

TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK DOESN'T STOP THEM.
KILLING THEM DOES.

FLAWED JUSTICE

A DCI GRACE PARKS CRIME THRILLER

SAMPLE
CHAPTERS

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Chapter 1

Friday 14th January

They always take.

I am not a monster, though there are people classified as such: people with no emotion, no remorse, and driven by a strong inner voice or need. I'm not like them. I'm not like that. I have feelings, powerful feelings that guide me. I do what any law-abiding citizen would if they had the skills and desire to protect the innocent. The people I represent can't fight for justice, but their relatives can glean some comfort from knowing the person who brought such deep enduring pain into their lives will never harm another person again. I know the relief that brings.

Days like these are my favourite. It's dark before five. The cool rain is perfect. People are less alert, more focused on rushing to get out of the cold and wet than to take note of what's going on around them. In their self-indulgence lies opportunity. The damp, chilled air fills my lungs with hope and unimaginable belief. My sense of optimism in justice prevailing is heightened in these moments. I am the key that locks the door behind grief and loss and delivers salvation.

Moral debate occupies the grey space between opposing judgements. What is right and what is wrong? Therein lies the real problem. The truth isn't complex. Guilt can't be measured by the way a person feels because for some inhumane beings, that emotion is as alien as the idea that they will ever be caught. I'm under no illusion as to the consequences of my actions or that I must pay my dues. My bad deeds aren't these deeds. Call this justice. Call this revenge. I don't care for words to describe something so blindingly obvious.

Turning the other cheek doesn't stop people doing bad things.

Killing them does.

Thirty-eight-year-old Ollie Brown is next. He conceals scruffy mousy brown hair under the cheap baseball cap he wears beneath the hood of his coat. He's approaching the fair-haired guy on the corner, Connor Harris – now he's a man who knows a deal when he's offered one – where South Street meets Longton Road, where the streetlamp is conveniently broken and there's a blind spot in the CCTV coverage. Ollie skulks along with a limp and looks like he isn't comfortable in his skin. I've often wondered if that sense of inadequacy is a genetic trait, a significant factor that differentiates the likes of him and me. Ollie's shoulders curve forwards, and his head is bowed as he stops next to Connor.

Soon, Ollie won't have to hide from his own shadow or run from the guilt, and he won't be a financial drain on a society that would be better off without his destructive influence. This meet-up of theirs serves one purpose only, of course. They both have a Thrifty carrier bag, and the familiar exchange is completed within seconds. It's that simple, blasé almost because no one cares, until it affects them directly. At that point, it's too late, though the irreconcilable damage that awakens them cannot be undone.

Ollie nods his head and scuttles off into the darkness, the rat heading to the burrow that is the centre of his pathetic existence. The pitiful space he calls home is number thirty-five on the third floor of the filthy block of council-managed flats on Longton Court within a scheme designed to provide shelter and false hope for the unemployable. He's an Army veteran who was medically discharged, abandoned by the family he served for nine years. He's found his new family here, and it pays him well enough. Why work hard for a living if you don't have to?

"Ollie. Ollie. Ollie." Whispering his name brings a satisfactory smile that sets in motion a steady flow of adrenaline.

The drizzle is refreshing and cools the rising warmth inside me. I close my eyes and focus on the slightly bitter taste of rain. When it stops pouring, the pungent smell of urine drifts across my path from the garage stairwell. Heat simmers just below my ribs, and the beat becomes stronger with the excitement that the next few hours will bring.

"It's your time, Ollie Brown."

Finally, Ollie reaches the black composite front door of number 35. His flat. All the doors in the row are the same dull shade. It's a soulless building, trying to make a statement, and it reeks of poverty and desperation. He unlocks and opens the door, looks over his shoulder into the night, then steps across the threshold and closes it quickly behind him. He's not totally oblivious to the fact that he's being watched, because he's haunted by being caught by someone: his dealer, the druggies, the police, or the friends of those he's sold shit to in the past.

Or someone like me.

Guilt is the bitch that gets her teeth into him and gnaws through his thin skin and fragile bones until paranoia beats his heart and dominates his mind.

