evidence of external trauma, and an examination of the major organs showed no definitive cause of death. Again, not that unusual. The standard femoral blood and urine samples were then sent to the hospital’s pathology lab for basic screening; for those of you who like to know all the details, that was immuno-assay testing. A week ago we received notice that the additional copy samples held by us were required as there had been some unexpected results. After discussion with Superintendent Allen and the hospital’s pathologist, these additional samples were sent to our own forensic service, where they could be expedited. Mass spectrometry analysis confirmed the hospital’s earlier results.”

He paused. Smith had already reached the end of the report in front of him, and had already understood what he was about to be told. When he looked up, Robinson continued.

“Mrs Riley died from an overdose of morphine. Looking at the numbers, one would have to say a very significant overdose. Morphine, as you all know, is the medical pain-killer of last resort. However, these results tell us a little more. The identification of chemicals by mass and charge is a sophisticated tool; in this case it is highly likely that the morphine discovered in the body had been metabolized by the body before and during the process of death – this is what happens when someone has taken a significant amount of heroin.”

All of them were looking at the report now – though still only two pages, it seemed to have somehow become more substantial.

“A heroin overdose first inhibits the breathing response, leading to unconsciousness and then cardiac arrest. The only slightly puzzling thing for me is that physically the heart showed little sign of such an event; on the other hand, the dose appears to have been massive and the heart perhaps had little time in which to put up a fight. So to speak.”

He glanced at Allen as if to say ‘Is that enough?’ Allen looked around to see if there were any questions and then thanked the pathologist for his time. He made another joke about having people waiting for him, and then Dr Robinson was gone.

Superintendent Allen had repeated his warnings about the sensitive nature of the case without, again, explaining what these were, and then he too had departed after asking DI Reeve for their planned outline of approach before taking any action or speaking to anyone that might be involved.

Alison Reeve’s first move was to rearrange the tables in the incident room so that they were sitting round a couple of them in a more informal way. Then she phoned her office support girl, Amanda, and asked for tea and coffee and the two packets of biscuits concealed under the files in the bottom drawer of her desk. As she busied herself, she caught Smith’s eye and was grateful for the nod of encouragement and the smile. It would be a mistake to wait for the drinks, though, and fortunately she realized that.

“OK, let’s get going. Any questions about what we’ve heard so far?”

They looked around at each other, which didn’t take long. It was Richard Ford who asked the obvious newbie’s question.

“So, if you don’t mind me asking, ma’am, is this a murder inquiry?”

Maggie smiled at Smith who put up a hand as if he was the best-behaved boy in class.

“Yes, DC?”

“Can I just say that if Fordy has been promoted to CID, someone should tell him about the dress code.”

Richard Ford had been feeling out of place all morning, and now, with everyone turning to look and smiling, one of them openly grinning, he blushed.

“Thank you, DC. Richard has not been ‘promoted’ to CID – as you well know, CID is no longer viewed as ‘promotion’, it is simply police work that utilizes a different skill-set.”

Reeve’s imitation of management speak had them all smiling, and she was sharp enough to know that Smith’s comment had been made only to give her such an opportunity.

“Richard is here because he was the officer who attended Rosemary House on the night of Joan Riley’s death, and also because a uniformed presence might be useful at some point in view of the place where most of this inquiry will take place – also Rosemary House. Finally, I thought it would be good experience for an officer who might in the future wish to utilize a different skill-set.”

Smith half-turned and winked at Ford. The blush still lingered on the sides of the uniformed constable’s neck but he knew that, as initiations go, it could have been much worse.

John Murray spoke for the first time that morning.

“It’s a fair question though, boss. What exactly are we looking at here?”

“Over the next few days - let’s hope it isn’t weeks – some of you are going to get to know the ins and outs of Rosemary House all too well. I did a bit of research last night – you should all look at the website before you go there. It’s an up-market care home for the elderly, part of a small chain that is well-established and has a good name in the business. A proportion of the residents, reading between the lines, will have some form of dementia or at least be at risk of harm if they were not in this monitored environment. All the doors are key-coded and the residents are not allowed free exit from the building.”

Smith knew the place well enough, or at least he knew where it was. A two-storey building that overlooked the golf course beyond Gorsefields, and not that far from where the Subics lived – funny that, all those years focusing on the docks and the dodgy parts of the city, and then two cases out in the leafies, almost one after the other. It was a modern building, and probably purpose built, though he couldn’t remember it going up. Nice gardens, some trees and lawns – one side of it must have decent views of the golf course, and they’d be able to see Superintendent Allen in his checkered trousers and flat cap on Saturday afternoons.

“The significance of the doors should be fairly obvious to all; even if we can imagine a 78 year-old woman going down to the Towers to buy heroin, she would not be able to leave the building to do so, at least not alone. Therefore it is most likely that someone supplied it, at the very least. Whatever happened subsequently, another party is involved, and whichever way you look at the law, that party has committed offences.”

Periodically she looked in Smith’s direction but she needn’t worry – she looked and sounded the part already. The coffee arrived and Smith again offered Amanda his Irish sixpence as a tip which she again politely refused. They all took biscuits and there was a pause in the proceedings – he managed to resist the temptation to say “Well, this is nice.”

“So, the sensitive aspects that Superintendent Allen mentioned – by the way, I’m just going to keep talking but anyone can jump in at any point. First, as I’ve already said, some of the people that we interview might have difficulties in remembering or in understanding what it is that we have asked them. We will need to be very clear that though what they tell us might be important, it might also quite innocently be completely mistaken or confused. The rules are not clear as to whether they should have a friend or representative present – we will play that by ear, but if they have given power of attorney to another person, it might have implications – I’ve got someone looking into that. Because of these issues, and to get better continuity, I’ve decided that initially all the interviewing will be done by two people – Maggie and DC, who have both had the advanced interviewing techniques training. If you think about it-” and clearly, thought Smith, you’ve been thinking about nothing else since this landed in your lap – welcome to the club – “we will have to interview the residents in situ, we can’t go hauling them down to the station. And neither can we go in mob-handed and disrupt their routines. These are the kinds of problems we face in this investigation.”

She stopped and drank some coffee. The nerves were all gone now and the adrenalin had taken over – too much of that coffee and we might have to restrain her for a few minutes. Smith could recall that feeling, could recall years ago trying to explain it to someone, saying it must be something like people get on a frosty autumn morning, before the hunt, the horses impatiently snorting, the hounds whirling around in a pack, the odd rituals the riders go through before the bugle sounds. He tried to imagine Alison Reeve in a scarlet jacket and jodhpurs but it was still too early in the day.

“Boss?”

“Yes, John?”

“What do you want me to do, then?”

As she opened her mouth to answer, her mobile buzzed on the desk. She looked at it, waved an apology to John Murray and left the room.

“John, I’ve had an idea.”

“Go on, DC.”

“You could arrange a trip to the seaside for some of the residents that we’re not interviewing. They’d love that and so would the brass – community relations, the human face of the modern police force. Or a garden centre if it’s too chilly on the coast.”

Maggie nodded enthusiastically, and Richard Ford looked from one to the other, wondering if he’d have to go as the uniformed presence until Murray raised a single finger in the general direction of Smith.

Reeve returned and sat down.

“Sorry. Superintendent Allen wanted to remind me of something that I hadn’t forgotten. I’ll tell you now in the unlikely event that I do forget it. One of the residents that you might meet at Rosemary House is a Mrs Lily Devine. Sorry again, John, I’ll answer your question in a moment.”

The news seemed to have little impact until Smith raised a hand and said, “Would that be Devine with an ‘e’?”

“Yes, it would.”

Maggie closed her eyes, John Murray said “Gordon Bennett!” and Reeve explained it to Ford.

“Apparently, Assistant Chief Constable Devine’s mother has been in Rosemary House for some years. He visits her regularly and knows the staff there. So we can expect that he will-”

“Be taking a personal interest in this case. Sorry – ma’am – but remember what happened when he did that last time? Waters can still hardly bear to look in the mirror.”

“Just be aware, that’s all. It won’t alter our approach in any way. Talking of which, we need to get on with that now. I want to visit the home today before there is any chance of the autopsy results reaching them by another route. Intelligence first.”

That was one of Smith’s mottoes, and he saw both Maggie and John look first at each other and then at him. Reeve was turning pages in her folder, unaware that what she had said was the subject of any scrutiny. But she was right to go in quickly and Smith decided to reinforce the point.

“With respect to the softly, softly approach needed here, I don’t disagree but I think we still need to do a bit of a raid as far as the intelligence is concerned. How long ago was it? About a month? Whoever else was involved has probably assumed that they’re in the clear by now. Everyone imagines that tests results come back within about ten minutes like on the TV, so if anyone had their guard up, they might have lowered it. If we’re seen just hanging about, stuff could disappear – we need to make a list of what we want, go straight in and secure it.”

Ford had been a little disappointed so far but this sounded more like it.

“What sort of thing?”

“Time for a brainstorm, Fordy. I’d put in any visitors’ logs, going back several weeks, and the residents’ personal files. We’ll need access to them…”

“Medical records?”

“Good lad. A problem, though,” addressing this to Reeve, “is that we won’t be able to remove them for obvious reasons. We’ll need some sort of copying facility on site – and for anything else on paper, come to that. Blimey, this could solve the budget crisis – we could afford a new DCI.”

She was busy making notes, so Smith looked at Maggie.

“Staff files for everyone, management down to carers and cleaners.”

“And records of any other contacts she had with family apart from the visitors’ book.”

Smith continued, “Thanks, John, I reckon that’ll keep them busy for a while. And we need enough of us there this afternoon so that we can see what is where and who does what. We don’t want anything walking out or getting flushed away. In particular, we want copies of everything we can think of relating to Joan Riley today – no putting that off until tomorrow. It’ll seem a bit heavy and someone won’t like it but I don’t see any alternative.”

Reeve understood what he was saying, and nodded. She would have the tricky job of explaining all that to Allen before lunch if they were to get this going after it.

“Er, boss?”

“Sorry, John! I’d like you to come in with us this afternoon, and you, Richard. Five of us should be able to do what DC has suggested. But your towering presence might intimidate some of our interviewees, so after today I’d like you to be station-bound on this one, looking into anything that DC and Maggie come up with while they carry on with the interviews at Rosemary House. Everyone OK with that as a plan?”

So far, so good but Smith thought that she had miscalculated on one thing – best to say so as holding back might look as if he was treading too carefully where Reeve was concerned.

“I’m not sure that one pair of hands will be enough to do that, even John’s huge mitts. This will throw up a lot of stuff that needs checking as soon as we start delving into files and records.”

She shook her head.

“I’ll be around as well and can do some of it, thanks DC. OK, it’s Wednesday. We need to set ourselves a target. Where do we want to be by the end of play on Friday?”

Sitting down with his feet up, cup of tea, watching the rugby on telly would be nice. Or driving through the Norfolk dusk towards Pinehills? Getting ready to give the caravan its winter once-over, and then maybe a pint at the club… “If I’d wanted to hit targets, I’d have taken up archery,” his old boss DCI Miller had said in that flat Lancashire accent when the nonsense first began, and not long after that it had driven him out. Like so many others, he had died within a couple of years of leaving the force, almost as if when you left the force, the force left you. Another reason for not going just yet? Or another reason to think again about what Dougie Waters had said to him only last night?

Chapter Four

“I’m sorry to ask – but is there any chance that someone has a made a mistake here?”

“I’m afraid not. Two independent laboratories came up with identical results.”

Irene Miller turned from the face of the well-dressed Detective Inspector to the rather insignificant-looking Detective Sergeant who sat by her side. He had said nothing yet, had spent his time looking idly around the office and out of the side window that gave a view of the entrance lobby. It was the Inspector who had given her the dreadful news.

“I don’t know what to say. I have never come across anything like this, and…”

Her voice tailed away. After a moment, the sergeant looked at her with an odd expression, something between sympathy for her plight and a vapid, inappropriate smile.

“I need to speak to my head office. Could you wait outside?”

“That won’t be necessary, Ms Miller. It is Ms, isn’t it?”

Smith had noted the absence of a ring, too, but these days who knows what lies behind the unencumbered third finger?

“Yes, it is. I don’t think it is your decision whether I need to take advice from my management about how to proceed in such an unusual event. I-”

Reeve took out her phone and began searching through it as she interrupted.

“It won’t be necessary because I’ve already contacted a Mr… here it is, a Mr Donaldson. I believe he is the company secretary of Regis Homes?”

“Yes. He is.”

“Mr Donaldson has asked us to keep him informed of what happens. But I’ve no doubt that he will wish to speak to you in person. At the appropriate time.”

Which is not now, thought Smith. That was lovely – Reeve had not told him she had done that. Classy. Ms Miller was completely wrong-footed and would do well to recover.

“What happens now?”

“We will find out what happened here on the 6th of December. Whatever the explanation, it is a serious matter, as I’m sure you have already realized. With the full cooperation of your staff, we can deal with it quietly and, hopefully, quickly.”

“How quietly?”

Smith sighed and turned his gaze back to the foyer whilst still following the conversation. These days, it’s always about the publicity, the media fall-out, the corporate image. This manager, who had presumably known Joan Riley for a good while, had not said ‘The poor dear’ or ‘Who would have done such a thing?’ No – her first concern was how much fuss there would be. And her second was probably, how much will that fuss harm my career prospects?

“At the moment, media interest will not help our inquiries at all, Ms Miller – though that can, I have to warn you, sometimes change. At present, if approached, we will have no comment. However, once we begin to speak to your staff, even if we do not go into details, they will begin to realise that something is wrong. That is inevitable, and we cannot be responsible for what they then do.”

The landline on Irene Miller’s desk began to ring. The three of them looked at it, all perhaps assuming the worst in view of what was being discussed, and then the manager jabbed a finger onto the keypad; after a moment, they could hear a phone ringing somewhere in another office.

“My main concern is with our residents. Some of them listen to the news and read papers. If this becomes public, it will upset them. If there is any way we can minimize that risk, I would appreciate it.”

Smith looked at her again. She seemed to be sincere.

“I can give you my word that if we need to make a statement, you will be forewarned. I will do that personally.”

“Thank you, Inspector. What can I do to help now?”

“Sergeant Smith has a list of what we need to see and do this afternoon. He will be in charge of the officers who come to Rosemary House, and will lead in the interviewing process. He will take you through the list while I make a call outside. And then I would like you to show us around while the other officers get to work.”

When Reeve had gone, the two of them faced each other in silence. Then Smith got up and took the folder around to Ms Miller’s side of the desk. From there, he could see the world of Rosemary House as she saw it.

Irene Miller could see why some of the items were on the sergeant’s list but others mystified her. He had come with two copies, one of which was for her own records – naturally, he said, she would want to keep her own account of the investigation. She had not considered that, not yet. He annotated his own copy as she told him where the various files were kept and who was responsible for them. In response to his questions about the administrative staff, she told him about her office manager, Rita Sanchez, and Rita’s part-time assistant, Tracey. He wanted to know exactly where their offices were in relation to her own – she said that she would show him in just a moment, if it was that important. He was silent for a moment then, and she felt that her remark had been taken as somehow offhand.

“Well, Ms Miller, that’s just one of the problems in my job. When you start off, you have no idea what will, in the end, be important. So it’s best not to judge, I find, just treat everything as if it might be. Does that make sense?”

He waited until she nodded like an uncooperative schoolgirl. Then he took out a small black notebook and asked her to repeat and to spell the names of her administrative staff as he wrote them down.

“And their phone numbers will be in their staff files, I assume. Perhaps you’d be so good as to give me your number while we’re at it, save me looking it up.”

She did so. All this was intrusive and he knew it – he was making no apologies for it, but quite the reverse – he was making a point.

“And finally, Mrs Riley’s medical records which you say are kept here in your office. I presume in these cabinets here, which have the keys in the locks… Are these generally kept locked when you are not in the building? Who has access to the medical records?”

She took another look at the detective sergeant and he returned it, eye to eye. He wasn’t rude, wasn’t officious, but there was something… She struggled for the word. Something almost relentless in the way he moved methodically through his list of questions, in the way he went straight on through any reservations she might have about what he wanted to know or how he wished to proceed. She sensed that whatever answer she gave next would seem questionable but there was no alternative.

“The filing cabinets are not locked during the day when I am here. When I leave, I lock my office but the shift supervisors have keys – they must be able to access records for obvious reasons. Illness is not unusual here.”

“I see.”

Did he? And what did he see? There would be more questions.

“The care staff will be giving medication daily, probably several times a day, I suppose. They don’t come up here every time to check, do they? There must be other records of all that on the wards?”

“We do not have wards, sergeant.”

At least he got that wrong.

“We have floors divided into groups of private rooms, as you will see shortly. Each of the two floors has its own secure space where medicines are kept, and you are right – every patient has his or her own record card where we keep track of daily medication. The information is entered weekly onto a database. We have a very good inspection report in that area of our work.”

He walked over to the filing cabinets and pulled one open slightly.

She said, “Excuse me. I need to find out what will happen with the medical records. As you know, they are confidential. I’m not sure what the situation is, and I-”

“I can tell you what the situation is, to save you a bit of time. If you like…”

He wasn’t looking at her; instead he had taken out the black notebook again and was writing something down about the files in the cabinets – or perhaps he was making a note about her objections. Either way, he was waiting for her to respond as he did so.

“Go on.”

“We have no warrant. Therefore we can only request that you disclose these medical records to us under Section 29 of the Data Protection Act of 1998. You are under no obligation to do so but may do so where patient confidentiality is outweighed by the greater public good – such as the detection of a serious crime. I think that applies in this case but if necessary we can apply for a warrant under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act of 1984. You could phone Mr Donaldson but I expect he’d start wondering why you were not yet cooperating fully with the police.”

He had finished scribbling in his notebook and was now looking out of the window into the foyer again.

“Can I assume that you will let us have Mrs Riley’s medical file so that we can make a copy of it? We will leave the copy with you and exchange them when the investigation is over. And did I mention while we’re at it that we will need a couple of rooms to work in, and an outside line – and some photocopying facilities?”

“Is that all?”

“Canteen?”

She told him that Rita would arrange something for them. He came back to her desk and stood a little to the side of it and a little behind her – she turned in her swivel chair to see what he was doing.

“When you are here during the day, do you work with your door open or closed?”

She held back the impulse to ask the question again; in her life she had had few dealings with the police. Perhaps they were all like this.

“It depends. It’s often closed. I have to make some awkward phone calls, and write some detailed reports. When I’m doing that sort of thing, the door is closed.”

“Because I’ve noticed that when it is, you can’t see the outer door. You can’t see anyone going in and out of it, and you don’t have a receptionist, do you?”

“No, we don’t. We could not justify that. Rita’s office is opposite, and she can hear anyone coming and going.”

“Hear but not see?”

“The door has a numerical key code, sergeant. People cannot just walk in and out – you must have noticed that.”

“Yes. A four digit code. We’ll be coming back to that, I’m sure. So anyone who knows the code can come in and out during the day and not necessarily be seen by anyone in the offices. And after office hours?”

Was that an implication? Did this annoying little man really imagine that she worked ‘office hours’, that her phone never rang at midnight, that she never had to drive in through the rain at two in the morning to sort out hysterical residents and incompetent care staff?

“When the day and evening staff leave, the outer doors are locked. I don’t know whether it’s a three or five-point locking system but no doubt I can find out.”

“And the lift in the foyer? Where does that go?”

“Up.”

For the first time, he seemed to have a genuine smile on his face.

“Ms Miller, you’ve been most helpful. Can we take that tour now?”

Smith found Alison Reeve outside in the foyer, examining the visitors’ book that lay on a table close to the outer door. Around its cover was a fringe of silver Christmas tinsel that someone had forgotten to remove. She pulled a face at him and looked down at the book again, turning the pages back into last year.

“All a bit leaky, isn’t it?”

She nodded, still running her eyes up the columns ruled in the book.

“You could say that. Visitors are requested to sign in and out with time and date but there doesn’t seem to be any check that they are doing so. I can’t see a camera anywhere. While I’ve been standing here, one person has come in and one has gone out. They didn’t sign in or out, so I assume they were staff but who knows? How did you get on?”

“A bit of institutional resistance to overcome. Sorted now, I think.”

He went over to the door and examined the keypad. Ten single digit keys, quite worn and shiny, probably been there for a year or two. Then he looked at the locking system – which was a five pointer, must mention that to Ms Miller – and tried the handle. It was a substantial Yale but was also probably the original fitting; it had certainly been there long enough for all sorts of people to have keys gathering dust in drawers and glove compartments.

“What was the phone call? Or were you just giving us the opportunity to get to know each other? I think we’re going to get on very well.”

“It occurred to me that these places are all inspected to death now, like the rest of us. That’s a bit inappropriate, isn’t it… Never mind. So I called Amanda and asked her to look into locating some reports, ready for John when he’s back at his desk.”

Irene Miller came out of her office and made something of a show of locking the door and trying the handle when she had done so. When she looked up from that, she found Smith nodding with approval.

Rita Sanchez was not surprised when they were introduced to her which probably meant that she already knew there were police in the building. She was small, olive skinned, darkly pretty and as Mediterranean-looking as her name had suggested she might be. Her office was large and immaculately tidy, and when Miller said “Our first line of defence against everything!” Smith caught the odd, intense look that went between the two women. When Rita turned away to a drawer to find the floor plans of the building that she would copy for them, he saw too the tiny gold nose stud and the little hoops of the same metal that pierced the side of her left ear like a sequence of miniature curtain rings.

When he asked about the other occupant of the main office, Smith was told that it was one of Tracey’s college days – she was never in on a Wednesday or a Thursday. Smith wrote that down in the notebook, aware that he was being watched as he did so.

The three of them took the lift up to the first floor. Irene Miller explained that Rosemary House had two floors for residents and a basement for the boiler room, the laundry and storage. The upper floor, where Joan Riley had lived since her arrival, was for the less dependent elderly; some had early stage dementia, some had mobility problems, some had other chronic medical conditions which meant that they could no longer live alone. Their ages ranged from the late sixties to well over ninety. “Those are actually quite different generations – something else we have to deal with that few people outside understand,” the manager had said as the lift door opened onto the upper floor.

It was light and airy, the ceilings white and the walls painted in light green and pale blue, as if someone had chosen colours to represent a sunny spring afternoon. They walked off the landing and onto a central corridor with rooms on either side, four rooms on either side before the corridor deviated slightly to the right and then straightened again. Here was a change in colour, the walls now a soft primrose yellow. Irene Miller stopped and explained.

“Our rooms are grouped in fours and sixes. It gives a sense of local community, each group is like a little village. Each area has its own name as well – we’ve just come through Peace.”

Smith said, “And where are we now?”

“Harmony.”

“OK.”

Some of the rooms were empty, others held their residents, sitting in easy chairs, televisions on, or radios, with magazines brought in by relatives, fruit bowls on little tables, prints on walls, slippers under beds… Smith took it in professionally, aware that at some point he would need to process what he was seeing in a different way. One or two of the occupants looked up at the unfamiliar faces but most did not, seemingly unaware of the changing world just a few feet beyond the threshold of their door.

The corridor deviated again, this time to the left and they were into pale lilac and Stillness. Irene Miller halted and pointed at a closed door; it had the number three stencilled on it and the name plate ‘Iris’. The manager said quietly, “This was Joan’s room.”

Reeve said what Smith was thinking.

“At some point we will need to have a look, I’m afraid.”

“Iris has been in here for three weeks but she’s very cooperative. It shouldn’t be a problem. But everything will have changed, of course.”

She knocked on the door but there was no response.

Smith said, “They can lock their rooms?”

“Yes, they have more privacy than in many homes. If they want to be alone, we let them, as long as it doesn’t become complete withdrawal. Obviously we have pass keys but we don’t use them unnecessarily.”

“We don’t need to disturb her now, if she is in there. I’d like to come back in an hour or so, with PC Ford – he was the constable who attended on the night that Mrs Riley died. If that’s alright?”

Irene Miller noted the change in tone. She wasn’t that surprised – the reality of life, of the remainders of lives, in a care home affected people in all sorts of ways.

“Yes. If you can make it a little earlier, I can get one of the staff to ensure that she goes to afternoon tea in the social area.”

“We’ll do that, thank you. You say everything will have changed. What happens when someone leaves – when someone new takes over a room?”

“We provide whatever is needed to furnish a room but most people like to bring things of their own. Favourite chairs, a small cupboard or dressing table, quilts and so on. Joan’s family cleared the room after her death.”

They moved on. At the mid-way point was a set of stairs down to the left; the double doors had a keypad and Smith asked if the code was the same as on the front door. It was. They passed through three more groups of rooms – Comfort, Friendship and Love. At the far end of the building another set of stairs went down, this time to the right. Beyond here the corridor opened out into a spacious communal area that had a large, wall-mounted television, a sound system, shelves of books, a huge tank of goldfish and a variety of arm- and easy chairs. There were windows all along the longer wall, and views out over the golf course and the wooded gardens of Gorsefields beyond.

Reeve said, “I haven’t been into many care homes, Ms Miller, but this is, well, it’s lovely, isn’t it? Compared to many? To most?”

“It is.”

The inspector looked at the manager, waiting for her to say more.

“I’m sure you are already aware that our residents are mainly privately paying people, though we do have a few local authority beds – whose occupants, I must stress, are treated no differently to anyone else once they are here. We do our best to make sure that their stays are as safe and fulfilling as they can possibly be.”

All of them must have been aware of the irony in her words as they looked around and waited for someone else to move the conversation on. At the far end, two carers in blue uniforms were packing things away into cardboard boxes – Christmas decorations as far as Smith could see. It seemed rather late but perhaps it helped to make the season of goodwill to all men as long as possible under the circumstances. Two elderly women that he had not noticed at first slept in easy chairs; one had her fingers tangled in knitting that lay on her lap, and the other’s head had lolled to one side, her mouth open.

The room’s only other occupant was a man sitting in a chair close to the windows. He held a newspaper in front of him as if reading it but Smith noticed that the man’s gaze was actually fixed firmly on the visitors. Smith walked over towards the window as if he was interested in the view, and nodded a greeting to the gentleman in the armchair; the paper, he could now see, was The Times. The man returned the nod, keeping his eyes on the new arrival.

“You have a splendid outlook from here.”

The man lowered the paper as if he had been reading it after all, and peered at Smith over gold-rimmed spectacles.

“Sometimes it goes on for too long.”

“Sorry – I said you have a splendid outlook,” with a little more volume and enunciation.

“And I said that sometimes it goes on for too long.”

The eyes were a sharp blue, the pupils tiny in the bright afternoon light. The face, though a little shrunken and hollow around the cheeks, had always been thin but the silver hair was not; though cut short, little more than a crew cut, there was no sign of baldness.

“Do you mean that you can see too far or that you can spend too long looking at it?”

The man folded the paper once so that it was tabloid in size and laid it on his lap, as if the conversation might be of some slight interest after all.

“You assume that my “it” refers to the view, whereas it might have referred to any number of things. Also, the word ‘outlook’ is rather ambiguous, and, in whatever sense one might be using it, whether it is ‘splendid’ or not is highly subjective. Nevertheless, you must remember that I am the occupant of a care home and therefore likely to make statements that are less than rational.”

“Ralph! Our visitor was simply making conversation!”

Irene Miller’s tone was as much amused as admonitory, raising her eyebrows as she looked from Alison Reeve to Smith. Ralph’s gaze, meanwhile, had not left Smith. On an impulse, the detective stepped forward and held out his hand.

“David Smith.”

The older man was taken by surprise. He looked for a moment at the proffered hand and then levered himself upwards until he was standing, taller than Smith. A large, bony, blue-veined hand was extended in return, the grip as strong as Smith had guessed it would be.

“Ralph Greenwood.”

“Ralph is an institution. He’s one of our longest staying residents – he must be in his fourth year, if not his fifth.”

The three of them were back in the manager’s office, finalizing the arrangements for conducting the first interviews. When they had done so, Smith had asked about Ralph Greenwood.

“He seems pretty sharp for – well, you know what I mean.”

“I would advise you to leave most of your preconceptions at the door, sergeant, and not just about Ralph. These people had interesting lives, high-flying careers some of them. But Ralph is different, I know what you mean.”

Reeve said, “You’d think someone as bright as that would still be living independently with some support. At least, I’d think that. I don’t profess to know much about it.”

Irene Miller went across to the filing cabinet of medical records and pulled open the second drawer.

“His file is here – it’s one you’ll most likely want to see. He had a heart attack some years ago, before he came here, which led to vascular dementia. I suppose I can tell you all this as you appear to have access anyway,” with a meaningful glance at Smith. “Unusually, he seems to have recovered much of the function he lost at that point. His daughter lives in Kings Lake, that’s why he moved up here, and she has a house big enough to accommodate him. She looked into it a couple of years ago and tried to persuade him but he chose to stay on. It wasn’t a question of the money. I think they’re well-to-do but he made his feelings clear and that was that. The elderly often worry about being a burden.”

“Does he get visits?”

“Yes, regularly, and he has a granddaughter too, Astra. She lights up the place when she comes.”

She was searching for the file, walking her fingers across them and reading the names. Smith was surprised that it hadn’t all been digitised already; there was no shortage of money here.

He said, “You said that we’d most likely want to see Mr Greenwood’s file. Why is that?”

“Oh, he and Joan were good friends, both members of the Famous Five.”

Both detectives were silent, one having learned from the other that sometimes it was better to let questions ask themselves.

“For a year or two we’ve had a little group that occupied those window-side chairs in the social area, where Ralph was today. We nicknamed them the Famous Five and it sort of stuck. They were as thick as thieves and kept us on our toes.”

“And now they are down to four…”

“No, three, I’m afraid. Elspeth died a few months ago.”

“How?”

Smith’s question was simple, matter of fact even, but in the pause that followed the atmosphere in the room changed, as if the front door had been left open, allowing the heat to escape.

“She had a heart attack.”

“I expect that’s common enough here, isn’t it? We will have the files of the Famous Five anyway, might as well start there as anywhere. But we’ll talk to the staff first, as agreed, beginning with yourself. Say, ten minutes?”

Miller left the office to let Rita Sanchez know what was happening. After an exchange of glances, Reeve took out her phone and tapped in a note to herself.

She said, “I’ve just thought of something else for John to do.”

“Coroner’s records?”

“Yes.”

“He’s going to be busy, our John…”

“So, if you were right, who else do you want?”

“Depends who is available.”

“I’ll look into when I get back, just in case. Tell me your thoughts about this, before I go. Allen’s bound to find me as soon as I’m in the building.”

Smith was manoeuvring chairs around the manager’s office and didn’t answer immediately. He pushed the high-backed swivel chair into a corner and placed two plastic ones on the manager’s side of the desk; finally, the other, more comfortable chair for longer-staying visitors was placed in front of the desk.

“I think that it’s going to be very tight, with just Maggie and me in here – I mean operationally, I’m not implying she’s putting on weight. Example – I’ve just arranged to interview Ms Miller and realized I should be going upstairs with Fordy to look at the room, so this will have to wait a few minutes. As for first impressions…”

He sat in one of the plastic chairs, frowned, got up and sat in the other one. They appeared identical but some subtle difference made him return to the first and claim it as the one that he would use.

“Mrs Riley was given what she took by someone. Not necessarily a single someone… She might have been forced to swallow it, assuming that she did swallow it. Did she? Has anyone had another look at the body? Needle marks can be easy to miss. Anyway – that would be murder in my simple world. She might have been tricked into it – also murder. Be good to have had that glass Fordy picked up, eh? Or she might have taken it willingly, might even have asked for it, in which case we are into grey areas. But for all that, someone assisted and could be looking at – fourteen years, isn’t it?”

Reeve nodded and said, “Family, staff, residents?”

“That would be the most likely order from what I know at the moment. The place isn’t as secure as I’d thought but a break-in or a resident is pretty unlikely. But I’m sure we’ll have great fun interviewing them.”

“Anything else?”

“Odd choice of weapon, heroin.”

“Anyone else?”

“We’ll need to speak to the GP.”

“OK, DC, I’m going to leave you to it. I’ve got to go and break the news to Mrs Riley’s daughter on my way back to the station, before it leaks out. Ann Crisp is family liaison on this, she’s meeting me there.”

“I’d like to see how Mrs Bradley reacts.”

“You can’t be everywhere. I’ll let you know.”

As she reached the door, Smith said, “Can you do The Times crossword?”

“God no. I don’t even understand half the clues. Why?”

“Just an idle thought of an idle fellow. I used to be able to get a few of them, and then I realized that life was too short. Let me know how it goes with the daughter.”

Chapter Five

Smith sat at his desk that evening, transcribing the notes he had made in his working Alwych notebook into the second one, his personal record of the cases that he worked upon. On the shelf above the desk every one of his notebooks stood in a line, in date order, with an index of its contents printed neatly inside the back cover. About once a year, Sheila used to take them down and flick a cloth over them – she would say something like “Just dusting down your life’s work” if he was in the room at the time, and then he would put them all back again, in date order.

As he worked, he summarized, and the process made him stop, think and re-evaluate what he had heard and seen. Richard Ford had realized the importance of the glass as soon as Smith began to question him about it. He said, “So, DC, tell me honestly – if you’d been there that night, on the scene, what would you have done?”

“I’d have had that glass in a bag and in my pocket.”

“Analysed for its contents?”

“Prints first. I’d have quietly picked up some personal thing, just to check them.”

Ford had been mildly devastated, not least because he believed that he had blown any chance of making it into CID, never mind the fact that his mistake suggested he might not belong there anyway. Smith had laughed and said, “Don’t worry, Fordy, there are some good career prospects in traffic, they tell me.”

But that made him think about the GP. Ford had taken her name and number, it was on his tablet thing, and Smith made a point of complimenting him on that. It wasn’t a name that he recognized. Some of the regular, experienced GPs – and you got to know them over time – would have at least have had a sniff at the glass and wondered. Ford also remembered that he thought the manager was a little defensive in general, that she would rather the police were not wandering about the place and upsetting her residents; having met her, Smith thought that made some sense but she might, of course, have other motives for feeling that way. It was still too early to say. Other than that, the room was tidy, and the old lady appeared well cared for apart from the fact that she was dead.

The interview with Irene Miller had been straightforward at first. The little bit of what Smith termed ‘creative friction’ that he had engineered between them earlier in the day seemed to have dissipated – she had had time to compose herself and spoke professionally about the home, her role and her expectations of staff. Maggie asked most of the questions, as they had arranged beforehand, and Smith made the occasional note. Kayleigh Greene – with an ‘e’ – had found Mrs Riley at just after nine in the evening. She had called for help and Kipras Kazlauskas had appeared from the corridor seconds later. Within two minutes at the most, Irene Miller had been in the room. It was apparent to her that Mrs Riley had been dead for some time and that emergency resuscitation would not be appropriate, especially in view of the advance directive which she knew to be in Joan’s file. At that point, Smith had intervened.

“Nine is late to be working, isn’t it?”

“Caring is a twenty four hour business, sergeant.”

“I meant for you. You work full days – surely you are normally at home in the evening?”

“No. I also do two or three evenings a week, until about ten o’clock.”

“Do you have a rota for that?”

“Yes. We don’t do these things randomly.”

“So you could show us a rota that said you were due to be on duty that evening?”

She could, and did. Then Smith asked about her medical knowledge, and whether she felt qualified to judge how long Mrs Riley had been dead. Irene Miller held advanced first aid certificates, which were framed on the wall of her office – she pointed them out before the detective asked to see them for himself. Finally, he inquired about the advance directive.

“It isn’t that unusual these days. A few of our residents have them now.”

“How many?”

“I really haven’t counted them. Why would I?”

“An estimate will be fine.”

He was smiling again and the creative friction seemed to be back.

“At any one time, we have about fifty residents here across the two floors. I imagine that ten per cent will have such a directive in their files.”

“So only about five.”

Finally, Maggie had asked the manager to give them her impressions of Joan Riley in the days before her death. The staff had reported that she had seemed somewhat quieter than normal, and had stayed for longer in her room, but that some of her friends amongst the residents had still been going in to sit with her that week. She had not been viewed as depressed but had been put on the list for the routine GP visit on the Friday morning.

Maggie had said, “Do you think that she was ill, Ms Miller?”

“No, I don’t. I think she was feeling her age. That isn’t a flippant remark – it’s something that we recognize here. There are often long spells of temperate behaviour, when individuals feel calm and settled, and then something will remind them that they are old and frail. It can be something physical but equally it can be social or psychological. They can quite suddenly ‘go downhill’.”

“What do you do in those circumstances?”

“Our best.”

The three of them had sat in silence for a few seconds before Irene Miller added a final comment.

“To someone outside this closed world, this might seem hard to accept but – people often know when their time is over. They say or do things which, when they are gone, you realise were indications that they sensed their own end was near. Joan didn’t say anything to me personally but her behaviour fits that pattern, in my opinion. I think she knew she was going to die.”

That was difficult to summarise. When Smith closed the notebooks, putting one into his jacket pocket and leaving the other on the desk ready for tomorrow, it was almost eleven o’clock. He fancied another cup of tea but didn’t fancy getting up in the night as a result. A tricky decision… On the desk he noticed a business card, one that he had put there last night, and he picked it up. Expensive card that, with nicely understated print telling him that Marcia Williams was very well qualified in accountancy, with lots of As and Cs in various combinations after her name. He turned it over and realized for the first time that there was a handwritten message on the back – ‘If you ever need help making things add up’. When had she had the time to write that? He recalled clearly how she had taken the card from her bag as they said goodbye as if it was merely an afterthought.

From the shelves above the desk, three photographs of Sheila looked down upon him like the three graces. He flicked the card over again, reading the name, the print and the card itself for more clues before opening the top drawer and placing it there amongst the other odds and ends.

All he could see was Charlie Hills’ large backside poking out from under the desk behind the counter, and all he could hear was a muttering and the click of switches on and off. He leaned forward and said, “When you’re ready landlord, mine’s a pint and a packet of cheese and onion crisps.”

The backside reversed out slowly before its owner straightened up and brushed himself down.

“And have one yourself.”

“Good morning, DC. I’ll have a triple scotch. Something’s gone wrong with my mouse.”

“Yes, I’ve heard the rumours. I suppose your Mrs is quite relieved. Alcohol won’t help.”

“What can I do for you?”

“Nothing, Charlie, but don’t take that personally. Is DI Reeve in? Save me going up the stairs if she isn’t yet.”

“She was in half an hour ago, very industrious-looking. First time SIO, isn’t it?”

Smith nodded and then shook his head wistfully.

“Yes, those were the days. When all was spring, and summer beckoning… Ah well. I know a couple of girls down at the docks who can sort out faulty mice if you’re interested, Charlie.”

“Very good of you, DC. In my role as your personal messaging service, here you are.”

Charlie picked up a notepad.

“Dame Butterfield’s clerk left a couple of dates when she will be in Lake if you need to run through a mitigation? I expect her clerk gets paid more than I do for being yours.”

He tore off the first sheet and handed it to Smith.

“And there’s this woman been trying to get hold of you, she rang more than once yesterday.”

“Another one? Why do they always want to get hold of me? Ah, but this is a dream isn’t it, and any minute now I wake up. What did she sound like?”

“I already said – a woman.”

“Did she sound tall? Because I have a bit of a problem with that.”

Charlie was trying to read his own writing.

“Jo Evison.”

“Jo? And you’re sure that was a female Jo?”

“Well, here you are. Ring back, make your own mind up.”

“What did she want? You must have asked.”

“I’m not one to pry, DC, you know that. But when I inquired if it was business or personal, she said ‘Both’. She sounded nice and about five foot seven.”

“Never heard of her. See you later, Charlie.”

Reeve was not in her office, and he wasn’t going up to Allen’s to see if she was there. On his way back down, he detoured past Incident Room 1 to see if it had been secured for the investigation as he had requested. It had – there were boards in readiness, and when he stepped closer and looked through the glass panel he could John Murray bending over a screen and having something pointed out to him by Chris Waters. Good decision from Reeve – he’d had it in mind but did not want to be seen as directing the boy’s course, especially after last time. He should be safe in here, and far enough away from any elderly miscreants who wanted to punch him on the nose.

When he left the main building by the side door, the January air caught him unawares. There had been no snow this winter yet, just weeks of grey, miserable rain, but now the chill was tangible and he pushed his hands into his trouser pockets as he crossed the tarmac towards the police mortuary. Was there time for a cigarette? He remembered his last visit, seeing the body of young Wayne Fletcher - that had been a four-cigarette day. He had no intention of meeting the mortal remains of Joan Riley in person but would hold on to the cigarette, just in case.

Much to his relief, Olive Markham was sitting at the desk in her tiny office. Above her head, mounted on the wall, was the golden face of a Buddha, its enigmatic smile a reminder that his own simple practice had been neglected recently. Now that he was on a case, he should pick it up again, set the alarm, starting tomorrow. He hoped that Olive wouldn’t inquire about it.

She looked up when the door opened, and nodded a greeting.

“Good morning, Olive. One simple question. If you wanted to kill me with heroin, and you mixed some into my orange juice, how long would it take to do me in?”

“Good morning to you, Sergeant Smith.”

She closed the book that she had been reading. In a quiet spell, some mortuary technicians probably read romantic fiction but Olive had closed the Journal of Applied Pharmacology, which, when he thought about it, was a little odd, as if she had been swotting up ready for his question.

“I take it we are speaking hypothetically, and that you are not about to propose a scheme to me. Though I do realise that men of a certain age and disposition are inclined to take stock of things…”

“Charming.”

“But what kind of orange juice? It matters because the fresh variety can be quite acidic and that can affect the operation of opiates.”