The light from Ollie's window disappears as he draws the curtains. It's 6:35 p.m. I'll wait for him to settle in.

I pull out my phone. No messages from Mum. That's good. I wouldn't want her worrying that she's in the house alone. I press and hold the button until my phone shuts down, pull the hood of my coat tight around my ears, and lean against the concrete wall of the municipal car park, watching the flat from the street. No one gives me a second glance.

Eventually, I lift the rucksack onto my back, cross the road, and head slowly up the steps Ollie climbed. It's time to get to work.

Tap, tap, tap.

The door is opened a sliver, and I maintain a disarming smile as his face appears in the gap. "Hey, Ollie. Probation services. My name's Peter Faulkner." I hold up the badge and turn my back to the woman who's passing-by. The probation services are no strangers to many of the occupants of this building.

He acknowledges the badge. He might not be able to read *The Times*, but he's familiar with the purple lanyard with white writing. "Where's—"

“Trev. He’s had to go on long-term sick. I’m picking up your case and just thought I’d pop in to see how things are and introduce myself personally.” I shrug as if it’s no bother for me to be here on a piss-wet Friday evening. “Trev said you were doing great, made all your meetings.”

“Huh.”

He inches the door open a little further, and the sickly stench of skunk hits my nose. I’ve never liked the smell of it, let alone the effect it has on the mind. I prefer to think clearly and remain in full control of my mental faculties. “Fucking shitty weather, eh?” I indicate to the TV while shivering for effect. “You watching the footie?”

“Yeah.” He sniffs.

“Look, I’ve got a couple of forms I need you to sign, to say you’ve been told about the change of PO. It’s bureaucratic BS, if you know what I mean?” I slip the rucksack off my shoulder and slowly unzip it, hoping he’s going to wake up to the fact that it would be polite to let me in.

He looks towards the cheering coming from the TV.

“Someone scored?” I ask like I give a shit.

“Chelsea.”

“Bollocks. I’m a West Ham fan.”

Ollie grins, revealing yellowed teeth which add two decades to his appearance. There isn’t much going on behind his eyes, courtesy of the skunk.

“Me too,” he says and opens the door fully. “You wanna come in?”

The place is neater than I expected, and the fruity aroma coming from the potpourri makes me smile. It’s the woman’s touch, the blond I’ve seen visiting regularly. I assumed by the way they touched each other up that she was his girlfriend.

I lower my hood, drop the rucksack at the side of the chair I intend to sit in, and stare at blue shirts chasing maroon shirts on the oversized flat screen TV, while wiping the rain from my face.

“Great game,” I say, swallowing back my bitter taste for football.

Ollie takes the seat directly opposite the TV. The carrier bag that he exchanged a moment ago is on the floor at the side of his chair furthest from me.

“It’s only a charity match, but still important, right?” he says.

“Reputation is important, hell, yes,” I say.

“Right.”

He has his eyes glued to the screen as if it was the European Cup Final. He takes a swig from the can of lager, then takes a long drag on the roll-up from the ashtray on the small square coffee table.

To him, it appears as though I’m watching the match when I’m taking in the room.

There’s a creased photo of the woman I’ve seen visiting on the shelf in one corner of the room. She’s smiling naturally, caught in a moment of pure joy. I didn’t think Ollie was the type for spontaneity. I’d be surprised if he noticed how happy she looks. If he took that, I’m impressed. One door leads to the kitchen area, another to where the toilet is visible. The toilet seat is up. It’s the little things that confirm my suspicions about character. He will always do what comes easiest. That’s why he deals drugs. He doesn’t think about the consequences of his actions. He won’t change.

Every flat has the same layout in this block. Not very imaginative, but that’s what happens when council budgets are smaller than social ambition. A single bed is folded up against the wall. An unrolled sleeping bag and pillow are abandoned in the corner of the room where the bed would open out when lowered. The carpet looks clean, and it isn’t the squalor I imagined he might live in. It’s nice to get a few pleasant surprises, albeit too late in the day to make a difference to my decision. But who doesn’t prefer a clean and tidy workspace?

“Yes!”