“I don’t know – I made that bit up.”

“You might have difficulties there if it comes to court.”

There was an empty chair in one corner and Smith pointed to it with a question on his face. She nodded and he sat down – this was Olive’s domain and he saw no benefit in taking liberties.

“I assume that we are talking about the unfortunate Mrs Riley, who is, in one sense, still with us, I’m sorry to say. Did you need to see the body?”

“Not particularly. But I did wonder whether anyone had checked to see if the heroin was delivered in some way other than orally. You always think of needles with it.”

“No. When the request came in for the second samples to be tested, we re-checked the stomach contents. It’s present there in significant amounts.”

“Right, that takes care of that one, then. What does it taste like?”

“Very bitter – unpleasantly so, particularly in the quantity she must have consumed.”

“Could the taste be disguised?”

She shook her head.

“No, not if that amount was taken in a normal-sized cup or glass. I can’t think of anything that could hide the taste.”

“Which tells me that she knew she was drinking something that wasn’t right, even if she didn’t know exactly what it was. But she seems to have drunk it all anyway, despite that… An amount like that was lethal, wasn’t it? It was meant to do the job?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Back to my first question, then – how long?”

“In an elderly woman, that amount would affect her breathing in a very few minutes.”

“And we’ve got back-up samples of everything just in case, now that it’s turned nasty? Sorry to ask, Olive – purely routine, force of habit, habit of the force and all that.”

“I have already taken additional material, Sergeant.”

He stood up. She would have been mortified if he had offered to shake her hand but he had to say something about Petar Subic. If she had not scribbled that pencil note on the autopsy report, they would never have uncovered the story that lay behind Wayne Fletcher’s death.

“About the previous business, Olive. I wanted to say thanks – your sharp eyes will mean a bit of justice for the boy and made sure some unpleasant types got moved on out of our patch.”

She dismissed it with a wave of her hand.

“I actually called in here just after Christmas but you were away, on leave the good doctor said. Go somewhere nice?”

“Not really. My mother died.”

He winced but she dismissed that too.

“She was very old and suddenly very ill; it was little more than a merciful release. A timely one. We had never discussed the matter but I think she would not have been averse to Mrs Riley’s solution – if you’ll pardon the expression.”

Smith said thanks again, and left her to the learned journals of her profession. Outside, Kings Lake felt a little closer to snow. In the corner made by the entrance porch to the police mortuary, he found some shelter from the wind and lit up a cigarette. Like all cases that interested him, this one had already begun to colour the world around itself and around him. There would be more of these coincidences - a word that he disliked when others used it in investigations - more of the odd little ironies that one never even notices until the sequence of events leads one to look in certain directions in certain ways. He blew out the smoke mingled with his own breath on the cold air, and through it gazed at the several storeys of the headquarters of Kings Lake police. Lots of offices, lots of windows – someone would be watching but no matter. What were they going to do? Put him on a charge? Growing older has a few benefits, and he might as well make the most of them. He’d smoke the whole of this one, and for the want of something better to do, he’d think a bit about Dougie’s offer.

Detective Inspector Alison Reeve sat with her back to the window, and over her shoulder Detective Superintendent Allen could see the small figure huddled in the corner out of the wind, could see the occasional puff of exhaled smoke; if there were any bike-sheds, no doubt Smith would have preferred to have his crafty cigarette behind them. All of which made the question he eventually had to ask Reeve seem faintly absurd.

“That still only makes four on the case, Alison, plus Constable Ford if needed. Are you sure it’s enough? If we are questioned about it later, I don’t want it to seem that we were not serious about the investigation.”

Yes, she was sure. Where would they put anyone else at the moment? The more officers they crammed into Rosemary House, the more quickly complaints about disruption to the residents’ care would arise. The two detectives asking the questions were the most experienced and the best qualified to do so – no-one could doubt that.

Allen’s nod of agreement was, somehow, simultaneously a shake that expressed if not doubt then at least a little caution. Smith was still there – had he lit up another? What on earth could he be thinking about out there in the yard, in the cold, in the middle of the morning when there was an investigation underway?

“I won’t beat about the bush, Alison. Smith is not averse to playing it his own way, when it suits him. We do not need any more bad publicity at the moment, not after Macpherson. And somehow the press got onto the Subic-Fletcher case early, as well. I’ve asked questions about that and I cannot pin it down but somebody leaked it, I’m sure of that.”

“Are you saying, sir, that Detective Sergeant Smith was responsible for that?”

Exactly the kind of unnecessary question that Smith himself would ask, thought Allen.

“No, of course not, but certain officers have a way of… You must know what I mean by now, Alison. They always seem to attract controversy, wherever they go and whatever you give them to do. Even the most innocent of things. Take these visits into sixth forms, for example. What has happened there? I now have to deal with a senior county education official demanding that we send more experienced officers into schools to ‘Tell the students the truth about drugs’! What do they think we were doing before? Making it up? When I look into it, whose name do you think crops up as the start of it all?”

“Apparently he has a way of connecting with young people, sir.”

“Connecting is all very well, but how do we resource such a programme? If you are going to find yourself in a senior management position, Alison, you’ll need to be aware of issues like this.”

When he looked out of the window again, the corner was empty. He squinted a little through the new varifocal lenses that still didn’t seem quite right to him, but he was not mistaken – a few flakes of dry, powdery snow were drifting past. He might as well broach the other matter.

“Whilst on the subject – you know that Serious Crimes is being restructured as part of the national initiative. It looks as if it will be coming back to us as a regional thing, once again. It makes you wonder, it really does… Anyway, we’ve reached the point of considering names, and making recommendations for the core of officers that would be involved in the county. Someone has put Smith’s name forward.”

The look on her face was somewhere between surprise and concern.

“He would not want any sort of promotion, sir, I can tell you that now.”

“No, it isn’t about that, as far as I can see. No doubt they will want some sergeants. The aim seems to be to get some experience in place at the beginning and then add the talented, high-flying people and the specialists. Beyond that, I’ve no idea what they have in mind. Don’t ask me where it would be based, or whether the members would remain in their current locations and just form up for particular investigations. People like me are not consulted about strategy. Would Smith be interested? His name is on a list and I have to comment, that’s all.”

She did not answer immediately, and he could guess why. If she had any sense, she would consider carefully the effect on her own team’s results of losing someone like Smith. One had to weigh the aggravation he caused against the value of his experience and it might be a close call; the Subic case was an example. The press had, thanks to Allen’s own efforts in part, it was fair to say, now decided to report it as an example of clever police work, and as long as the involvement of the intelligence services did not become widely known, they would come out of it pretty well after all. People like Smith had their uses, as long as they were properly managed.

“I don’t know is the honest answer, sir. All I can do is ask him.”

Chapter Six

Smith stood at the window of Irene Miller’s office and looked out over the flower beds that surrounded the car park. No flowers, of course, just the stumps of a few rose bushes that had been chopped down close to the ground. His father had spent hours at that every autumn, carefully choosing the proper outward facing bud and pruning the bushes for the following season – here it looked as if someone had gone over them all with a chain saw. Contractors, targets to meet, cheap, unskilled labour… On the bare soil between the bushes he could see the fine dusting of snow that had fallen about an hour ago, just a millimeter or two blown into tiny, wrinkled drifts by the easterly wind; he hadn’t listened to the forecast that morning but the feel of that wind when they had crossed the car park left no doubt that sometime soon there would be more of it.

“She’s been in the country nine years and has worked here for almost three.”

They were waiting for Rita Sanchez.

Maggie Henderson turned another page in the file in front of her. Smith kept his eyes on the scene from the window – it was several more seconds before he made any comment.

“What did she do before this place? Does it say?”

“No, don’t think so. Oh, it’s here at the back – PA to a haulage firm director in Lincolnshire, two years. Good reference.”

“Which firm?”

“Rollings.”

Smith raised his eyebrows.

“Big company. They helped us out in the people-smuggling thing a couple of years ago. PA to a director? What’s she doing here?”

Maggie Henderson shrugged and closed the file. They had been told that Ms Sanchez would be no more than five minutes but that had already been and gone. She looked up at Smith, his profile half turned away from her as he continued to stare out of the window. On the drive in they had talked about the case, inevitably, but he seemed a little abstracted, and there was none of the usual banter. It must be hard, going home to an empty house, especially at this time of the year. She knew that Sheila hadn’t worked for some years before she died, and that meant that Smith had been used to warmth and cooking and the noise of a television or a radio as soon as he walked in through the door. For a moment Maggie couldn’t remember exactly when she died, and then it struck her that it must have been about this season; something about making that one more Christmas, and then passing away soon after it. That was more than enough to account for his mood this morning.

“So she wasn’t dismissed for fraud or the attempted poisoning of her boss? Bugger.”

The door opened and Rita Sanchez entered the room. Smith pointed an invitation to the empty seat and then took his own beside Maggie. His notebook already lay open on the table and he picked it up and read something from the last completed page.

“Good morning, Ms Sanchez. Do you know why we are here?”

The abruptness of the question seemed to take her by surprise.

“About Mrs Riley?”

“Yes. Very good. What about Mrs Riley?”

The dark brown eyes flitted between the two faces in front of her before she answered.

“Is something missing? Is it about some money or something? I keep all the records of the spending money, so-”

“Just one moment, Ms Sanchez.”

Smith stood up from the desk and without explanation to either of the women in the room, he walked out of it and closed the door behind him. Maggie Henderson looked at Ms Sanchez and sighed, as if to say ‘This is all your fault’; then she opened her iPad and busied herself with whatever was written there.

He was gone for perhaps two minutes, during which time nothing more was said. When the door opened again, he had the same fixed expression – brisk and business-like, with a hint of I-can’t-believe-I-had-to-go-and-check-that-but…

“I asked Ms Miller this morning exactly whom she had informed of our reason for being here. You were on that list, along with the shift supervisors. You have been told why we are here, Ms Sanchez. You could have answered my question.”

The face was a little darker now.

“I am responsible for the office here, and for the residents’ finances. These things I know about. I am not involved in patient care. I do not know much about their illnesses and the causes of death. But yes, Ms Miller has told me something of it.”

“Did you speak English before you came here from Spain? Nine years ago, I believe.”

“I spoke a little English. What has this to-”

“Your English is very good now.”

“Thank you.”

She was watching him closely now, not afraid to look him in the eye again after the surprise of the first question and his unexpected actions – a quick recovery, he thought.

“Do you live in Kings Lake, Rita?”

She smiled a little at the use of the Christian name, as if she understood his game now.

“Yes.”

“Far away from work?”

“A drive of a few minutes.”

Maggie Henderson opened the staff file again, and Smith saw the secretary’s eyes glance down at it as the detective turned the pages. It was why he had wanted Maggie on this – she knew how to work with a partner.

“Tell us about what you do here. How is the residents’ money looked after?”

Every resident had their own monthly account. They could use it to buy extras for themselves, or for their friends, come to that – sweets, cakes and biscuits came around on a trolley two or three times a week, for example, and before Christmas a local lady who made soft toys had held a sale for them to buy presents for grandchildren. Hairdressers and chiropodists visited regularly, providing services additional to those offered by the home. Maggie asked how these providers were selected and monitored; the answer was that they were chosen carefully by Ms Miller with Rita’s help. All the current providers were long-established and trusted. Had Joan Riley used them, and were records kept of when she last did so? Yes and yes, were the answers and she would provide those records this morning.

Smith asked about bank accounts, and was told in no uncertain terms that no-one in the organization ever had any dealings with a resident’s bank account. Fees were paid by direct debit to the head office of Regis Homes. The spending money was paid in by relatives or, in a few cases, by solicitors; some people brought cash each month, others had set up bank transfers when the total went below an agreed amount. When Maggie asked how Rita kept her records of all this, she went and fetched an example of how every transaction was noted and the running totals adjusted. Smith said that it was very clear – could they have Joan Riley’s recent account, too? It appeared within seconds, but then, Rita Sanchez was not a fool – it would have been waiting on her desk since yesterday afternoon.

“So, Mrs Riley’s daughter paid in money when you sent her a copy of the account, usually fifty or sixty pounds at a time. I can see that you are good at your job, Rita. Would you just look over Mrs Riley’s account for the past few weeks and tell me if there is anything, even a small thing, out of the ordinary?”

She did so, running a finger down the columns. Smith looked a question at Maggie and got back just a slight shake of the head, confirming his own thoughts.

“There is nothing wrong here. Mrs Riley always spent the same way, every month.”

“How well did you know her, Rita?”

It was a different kind of question, and brought a slight hesitation.

“I do not see the residents every day. You should speak to the care staff for that.”

“But you did know her.”

“Of course.”

Both detectives waited until the unspoken question was answered.

“She was a nice lady. Very quiet. Nobody would hurt her.”

“And yet somebody did.”

Rita Sanchez looked a little upset, for the first time.

“I cannot explain such things.”

“What time are we finishing tonight?”

“About six, I reckon. If you need to be off earlier, let me know.”

Maggie Henderson thought again about what she had in mind, and then she went ahead with it anyway.

“Do you fancy a drink after work? We could talk this through then, and just push on with the interviews now. It might save time.”

Smith leaned back in the plastic chair until it was on two legs.

“Well… Thanks but by the time I get round to eating something, it’s already late. The old digestion can’t take a lot of disruption now. It’s OK for you young things, all this gallivanting.”

Maggie was thirty seven and counting.

“If you don’t want a drink, we could get something to eat. That bistro near the station is decent – save you cooking when you get home. Assuming that you do cook for yourself when you get home…”

She could see that he was considering it.

“John has a late one, DC. A bit of company would be nice.”

“Go on, then.”

“Good. What did you make of Rita?”

“A bit over-gunned for her job, I’d say. I don’t get that, but she seemed straight enough in the end. We need to check Joan’s finances from the family end, and we need to ask about the will, but I don’t see how anyone here could get access to any money, and that pretty much eliminates one obvious motive. We know she wasn’t in work at all that Saturday, so not much in the way of opportunity. Apart from the ending-the-suffering thing as a possible motive… And the lady in finance wouldn’t be top of my list for that. She’d need a partner in crime to carry it out.”

Maggie was smiling, as if he had said something amusing. When he asked for an explanation, she told him to pick up Irene Miller’s folder and read out her home address. When he had done so, she handed him Rita’s folder open at the page she had selected. He looked at it for a moment before the penny dropped.

“Well, bugger me! What made you look at that?”

“Feminine intuition?”

“I don’t usually go along with that, but in this case…”

“She could just be a lodger.”

“Which one? We don’t know who owns the house. But you think they’re…?”

“An item? I’d put a tenner on it. It didn’t occur to you?”

Smith shook his head and looked at the addresses again to be absolutely sure.

“No. To be honest, I get a bit flustered by all that, my mind goes sort of fuzzy like when someone pulls the aerial out of the TV.”

Maggie was laughing at his awkwardness, which she knew was only partly an act, while remembering that he had led teams working in vice and drugs; it seemed incongruous but somehow touching.

“Does it make any difference?”

“A little. If two witnesses are in a relationship, I bear it in mind. They have a motive then for not being entirely open, for protecting someone else. But I don’t fancy either of them on what we’ve got at the moment. When I say ‘fancy’, I don’t mean – just because they – you know what I mean, so stop taking the mickey!”

“Let’s talk about it tonight, when you’ve had time to calm down and get over the shock. Who’s next?”

“Margaret Reed, shift supervisor. When did you stop being a Margaret, by the way?”

She was heading for the door, to send for the next interviewee.

“I never started.”

The senior staff had been told that the police were making discreet inquiries into Joan Riley’s death because some test results had been unexpected – that was all. Margaret Reed showed no curiosity whatsoever about that, but Smith soon had the impression that Margaret Reed had rarely, if ever, been curious about anything in her fifty or so years. She was a large, rectangular sort of woman whose hair was a little too blonde and whose eyes were a little too pale and close together for comfort. She sat across the desk from them and gave the sense of being immovable in every way, so dense that she might have been placed there by mechanical means.

Yes, she had been on duty that night, from eighteen hundred hours. Yes, she had spoken briefly to Joan; she could not remember what was said but she would have noticed if anything had been amiss.

“Anything?” said Smith.

“Yes. As people’s powers diminish, they cling increasingly to routines. Routine is the key to running an ordered and stable environment. Nothing was out of the ordinary that evening. I would have noticed.”

“But something out of the ordinary did happen, Mrs Reed.”

“Not in my presence.”

When pushed, not the most straightforward of tasks, she thought that it must have been close to seven o’clock, or nineteen hundred hours, when she last saw Joan. She was sitting on her bed. No, no-one else was in there at that point. After that, she, Mrs Reed (Smith wondered briefly and sympathetically about Mr Reed – there was a wedding ring), had returned to her office and worked on the week’s records, as she did every Saturday evening. At just after twenty one hundred hours the alarm on her pager sounded and she went onto the corridor to see what had happened.

Maggie had taken over the interview; Smith glanced at Mrs Reed occasionally, wrote something into his notebook once and studied the darkening afternoon outside through the window.

“When you arrived at Mrs Riley’s room, who was there?”

“Kayleigh Greene and Kipras Kazl – Kazlaus…”

She pulled a face of irritation, presumably at her inability to pronounce the name.

“What were they doing?”

“They were standing there, waiting for help. There was nothing else they could do. Mrs Riley was obviously dead.”

“Sitting in her chair.”

“Yes.”

“Where was she when you saw her at seven?”

“On her bed. I believe that you wrote that down when you last asked me.”

Smith looked away from the window.

“Mrs Reed. Would most people here say that you are good at your job?”

“I believe that they would.”

“So is my colleague.”

The woman bridled and glared at Smith who held her gaze until she looked away.

“Were any of the residents present in the corridor as this was happening? Was anyone taking an interest?”

She hesitated and made a show of recalling the events.

“There are often people wandering about – it’s what some of them do. But I don’t think any had realized what was happening at that point. I don’t recall anyone in particular.”

“And what kind of a person was Joan Riley, Mrs Reed?”

“I don’t see the relevance of that sort of question. As a supervisor, my role is to keep a profess-”

Smith said, “I don’t expect you to see the relevance of all our questions, Mrs Reed. But I would like you to try and answer them, nonetheless. As a professional.”

If anything, the woman had grown larger since the interview had started – she now looked as if she might burst as a result of some inexplicable inner pressure.

“Mrs Riley was not a troublesome resident.”

“Not someone that you got to know well, I assume.”

“As I was trying to say earlier, it is important to keep some professional distance.”

Maggie said, “Did she have friends amongst the others on the first floor?”

“Oh yes. She was part of a group that kept each other company every afternoon.”

“The Famous Five?”

She was surprised when Smith said that, and only nodded an answer.

“Perhaps you’d be good enough to give us the names of that group. If we can focus on Joan’s closest acquaintances, it might mean less disruption for everyone else.”

“Nancy Bishop, Martin Collins and Mr Greenwood are the ones who remain.”

“I assume that’s Mr Ralph Greenwood whom I met in the social room this afternoon?”

Again the pale stare narrowed onto the face of the small and rather undistinguished-looking detective; for someone who had only been in the building for a couple of hours, he seemed to have made himself surprisingly familiar with what went on there.

“Yes, it would be.”

“Thank you, Mrs Reed. We might need to talk to you again but we will avoid it if at all possible. What with you being as busy as you are…”

When she had gone, Smith pulled across Maggie’s notes and copied the names into his book, while she got up and switched on the overhead fluorescent strip. The office had grown gloomy during the last interview and outside in the car park the yellow sodium security lights had switched themselves on.

“I think it was Mrs Reed’s warm personality that got her to where she is today, Maggie.”

“Agreed. And I think she was beginning to take a real shine to you. Who is this ‘Mr Greenwood’? Him she does not like, and she didn’t try to hide it, professional distance or not.”

“Having met both, I can sort of see why they might not get on. I’ll introduce you tomorrow, and see whose side you’re on. Let’s make a list for the morning and sod off back to the station. I need to ask Ma’am a bit more about her meeting with the family yesterday – and I’ve got a hot date tonight.”

Chapter Seven

“John? Six deaths in the past year. Is that a lot?”

“I don’t know. In a randomly selected fifty people from the general population it would be – but what’s the average age in there? Eighty?”

Waters thought about it.

“I could probably find out. There must be a statistical algorithm for it. What do you think?”

John Murray didn’t think about it for long.

“No, just copy out the names and give them to DC.”

He watched as Waters highlighted parts of the screen in front of him, and then the printer in the corner began chattering away to itself.

“I suppose I could email this to him, be quicker.”

“No, it wouldn’t, because then you’d have to find him to tell him to check his email. And then you’d have to explain to him again how to do it. Best to give him a piece of paper.”

Waters had settled in quickly, not just in this room today but into the station and its way of life. DC had rated him from the start; John Murray, naturally cautious and taciturn, had reserved his judgement but he could see it now. They had got through the first lot of information requests almost too quickly once there were two of them on the case, but when DC and Maggie called in and asked for criminal record checks on the whole staff list, they suddenly had something to get going with tomorrow. He stood up to stretch his legs and smiled to himself – the boy was on the home page of the Office of National Statistics.

“Chris – I’ve got a late duty. You can clear off whenever, go and see that young lady.”

Waters nodded vaguely, preoccupied, and Murray wondered again what would have happened that night if he had not been caught up in the traffic jam that prevented him from getting to DC and Petar Subic. He too would have stood his ground against Hamilton’s heavies, and he would not have taken the hit on the nose, but the outcome might have been worse. It’s the little things that decide our fate in the end.

“Thanks, John, but Clare’s off at a training course this week. Might as well get on with some of this new stuff.”

“Up to you – DC and Maggie have already clocked off and gone to get something to eat.”

He could see Waters’ attention come away from the screen. After a minute or two, the younger man said, “Have they known each other long?”

Murray laughed and said, “If you mean, am I bothered, not in the slightest!”

Waters coloured up and Murray relented.

“A good few years, she knew him before I did. We’ve all been together on plenty of cases. I reckon she’s in safe hands, Chris.”

Waters swivelled his chair round.

“Do you know much about his time in the army?”

“Only what he’s told me himself.”

“When we arrested Petar Subic, it was almost like Captain Hamilton knew him, knew DC. It was pretty weird, some of what he said.”

“They’d never met before the case but – well, from what I can make out, they had some stuff in common, service stuff. Nothing much to that.”

Waters was still thinking it over, and Murray sat back and waited, showing that he was not trying to avoid questions; whatever it was must matter to Waters or he would not be asking.

“Hamilton said that they had come after DC – who were ‘they’ exactly? I mean, if it’s private I’m sorry I asked, but…”

“Don’t know for certain but I’ve always assumed that it was the Provisional IRA or some splinter of it.”

“What happened?”

“The first time they booby-trapped his car. The army was called in and they closed half the town where he lived for a day. This was before he came to live in Lake.”

“The first time? It happened again?”

“The second time they sent a girl. DC dealt with that himself.”

“How?”

“I don’t know the details – I never asked.”

It was a lot to take in. Waters half-swivelled back to the screen and then changed his mind.

“Do you know why? What he’d done to cause all that?”

“Again, no details, but I always thought it must be the same thing that makes him good at this. You must have noticed it already. He has a way of not seeming to be a policeman, a detective, even when people have just been told that he is. If he was as good at not being a soldier, or seeming not to be, he must have been pretty effective undercover. When they found out, it rattled a lot of cages, I suppose.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s no different to what he would tell you himself. Apart from the last bits.”

“Do you think he has any ideas about what happened at Rosemary House yet?”

“God knows. But he’ll be talking to people and putting them into lists – unlikely, maybe, probably. He likes lists.”

“Until he gets to impossible and definitely? ‘Whatever remains, however unlikely…’?”

Murray thought about that and then said, “I’m not sure there’ll be an impossible list this early in the game.”

“Maggie, you wouldn’t believe it. My social life is a hectic whirl – this is the second time I’ve eaten out in three days. I’ve got women I hardly know leaving me calling cards and women I’ve never heard of phoning me up.”

He took another forkful of the rigatoni and shook his head as if things were so serious he would have to take steps to slow himself down. Maggie Henderson smiled and ate a little more of the aubergine in tomato sauce. Smith had ordered for them both, pronouncing the names of the dishes in a convincing Italian accent, much to the pleasure of the waiter. She had teased him about it as they waited for the starters and he had been quite forthcoming – more so than usual, making her even more certain that something was on his mind. He had told her that when he was in Belfast he had gone out with an Irish-Italian girl; from the way in which he talked about it, it must have been something more than a casual thing. He had spent time with the girl’s family and learned the accent if not very much of the language.

“What happened?” she had asked.

“Irish-Italian in Belfast, and me in the army? It wasn’t likely to work out in the long-run, was it? But she was a lovely girl.”

“What was her name?”

“Catriona.”

They ate in silence for a minute or two.

“And then you met Sheila.”

“Not exactly. We sort of knew each other before, right back to sixth-form days. Used to wave at each other from passing buses and wonder, that kind of thing. We lost touch when I joined up. And then, when I came back for good, out of the service, she was one of the first people I met, and, well, everything was different.”

“One of those meant-to-be things.”

“Yes.”

After all this time, the mention of her name could still affect him. Maggie felt sad for him and envious at the same time – was there anyone out there, in her own romantic past, who would still react like that at the sound of her name? A selfish thought, she told herself, thinking about John back at the station, good, honest, dependable John Murray who had been something of a salvation for her when they finally teamed up, more than four years ago now.

She was about to mention the case as it was the supposed reason for having this meal when Smith said unexpectedly, “And as well as being pestered by ladies, people keep offering me jobs.”

When she inquired, he told her about both opportunities. She had never worked with Dougie Waters but remembered him, and knew that he had been a DI on the Andretti case when Smith himself was running it as DCI. DC told her the details as they had been put to him by Dougie, and she was unable to read how he felt about the offer. The Serious Crimes work he seemed to have dismissed already. She asked him why.

“Well, it’s partly an age thing. Sorry to bang on about that but me and Charlie Hills are the granddads now, aren’t we? As a young man, it’s the dream job, getting into an elite squad, chasing the serious villains all over the country. But I’ve sort of done it, worn the T shirt they say, don’t they? Do I really need to be spending nights in cheap hotels or boarding houses to keep the costs down, and stepping on the toes of the local boys who were often onto something already? There’s a lot of resentment when these squads come barging in. I reckon I’m happier just being of the local boys being resentful!”

“And the other thing? What about leaving the force?”

He wasn’t ready to talk about that in the same way, and Maggie concluded that this was because he was considering it more seriously.

She said, “I can’t imagine Kings Lake without you.”

“Yes – but can you imagine me without Kings Lake?”

It was a serious question. She realized then that there was perhaps no-one else to whom he could ask it, not now. He had sisters but they lived far to the south and he never mentioned them. He was an uncle but she did not know how many times or whether he ever saw those children. His parents were both long dead. Who else was there, apart from his few friends at work?

“DC, this might sound weird but I’d like time to think about that.”

He looked almost relieved, and said he could give her up to five years.

“So what did Alison say about the family when she visited them?”

Somehow ‘We’ll just have a starter’ had turned into a three course meal. She hadn’t realized that Smith had a sweet tooth but when he was told by the waiter about the exceptional sticky toffee pudding he had shown little resistance and she felt duty bound, despite her dieting, to venture with him at least as far the tiramisu.

“ ‘Understandably upset’ was the phrase. She confirmed what we found in the visitors’ book – they did see her that morning before the daughter went off to London. ‘They’ being daughter and son-in-law. Do we count that as an opportunity? Theoretically they could have left the old lady a last night-cap… Does that work for you? Would an old dear be likely to sit there all day, planning the best time to take it? Assuming she knew what it was, of course. This isn’t becoming any clearer for me yet.”

“And you’ve already said that the place isn’t secure. Someone could have gone in unnoticed – but then they would have to get along the corridors and into the room, and out again without being seen.”

“We haven’t spoken to everyone yet. Maybe somebody was seen. We can check the daughter’s alibi easily enough, it’s the size of a coach party. Might be worth speaking to Mrs Riley’s son-in-law to see what he did with the rest of his Saturday. Ma’am did warn them that someone else would need to follow up her visit.”

“She hates it when you call her that.”

“I know.”

The pudding was all that Smith had been promised. He took the spoon around the bowl one last time, and when he looked up Maggie was smiling at him, as if she had discovered one of his guilty secrets. It had been a pleasant evening. There was no reason why he shouldn’t eat out more than he did; it wasn’t as if he couldn’t afford it. With the mortgage paid off years ago and only himself to worry about in the monthly bills, cash was steadily accumulating in the bank account. And a little company was nice, though he couldn’t ask Maggie too often. He wondered what sort of food Marcia Williams liked, apart from Moroccan.

“You say it isn’t becoming clearer but we have narrowed it down quite a bit, I’d say.”

“You mean the time frame? True enough. Between seven and nine, if the redoubtable Reed is to be believed. Actually, I reckon we can do better than that. The place seems to have no shortage of people able to pronounce that death has occurred – perhaps they get trained in it. Anyway, if Mrs Riley had not imbibed before Reed saw her on the bed – let’s assume she hadn’t – she took it sometime after, but not too long after. My contact in the mortuary tells me that the potion she drank would have affected an elderly lady in a matter of minutes, but Fordy was certain that when he saw the body she had been dead for a while. That was what, half past nine? He was there quickly, only being down the road, probably at the chip shop. How long is it before a dead body starts to look really dead?”

“I don’t know, DC. This isn’t very scientific is it?”

“No. But we don’t have scientific data, apart from the basic stuff on the doc’s report. What was she up to, by the way? She saw something that stopped her from nodding it through but there’s sod all in the report. Someone else we need to speak to… Where was I?”

“Bodies that look really dead.”

“Right. Joan died sometime between half seven and half eight, I’d say. We need a list of everyone who saw her that evening, up to the time she closed the door and said ‘Goodbye, cruel world’.”

He was animated now, a slight frown between the eyes and one set of fingers drumming lightly on the table. When the waiter passed by, Smith nodded for the bill without saying anything and then his gaze returned to the middle distance, to the investigation. Maggie knew that a part of him wanted to go back to the station now, pin up some sheets on the boards, read files and knock on someone’s door late in the evening. In times past, that’s exactly what he would have done.

“You think that’s what is behind it? That she went willingly – that it was suicide?”

“Assisted. I think we’re looking for a bad Samaritan. Seventy thirty on that until we find another motive, and a better one. We need to ask about the estate as well…”

“DC, it’s half past eight. Let’s go home.”

Chapter Eight

If they tried to speak to everyone, residents and staff, there would be more than seventy interviews to carry out, in addition to the ones that they had already held. It was hardly feasible with just the two of them. The next morning they agreed that a better approach was to concentrate on the duty staff for the evening shift of the 6th of December, and then Joan Riley’s closest acquaintances among the residents – Nancy Bishop, Martin Collins and Ralph Greenwood, the remaining members of the Famous Five. After that, they could decide whether they needed to widen the circle of interviews. Outside of Rosemary House, they needed to speak to Joan’s immediate family and to Dr Miriam Tremewan.

Kayleigh Greene was on the evening shift again but agreed to come in straight away. Smith soon concluded that he need not have bothered her. She had been employed by the home only three weeks before the night on which Mrs Riley died and didn’t know her personally – it was only her second evening shift. She gave a clear account of how she found Mrs Riley sitting in her chair, and how she had tried to wake her before realizing that something was wrong. Smith asked her to picture the scene again in her mind, and then he asked her questions. Was the bed made? Yes. Was the window open? She didn’t think so but you can only open them a few inches anyway, for safety reasons. Were the doors to Mrs Riley’s wardrobe closed? Yes. Was there a glass on the floor by her chair? She could not remember that.

Maggie asked her to describe exactly what she did when she realized that Mrs Riley was unconscious. Kayleigh had shaken her a little by the shoulder; when her head fell forward, she had gone to the door and shouted for help but Kipras Kazlauskas was outside and he went into the room straight away.

Smith said, “Kipras was outside? What was he doing outside, Kayleigh?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I mean, was he walking by, pushing a trolley, cleaning the floor?”

“I’m not sure… He was just there. I’m glad he was.”

“Kipras knew what to do?”

“Yes.”

“What exactly did he do?”

“He kept talking to her, kept saying her name. He tapped her cheek to wake her and then he felt the side of her neck, for a pulse.”

“Can you show us just how he did that, if you can remember?”

She did, and it seemed to be pretty much the right spot.

“What happened next?”

“I think he was going to lift her out of the chair onto the floor, into the recovery position? Then he seemed to change his mind and he told me to press the alarm on my pager. I should have done that straight away – I’m sorry.”

She was becoming upset at the memory of it all and Maggie told her to take a moment and that none of it was her fault. Smith watched closely, decided that if it was a performance it was a good one and wrote in his notebook.

Maggie said, “Did either of you touch anything or move anything in the room? We’re not here to accuse you, Kayleigh, we just need to find out what happened so that we can speak to the right people.”

No, they didn’t. Kipras stayed very close to Mrs Riley, kneeling by her chair and still talking to her. There were other people there within a few seconds of pressing the alarm but Mrs Reed had pushed through and taken charge of everything. She couldn’t remember exactly who was outside in the corridor but she didn’t know the names of all the residents anyway. Mrs Reed had called an ambulance straight away and then she had checked the body for signs of life but more thoroughly that Kipras did. After that, she had told them to leave the room, and not to let anyone else into it and not to say what had happened. They were to wait outside, that was all – Kayleigh went to the staff washroom while Kipras stood guard outside the room. Then, after she returned, they waited there together for a while until Kipras had told her that she could go and get some tea – it didn’t need two of them just to wait outside the room.

“So, as far as you know, Kayleigh, no-one else went back into the room?”

She shook her head, looking, if anything, more frightened than when they had started; clearly she thought that the investigation was into how the staff had behaved in the emergency and whether anything could have been done to save Mrs Riley. They sent her away with the conviction that she had told them all that she knew and nothing more.

Kipras Kazlaukas should in theory have been on the same shift as Kayleigh Greene and therefore would also need to come in especially for the interview, but they discovered that he was at work this morning. He arrived within two or three minutes of being sent for, and stood in front of their desk as if he expected the whole matter to be conducted with him on his feet and them sitting. They persuaded him to sit down, and after a glance at his folder and another at Maggie, Smith set off in an entirely different direction to the one that they had just agreed.

“Hello, Kipras. Is it alright to call you that?”

“Yes. Sir.”

“No need for ‘Sir’. Or ‘Madam’,” with a smile and a nod to Maggie.

“Have you changed your shift in the past month, or are you doing extra hours, Kipras?”

“I do extra hours when I can.”

“To send money home?”

He was no more than twenty two or three years of age but the restless, wary eyes already seemed to have seen too much, too many things that they could not forget. Now he hesitated, perhaps wondering whether that was an offence that he had not been warned about.

“When I can, I send a little.”

“To your wife? Do you have children?”

“No!” The thought seemed to alarm him. “To parents. I have younger brothers and sisters, too many of them.”

“Where is home?”

“Lithuania.”

Smith smiled encouragingly.

“Vilnius?”

Kipras was surprised. No-one else here had ever mentioned the name of his country’s capital – no-one else had asked him about his home since Joan Riley.

“No, but not so far from there. A small town – Trakai, that is my home.”

Smith looked down at the file.

“And now you live in Kings Lake. Do you have a flat in Regents Road?”

“No. Just one room. I share kitchen and bathroom.”

“But still not cheap. So you work extra to send money home. Lithuanians seem to be hard-working people. Last year I met some who live out in the west of Kings Lake – they call it Little Lithuania. Do you know it?”

Kipras nodded.

“I met Andrius Radvila and his family – very hard-working people. We had tea together. Do you know them?”

“Not Andrius but his son, Tomas. I know him. We study together.”

“Back in Trakai?”

“No, no, here, in evening class.”

“I see – that would have been quite a coincidence. What are you studying here?”

“Tomas studies mathematics, A level. He is very clever.”

Maggie said, “Do you study maths as well, Kipras?”

“No, I am not clever. I cannot do maths!”

“What do you study?”

“I study for certificate in care.”

Smith nodded and made a point of writing something down.

“Good. So for you this work is not only to make money – it is a career?”

“I hope so.”

“We are hoping that you can tell us about what happened to Mrs Riley, Kipras. I’m going to be completely honest with you, as I think you are being with us, OK?”

Kipras nodded, a little less wary than he had been five minutes ago.

“OK, then. Mrs Riley had some tests done when she passed away. Some of the tests gave us results which surprised us and we need to find out what caused those results. If you know anything that might help us, please just tell us. But we will begin by asking you some questions.”

Smith nodded to Maggie, letting her know that they were back on the original track.

“Kipras – when Kayleigh called for help, you were just outside Mrs Riley’s room. Can you tell us what you were doing there?”

He said that at nine in the evening, some of the residents were already going to bed and that one of his jobs was to visit those who needed help to do that – he was on the corridor, going from room to room.

Still smiling, Smith shook his head a little.

“Kipras, I’d like to you to be more specific. Who had you just been helping?”

“Before I heard Kayleigh, I had been in Mr O’Byrne’s room. He is quite disabled.”

“And where is Mr O’Byrne’s room.”

He didn’t understand and looked from one to the other of the detectives.

“Is Mr O’Byrne’s room near to Mrs Riley’s room?”

Kipras paused and seemed to be counting.

“Three rooms away.”

“OK. Before you tell us what happened when you went into Mrs Riley’s room, I want to ask you what some other residents were doing. Mrs Bishop, Mr Collins and Mr Greenwood – were they in bed, Kipras?”

An involuntary smile appeared on the Lithuanian’s face as he answered.

“I did not see but they would not be unless they were ill, and nobody was ill.”

“How can you be certain they were not in bed if you had not been into their rooms?”

“They stay up often, never go to bed until the last. In the social room or in the kitchen, or Mr Greenwood’s room.”

“I see – and they were friends with Mrs Riley?”

Kipras seemed happy at the memory of these elderly people, all of whom were old enough to be his grandparents.

“Oh yes, all good friends, Famous Five!”

Maggie said, “And the fifth person was Mrs Grey, before she died?”

He nodded.

“How did Mrs Grey die, Kipras?”

Smith was watching closely but could see no reaction – Kipras said that she had been found dead in her bed one morning, after she had failed to appear as usual for breakfast. He had been on duty but had not been involved. When Maggie asked if Mrs Grey had been ill before she died, Kipras told them that she had been very frail in her last few weeks but he did not know what illnesses she had at that time.

His account of what happened when Kayleigh called him into Joan’s room matched closely what the girl had told them. He admitted touching the body several times in his attempts to wake her, and, yes, he did begin to lift her out of the chair to put her into the recovery position. Smith asked why he had not done so, and he answered, after a pause, that he knew it was already too late. Then Maggie asked him to describe exactly what was where in the room that evening. His answer was surprisingly detailed, and as she listened, she was aware that Smith had glanced across at her to see if she had noted the same thing. It was Smith who asked the next question.

“Kipras – the glass on the floor. Was it on the right or left side of the chair?”

“Left side.”

“Do you know whether Mrs Riley was right or left-handed?”

“She was left-handed.”

Smith wrote in his notebook, which Maggie took as a signal to carry on.

“You are very observant, Kipras. We wish more people could help us this much. Was there anything you thought was unusual, anything at all, even a tiny thing?”

For the first time in some minutes, there was hesitation. Smith stopped writing and looked up.

“What is it, Kipras?”

“It was her favourite chair but not in the usual place. She had two chairs, the one for the visitors was usually by the window, not this one.”

“OK. Where was her favourite chair usually, in the room?”

“At the end of the bed. A big, basket chair, with high back. This was her favourite.”

“Anything else about the chairs?”

“The one she was in when she … Not in the usual place, as I say. It had been moved to the window.”

“Moved how?”

“Turned around and moved across the floor, to face the window. And the other chair was by her bed. They had been moved, both chairs.”

“Could Mrs Riley have moved the visitor’s chair, Kipras?”

He thought for a moment before nodding.

“Could she have moved the other chair, her favourite one?”

“No, too heavy for her.”

“Did Mrs Riley ever ask you to move her chairs in the room?”

“No.”

“Had you ever seen Mrs Riley’s chairs moved around like that before?”

Again no. When Smith asked if there was anything else like that that he could tell them, the answer was an immediate shake of the head, as if Kipras Kazlauskas thought that he might already have said too much. Smith thanked him and complimented him again on being such a helpful witness.

“OK, Kipras, I think we’re almost done. After Mrs Riley was found, Ms Miller asked you to wait outside Mrs Riley’s room, to make sure that no-one else went into it. Is that right?”

It was, he said.

“So can you tell me who the next person was to go into the room?”

Kipras thought carefully before he answered.

“Ms Miller came back with a policeman – they go in and he looks at things. Then the doctor comes to examine. And then the room is locked again waiting for the ambulance men.”

“And you stayed outside, so no-one else went into the room, which was locked anyway? That’s pretty clear, then. Thank you.”

Once the impression of an ending had been created and Kipras was half out of his chair, Smith spoke again.

“Before you go, Kipras, tell us about Mrs Riley herself. It helps us to know about people, and I think that you knew her well.”

The compliment encouraged him. Mrs Riley, she was a very kind person, to everyone. She was a clever person, knew many things about history and geography; she knew about his own country and how much had changed in Europe since the war. Mrs Riley had good friends here and a family that came to visit her every Saturday and sometimes also in the week. Mrs Riley cared about others and was a generous person.

In the silence that followed, Smith rubbed a finger across his chin and wondered how long it would be before Maggie asked the question that he knew both of them were considering. The answer was about five seconds.

“In what way was she generous, Kipras?”

He stumbled a little over his answer, his English suddenly seeming to deteriorate.

“She was very kind to everyone. Helpful to everyone. Not mean like some… Very kind.”

They let him go, and then Smith went out to fetch coffee. They would need it. There was, finally, something to talk about.

Despite his heartfelt desire not to interview Mrs Reed any more than absolutely necessary, Smith knew that she was right about at least one thing – the importance of routine in any institution. For the elderly, it probably took on a particular significance. He even thought briefly about his own habits these days before focusing on what Kipras had just told them. Any deviation from the norm was worth exploring, and there seemed to be some here. First, Mrs Riley had gone to bed earlier than usual, and at that point Maggie had corrected him; Mrs Riley had gone into her room, alone, earlier than seemed usual but she had not gone to bed. The people with whom various witnesses had said she invariably socialized had left her alone that evening – they would need to ask about that.

Second, she had been found sitting in her favourite chair but it was not in its usual place in the room. Maggie told him about her own father and the importance of ‘the chair’; as the world of the aged shrinks, the items that remain within it take on greater and greater value. ‘The chair’ becomes the tiny territory from which what remains of our lives is viewed, an eyrie, a lonely crag… Smith gave her a quizzical look and said that he would not write that down but that it was very poetic.

Third, the chair itself had been placed in front of the window that looked out at the golf course with its greens and trees, and at the large, wooded gardens beyond. They spent several minutes discussing the possible significance of this. Some elderly people do spend their days looking out of windows but it seemed that Joan Riley had not been one of those; she had been quite sociable, with a circle of friends, someone who enjoyed contact and communication. And yet, on this particular Saturday, she had sat and, presumably, gazed out of the window as she died.

“Taking her last look at the world?” Smith had ventured.

“That makes a sort of sense to me.”

“From a chair that she could not have moved herself, according to Kipras.”

The two of them sat in silence for a moment, picturing the scene before Maggie spoke again.

“But he didn’t tell us everything, did he?”

“No.”

Another short silence. Smith picked up the notebook and read back through what he had written before continuing.

“When we asked if there was anything else, anything at all, he answered quickly, as if he’d made up his mind beforehand – as if there was something he had decided not to mention. And?”

“When we asked him to explain ‘generous’, he was uncomfortable.”

“He knew he’d made a mistake, Maggie. Bad choice of word. I’m guessing that there are all sorts of rules about it.”

“Bound to be. But was it money? How could it be when Rita Sanchez can account for every chocolate bar? Another thing - could you describe your lounge any better than he described her room, bearing in mind it was a month since he last saw it?”

Smith nodded, which meant in this case, no, he could not.

“Either he has the old eidetic memory and could describe everyone’s room like that or he spent a bit of time with Joan, a bit more time than he has accounted for so far. Long chats about geography and European history? A pity she didn’t get to meet Waters.”

“We need to have a look at him, DC.”

Smith said that they would get the other half of the team to check with Lake Community College about the evening classes, and on Kazlauskas’ immigration status. Nothing had come back on criminal records, so that needed chasing – was it blank or not yet checked? He had lived in Lake long enough and was young enough to know where to buy the illegal things that these days were needed to make the weekends go with a bang. Maggie asked about mentioning him to the Radvilas as Smith was now in the habit of taking tea with them but he said no – he didn’t want Kipras hearing that they were looking at him that thoroughly, just in case.

“Mrs Reed mentioned ‘professional distance’, didn’t she? Was that some sort of criticism, of staff who don’t maintain it?”

Smith closed the notebook, signalling that it was a day for an early lunch.

“I expect that some people find it easier than others. I expect that it’s not a problem at all for Mrs Reed… I think that Kipras and Joan were good friends. It’s a thin line, isn’t it, in a place like this. If your dad was in here, what would you want? Someone to show him friendship, to take an interest? Or professional distance? But you’re right. We need to have a closer look at Mr Kazlauskas.”

They went back to the station to eat in the canteen; Smith regularly made a point of doing this and encouraged others to do the same so that the b’s couldn’t close it down. John Murray and Waters joined them, and the conversation was, inevitably, mostly about the case. Both men asked good questions, and Smith took another spur-of-the-moment decision – the four of them would go up to the incident room and talk it over properly. If that meant not interviewing again until tomorrow, so be it.

They had the staff files with them. Waters was able to scan and then enlarge images of the four people that they had interviewed so far. Smith moved one of the battered old display boards away from the wall and pinned the grainy pictures to it in a row. At the top he wrote ‘The Staff’ and underneath each picture the name of the person and their role at Rosemary House. He had spent enough hours himself stuck in offices supporting others out in the field – this way the support staff would feel more involved and, most importantly, they would produce better results.

Waters plainly thought that the display was rather quaint. He asked Smith whether he had ever used Powerpoint and an OHP. Smith answered that as he didn’t have much power any more, what would be the point?

They stared at the pictures in silence. The conversation which had been lively around the lunch table had died away but Smith knew that eventually something would spark it off again. Ideas do not come to order – if anything, in his experience, it works the other way around.

Murray said that they had completed the criminal record checks that morning. These four people had nothing between them save for a speeding offence – Irene Miller, two years ago. Smith asked for the details. She had driven back a little too quickly from a meeting in Birmingham, having received a phone call about a crisis at the home; the case had been contested, hence the information in the file, but the magistrate had ruled against her. Smith shrugged.

“I don’t have much to compare it to but I think she does a decent job. The paperwork is solid, and you reckon there’s nothing in the inspections that we need to worry about. We know it isn’t easy to get good care staff but the ones we’ve met have been sound enough. The security isn’t great but you have to weigh that against giving families and friends access – you don’t want it to feel like you’re visiting someone in the A wing at the Scrubs…”

Then they talked more about Kipras Kazlauskas and decided that he would be the focus for the support team next. Murray told Waters what he knew about checking immigration status, and Waters pointed out that he had already done that for the Subic family. Smith did not intervene; they knew enough between them and would soon fill in the gaps. Waters wondered whether the lady who had helped them recently at the community college would be able to do so again, and Smith nodded knowingly before saying, “It might depend on whether you sent her the flowers and chocolates like I told you to. It’s amazing how often the same people crop up when you need intelligence.”

Maggie was putting forward ideas about the best kind of chocolates to send in those situations when DI Reeve entered the room. They all sat down again, and Smith took her through the investigation so far. She listened and said very little until he was finished.

“Two questions.”

“Fire away, ma’am.”

Pause.

“It’s not murder, is it? Please do not tell me it’s a murder.”

“At this stage I’d say it probably is… Not anything as straightforward as a murder.”

“Two – have you interviewed Assistant Chief Constable Devine’s mother yet?”

“No.”

“Do you intend to do that?”

“Not if we can possibly avoid it, ma’am.”

Another pause.

“Good. Another update tomorrow, please, and I’m here if you need me to do anything. I haven’t been out of my office all bloody week. Goodnight.”

The altered shape of the day meant that it took Smith only a matter of minutes to write up his notes. No pleasant female company, just for a change, he told himself, meant that this really was an evening off. He had cooked for himself a version of the rigatoni he had enjoyed along with some chicken, and now he was contemplating a glass of the twelve-year-old malt that his sister Elaine had sent him for Christmas. The decision was not in doubt but the contemplation was an important part of the enjoyment – there is a little zen even in the drinking of whiskey.

It was also time to listen to Rory again, after the talking about Belfast. He took down the triple CD box set ‘Let’s Go To Work’, a title that said everything about the man, and selected from it the Irish Tour of 1974. The sound system had been their shared luxury, and every time the drawer slid smoothly, invitingly open he thought about her and the never-ending, good natured arguments about what should be played next in the long evenings together.

He was no more than three minutes into ‘Cradle Rock’ when the telephone rang.

“Good evening. Is that Mr Smith?”

“No.”

“It isn’t Mr David Smith?”

“No, my walls are insulated, as is my loft. No, I have never been sold payment protection insurance. No, my car and house are comprehensively covered. No, there is nothing wrong with my computer, Windows was functioning normally the last time I looked. No, thank you.”

“And no, I’m not selling anything, Mr Smith.”

“Oh – it’s a survey then, that will nevertheless end in a no-obligation quotation. The answer is still no.”

“My name is Jo Evison, Mr Smith.”

The piece of paper was still in his pocket – he took it out to be doubly sure.

“May I ask how you got my number?”

“I looked you up.”

“I’m ex-directory.”

“I didn’t say where I looked you up.”

He paused, a little annoyed because she had managed to interest him after all.

“What can I do for you, Ms Evison?”

“I don’t want to keep you on the phone, Mr Smith. I’m sure you haven’t been in long - I know what the job is like. I just wanted to introduce myself.”

A nice voice – on the low side for a woman, and quite unruffled by all his nonsense. He knew better than to try and guess her age, though.

“Well, consider it done. Do you do anything else apart from phone up and introduce yourself?”

“I’m a writer.”

“Oh dear. Have you tried a support group? You can find them for anything now. Nice to talk to you.”

“I’m not a journalist, Mr Smith.”

“They never are, to begin with.”

“I am not, never have been and never will be a journalist.”

“Well, this is a funny way for a novelist to behave.”

She laughed, and he found himself guessing, despite himself – thirties, forties?

“I really don’t want to take up your evening. Can I send you something to look at?”

“Is it a photograph? I think you already know what I do for a job, so…”

“It’s a book – one of my books.”

“Very generous of you. Why would you want to do that?”

“Because I’m planning to write another one.”

“What about?”

“Your most famous case.”

Chapter Nine

They had discussed with Irene Miller where it would be best to interview the residents of Rosemary House. She had said that they should offer them a choice – her office or their own room. Then Smith and Maggie had debated the order in which they should speak to them; in the end Smith agreed to alphabetically by surname, having realized that that would lead to them interviewing Ralph Greenwood last.

Nancy Bishop chose to come to the office. She was a small, rotund and nervous-looking woman; it was at first impossible to say whether this was her normal condition or whether word of what the police were doing here had begun to travel around the home. After a couple of false starts and awkward hesitations, Maggie asked her what she used to do when she was at work.

“I was a nurse, my dear.”

“Really? Here at Kings Lake General?”

“No. Abu Dhabi, amongst various other places around the world. But mostly in the Middle East.”

Her husband had been in the oil industry, and she had followed him on his travels. She never needed to work because of the money he earned – she did so because she would have been bored otherwise and because she enjoyed what she had been trained to do. They had no children and she had held some senior positions in different hospitals, in the days when nurses were nurses and doctors were doctors. Smith had asked her what she meant by that.

“The lines were clearer and if you ask me that was a healthy thing. The doctors diagnosed and the nurses cared. Now they train nurses in universities, they take endless exams and end up with degrees. I was on a ward on my first day! I expect they do six months theory before they empty a bedpan now.”

“It’s just the same in the police service, Mrs Bishop.”

“Without the bedpans, I presume.”

“Well, you’d be surprised, some of the messes we have to clear up!”

She gave a small, squeaky laugh and Smith asked her if she would like a cup of tea. Maggie went to fetch one and Smith chatted to Nancy Bishop about her life in warm, exotic places. Outside he could see the sky was snow-grey again; the whole country was waiting for it to fall heavily as the forecasters were predicting it must.

Over their cups of tea, they moved on to the business in hand. Yes, Joan had been a good friend during their time together in Rosemary House – almost two years. They met every day and often visited each other’s rooms, as well as usually having meals together and enjoying the music and television in the day room.

Smith said, “Is that what the staff call the social area, the large room at the end of the corridor?”

It was. Maggie said that the staff had already told them about the regular group, the Famous Five who sat there together every day, but Nancy Bishop’s reaction was not what they might have expected.

“The staff told you, did they? Well, I don’t suppose they are so bothered now it’s just the three of us.”

“Bothered, Mrs Bishop?”

“You may call me Nancy.”

“Bothered, Nancy?”

“They didn’t always approve. They tried to break us up, make us socialize with the rest, but we never shut anyone out. Anyone could sit down with us, and if they chose not to, that was their problem, Ralph used to say. Mrs Reed did her damndest but she didn’t get anywhere!”

For a moment there was the glint of battle in her eye.

Maggie said, “We spoke to Mr Kazlauskas. He seemed to know Joan very well – he never mentioned any problems.”

“Oh, Kip is different to the rest. We made him an honorary member!”

They asked her about the last Saturday afternoon that Joan was alive. The four of them had sat at their usual table in the day room. Joan was the only one to have had a visit that day, from her daughter and son-in-law in the morning – they came most Saturdays. She had talked more than usual about her daughter and her grandchildren but everything else was perfectly normal. They had discussed the news in the papers, with Ralph reading out things for them to complain about, the world being what it is today. They had afternoon tea together at four o’clock and went off to their rooms as they usually did. Joan had said she was tired but when you are getting on for eighty, that’s perfectly normal too, isn’t it?

“And you didn’t see Joan again, Nancy?”

“No, I’m sorry to say that I didn’t.”

“What did you do that evening?”

She blinked once or twice and frowned as if trying to recall.

“I stayed in my room.”

“So your group didn’t get together on Saturday evenings? Have a bit of a party?”

She managed only a half-smile at his joke.

“Sometimes we did – but not that Saturday.”

Smith stopped the interview there, so unexpectedly that even Maggie looked surprised. Nancy Bishop seemed to hang back a little as if she had more to say or as if she would like the chance to answer the last question a little differently but Smith simply escorted her to the door and asked if she would able to find her own way back to the floor. As she left, he said that they might want to speak to her again.

“What just happened, DC?”

He was at the window, arms behind his back, one hand holding the opposing wrist, standing, Maggie realized, at ease in the military fashion. She had seen him do it many times but only now understood its significance.

“I wanted her to leave with the feeling that she might have made a mistake.”

Behind him, still seated, Maggie pulled a momentary face of surprise and sipped at the last of the tea, which had grown cold.

“I always imagined you’d be kind to little old ladies.”

If he thought about her remark, he never showed it. He was somewhere else now and all she could do was wait.

“If someone I’m interviewing tells me it was ‘perfectly normal’, on a good day I’ll just assume they were being careless with language. I say careless because nothing ever is perfect or normal. But if they tell me it was ‘perfectly normal’ twice in a minute, I start to assume that it isn’t carelessness. Someone who does that is just too anxious to convey that there is nothing for me to worry about. That’s when I start to worry.”

She hadn’t seen it, and neither was she entirely convinced. It seemed such a slight thing… And yet she had seen Smith catch people out with less than that. She did have something of her own to offer, though.

“Another little break in the routine as well – Joan talking more than usual about her family? And then not only does Joan stay in her room alone, so does her friend. I wonder what the other two did that night.”

“I suppose we will find out.”

Maggie looked up. Something in his voice was different. With Smith’s profile half-turned away, she could not see his face but as she watched she saw him swallow awkwardly, with difficulty. She didn’t know what to say.

When he finally turned away from the window, he seemed to be himself again.

“I wonder how much of this carpet DI Reeve and Superintendent Allen would like us to lift up. Just a corner, a little bit of work with the hand-brush? Or do we spring-clean the whole room?”

“You really think there’s something here? More than whatever happened to Joan Riley?”

“I think we’d better send for Mr Collins. I’d like to speak to him before he speaks to Nancy Bishop.”

Martin Collins had also chosen to come to the manager’s office to be interviewed. He sat down heavily in the chair and was a little breathless for some seconds – both detectives waited until he was able to speak without difficulty. Time and his own weight had bent him somewhat but Collins was still a large man – in his prime he had stood over six feet. His big hands rested on the arms of the chair, and his eyes, after looking at them both, eventually rested upon those of Smith.

“Thank you for coming, Mr Collins.”

“Aye, well, I didn’t think I ‘ad much choice in the matter. If I din’t come to see you, you were coming to see me.”

“Absolutely right, sir.”

The vowels were flat and northern – but not far to the north. Smith guessed Sheffield or somewhere nearby. The man nodded slightly at the detective’s honesty.

“Do you know why we need to speak to you, Mr Collins?”

“Summat to do with Joan.”

“Yes. It doesn’t look as if she died of natural causes.”

Martin Collins narrowed his gaze and looked down at the surface of the desk, with its papers and open files.

“I’m not quite sure what you’re sayin’ – sergeant, is it? Are you sayin’ somebody killed her? If so, that’s-”

“No, Mr Collins, that’s a different thing from what I said, isn’t it?”

Smith left the man to reflect on that, and then Maggie took over, asking Collins, in her friendly, matter-of-fact way, to tell them what he could remember of the events on Saturday the 6th of December. The story was pretty much the same as that of Nancy Bishop. When asked how long he had known Joan, he said that it would be for at least eighteen months, and that the five of them had been what he called ‘close enough’ for more than a year. Aye, she’d been a bit poorly lately but cheerful enough, you had to be in this place. Sometimes they’d get together on a Saturday night, sometimes not. He’d not been feeling too chipper himself, as it happened…

Maggie asked him what had been the matter, the way that women do, and Smith carried on reading the file in front of him, Martin Collins’ file.

“Arthritis in the hip.” He leaned to the side and rubbed at his left hip as if to make sure they understood exactly what he was saying. “Sometimes it won’t straighten. It’s me own, don’t hold with these artificial things, half of ‘em made in Korea. Anyways, I got stuck in the bathroom that night. Like the three old ladies.”

Maggie smiled sympathetically and asked what happened.

“I were lucky Ralph came in. He tried to pull me up but I’m too much of a weight, as you can see. So he fetched Kip and they got me back to my room. We sat in there for a while, me and Ralph, watching the football.”

Smith had looked up from the file with an expression that Maggie recognized.

She said, “Well, I suppose that’s the benefit of living where there is always someone to help, Martin. Who was it you said that got you out and back to your room?”

“It were Kip. He’s the best o’ the bunch.”

“Yes, we’ve already met Kipras, Martin. About what time was it that he came to help you? Can you remember? We’re just trying to find out where everybody was that night.”

“I can’t be exact about it. But football were on when we got back to my room. He pushed me in a chair, like… So it must have been half nine or so.”

“How long did it take, Mr Collins, to get you out of the bathroom and back to your room?”

He looked at Smith almost as if he had forgotten the other detective was in the room.

“No more than five minutes, I’d say.”

“And did Kip stay in the room, watch a bit of the footie with you and Ralph?”

“No… Well, a minute or two maybe, just making sure I was alright. But I was, Ralph being there an’ all.”

“And this was definitely sometime after nine o’clock that evening?”

“Aye.”

As he spoke, Smith continued to write notes in his Alwych – small, neat, already bullet-pointed notes.

“We specifically asked him, did you stay outside the room? Did anyone else enter the room? Did you wait there as Ms Miller asked you to? Who were the next people to go into the room?”

“Agreed. It’s possible that he forgot about helping Martin Collins.”

“On that night? No – he’d remember the dilemma of deciding whether to stay where he’d been told or to help a resident.”

“So why lie about it?”

“All sorts of reasons. Most likely he feels guilty about deserting his post, that sort of thing. But it means that the room was unguarded for a few minutes, with Joan Riley’s body inside.”

“But still locked, DC.”

He looked at her with a flash of impatience and irritation. There were downsides to working with him, and this was one of them – you could feel stupid at times if you were not keeping up, and he would not hesitate to leave you behind if it meant closing down a case more quickly.

“OK – keys. A member of staff could have gone inside.”

“Or?”

“A resident who’d got hold of a key.”

“I’m not saying yet that anyone did but now we have to allow for the possibility. Why would they? Again, we don’t know but maybe to tidy up, to check that nothing had been left to incriminate whoever helped Joan Riley out of this vale of tears.”

“Do you want me to fetch Kipras? Put it to him straight away?”

“No. Still waiting on Waters for the background. He’s being a bit slow for a whizz-kid.”

“Ralph Greenwood, then?”

Smith was thinking hard now, his mouth slightly to the side, teeth nipping at the inside of his cheek.

“No.”

“Earlier you said you didn’t want them talking between these first interviews.”

“This time we’ll let them. See what it shows up, how close they really are.”

At Smith’s suggestion they opened up the residents’ files and read them again. They were detailed documents and included surprising amounts of information about the earlier lives of the people who now resided at Rosemary House. Smith thought about that and concluded that it enabled the staff to find connections and subjects of conversation with the residents. After a while they exchanged files and read again, trying to develop an overview of the Famous Five and their relationships.

Eventually Smith said, “You’ve got Joan’s there. Remind me what she did for a living.”

Maggie opened the folder and found it.

“She was for… God, for a long time she was secretary to the headmaster of the Queen’s School. Almost twenty five years, must have been several different heads in that time.”

“Major public school. Heads most likely bring in their own staff unless the one already there is irreplaceable. That’s a big job, like your modern PA. What was her education?”

For some of the residents that information was in the files, and Joan was one of them.

“Left school at fifteen, but she went to the old Lake High Grammar for Girls. She was a scholarship girl.”

“Hmm, like my mum…”

Smith did a calculation roughly and realized that the two women might even have known each other.

Then he said, “Nancy was a nurse who was a bit of a career girl, got to positions of responsibility. And did you see Mr Collins? I’ve got it here. Engineer on British Railways but not by the look of it a grease monkey. He retired as engineering manager of the Midlands Region. These were, sorry are, bright people.”

Maggie reached for Elspeth Grey’s file.

“Elspeth ran her own jewellery business, four shops in East Anglia.”

Smith picked up the last file to be certain of what he had already read in it.

“Ralph Greenwood was a solicitor’s clerk in London. That’s all it says.”

“Still a good job. You’re right, above average achievers for the times, especially the women.”

Smith was still reading Greenwood’s file, looking at the same page, a slight frown creasing his forehead. Maggie was right, of course, but he was remembering his first encounter with the ‘solicitor’s clerk’, recalling their exchange by the window.

Maggie said, “It explains why they all got on – they had plenty in common, I suppose. But we have to remember this is a fairly up-market care home, DC. Most of the people here will have been successful. If only to pay the fees.”

“Yep. It makes it more interesting though. Not only are we dealing with people some of whom might be losing their marbles occasionally – we are dealing with bright people who have a lot of marbles to lose and who might be doing so only occasionally.”

A buzz followed by a tinkling sound had Smith reaching for the phone in his jacket pocket. He opened it and read the message.

“It’s Robin – he must have heard me. I wouldn’t be surprised if he can set this up so he can do that. Anyway, Kipras K checks out. All perfectly legal, full documentation… Is who he says he is… Oh.”

He stopped reading and looked up at Maggie.

“What?”

“Waters knew this was worth including. Good boy.”

“DC. What is it?”

Smith could be infuriating at times.

“Before he left Lithuania, Mr K did a year at university. So much for ‘I am not clever’. Guess his subject?”

She shook her head and said, “Not maths?”

“Medicine.”

As they took the lift up to the first floor, Smith said, “Another thing. There’s a distinct lack of curiosity about what happened to Mrs Riley, isn’t there? Neither of those two, friends of hers, asked for any more information. Sometimes what people don’t say matters as much as what they do – I keep telling Waters that.”

Maggie considered it.

“Older people, more respect for the law, the police? Not their place to ask, maybe…?”

Smith gave a shrug that said he was only half-convinced by the suggestion.

Ralph Greenwood’s room was at the end of the corridor, the final room in the building, and as a result it was of a somewhat different shape and a little larger than the rooms that they had visited so far. The door was open but they knocked and waited for him to appear. He came from the kitchenette, tea towel in hand, waving them forward with the other. Briefly he peered at them over the rims of his glasses; there were books open on the table and Smith concluded that Greenwood was probably still long-sighted.

As a result of its extra size, the room had more furniture than most without looking overcrowded – four chairs in total. The three of them sat down, and Smith looked past their host for a moment to the scene beyond the window; no golf course on this side but a view of Lake in the distance, the tower blocks and one of the dock cranes just visible through the greyness of the late afternoon.

Maggie said, “You have a very nice room, Mr Greenwood.”

“Thank you. It’s not much but… And please, call me Ralph.”

It was a good room. Smith looked around, noting the bookcases, the small flat-screen television, the digital radio, a chess set that might be ivory, a compact, quality sound system and the Apple laptop on the table, its screensaver rolling gently around in disappearing spirals like remote galaxies. The bedspread looked hand-crafted, composed of many little squares of knitted material, and on the walls were water-colour landscapes and portraits that Smith was sure would be mostly, if not all, originals. The more one looked, the more one realized that this room was entirely different to any other that they had seen.

They had agreed beforehand that Maggie would ask the first questions, and when she did so, Greenwood glanced at Smith and gave a brief smile before looking back at the female detective. When asked if he knew why they were in Rosemary House, Greenwood said, “I don’t know any details but I believe that there was an irregularity in Joan’s death.”

“We have to consider a heroin overdose more than an irregularity, sir.”

Greenwood looked at Smith, aware of Maggie Henderson’s own surprise at Smith’s interruption, and at the nature of it.

“Quite so, sergeant – more of a singularity, I’d say. How on earth could she have got hold of such a thing?”

“Well, that is exactly what we are here to find out. We have to assume that someone in the building gave it to her.”

“In which sense of the word? Do you mean that someone administered the drug or that they gave it to her and that she administered it herself?”

“At this point it makes no difference to us, as it happens; both acts are illegal under English law.”

Greenwood smiled again and Smith, despite himself, heard the pompous echo of his words.

“Indeed they are. You must forgive me if at some point I seem to be enjoying this as a diversion, but we get so few here, as you can imagine. And Joan herself enjoyed a murder mystery – isn’t that ironic? How can I help you both?”

His account of the 6th of December squared perfectly with that of Martin Collins, except that Ralph Greenwood could add more detail, such as which match had been on the screen when Kipras had been in Martin’s room for a minute or two. He told them the time without being asked and mentioned that he had realized something had happened when the trolley was wheeled along the corridor later that night, though obviously he did not know who was involved until the following morning. It was all very sad but one had to remember that here everyone was living in the departure lounge and flights left with monotonous regularity. Was there anything else he could tell them?

When they stood up to leave, Greenwood saw Smith looking at the chessboard. He picked up a piece, a pawn, and handed it to the detective. As he had suspected, it was made of ivory, and he nodded, impressed.

“Before you ask, sergeant, it is CITES cleared.”

“The thought never entered my head until you put it there, sir.”

Greenwood said, “Do you play?”

“I have done.”

“Well, if your investigation isn’t a brief one, perhaps you could drop in and make a move or two.”

“I don’t imagine we’ll be clearing the matter up this week.”

“And I can imagine why. A lack of forensics, for one thing, it being at least a month ago. Very difficult for you…”

“But not impossible.”

“The perfect witness, DC.”

They were crossing the car park of Rosemary House, a bitter easterly blowing in from the North Sea just a mile or two away. Smith didn’t answer until they were in the car with the engine running. Maggie did a little tidying up of CD cases and mint wrappers while Smith repositioned the vents for maximum effect.

“Yes, he was.”

“Obviously as bright as the others. I can imagine them being a handful if they decided to be awkward together – not that I’m offering that as a motive! But what on earth is someone like Ralph Greenwood doing in there?”

“Irene Miller told us, didn’t she? Had a heart attack, vascular dementia, since which he’s had some recovery of functions. He’s brighter than the other two, by the way.”

“Well, if that’s ‘some recovery’ I don’t know what he was like before the heart attack.”

Smith didn’t answer. He was driving slowly because the windscreen was misted over; the cloth had disappeared again and he didn’t want to use his hand because that only made it worse in the long run.

“And his room was nice, too, a proper little home from home.”

This time Smith gave a quiet “Mmm” that managed to express both agreement and doubt.

“What?”

“I once visited a man called Billy Slater. He had a room like that, different, superior to everyone else’s, all mod cons. Ha, all mod cons! You’ll laugh when I tell you where it was.”

“Go on.”

“HMP Littlehey. These blokes are always there. If you’d banished Billy Slater to the North Pole, he’d have had the biggest and best equipped igloo within a month.”

“What are you saying about Ralph Greenwood?”

“Nothing – not jumping to any conclusions. But whereas some of those poor old dears are staring all day at the TV and failing to keep up with Antique Bargain Hunt, our Ralph is reading The Times, completing the crossword and surfing the internet. Did you notice the modem? If anyone can tell us more about what goes in Rosemary House, it’s Ralph Greenwood.”

Chapter Ten

The Friday was one of those days when nothing quite comes together. The interviews that Smith had planned to arrange with Sarah Bradley, Joan Riley’s daughter, and Dr Miriam Tremewan both failed to take place; the former was at a sales conference in Norwich all day, and the GP was involved in training nurses at Kings Lake General – a busy schedule that could not be interrupted. Smith then thought that it might be worth going back to Rosemary House after all and talking to a few residents more generally about Joan, just to see what might come up – at least they could be sure of regular tea and biscuits there, the canteen boiler at the station having burst sometime during the night. When Maggie came in he put the idea to her and then realized that she wasn’t herself at all – he sat her down, found John Murray and told him to take her home. Apparently she had been feeling unwell on and off through the week but had said nothing to Smith. He kicked himself for that – he’d forgotten how women could suffer in silence.

At ten thirty he sat alone in the incident room, such as it was. Just the one board had anything pinned to it, the rest huddled uselessly in the corner. Some files lay untidily on a couple of the desks, and there was someone’s unwashed mug from the previous day, looking about as purposeful as Smith felt. He had been on the point of going to look for Waters, sarcasm at the ready, until he recalled that Waters was attending a de-briefing on the case he had been working with Detective Sergeant Wilson’s team for the past month.

He took out his notebook and turned back to the pages that covered their interview with Kipras Kazlauskas. As soon as Kipras had left the room, Smith had written down the words exactly – “She was…very kind to everyone. Helpful to everyone. Not mean like some…very kind”. They had asked him to explain why he had used the word ‘generous’ and that was what he had said, but haltingly, awkwardly, even guiltily. What had Joan Riley given to him? A soft toy? A chocolate bar from the sweet trolley? Or money?

When he called Rosemary House, he got straight through to Rita Sanchez, who sounded a little disappointed – she seemed to think that the interviewing part of the investigation must be over as no detectives had turned up this morning. ‘The interviewing part’ thought Smith; little did she realise that there were no other parts in a case like this one. She explained to him that there really was no need for residents to have sums of cash in their possession, that it was actively discouraged as a potential source of conflict and possible theft. The allowance system was set up to avoid all of that, and it worked very well.

When she had finished speaking, he complimented her on how well everything was being run, how efficient her office was, and then he said that if a visitor had brought in some cash for a resident and given it to them directly, then obviously she and the management could not be held responsible. To her knowledge, had that ever happened?

“Yes, once or twice it has happened.”

“Recently, Ms Sanchez?”

“No.”

“And, I presume, never involving Joan Riley.”

“No.”

“Could you tell me whether it has ever happened involving her friends, Nancy Bishop, Martin Collins, Ralph Greenwood and Elspeth Grey?”

“Not to my knowledge. There would be no point – all these people have everything they need.”

Smith thanked her and said that he looked forward to seeing her again next week; she seemed nonplussed by his words and the phone call ended in an awkward silence, and a slight smile on Smith’s face.

He picked up the visitors’ book and looked again at the entries for the morning of the 6th of December, just to be certain – yes, both daughter and son-in-law had visited. On reflection, then, it was fortunate that today had not worked out. If it had, he would only have questioned Sarah Bradley but it would be more useful to interview them both. No work had been done on these two, all the office intelligence-gathering focus having been on the staff so far.

Neither had criminal records, not even a caution. Smith had to admit, in the privacy of his incident room, that this computerized database was easier than the old system - the hours they used to waste flicking through illegible reports and record cards! Now, click, click, click and it was there in front of you. Sarah Bradley didn’t seem to exist at all on the Interweb – the name he used to aggravate Waters and co – but using Google he did eventually find one Anthony Bradley, proprietor of Lake Bodyworks. He looked at the company’s website. Vehicle body repairs, insurance work undertaken, but with an emphasis on high-end customized work, lots of photos of the mad things young men with more money than sense do to cars. Pictures of said Mr Bradley and others standing by their handiwork, grinning away. Smith called the Bradley’s home number and left a message – he would like to speak to them both at home at nine thirty next Monday morning. If this was inconvenient they should let him know, and he left his mobile number.

Footsteps outside the room had Smith looking expectantly at the door but no-one entered, and the steps carried on down the corridor. Perhaps they were closing early today, it being a Friday. He got up and decided to go for a stroll, see if the canteen was functioning yet.

It wasn’t but Charlie Hills had under his counter the means to make a cup of tea. Even he wasn’t to be seen when Smith arrived there but a shout of “Shop!” had him out from the back office in a matter of seconds.

“Charlie, I’m gasping.”

“Finally realized you’re a fish out of water?”

“You and me both. The tide’s gone out and left the likes of you and me behind, Charlie.”

Charlie filled the kettle from a jug and switched it on.

Smith said, “One of your lads is in the garage business, isn’t he?”

“Jonathan. He’s been at Mertons since he left school.”

“Doing alright, then.”

“Talk of him being made a director this year.”

Smith could hear the note of pride in the answer though Charlie’s face looked as stern as ever.

“Good lad! How old is he, Charlie?”

“Thirty bloody two. It makes you wonder, doesn’t it?”

“Everything makes me wonder.”

Charlie filled the two mugs with water and mashed the teabags with a spoon. Smith looked faintly aghast at the procedure but said nothing, the canteen situation being what it was.

“Do you know anything about Lake Bodyworks, Charlie? They’ve got a place on the Western Industrial Estate.”

“No, never come across it. Don’t have accidents.”

“We don’t all have your willpower, Charlie. I suppose your boy would know something about them, though…”

“No doubt. Want me to give him a call?”

“Just a general talk-in-the-trade, health-check sort of thing would be helpful.”

“Not urgent?”

“No.”

Charlie added what was probably milk from a carton, and then two spoons of sugar to his own mug. He passed the other to Smith. For a moment the station was eerily quiet, and they drank in silence as if they had no wish to disturb it. Then the outer door opened and someone entered. Smith turned around to see the face of an angry woman, a dog’s lead in one hand and a small, frightened boy in the other. As she advanced upon the counter, Smith, keeping one eye upon her, upended his mug and said, “See you later, Sergeant Hills.”

Waters reappeared after lunch. He didn’t say anything about Wilson’s team de-briefing and Smith decided not to ask – an uneasy peace had developed over the past couple of months and he was happy enough for that to continue undisturbed. For the want of something better to do, Smith began to update Waters on the interviews that they had had the day before, but within a couple of minutes Alison Reeve had also arrived, asking to be brought up to speed herself. Smith invited her to sit down and join in. When the scent in a case was strong, he was inclined to say as little as possible, not wanting to jinx anything or be distracted; this case was, at present, quite the opposite of that sort, and talking things through with new people might throw something up.

Smith was not surprised when Reeve began by considering who had a possible motive to help Joan Riley take her own life – it was where he always began himself, and some of her formative years as a detective had been spent working alongside him. Like him, too, she had concluded that Joan Riley had played a significant role in her own death, based on what they knew so far. Smith reported that after Monday morning he would know more about the estate that Mrs Riley had left, about her will, hopefully, and about the family situation. Reeve opened her tablet and looked at her diary – she would make herself available, having met Sarah Bradley already. Money, said Smith, was a possible motive, was almost always a possible motive, and one reason why the law was framed as it was. Moving on, it was difficult to see how anyone else would benefit financially from the woman’s death, but he then explained what had happened during the interview with Kipras Kazlauskas – they now had more questions about him than when they started. Waters took out his notes and spoke about the young Lithuanian’s background; Smith wondered whether it would be possible to find out why he left his medical course at university but it seemed problematical. Both Smith and Maggie Henderson felt that he had not been open about why he had said that Mrs Riley was ‘generous’, and it was clear that for some reason he had not told them that he left Mrs Riley’s room unguarded for some minutes on the evening of her death. More than one resident had said favourable things about Kipras, that he was better than most of the carers, different, and it seemed that he had a closer than usual relationship with Joan Riley.

Reeve stood up and went across to the display board where the grainy images of the staff were pinned up, with their names in capitals written underneath. Kipras looked out from there, a little uncertain but with a smile, nevertheless.

“He’d be on my list, DC, and not at the bottom of it. Lots of opportunity, too. ”

Smith nodded but said, “Telling us about the chairs would seem a bit daft if he was involved and just wanted to keep out of it – on the other hand, it could be a smart move, a neat little distraction.”

Waters went back into his notes with new interest, checking to see if anything else he had found out might be relevant.

The interview with the GP would be at her surgery on Monday afternoon. Alison Reeve was already busy then but Smith could see that she viewed that one as a matter of routine anyway. Maggie would probably be back but if she was not, he would take Waters with him. They might even go to the park while they were out and let him off the lead. Waters smiled briefly but didn’t blush or comment – and then Smith realized that the early days were already over, that Waters was no longer an awkward newcomer. Smith ought to find out exactly what he had done in Wilson’s team, and how well he had done it.

He told them about the residents that they had interviewed so far, about the Famous Five. They laughed at one or two things that he said, and he realized how difficult it was to convey to someone outside the nature of that confined and cloistered existence – he had not meant to be funny about those people, and felt somewhat guilty that he had.

Reeve said, “Mr Greenwood sounds like a character.”

“Oh yes.”

Something in the tone of those two words caught Reeve’s attention.

“What’s it like there?”

“Like? To be honest, it’s a bit…troubling? If you know what I mean.”

“Explain.”

Could he, just like that?

“It’s well run, pretty safe, warm, no-one has complained about the food. But all those lives shrinking away, the horizons getting narrower by the day… Talented, hard-working people, just like us.”

They had both smiled and he realized that that was the price one paid for living an ironic life – people expected nothing less from him, and nothing more.

“No, for once I’m serious, folks. It makes you think. Not one of them in their prime ever imagined they’d end up in Rosemary House or anywhere like it, but they have.”

“Tempus fugit…”

Both of them looked at Waters, and then at each other before Smith said, “Can you do The Times crossword?”

Smith’s mobile began to ring and he picked it up from the table. Reeve watched the look of concern spread over his face, and within a few seconds she had guessed the subject of the conversation.

“Does she?” Smith said, and then, “Well, you do that, straight away. Do you need anything? Need a lift? No?”

The caller spoke again, Smith nodding, glancing at Reeve.

“Alright, John. Get off there now straight away. And call me, if there’s any news. Call me any time, you know that…”

Reeve said, “Maggie?”

“Yes, sod it. He took her to the GP just now, and the doc wasn’t happy. John’s on his way to the General with her. I said I’d run it past you.”

She waved it away, stood up and said, “You let me know too, if there’s anything I can do.”

When she had gone, Smith looked at Waters – “And then there were two. Better get your cape out of the wardrobe, by the look of it.”

He had decided in advance that this would be a weekend without work but there was just one note to make in his Alwych at home. On the way out of the station he had stopped to say goodnight to Charlie as usual, and he’d received some intelligence about Lake Bodyworks. Before the financial crash they had made a lot of money customizing cars, proper high-end jobs that sometimes were featured in the trade press and the specialist magazines. But the past couple of years had seen that sort of spending dry up – surely to no-one’s surprise, thought Smith – and they were probably in a bit of bother as far as money was concerned. Charlie’s son had employed a technician who had been laid off by LB last summer.

Smith checked the website again on his PC – Tony Bradley was the sole proprietor, or at least he had been when the website was constructed. It probably meant nothing and proved even less, but an injection of cash might come in handy for Tony Bradley’s little company.

Later, after beans on toast, a perfectly balanced meal according to some cook on the television, he stood facing the shelves of CDs. After staring at them for a while he said aloud, “Well, we’ve almost been through the lot again. Just this one left, I reckon.”

He placed the disc into the tray and watched it slide silently into the player – just a compilation, a sort of greatest hits thing that he had bought in her memory a couple of years ago – she wouldn’t have been able to resist it.

He sat on the leather couch, leaned to one side to rearrange a few cushions and then slumped back again. “Do you know, he’s pushing seventy and he can still play like this, when he can be bothered. Seventy! Who’d have thought it?” He smiled and closed his eyes as the guitar began to climb the scales. When he couldn’t see that she wasn’t there, she sometimes almost was again. The silly games we play.

“So, is there a care home for old rock musicians? Does that much money enable you to make ‘other arrangements’?”

The kind of thing they would have talked about idly and amusingly for hours on end, here on this couch, especially in the final few months. They had bought it especially, a four seater, so that she could lie down and there would still be room for him to sit at the end, close by. And he thought, well, she was spared Rosemary House – she knew that, had said as much. He remembered the poetry book then, the one he had thought of in Irene Miller’s office yesterday. It would be up there on the shelf but he wasn’t ready to take it down and find the poem yet, not tonight.

Tempus fugit… He listened to the end of track five, one of her particular favourites. Then he picked up the house-phone, went upstairs to his desk, took the card out of the drawer and dialled Marcia Williams’ number.

Chapter Eleven

Afterwards, when Jane Waters asked her if it had been a date, she had to say that she wasn’t sure. She had an association dinner that evening, so they had arranged to meet for lunchtime coffee at the Old Minster hotel in town. Arriving a few minutes early, she had expected to be waiting for him, but he was already there and had secured two seats in an alcove with a window that looked out over the market square. When he saw her walk in, he stood up, came across to her and asked her what she would like to drink – they were standing close to the bar then, with a young waitress already in attendance. Marcia Williams thought that he would consider a latte as nothing more than frothy milk but she asked for that anyway; Smith was looking at the small bags of speciality coffees that the hotel sold from the counter as a sideline.

He pointed to one and said to the waitress, “Any chance of making me a pot of that?”

“I can find out for you, sir,” and she disappeared around the corner of the bar.

They smiled at each other, both perhaps trying to remember how their last conversation ended, how it had led to them being here this afternoon.