Ollie’s exuberance brings my attention sharply back to the blobs of maroon dancing circles around each other on the screen. “Fucking get in there.” I’m amused by my enthusiastic tone. I offer my fist and he bumps it with his. Then I reach into my rucksack and pull out the paperwork I’d promised him. “Hey, man. Any chance of a drink?” I ask. “It’s Friday night after all. It’s my birthday, and I’m off work now with nowhere to go. It’s been a bastard week.” A conspiratorial expression has him jumping to his feet. We’re mates now, based on lies; he’s that shallow. It’s his need for a family that makes him this way.

“Happy birthday, mate. You want a beer or coffee? Sorry, I’ve only got instant.”

I never expected filtered and don’t want to wait for the kettle to boil, but I’m flattered he thinks I might prefer a quality coffee. “Beer, thanks.”

He has the spring of a child on a sugar rush as he heads into the kitchen, while I slip the Rohypnol into what remains of his beer and swill the can. The paperwork is on the table waiting for him when he returns. “Game on,” I say and raise my can in a toast to the TV before bringing it close to my lips. It smells like piss. I take the smallest sip. It’s tepid, and I smile to hide my disgust. My preference is a fortified wine or oak-aged brandy, but this isn’t a social call.

He finishes his drink in long gulps with his eyes glued to the screen, flips the ring on a new can and sips at the froth as it spills upwards.

“You can read this first.” I know he won’t be bothered. “Or you can just sign it. Up to you. As I said... Fucking great defence, Kurt. Love that guy.” I push the paperwork across the table and feign my distraction with the match. “It’s just to say you’ve been informed about the... Come on, the Hammers.” I fist-pump and sit forward in the chair.

He flicks his scrawl on the paper and glugs his drink. He’s out of his seat now and yelling at the TV, like his words of encouragement will guarantee another goal. “Fucking go, The Hammers.”

I sit back and breathe deeply while mentally rehearsing my next steps. The slow passing of time tingles through every cell in my body, anticipation climbs towards that delicious crescendo moment, and I'm in no rush for it to peak. "Have you seen them play at the London Stadium?" I ask.

He shakes his head.

"I get tickets from time to time, a perk of the job. If you're ever interested." A ripple of excitement brushes across my skin.

His eyes widen. "You serious, man?"

It's the closest thing to an expression of joy, and it's almost amusing that he thinks he's onto something. I take another sip from the can and swallow like the beer is nectar. "Sure. My job is to help keep you on the straight and narrow, right? Anything I can do to help. I can't always get to the matches, and my mates aren't supporters."

He laughs. "Wankers."

"Right."

He stares at the TV. "I don't sell shit," he says after a long drag on his spliff.

"Yeah, Trev said you were sound. Medicinal, eh? No harm in that."

"Pain relief. Got my leg blown off in the fucking war."

I hold my hands up in submission. "Drugs should be legalised in my view. It would save me wasting my time babysitting guys like you who are just trying to live their lives. Well, I thank you for your service, Ollie."

He raises his can, yawns, and relaxes back in the chair, then takes another long draw on his beer and blinks slowly. "Thanks," he says.

I point to the photograph. "Is that your girlfriend?"

He turns his head and smiles. "Yeah."

“She’s pretty. You’re a lucky man.” The memory of my wife tightens my chest, and bile and beer rise into the back of my throat. Christmas two years ago, and it still feels as raw as if it was yesterday. Time heals, they say. The fuck it does. “Did you take the photo?” I have to know.

“Nah. A mate of hers took it. I like it.”

I inhale a deep breath and withhold the smile of satisfaction that I was right. “It’s a great picture. She looks very happy.”

“She’s the best. She’s expecting a boy.” His smile still doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Good on you. How come she’s not here?”

“She lives with her mum. She’s on the list for a flat on the south side of town. It’s safer there. She’ll probably be out with her mates tonight.”

He’s telling me something I already know. It pays to do the research. She never stays here overnight and never visits during the weekend. He’s slurring his words now. As he rests his head back, I wonder if he’s thinking about her and the baby and their rosy future together. It will be nice for him to go out on a dream, to die with joy in his heart. It’s more than he deserves, but I can allow him that small pleasure. I’m not a monster. I know what it is to love deeply.