“You obviously like your coffee.”

“Not all of them. To be honest, I prefer tea at work and don’t drink coffee in the evenings, so it’s a weekend treat, really. But I like Costa Rican.”

The girl returned and said, “That will be fine, sir. I’ll bring it over to you.”

Before they sat down, he took her coat and hung it on a peg in the alcove – then he had pulled out her chair before taking his own. There was an unselfconscious and unabashed quaintness about his manner that she rather liked, novel though it would have seemed to her usual social acquaintances. But then, he was older than her by some ten or fifteen years… She sat looking at him for a moment, quite unable to read his thoughts, and decided to get one matter out of the way immediately.

“Have you thought about Douglas’s offer?”

“Yes. I haven’t come to any conclusion yet, but it was flattering to be asked. I assumed that you were a part of the presentation.”

“And I assumed that you would assume that.”

They both smiled – fifteen all.

“It’s a genuine offer – he’d be thrilled if you accepted it.”

“We used to work together pretty well, so…”

“Even if you don’t, you should stay in touch. I’ve spoken to him twice this week and he’s mentioned the evening both times. I don’t think there is anyone else from back then that he’s in touch with any more.”

“I know how he feels.”

“There you are, then – you can have some man-time together – mutually assured nostalgia.”

Another smile, and a nod this time to her wit and gentle teasing. She didn’t want him to think that this meeting was just another part of Douglas’s recruitment drive, and so she asked him what he was working on, with all the usual acknowledgements that she didn’t need to know the details. He told her the nature of the case, and talked specifically about the difficulties of dealing with the elderly and infirm. He said that although a crime of some sort had been committed, and although no crime was victimless, this sort of thing could sometimes seem to be a crime without a criminal.

It was a subtle but striking idea, and she asked him to explain – but then the waitress arrived with their coffees and a little plate of complementary biscuits for them to share. Smith was very nice with her, and the girl walked away with a smile on her face, saying they only had to wave to her if they needed anything else.

Marcia pursued the idea when they were alone again – how could a crime have no criminal? It depends, he said, on how one uses the word ‘criminal’. Do we apply it to everyone who breaks any law, however outdated or trivial? In which case, every one of us, every person out there on the square, is a criminal many times in our daily lives. Or do we use the word only for those who break the law for selfish reasons, for gain or to satisfy their individual needs, disregarding the pain that will be caused to others?

He left the question there for her to answer – she was not going to be allowed to be a passive participant in the conversation, and the realization took her by surprise. It was common sense, surely – when we use the word, we use it in the second sense.

“OK, agreed, of course we do. So how should the law treat a person who, at another’s request, usually someone they care for dearly, helps to end a life that is full of physical pain and mental suffering? They seek no material gain, and act, some would argue, most unselfishly in that they are depriving themselves of the company of someone that they love. In what sense is that person a criminal, and how should they be punished?”

She had expected a cup of coffee with a new acquaintance, and perhaps a new friend – she had not expected to find herself wrestling with a moral dilemma under the fixed gaze of a highly experienced detective.

“To be honest, I – I don’t know what to call you! What do I? Was it really alright to call you David when we had dinner at Douglas’s?”

“A bloody plonker would be about right, going on about such stuff when you’ve agreed to come out and… I can only apologise.”

When she laughed and said that he still had not answered her question, he said, “David is fine. Not everyone’s comfortable with initials. I sometimes sound like a character in an American cartoon… DC?”

“Right – David. I need time to think about it. If we meet up again, I promise to have given it serious consideration. I know that’s a bit of a cop-out.”

“Sounds good to me.”

And to me, she thought. He wasn’t boring, after all, and he had taken the trouble to dress well, Saturday casual but smart. The boots under the dark green cord trousers were plain but expensive, and, either by luck or design, they matched perfectly the ageless leather jacket. He waved to the waitress and ordered another latte for her. She came across and poured him more coffee from the pot. When she had done so, he said, “Thank you, Nicole!” and she had blushed and looked down at her own name badge, before trotting away.

Then Marcia asked him if he thought that he was dealing with such a case now, a crime without a criminal – a mercy killing. He thought before answering, longer than he had thought about anything else he had said since they sat down together.

“It’s one possibility. It sounds weird but I’d rather it wasn’t. It’s simpler to have a proper villain and an old-fashioned, selfish motive. The older I get, the more I like simple.”

After that, they talked about the future of accountancy in the digital age.

As he drove home, Smith thought that the weekend-without-any-work idea had begun well, and when he reached his front door, another distraction awaited him. The card had not been pushed all the way through the letter box, and he withdrew it without unlocking the door. The box ‘Left at rear of property’ had been untidily ticked, and so he walked down the side of the house, not knowing what to expect – he had ordered nothing and few things arrived without warning these days.

The padded bag lay on end against the patio door. He picked it up and examined it – a generic post office label, the stamp incomplete and obscure and no return address on the back – why didn’t people bother with that any more? It was book-shaped and book-weighted, and then he remembered.

In the kitchen he took a knife out of the drawer and made a careful slit through the top of the package; then he held it at arm’s length, opened it slightly and looked inside. Old habits, he thought. A hardback book of moderate length, complete with dust-jacket – brand new. He slid it out of the bag and laid it on the work-surface, glancing at the cover before he filled the kettle and took the coffee jug out of the cupboard. Deliberately, he kept his eyes away from the book for some seconds, busying himself with a filter, fetching the ground coffee storage jar from its place in the fridge and placing one of the little cups on its saucer, one of the set that Sheila had always kept ‘for best’.

He had recognized the two children immediately, their separate photographs showing them smiling, happy, alive. Presumably the parents would have agreed to that – he hoped so. The background was an image of a path ascending a steep, grass-covered slope, looking upwards, the top third of the scene occupied by blue sky. Across that was the title - ‘They Went Up The Hill’ - and beneath that was a strap-line in smaller print: ‘The Westcott Murders’. The writer’s name ran across the bottom of the cover – Joanne Evison. Smith glanced briefly at the spine before putting the book down again; it was from a reputable publisher. When the coffee was ready, he took the copy of The Times he had bought in town along with the book and sat on the sofa. Whenever the weather was good enough he preferred the conservatory but it was grey and cold again, and the garden was empty of colour.

The book lay on the little antique mahogany table - a wedding present from her father’s shop - for over an hour before he looked at it again, though if pressed he would have admitted that it was there at the back of his mind. In the paper he read the home news, the letters page - still mostly about Europe and ‘our porous borders’ - glanced over the cricket report from India and read about the changes proposed to England’s Amateur Boxing Association. Even the crossword received some desultory attention before he finally put the paper aside and contemplated the book on the table.

There were several reasons why he did not want to read it. A weekend-without-work surely included not reading about work, even if it had been done by someone else. Also, he harboured deep suspicions about ‘true-life’ crime writing, and about the motives of people who undertook it. The Andretti case had not been spared the treatment, and although he had been told that the investigation hadn’t been heavily criticized, he had not broken his vow that he would never read that book himself. Years ago he had read an account of the Yorkshire Ripper investigation, and he had been disgusted by the writer’s smug dismissal of the detectives’ methods – how easy it was in hindsight for someone who had never seen a murder victim to mock the work of those who had to confront them in their daily lives and again in their nightmares. And then there was the impact on the families and friends – how much of that was taken into account when publishing executives discussed target market penetration?

After the title page there was a dedication: ‘For Michael and Angie, and for their families, without whose support I could not and would not have written this book.’ He turned to the back fly-leaf then but there was no photograph of Joanne Evison, only a short biography. A psychology graduate of Cambridge University, she had joined the Metropolitan Police as a forensic profiling officer. After rising to the rank of inspector, she had left to pursue a second career as a writer and a consultant. There were no dates but Smith’s rough and ready calculation told him it must have been a fairly rapid rise, and she was already the author of three books about well-known police investigations.

He went back to the dedication. The ‘would not’ impressed him, if it was true. Having decided that he would not read this, did it impress him enough to make him change his mind?

It was a little after eleven o’clock that night when he completed it. Many of the details of the case he had recalled as soon as he began to read; they had lain closer to the surface than he had realized, in the shallow grave of his memory - another occupational hazard, no doubt. Michael Fielding and Angie Barrett, unrelated, two children from the same Devonshire village, murdered on the same hillside above that village within a matter of months. The same perpetrator, the same methodical strangulation and a complete absence of sexual interference – that alone made it almost unique, never mind the different genders of the victims. All the strange trivia of a murder investigation was there, as it must be, but what struck Smith most of all was the quality of the writing. It was clear, concise, thorough but at the same time it did not lack the humanity that was missing from so many other sensationalised accounts. The parents had been spoken to, and were sometimes quoted, at length – in that alone, Jo Evison must have had their full consent to write as she had. The detective superintendent leading the investigation had been given extensive opportunities to explain why she took the decisions that she did, and to defend herself against the usual charges that the second murder could have been avoided if only x, y and z had been done. The press response itself was analysed in depth in a chapter of its own; there were trenchant criticisms of it and Smith noted that the headlines used when the case became a national one – ‘The Jack and Jill Murders’ – had not been used by Evison for her book. He could imagine the editors pressuring her to do so in some form or another.

During a break in reading he had gone back to the envelope but there was no sign of a compliments slip, and neither was there anything written inside the cover. Only when he reached the last page had a hand-written note fluttered down onto his lap. It said, ‘I hope you made it this far. If so, perhaps we can talk. My number is probably still on your phone. Sadly, I do have a website, and you could email from there if you prefer, Jo.’

During his absence, and while it was switched off, Windows had decided to update itself – he could never make out how it did that. He waited patiently, watching the percentage bar creep to one hundred, and then he had to restart the whole thing anyway. It could have waited until the morning but his curiosity had got the better of him.

There was one photograph on the website – not a professional portrait but the upper two thirds of her on a beach somewhere, looking into the camera, the wind lifting her hair, blowing a single tress across her face. Light-coloured hair, it must be blonde, or was when the image was taken, which could, of course, have been years ago. In the picture she was probably in her thirties, late thirties, wearing an anorak and jeans, the jacket zipped up against the cold, a serious, intelligent-looking face with its chin resting on the high collar.

The biography added little to what he had read in the book. ‘A first class degree’ – people couldn’t resist letting you know that, but fair enough if it was from Cambridge University proper and not some backstreet private college with a new notice-board. He wondered how many Oxbridge graduates joined the police these days, and decided it was probably more than it used to be, what with the devaluation of all degrees. And there was Waters, too, with his degree – first class – in history. How on earth had plodders like himself managed to make a go of it, eh? But then, A levels in his time probably equated to a lot of the degrees today.

The website had links to her books. He clicked on the other two and was able to look inside the digital versions, the things that he sometimes saw people reading on their mini pads or whatever they were called. The same style of writing, respectful, factual, unbiased, and then he read some of the reviews that people had posted; all complimentary, nothing below four stars out of five, and it was clear that a couple of these were by readers who were in, or who had once been in, the job. The books were not cheap compared to some of the ‘you might also like’ ones but it was obvious that plenty of people still bought them. When he looked under ‘Contact me’ he found the email address, and another one for her publisher, but no reference to Facebook or another social network. That was interesting. Even Smith had realized the usefulness of these recently when you were first taking a look at someone, but if she was on such a network Joanne Evison was not publicising it here.

When he shut down the computer, it was almost midnight. He turned out the light and then looked out of the curtained window. All quiet on Old Street. The road was dry and on the parked cars there was a sheen of frost. Away from the streetlight that half-illuminated his own small front garden, the night had a bluish tint – somewhere above there must be a moon in the clear sky. As he watched, waiting for tiredness, a cat leapt up out of the shadows and sat on the low brick wall between his garden and the next. Only its silhouette was visible in the moonlight. It was still there when he finally closed the curtains.

Even on a Sunday he was up by seven o’clock. If asked, he would blame his days in the army but he had not enjoyed lying in bed even as a teenager. By seven thirty he was back from the newsagent’s with a copy of the Sunday Telegraph, one of the two newspapers that he read every week; the new Asian owners had stopped asking now if he would prefer to have the Sunday paper delivered. He liked the short walk, even on mornings like this one when every breath clouded the air and one could feel the pavement slipping away, however carefully one walked.

Two rounds of toast, the French coffee for Sunday mornings, and switch the heating on again so that he could sit in the conservatory. After a glance at the headlines, he lowered the paper and thought again about Joanne Evison’s book, upstairs on his table. No need for a quick decision on that, no need at all, but it surprised him that there was a decision to be made. He would leave it for a few days and then look at the book again, try to imagine his name in the text instead of Detective Superintendent whoever-she-was. And then there was the question of the families of the murdered girls – how was that all sorted out? The thought left him cold for a moment – perhaps there wasn’t really any decision to be made, after all.

One consequence of such a busy Saturday was that his weekly shopping had not been done. He would go to the supermarket after breakfast and a proper read of the paper, and then see what the afternoon might bring. The thought repeated itself and with it came a little, rueful smile – probably not too many surprises, David. He opened his mobile then and found a message from Marcia Williams – ‘Thanks for the coffee. Really enjoyed our chat. Do it again?’ Followed by an ‘X’. Blimey. Then he looked at the time and date and realized that it had arrived yesterday afternoon. How had he missed it? And what was she thinking now? He found ‘Reply’, and then fumbled with his first few letters, writing ‘Tanks’ twice as if he was reporting on a military advance. A white lie was the only realistic option, and so he texted that his phone had been left on silent because… Well, just left on silent. Perhaps she would imagine he had been on a delicate investigation.

He had thought that the supermarket would be less busy late on a Sunday morning than early on a Saturday but if anything it was worse. What sort of lives do these people lead? But it’s the new religion, shopping, and here he was, paying homage, part of the crowd that was annoying others judging by the gloomy looks on the faces around him. Some, he noticed, had Christmas things in the trolleys, buying up discounted items ready for next year – he could not imagine planning that far ahead now. Once upon a time he had done so, and it had been a strength; now it seemed futile, and only at work did he still make the lists and flow charts that once gave order to his whole existence.

Work was still on his mind when he turned the corner into the next aisle and saw them. They were sharing a trolley, which was already half full, and had stopped by the shelves of cosmetics. Rita Sanchez was holding up some small object close to Irene Miller’s face and peering from one to the other, while her manager stood very still and watched her. It must be an item of make-up – Rita reached to the shelf and picked up another, repeating the process. When Irene moved to look, Rita scolded her, took her face gently in both hands and turned it into the light again.

Smith stepped back to the corner of the aisle so that he was half-hidden and watched them. They were talking quietly to each other, smiling, suppressing laughter, especially Rita Sanchez – they were oblivious of the customers who passed by them. If anyone noticed, any of those customers, what did they see? Two women, friends, out shopping together, one advising the other on which eye shadow to buy. That wasn’t what Smith saw. He saw two people in love, two happy, unconcerned people with nothing on their consciences. All week the police had been in their offices and all over their work, and they were not worried. It might be complacency but Smith’s instincts told him otherwise. They had been on his list, albeit low down. Now he was certain that he could cross them off it altogether.

# Chapter Twelve

“Well, I’m sorry to ask this, Mrs Bradley, but had your mother ever indicated to you that she might at some point want to take her own life?”

On the drive over, he and Alison Reeve had agreed an approach; as she had already met them and had been sympathetic when she told them about the unexpected test results, she would continue in that role. Smith, whom they had not met, would ask the difficult questions.

“No, she didn’t ever say that.”

The Bradleys sat together but apart on the couch, the cups of tea that they had made untouched on the coffee table in front of them. Smith had left his too, as a sort of mark of respect, but he really fancied a sip or two now.

“It’s just that I noticed in her medical file that she has an advance directive – she had stated that she did not wish to be resuscitated. In my experience, people who have thought that far ahead have often considered the whole matter of how they will end their days more fully than most of us do.”

He had put it as delicately as he could. Mrs Bradley nodded, though she was obviously upset by the thought; it was her husband who looked angry on her behalf, as he had done more than once since the interview began. He spoke now, directing his words to the senior of the two detectives.

“Joan never hinted at any such thing to us. She was very happy in Rosemary House.”

Nevertheless, it was Smith who continued.

“I also noted that Mrs Riley’s medical condition was deteriorating. That might have been weighing on her mind – in fact, I’m sure it must have been as she was by all accounts quite alert and fully understood her situation.”

“We do not believe that Joan would have taken her own life. Somebody gave her that drug, Inspector.”

Reeve and Smith looked at each and somehow agreed that she would deal with this awkward point.

“Mrs Bradley. My officers have looked closely at all the forensic evidence. They have interviewed several witnesses and they have spent several hours discussing what happened to Joan. I have to tell you that there is no evidence that your mother was in any way forced to take the heroin that was found in her system. So we have to think carefully about what we mean when we say that someone ‘gave her the drug’. At the moment we believe that the most likely scenario is that someone procured and handed the heroin to your mother but that she chose to take it. It is not a substance one takes by accident or unknowingly; we are told it would be impossible to disguise the taste of a concentrated dose. I’m sorry.”

Mrs Riley’s daughter was determined not to cry, despite the nightmare of having to relive her mother’s death all over again, and Smith had a certain sympathy for her. Mrs Riley’s son-in-law looked from his wife to the officers, clearly uncertain about how to proceed in the light of what had just been said.

After a silence Reeve said, “I am not implying anything in what I am about to say, Mrs Bradley. It is obvious that serious offences have been committed but if a family member has been asked to end someone’s suffering and they do so, the law does take a somewhat different view of the matter than it does if the person assisting the suicide is unrelated or is a medical professional.”

“I think you bloody well are implying something! How can you suggest that my wife, that anyone in this family would – she wasn’t depressed, she wasn’t in pain, ask her bloody doctor!”

Smith said very quietly, “I’ll be doing just that at two o’clock this afternoon, sir.”

Then he picked up the teacup – it was obvious now that he and Tony Bradley would not be exchanging Christmas cards this year.

“These are very difficult cases, Mr and Mrs Bradley, and it’s natural to feel upset. My sergeant will not ask you anything that we do not feel is essential to the investigation. You have my word on that. Sergeant?”

Smith opened his notebook as if he had the list of questions prepared and written down.

“Did Mrs Riley manage her own bank accounts, Mrs Bradley?”

“No, not for the last year or so. I have full power of attorney.”

“I see – that’s pretty common these days, with the ageing population. Are your mother’s accounts held at the same bank as your own?”

“Yes.”

“Would you have any objection to us seeing those accounts, if we feel it is necessary? This is generally just a matter of elimination-”

“Eliminating what? Are you suggesting that we were after her money? Inspector, this is not acceptable at all. My wife has suffered enough.”

Smith was spending more and more time studying the face of Tony Bradley. He seemed to be losing the plot – Reeve might have to ask him to leave the room but it would be more useful if he stayed and got even more annoyed.

He decided to give that a try with, “It’s routine when we have to look for possible motives, Mr Bradley. Sadly there are some very unscrupulous people in the world. That’s why we do have the right in law to access anyone’s bank accounts in a criminal investigation.”

“Do you? We live in a police state, then.”

“And while we’re on the subject, sir, do you and your wife have a joint account?”

“Yes, we do.”

“What about your business accounts, Mr Bradley? Lake Bodyworks, isn’t it?”

For the first time, Bradley looked back into the gaze that was fixed upon him. Was the man smiling at him or was that just his imagination? Was the detective trying to frighten him?

“Yes – what about my business accounts?”

“We just need to know if they are separate from anything connected to Mrs Riley, sir.”

“Of course they are.”

“Thank you. And can I ask whether your mother left a will, Mrs Bradley?”

Yes, she had, and no, there had been no recent changes to it. When Smith asked her whether they could see the will if necessary, his eyes remained more or less on her husband but the man’s anger seemed to have disappeared, leaving behind an expression that was more concerned with personal survival than with the theoretical debate about whether Smith was part of a police state.

Alison Reeve asked how Mrs Riley had been on that last Saturday morning, and was told by Mr Bradley, with a look to his wife, that she had been her usual self. Then Smith asked Mrs Bradley if she had met any of her mother’s friends – he named the four people whom he now knew had been closest to her. Yes, she had met them several times, and had sat with them in the social room. They were delightful people who had made her mother very happy in her final years; she would go in to say thank you to them soon, when this business was over. They must have been upset by it, too.

They had stood up and were preparing to leave when Smith seemed to remember another question. Had they ever given Joan any money, a sum of cash? It was Mrs Bradley who answered.

“No. We paid her money into the account in the office. They don’t like them to have cash.”

“Yes, they seem quite strict about that. You can see why. I just wondered – did Mrs Riley ever ask you to bring her any cash – even just a few notes?”

“No.”

Reeve was moving towards the door. He tried to get her attention but she was thanking Mr Bradley, thanking him for his patience and understanding at this difficult time, the usual platitudes. Smith caught Sarah Bradley’s eyes again, and again she looked away from him. She had wavered for the first time in her answers but the moment had gone.

As she drove back to the station, Reeve gave her verdict. She had thought that Mrs Bradley was straight enough and that Mr Bradley was a bit of a bully, probably taking some advantage of his wife’s emotional trauma. Smith was still thinking about that missed opportunity as they were leaving but said nothing. He might have been wrong – it had been known. But he made a mental note and tonight he would make a written one, for future reference, just in case.

He said, “Taking advantage how? Financially?”

“I don’t know. It’s possible, isn’t it, from what you told me about his company? But if it gets a cash injection in a couple of months, so what? It’s their money now.”

“We could check the will but no-one blinked when I mentioned it. I’m guessing it’ll look straight up if we do. It might be worth examining the old lady’s bank account, though, just to see if anyone has had anything substantial out of it over the past year. If they were desperate enough, that might show something.”

She nodded and said, “I had the same thought. Let me do it, DC. I need to stay operational at least part of the time. If I ever get another interview, all I’ll be able to talk about is staffing strategies, managing overtime budgets and six monthly reviews.”

“I’d ring her up at work with no Mr B around. Ask her nicely for her consent to have a look, even though she now knows we don’t need it, being part of a police state. See how she is on her own, woman to woman.”

The evasive look in Sarah Bradley’s eyes would not go away.

Reeve agreed, and they drove on into Lake. The early brightness had given way first to rain and then to sleet – Reeve switched on the wipers and other cars switched on their headlights although it was not yet midday. When they found themselves in the usual jam at the western bypass interchange, she switched on the radio, jabbed in a couple of station changes and then switched it off again – something was bothering her.

“DC, can I ask you something? It’s personal but sort of connected to this case.”

“You want to see my bank statements? Oh God, caught at last. All those bribes from Ma Budge. Why didn’t I open an offshore account?”

“Thanks for that. Trying to be serious about something a bit awkward…”

And she was, he could see that now. He told her to go ahead.

“Years ago, when Sheila was really ill, you said something. I’m sorry to bring this up… You said something about a conversation you’d had, the two of you.”

He could remember both conversations, the one with Sheila and the one with Alison.

“Yes.”

“Well, what I wanted to say was, if this investigation is difficult because of that, in any way… Or if it becomes difficult, you should tell me. You know what I’m talking about. I mean difficult personally or professionally, you should tell me.”

Smith sometimes assumed that only he had that sort of memory, and that was a mistake. He had made that mistake before, both with colleagues and with clients, as one laughable memo from on high had called the villains a couple of years ago. Clients! His mind was trying to draw him away from what Reeve had just said to him, and he took a moment to re-focus before responding.

“It’s not a problem. But thanks for thinking about it.”

“If it becomes a problem, DC, you need to let me know.”

So she was reading the case as he was, guessing which way this was likely to go.

“If it does, I will.”

“Sorry I had to bring it up.”

“Just doing your job. Well.”

“Thanks.”

They were almost at the top of the hill, could see the roundabout ahead and beyond it the view down into the old city. Through the thin, miserable sleet he could name every church spire, knew the businesses that occupied every commercial block and could detail the criminal records of occupants of every one of the towers out to the east. The cranes at the docks were skeletal and barely visible now but if you watched long enough from here you would see them swing loads onto ships bound for European ports, and no doubt some of those loads contained contraband that he would be able to find if he had the time and the men to do it. Priorities. Long ago, DCI Miller had said to him that it was a war – we advance, we retreat, Smith, but you’d better make sure that we never lose. The law is the wavy line between order and anarchy, between civilisation and chaos… The old bugger was a bit of a philosopher in the saloon bar after a big case. What would he have made of this investigation into the quietly dignified death of an old lady who had decided her time had come?

“There’s one more thing, David.”

David? Oh dear.

“I spoke to Allen about the idea of you going onto the Regional S.C.U. I told him that you were not keen on it.”

“Right.”

“But he wasn’t convinced. He wants to talk to you himself, see if he can’t persuade you to better yourself.”

At all times Smith tried to avoid swearing at or in front of ladies, even though Reeve was probably having a quiet smile to herself. He closed his eyes and muttered, “Joy of bloody joys.”

As they waited at the surgery’s reception desk, the thought occurred again to Smith that Waters had grown into the job quickly. He was relaxed as the two secretaries behind the receptionist exchanged knowing looks because the police were here, wanting to speak to one of the doctors – a few short months ago Waters would have blushed. Now he spent the time examining the noticeboards, particularly the one that detailed the names and qualifications of all the surgery’s staff. At some point in the future, something there might come in useful.

Dr Tremewan appeared and invited them into her room as if they were an odd pair of patients, and Smith wondered what some of the others in the waiting room made of it. Once inside and seated, he said to her that he guessed she knew why they were there – an invitation to say what she did know, which she accepted. She had received copies of the results from the laboratories, and she expressed surprise that she had waited this long for a visit; when Smith commented that the reason was that she was not top of their list of suspects, she seemed to take that seriously – at least, she didn’t smile. It was then that he sensed this might not be as straightforward an interview as he had been assuming.

She told them where she had been when she received the phone call that Saturday, how long it had taken her to drive to Rosemary House and what she had seen on entering Joan Riley’s room. Smith asked her to be precise about the time that she entered the room, and she pointed to her notes which lay open and ready on the desk in front of her. Then she described her examination of the body, mentioning that she had taken its temperature.

“Did you? Why?”

“Because it can sometimes help to establish the time of death.”

Considering the potential seriousness of the case, they didn’t seem to have sent a very knowledgeable detective. They didn’t even seem to have sent one who looked much like a detective – he reminded her of Mr Wood, her first chemistry teacher, a shy, ineffectual little man.

“Well, it can if later readings are taken at measured points in time. Were they? No mention of it in any of the reports.”

She looked down momentarily at the file. She could search through it but knew that he was right – there was no mention of further checks.

“So as far as we know, other readings were not taken. Did you ask for them? Have you followed it up at all?”

“No, I didn’t and no, I haven’t. I-”

“Never mind. As it happens we have a pretty narrow time frame on it. It was a good idea though…”

Not quite like Mr Wood, after all. It might be a mistake but she gave in to the temptation to justify herself a little.

“I apologise, Sergeant. I have only worked in the area a few months and things are done quite differently here to the way they were in my previous authority. And I’ll admit that despite appearances, I haven’t been in the job that long. I haven’t dealt with many sudden deaths.”

Appearances? She must be all of thirty.

“Well, despite appearances, I’ve been in this job for far too long and I still make mistakes every day. We’ve got the very man to confirm that sitting here with us. Any questions, DC Waters?”

This time Smith hadn’t primed Waters at all.

“Thank you, DS Smith.”

Cheeky sod.

“Can you tell us about Mrs Riley’s state of health? You examined her on the Friday, the day before her death.”

“No, I didn’t examine her. I chatted to her and asked her if she had any problems.”

“And did she?”

“I’d say she was more or less her usual self.”

Smith was watching the doctor but he sensed Waters simply raising his eyebrows. At that point he would not have said anything and neither did Waters.

“I would say that Mrs Riley was becoming weaker. In addition to the ongoing osteoporosis, she had less energy and had lost some weight, I imagine. The most likely cause was deterioration in her kidney function. She was an intelligent woman and aware of this. Mentally she was still alert and did not seem unhappy.”

Smith said, “When you had that chat, were you alone with her?”

“No. We were in one of the shared side rooms. At least two other residents were there. Why?”

“But presumably you were alone with Mrs Riley when you had examined her previously?”

“No, never. There is always a carer present in an examination – it’s the home’s policy. And a good one.”

“I agree. We have to ask these questions, Dr Tremewan. They don’t always seem very polite or even to make sense to people outside, a bit like some aspects of your own job. Sorry, DC Waters…”

He took it up again without hesitation.

“In PC Ford’s statement, he says that you picked up a glass from the floor beside Mrs Riley’s body and handed it to him. Presumably the glass was empty?”

She coloured a little – like Ford himself, she now realized the potential significance of the glass on the floor.

“It was, and on its side. I am sorry about this. As GPs we get about half a day’s training on crime scene investigation and police procedures. It never occurred to me. If it had been a younger, fitter patient then it might have done.”

“We can be pretty sure that’s how Mrs Riley took the heroin, from the autopsy results. The glass might have told us more but you were not the only person to miss it, Doctor.”

In their interview techniques, detectives tend to specialize either in nasty or nice – Smith wasn’t sure which way Waters was going yet but he was doing alright. And the next question was a beauty.

“May I ask why you were unwilling to complete the medical certificate? I’m right in thinking that you could have done so?”

She thought longer about that question than the others she had been asked.

“I wasn’t – certain, that’s all. She had medical conditions that were in the end going to be life-threatening but, as you know, I had seen her just the day before, and… Well, look, it seems very unscientific but one of my very first cases here a few months ago was also at Rosemary House. Another old lady found in her bed in the morning. She had more serious heart problems, and I signed that certificate. There wasn’t an autopsy.”

“But?”

She looked from Waters to Smith, and then she shrugged.

Smith said, “Dr Tremewan, are you saying that something reminded you of the earlier death?”

“‘Reminded’ is too strong – it was almost subconscious. I’d only been here a matter of days before the first one, and afterwards I’d wondered if I should have done it differently. So the second time, I did.”

Smith nodded, considering his next question, but she spoke again before he could formulate it.

“And I do have to be aware of my position in cases like this, I know that.”

“What position is that?”

She looked suddenly very knowing, as if Smith had tried to catch her out in a lie.

“I’m not naïve enough to think that you won’t have looked me up, Sergeant. I don’t make any secret of the fact that I am an active member of CLARIFY.”

“Fair enough. As you’ve brought it up, could you explain to us how that has a bearing on the matter in hand?”

She certainly could. All its members were medical professionals, including a number of eminent consultants – she made that point more than once. Whilst some in the NHS were content with the vagueness of the law when it comes to the questions of assisted dying and assisted suicide, leaving it to the CPS to decide case by case whether a professional had stepped over a virtually invisible line, others were determined to have new laws that brought all the decision-making processes into the open. Dr Tremewan had joined as a student – her experiences since had only strengthened her belief in the cause.

At the end of it, Smith simply nodded and said, “Mrs Riley didn’t ask you to assist her in committing suicide, did she?”

“No.”

“And you never discussed the matter with her? You never mentioned CLARIFY or its aims?”

“Of course not.”

“Thank you. I never thought for a moment that you would have done so. I just have one other question, if you don’t mind?”

“Go on.”

“That first case at Rosemary House, a lady found in her bed. Do you happen to recall the name?”

The GP swivelled round in her chair to a second computer on the shelf behind her. The screen flickered into life and she began clicking through menus. Smith looked at Waters, held up one hand and then crossed the index and middle fingers.

“Here it is. Do you want me to print anything out?”

“No, not for now. Just the name will do.”

“Right. Her name was Elspeth Grey.”

As they passed the duty desk, Charlie called him over.

“Your phone off?”

Smith took out his mobile and found that this time it really was on silent. He had no idea how.

“What’s up, Charlie?”

“Ring her ladyship as soon as…”

He did, from the situation room. There had been a development with Mrs Bradley, who would be in the building any moment now. Smith gave a low whistle and said, “You’re bringing her in? What’s she said?”

“Nothing yet but I rang her and she asked to see me, virtually straight away. Something’s been on her mind since we were there this morning, I’d say.”

“Coming on her own, I hope.”

“Yes. This is how I want to play it, DC. As soon as she gets in I’ll ask her if she thinks she is going to say anything that could lead to charges for anyone. If it’s a yes, I’ll want you up here, a recording, the works. If it’s a no, and if I’m sure of that, I’ll talk to her informally and brief you afterwards. Whatever – stay in the building, OK?”

Amazing how a bit of practical could bring a decent copper back to life after all the management nonsense; it made him remember some of the reasons why he had climbed back down the ladder himself. Reeve was positively excited.

Waters was impressed by how Smith had used the web to get the background on Dr Tremewan and CLARIFY. When Smith confessed that he had never heard of said organization, Waters was even more impressed by the deception, and then Smith corrected him.

“No, that’s the point – I didn’t deceive her, did I? She made assumptions and then she deceived herself. As I’ve said before, people will often tell you more if you don’t ask them too many questions. And let them make assumptions about what we know; all but the real villains will assume that we know more than we do, and they give themselves away. My old PE teacher used to say ‘To assume makes an ass of you and me’. Mr Gudgeon, that was. First time he said it, I didn’t get it, not till hours later in Geography or something – the ‘u’ and the ‘me’. It still makes me smile. Coppers should have it tattooed on their left buttock.”

Waters took an image of Dr Tremewan from the surgery’s website and pinned it up on the board. It was Smith’s idea. The boards looked a bit sparse, and adding a few more pictures and lines might make it look as if they had been busy and were getting somewhere.

Waters said, “You don’t think she’s involved, do you?”

“Tell me what you think.”

He took his time.

“I didn’t get anything that made me suspicious. But I had a thought about that glass. If she had been involved, being seen handing it to a policeman was a good move. Prints, DNA, nothing would count then in court, would it?”

“No, you’re right. Anything else?”

“Well, there are precedents – Shipman? But then, why not just sign the certificate?”

“And why draw our attention to another death if she is an apprentice of Dr Harold? Why use heroin when she has access to other goodies? Unless that was a clever attempt to throw us off. And we only have her word for it that she never saw Joan alone. Is that worth checking out?”

They sat and stared at the board for half a minute before Smith continued.

“No… But she has to be up there, just in case. Can you imagine the fuss if we’re wrong and it turned out we knew all about CLARIFY? Write a bit about that up there, in the name of CMB.”

“CMB?”

“Cover my backside.”

“And mine?”

“I’d rather not think about that, thanks.”

He picked up another marker pen and joined Waters at the boards – they had two in operation now, so it was starting to look more convincing. Between the names of Irene Miller and Rita Sanchez, Maggie had drawn a line with a question mark at its centre; Smith rubbed out the question mark, joined the line together and wrote ‘Relationship’ above it. Not that it mattered – he was increasingly certain the answers to the puzzle lay in a quite different direction. Maggie? He had tried to call her mobile on the Sunday and there had been no answer, no message back, and it had gone out of his mind entirely today. No sign of John either… And then the realization that it must be something serious.

“But what we do need to think about is the name the good doctor gave us. Elspeth Grey – lovely name. Coincidence? The first death she dealt at the home was the first in this little group of friends, this tight little gang of grannies and grandpas, and it’s been niggling away at her ever since. Heart trouble, she said. Let’s have another look at Ms Grey’s files. Give me the general one and you take the medical.”

As he read, more carefully than the last time he looked at this, Smith’s mind was also simultaneously aware of other aspects of the case – no call from Alison Reeve must mean that the conversation with Sarah Bradley had taken an informal direction, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t important. Something told him that it was, just as something was now telling him that focusing back on the deceased Ms Grey, the lady with the lovely name who ran her own jewellery business, was the right way to go. Instinct, intuition or just long experience?

“Here we go, DC. There’s a bit of technical stuff about her heart problems. She had an examination at the General about two months before she died. Worsening condition, and they increased her medication. Notes about side effects.”

Smith considered it.

“So both old ladies had worsening medical complaints, serious things, kidneys, hearts. But at their ages it’s what you’d expect, isn’t it? We probably couldn’t find two residents in there who didn’t have something similar.”

Waters continued leafing through the file until he reached the end. Then he held it up, open and towards Smith.

“Didn’t you say Joan Riley had one of these?”

“Is that what I think it is?”

“It’s a DNR notice.”

“Yes she did, then. Get the other three medical files, chuck one of them to me.”

Nancy Bishop and Martin Collins had similar notices.

“We didn’t spot that, even though I specifically asked Irene Miller how frequent they are. Bloody idiot – me, not Ms Miller.”

Waters didn’t look impressed.

“So? Are these unusual? I don’t see why.”

“Ms Miller reckoned only about ten per cent of her clientele would have these. She has about fifty residents – that makes five, by my reckoning. And we have four of them on this table.”

It was after five o’clock when Alison Reeve entered the incident room. She sat down with Smith, who waved Waters into the conversation; he explained that in the absence of the other two, Waters would need to take Maggie’s place.

Reeve said, “We should know something shortly – John’s in the building, he’s coming up to see me. Anyway, Mrs Bradley. Any guesses?”

“Well, as I’m still sitting here, I’m assuming” - with a glance at Waters - “that she has not confessed to everything. I’m also assuming that she knows something that she didn’t want to say in front of her husband.”

Not bad, said Reeve. Sarah Bradley had admitted that on the morning of the 6th of December when they had visited Joan, the old lady had not been herself for the whole of the visit. When the time came to say goodbye, at about half past twelve, her mother had taken her hand and held it for some time – a display of affection that was almost out of character. And she had said thank you several times in a way that had left an impression on her daughter for the rest of the day. Just ‘thank you’ even though nothing out of the ordinary had been done for her that day. To Waters it seemed rather slight but he could see that it interested Smith.

Reeve paused and then said, “There’s more. Two weeks before that visit, Mrs Riley had asked her daughter for a sum of money, cash for herself, not simply a top-up for her account. Sarah Bradley said that she couldn’t because of the home’s policy but her mother insisted and became upset about it.”

Smith said, “Mr Bradley not present?”

“No. He didn’t go every Saturday. Sarah gave her mother the money the following Saturday, a week before she died.”

“How much?”

“One hundred pounds in twenties.”

“Did she ask what her mother wanted it for?”

“Yes. All she said was ‘It’s not for me’. But having the money seemed to make her mother very happy. Sarah is now in a bit of a state – you can imagine what she’s thinking.”

Smith nodded and said, “She might be right. A hundred would do it unless I’m completely out of touch on street prices. But ‘It’s not for me’ is an odd thing to say, in the circumstances. All in a statement?”

“Signed and dated.”

“Great work, boss. There’s a place for you on my team whenever you want it.”

He was on the point of telling her about the discovery of the advance directives when the door opened and John Murray’s large frame filled the entrance to the room. He didn’t say anything but that in itself was not unusual – Smith tried to read the expression but it was an unfamiliar one.

Reeve said, “John, come in. How’s Maggie?”

He closed the door, walked towards the table where they were all seated but did not sit himself. With a closer view of it, Smith concluded that the expression on Murray’s face was actually bewilderment. Eventually, the new arrival answered the question.

“Well, she…had a lot of tests. They kept fetching different doctors but then yesterday afternoon they told us. They told us that she’s pregnant.”

Reeve was up with her arms around him immediately, while Smith stood and waited, watching the face, trying to guess if things were OK, whatever that meant in such circumstances. They seemed to be - John was smiling at Alison’s excitement, and he began to describe how odd Maggie had been feeling, how worried they had become, how the weekend had been an eternity.

Smith said, ‘I tried to ring but no-one answered.”

“Sorry, DC. It all got too much. We turned the phones off. And sorry about today. We had to go back for more tests because, well, she’s no spring chicken and-” – Reeve said ‘John!’ – “she’ll have to be careful. But they said she’s OK. They’re both OK.”

And when he said ‘both’ the flood-bank almost gave way.

Reeve said, “How far is she, John? I can’t believe it!”

“They reckon almost three months. I can’t believe it either. I mean, we’d sort of decided, and… I don’t know how it happened, really.”

Smith looked around at Waters and Reeve before turning back to John Murray.

“Well, John, for future reference, if you’ve got a piece of paper, I can draw you a picture…”

# Chapter Thirteen

Kipras Kazlauskas was reading the New Scientist magazine. It was not yet nine in the morning but already he had studied articles about the interface between nature conservation in East Africa and satellite monitoring technology, and the biotechnology community growing up around Cambridge, which was not so very far away. Now he was engrossed in the item that had really caught his imagination when he saw the cover of the magazine on the table in the social area of Rosemary House – the future of transplant research. Always this had fascinated him; it had been one of his dreams when he first went to the medical school, a dream that had lasted just a few months. Even so, there was nothing to stop him reading and wondering about what might have been, what might yet still be. Who can tell?

He was not so foolish as to have asked Mrs Reed for the magazine but Ms Miller had said yes, he could take any that were of no interest to the residents – after all, they were donations in the first place and cost the home nothing. He turned the page and continued reading slowly and carefully. He might have done this – first the specialization in surgery, then extra work in the biochemistry of rejection. The article was technical in parts but he felt himself able to follow it still.

There was rarely a knock at his door, and at first he assumed that it must be at one of the other two bedsits on his landing. When it came again, louder and more persistent, he got up, folded the magazine so that he did not lose his place and went to the door. He could hear voices now, two men’s voices as he opened it.

“Mr Kipras Kazlauskas?”

The man who spoke was about his own age, tall and fair-haired, wearing a zipper jacket and casual trousers but behind him stood a large, stern-faced policeman in uniform. Kipras looked from one to the other and nodded.

“I am Detective Constable Waters, and this is Sergeant Hills. We’re both from Lake Central police station. Can we come in, sir? We’d like a word.”

The room was tidy; even the work-surface in the tiny kitchen was spotless. Waters thought ruefully about the flats he had shared in his student days, and then he turned back to the young Lithuanian man.

“I believe that you have already spoken to my colleague, Detective Sergeant Smith, Mr Kazlauskas.”

“Yes. At Rosemary House. What is the trouble?”

“No trouble, sir, but we’d like to ask you a few more questions, if you don’t mind.”

“It is OK. What do you wish to ask me?”

“We’d rather you came down to the station this time, Mr Kazlauskas.”

The sergeant’s gaze had been travelling slowly around the room – now it came to rest on the young foreigner’s face. The door to the bedsit was still ajar and Kipras looked in that direction involuntarily; it was a mistake, of course, and he knew that the uniformed man was ready to bar his way if he moved towards it.

“You are arresting me?”

“Absolutely not, sir. But we would like to speak to you at the station.”

“I have work soon.”

“Yes, your shift begins at twelve o’clock today. If we can get on with things, I’m sure that we can give you a lift so that you aren’t late.”

Charlie Hills nodded, never taking his eyes from those of Kazlauskas – DC had asked him to accompany Waters on his first fetch and the boy was doing well, not threatening but quietly insistent.

Kipras picked up the magazine, closed it and placed it neatly on his table.

“You don’t mind if I call you Kip, do you?”

“It is OK.”

“Only I’ve been talking to some of the residents and that’s what they call you, isn’t it? You’ve got a bit of a fan club. You know who I mean – Nancy and Martin and Ralph. And I think that Elspeth and Joan were founder members too, before they passed away. I don’t think they want to be on first-name terms with all the carers, to be honest, but you’re the exception, Kip. It’s a bit of a compliment to you.”

The young man shrugged and raised his eyebrows. He hadn’t touched the mug of tea in front of him, and neither had Waters but Smith had drunk his and could do with another one. He fancied a cigarette, too, always did during interviews, especially when they got interesting; in the past you could play all sorts of psychological games with boxes of cigarettes, boxes of matches and lighters but now it was viewed as a health risk – heaven help us.

“Anyway, Kip, I haven’t turned this recorder on. This isn’t a formal interview but you are welcome to have a legal representative here, either your own or one that we’ll find for you. Got all that?”

Still just the nod and the wary look – there was nothing on his record but he seemed distinctly nervous.

“OK. We brought you here because we need to ask you some more questions about the night that Mrs Riley died. Remember what you told us before? You were second into the room after Kayleigh Greene. Then Ms Miller asked you to lock the door. She told you to stay outside the room, to keep the door locked until someone else came up to sort things out. You were present when the policeman and Ms Miller came up, and you saw the doctor arrive. I’m sure that you can remember all that clearly. Have I missed anything out?”

“No. That is what happened.”

“And what about you?”

“About me? I do not-”

“I mean, have you missed anything out?”

The detective’s expression was still friendly, the eyes were still smiling, but something had changed. Kipras frowned as if trying to remember and shook his head slightly but the policeman said nothing more.

“No, I have told everything, that is what happened.”

“In that case, Detective Constable Waters will read something to us.”

Waters picked up the notes that Smith had made during the interviews with Martin Collins and Ralph Greenwood and read aloud the parts that pertained to the assistance given to Collins by Kipras that night, when he had found himself unable to get out of the toilets. When he read aloud the times, Smith interrupted and asked him to repeat those details, watching Kipras’s face pointedly as he did so. When it was over, Smith sat with his palms raised and a look of mystification on his face.

“Kip, you see our problem. These two gentlemen are not going to have made a mistake about the night on which that happened, are they? And they have independently told us the same time at which it happened. We could even check the TV schedule to see what time that football match was on. So…?”

It was only momentary but Smith did not miss the first reaction on the carer’s face – it was a look of relief. He knew then that Kipras had been expecting something else, something worse – he knew then, too, that his suspicions about the nature of the relationship between Joan Riley and Kazlauskas were probably correct.

“For five minutes, maybe for ten, yes. I forgot this – I did go to Martin. But I took the key, and when I got back there is no-one there. All was OK. I forgot this but I think it caused no harm.”

“Kipras, did you go into Mrs Riley’s room yourself, after Ms Miller told you what to do?”

The detective wasn’t smiling any more.

“No, I did not.”

“To your knowledge, did anyone else go into the room? Did you let anyone into the room?”

“No.”

“Do you think that anyone else might have gone into the room during the time that you were away from it?”

Waters’ head was motionless but his eyes followed the questions back to the recipient each time, as if he was watching a game of tennis; somehow Smith had got to the net and Kipras was somewhere out beyond the baseline. This time the ball did not come back – there was only an awkward silence.

To Smith, the explanation was simple. Fundamentally honest people will sometimes lie but they do not enjoy it, and they are not very good at it. He had concluded some time ago that Kipras Kazlauskas was fundamentally honest and so the sooner they could get past this opening exchange, the better for all concerned. When the silence had gone on a little too long, Smith sighed and placed his hands on the table, as if he was laying out the cards that he held.

“Kipras – you are holding up this investigation. You are wasting our valuable time. I have to tell you that we’re dealing with the easy matter first. After this, I’m going to ask you to explain why you said that Mrs Riley was a generous person, and then I’m going to ask you about the missing one hundred pounds. At this rate, you’re going to be late for work, son.”

He wanted to tell them everything but the sergeant would not make any promises. That in itself made Kipras trust him a little; the detective said it himself, that it would be very easy for him to make all sorts of promises now, here, in this informal interview that was still not being recorded, but he would not do so. If Kipras had broken the law, he would be charged – but if he had not, then maybe he would be able to keep his job. Only after he had told them what he knew would the policeman be able to decide.

When the room had been locked the first time, Mrs Riley’s eyes had still been open. This was not a sight that he would forget or be mistaken about – her head tilted against the back of the chair, her eyes open, staring sightlessly out of the window. And the chair had been moved to that position, it was not in its usual place. It was a heavy chair, too heavy for Mrs Riley to have moved on her own since she became quite weak. The sergeant asked him again – could someone have closed the old lady’s eyes when the room was unlocked the first time, Ms Miller perhaps, but he was sure that this had not happened; when he opened the door for the manager and the policeman, the first thing he had done was to look at Mrs Riley again – and her eyes were closed.

The two detectives talked quietly to each other, and the young one who had brought Kipras to the station left the room. Kipras was asked if he would like a fresh cup of tea, and then the sergeant began to read again through the papers in front of him, and through a little black notebook. After a minute or two, Kipras looked at his phone to check the time; he was not sure of the way from here – he would be late for work, for the first time.

About ten minutes later the young detective returned.

“Did you manage to speak to Olive?”

“Yes, on the phone.”

“You didn’t call her Olive, did you? If you did, your career might have just come to an abrupt end. What did she say? It’s a pretty weird question.”

“Most unlikely – she has never heard of it.”

The sergeant turned to Kipras.

“It would appear, then, that if Mrs Riley’s eyes were closed, somebody closed them for her.”

“But the room was locked. By me. I check before I leave it and when I came back.”

“There are other keys. DC Waters and I will speak to everyone who has a key. However, I doubt…”

Smith stopped speaking and stared down into the notebook, as if he had just found something there that he hadn’t noticed before. Ten slow seconds passed.

“Kip – does each resident’s door have an individual lock? Does each one have a different key?”

“Yes. All different, for privacy.”

Another silence before DC Waters asked the next question.

“What about the pass key, for when the staff have to open a door?”

“Only one pass key, it opens all doors.”

Now all three of them seemed to be puzzling over the problem.

Smith broke the silence eventually.

“Kip, is it possible that one of the residents might have a pass key?”

“No, no, not allowed at all. Ms Miller is very careful about keys. Every week we are told about security – never tell the codes and never put down keys, always in the pocket. It would not be allowed.”

“I know it’s not allowed, son, but I asked if it was possible.”

The boy wasn’t stupid. He understood his second language well enough to see the difference and eventually he nodded.

“Right. Now then, Kip. When you get back to work, I don’t want you discussing this with anyone, there’s no need and your life will be simpler if you just keep quiet about it – alright?”

Kipras nodded. This sounded hopeful, as if he would be there soon, away from this police station. Then the older detective closed the little notebook, shuffled the papers together and leaned back in his chair with a serious expression. Kipras had forgotten about the other questions he was to be asked.

“I don’t think you are a bad person, Kip. And I want to make this easy for you. I’m going to tell you what I think, and then you tell me where I’ve got it wrong. You told me and my other colleague that Mrs Riley was a kind person, a generous person. You had a good relationship with Mrs Riley – some people might even say that you were friends. Am I right so far?”

“Yes.”

“So before we go any further, you should understand that I know about the one hundred pounds. I know exactly when it was given to Mrs Riley, and I know what she said to her daughter when she was asked why she wanted that money. She said ‘It’s not for me’.”

For the first time, Kipras looked emotional but he said nothing.

“I’m assuming then, Kip, that you did not steal the money from Mrs Riley.”

“No! I never would do such a thing. She was the kindest person to me. She-”

“So she gave you the money. All of it?”

He nodded.

“Did you buy drugs with it, Kip?”

The tears that had formed in Kipras’s eyes suddenly became tears of rage. He was half out of the seat as if he was coming across the table and Waters had instinctively reached his left arm across between the other two men. But Smith had not moved, not an inch – he was simply holding the Lithuanian’s angry glare with his own calm gaze.

Slowly Kipras sat down.

“Why always this assumption, that we are drug dealers, criminals, scum? You are wrong. It is educated people who come here because our own economy is even more ruined than your own, that is all.”

“I know that, Kip. Educated people like Mr Radvila and his boys, picking fruit. Educated people like you, training to be a doctor. What happened?”

The surprise was obvious and Kipras made no attempt to conceal it.

“Sorry, son. Despite appearances, we are quite thorough. Tell me how you ended up here.”

Brothers and sisters, too many of them, and a father at first with no work and then with no hope. As the oldest, Kipras took responsibility; this is what family means in his country, with a pointed look at the two detectives that neither could take offence at. Maybe one day he would go back to his studies.

“All credit to you, boy, that’s all I can say. Just try to understand that part of my job is to ask people questions that they don’t want to hear, for all sorts of reasons. It’s not what we call ‘personal’. I’m going to ask you another one. Did Mrs Riley ask you to use the money to buy anything you shouldn’t – or did you offer to buy anything for her?”

The anger had gone.

“No. Neither of those things. The idea is ridiculous.”

Something in the use of the word brought a smile to Smith’s face, and Kipras did not take offence.

“Fair enough. So tell me what you did with it.”

“I did exactly what she wanted – I sent it to my family, for their Christmas. This was her wish. She had a great…heart, do you say?”

Smith didn’t answer straight away. He glanced at Waters, opened the little notebook and wrote something down, just a word or two.

“You understand that I need to check that, Kip?”

“Yes. Go ahead. Check.”

“How did you send it home?”

“Bank transfer.”

“You bank online? If so, would you be prepared to log on and show my colleague your account, so that we can clear this up straight away?”

“Yes.”

As they did so, Smith took another close look at Kipras Kazlauskas. Something had lightened in him over the past hour – there was no resentment as Waters took him through the process. It was relief that nothing now was concealed, nothing was weighing down his conscience. He was a decent young man who had made a great sacrifice for his family, and that was probably what Joan Riley had seen in him. She had wanted to do that thing for the children that she would never meet who lived in a country that she had never visited – give them a good Christmas.

Waters looked up and nodded.

“Right then, Kip. You should have told us all this earlier but we’ve got there in the end. We might need to talk to you again but don’t panic if we do. You’ve broken one of the rules at Rosemary House but that’s not our business. My colleague will now work out how he is going to keep his promise of giving you a lift. Over to you, DC Waters.”

First he saw Astra’s red Yaris, her eighteenth birthday present from him, come quickly up the drive – she must have parked close to the front of the building, just out of sight unless he got up and went to the window. Then he looked back at the road beyond the entrance and noticed the police car. A Skoda – how things change! One of those VRS estates, it pulled up just before the gates. Two people in the front, and then the back door opened and someone was getting out. Ralph Greenwood squinted a little, just to be sure that he had not made a mistake. The figure leaned down a little and spoke to whoever was in the front passenger seat. Ralph managed to get Martin’s attention without saying anything and nodded towards the window. They both watched as Kipras Kazlauskas straightened up again and the police car drew off into the midday traffic. Then the young man began to walk up the drive towards Rosemary House.

“Trouble?”

Martin spoke quietly but it seemed that Nancy’s snoozing had become a midday sleep. Ralph was still considering it and there was no need for an answer immediately. Dropping him at the end of the drive was quite discreet, as if they didn’t want to make it obvious where Kip had been; if they had wanted to make a point or were trying to scare the boy, they would have driven to the front door and found reasons to hang around for several minutes. He knew how they worked – but it was obvious that Kip had been questioned again.

“Nothing to worry about.”

Martin looked back at the television while Ralph continued to watch through the window. Kip raised a hand but it was not up towards the social room – it was to someone on the drive near the building, and then Ralph saw his granddaughter walking towards Kip. They both stopped for a moment, chatting, laughing as young people do, but not touching, not embracing, two or three feet of space still between them. She had got to know him during her visits, and Ralph was well aware that she liked the boy, that perhaps her grandfather was not now the only reason that she came to visit once or twice a week. From where she had parked, however, she should not have seen the police car, which was good.

In a minute or two she would be here in the social room and he would say something like ‘Here she is, the light of my life!’ and then Martin and Nancy would say something similar. She might sit on the arm of his chair, and they would pester the carer on duty for extra cups of tea. If it was one of the miserable ones, Astra might go into the kitchen again and make them all tea herself, against the rules, but one day, when Mrs Reed had come to complain, Astra had asked her so sweetly whether she, Mrs Reed, would like a cup too, that everyone had laughed, except Mrs Reed, of course.

He smiled in anticipation but was aware, too, of the wave of drowsiness again. This new medication - better check online for the side effects. He couldn’t have anything that slowed him up, anything that would cost him his edge, not now.

# Chapter Fourteen

After lunch, Smith called the team, such as it was, together. John Murray and Alison Reeve joined Waters and him in the incident room. Murray told them that Maggie had been instructed to refrain from work until she had passed four months – then she could do light duties. Reeve said that there were no signs of suspicious activity in any of the Bradleys’ bank accounts. She had also looked at that of Joan Riley and even the one hundred pounds did not show there – her daughter must have given her own money to her mother. Smith reported on the morning’s interview with Kipras Kazlauskas, ending with the point that as far as he was concerned, the carer was not under suspicion for anything other than being too kind to his charges.

“So that just leaves?”

Reeve wasn’t being impatient or cynical. Plenty of senior officers would have been banging on about a lack of progress long before this, even though there had been no such thing. Smith put it down to the modern obsession with forensic evidence; the science had developed so rapidly and now so dominated their thinking that when a case came along in which it had little to offer, many investigating officers were stumped. Apart from the post-mortem test results, forensics had nothing for them in this case – it was down to old-fashioned investigation, interviewing and elimination. As far as those were concerned, there had been plenty of progress.

Waters said, “Another resident?”

“Or residents.”

All eyes turned to Smith.

“Don’t get me wrong – I don’t know anything that you people don’t. But Joan had a circle of close friends, four of whom have advance directives in their medical folders. Presumably they talk about such things in amongst the football results and their fond reminiscences of Maggie Thatcher. Now two of them are gone in vaguely similar circumstances. And we have the strong likelihood that someone went into the room and closed Joan’s eyes after she died. We need to ask why, and who, because it’s not something that most people would feel comfortable doing, is it? Did they go in just to do that or were they ‘tidying up’? In which case, how did they miss the glass, which could have given the whole game away there and then?”

Nobody else commented; suddenly there seemed to be a lot of questions.

“Anyway, we don’t have much else left. If anyone comes up with something new, please do not keep it to yourself unless doing so guarantees you promotion. John, can you find out about Elspeth Grey’s last resting place? I’m hoping that she went up the chimney, because if she didn’t, we might have to…”

Reeve was the first to understand.

“DC, we absolutely do not need one of those, no way. Not after last time.”

Waters looked puzzled until Murray said, “An exhumation.”

“What happened last time?”

“Detective Superintendent Allen appeared on local television.”

“And became,” said Smith, with a faraway look in his eyes, “an overnight sensation. Is it still on You Tube? Let’s hope that Ms Grey had the common sense to get herself cremated. This afternoon, Waters and I will dig away yet again at the three remaining musketeers in the hope that we have missed something. Boss, just to remind you that tomorrow morning I have to go and see Gloria QC about the Subic mitigation. I thought I’d take Chris with me, so that he can see what he’s up against should he ever solve a crime of his own.”

“Right, good luck. Do give her my regards. Ask her when she’s going onto the bench.”

“She never will. She enjoys taking policemen apart far too much to give it up. OK everyone, let’s get to it.”

When he checked his phone that afternoon, he discovered that there had been another development in his social life. A message from Marcia said that her plans had changed, that she would be available for dinner on Saturday after all, if he still wanted to, dot dot dot. Had she been surprised by his asking and just needed time to think? Had she actually been booked up but had now rearranged things because she would rather go out to dinner – with him? He could text back and say that now he was booked up but he would see if he could… But it was unlikely a woman as smart as Marcia would believe him. And why play games? Still, now he would need to choose a restaurant and then book it, and what did he have to wear that wouldn’t be… And what about afterwards? He’d heard that women these days have different expectations.

He turned his attention back to the case. The plan was to go through the personal and medical files of Martin Collins, Nancy Bishop and Ralph Greenwood line by line, looking for anything, absolutely anything that might give them a new starting point – because it was clear now that they would need to speak to them again. The second interview is always different, more difficult and often more threatening as people are asked to repeat answers or to go into more detail about matters that they would rather forget.

Without looking up, Waters said, “Nancy Bishop was a nurse.”

“Yes. So?”

“She wouldn’t be too squeamish, then. She’s probably closed a few dead eyes in her time.”

It was a sound point. They continued reading. Smith had Ralph Greenwood’s folders in front of him again. To Smith he seemed to be the most interesting person – not in the criminal sense, not yet a ‘person of interest’ – and yet they knew less about him from these files than they knew about the other four. Why was that? What was missing? No recent additions to the medical notes – perhaps he was just healthier than the others. And no advance directive, the only one of the five folders without one of those. Smith went back to the personal file. Again, less informative about the subject’s earlier life than the others; it simply stated that he worked in London for many years as a solicitor’s clerk. He thought back to his two meetings with the man, in the social room that first morning and then talking to him in his room, the room that was different to the others. Were those the conversations of a solicitor’s clerk? Was that the room of a retired solicitor’s clerk? Laptop, internet connection, mobile phone, chess set… And books, lots of books in a couple of bookcases; he hadn’t looked at the titles - should have one so, what people read can tell you a lot - but they were proper books, he was sure of that.

He returned to the front page with its photograph, and that was different, too. The others had recent pictures, just portraits obviously taken in Rosemary House, taken for the record, for the file, commemorating the moment at which independent life had come to an end – hence perhaps the sadness that glimmered through the attempts at smiles. But the photograph in Ralph Greenwood’s file was not taken in the home; he was half turning away from the camera, mouth parted in a surprised smile. The girl in the picture with him must have come from behind and put her hands on his shoulders as the picture was taken – a petite, pretty girl with short, almost cropped blonde hair. Behind the two of them was a table laid out for some sort of party, a family party, Smith guessed. Hadn’t Irene Miller said something about a granddaughter? This might be her.

He’d said it himself, days ago – if anyone can tell us what goes on at Rosemary House, it’s Ralph Greenwood. And what had the man said, with a gleam in his eye, something about the lack of forensics? Was that pawn to king’s four, an opening move? Not a shred of evidence, not even a shred of proper intelligence but…

“Chris, I did a Google thingy on this one when we started and drew a blank. You have a go.”

Waters reached for the files and tapped away at his keyboard. A few mouse clicks, a shrug and then more keyboard, more mouse clicks. Smith watched and thought ‘And that’s modern policing for you.’

He went down to the canteen, fetched two mugs of tea and two cereal bars from the vending machine. Waters took the cereal bar but not the tea, which meant that Smith could down one quickly and then sip the second in a more leisurely fashion. He dipped the cereal bar into it experimentally but it wasn’t great. Then he looked at his phone to see if Marcia had replied yet – no. Waters frowned and went back into the folders which reassured Smith that he hadn’t missed anything obvious – Ralph wasn’t easy to find, after all. But then, he mused, Ralph’s life was a while ago, his real life, his work as a solicitor’s clerk in London. That was life before the internet, before the digital footprints that everyone was now leaving behind them for eternity.

Smith took the photographs out of the folders and went down to copying machine. After various interesting failures, he managed to get it to enlarge them so that they would not look too silly on the whiteboard. He felt a little guilty at putting them up there; old age pensioners as suspects looked somewhat desperate but it was at least evidence that an investigation of some sort was still taking place. He wrote up their names and then drew a circle around them which he labelled ‘Close Friends’.

Almost forty five minutes had passed since he asked Waters to do the first search – one had to admire the boy’s persistence. He’d gone back to the folders several times and stared at the screen several times; now the intervals between bursts of activity on the keyboard were growing longer. Five more minutes and then it would be time for a re-think.

He was heading towards the door with the empty mugs when he heard “Got him!”

Smith found himself looking a newspaper, or rather at a photostat copy of one. It was grainy and a little blurred but the photograph was clear enough – a man shaking hands with a dignitary wearing a chain, a local mayor or something, both looking into the camera. Around and behind them a group of men, mostly middle-aged or elderly, one or two of them sporting their legal get-up of robes and wigs. The image was not sharp enough to stand up as evidence in a court of law but underneath it the caption was not in doubt – ‘After thirty five years of service, Mr Ralph Greenwood retires as clerk to the chambers of Fitchett and Royce, Lincoln’s Inn’. Smith found the date and did a quick calculation; Ralph had gone the full distance and not retired until he was at least sixty five.

“How the hell did you find that?”

“It was a last, long shot. I went into the online archives of the London Evening News. Each year is a separate file, so you have to enter the search details every time. I should’ve started further back – but we got there in the end.”

Modest as ever but Smith could see how pleased Waters was – he’d buy him another cereal bar at some point.

“Is it any use?”

Smith was reading the short article as he answered.

“Well, there’s not much in this but it tells us one thing. ‘Solicitor’s clerk’ doesn’t quite cover what our Mr Greenwood did in his working life, or at least the latter part of it. Do you know what a ‘clerk to the chambers’ is?”

“Not really. ‘Chambers’ is barristers, isn’t it?”

“That’s it. And Lincoln’s Inn is sort of Barristers’ HQ. They’re more spread out these days but I reckon the top lot still want chambers in the Inns of Court – certainly that was true in our Ralph’s time. The clerk to the chambers runs the business, literally; organizes all the admin, allocates cases and supervises the work of some of the cleverest people you’re ever likely to meet. I think I can safely say that what you just found is quite useful.”

And then Smith fell silent. He appeared to be staring down at the files on the table in front of him but Waters soon realized that his attention was elsewhere by some considerable distance. After a couple of minutes, Smith stood up and walked to the room’s only window; this did not face the outside world, only the corridor, but Smith stood there for another minute or two as if he was gazing at mountain scenery or a view of some distant ocean. At one point he shifted into the now-familiar at ease pose, right hand holding left wrist, shoulders back; Waters couldn’t see but he thought that Detective Sergeant Smith might have closed his eyes.

Waters looked away and back at the screen. He saved the newspaper page and then reopened a search screen. Light flickered on his face as he moved the mouse and began to read.

When Smith returned to his desk, Waters looked up and said, “I’ve just been onto a careers site. The starting pay for a barrister’s clerk is pathetic but some of the chambers specify an Oxbridge degree! It’s mad!”

“Forget starting pay. I’ll bet the best clerks to chambers can write their own ticket. I expect Ralph’s office whip-round was more than you’ll earn this year.”

Waters glanced at his watch.

“We ought to go and see him, DC. There’s still time.”

Smith didn’t answer straight away and Waters guessed that this was one of the matters that had been occupying him – what the best next move was and when it should be made.

“Yes, I know. There is time but I’m not sure it’s the right time. Leave it until tomorrow morning, after we’ve been up to the court offices. Do some research on those chambers he worked for. They’ll have websites now. Do they specialize? Some do, get expertise in certain types of case. See if you can connect them to any well-known trials in the last few years that Ralph was working there – it doesn’t matter what. I need to run something past DI Reeve.”

“Ah, Smith, on your way to see me, no doubt.”

“No, sir, DI Reeve as it happens.”

Smith could have kicked himself; going upstairs always involved some risk but he should have considered this more carefully, knowing that Allen wanted to speak to him – he should have come up by the back stairs.

“Never mind, as you are here…”

Smith pulled across his usual chair, the little plastic one that had been positioned to hide an untidy tangle of IT cables in the corner. He saw the irritation on the face of the superintendent but ignored it, standing almost to attention until he was invited to sit down.

“DI Reeve tells me that your first thoughts about joining the new Regional Serious Crime Unit are not very positive.”

“Well actually, sir, I’d go further than that.”

“Really? Further than the Regional? I don’t understand.”

“No, I mean that my thoughts about it are quite negative, sir.”

“Oh, I see. Well, I still think you should consider it, Smith. I’m not naïve enough to say you should think about your career, which is…Which is…”

“Over, sir?”

“Of course not. But you are a serving officer with a great deal to offer a new unit like this. The people leading this will need some experienced men as well as…”

A look of mild panic appeared on Allen’s face as he realized that Smith might fill the conversational gap once again with suggestions of his own, suggestions that Allen knew he did not want to hear.

“As well as the young and ambitious detectives that such a prestigious group will undoubtedly attract. You would be a steadying influence. And, of course, the cases would be the kind of challenging and complex ones that would be worthy of your particular talents. I’m sure that you are sometimes bored by what Kings Lake has to offer you these days!”

Smith was quiet for a moment. Allen was selling the idea hard, and there had to be a reason for that beyond the fact that he was hoping for a quieter life.

“The Subic case was far from boring, if you don’t mind me saying so, sir. And this current business at Rosemary House is getting more intriguing by the day.”

“Really?”

It was the word ‘intriguing’ that worried him, Smith could see that.

“Yes, sir. I don’t know if DI Reeve has brought you up to speed since this morning but we could have some major developments soon.”

“Excellent. Developments such as?”

“Well, a possible exhumation, sir.”

As the blood slowly drained from the superintendent’s cheeks, Smith wondered where it actually goes when it does that – does it all end up in your feet? Waters could probably find the answer with his internet-searching skills.

“That is not something that we undertake lightly, Smith, as you well know. Authorisation – at the highest level. I’d rather you did not go bandying that idea about until you, until we, are absolutely certain.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, sir.”

Once again in an interview with Superintendent Allen, an uneasy and uncertain quiet seemed to have come upon them, a hiatus. Smith smiled politely, and nobly took upon himself the responsibility of moving things forward.

“So this new role would be based where, sir?”

Allen clutched at the question as if it was a life-raft and unfathomable depths yawned beneath him.

“Ah. Well, you could often find yourself using our facilities here, and you would always find a welcome, Smith, you know that. But obviously the operational base itself would be at the county headquarters.”

“At Norwich, sir?”

Allen nodded, and now it made sense. Smith would be off the local payroll completely, as well as out of Allen’s thinning hair. The element of his salary that was protected when he moved down the hierarchy made him expensive; if he was replaced at all it would be with an inexperienced and inexpensive newbie at a third or even a quarter of the cost.

“I’d like to thank you for the opportunity, sir. As it happens, I am considering my options at the moment.”

“Really? Well, you know you can approach me at any time, Smith. Retirement, at last?”

Paddling away furiously, Allen looked as if he had finally caught a glimpse of a palm tree on a distant shore.

“Not exactly, sir. You see, I’ve had another offer.”

“Oh, right…”

Smith stood up, ready to leave. It was the kindest thing he could do, in the circumstances.

That evening he took a lot longer than the allotted hour to think over the case, and then there were some personal matters to consider as well. Murray had come back with the news that Elspeth Grey had been cremated, and so that potential avenue of investigation was firmly closed. Smith was relieved in a way but also disappointed for Superintendent Allen – he would not break the news to him for a while yet. The short meeting late in the afternoon with DI Reeve had also produced a result – they could prepare a request for a search warrant and have it ready at short notice; the issue of whether it needed to cover all of Rosemary House when only one room might be examined was unusual but was resolved by a phone call to the office of the police solicitor in Norwich. These days most suspects were in custody or under arrest before a search and an inspector could OK it but in this case he had to be careful. Arresting the elderly and infirm without very good cause could lead to all sorts of complications and horrible headlines.

So, thought Smith, it’s that time, that moment when you have to place your bet before the spin of the wheel. He had not, he knew, entirely eliminated everyone else. For example, he should ask to see Joan Riley’s will, but what is the use of experience if you don’t sometimes rely on it? He was certain that the will would be unchanged, that there would be no recent alterations, and he based that on his meeting with her daughter and the daughter’s subsequent interview with DI Reeve. Everything in her behaviour suggested that she was telling the truth. Smith didn’t like the husband very much but the man had no opportunities to influence his mother-in-law that Smith could see, and he had the impression that Mrs Riley might well have had enough about her to come to the same conclusion as Smith about her son-in-law. The senior staff that he had interviewed in Rosemary House had opportunities but no motives; none of them seemed to have had a close enough relationship with Joan to have risked imprisonment, and the residents’ financial affairs were well insulated from those who managed their lives at the home. Kipras Kazlauskas did have that sort of relationship with the woman; in one way that was an odd friendship but Smith had been convinced by the Lithuanian’s story. Even the things he had not told them the first time around made sense: Kipras had been afraid of losing his job but the fear of prosecution for assisting a suicide never seemed to enter his head, suggesting that the idea of it had never occurred to him. Dr Tremewan… If she had any involvement at all, if she had decided it was time to put the beliefs of, what was it, CLARIFY, to the test, why on earth would she have then drawn their attention to the previous death at which she attended, that of Elspeth Grey? Unless she saw herself as some sort of martyr to the cause, wanting to be in the public spotlight, raising the profile of the issue? It was possible – but he didn’t believe it.

On that night, the 6th of December, Joan Riley’s death had been carefully planned. Heroin had been obtained in advance. That he could not make out yet, not at all. Smith knew half a dozen places that he could drive to now, within fifteen minutes of his home, and reasonably expect to find some, but how it had made its way into Rosemary House he could not see. Nevertheless, it had done so. It must have been carefully hidden, in a building in which various care and cleaning staff could go through the resident’s rooms on a regular basis. Hidden for how long? If Elspeth Grey had departed in the same fashion, maybe for some months. Or did whoever was doing this just have the amount required brought in as necessary?

Then, on the night, someone had prepared the drug, dissolved or at least mixed it into a drink, and left it in her room. They had entered the room with her, unseen – no-one had been reported as being with Joan during that afternoon or early evening. They had moved the chair that she could not have shifted herself, and had perhaps even sat with her until the drug took effect. Afterwards, someone had gone back into the room, unless Olive Markham’s unheard of event had taken place, and closed her eyes after her death. But that someone had missed the opportunity to remove the glass, the most obvious piece of evidence of wrongdoing. Whoever it was, the opportunity had been created by Martin Collins’ unfortunate situation in the gentlemen’s toilets – a ten minute window, at most. In those ten minutes, someone had gone through a locked door, if Kipras Kazlauskas was to be believed. And Smith did believe him. It was an intricate plan, one that required timing and a cool assessment of the risks involved.

He booked the French restaurant, Sandrine’s, after due consideration, a table for two on Saturday evening. He had not been there for years, of course, but as far as he knew the ownership had not changed. He thought about ringing Marcia to let her know but it was already late and he had no idea what she might be doing – instead he sent another text. This was how matters were carried on these days, he’d read about that in a Sunday supplement, and so he must be a la mode, for a change. Then he emailed Jo Evison about her book. The more he thought about it, the more impressed he was but if he was too enthusiastic, she might get the wrong message – she might assume that he was keen for her to make her next one about Andretti. He typed it several times before he was happy enough to click send – ‘I finished your book. It’s good, you know your stuff, but I’m not sure there is anything new to say about the one I worked on all those years ago. Still, thanks for the offer, Regards, …’ and then he spent some minutes wondering how to sign off. None of the alternatives seemed appropriate. In the end, he just left it saying ‘Regards’.

He was on his favourite site for ordering new strings when he heard a ping and saw the tiny icon in the bottom right-hand corner telling him that he had new email. She had replied immediately: ‘Hello David – or should I say DC? Glad you liked it. I’m not sure there is anything new to say either – that’s why I would like to talk again. Can I ring you when I get back? At a conference in Munich until Friday. PS if I don’t hear I’ll assume it’s OK to ring. If it’s not, just text ‘no thanks’ and I’ll leave you alone, promise, Yours, Jo.’ After the message itself, it said ‘Sent from my iPhone’. At a conference in Munich… A conference for writers or one for consultant forensic profilers? Or something else entirely, as she seemed to be a woman of numerous parts. He could stop it all now with two words. He clicked reply but typed nothing. After thirty seconds the screen got fed up waiting and went to his saver, a picture of the beach at sunrise, the beach just west of Pinehills, no more than a couple of hundred yards from the caravan.

Thinking about Sheila then, he went downstairs and found the book of poems that had been there in the back of his mind since he first visited Rosemary House. Larkin had been her favourite, even the ones with the four-letter words, and when she read them aloud to him she said those words, laughing – the only time in her life that he heard her use such language. He flicked through it now and found the one that had come to mind. It was all there, in every verse – stanza, Sheila would say – the physical decay and the mental anguish. He had thought he would read it aloud in her memory but could not, he now realized, trust himself to do so. ‘The Old Fools…’ Yes, he had seen some like those Larkin described as he walked around Rosemary House that first day – the vacancy, the staring, the hollow, haunted eyes; but then too he had met Martin and Nancy and Ralph who still seemed to have the power of choosing, whose only weaknesses were in their ageing joints, muscles and bones. Old age, it seemed, could take one in any number of ways, and he could not help wondering which it would choose for him. Well, as the poet said, we will find out.

He found the line she loved, the glimpse through the window at a lost world – “The blown bush at the window, or the sun’s faint friendliness on the wall some lonely rain-ceased midsummer evening.” Isn’t that beautiful, she had said, lying on the couch behind him until he turned to look, and saw once again that it was empty now.

# Chapter Fifteen

In full regalia, Gloria Butterfield QC made stately progress towards them across the huge foyer of the Crown Court building. Smith and then Waters stood up to mark her arrival at the little circle of chairs that they had occupied for the past few minutes.

“Detective Chief Inspector no longer? Sergeant Smith? What on earth did you do? At first I couldn’t believe it was the same person – I thought there must be another Detective Smith!”

They shook hands and Smith introduced her to Waters – she shook his hand firmly as well. She was tall and imposing – there was no other word for it. In her demeanour there was something of the ageing PE mistress but the voice was rich and sonorous. When she dropped it, as she did now, it became low and almost ludicrously seductive.

“Do you mind if we sit here? My junior has our present client in the cupboard they call our room. If he saw the police he might make a run for it again – obviously I’m talking about our client, not my junior… Smith, tell me what happened. Explain yourself.”

As Waters listened to Smith explaining himself, he realized that perhaps for the first time he was hearing genuine respect in the older detective’s conversation; the two people never used each other’s Christian names – Smith was simply ‘Smith’ and she was ‘Mrs Butterfield’ – but there was clearly a deal of mutual admiration between them. Old cases were mentioned and knowing looks were exchanged. One or two other names, of police officers and lawyers, were passed back and forth for brief consideration; some had retired, it seemed, and some had passed away. Waters had a sense for history and felt it reverberating between the two as they spoke of their meetings in times past.

Then, after a look at her watch, Gloria Butterfield was speaking of the present.

“Well, we are very grateful for your help, and very fortunate that it was you two who made the arrest in this case,” with a look to Waters – she must have remembered his name from the case notes. “Mr Subic senior asked me to say thank you to you both. Your statements will help us in what we have to say in mitigation. We might not need to call you, Smith, if the prosecution behave themselves, but it is good to know that we can do so if necessary.”

“How is Petar doing?”

“Well. As you know, all my clients are innocent, Smith, but it is a pleasure to have one who is also completely honest. For that alone, we must do our very best for him.”

“A likely outcome?”

She smiled and was not to be drawn.

“I am hopeful. Of course, the case does have some political dimensions to it which have so far remained, what shall we say – out of sight? They will probably remain out of sight unless we are forced to appeal the sentence. Perhaps his His Honour will bear that in mind…”

It was a glimpse of the ruthless intelligence that, among other things, made Smith respect this barrister for the defence. Waters had been in the station long enough now to have heard the disparaging remarks about defence counsels; now he was seeing the matter from a different perspective. Mrs Butterfield was drawing the meeting to a close when Smith spoke again.

“I was wondering whether I might ask you a question on another matter, Mrs Butterfield. Entirely off the record, naturally.”

“Goodness, how interesting. And you know how fond I am of irregularities! What is it?”

“I was wondering whether you have ever worked out of Lincoln’s Inn?”

“The very thought! I am a Grays’s Inn girl, sergeant, and always have been. Why on earth do you ask?”

Smith took his time before answering.

“I would like to mention a name to you, Mrs Butterfield.”

Waters saw the look that passed between them, and he saw too the analytical cogs of the machinery of the law begin to engage as she chose her own words with care.

“Is this a person of interest?”

“Possibly.”

“Has he or she been arrested or charged at any point so far?”

“No.”

She looked at Waters and said, “Young man, I should really ask you leave at this point but as you are here in Sergeant Smith’s company, I’ll trust his judgement. What is the name?”

“Ralph Greenwood.”

Her eyes gave nothing away.

“Of Fitchett and Royce, Lincoln’s Inn?”

“Yes.”

She raised her eyebrows and thought for some seconds.

“I believe that he retired a good few years ago. He was clerk to the chambers for as long as I can remember. And I cannot comprehend how he has come into your purview, Smith.”

“It would be wrong of me to burden you with details, Mrs Butterfield. I was simply wondering whether you had any knowledge of him, as a clerk to the chambers.”

She could see what he wanted, some sort of character reference; the only question was whether she would provide one.

“I never worked with him, obviously. But the Inns are a closed and intimate world, even today. What can I say? Mr Greenwood was something of a legend. He was old-school. I’m sure that he would have worked his way up from office boy to managing the chambers but I do not know that for a fact. What I do know is that he was famously good at – organising things. It’s difficult to grasp if you haven’t worked in such an environment. The clerk has to understand the personalities and relationships of clients and solicitors, and of barristers, clerks to the court and judges. He has to know how to manipulate the listings process without ever appearing to do so. He has to develop along the way a deep knowledge of the law. He can be the difference between a chambers being financially successful and impoverished. As a junior, I met him once or twice in the course of business, but I never got to know him. I think that’s all I can say.”

Smith stood up and thanked her. As she returned to the cupboard that held her innocent but nervous client and her no doubt awestruck junior, to the wood-panelled courtrooms where justice lives and sometimes dies, Smith watched and waited until she was out of sight. Then he reached into his pocket, took out his car keys and handed them to Waters.

In response to the unasked question he said, “Rosemary House.”

Irene Miller did not immediately grasp what Smith was saying.

“Well, I’m sure he will either be in his room or the social area – you can go straight up and see, sergeant.”

Smith shook his head.

“Not this time, Ms Miller. This is a second interview. When we go back and question people about things that they have already told us, it can get awkward. People can start assuming that we did not believe them or that they are under suspicion. I’d rather approach it differently this time.”

“I see.”

She didn’t, not at first, but then as she thought about what Smith had said, Waters saw the lights coming on.

“Sergeant, are you implying that Ralph was somehow involved?”

“No. I am implying nothing – I’m saying that we need to speak to Ralph again to go into a bit more detail about some of the things that he has told us and that other people have told us since, and that I’d rather do it in your office this time. Also, unless Mr Greenwood asks for his legal representative to be present – and I don’t think he will – I would prefer it if you sat in with us, just in case he gets upset or stressed, even though I don’t think he’ll do that either. While we’re at it, I’d like the same arrangement to be in place for when we speak to Nancy Bishop and Martin Collins again, if you don’t mind.”

She had been standing in her office – now she sat down at her desk and looked at Smith.

“What a situation… Is there anything else I need to be aware of? As the home manager I know that there are some circumstances in which I have quasi-something status. I expect that covers this.”

At that point Smith explained the arrangements for the search warrant. It covered the building but he could only see the need to look at one room at present. He wanted to do so this morning, with her agreement. It would be done discreetly, without the resident being aware of it on this occasion. She was free to telephone Inspector Reeve herself and confirm these arrangements. And they’d need a pass key.

Waters watched her closely. In the car, Smith had told him that they were in a grey area here, and if asked DI Reeve might well want more explanations from Smith about what he was intending than he felt inclined to give. But then Irene Miller waved it away, and took a spare key out of her desk drawer.

“You obviously know what you are doing, but I don’t know how you do this, I really don’t. It makes me ill just thinking about it. Should I go and fetch him?”

When she had gone, Smith turned to Waters and said, “Is John all set up? Good. Text him and say to call you in fifteen minutes. Then just do what we agreed. Don’t worry, I don’t reckon you’ll be breaking any laws – not important ones, anyway.”

“I expect if I don’t crack today, you’ll be taking me to the station next time!”

Smith smiled, Waters watched intently and Irene Miller looked distinctly uncomfortable. Ralph Greenwood returned Smith’s smile and looked around the office.

“Still, it isn’t the first time I’ve been up before the head, is it Irene?”

“You and I have had our moments, Ralph.”