“I’m gonna move in with her once probation’s up. Fresh start kinda thing.”

“Sounds like a good idea.” I bring the can to my lips but can’t bring myself to sip the cheap warm lager. I wait for his eyelids to close and his breathing to shallow. The noise from the screen draws my attention again. I really fucking hate football.

I let him settle into a deeper sleep.

He won’t wake to know his fate, but he would at least have been happy to see The Hammers score again. I really want to tell him. He snores lightly, his breathing soft and slow, and I take in a long deep breath. “Time’s up, Ollie,” I whisper and pull the surgical gloves from my rucksack.

Chapter 2

Tuesday 18th January

Temporary Detective Chief Inspector Grace Parks glanced across at her mobile on the table, buzzing and ringing for the third time in quick succession, as she fastened the buttons on her suit jacket. She couldn't pick up because she was trying to get out the door in good time to get a decent parking slot outside the court building. It seemed her ex-wife still had no concept of the fact that calling her before midday would result in a one-way conversation into the answerphone. Of course, that would be Grace's fault. Not that Holly needed to be gifted any ammunition to throw at her. She could always find a way to point at some attribute or another in which Grace was seriously flawed.

She took a deep breath, checked herself in the mirror, and picked up her phone without answering. The buzzing stopped, and she sent Holly a short text. *Can't talk, heading to court.*

The response came back immediately. *We urgently need to talk about Meg.*

Grace grabbed her keys and headed to her car as she pressed the button and made the call. "What about Meg?" she asked with more than a hint of irritation in her tone.

Holly huffed. "She wants to spend more time with you."

Grace lifted her chin as she inhaled deeply. Rain spat in her face, mocking her. She unlocked the car and got in. "You know that's difficult with my job."

Grace would have loved to see her daughter more often, but where was she supposed to get the time? Thirteen-year-olds needed looking after, and Grace couldn't just leave the house at the drop of a hat to deal with a call out. She wouldn't be able to give her job the attention it needed while leaving Meg to her own devices. That would be irresponsible parenting, and she would worry herself sick. No, she couldn't do that. Both her daughter and her job meant too much to her.

“Grace. You promised you would see her weekly last time you were here. That was Christmas. It’s nearly February.”

“I said I’d try. And it’s mid-January. I’ve been slammed with work. You know what that’s like better than anyone.” Guilt tightened its grip on the memory of having to leave Meg earlier than planned on Christmas Day to deal with a case. Three weeks had passed since then. She’d parked the hasty promise that she’d made to the back of her mind. That didn’t stop the ache tightening in her chest, with the thought of letting Meg down. The guilt always had a way of surfacing to poke and prod at her.

“Yes, Grace. I know what it’s like juggling a full-time job with childcare.”

Grace bit her tongue to stop herself rising to the bait. Holly was in a similar position as Grace, working shifts at the hospital, but Holly had a support network. “At least you have your mum to help. I have no one here.”

“That was your fucking choice.”

Grace took a deep breath. She had neither the time nor the energy for an argument. “I’ve got to go. I’ll call you later.”

Grace’s job, like most of the cops she knew, had been at the root of their decision to separate. Once that step had been taken, divorce had followed quickly. And then, Holly had decided to move north to be closer to her mother. She now lived a two-hour drive up the M1 on a good day, and Grace never had a good day on which to spend four hours on the road.

“Why is everything always so bloody impossible with you?” Holly asked.

Grace held the phone from her ear until Holly finished yelling. The familiar click indicated Holly had ended the call, as she often did, without saying goodbye. She listened to the silence at the end of the line. Rain thrummed against the windscreen faster than the wipers could clear it. She desperately needed a strong coffee.

She turned the engine over and headed north to Branch, having stopped at the motorway services for a flat white coffee with an extra shot. By the time she reached the Branch Court parking area, she was flying high on caffeine and annoyance.

Detective Constable Jack Taylor, her newest team member, stood vaping just outside the main door. He emptied his lungs and pocketed the device. "Morning, boss."

"You're early," she said, pleasantly surprised.

"Early bird gets the best seat in the house, boss."

She admired his enthusiasm, but in the three weeks he'd been a member of the team, he had come across as a bit of a know-it-all. He'd already pissed off Lisa with his propensity towards self-praise, though in fairness irritating Lisa wasn't that difficult to do. At work, Lisa had neither the time nor the will to nurture new blood.

"They're all made of plastic, Jack. There's no best seat unless you're sat on the judge's lap." Grace watched an expression of confusion cross his face, followed by a smile.

"Funny," he said, striding half a step ahead of her. "The first case hasn't been heard yet. Something to do with the defendant's barrister. It's a pain as I have to get back to the station to help Lisa."

Grace checked the time on her phone. "No, you don't. Your job is here."

Lisa had specifically asked Grace that Jack attend court today and stay as far away from her as possible. How did Grace have a conversation with him about dulling down his enthusiasm and getting a grip on his ego without busting his confidence?

He looked down. "Oh, right. Okay."

The frustration she'd brought into the building had vented itself through her clipped tone. She was still reeling from Holly's wrath, and the inadequacy she always felt after a conversation with her. And when it came to discussions about their daughter, that pain was more acutely felt and immensely distracting. That wasn't Jack's fault. She had a duty to mentor him more closely to develop him, and she didn't have the time for that any more than Lisa did. She smiled. He was just young and keen to do well. In some ways he reminded her of herself fifteen years ago. "Lisa can manage the interview without you, Jack. There's no rush for you to get back to the station," she said.

He narrowed his eyes and looked down. "Okay, boss."

His shoulders dropped, and she hoped he was thicker-skinned than he appeared. Perhaps she should have a chat with him now, to set the slate clean while they were out of the office and before he wound up Lisa any further. She didn't need this kind of distraction and petty irritation at work. The job was hard enough without having to manage sensitive personalities.

"I know you're not new to being a cop, but I want you to be the best, Jack. Pay attention to everything. Notice the small details, the things other cops miss, because that will be the difference that separates you from the rest." She recalled receiving similar advice from her boss when she started as a new detective. She held his gaze. "And then just say it as it is, Jack. You don't need to try to prove yourself." How hard was it for an ambitious kid to do that? But, proving himself to boost his ego at the expense of the others in the team was never going to cut it. She waited until he nodded. "We're all trying to find out what's happened in a case – together. It's not a race for you to win. And remember, self-praise is no praise at all." She patted his arm. "You have a brilliant mind, but you still have a lot to learn about being a good detective and especially working as part of a tight team. Humility goes a long way to getting people to help you willingly. Do you know what I'm saying?"

He flushed and swallowed hard. "Sure, boss."

"Good. Now, let's get into the courtroom. I'm not waiting around out here just to be hounded by the public who will take great pleasure in telling us we're failing at every turn. No, thank you very much."

She vowed to call Holly back after the sentencing hearing and arrange to visit Meg this coming weekend. They could go to the park. Sod that, it was too cold and likely to rain. Perhaps there was a film Meg would like to see, though the cinema wasn't Grace's thing. Maybe they could go shopping and have lunch somewhere nice. What did a thirteen-year-old kid want to do with their time, other than chat on social media? How could she make it a special day? She parked the stressful thoughts as she entered the courtroom.

Detective Sergeant Bob Hanson from the Online Child Abuse Investigation Team approached. "All right, Grace?"

“You first up?” Grace asked.

“Sometime this side of lunch, I hope. I’ve got a job to do.” He rolled his eyes. “Bloody waste of time me being here, to be honest. He’ll get a suspended sentence. They always do. Fucker waited until the last minute to plead guilty. Would have been a blessing for us all if he’d topped himself months ago.” He bit his lip and shook his head.

Grace knew that level of frustration. “He’ll be the Sex Offender Unit’s problem now. At least it’s one more on record.”

Bob turned to Jack. “Hey, Lambo, how you doing? Enjoying life in the fast lane?” He laughed.

“It’s never fast enough, Bob,” Jack said.