Smith opened the folder and his notebook.

“Ralph, I hope you don’t mind but there are a few more things to clear up. When we met last time it was early days. Since then we‘ve spoken to a lot of people and well, to be completely honest, while some things are clearer, others aren’t. So we’ve got to go back over some old ground.”

“Standard procedure – ask the same questions several times and see if the answers vary at all. Fire away, sergeant!”

Waters made a note then in his own book, as Smith had suggested. He wrote ‘He’s thoroughly enjoying this’.

“Funnily enough, Ralph, I was saying to my boss only yesterday that there’s very little that is ‘standard’ about this case. I’ve never come across one like it before. But I do think that we’re going to come across cases like it a lot more in the future, don’t you?”

“What sort of cases are those?”

“Oh, assisted suicide. Assisted dying, that sort of thing. It’s inevitable, isn’t it, with the ageing population, limited resources and people’s expectations about quality of life? It could become all the rage.”

Irene Miller shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Waters felt for her and fleetingly thought about passing her a note that said something like ‘Sorry, but you haven’t heard anything yet’. The eyes that were locked onto Smith’s were smiling again but seemed somehow a sharper blue than when Ralph had first entered the office, after holding open the door for Irene Miller.

Ralph said, “Well, it’s easy to be glib about these things when one is only, what – fifty?”

“Now then, Ralph, you won’t get round me with compliments! But seriously, I didn’t mean to sound glib. It’s just my way. People misunderstand me sometimes – I expect you have the same problem.”

For a moment the smile disappeared – and then it returned again slowly. Smith’s unconventional approach had not rattled Ralph Greenwood yet, and Waters thought about what Gloria Butterfield had told them that morning.

“What was it you wanted to ask me, sergeant?”

“Well, we are already on the subject, as it happens. Did you ever discuss these matters – assisted suicide, assisted dying – with Joan Riley?”

“Yes. When you are as close as we are to the end of life, these are subjects that tend to loom large in one’s conversations.”

“Did you ever discuss them with Elspeth Grey?”

Still no hesitation, and not a blink of the steely eyes.

“That was some time ago but yes, almost certainly. Elspeth was another intelligent and thoughtful woman.”

“For obvious reasons, Ralph, I would be grateful if you could tell me what Joan’s attitude to the subject was. Did she have strong opinions on how life should end?”

“You would not expect me to put words into the mouth of someone who has died, sergeant. But like most of us, I think the loss of control was a concern. We all like to think that we will have some say in the matter.”

Smith nodded.

“Of course, completely understandable. That explains the advance directive, doesn’t it?”

“I believe that Joan had such an instrument in place.”

“Yes, she did. So did Elspeth Grey. So do Martin and Nancy. I’m sure I’m not breaking any confidences in telling you that, as you do all talk together and these subjects loom large in your conversations.”

Smith glanced at Irene Miller – he had forgotten to point out to her all those advance directives in such close proximity. She did look suitably surprised and he wondered whether she would say anything now – he hoped not.

“In fact, Ralph, the only person amongst the Famous Five who doesn’t have such an instrument is – you.”

For the first time, Ralph took a moment before responding. When he eventually did so, he managed to sound a little bored.

“Two points, sergeant. First, I do not see what possible bearing that fact, if it is a fact, has on your investigation. Second, you are making an assumption. You are assuming that because such a document is not present there” – and he pointed with some contempt towards the folder in front of Smith – “that I do not have such a directive in place.”

Smith looked at Irene Miller again.

“Some of our residents have their own arrangements with their doctors, as they are perfectly entitled to do. Obviously we try to keep our own files up to date – we need to be told about developments if we are to offer the best care but-”

Waters’ phone rang. As he answered it, he made the usual vague apologies. After listening for a moment he said to Smith, “Sorry, it’s the station. I should probably deal with this.”

Smith nodded and Waters left the office. At first they could hear his voice outside and then it faded as he walked away from the door.

Smith said to Ralph Greenwood, “I’m sorry if I seemed too personal, Ralph. Sometimes people who don’t know much about police work do not understand why we ask the questions we do.”

It was the tiniest of barbs but it went home.

“Nevertheless, may I ask whether you do have an advance directive like the others?”

“Yes.”

“You do have one.”

“I was answering your question. You may ask.”

Smith’s smile became a grin as if he hadn’t had this much fun in years.

“Very good! Ralph Greenwood, do you have an advance directive lodged with your medical practitioner?”

“I find that rather too personal a question, and one that I do not feel obliged to answer.”

“Entirely within your rights, sir. Of course, we do also have the right to examine anyone’s medical records. Ms Miller and I have already had that conversation. I assume that she will at least know the name of your doctor.”

The interview had long ago taken unexpected turns; Irene Miller simply nodded rather vaguely when Smith looked at her this time.

“You have that right if you have reason to believe that a serious crime has been committed, sergeant.”

“Well, absolutely Ralph. And there’s not much doubt about that, is there? A fatal dose of heroin? Sounds quite serious to me.”

It was the first time that it had been said to anyone other than Irene Miller herself. She looked at Greenwood but there was no visible reaction on his face; he continued to look at the detective sitting in front of him for a few seconds before he spoke.

“Goodness me. Is that what happened?”

No-one said anything for several seconds. Ralph Greenwood looked towards the door and then seemed to be listening for something – possibly the sound of the young detective on his mobile phone. Smith managed a surreptitious look at his watch; only five minutes since Waters went out. He needed to give him a bit longer than that but Greenwood was under no obligation to remain here, and he was the sort who would have no qualms about getting up and leaving as soon as he felt like it.

“Yes, Ralph, that’s what happened. It’s a bit of a puzzler, to be honest. I mean, in a care home?”

Something about the phrase seemed to irritate Ralph for a moment.

Smith said, “It’s not the first thing you’d think of as the drug of choice in a care home, is it? I’d imagined perhaps a glass of dry sherry while Mrs Reed’s back is turned, or maybe a relative sneaking in with a bottle of single malt at Christmas – but heroin? It’s evil stuff, I can tell you. I’ve cleared up too many messes because of that – lives blighted, pretty young teenagers lying dead for days in bedsits… Most people have no idea.”

Irene Miller was watching Smith rather than Ralph now. She sat slightly behind and to the side of the elderly man, and her look seemed to be saying, what are you doing, where is this going?

“The thing is, Ralph, I can’t see how it arrived here in the first place. I’m going to be honest now and ask for your help with this because, let’s face it, you’ve got a lot more about you than some of the people in here. As a resident and an observant one at that, have you any ideas about how heroin could have been brought into Rosemary House?”

Greenwood was a proud man – Smith sensed that more and more. He hated the thought of being in a ‘care home’, that was obvious, even though for some reason he had opted to remain there when his family had offered to take him back. Could be all sorts of reasons for that, though. But was he also a vain man? Could he resist the chance to ‘help’ the police? To show off just how smart he really was? Could he resist the opportunity to play games with the rather shabby detective sergeant who had been a little too much in his face for the last few minutes?

“Well, sergeant, I believe it comes in rather small packets. Somewhat easier to smuggle in than a bottle of single malt.”

“Yes, I’ve got that far. We’re only talking about a tiny amount needed to help an elderly lady end her days, aren’t we? But who? That’s my problem. Who comes into Rosemary House who also has the right kind of contacts out there to find that sort of thing? There can’t be many such people – I think that’s the way I’ve got to go with this now.”

Ralph nodded. He seemed to be thinking it over carefully. Smith glanced up at Irene Miller again; once he was certain that Ralph’s eyes were not upon him he gave the manager a tiny shake of his head and hoped that she would understand.

“So I’ll tell you what I’m thinking, Ralph. The most likely person is one of the younger carers – someone who knows the scene in Lake, someone who either for money or out of some mistaken sense of idealism has brought that heroin into the building. They perhaps didn’t even know what it would ultimately be used for. What do you think?”

The suggestion had brought the predicted look of shock to Irene Miller’s face but she had grasped his warning shake of the head – nothing else could explain her silence at that point. Ralph understood her position, though, and he half-turned to her with an amused expression before he responded.

“I cannot imagine what Irene makes of your suggestion, sergeant! No doubt it is possible. Do you have someone in mind? I’m not asking you to tell me any names, naturally.”

“There aren’t many carers young enough to fit my profile, Ralph. It shouldn’t take long to track him down – or her, obviously.”

Ralph Greenwood picked up the qualification instantly, and despite himself Smith felt a long-forgotten flutter of excitement mingled with doubt – it’s a very odd sensation when one realizes that one might not be the smartest person in the interview room, even though you are the one asking the questions. But whatever Ralph said now, if he said anything at all, would tell Smith something.

“Sergeant, for what it’s worth, I’d say it was more likely to be some occasional visitor. We get them in all ages, classes and sizes. They bring gifts and sit in the residents’ rooms, out of sight. A small packet, you say? Easily done. I don’t think any of our carers would risk their job, let alone their freedom.”

Waters re-entered the office, making a show of closing his phone. Ralph nodded to him and then turned a smile towards Smith. A knowing smile. To end abruptly now would be tantamount to a confession and so Smith opened the file on the table in front of him.

“Well, thanks for your input, Ralph. I hope you don’t mind if I call on you again at some point.”

“You’ll always find me at home, sergeant.”

“Yes, I suppose I will. I couldn’t help noticing your photo here. It’s a good one, isn’t it – different to everyone else’s. Who is this?”

“My granddaughter.”

“Oh, I thought it must be. Astra, isn’t it?”

Ralph didn’t answer – he seemed intent on remaining absolutely motionless.

“I know because a couple of people have mentioned her already. Her name is in the visitors’ book regularly – nice to see a youngster staying in touch like that, isn’t it? You must be proud of her.”

“I am.”

“Pretty girl, too.”

Smith angled the photograph round slightly so that Waters could see it, as if he needed confirmation. When he looked back up at Ralph, there was no trace of the smile, nor of the irritation that sometimes replaced it for a moment; what Smith thought he could see there now was anger under an iron control.

“How old is she?”

“Nineteen.”

“Tsh – a wonderful age to be! What does she do?”

“She is a student.”

“Ah, aren’t they all these days? Can’t be far away though, if she visits you most weeks…”

“She is living at home for her first year.”

“And that must be here in Lake, then. Where is she at college, Ralph?”

“University. She is at UEA.”

Smith said to Waters, as if he didn’t already know it, “That’s one of the proper universities. At Norwich. What’s she studying?”

“IT.”

“Oh, that’s the thing, isn’t it. ‘IT’ covers a multitude of sins, though. I expect she just calls it that so she doesn’t have to explain all the complicated things to oldies like us.”

“A BSc in Computer Science.”

“Well, it’s good to see girls getting involved in everything these days, I say. Well done, Astra.”

Ralph Greenwood’s hands were very large, and the fists were gripping each other tightly enough to make the knuckles go white.

“Anyway, you’ve been most helpful, sir – thank you. I’m sorry to bring up these subjects in a place like Rosemary House but what can I say? We all have a job to do. What we actually need is for a case of assisted suicide or something to go through the courts right up to the top, to the House of Lords, say, with proper reporting so that there could be a public debate. Because it’s not straightforward – I can see that, and it makes you think about what your own wishes will be when the time comes. I mean, only recently I was talking to someone involved in the CLARIFY campaign, and that opened my eyes, I can tell you. Have you come across that group, Ralph?”

The indulgent smile had returned – the detective seemed to be nattering away like a tea-lady.

“I can’t say that I have, sergeant.”

“Well, that’s what they’re after, a case to mount a campaign around, get the whole issue into the open. Like that thing years ago – oh, it must be donkeys’ years ago now – when the South African investments scandal blew up. Was it moral for British banks to be investing in South African natural resources? Never mind moral, was it even legal? That went to the Lords in the end, didn’t it? And then everyone knew where they stood. I can’t for the life of me remember what the case was called, though… Anyone?”

Smith looked around at the room’s other three occupants. Waters’ face was a blank. Irene Miller was looking back at him as if he was soon to be admitted as a resident needing special care, and now it was her head that was shaking a little. Ralph Greenwood’s ironic smile was still there but somehow it seemed as if it had stiffened a little, as if it had become a mask that he was gazing through at the detective sergeant who knew perfectly well the name of the case to which he was referring.

“Oh well,” said Smith, “I expect it’ll come back to me when I least need it.”

# Chapter Sixteen

Immediately afterwards, Smith had said to Irene Miller, “What did you mean when you said that you and Ralph had had your moments?” She had explained that Ralph was, in her opinion, a man of considerable intelligence combined with strong ideas and firm principles. At times this brought him into conflict with ‘authority’, usually on behalf of another resident rather than for himself; they had had some lengthy debates.

Smith had said, “Do you like him?”

The question had taken her by surprise. After a moment she replied, “Yes.”

“So do I, as it happens, but I imagine that he gets up some people’s noses…”

She had smiled.

“Such as Mrs Reed – I imagine she takes a more old-fashioned view.”

The detective sergeant had a way of making remarks that were not questions but which nevertheless invited confidences.

“Ralph usually comes to me these days.”

“How much freedom does he have? Sorry if that’s the wrong word but it’s sort of complicated – you have locked doors and codes that the residents don’t know, so they are confined. I’m assuming Ralph doesn’t know the codes, of course.”

“No, he won’t know them but I’ve never known him ask to go out unaccompanied. Ralph is different to most, as you have realized. He has more independence than the others, more ‘freedom’ as you call it. He can be useful once you get him onside – he’ll talk to other residents and help to resolve issues.”

“He has a mobile phone?”

A minor hesitation before “Yes. We generally don’t allow it. They can pester relatives and cause a lot of unnecessary worry but there is no question of that with Ralph.”

“He doesn’t like the idea of being in ‘a care home’ though, does he?”

They were standing in her office. Through the window Smith could see an ambulance in the car park, returning one of the residents from a visit to the hospital, presumably. Irene Miller had thought about her reply for several seconds before she made it.

“No, he doesn’t. It’s not a term I like myself. We are a residential home for the elderly who need some level of care.”

“A fine distinction – if you don’t mind me saying.”

“Nevertheless, it is one, sergeant, and I had the impression that you were using that term in order to provoke a response from Ralph.”

Then Smith himself had paused momentarily.

“Well, we all have unpleasant aspects to our jobs, Ms Miller. Before I go, can I ask about this issue of his medical records?”

Ralph had his own GP who visited privately about once a month. There was an expectation that his records at the home would be updated on a regular basis but she could not be certain that this always happened when it should – they had had to ask about developments in the past. Ralph fully understood his own medical issues and felt able to manage his own treatments. He had made a hospital visit quite recently but she was not aware of any significant changes resulting from that.

“You don’t know what it was for?”

“No. Lots of our residents make visits. It is sometimes a while before we are officially updated but anything serious we know about straight away, obviously.”

He arranged with her that they would return after lunch and speak with Martin Collins and Nancy Bishop; he didn’t need to ask her to be there this time. It felt as if she would insist upon it now.

He told Waters to drive out onto the bypass – it was time that he was introduced to the true gastronomic gems of Kings Lake if he was determined to hang around the place. As they travelled, Waters began to talk about his visit to Ralph Greenwood’s room. Smith interrupted him.

“Hold on, first things first. Did you, as they say on the TV, find the drugs?”

Waters looked concerned.

“No, DC. That’s not what you said, you told me to-”

“I know what I said, I just thought you might have a quick look. Anyway, carry on.”

Waters slowed down and inched the old Peugeot around some roadworks – BT laying fibre optic, maybe. His own connection in the flat was equivalent to camels crossing the desert on a very hot day.

“As it happens, I did have a quick look…”

After a deleted expletive, Smith told him to get on with it.

“Well, the laptop doesn’t have a password. People who do that are either careless or confident. I looked for the things we said and there’s nothing, not one of them. He looks at chess sites quite a lot, and he obviously still follows legal matters and court cases but none of them relate to what you’re looking at in Rosemary House. Several different news sites – he likes to keep up. One or two medical ones, you know, Netdoctor, that sort of thing.”

“Can you see what he’s been looking at on them?”

“You’d need more time for that, and probably more expertise than I’ve got, DC. I might seem like a wizard compared to you but-”

“Yes, yes, I get it. What else?”

“The delete bin is empty. It isn’t set to do that automatically, so someone has manually cleared it, recently. There’d usually be something in it.”

“Someone’s been tidying up, then.”

“I’d say definitely. The hard drive had a major defragment over the weekend.”

“Really? I think my doctor told me to get one of those when he last checked my blood pressure. What the hell is it?”

Waters explained patiently – when files are deleted, spaces are left behind but in the wrong places for the computer to re-use them efficiently. Defragmentation reorganizes the location of the computer’s files to improve its effectiveness.

“Very nice. Now in old-speak?”

“A lot of material has been deleted recently. There’s more, though. When you delete a file from a hard drive, it still leaves evidence of itself behind – a footprint. Those footprints can be read by someone with the right knowledge until that space is written over again.”

“Go on. Do we need to take this laptop into custody?”

“You might get something but someone has almost filled the drive with new stuff in the past few days.”

“What sort of stuff?”

“Pictures.”

“Pictures? What of?”

“It looks sort of random. Gardens, boats, landscapes. Nothing particularly connected to Ralph’s interests as far as I can see. Hundreds of high quality images – pictures take up the most space on any drive.”

Smith gave him directions and then sat in silence for a couple of miles of bypass.

“Are you saying that someone has deliberately filled it up to cover their tracks?”

“That’s one possible interpretation of what I saw.”

After another silence, Smith said, “Remind me not to introduce you to any more lawyers.”

As they walked across the rutted and pot-holed lorry park, Smith pulled his duffel coat tighter and said that if he happened to own a brass monkey he’d be checking it to see if it still had all its necessaries right about now.

It was lunch-time and the windows of the Tuck Stop were steamed up and running with condensation. Inside there was noise – male voices, the repetitive electronic rattle and thump of fruit machines and somewhere at the far end country music whined from a jukebox. But there were spaces at the high counter and Smith leaned both elbows on it as he studied the menu chalked on a blackboard. He was relieved to see that it was strewn with misplaced apostrophes - Floyd was still running things.

A heavy man in chef’s whites appeared at the end of the counter from a doorway that led into a kitchen. He had remarkable jowels, hanging down far beyond the jawbone like the ears of a basset hound. When he saw Smith he gave the briefest nod of recognition and returned to the first circle of his ancient iron range, leaving what could only be one of his sons to take the newcomers’ order.

“Steak pie medium rare, chips and gravy,” said Smith.

The youth wrote it down, all of it, on a pad, and then looked up at Waters.

“Oh, er, the same, thank you.”

An ‘X 2’ was scrawled by the first order, and then the figure backed away a little before turning and disappearing into the kitchen. At some point he had been told ‘Police’ but by whom or exactly when, Smith could not be sure.

They found a table by one of the windows. Waters rubbed the condensation away and peered out at the lorries parked there, at least a dozen of them, mostly long forty tonners. One or two must have been parked overnight – frost still covered the ground beside them where the early morning sun – now only a memory – had failed to penetrate. As far as he could tell, the transport café had no rooms to let; the drivers must have slept in their cabs. He turned his attention back to the men who drove them. Some sat alone, chewing or drinking from huge white mugs, reading The Sun or The Star, while others had grouped themselves into twos or threes, talking. From somewhere came the smell of cigarette smoke but it was impossible to see anyone indulging, at least with a casual glance around. Above the counter on the wall was a standard printed sign that said ‘No Smoking’. Over the top of those words someone had scrawled ‘The Goverment says’.

“This is a handy place. I’ve picked up a few leads here, I can tell you. When we broke up the illegals racket in the docks a few years ago, my best bit of intelligence came at that table by the door. Good lorry drivers are a mine of information, and I still keep a few on my books. Think about it. Even today, almost everything worth nicking or selling has to be moved.”

Waters looked again at the men – mostly middle-aged, mostly needing a shave, mostly showing no interest whatsoever in the only two people in the room who were blatantly of a different profession.

“Any of them in here now?”

“I recognized a couple of faces when we came in.”

Waters hadn’t noticed that at all. Perhaps these men were not uninterested or unaware of the police presence; perhaps they were making a point of not showing any interest in it.

Smith said, “We’re not friends with these people. That’s the last thing anyone wants. But sometimes we can help each other out. Most drivers will do a little baccy or booze for friends and relatives but they don’t like being hassalled about more serious stuff. It makes their lives more complicated. If they know they can talk to you without any comeback, they will, after a while. It takes years. And you don’t offer these blokes money for information, not ever. It’s mutual back-scratching; if they’ve done you a good turn, they might mention your name when some uniform pulls them over for talking to their missus on the phone.”

The food arrived, brought by the same youth who took their order, a hefty plate balanced in each hand. The pies were twice the size of any one could find in a supermarket, steaming hot and burned to a crisp around the pastry edges; a small mountain of chips rose up above the lake of gravy and on both plates there was also a heap of mushy peas. The waiter said “Alright?” and then departed without adding “Enjoy your meal.”

Waters said, “We didn’t order peas.”

“Ah, that’s just Floyd saying hello. He’s a man of few words but many pies. Years ago, not long after he opened here, he started getting a problem with bikers, the hairy sort. One Saturday night he’d had enough, so he set about them with the proverbial baseball equipment. Some of these hard men tried to bring charges but the local force couldn’t find enough evidence, even at the hospital. Charlie Hills could tell you all about that. Uniform drop in here pretty often – they eat well and Floyd doesn’t have too many problems nowadays.”

The food was hot, salty and surprisingly good. They ate in silence for some minutes until they were full but there were still chips remaining on both plates. Smith sat back and patted his stomach as if to reassure it – then he picked up a chip, dipped it in the brown sauce and ate it.

“Right, back to work. When Manuel notices us, we’ll get some tea. Thoughts on Mr Greenwood?”

Waters had been expecting the question.

“A character. He was enjoying the interview some of the time but then something would annoy him. I couldn’t decide whether he likes the police or not, to be honest.”

“Probably knows too much about us.”

“I thought it confirmed everything the QC told us about him. Was that just a lucky shot, that she knew him?”

“Yes and no. It was years ago, when the lawyers were even more of a closed shop than they are today. Everything was in four places in London, and they all knew each other; once I knew he’d been at Lincoln’s Inn I reckoned there was a fair chance Mrs B, QC, would have come across him.”

“And that’s why we didn’t interview him yesterday.”

Smith nodded as he made the T sign to Floyd’s offspring.

“It made sense, to see her first. Do you know what struck me? I gave him the chance to lay it off on one of the staff, didn’t I? I said, most likely one of the young carers. He wasn’t having that. Why not?”

The question was as much to himself as to Waters.

“Trying to protect Kip. When you said ‘Him’, Ralph knew what you were getting at, for sure. We know they’re fond of him.”

“Yes – but this is where it gets complicated, at least to my puny, ageing brain. One scenario: Ralph knows nothing about what happened to Joan Riley; for all he knows, Kip was involved but because he’s their favourite carer, he decides to protect him, telling us that he doesn’t think it was the said young man who assisted in her suicide. Or her dying, whatever. Another scenario: Ralph does know something about what happened to Joan, maybe he knows a lot. Now, we’ve pretty much concluded that Kip was not involved, but Ralph doesn’t know that – in fact, I suggested the opposite. Ralph could have tried to put us off the scent by letting us go after Kip, or another one of the young carers, but he doesn’t. He actually points the finger at one of the visitors. As it happens, I agree with him.”

Two large mugs of tea arrived with as little ceremony as the meal itself. As the plates were being removed, Smith said, “My compliments to your dad, young man. Tell him he isn’t losing his touch.”

The surly astonishment almost gave way to words but then the young man thought better of it and left them in peace.

Waters said, “I sort of see what you’re driving at… But it isn’t a big deal, is it?”

Smith had reached into the pocket of the duffel coat that was hanging on the chair behind him. Absent-mindedly he took out the cigarette packet, then realized and contemplated it sadly – a choice between tea in the warm or smoking out in the cold.

“Well – it is if we’re going with scenario two, which is that Ralph knows something about this but he doesn’t accept my idea of going after one of the carers. A proper villain would have grabbed at that – yes Smithy, get after those carers! I think our Mr Greenwood really is a man of principle, and he wasn’t willing to see an innocent person being blamed. However, I also think he knows something. I think he knows a lot. So where is this leading?”

He gave Waters a couple of minutes. This was difficult and subtle, delicate and sinuous but how else is a young detective to learn? Because people too are all of those things, and if you don’t learn to work out people you remain a clodhopper, a slave to procedures and processes, someone who pursues targets rather than wrongdoers.

After doing his staring thing for a while Waters said, “Well, if we’re going to look at visitors, we should probably start with…”

“Ralph’s visitors – good point. When we get back, grab the book and make a note of every visit in the book for him. Go back six months. No, make it a year. We know one person who will figure a lot, of course.”

“His granddaughter.”

“Whose favourite subject is?”

“Yes, I’d picked that up. She’d know more than enough, or should do. So do we need to take the laptop?”

“Not yet. Whoever did it thinks they’ve done enough. They might well have done but we won’t play that yet. What else?”

One of the lorries roared into life, pulled out of the line and swung close to the window. The building shook a little and they watched the vehicle as it was driven out onto the bypass – a forty tonner from Germany, heading north.

Waters said, “He knew the case, didn’t he? The Crown versus DeVries – I looked it up again last night.”

“Of course he did. One of the biggest legal deals in decades and Fitchett and Royce had several top people involved in it.”

“Why didn’t he say anything?”

Smith shrugged and started to pull on the duffel coat.

“It surprised him, and he’s a cautious man. He wanted time to think that over, the fact that we’d taken the trouble to dig it out from his past.”

“Why did you? You had to work hard to make it relevant, and even then it seemed a bit…laboured.”

Suddenly Smith was ready to go, impatient, and Waters was hurrying to catch up.

“Well, I’m sorry about that. But it’s not a play, is it? We’re not performing it for some arty-farty drama critic’s benefit. Somebody died. I wanted Ralph to get the message about him and me.”

They were at the door, and Smith was buttoning the coat against the cold that awaited them.

“What message?”

“That our relationship is moving on. That I’m getting serious.”

As soon as they arrived back at Rosemary House, Smith was brisk and business-like. In the foyer he pointed to the visitors’ book and said, “Can you do that now? Do all three – Mr Greenwood, Mr Collins and Mrs Bishop. Fifteen minutes? I’ll be in the manager’s office.”

At the sound of voices, Rita Sanchez appeared at the door of her room. She stared for a moment until Smith said, “Good afternoon, Ms Sanchez. Is there a problem? A message for me?”

She shook her head and disappeared back into her office. Smith glared at the empty doorway for a little longer and then walked towards Irene Miller’s room. Waters had already opened the visitors’ book and was flicking his way back to last year. This was a moment to look busy; he must have offended in some way and now had some work to do.

When he knocked and entered Irene Miller’s office twelve minutes later, Smith and the manager were both present but no conversation was taking place. That it had been was evident on Miller’s face – she was pale and concerned about something.

As soon as he saw Waters, Smith said to her, “OK then, we’ll see Mr Collins.”

She left the room and Smith held out a hand for the notebook. Waters had written three lists on three separate pages to make it easier. None of them was very long but Ralph had had more visits than the other two combined. Smith glanced at all three and pulled a face that seemed to convey mild but unsurprised disappointment.

“No more pussy-footing, I think. See what happens… Worth looking out for any sign that Ralph has been to see them since this morning. I left him long enough.”

He had said it – well, not exactly as a joke but in a jocular fashion. The room had gone rather quiet and now the older of the two detectives was looking back at him, a cold, hard look that made him a little uncomfortable.

“I beg your pardon, Mr Collins?”

“I said, well, I just said as I’d never have guessed that she were a…”

“A what, sir?”

“A drug addict is what I said.”

Collins felt foolish and his huge, old engineer’s hands twitched and flexed as if looking for something solid to grasp and work with – anything to avoid this confrontation with a policeman who was nothing like as friendly as he had seemed the last time they met.

“And is that what you believe to be the case, Mr Collins? Because if it is, if you know something to that effect, it is your duty to tell it to me now. This is a serious matter. If it is not the case, if what you have just suggested about Joan Riley is not the truth, then to have said it at all was – irresponsible, to say the least. If it was a joke, it was in very poor taste, particularly if she was, as you have said, a good friend of yours.”

Waters had to look away from the old man. He caught sight then of Irene Miller, who seemed equally uncomfortable. The silence that followed Smith’s words became oppressive and Waters could hear Martin Collins swallowing and breathing heavily.

“Course it weren’t true. I just… Spoke out of turn, that’s all, I-”

“Let’s be absolutely clear on this, Mr Collins. You are saying that you have no knowledge of anyone, Joan or any other person, providing or using Class A drugs here in Rosemary House – is that correct?”

“Aye, it is!”

He had raised his voice, and Irene Miller glanced across at the door. Shouts in here could be heard out in the foyer. She might have to put a stop to this – she hadn’t realized.

“Good – at least we’re clear on that, Mr Collins. Now I’d like you to tell me again what happened to you on the night of the 6th of December last year. Take your time, don’t miss anything out.”

Smith’s tone was suddenly more reasonable and not unfriendly but as Collins began to speak, Waters could hear the tremor in the voice – Smith had done that, and done it deliberately. Collins told the story of how he had had to get help, first from Ralph Greenwood and then from Kipras.

When he finished, Smith picked out a folder from the small stack on the table in front of him. He opened it and leafed through until he found what he was looking for.

“This is your medical record, Mr Collins. It makes no mention of arthritis.”

“Aye, well, I’ve never had it diagnosed as such but it’s what it is. We all have it here, for God’s sake, we’re all heading for scrapheap!”

“Has it troubled you since the 6th of December?”

“Now and then, it gets a bit stiff, like.”

“So you sometimes have difficulty walking? A bit of limp, that sort of thing?”

Collins nodded, and Smith turned to Irene Miller.

“Is that something that you have noticed, Ms Miller? Obviously if Mr Collins has problems with mobility it needs to be addressed.”

She was uncertain about to whom she should respond and ended up with her eyes darting between the two of them.

“I haven’t – I’m sorry, Martin, if you are having problems you should have said.”

“Ms Miller is absolutely right, sir. You should have this fully investigated before it gets any worse. Scans and examinations, and they can do wonders with those cortisone injections. It’s a bit painful at first, I’m told, but afterwards you should feel like a new man.”

He gave them all his least convincing smile, and closed the medical file.

“Mr Collins. I’d say that our investigation is entering its final stages. That being so, I have to give you the opportunity now to tell me whether you know anything about the sad demise of your friend, Joan Riley, anything that you have failed to disclose to us so far.”

“As it happens, I don’t. Can I go now?”

Collins left on his own, having refused the manager’s offer of assistance. They all watched him as he made his way to the door – it was impossible to tell whether he was trying to demonstrate a slight limp or to conceal one. Then Irene Miller had turned a silent but questioning face to Smith. The question was probably, did you have to do that, but the detective decided to interpret it as, what next, and said, “Nancy Bishop?”

When she had gone, Waters looked around the office, drummed a couple of fingers lightly on the table and said, “I don’t think we’re as popular as we used to be.”

“Occupational hazard, especially near the end. If you’re any good at this, you always make someone unhappy.”

“I suppose so… Are we near the end? It doesn’t feel like it somehow.”

Smith nodded and almost smiled properly.

“That’s because, despite all our best efforts, your basic copper’s instincts are still sound, at least as far as building a case is concerned. There is no case here. We’ve got nothing, zero, zilch. I’m certain in my own mind that the three people we’re looking at now know something about it, and I reckon, for what it’s worth, that they know everything about it. In a court, that certainty is worthless unless I can produce some evidence. I’m not complaining – that’s how it has to be. We can’t go locking people up because coppers think they are guilty. Or we could but then we’d have to swear allegiance to President Putin or Kim Jong what’s-his-name, and I don’t fancy that.”

Waters thought for a moment.

“It’s funny, but Maggie said something, days ago. She was telling me about the first meeting with Ralph Greenwood – that he had said something about ‘no forensics’. She thought it was odd… Significant.”

“Yes, well, if Maggie is half as good a mother as she is a detective, that child should do alright. When I heard him say that, some voice in my head said ‘Oh dear’ as well.”

“And there’s nothing else?”

“No. We’ll look at the visitors, check up on any iffy ones, check up on them all, come to that, but unless we get lucky, this will all peter out. All we can do is to get Ms Miller to put us on her mailing list for the next one.”

“Seriously? You think there’ll be more?”

Smith looked at his watch and wondered why Nancy Bishop was not here yet. Then he pointed with his pencil at the medical files.

“Eighty per cent of these have a DNR. What’s the betting that Ralph has one tucked away, as well? That would be one hundred per cent. Let’s just say I wouldn’t be totally amazed if we’re back here at some point in the not-too-distant.”

# Chapter Seventeen

“What about the interview with Nancy Bishop?”

Waters could see that Inspector Reeve was not happy but she was not blaming anyone in particular; he had thought about it all last night after Smith had dropped him off at the flat, and it was true – there was nothing that resembled a court case in it. Smith gave a clear and thorough account of the final interview but that could not convey the atmosphere of unease that had prevailed in the room. Irene Miller was expecting the worst after seeing Martin Collins interviewed, and Waters himself had listened with a kind of awed fascination as Smith took a different but still challenging line with the elderly lady. His opening question had been “You don’t seem to get many visitors, do you, Mrs Bishop?”

At first she had made as if to apologise for the fact and then, oddly, she had brought herself up short, looked Smith in the eye and said, “No, I do not.” Smith had asked her how well she had got to know the people who visited her friends – she had named one or two, including Astra Maitland – but gave nothing away about her opinions of them. The next line had been to ask her to tell him again about what she had done on Saturday the 6th of December last year. When she looked a little blank, Smith had said, “That’s the day your friend died, Mrs Bishop…”

This answer was more hesitantly given, as if remembering was an effort – was she trying to remember what happened that night or what she had told the detectives in her last interview? When she had finished, Smith looked into his notebook for some seconds and sighed. Then, “Mrs Bishop, in your work as a nurse, in your long career caring for the sick and probably saving lives, did you ever have responsibility for dealing with the bodies of those patients who had died?”

“Yes. A number of times.”

“That was something that you were able to do?”

“One has little choice in the matter – and one gets used to it eventually.”

“You see, while you were sitting alone in your room that Saturday night someone went into Joan’s room after she died. We believe that they probably touched the body. Have you any idea who might have done that, Mrs Bishop?”

Involuntarily the elderly woman had glanced at Irene Miller before answering.

“Of course not!”

“Why ‘Of course’, Mrs Bishop?”

The question had taken her off-guard.

“Because – I – well, obviously I would have said something.”

“To whom?”

She was floundering a little, the most easily confused of the three and even Smith seemed to have felt a pang of guilt – at least, Waters had that impression.

“To Irene – to the police?”

“You are saying that you would have called the police if you had suspected any such thing? Quite right because to interfere with a body, particularly when knowing that the body itself is evidence of other criminal acts, is a serious matter. But you didn’t tell anyone because you knew nothing about any of this until I told you just a moment ago – is that correct?”

Smith had told her that she could go shortly after that, and she was halfway to the door, leaning on Irene Miller’s arm when he called out to her, “Oh, Mrs Bishop, I need your professional opinion on another matter.”

She had stopped and turned towards him.

“Mr Collins seems to be suffering with his arthritis again. I wondered if he had mentioned it to you. I expect they ask you about things like that.”

“It’s an affliction of age – we all have it somewhere.”

“Mr Collins seems to be suffering badly in his hands.”

She straightened up a little more and said, “I’d say his hip is worse.”

“Ah, would you? Which one?”

She tried to think – Waters could see her eyes going right and then left as if they would find the correct answer. Had someone else already been asked the question?

“I think he has it both sides. It comes and goes.”

“Yes… A bit like my faith in human nature, Mrs Bishop.”

As they were leaving, Irene Miller walked them to the outer door. She had asked if they would be back and Smith had, after an ironic frown at Waters, replied that one way or another he feared that she not seen the last of them.

“So you’ve got the visitors to look at. Anything else?”

“I’m going to ring Ralph Greenwood’s GP this morning.”

Alison Reeve looked round at the three faces as if to say, is this really all we have left? Waters, Murray and Smith waited, relieved in their different ways that it was not them who now had to go and report progress to the senior officers’ weekly briefing in half an hour.

“OK, go national on the check into the visitors. If you’ve only checked everyone else out on the local database, go back and do those nationally as well. Find me something – I don’t like the way this is heading, just when our ‘Ongoing’ percentage was beginning to fall.”

Smith watched her walk briskly past the one small window of Incident Room 1. Then he said, “I don’t know what she’s complaining about – my ongoing percentage has been nil for years. It doesn’t make you happy. Let’s deal with the important things first. How’s Maggie doing, John?”

Well, it seemed, but she was refusing all anti-sickness drugs, so mornings were still somewhat traumatic – and she was still fretting about letting DC down.

“Daft…woman. Chris, I hope you’re taking all this in – morning sickness? You and Clare should go and do an early visit before you get carried away. How many texts have you had today? I thought you must have a mini beehive in your pocket yesterday. Fetch us some coffee and then you can sneak in a reply. John, let’s divvy up these visitors.”

They discovered that Martin Collins’ younger brother, who had visited him one day in late summer, had a conviction for fraud and a suspended sentence hanging over him, but try as they might they could not turn that into the remotest likelihood that he had graduated from fiddling his accounts to supplying heroin. Nevertheless, an email was sent to the Nottingham force to double check on the man’s character and known associates. When Waters found nothing for Astra Maitland, Smith went across and made a couple of suggestions but these too proved fruitless. He said that he wasn’t surprised – she was bright, from a well-to-do home and had Ralph Greenwood watching over her; even if she was going to be naughty, she wasn’t likely to make silly mistakes. Waters continued to look at the blank results screen; then he went onto the University’s web pages and tried various searches but none would provide student lists. Smith said he knew why – “It’s a lefty place, isn’t it. Even without data protection policies, they wouldn’t be especially helpful. I was there on a case once – we were as welcome as a fart in a lift. If she comes up clean, she comes up clean and that’s that.”

Waters said, “I thought she was our best bet, DC. Once you discount her, what have you got? No likely visitors for the other two, and then you’re looking at someone else entirely being involved.”

Smith nodded – this was what he had seen coming. He went back to his desk, found Ralph Greenwood’s files and then the telephone number that Irene Miller had given to him yesterday. It was a mobile. With any luck he’d get through directly – doctors’ receptionists were the worst of the lot.

“Good morning. Am I speaking to Doctor Ibrahim? Good. I wonder if you could help me…”

Smith explained who he was and what he wanted in general terms – then he mentioned Ralph Greenwood’s name. Waters watched and listened. After about twenty seconds, he saw Smith close his eyes, and that was followed shortly by the customary sigh.

Smith said, “No sir, no caution and no charges…” and then listened some more. “Well, yes, it is in connection with a serious matter but…” Smith caught Waters’ eye and made a gesture towards the mouthpiece, a complicated gesture that began with a clenched fist and somehow became a single finger. “Very well, sir. Yes, I see… Before you go, Doctor, can I ask you something else? It’s not actually about Mr Greenwood’s medical records as such. Are you able to tell me whether you hold any other documentation for him – such as any instructions about treatment in the event of serious illness? Well, I mean terminally serious… I see, you are not able to tell me that either. Thank you so much. May I say what a pleasure it has been to – oh, he’s gone.”

He replaced the phone and immediately wrote a record of the conversation such as it was in his notebook. Then he looked up at Waters and said, “Dr Ibrahim was either very carefully chosen or very well-briefed – probably both. Ralph could have been standing behind him and working him with a pedal. You’ve got to hand it to the old boy.”

After a few seconds, the only sound in the room was the whirr of a printer in the corner, and even that sounded slightly bored.

“John, any ideas?”

John Murray switched off his monitor – he was always funny about things like that, thought Smith, and was probably already worrying about future energy bills when Maggie stopped work.

“Check every visitor in the book?”

Smith nodded glumly; they were reduced to that, the sort of mindless, repetitive search that produced a result about one time in a thousand – but they had nothing else. He turned to Waters.

“Starsky? Or are you Hutch? I can’t remember… Anyway, any bright ideas from you? Have you yet turned the full force of the university-educated brain onto this case?”

He was only joking, of course, but Waters had not forgotten the silent drive yesterday back from the Tuck Stop to Rosemary House; he wanted to contribute something to make up for that careless remark. He had learned already that Smith, whilst utterly loyal to the colleagues he trusted, was not averse to letting them know if he thought they were out of line or not pulling their weight. So he offered one tentative idea.

“We’ve assumed that someone must have brought it in, the heroin.”

“Yes?”

“Well, there are other ways things can get into a building. Maybe someone sent it in, had it delivered.”

Smith and John Murray exchanged glances. After a short silence, Smith said, “You’re not telling me you can order this stuff from Amazon now?”

Murray said, “He’s got a point, DC. A tiny little plastic bag could go into an ordinary envelope. We know cocaine gets imported like that.”

Smith considered it.

“OK… That place must get a stack of mail every day. There’s about zero chance that they keep a record of who gets what but it’s worth asking. Chris, you can do that. Phone Irene Miller and find out what happens to the post. Talk about long shots, though. If we aim any further out we’ll have to take account of the curvature of the earth. We need to keep at this, boys. I’ve a horrible feeling that-”

Before he could finish the sentence, the event that he was about to predict took place. The door to Incident Room 1 opened and DI Reeve entered; Detective Superintendent Allen’s head could be seen out in the corridor, framed by the little window to her left.

“DC, could we have a word?”

After his customary Thursday night dinner of baked beans on toast – “a balanced and nutritious meal that you should not feel ashamed of” according to the booklet he had bought for twenty pence on a market stall, ‘Healthy Eating for Happy Singles’ – Smith refused to go up to his study and do his usual hour of unpaid overtime. “A word” had turned into quite a lot of words; after a couple of minutes, Reeve had suggested that the three of them adjourn to her office – this type of conversation was best not carried out in a corridor.

Superintendent Allen had pushed for details of the Rosemary House investigation until even Smith’s memory gave up and he had to resort to his notebook – nothing was more likely to make him feel like a probationary constable and his answers had become progressively more sardonic. He had known that it was happening, had not failed to see the warning glances from Reeve but had carried on regardless. As he explained what they had done and why, and then had to listen to Allen’s facile suggestions, he wondered what lay behind this; the ACC’s mother had not come up on any radar as needing to be spoken to or even of, and there was no hint of press interest, which was the most usual reason for Allen to start having problems with his underwear. And then Smith wondered whether this was, for the Superintendent at least, a slightly more subtle manoeuvre – was this about Smith’s refusal to consider a transfer? Was Allen out to make his life here uncomfortable in order to encourage him to reconsider?

After some twenty minutes, Allen had said, “Well DC, what are you going to do?” DC? Invariably he was either ‘Smith’ or, if they were trying to get him to retire, ‘David’. He decided to ignore the change in nomenclature for now, and said that basically, he intended to wait. Now he leaned back on the sofa and replayed the conversation that followed.

Allen had said, “Wait? Wait for what?”

“Another development. We’ve all had these cases, sir. Sometimes there is nothing else you can do. We’ll go through every visitor for the past year if necessary and we will monitor the situation.”

“How will you do that?”

“Well, we’ve established a reasonable relationship with the management of Rosemary House. I will keep in touch with Irene Miller.”

“You will keep in touch… And what sort of things might she able to tell you in, say, a month’s time, that might enable you to solve this case? I don’t follow this line of reasoning, I have to say.”

Smith had seen the expression on Alison Reeve’s face – surprise and concern. He knew what lay behind it; she had never seen Smith pushed like this, and she would probably end up feeling somewhat embarrassed for him. Something had altered in him then.

“Well, I don’t mind explaining it to you, sir. Irene Miller is not a stupid woman. She will now be more vigilant and be looking for certain behaviours amongst her residents. I will make sure of that. Or something might be said that sheds some light on Mrs Riley’s passing, now that we have been in there and upset a few people. One of them might be overcome with remorse and make a full confession. Who knows, we might even get another body and be able to do some proper forensics next time.”

Allen’s face had shifted slowly from irritation at assumed incompetence to alarm as he realized that Smith was perfectly serious.

“Are you telling me, Smith, that you think there is even a remote possibility that this will happen again?”

“It’s at least a remote one, sir. I think it’s already happened at least twice. We’ve got at least three other people in the same group signed up to the do-not-resuscitate club. A third one would, of course, make it officially a serial matter – but I’m not sure whether you can technically have a serial suicide. For obvious reasons.”

When he had glanced at Reeve, she had her eyes closed briefly, but she had opened them before Allen turned to her.

“DI Reeve – your views? Personally, I find it unthinkable that we do not act to prevent what Smith has suggested might happen. If it ever got out that – and we could have prevented it? Everything possible must be done.”

“I agree, sir, but DC-”

“Absolutely everything. Smith, this Greenwood character. You clearly have some suspicions?”

And Smith hesitated – where was this going?

“That’s all they are, sir. There’s nothing else, not one shred.”

“Even so. Have you pushed him? We don’t need to be too subtle, too psychological if lives are at stake, do we? He has only been interviewed at the home?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why not get him in, shake him up a little? I don’t need to explain any of this to people as experienced as you two, do I?”

Allen had smiled then, showing lots of teeth, as if he had revealed to them the one idea that they had failed to consider.

Smith said, “Well, a couple of thoughts spring to mind. First, he is seventy four years old, so there are considerations as to his own well-being and mental state. The second reason might appear to be contradictory to that but actually isn’t; Mr Greenwood would probably rather enjoy such an invitation. Sir.”

“Enjoy it? Not in my day, sergeant! Why-”

“With respect, sir, you won’t have come across too many like Ralph Greenwood.”

The interruption had brought things to some sort of conclusion.

Superintendent Allen had said, “Nevertheless. You and your team have tomorrow to make some sort of further progress. I want to see you both on Monday morning – Alison, my PA will contact you about that. If necessary, I will conduct the next interview with Mr Greenwood myself.”

Smith went upstairs and into the back bedroom – the guitar room. He picked up the classical acoustic, settled it across his knees and pulled across the six strings. They were still new, still rich in tone but had now stopped that initial stretching – they were perfectly in tune. Without thinking he began to play ‘Mallorca’. When Allen had left the room with the self-satisfied air of a man who had managed to find time in his busy day to instruct his juniors in the finer arts of their craft, Reeve had begun to apologise, and Smith had then interrupted her.

“Really, I don’t give a monkey’s whatever. What’s he do all day but pull rank on people? He won’t achieve anything and he might make things worse – but as long as I’ve said that, my backside is covered, isn’t it? That’s the name of the game now.”

“DC? You’re allowed to be cynical but not bitter.”

Spain… They had been once, on a cheap package holiday to Malaga. He had heard guitars in the backstreets, in cafes and from deep shadows on sultry evenings. They should have gone back, said they would one day, to the interior, to the heartlands of the Sierra Nevada, following the true music up into the hills.

When he did not respond, Reeve had said, “As it’s all being said today, I need to ask you something myself, DC. I mentioned this a few days ago. If this is a difficult case because of you and Sheila, you need to say so.”

Smith had been honest then, and said that he couldn’t remember exactly what he had told her – it was more than three years ago and a lot had been going on then.

“You told me that she asked you a question. They had brought her home, and you were caring for her. You had several weeks off, I remember. I expect you had many conversations but – you told me that she had asked you the question. So, if you’d rather not deal with this case, I would understand. Completely. And it would not go any further. In fact, why not let Super Allen get his hands dirty for a change?”

He had said, “I don’t think it has caused me any problems with this. It was a while ago now.”

“Still – you don’t dislike Ralph Greenwood. Is that because you have some sympathy – for what he might have done? Sorry to go on, David, but, well, I’m trying to consider all points of view here.”

“Not sympathy. It’s difficult to find a victim in all this, if what happened is what I think happened but that doesn’t mean I cannot do my job. If you think I can’t do that, say so, pull me off it.”

He hadn’t meant to sound that abrupt. At the doorway, before he opened it, he had turned and said, “Thanks, Alison.”

“For what?” She looked as if she was expecting another cynical remark.

“For never asking.”

“Asking what?”

“What my answer was, to her question.”

Playing the Albeniz piece had made him think of Julian Bream. The CD had not been spinning more than a couple of minutes when his mobile rang. It was Marcia Williams. He looked at the screen for a moment, then switched off the CD player and walked up to his office.

“David? I meant to call earlier. Is it too late?”

“Depends on what for but I reckon ‘too late’ is my default position these days. Is it about Saturday?”

In an odd way he was hoping that she wanted to cancel – the same thought had crossed his mind more than once.

“Yes. I don’t know this restaurant. Is it really posh? I was wondering what to wear…”

Somehow the conversation lasted six minutes – he noticed that when it was finally over. During it he signally failed to give any sartorial advice whatsoever but he had realized immediately that the call had been less about what to wear than about establishing, at least on her part, some sort of intimacy before they met for dinner. He really did not want to read anything into that – but had it worked for her? He tried to recall exactly what they had talked about in those minutes but it was difficult; that was the problem with idle chat, of course. It was idle – not important, not memorable, but it was, nevertheless, crucial to be able to carry it out. And then he fell to wondering why it was crucial, and concluded that it was so only if one had certain ends in mind; if one did not, it would soon become little more than tiresome. Sheila had never been afraid of silences. She sought them out on the high tops in the Lakes and the Yorkshire moors, and sometimes he had been the one who wanted to speak but who had learned to be quiet. In those moments she had been somewhere without him but he was happy – happier than he had realized at the time – to wait for her return. Most women are not like that.

He had turned on the computer for no particular reason. Marcia had not cancelled - she had said twice that she was looking forward to it, and after the second time he had felt obliged to say something similar. Now, as the home screen loaded, he knew that he should not have said it. Why had he done so? Because there is an expectation, something deeply ingrained socially or culturally which says that a single person must still be in the game, must still want to be even if they deny it until they are blue in the face. Smith could acknowledge it in himself – it would ‘nice’ to have some company, a friendship away from work, but at what price? Intimacy seemed to be what many were willing to pay but the thought of it repelled him a little.

Another email from Jo Evison. For a man who refused to believe in coincidence it was somewhat troubling, as if the two women were in some sort of conspiracy.

‘Sorry to be a pain. What about meeting up instead of a phone call? I’m in Norwich a week tomorrow, the Friday. I could drive across on the Saturday. I’ll probably go up to the coast anyway, so… Let me know, Jo E.’

Two Saturdays in a row spoiled by worrying about what to wear, what to say, what to do next and what not to do? He didn’t think so.

‘I don’t want to string you along. I don’t fancy being written about that much – best to say so and have done with it. There are plenty of other murders – hope that doesn’t sound too harsh. Best of luck with whatever you tackle next, though.’

He read it over before he sent it, and thought that it was pretty polite – he could have just said that he was washing his hair.

# Chapter Eighteen

“Well, sergeant, this is a little embarrassing, isn’t it?”

Ralph Greenwood stood in the doorway of his room, watching as it was searched by Waters, Richard Ford and Julia Conroy, a young female constable that Smith had met for the first time that morning. Smith was in the corridor, close to Greenwood; a few yards away, Alison Reeve stood with Irene Miller but there was little or no conversation between them – the manager was there to steer away any residents who wanted to know what was happening. She was not at all happy at the decision to take Ralph to Lake Central for yet another interview, and head office had already been consulted.

“Sorry about that, sir. As I’ve already said, not my idea.”

“Oh – I don’t mean for me. For you!”

Smith looked up at the older man and the amusement in the bright blue eyes seemed to be genuine.

“How is that then, Ralph? I hope you don’t mind if I call-”

“Sergeant, I already consider us the best of friends, old chap. Do you know your Dickens? As to this matter, you did appear to be in charge of it for a while, despite your rank – you don’t mind, do you? – but now the brass have taken it over. Lack of progress, I suppose. But you’ve done all the donkey work and now they move in to get the glory. Still, not the first time you’ve seen that, I’m sure.”

“Do you think there is any glory to be got in this, Ralph?”

Greenwood’s slight shrug and considered expression seemed to acknowledge that the question was a good one but he said nothing in reply to it. They watched as Waters unplugged the laptop and held it up towards Smith, who nodded.

“The authority covers the removal of any devices that might move the investigation forward, so…”

“Feel free, sergeant. You’ve already had a look but obviously you can do more at the station. And I imagine there is a specialist department somewhere that can ‘drill right down’ as they say these days. It’s all quite diverting – but I do feel for you, as I say.”

Smith overcame the impulse to walk away immediately. Greenwood was right, of course, it was embarrassing but not quite for the reasons that the man might have imagined. The loss of his ‘authority’ in the case was irrelevant – as a sergeant one has little, and that, after all, was one reason why he had accepted the rank. What annoyed him was the way in which first his advice and then his strongly expressed opinion had been ignored; Allen had listened to both that morning with thinly-veiled contempt, before ordering that the search warrant should be drawn up and that the suspect – Allen’s word – should be brought in “for a proper interview”. And beyond the insult to his own feelings, Smith had a sense that this course of action might have all sorts of unintended consequences; when he voiced that thought, no-one seemed willing to listen.

Ralph Greenwood said, “So who is in charge now, sergeant?”

“I expect that Detective Superintendent Allen will want to conduct the interview.”

“Goodness – Detective Superintendent! Is he very formidable?”

“I’ll have to leave you to make up your own mind on that, Ralph.”

The three young officers were making a fingertip search of the room – they could be at it for another twenty or thirty minutes at least. He could hurry things up – it was an absurd waste of time – but Reeve was there and it was up to her. He approached her and said, so that Irene Miller could hear, “I’m going to have a wander, see if I can find Martin and Nancy.” Then he looked directly at the manager and said, “No more questions, just a quiet word in case they are bothered by all of this.”

He walked away without waiting for comment or consent.

Their doors were closed. He could have knocked but that would be more intrusive than he wanted to be at that moment. It was lunchtime now, and they might be in the dining area but when he watched briefly from the doorway he could not see them. The room was only half full, and it seemed to him that the whole floor was quieter, more subdued than he had known it up to now. On the way to the social room, the final place that he might find them, he passed two elderly men standing in the corridor. They were talking but stopped as soon as they noticed him, and then they watched him approach, staring openly with the truculence of those who have nothing to lose by rudeness and nothing to gain by politeness. Smith said good afternoon as he passed and neither replied. He stopped and looked around at them – then he pointed to the large, flowery letters on the wall beside them that spelled out ‘Friendship’. Still nothing.

The social room was empty. It didn’t matter that much, and he hadn’t really come to reassure them – he had wanted to see whether they had been rattled by what was, to all intents and purposes, a police raid in which their close friend would shortly be taken away for further questioning. One of them might have gone a bit wobbly… But never mind.

He walked across to the window, the window by which he had first spoken to Ralph Greenwood. It was only a matter of days ago but seemed like weeks. Odd, but a case could do that to your sense of time; you delved so quickly and deeply into people’s lives that knowledge which would usually have taken years to acquire, in the normal course of relationships, was yours sometimes in minutes.

In the car park he could see the two police cars, right outside the entrance, no attempts at subtlety this time. The only thing missing was flashing lights and a couple of black-shirts from the armed response unit, automatic weapons at the ready in case Ralph made a break for it. He gave an involuntary shake of the head. Stupid.

As he watched the scene, wondering how long he could reasonably stay away, his thoughts went back to the weekend again, to the Saturday night. It hadn’t been a disaster. Conversation had taken place, pleasant conversation with some smiles and a little laughter. The food had been excellent – she said so several times – and their table for two had been in an alcove from which they could watch the street and talk about the people who passed by under the lamps. Marcia had worn a skirt and blouse, with a French-looking scarf – a clever touch, Smith had thought – and she looked altogether a lovely, mature, sophisticated woman. Smith couldn’t imagine what he had looked like in comparison – he could only be certain that it had not been a handsome, mature, sophisticated man. And then afterwards, after the meal, as they drank coffee… Why is it always at coffee that things are really said? And would it have been so difficult for him to have talked about what he was looking for rather than what he was not? The thought, the search for an answer, distracted him, and then he looked out of the window again.

Snow had begun to fall properly after a fortnight of anticipation. The air and the ground were so cold that every flake appeared to be settling. Beyond the grounds of Rosemary House, the distant cityscape was disappearing in a white mist. Winter had come at last.

He watched it fall, the snow, and it was soothing in an odd sort of way. For a minute or two he was able to think of nothing but this event out in the frozen air, beyond all human calculation and control. The world was being transformed before his very eyes.

It was only when he finally turned around that he realized he had not been alone at all. The woman who sat in one of the deep armchairs was tiny and twisted to one side by her age but her eyes were open and fixed firmly on Smith – they might have been so for several minutes. Leaving the room meant that he would walk within a few feet of her chair and it would have been rude to say nothing at all. He halted and said good afternoon.

“Snow.”

“Yes, at last. It’s been on the cards for days, hasn’t it?”

“I’ve seen plenty of it. 1947…1963. People make too much fuss.”

“Nice for the children, though.”

“Mine never liked it. Do yours?”

“I don’t have any, sorry to say.”

“Plenty of time yet, for a man like you. Get a younger woman.”

“Well, thanks, I’ll bear that in mind!”

Smith began to move away.

She said, “Are they still out there, the police?”

He stepped back towards her a pace or two and said, “Yes. Do you know why they are here?”

“I don’t listen to any gossip!” She spat the word out as if it had an unpleasant taste. “But two of them were over there for a few minutes just now, talking about it. Mumbling away like they do – I could hear some of it.”

“Some people don’t like the police much.”

“What about you?”

She had twisted herself round to see him more fully. Despite her age, which must be considerable, he was still not sure whether she was toying with him, whether she knew perfectly well who or what he was.

“Some of them are OK, I suppose.”

“My son’s a policeman.”

“Is he? I expect he’s one of the nicer ones.”

“Chief Constable or something, so he says. You can’t always believe what they tell you.”

“I’m sure he’s telling you the truth. What’s his name?”

The light had finally come on.

“John.”

A common enough name still but too much of a coincidence not to be John Devine, Assistant Chief Constable. Great and tempting possibilities opened up before Smith but he knew that he must resist them.

“Well, if he’s Chief Constable, your son has done very well for himself.”

“He was clever at school, always wanted to get on. But,” and then she raised a finger of warning to Smith, “he was a devious little sod sometimes.”

“Really? I find that hard to believe with such an honest mother.”

The lower half of her much-lined face cracked open into a near-toothless smile.

“Well, he looks after me, I’ll give him that. This place is alright. Some of them are friendly.”

“What about the ones who sit over there?”

Smith pointed to the table by the window. Mrs Devine must be, he thought, the oldest person I’ve ever questioned in an investigation.

“Them? Stuck up, hardly ever speak to anyone else. Two of them were there just now, never said a word to me. But I could hear them.”

“You said they were talking about the police. The two of them? A man and a woman?”

“And you ask a lot of questions. You should join the police. I’ll have a word with my son.”

This could go horribly wrong, Smith told himself, but he waited and she picked up the thread of the conversation again.

“There were the three of them but then one was fetched away. The other two were talking about the police cars, muttering. Then they went off as well.”

“Ah yes, I think I know those people.”

“Friends, are they?”

“No, not friends, just people I’ve met.”

With one arm, she pushed herself forward a few inches, so that her face was closer to where he stood; in response, Smith sat down in the adjacent armchair.

She said confidentially, “I can tell you something. They have séances.”

“Really? Where?”

“Over there! Round that table, large as life.”

Smith made a point of looking across the room, as if he was trying to picture the scene.

“What do they do?”

“Hold hands like they are praying or something. Shouldn’t be allowed in public. This is a public room.”

“The three of them hold hands?”

She closed her eyes for a moment, and Smith had a vision of how close she was to her own end – he had seen, perhaps, too many bodies in his time. But she was only remembering in order to answer his question better.

“Last time there was four. I expect one’s moved away or they’ve fallen out.”

“Can you remember when it was, that last time?”

“No. Quite a while…”

“Since Christmas?”

“Before that.”

Smith stood up slowly, conscious of the time he had spent there. Mrs Devine watched him, and when he said goodbye, he had to be getting on, she said, “Can you get it stopped? This is a public place.”

He said that he would see what he could do.

Interview Room Three would be quite full when everyone finally arrived. Ralph Greenwood sat in the interviewee’s place, an empty chair beside the one that he occupied. He had examined the recording device and asked about the camera mounted on the wall to his right. Satisfied, he had been sitting quietly and apparently calmly for some minutes. To his left, and Smith’s right, sat Waters and PC Julie Conroy, their seats several feet away from the desk – the space clearly indicating that they were to act as observers or to support the interviewee in some way if necessary. A female officer was expected in that role if the interviewee was a female or a minor; Smith wondered at what age exactly the same principle applied to elderly men. Would he soon get one himself, even sitting this side of the desk?

Speaking to Reeve a few minutes ago, Smith had the distinct impression that Allen had originally planned to interview Greenwood in her company rather than his. She had said something about the fact that as he, Smith, had been involved from the beginning, and had conducted both earlier interviews, it really had to be him who was present at this one. Allen must have given way on that point but if she had been arguing to save in some way Smith’s honour, she had been mistaken – he would have been happier to be out of it entirely now. He had no intention of participating much at all in what was about to take place.

He looked at his watch and raised his eyebrows to Greenwood – was Allen keeping the man waiting, thinking that he was raising the pressure? Greenwood’s look in return seemed to say, yes, pathetic isn’t it?

Finally the door opened and the detective superintendent entered. Both younger officers shifted position slightly, as if they thought they ought to stand but thankfully neither actually did so. Greenwood gave the new arrival a vacuous smile and Smith allowed himself a brief one of the same ilk. Allen was carrying a folder that Smith did not recognize; the important ones were already on the table, so Allen’s was probably just for effect.

Allen sat down next to Smith and said, “Ralph Greenwood?” At least he hadn’t followed that with “I presume…”

Greenwood admitted to being whom he was, and then Allen explained again that the interview would be taped and filmed, possibly for the purposes of evidence - was that all clear? It appeared to be so.

Allen said then, “I hope that it has also been explained to you that you have a right to legal representation in these circumstances?”

“It has been explained with admirable clarity by Sergeant Smith.”

“And so I assume that you are waiving that right at present.”

Ralph Greenwood looked closely at the empty chair beside him before answering, “So it would seem.”

Allen was undeterred – he had met hard cases like this before.

“Most people in this position would choose to have a solicitor present, Mr Greenwood.”

“I suppose that would be because most people in this position are guilty of something.”

Superintendent Allen gave the suspect his best be-it-on-your-own-head look and said, “Would you please confirm for the tape that you are waiving your right to legal representation in this interview?”

“I confirm for the tape that I am waiving my right to legal representation. Would you, superintendent, please confirm for the tape that I am neither under arrest nor under caution?”

Allen glanced at the camera for a split second as if to check whether there was, after all, a local news reporter hiding behind it.

“You have not been arrested or cautioned at this point in time other than to advise you of your right to silence, Mr Greenwood.”

“‘At this point in time?’ Ridiculous phrase – I don’t know how or why it has found its way into the language. Nevertheless, I have not been cautioned today as to my right to silence. Is that because you are making a de facto assumption that I am already aware of that right under the law? If so, I would like to know on what basis you are making that assumption.”

Allen was looking at Smith now.

Smith said, “Mr Greenwood was not cautioned as to his right to silence, or to its adoption’s possible implications in a future court appearance, in the previous interviews as it was not deemed necessary by me. The caution has not been given today – in the absence of the interviewing officer, and in view of the fact that the tape isn’t actually running yet, sir…”

To his credit, Allen never blinked. The entire interview so far was re-wound in spirit, the tape and camera were switched on – much to Waters’ relief he had something to do – and Ralph Greenwood was given his statutory right to silence, which he promptly declined with an ironic “at this point in time” and a friendly smile.

Perhaps that smile deceived Allen a little. He seemed to adopt a more amenable approach once the interview was properly underway, and his opening remark was “I know that you’ve already had a couple of chats with Sergeant Smith – he has told me a lot about you.”

“Really?” Greenwood had replied. “You do surprise me, superintendent.”

“Why is that? We do talk to each other!”

“No doubt. But I cannot imagine that Sergeant Smith knows a lot about me. That he knows something, I am certain, but a lot? I doubt it…”

It would be wrong to say that things went downhill from there – they just trundled along at the same level for an hour or so before Allen thanked Mr Greenwood for his assistance and asked Smith to ensure that he was safely returned to Rosemary House. It wasn’t incompetently done but it was uninspired, and Smith wondered what Waters was making of it. The whole thing could have been avoided if they had listened – this is what happens when you formally interview a clever man who knows at least as much about the law as you do, and have no sodding evidence! In boxing terms, Allen had not laid a glove on Ralph Greenwood, and all three of them – Greenwood, Allen and Smith – knew it. Afterwards, Allen had dodged away quickly, saying that they would meet after reviewing the tapes; it was just as likely, thought Smith, that he was trying to think of a way of losing them.

Only once had there been a moment when all in Interview Room 3 had held their breath. In the last few minutes Allen had suddenly asked, probably out of simple irritation, whether Ralph knew anything about the death of Joan Riley that he had not told them. Greenwood had paused before answering, “Yes, I do.”

No-one had said, well, what is it – everyone had simply waited for him to tell them.

“I haven’t told anyone how much pain she was in from her multiple fractures. At our age, they never heal properly, you know. I haven’t told anyone how afraid she was of another fall or how courageously she faced that fear. I haven’t told anyone what a fine woman she was and how much I admired her.”

Waters drove Smith’s car while he sat in the back with Ralph Greenwood. In the couple of hours that they had spent in the station, the snow had continued to fall, steadily and straight down onto the frozen streets. The main roads had been kept clear by traffic but once they were into the suburbs and heading for Rosemary House the surfaces became compacted snow and Waters had to slow down and drop the gears. Smith had wondered then whether he had ever driven in such conditions before, but they hardly drifted and they arrived at the car park without incident.

Little had been said. When Ralph opened his door, Smith told him to wait until he was outside himself. Sometime earlier the path to the entrance doors had been swept but already fresh snow had begun to fill the cleared area – he would see the old man to the door.

He took Greenwood’s arm without asking and there was no objection, no attempt to pull away. Under his other arm, he held the laptop which Superintendent Allen had concluded did not merit further investigation at this stage. A few feet from the door was a lowered kerb, hidden by the snow and as he stepped forward, Ralph’s foot slipped from it and he stumbled, losing a little of his balance. Without Smith’s grip he would have fallen; as it was, he half-twisted to save himself and it was then that Smith glimpsed the look of pain, strong and involuntary pain, that took momentary possession of the face, even of the sharp blue eyes.

Ralph Greenwood was immediately aware that more than his foot had slipped in that split second. He laughed aloud and thanked Smith for his assistance, said it was his fault for talking about the elderly and their falls, a silly coincidence… He disengaged his arm from Smith’s and straightened up, demonstrating that he was well again and once more in control.

Smith said, “If you’re sure you are OK, then. I don’t mind seeing you indoors.”

“No need, sergeant, but thank you.”

He turned away from the doors and looked across the floodlit car park to the gardens beyond – Smith did the same. It was still snowing, a little less heavily than earlier on but it was clear that there was much more to come from the great darkness overhead. Only their car tracks and footprints showed in the white, smooth covering, and the rose bushes and bare shrubs held a little V of whiteness in every fork. And then there came the silence that only snow can bring, new snow that softens the edges of every sound, that muffles every tread, the silence that seeps into familiar things and slowly freezes them into a stillness. In the car, Smith could see only Waters’ patient hands gripping the wheel, waiting, and behind them, in the building, there was no sign of life.

Ralph Greenwood said, “Isn’t this beautiful?”

“Yes. The more so because it’s been a long time coming, I suppose.”

“In the end, sergeant, it is only moments like this that matter.”

Moments like fresh snowfall, thought Smith, or perhaps the sun’s faint friendliness on the wall some lonely rain-ceased midsummer evening? He could hear the older man slowing and deepening his breathing to take in more of the pure, cold air.

“You alright, sir? I thought you might have hurt yourself when you slipped.”

“Really, sergeant, I am fine. Thank you for your concern.”

They stood for a few more seconds watching the fall of snow, and then, without taking his eyes from it, Greenwood said, “Have you read any Joyce, sergeant?”

“I don’t think I have – I suppose I would remember. But I’m sure my wife did, if that’s any help.”

“Did? You are divorced?”

“No, sir.”

“Oh – my apologies, and condolences then. Why are you sure that she would have read Joyce – if you don’t mind me asking?”

“She was an English teacher.”

“I see.” There was a short pause before he said, “I never had an extended formal education. I left school at fifteen, took the first job I could get and worked all my life in an office. But you already know what I did for a living, sergeant! It’s of no importance now. But I discovered literature all by myself, you know – completely self-taught. I often think it’s the best way. Do you know who said ‘Nothing worth knowing can ever be taught’?”

“No, I don’t, but I can see what he was driving at.”

“Absolutely. But anyway, Joyce ends one of his stories with snow falling just like this. I could even quote for you the closing sentences, but fear not, I won’t. I think it’s probably the best short story that I’ve ever read.”

Smith turned at a movement behind them. Irene Miller was standing at the door inside, waiting to open it and let Ralph back in – she rubbed her arms to show that it must be too cold for him to be standing outside.

Smith said, “I’ll look it up, Ralph. I should be able to manage a short story. Irene is here – you ought to be going inside.”

Greenwood finally took his eyes away from the ever-whitening world, looked down at Smith and laughed as he stepped towards the door.

“Going inside, sergeant? I don’t think there’s much chance of that, do you?”

Smith shook his head and said, “Not much.” He held out the laptop to Greenwood.

Irene Miller had the outer door open for him now. He went through it then turned to face Smith.

“How will you look that story up if you don’t know what it’s called?”

“Sorry – getting slow in my old age. What is it?”

The outer door was on a graduated spring and was closing itself slowly upon Ralph Greenwood as he said, “Easy enough to remember. It’s called ‘The Dead’.”

# Chapter Nineteen

‘You are an egoist (or an egotist – I had to look them up, they mean the same). “I don’t fancy being written about that much”? You would not be. Take another look at the book. I’d say that less than ten per cent is about the detective in charge of the investigation, and a lot of that is her talking about the work of her junior officers. You’ve assumed that you would be the focus but that isn’t so at all. My interest is, and has always been, on the perpetrator and his victims – and in particular how the two are related psychologically, socially and even culturally.

‘Egotism is, to be fair, common amongst detectives for all sorts of reasons. I’d like to think it’s why I gave it up – ie not being egotistical enough – but I now suspect that writers suffer from it just as much. To assume that the world wants to read about your ideas and opinions is surely one of the high peaks of egotism. But I digress, as usual. Turn me down by all means, but make sure that it is for the right reasons – I really don’t want to write about YOU that much!’

Reading the email for the third or fourth time on his phone on Tuesday morning, he had to smile again. Feisty, in an intellectual sort of way, a clever-with-words sort of way. He had to reply to that, of course, and that was what she wanted. She thought that if she could build some sort of relationship with him then he might, in the end, agree to what she wanted. Everyone plays these games, it seems, but as the day wore on, he found himself thinking more than once about how he would respond to Jo Evison.

There had been the briefest of meetings with Allen and Reeve. The superintendent was suddenly very busy with preparations for a conference in Leicester at the end of the week; he had said pointedly to Smith that the new serious crimes unit would be on the agenda, as if Smith had one more opportunity to make the right decision. It was left to Reeve to tell him, after Allen had left the room, that they had decided to wind down a little the investigation, such as it was, into Joan Riley’s death. Smith would continue to oversee it and follow up personally any developments, and it would, naturally, go onto the list for a monthly review.

“So more or less what I suggested last Thursday?” Smith had said.

“More or less,” Reeve had agreed.

The three of them, Smith, Waters and Murray, spent the rest of the day working through the lists of visitors to Rosemary House. Late in the afternoon, they reviewed progress and concluded that although three or four names still eluded them, the chance of these being in any way involved was minute, so small that they could not justify three of them continuing to work on the case after tomorrow. In the morning, Smith and Murray would complete any outstanding paperwork, while Waters would go to the Crown Court with two of Wilson’s team. The ATM case had reached its conclusion – the first case in which Waters had been involved to do so – and the jury was very likely to be back in the morning. Waters’ presence was not needed in any way other than to give him the experience, and he had been nervous about asking to go; Smith told him that it was vital he should in order to appreciate just how boring the Crown Court was for ninety eight per cent of its existence.

At six o’clock, sitting alone in the canteen, Smith finished the plate of pizza and chips. The Happy Singles guide would probably have something to say about the nutritional value of that but at least he wouldn’t have to cook tonight. He was on his third cup of tea and wondered whether he could get away with a cigarette, if he held it under the table. Denise and Mel were out of sight in the kitchen – he could hear their voices but they wouldn’t dob him in, not after he saved them from the mouse in the kitchen a couple of weeks ago… But better not.

The snow outside the window had stopped again. It wasn’t over though, not according to the forecast – more by the end of the week. He thought about Ralph Greenwood then, and wondered exactly what it was that he and his partners-in-crime had got away with. They had made some sort of pact – Mrs Devine’s séance had confirmed that – but the exact nature of what they had agreed to do for each other, the exact terms on which they had carried it out, had eluded him. To himself he could admit that in the past he might have pursued them a little more ruthlessly. Perhaps, in the end, one has seen too much. Perhaps the messiness of life makes a nonsense of morality and the simplistic notions of right and wrong upon which ‘the law’ was founded. Perhaps he was just getting too old for this. Had Sheila’s death, the manner of it, affected the way in which he had investigated that of Joan Riley? He didn’t believe so. But if he could not be certain, then maybe it was time for him to do some serious thinking

On the way into work on the Wednesday morning, Smith took a long detour so that he could call in to Rosemary House. The roads were poor again but he did not want to leave things as they were simply by a phone call to Irene Miller – he felt that he owed her more than that.

In her office, the first thing she said was, “Is it about the post? I’m sorry I couldn’t be more helpful but we get hundreds of items a week – we cannot keep a record of all that.” Smith had said not to worry, it was only one possible and pretty insignificant line of inquiry. Then she had asked whether it, the inquiry, was over.

“No. We haven’t closed it and won’t do so for the foreseeable future. There were serious offences and it is likely that the person, or people, who committed them is still in a position to do something similar. Sorry about that but-”

“Do you really believe that, sergeant? Is it really possible that someone here gave Joan the means to end her life? I still cannot accept it, I’m afraid.”

Smith thought how much his view of her had changed. She was not concerned about bad publicity or losing her job; her inability to accept what Smith believed to be the truth was personal – she felt that she must have failed if someone like Joan Riley had chosen to end her own life rather than to go and discuss the matter with the care home manager. There must be a dozen reasons why viewing it in that way was being too hard upon oneself but Smith had to respect the woman’s professionalism and sense of responsibility.

“And I’m afraid that it does remain the most likely explanation. That’s partly why I called. I know I mentioned this on the phone but – well, I just thought we should talk about it face to face. It would help me a lot if you could keep an eye on things, not that you don’t, but this thing in particular. You know, ear to the ground… Anything that concerns you, you have my mobile number. I’d just come in, no fuss, and we could talk it over.”

She said, “Thank you,” and then after a pause, “You mean Ralph, don’t you?”

How much should he say? It’s always difficult with an involved third party.

“Mr Greenwood said nothing that gave us cause for concern during his interview.”

She smiled. “He has mentioned you more than once since he came back last night. You see, I’ve already started keeping an eye and an ear open.”

“Well, as I said, it wasn’t my idea. I have my bosses, just like you.”

“No, no criticism. I think he enjoyed himself. He’s looking upon it as a day out. He seemed quite reinvigorated!”

Well, thought Smith, as far as Ralph was concerned, the interview was pretty much a walk in the park. He said, “He’s an interesting man.”

“Sergeant, I think he feels the same about you.”

By mid-afternoon the statements had all been photocopied, boxed and labelled. Waters had arrived back at half past two, excited and talkative – the judge had not sentenced yet, obviously, but his closing words to the jury, who had convicted on all counts, had been that sentences for an attack on the security of the banking system would be nothing less than exemplary. Someone in Wilson’s team had already opened a book on how many of them would receive double figure terms. As a reward, Waters had been allowed to fetch Smith and Murray extra teas without having to pay for them himself.

They took a break to drink them and the talk became almost philosophical for five minutes or so – was there any other job with such highs and lows? When you broke a case and saw the guilty get what they deserved, there was nothing else that you would rather be doing, said Smith, nowhere else you would rather be. But when a case gets away from you – worst of all, when you know who did what to whom, and you are unable to find the evidence to prove it, then you feel yourself sinking into the pits of despair. The world has turned against you and the legal system has set traps and snares for its own in some cruel and apparently random game of chance. John Murray thought that surgeons had similar ups and downs – the days you lose a patient must live with you forever – but then, to save a life, to see that person walk and talk again must be something else. Smith could see that but not Waters’ suggestion that teachers must feel equally thrilled and horrified according to whether pupils passed or failed their examinations – no, he could not accept that.

They were at the display boards, taking down the pictures and notes for the files when the door opened and Wilson walked into the room. Smith nodded briefly and looked away – few words had passed between them since last year’s trouble. Murray pulled some sort of face at Smith and turned back to his own board. Obviously it was Waters that Wilson had come to see, and to the young man’s credit, now that he had worked in both teams, he seemed to have found a way of operating in both without causing offence to the other side. Wilson went over to the board that Waters was clearing and spoke to him.

“Chris, we’re having a few beers tonight at The King George – a bit of a celebration. You’re invited, they asked me to come up and let you know.”

And, thought Smith, it’s a perfect opportunity to come and have a look, and probably a laugh, at this investigation which has gone nowhere…

Waters thanked him and said that he’d be there. The conversation dropped a little and Smith made a point of not trying to listen in – but then he heard a question and surprise in Water’s voice – “Really?” – and then, “DC?”

Smith walked across to them.

“DC? Sergeant Wilson-”

“It’s John, for God’s sake!”

“Sorry. John thinks he recognizes a face on this board.”

Waters was clearing the board upon which they had put up the photographs of the staff and residents of Rosemary House. Smith took a guess and pointed to the image of Kipras Kazlauskas – “This one?” They could have been wrong about him.

“No.”

Wilson raised a hand and pointed to the picture of Ralph Greenwood.

“Really? A very old court case, maybe.”

“No, not the old boy. The girl behind him. I remember her.”

Wilson had been part of a raid on a party the previous summer. Lots of youngsters celebrating the end of sixth form and college, lots of eighteen and twenty year olds but it had been at a private house out in the country, owned by some player in the film or music business. They’d had a tip-off days before, someone with a grudge most likely, and a dozen or so officers had gate-crashed the affair on a Saturday night.

Wilson spun it out a little for Waters’ benefit but Smith said nothing and waited for the bottom line. Wilson saw and cut it shorter than it might have been.

“She was there. There was a houseful and I won’t describe what was going on upstairs but she was in the room where we had several in possession of Class A.”

“What exactly?”

Wilson said, “There was plenty of coke being used. But a couple of them also had H in their pockets – no doubt that was for later. They were charged, you can look it up.”

“Was the girl in possession? We’ve checked and-”

“No, she was clean.”

They all looked again at the photograph, the girl laughing into the camera, her hands on her grandfather’s shoulders.

“What makes you sure it’s her? I’m not being funny, Wilson, but it’s not the best of pictures.”

Wilson was obviously so sure of himself that he felt no need to take that personally.

“First, a very pretty blonde, distinctive, and second, she was as arsey as they come.”

“How?”

“Knew her rights and made sure everyone else in the room did. Started shouting out legal advice!”

Smith nodded and looked at Waters.

Then Wilson said, “That’s why I cautioned her for knowingly associating, to shut her up.”

“You did what? You cautioned her? There’s nothing on the system, we checked at least twice.”

Wilson shrugged. “I’d have put it in, along with several others. They’ll all be there. You can check… If that one didn’t get on, it’s the system. It isn’t perfect, you’ve been here long enough to know that. She had a funny name, I can’t remember it but… I’ll find my old recs if it’ll help you out, DC!”

He was walking away now, heading for the door and smiling, on a roll.

Smith said, “Wilson?”

“What?”

“Thanks.”

He had said from the beginning that this case would never have legs unless somebody told them something; that the someone had turned out to be Wilson was an irony that he would dwell upon some other time. As yet they could not be certain that it was the same girl, of course, but what were the odds? ‘She started shouting out legal advice’, Wilson said, and Smith had no doubt that Ralph Greenwood would have taught his granddaughter legal survival skills the way other grandfathers teach their grandsons the art of fishing. Waters had said, hadn’t he, that she was their best bet and now here she was, knowingly associating with people using Class A drugs – anyone who can get hold of cocaine can get hold of heroin. It was a direct link between the world of wild parties and the quiet suffering of Joan Riley’s last days but proving anything now would still require considerable thought and even more luck than they had just had.

They went back to Waters’ computer and searched the database again – and again nothing. Wilson had many faults, and in their wonderful time together Smith had probably told him every one to his face, but he was not normally careless with routine procedures. It was John Murray who suggested just entering the surname. There were a few more than Smith expected; Maitland was not as uncommon as he had supposed. They worked through the list and had found her in less than five minutes but she was present as ‘Aster’, not Astra. A spelling mistake? Simply misheard? The girl herself being clever? It made no difference – against her name was the caution that Wilson had given her, and her address in Lake was the same as the one that they had found for her when checking the visitor’s book at Rosemary House. Smith remembered his interviews with Ralph Greenwood. The only times he had seemed on edge had been when his granddaughter had been mentioned and now that made sense. If Smith was right, she had told him about her caution and Ralph had realized that this was, potentially, a weak point in what they had done or were planning to do. And then Smith wondered whether that moment, after all, the moment when he realized that his granddaughter knew such people, had been the moment at which the thought had first occurred to him. It was possible… But there were many other possibilities.

It was all they could do to prevent Waters heading for the door. Smith stopped him with who, what, where, why and when – every question needed to be answered if they were to make the most of this break. Who needed to be involved? Allen was already in Leicester – absolutely the best place for him, Smith said. Reeve was not in the building but she answered her mobile and agreed immediately that they had enough suspicion to bring the girl in for an interview – an interview at which she wanted to be present.

One by one, they worked through all of Smith’s questions from as many angles as possible. It took more than two hours, three more cups of tea and several stale Danish pastries from the canteen. All that remained was the decision as to when they would bring in Astra Maitland – tonight or tomorrow morning? If they went for tonight, it would mean a late finish for everyone and Smith would have to sign off on more overtime; tomorrow would be more civilized in every way but… But the momentum had swung their way for the first time in this business. Smith checked with Murray that Maggie was OK at home alone for an evening, and then he told the two of them to fetch the girl straight away.

Waters asked if he should sign out handcuffs just in case.

“John, can you believe this? He’s done one fetch and now he wants to put cuffs on. Chris, I reckon what you should do is put those pink furry ones you’ve got under your bed in your pocket, just in case.”