“You still got that Lamborghini photo on your vision board?” Bob asked.

Jack unfolded a piece of paper from his wallet and showed it to Bob. “This will be on my driveway soon enough.”

Bob whistled as he studied the black sports car. “Are you safe being let loose with that?”

Jack laughed. “I’ve done all the driver training courses, Bob. I can handle it.”

The members of the court rose as the judge entered and took her seat, then they sat, and a hush swept across the room. The judge called the prosecution’s barrister. Grace settled her gaze on the man in the dock as the barrister spoke. The defendant didn’t look more than a hundred pounds, reasonably handsome, with slicked-back hair and trendy oversized glasses. She turned her attention from the prosecution barrister to the defence barrister, who stood up from his seat.

“Your honour, please accept my apologies for delaying the start of court this morning. As you are aware, my client pleaded guilty at his last hearing and gave a commitment to seek help.”

“Heard it all before,” Bob whispered.

He looked weary. Worn down by the job, no doubt.

The defendant lifted his head and stood taller.

Mr Fielding, the defence barrister, continued, “Mr Ingram is a man of previously good character, who has worked in uninterrupted full-time employment for fifteen years with True Print Services. He has power of attorney over his ageing mother’s estate and assists in the provision of her care. He has demonstrated remorse, as you will see from the pre-sentence report provided by the Probation Service. He has attended all his probation meetings and has embarked, at his own expense, on a programme with an organisation that supports the rehabilitation of internet sex offenders to ensure he does not reoffend.”

Bob huffed and crossed his arms as he leaned back in the chair. He mumbled something to himself that Grace knew reflected his lack of faith in the rehab programme. Grace noted the look in Ingram’s eyes as he glanced towards them. He appeared calmer than others she’d seen in his position, and she wouldn’t associate his apparent composure with someone guilty of getting their kicks out of looking at child abuse images. In her experience of working with such offenders on the rehab programme, most were remorseful. They were aware of the negative impact of their actions, felt shame, and showed relief at having been stopped because they were unable to stop themselves. They were also the likeliest category of offender to attempt suicide after being caught. Ingram’s demeanour, however, portrayed contempt more than remorse. If she were a betting person, she would put her pension on the fact that it was only a matter of time before this man reoffended, or worse still, escalated his activities. The next time he appeared in court, it would be for a contact offence against a child, she was sure of it.

She’d attended some horrific scenes over the years, but offences against children always left a nasty feeling. As Mr Fielding’s speech came to an end, Grace turned her attention to the judge.

“Matthew Ingram, please stand,” the judge said. “Mr Ingram, you have pleaded guilty to the possession and distribution of two-thousand-five-hundred indecent images of children Categories A, B and C. This is a most heinous crime against the most vulnerable people in our society.”

Grace wondered at Ingram's expression, which hadn't changed the entire time. Not a flicker of an eyelid nor a twitch of a nervous muscle. Not even a sigh or a swallow that might indicate an emotion. Nothing. He didn't once look towards the gallery, which was unusual. She hoped his mother didn't know about his exploits. To find out your *caring* son was a child sex offender must be hard for any parent to accept, let alone one in a fragile state of health.

The judge continued, "You may think that they are just images, but behind every image is someone's child, and whilst there are depraved people like you who have a sexual interest in children, your actions perpetuate this most dreadful crime."

"Bloody right," Bob whispered.

Grace cleared her throat to cover his transgression. She didn't want him suffering the wrath of the judge should she decide to give him a piece of her mind for disrespecting the rules of her court.

The judge cleared her throat too before continuing.

"In sentencing you, I must take into consideration your guilty plea, albeit a late one, that you have no previous convictions, and the fact that you are of hitherto previous good character with a mother who is dependent upon you. This offence carries a custodial sentence and therefore, I sentence you to nine months, suspended for two years."

Bob lowered his head into his hands.

"You will sign the Sex Offender Register for a period of ten years and abide by the conditions of a Sexual Harm Prevention Order for ten years. You will attend a Sex Offender Treatment Programme as outlined in your pre-sentence report. There will be a destruction order granted for the disposal of the items seized by the police. Mr Ingram, you may leave the dock but ensure you speak with the probation officer before you leave the building."