Waters did not blush as he would have done a few months ago. Instead he said, “No good, DC – we lost the key.”

“Bloody hell – you haven’t still got someone chained to the bedpost, have you? John, you’re in charge. Do not arrest this girl unless she absolutely insists on it.”

There had been no answer to their knocks at the front door but the place did not feel deserted to Murray. Round the back, he had pushed at the French doors and Waters had asked whether they would have gone in if it had been open – but it wasn’t, so there was no point in discussing that. All the windows were closed but it was still January. Inside, through the kitchen window he could see that the gas boiler was alight and heating something, and there was a little condensation on the window itself, which probably meant someone had been in there recently. Beyond the kitchen doorway was a dim light in some sort of hallway. Oaklands only had big houses like this one – it must have five or six bedrooms – and Murray wondered idly, as one always did, where the money came from, but then DC had said that Greenwood himself was probably minted, and some of that might have gone into his daughter’s place. No-one had mentioned the son-in-law, though. The thoughts ran on in the background as Murray methodically worked his way round the house, and then they were back on the drive. Normally he would have knocked and asked a neighbour but the gardens were so large that the nearest one was at least fifty yards away through various shrubberies and herbaceous borders.

“DC? Thought I’d better ring. The lights are on here but nobody’s home.”

“Quel surprise. Lights on? Just nipped down to the takeaway?”

“I can’t imagine the takeaways do a big trade with a place like this. I’m wondering where we’re going to put a baby and this place has en suites to spare.”

“I reckon you’ve got communist tendencies, John. What’s your feeling?”

Murray looked back at the house.

“Someone will be about sooner or later – they haven’t left the country. If you want me to wait, I don’t mind, and Waters needs something to take his mind off his girlfriend being away. As long as he doesn’t get frisky with me in the car.”

There was a pause – he could see in his mind’s eye the frown, the slightly narrowed eyes as calculations were made.

“No. Come away and go home, there’s no danger of anyone getting wind of what we know. Can you do half past seven there in the morning, with Boy Wonder? I’ve always found seven thirty in the morning very productive. And you might miss some of that morning… Anyway, I’ll be in here at the same time. If we don’t find her home, we’ll have to tackle the Uni. We’ll send Waters in there first with his certificates.”

# Chapter Twenty

“Well, DC, she almost insisted on being arrested.”

Murray went on to explain what had happened earlier that morning. Astra Maitland had answered the door at half past seven, fully dressed and about to leave – her red Yaris had been warming up in the drive as they arrived. When they invited her to come into the station to talk about matters relating to her caution last year, she had laughed and not very politely declined; as far as she was concerned, it had been a trivial matter that was over and done with, so unless they had something more serious to discuss, she would rather go to college. Murray had said that it would be in her interest to clear the thing up sooner rather than later, to which she had replied that she doubted whether they were here for her benefit – did they intend to arrest her if she continued to decline their kind offer? Murray had then said, well, yes, he probably would…

Smith said, “Testing the water. She wanted to know how strong we think our intelligence is, that’s all. I’ll bet she then changed her mind and came quietly.”

Murray nodded.

“Well done. Good thing she didn’t call your bluff, though. Where’s the mother? Anyone else know we brought her in this morning?”

“She told us that mum is in Marseille on a business trip, back tomorrow. She called her from the station to tell her where she was and what was happening.”

Smith frowned and Murray went on, “Had to, DC. She wasn’t under arrest and she knows her rights – when I said that it wasn’t really necessary, that she’d only be here an hour or so, she told me that even if I had arrested her, she would still have the right to let someone know where she was.”

“You stayed in the room here when she made the call?”

“Yes, and she showed me the name and number on the phone before she called it.”

“Fair enough. How did the conversation go? Mum, I’m in the nick again…”

“Mum did most of the talking – perhaps she’s a lawyer as well. Lots of ‘Yes, mums’ and ‘Of course I do, mums’.”

“Well, if she is a chip off the old block, it should be interesting at least. Ma’am’s reading through the notes, she wants to start at nine. Waters can sit in. We’ll set the video to record and run live as well. You can watch from wherever the live screen is – the more eyes and ears on this the better.”

When Detective Inspector Reeve entered the interview room, there was momentary surprise on Astra Maitland’s face, and Smith thought, no, you didn’t expect that, and you’d rather deal with men – I wonder why… The girl was uncommonly pretty, and ‘distinctive’, just as Wilson had said. Her photograph, hidden in the folder in front of him, did not do her justice; she seemed a little childlike and gawky in that but the year or so that had passed since it was taken had improved her. She was still petite, still blonde, but her figure had filled out, and her face was flawless though she wore, as far as Smith could tell, no make-up. To cap it all, she had Greenwood’s eyes as they must have looked out on the world fifty or more years ago – a sharp, scintillating blue.

After the usual introductions and explanations of what was taking place, Reeve paused, looked Astra Maitland steadily in the eyes for a moment and said, “We’d like to start with the caution that you were given by an officer from this station last August. Tell us what you were doing at Wolverton Lodge that evening.”

The first thing that Smith noticed again seemed to be surprise, as if this was not what she was expecting to be asked, even though Murray said that he had given it as the reason for their visit. Had she assumed that was just a pretext? Then the young woman looked at her watch before she spoke, and Smith had half-expected awkwardness and questions and evasions from the beginning – instead they got a full account of how she and her friends had celebrated leaving school, getting A level results and confirming university places. Her speech was not plummy – she was too cool for that – but Smith did not need to ask her at which secondary school in Lake she had taken those examinations. If she had not been a student at the Queen’s School he would be amazed. OK, he thought, sometimes there are coincidences – the same school at which Joan Riley had been the headmaster’s secretary for all those years, long before Astra Maitland had walked through the gates for the first time.

“I’m sure that lots of young people were at similar parties last August, Astra, but most of them would not have involved Class A drugs, would they?”

Reeve’s question was given due consideration.

“Not ‘most’, I suppose, but probably more than you think.”

“How does your mother feel about your knowingly associating with people who use those drugs?”

“My mother is very grown up, and she trusts me to behave sensibly. Which I do. I’m quite willing to take tests and things if that’s what you want. But that doesn’t stop me from believing that all these questions should be for individuals to decide rather than for the state to legislate upon. What do you think?”

Reeve’s approach was simply to refuse to engage at this stage of the interview.

“What I think is that what I think is completely irrelevant, Astra. How well did you know the people at the party? Presumably you knew them well enough to know that they would be in possession?”

“But how can knowing someone ‘well’ be defined? Some of the people there I had known for ten years or more, others for about ten minutes before your officers broke the door down. Was that really necessary? Anyway, young people at parties often take drugs, so I suppose one would call it a reasonable assumption that there would be some in the house.”

“Are you still in touch with people from the party?”

“Yes – I’ve said that some of them are old friends.”

“Have any of these people ever supplied you with an illegal substance?”

The girl laughed as she said, “No!”

After a short silence, Smith spoke for the first time.

“Have you ever been supplied with such a substance by someone who was not at that particular party?”

Astra Maitland had been preoccupied with the smartly dressed and obviously senior female officer – now she looked at the man for the first time. He was quite old, she realized, and a little down-at-heel; the cuffs of his jacket were frayed, his tie didn’t really go with his shirt and there was a shaving cut under his chin that had bled a little.

“No. I’ve already said I will take-”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure you are very good at taking tests, but I’m not talking about recently. I’m talking about a while ago, a long time ago, when you were still a schoolgirl. As you just said, you’ve known some of these people ten years or more. So, has anyone ever supplied you with a Class A drug?”

“What kind of a school do you think that I went to?”

Smith smiled and shrugged.

“Well, I don’t know but I suppose I could make a reasonable guess. Are you going to answer the question, by the way?”

She was looking down at something, and then Smith realized that it was his ID badge which he taken off and put onto the table. When her eyes met his again, it was with a different expression.

“Yes, I am, and no, they have not.”

After another pause, Reeve said, “Sergeant Smith is now going to ask you some questions about another, but a possibly related, matter. I would like to remind you that although you are not under arrest, you still have the right to representation and that…”

Smith had opened the folder. The photograph lay on the top, and he gazed down at it, knowing that she would be bound to do the same. Then he said, “Tell me about your relationship with your grandfather.”

And she did. Smith wondered whether anyone else had noticed that she did not object or ask what on earth had that to do with the police. It’s all about the spaces in between, the things that are not said, the things that are not done. She told them that they were close, especially since her father had left the family home; without her grandfather’s help, her mother would have struggled in those first years and the bright young girl’s intuitive understanding of that had blossomed into strong affection for the old man. That all made sense to Smith but what surprised him a little was the sense that she wanted to tell someone this here and now, that she was more than willing to talk to them about Ralph Greenwood, her grandfather.

But when, having listened understandingly, he began to lead her a little, she saw immediately what he was doing and stepped back – there might even have been a trace of the ironic smile that would have appeared on Ralph’s own face at that moment. Smith had said, “I’ve met your grandfather – I’m sure that you already know that. He struck me as someone very loyal and very caring about people close to him.” She had nodded. Smith had continued with, “Someone who would not allow those close to him to suffer if he could in any way alleviate that suffering.”

“Grandpa is a kind man.”

“And a man with strong beliefs and principles, like yourself. I expect that’s where you get it from, don’t you?”

No answer this time.

“Would you say that your grandfather has had a lot of influence over you?”

“I’d like to think so – but it would only have been for my own good.”

“You have great respect for him.”

“And love.”

She had wobbled then, ever so briefly, and the voice had almost given way. He had heard it and had seen the eyes blink once or twice more than they needed but he had not acted on it, had not followed then the instincts that were already whispering ideas that he could not quite make out.

Instead he had said, “You would do anything for him.”

“Wouldn’t you, for someone you loved?”

That had caught him unawares, and he had fought off the impulse to glance at Alison Reeve. The girl was not being obstructive or devious – she was looking hard at Smith, waiting for an answer, waiting, perhaps, for some validation of whatever it was she had done – and he had backed away.

“Astra, tell me about some of your grandfather’s friends, the ones you’ve met at Rosemary House.”

Now the four of them stood in front of the screen in the adjacent room, quiet for a moment, watching Astra Maitland sitting in the chair. A cup of tea had been put in front of the girl but she had not touched it.

Smith shook his head and said, “What’s the time?”

Waters looked at his phone – “Nearly half eleven.”

Smith shook his head again, slowly.

Reeve said, “Well, you haven’t put it to her directly, which is about all you’ve got left. With respect, DC, we’ve been all around the houses in the last couple of hours. She’s cooperated and not cooperated – she’s told us lots and told us nothing. Whether it’s deliberate or not, we can’t keep her here all day.”

Smith did not take his eyes off the screen as he answered.

“With respect, ma’am, we aren’t.”

“Explain.”

“She knows her rights, better than most. She has been free to leave at any time in the past two hours but she hasn’t even asked how much longer this will take. She is keeping herself here.”

The figure on the screen made a slight movement, and John Murray said, “But she’s keeping track of the time, DC – she keeps looking at her watch.”

“Yes, I know, every few minutes.”

Reeve said, “Not something we can charge her with, though.”

Smith ignored it, saying instead, “I don’t get it. She’s a bit left wing, a bit bolshy, smart as they come, and she’s just sitting there. She hasn’t once questioned why we’re asking all this about her grandfather and his friends, which means she’s either dim – and you can forget that – or she already knows. But then, a guilty party complicit in something will usually at least make a pretence of ‘What’s all this about?’ She isn’t doing that either. She’s not asking why she’s here, and she’s not asking to leave.”

“What’s your gut feeling? Did she provide him with heroin?”

Smith finally looked away from the screen. It was a fair question from his senior officer but it took him away for a moment from something more important.

“Yes.”

“But we have not a shred of evidence.”

“Ah, that’s it! I knew there was something bugging me. If only we had some evidence…”

Murray and Waters looked at each other and then away at nothing in particular.

“DC? Please do not-”

But now he was looking at Murray with a new expression.

“John? That phone call. Tell me about it again.”

Murray did so but was interrupted after a few seconds.

“Did you ask to see her phone, who she was phoning?”

“No. She showed me herself.”

“Why would she do that, people? A bit too cooperative? Tell me what was said again, the actual words. You said earlier that she said ‘Mum’ several times? Why? Do we normally keep repeating the name of the person we’re talking to?”

Waters said, “Because she wanted us to know who she was talking to, maybe?”

“Or maybe who she wanted us to think she was talking to…”

He was back in the interview room before all of them had left the screen.

“Astra, listen. My boss says I should put this to you directly. Did you supply your grandfather with heroin?”

She shook her head but slowly and strangely – it was not in answer to his question.

“I’m not asking because I want to get you sent down. I don’t give a toss about that. I think you know why I’m asking.”

Still nothing.

“Give me your phone. I’ve got grounds for reasonable suspicion but if you want to waste a few more seconds while I arrest you, we can do that.”

He held out his hand and she placed the phone into it, and then he realized that she had begun to cry. He signalled to Julie Conroy, opened the phone and tapped on ‘Recents’.

“You phoned your GP? Except that…”

He redialled the number, waited for it to connect and listened intently, eyes still on the girl. The other three were now back in the room, watching and waiting. They could hear a voice, a recording of a man’s voice, saying that he could not take a call right now.

“Chris, get Irene Miller on the phone in the incident room. I’ll be there in a second. John, get a car round to the front door, take yours, it’ll be quicker – engine running.”

He spoke to Reeve as they walked rapidly to the incident room.

“That was Ralph Greenwood’s mobile phone. She called him from here early this morning. Now she’s sitting in there crying her eyes out. No need to waste any time wondering why. Silly girl.”

Waters was on the phone, speaking. He began to explain something to Smith, said, “Rita Sanchez” as Smith took the phone out of his hands.

Smith listened and then said, “What sort of incident?”

More listening and then, “What about a pass key?”

Then Reeve saw his eyes close and his knuckles whiten as he gripped the handset.

“Rita, listen. Tell her not to wait for a locksmith. Tell them to break the door down. And call for an ambulance.”

Smith walked quickly along the corridor. Turning the last angle before Greenwood’s room, he noticed that he had re-entered Peace but ahead of him was what looked like a crowd of people, a crowd of silent people. He noted faces – Nancy Bishop was there and Martin Collins, a little way from the people in the doorway, and also a little apart from each other. Both of them saw him but he was past them too quickly for them to attempt any sort of acknowledgement. At the doorway he turned to Murray and said, “John, clear as much of this as you can, and keep it clear. Chris, you come in with me.”

Irene Miller stood just inside, watching and maintaining some sort of order but there were still too many involved – a couple of uniformed staff members that he did not recognize, and a burly, bearded man in overalls holding, for some reason, a huge screwdriver. Then Smith glanced at the door and saw that it had been levered off its hinges – there were splintered gashes in the door-frame. By the bed, Mrs Reed was closest to Ralph Greenwood, fussing, re-arranging something on the bed, half-obscuring the man himself.

Smith turned to Waters and said, “Most of these people need to leave now.”

Waters set about it immediately, and within seconds only Irene Miller, Mrs Reed and the two detectives remained. Smith moved to the bedside, overcoming his impulse to say to the supervisor that she should touch nothing further; he had known what he would find as soon as he saw the crowd of people, saw the faces of those in the room and their body language, just as he could already the visualize the wording on the autopsy report.

Mrs Reed straightened up, looked at the body and said, “There,” as if she had done no more than tucked in his sheets or adjusted his pillows.

On the carpet by the bed, at the head end, was a small stain of vomit, soaking into the fabric now. They must have found him hanging off the bed, and turned him back into it – unlikely that they had lifted him off the floor, such a tall, heavily-boned man, but he would have to ask at some point. The face was pale and the bloodless lips were parted a little as if he was, or had been, about to make one more remark about the whole absurd affair. To the left of the head, on the pillow, was a pair of headphones, presumably connected wirelessly to the amplifier that was still blinking on the shelf a few feet away. And there, on the bedside unit itself, an empty glass standing on a piece of card.

After a moment Smith said, “Is this how you found him?”

Mrs Reed nodded. “Yes, but his head was hanging off the bed, so I… I couldn’t leave him like that, I’m afraid.”

“Not a problem. How long ago? You’ve checked, obviously.”

She looked at him as if he was something of a fool.

“Yes – obviously. I’ve had to do that too many times. We weren’t even close, I’d say. We couldn’t push the door in. We had to wait for Rolly – he was out in the grounds clearing snow from the paths. It took a while to find him.”

“What about the pass key?”

“It just wouldn’t turn. I have no idea why.”

Smith walked past Irene Miller, who had still said nothing, and examined the door that leaned at an angle against the inside wall. Just outside he could see the man who must be Rolly, some sort of caretaker or handy man. When he saw Smith bending to look at the lock, he stepped closer, pointed and said, “Been glued – super-glued. That was never going to turn. I had to lever the hinge screws out of the frame.”

Smith couldn’t stop the brief smile but it was gone before he straightened and faced Irene Miller. “You were here when they finally got in, I assume?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know when he was last seen?”

He realized that she was stunned, probably close to shock but sometimes that’s when to ask the questions. He felt clumsy and officious, all the same.

“At breakfast. He was in the room. He spoke to a couple of people but…”

“What?”

“One of the staff told me that he hadn’t eaten anything. He usually did, so – I’d made a mental note to ask him about it later, to see if he was alright. After what you said, I’d… This is what you meant, isn’t it, or something like it? I …”

Smith caught Mrs Reed’s eye and nodded sideways towards the manager. To her credit, she had Irene Miller out of the room and away in seconds, saying that they had to leave it to the police now that they were here.

The sizeable presence of Murray had established calm out in the corridor and no-one was now visible through the doorway. Smith turned to Waters, raised his eyebrows and blew out his cheeks as if to say, at last. He knew that Waters had been to a funeral but not whether he had ever seen a body in such circumstances – better get him talking and find out.

“So, what now?”

“We can’t do much until a doctor has been. We should examine the room, though.”

He looked positively keen to get at it. Smith reached into a jacket pocket and took out two pairs of disposable gloves, passing one to Waters.

“Yes, very good. Start with your eyes – don’t go rootling into stuff straight off. Just look, slowly and carefully.”

Smith went to the window. The top vent was an inch or two open, almost as far as it would go. Perhaps Ralph liked fresh air every night, or perhaps on this special occasion he had thought that he would have it cold and snow-scented, for his last breaths. Does anyone know what goes through the mind of someone as they plan their suicide? Has anyone ever changed their mind and then written it all down? If they had, would he want to read it? He wondered, too, whether Ralph had stood at the window, looking out at the world for the final time, just as Joan Riley had had her chair moved for that purpose. It must have been Ralph who did that for her, a big man, still strong enough… And had he sat with her until the end? Almost certainly.

But why make his own exit now? The girl knew, as soon as she had made that phone call. It must have been planned, of course, Greenwood would have left nothing to chance, but still, why now? He was ill, in some sort of pain, Smith had seen that much.

“DC?”

He turned around. Waters had come to the side of the bed, and was leaning over the cabinet, holding the glass in one gloved hand. Smith stepped across and followed Waters’ finger. Printed neatly on the piece of white card was the one word ‘Forensics’.

Smith laughed aloud. Waters said, “That is a pretty macabre sense of humour.”

“Macabre, is it? Mr Greenwood would have approved of your choice of word. ‘Forensics’! I like it! I wish someone would label all my SOCs. Look in the bottom of the glass – a few grains of something. Nip down to the car and get some evidence bags, John’s bound to have some, ask him on the way.”

Alone in the room, he looked at the body again. Peace… Nothing else remains, of course – death’s the end of all. He picked up the earphones and listened into one side. Nothing playing now but they were still switched on. He went across to the CD and pressed the eject switch. The Brandenburg Concertos, with Benjamin Britten. By the rack of CDs he found the empty case and replaced the disc; the rack was organized alphabetically by composer – it was easy to find the right space.

The chessboard was on the low, glass-topped table. One move had been made – pawn to e4, as if Ralph had been planning another game by himself after all, and then Smith remembered that he had never taken up the invitation to play. It would not have been wise, but had the old boy made that move wondering whether Smith would at this point be back in the room? Was it another card under the glass, another message, another joke? He picked up the black pawn, admired it briefly and placed it down on e5 – there you are, Ralph, I’m a bit rusty but three more moves and we have the Ruy Lopez, I think.

He heard someone come into the room behind him and turned. It was John Murray.

“We’ve got an ambulance crew down at reception, and a bloke out in the corridor who says he’s Ralph Greenwood’s doctor, DC.”

“Dr Ibrahim?”

“That’s what he says.”

“OK, send him in. Ask the crew to hold on if they don’t get a 999. See if they can take this one straight to our morgue – it’ll be simpler if Robinson and Olive do the job. We won’t be long.”

Murray disappeared and was replaced by a portly, smartly suited, middle-aged Asian man complete with black bag. Smith looked pointedly at the bed and said, “You’re a little on the late side, Doctor.”

There was no reply. He came further into the room, eyes fixed on his erstwhile patient and put his bag down by the side of the bed. Smith said nothing more as he watched the procedure. Eventually, as he was putting the stethoscope away, the doctor said, “You are the officer in charge here?”

“Yes.”

“I thought we might be waiting for someone else, that is all. I don’t want to-”

“We’ve spoken before, Dr Ibrahim. On the telephone, quite recently. Detective Sergeant Smith. There were various things that you felt unable to tell me – let’s hope that they don’t turn out to have too much bearing on what’s just happened here.”

The slender brown hands replaced the items of his trade meticulously into the bag, one by one, and then he took out a pad of pre-printed forms upon which the death would be recorded – Smith wondered how many remained on that particular pad, how many stories it would end before a new one was begun.

“Had Mr Greenwood been a patient of yours for long?”

“A few years – since he came to the home here.”

“And may I ask how it happens to be you attending here this afternoon? How did you know?”

The doctor nodded, realizing the question’s possible significance.

“Miss Sanchez telephoned me when she knew there might be a problem. It is our arrangement.”

Before he could answer, Waters came back in with a handful of bags – he stopped just inside the door when he saw the doctor. Smith said, “Just carry on, Chris, anything that might be useful. Doctor Ibrahim, we’ll need to know all about your most recent visits, and about what you have prescribed for Mr Greenwood. We will need to interview you, formally.”

The doctor was filling in the form with a silver pen, one of a pair that he had in the inside pocket of his jacket.

“I understand, of course, sergeant. But also I do not understand – he had new painkillers, yes, but nothing that could do this, or that he could have used to – I do not wish to pre-judge all the tests, but…”

“Why new painkillers, doctor?”

Again that hesitation, that notion of confidentiality, causing a fleeting look of irritation on Smith’s face before he mastered it and spoke in a matter-of-fact tone.

“It makes little difference whether you tell me now or in the inquest, Doctor. There will be an inquest, a very thorough inquest, and I will be there. I will hear every word that you say to the coroner. I don’t suppose there will be a trial as well, but you never can tell.”

Waters had sat down at the table where the laptop was still running, not looking but listening to the conversation.

“Mr Greenwood had been ill for some time. Very ill, and recently the pain had worsened. I accompanied him to hospital a few weeks ago. The news was not good and I was advised to give him strong painkillers, which I did.”

“Morphine?”

“No. We do not allow patients to use such a thing without close medical supervision.”

Smith looked again at the body of Ralph Greenwood before he said, “Well, if it’s any consolation, I think your patient had a back-up plan of his own.”

Doctor Ibrahim continued filling in the form.

“One more question, Doctor – you don’t have to answer now. What was wrong with him?”

For the first time, the doctor allowed himself a thin smile.

“I am filling in the pertinent box as we speak, Sergeant. Mr Greenwood had cancer of the pancreas. One of the slower forms but no less final, I’m afraid.”

“How long had he suffered from that?”

“More than a year.”

Smith nodded, recalculating the chronology of the investigation. It made sense.

The doctor said, “I think that only his closest family knew. A man of considerable will-power, I would say, to get this far.”

Smith said, “Well, that’s something we won’t disagree on, Doctor.”

He had seen the wave from Waters before the doctor had completed all he had to do but waited until only the two of them remained in the room before going across to the laptop. He could see a Word document but had left his reading glasses in Interview Room 3.

“He wrote it this morning, DC.”

“A suicide note? A suicide deposition?”

“I don’t know – it could be. But…”

“But what? Show me.”

“At the top, look. It’s addressed to you.”

# Chapter Twenty One

The further north he travelled from the town, the worse the roads became. The coast road itself was clear enough, the snow heaped up at the sides in long, slumped ridges by the ploughs, but the traffic was only a tiny fraction of what one would usually see on a Saturday morning, even in the winter. Most people had heeded the advice on the local news and stayed at home. At times the Peugeot was the only car in sight, and as he drove on towards Burnham Staithe, where they had agreed to meet, he became more and more convinced that she would not be foolhardy enough to drive across the county in such conditions. Fresh snow had not fallen since Thursday evening but more was forecast for this afternoon and on through the night.

It was something of a relief to see that The Wildfowlers’ Arms was still open – he had not fancied sitting in the car park for an hour, and that’s how early he was. Only three other cars and one or two of those probably belonged to the staff. He looked into each one as he headed for the door, thinking that she might have arrived early herself but all of them were empty – and none of them were the sort of thing you’d want to drive forty miles through snowed-up back-roads. No… Hopefully the coffee would be alright, a couple of cups and then head for home before the next lot comes down.

They had called in here a few times over the years, on the way to the beaches and then, later on, up to the caravan. There had been changes, it looked more shiney than it used to but at least there was no music playing, and on the counter were some daily papers ‘For the use of Patrons’ a little sign said, and that was a homely, encouraging sort of touch. He ordered an Americano, hoping for the best, and picked up the only broadsheet. Over the top of it, he watched the landlord working the controls of a coffee machine in a tiny galley that led off the bar – it looked complicated, more as if he was landing a light aircraft than filling a small cup with liquid, but the smell was promising.

It was dear enough, still summer prices in February here, and when it was finally handed over, the man, who must have been pushing eighty, asked Smith if he would be partaking of breakfast – orders closed at 10.45. He declined but the lunch menus up behind the bar looked decent, and he hadn’t had a full English breakfast since a long time ago.

He leafed quickly through the paper. There was plenty to interest him, to keep him occupied, and he knew that he would not be able to focus on any of it. Folding the paper in half, he laid it on the table and looked around the bar. In the opposite wall there was a fire, a proper open fire with burning logs, and that made you feel warmer straight away. At the other end, two elderly ladies sat, with two elderly dogs under the table, and Smith approved of that – a pub that allowed dogs in these days could not be all bad. The women were nattering away – he couldn’t hear any of it but they must be good friends, old friends, often taking their old dogs out for a walk along the beach. And that was it… He drummed fingers lightly on the table, and looked at the clock that ticked on the mantelpiece above the fire.

Then he reached into the pocket of his only outdoor coat, took out a folded sheet of paper, unfolded it and placed it on the table in front of him. He looked at it and told himself that there was no reason why he should have asked Waters for an extra copy and no reason why he had put it into his coat pocket this morning. Then he put on his reading glasses.

It began, ‘Dear Sergeant Smith – I hope that you don’t mind the conventional term of address. It might seem over-familiar but I do feel that in our few conversations, we did reach a kind of understanding. Forgive me if I am completely wrong about that.’

Can you forgive a dead man? Perhaps they had understood each other a little – does that qualify as an understanding? Smith twisted his mouth in thought and nibbled at the inside of his cheek; those were precisely the kind of questions that Ralph Greenwood would have delighted in if he had been sitting here in The Wildfowlers’ Arms on a Saturday morning.

He read it through again for what must by now have been the twentieth time. It was about half a page, closely typed in a small font, and already he could have quoted a few phrases from memory. ‘I must also apologise for writing so hastily but time, as you will appreciate, is a little short. And I do not know quite how short, for despite researching the subject at some length, the exact time that it will take really isn’t clear. So I must err on the side of caution…’ As far as Smith could see, the entire document contained not a single error.

‘But to business. The substance that concerns you was obtained by me for my own use some time ago. You will know by now that I am unwell. When I was given the diagnosis, I looked into the matter and realized that at some point it would become rather uncomfortable, and so I made the necessary preparations. No-one else at RH was involved in that. If you check the records of the Post Office you will see that I received a package at about the time under consideration. It was sent by recorded delivery but obviously the sender’s address given will lead you nowhere. You know the world in which I worked – I met all sorts of odd people and stayed in touch with a few of them.’

Nice touch, thought Smith, but why bother with that sort of delivery? Because, came the answer, Ralph Greenwood was a master planner; thinking far into the future, he had constructed a story that would account for his possession of heroin in a way that involved no-one close to him – a perfectly manufactured dead-end but one which would throw doubt on the pursuit of anyone else who might be questioned.

‘Not long after that, one of my good friends began to suffer terribly. We all talked and discussed the matter but only I suggested to her that if she wished to bring things to a conclusion, I had the means. She took that choice – again, only I was involved. Recently, as you know, a similar situation arose. I sat with Joan that evening and she was at peace when I left her. Again, no-one else was involved. I realise that this does not explain some of the details that seemed to bother you but I do not imagine that your superintendent will be too concerned once he is in possession of this document!’

Absolutely right, of course. Even if Smith himself wanted to pursue it further – and he could make a case for the prosecution that others must have been involved at some point – on Monday morning Superintendent Allen would seize upon the explanations that Ralph Greenwood had offered and sign the whole business off. Martin Collins and Nancy Bishop knew something, and perhaps everything; in fact, had Ralph left them as a legacy the means to fulfill whatever strange pact they had made? Should he suggest to Irene Miller that their rooms be searched? Were these legal questions or moral ones, or some peculiar hybrid of the two that he was no longer capable of confronting? Then there was the girl, the granddaughter.

‘Finally, I must, of course, make it clear to you that my granddaughter Astra had no knowledge of any of this. We had talked in general terms about the question of individual freedom versus state intervention as one approaches the end of life but that is all. I had already decided that I would conclude matters soon when I received her phone call this morning, and in an odd way I am grateful to you for that final chance to speak to her. Your intervention only served to force the moment to its crisis, and you must not feel badly about any of this. That my mind was tending towards making its quietus you, of course, can confirm if you recall our last conversation…’

Brilliant, thought Smith – he made me a part of the story; if I stood in the witness box, I’d have to say that he was indeed somewhat preoccupied with thoughts of death that last evening! Perhaps the judge would direct the jury to read the short story.

‘…As much as rational people like ourselves resent the notion, coincidence does seem to play its part in our lives, sergeant. I hope, for the sake of those I leave behind, that you are able to accept this. Sincerely yours, Ralph Greenwood.’

“And you must be David Smith.”

She looked a little older than her photograph but was still no more than forty two or forty three – skinny beneath the Shetland jumper and jeans, blonde hair tied back in a short pony tail. The second thing she had said was, “Shall we go?” and Smith had had to point to his full cup of coffee, the second, before she relented, smiled and sat down. Then she said she would fetch one of her own. They argued briefly before Smith concluded it by standing and walking towards the bar – he had no idea whether this was a terrible start or an excellent one.

When he got back to the table, she pointed to the paper that he had left there, and said, “Work?”

He nodded.

“It’s OK, I haven’t read it, just a wild guess!”

So, he thought, either you are telling the truth and were a useless DI or you are happily lying through your small, white, even teeth.

“Anything interesting? It’s alright, as long as it’s not murder you’re perfectly safe. I only do murder.”

The latter, then; she had seen enough to be interested and couldn’t pass up the chance to find out more, but her eyes, more green than blue, looked frankly into his own. And so he told her the whole story, without names, places and dates, and she listened well, saying very little.

When he had completed it, she pointed and said, “Why bring that out of the office? Why are you walking around with it?”

The question took him by surprise simply because of its directness and because he had asked it of himself several times since yesterday. It wasn’t easy to answer, and so he opted for the truth.

“It got to me a bit. The whole thing, age, sickness, dying. You don’t get to my age without losing a few people, and you can feel so hopeless – and helpless. This old boy decided to do something about it, right or wrong at least he took some action. You end up asking yourself exactly what it is you are investigating. This is a cheerful start, isn’t it?”

Jo Evison didn’t answer straight away. She drank some coffee and stared across the room at the log fire. Smith looked out of the window and saw that the sun was shining.

“I lost my mum last year. I went home and nursed her for the last few weeks – one of the blessings of working the way I do. But it was horrible. I expect you know what I mean, but… Medicine is amazing, doctors are fantastic but sometimes I think that all we’re doing is not so much extending life as prolonging death. Does that sound ungrateful?”

“No. I do know what you mean, all too well.”

She looked down at Ralph’s final words again.

“So he broke the law and ended heaven knows how much suffering.”

“Up to fourteen years for each offence.”

It annoyed her, just as he had hoped that it would.

“Well, all I can say is, there but for the grace of God.”

“You’re absolutely sure that you want to try this?”

They hadn’t left the car park yet and Smith was already calculating how many hours of daylight were left if they got stuck somewhere out in the dunes and had to walk back.

“I mean, I could just give you a more detailed description, probably even send you some photos.”

She started the car and shook her head.

“You must have faith – if not in me then in the car. There’s more to her than meets the eye.”

He had had a look as they came out from the pub; it was an estate, a Volvo XC70. They are pretty rugged, he thought, Swedish, built for these conditions, but even so. Reaching across to push warm air onto the misted windscreen, she pressed in the stereo button as well, and guitars, drums and a voice suddenly filled the car.

“Ooh, sorry! Do you listen to music?”

“Yes, a bit. I prefer to do it with my ears though, not as a whole-body experience.”

She was smiling as she pulled out onto the road.

Smith said, “Van Morrison.”

“Very good – ‘Brand New Day’.”

“Old hippy music, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so. I expect you can remember it – 1970, I think. I got my musical tastes from my dad…”

This time he took a longer sideways look and eventually her smile became a stifled half-laugh before she said, “Sorry. No music now, not where we’re going. Show a bit of respect, I think,” and then she turned it off.

As soon as they turned left off the coast road, she pressed a button for four-wheel drive. The dunes road was snow-covered, several inches deep in the sides, and Jo Evison took the car slowly down the centre. They were not the first to drive this way, there were other tracks, but to Smith they all seemed to belong to much larger and heavier off-road vehicles. Hopefully they also belonged to some that had managed the return journey as well. But the car was stable on the corners, and the only slides were minor ones which she corrected easily and without any appearance of panic. He let her get on with it and said little during the ride.

The little summer car park was a flat oblong of white space amid the rise and fall of the sand dunes that surrounded it. Other vehicles had made it that far but it was empty now apart from the Volvo. The sun was weaker but still shining, enough to make Smith squint a little as he pulled on his crime-scene wellingtons – at least he had remembered those. Jo Evison had donned outdoor gear, waterproof trousers and a windproof jacket – Patagonia, the proper stuff – and then she sat in the open tailgate and laced up some serious-looking, well-used hiking boots. To complete the picture, she hung a small pair of binoculars around her neck.

She saw him watching and said, “You should get some proper clothing if you’re going to bring women out to places like this.”

As he did up the anorak-cum-duffle thing that had served him for far too long, he said, “Would you believe I’ve got some somewhere in the attic?”

“Not doing you any good there, is it?”

It seemed an oddly personal remark after such a short acquaintance; he thought about it, wondering if he felt offended by it before deciding that the answer was probably no, he did not.

She said, “How far is it?”

He pointed up across the nearest dune and said, “Allowing for the snow, about ten minutes.”

Now the snow in front of them was untrodden. He had wondered yesterday whether he would be able to find the exact spot, and whether that actually mattered – he could always have invented a place and she would never know. The snow wipes out little features and could conceivably have made the whole exercise even more difficult – but he knew that they were heading unerringly to the place the first of the girls had been found. What he was less certain about was exactly how that made him feel.

She was a little ahead of him as if she knew the way too, at a pace just fast enough to make the wellingtons feel clumsy and inappropriate. Then, as if she had read his thoughts of a moment before, she stopped, turned and said, “Have you been back here since?”

Smith stopped too and took a breath, grateful for the rest.

“No.”

She nodded, understanding, and said, “People don’t realise what it does to you, do they?”

“Other coppers maybe, some of them, not all. A couple of my team had gone within a few months.”

“But not you.”

The sun was still faintly there in the south, behind them, and their two shadows lay close together on the snow, motionless, corpse-like and a little ghostly.

“If you don’t mind me asking, why are you still at it? I’m not guessing your age or anything but… The stepping down? You could have gone with honour, couldn’t you?”

“Instead of carrying on dishonourably? Thanks!”

She had his own trick of just waiting, patiently watching the face of the other, saying nothing.

“I don’t know. A lack of imagination. A lack of meaningful alternatives. And I’m in love with one of the duty sergeants.”

Jo Evison smiled but could not resist it.

“Really? What’s her name?”

“Charlie Hills. That’s Charlie as in Charles, by the way.”

It might have been true but somehow she just knew that it wasn’t.

“Let me wish the two of you all the happiness in the world!”

Now he was smiling as well, and it was odd, incongruous, like snow by the sea. Ten years ago, standing here among the barriers, the crime scene tapes fluttering, the plastic tents, he could never have imagined returning, never have invented a scenario that would involve standing here with a strange woman in the winter, and not another soul in sight.

“But seriously – why are you still in the job?”

“Seriously, it probably is one of the first two reasons but… I don’t know, I might not be in it for much longer. It’s getting harder.”

“How? You mean the bureaucracy, the interference, the politics?”

Of course she had heard all of that before. He wondered about her own reasons for leaving so early.

“Yes, all of that but there’s something else – it might just be me getting past it but nothing’s black and white any more, everything is grey. In my last two cases I’ve found myself going after people who I’m not convinced had wilfully done wrong. Or at least, if they had, they’d done the wrong thing for the right reasons. Crime isn’t what it used to be, a lot of the time.”

She was following his words closely, and thinking about them.

“You should have been in Munich – this came up. There was an American talking about the changing perceptions of crime in an age of moral relativism.”

“Really? Probably a good thing I wasn’t – I might have arrested him just for coming up with such a title.”

She didn’t laugh – he would have to make better jokes.

“It’s exactly what you are talking about. And with technological, political and cultural barriers breaking down, policing is going to need a revolution, too.”

He shrugged; it was too cold for a revolution this morning.

“And you’re thinking of quitting at this vital moment?”

“Someone made me an offer that I haven’t refused yet.”

She thought and then said, “As long as it isn’t divorces…”

She was a few feet away from him, looking down into the hollow.

Smith had pointed and said something like “Over there” when they arrived, and since then she had stared down into it and remained silent. She might just be wondering whether this would make a good book, of course, but he doubted that, although he would have been pushed to explain why he thought that – they had not known each other much more than an hour.

He looked away. From here the sea was visible, not far away at all, just beyond the last low dune of white. It too was empty – no inshore fishing boat after codling, no distant container vessel heading into the docks at Lake, further round the coast. Just a cold, grey-green band of colour merging at its horizon into the uniform greyness of the January sky – sea into sky, sky into sea, no difference.

He heard her voice say “The first one?” and looked around. She was still staring into the deep hollow between the dune upon which they stood and the next.

“Yes.”

“Juliet Richardson. She was only sixteen, wasn’t she?”

“Yes. The youngest.”

She already knew their names, knew things about them, things that Smith had been trying to forget for as long as he could remember. And then she was walking towards him, closing the gap until they were side by side again.

Smith said, “I don’t know if this has helped much.”

“It has, and I’m really grateful. I know what it costs. It’s like losing one of your own.”

“Is it? No kids, so I wouldn’t know.”

“Me neither.”

The sun had finally given up – now all the dunes were a little darker under the shadow of the massing clouds above them. Out to sea, where they were both looking, the vague horizon had also disappeared – instead what appeared to be a mist had formed, a soft grey-white wall that seemed to be advancing slowly towards the land.

A solitary gull drifted by low in front of them on the air that had begun to move east to west – a huge gull, brilliant white save for a piercingly yellow bill and an upperside as black as charcoal. Jo Evison lifted the binoculars and watched it for a moment in silence as it wheeled away without effort, without a single beat of its long, angled wings.

“Lesser Black-back,” she said.

“Really? Fancy that. But everyone needs a hobby.”

“I caught it from an old boyfriend, years ago. Then he flew away as well.”

“Did he go far?”

“Sydney.”

“Blimey, that’s about as far as a chap can go. You must have made quite an impression.”

“Thanks.”

The mist was closer, the wind was strengthening and the temperature was falling. Despite her outdoor clothing, Smith sensed her shiver a little.

Then she said, “I’d like to do it, if it’s OK with you.”

“The book?”

“Yes. At least I’d like to start it off and see how it goes. It wouldn’t be yet, probably at least a year away. But only if you are on board. It doesn’t work otherwise.”

Smith was looking out to sea a little more intently.

“You see that mist?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not a mist, is it?”

“No.”

“We should be going, then.”

“Yes.”

But they waited in silence until the first heavy flakes began to fall around them before they turned down the slope into the dunes.

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If you have enjoyed this story, please consider leaving a short review at Amazon, where you first found it. As I do not market or promote my writing in any way, it stands or falls entirely by the reader’s opinion of it.

Smith’s other cases can be found here:

An Accidental Death: A DC Smith Investigation   
by Peter Grainger   
Link: <http://amzn.com/B00FN0YJ6S>

Luck and Judgement: A DC Smith Investigation   
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In This Bright Future: A DC Smith Investigation   
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If you would like to know more about Smith and his other cases, you could email to petergrainger01@gmail.com Alternatively, you might like to try this:

<https://www.facebook.com/petergraingerDCSmith?skip_nax_wizard=true>

As ever, thank you for reading,

Peter Grainger

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