The judge spoke to the usher, who called everyone to rise. Grace stood and watched the judge leave the courtroom, followed by the guilty man who walked taller; the barristers, whose minds were probably already onto their next job; and a few members of the gallery, who muttered among themselves.

“As expected,” Bob said. He stood up and straightened his jacket over his more recently acquired paunch. Too much time sitting behind a desk did that to officers who had previously been fit and active. “So, what you got on, Grace?” he asked.

“A farmer who cut up his wife and put her in their septic tank. Thought she would disintegrate quicker, like in acid.”

“Jesus. I thought my world was bad,” he said, shaking his head.

“Stupid is as stupid does,” Grace said.

He shook his head. “How so?”

“He had pigs. Probably would have gotten away with it if he’d fed her to them instead.”

Bob laughed. “Crickey. I wouldn’t even think to do that even if I had pigs. I worry about you, Grace.”

“No need. I don’t have pigs.” Grace’s phone rang in her pocket. She cursed having forgotten to put it on silent and glanced at the screen. “Oh, well. Change of plan.” She turned to Jack. “I have to go.”

“I’ll wait.” Jack leaned back in his seat and crossed his legs.

Grace stood up. “And whatever you do, do *not* speak to the press.”

“Roger that, boss.”

Grace approached the Clerk of the Court’s desk, positioned in front of the judge’s chair.

He looked up and smiled. “DCI Parks. What can I do for you?”

“Sorry to disturb you, Mr Charles, I have an urgent job I need to get to. My colleague will stay for the sentencing. Would you please pass my apology to the judge?”

“Of course.” He smiled and turned his attention back to his work. “Good luck, Detective.”

Grace made her way swiftly out of the courtroom. From the brief message she’d just received, Grace was going to need a lot of luck and a strong stomach.

Chapter 3

Tuesday 18th January

The text from her colleague and deputy, Detective Sergeant Dave Bates, had said, *Brace yourself*. Grace took a deep breath and pulled up just short of the cottages. Blue-and-white police tape cordoned off the last house in the terraced row, and the white tent had been positioned around the front door of the victim's house. After another deep breath, she got out of the car, pulled her collar up around her neck, and strode towards the uniformed officer managing the outer perimeter. She flashed her badge and ducked under the tape, then pulled on the offered protective clothing. She entered through the front door of the cottage and the all-too-familiar smell of death, coated with a hint of men's aftershave, hit the back of her throat.

"This way," Dave said. He led her across the foot plates and into the living room. "Crime scene investigators are still taking photos and processing the scene."

"Hello, Grace." DI Nigel Masters, the Crime Scene Manager, was studying the victim and taking notes. "Got ourselves a nasty one here," he said.

Grace was glad it was Nigel managing the scene. Some of the CSMs could make life difficult. She'd worked with him on and off for the best part of ten years and they spoke the same language, which was worth its weight in gold, especially when the case wasn't straightforward.

"Who is he?" she asked.

"Johnny Franton. Forty-two years old. Building labourer," Dave said. "Lived alone. His mate, Ed Waikes, discovered him. He came in through the back door as he normally does, apparently. The spare key was left under the pot plant. There was no sign of forced entry. Waikes has gone with a uniform to the station. We'll talk to him later."

Grace stared at the body in the chair. The man's hands lay on the floor in small pools of blood. An opened can of beer was on the floor at the righthand side of the chair.

"I've called Anita. She's on her way," Nigel said. "I've allocated the scenes as per our usual method."

Anita Darlington was one of the most rigorous Home Office forensic pathologists and from what Grace was looking at, they were going to need the best on their team.

"Anita will say if we need separate wound analysis, but I've already requested blood experts to do spatter for us," Nigel said.

The man in the chair looked as though he had just fallen asleep until she got to his arms. "Handy job, eh," she said. "The super is going to love this – not."

"It's not quite a surgeon's touch, but it's not a hatchet job either. I'd say they knew what they were doing or had done some serious research on it," Nigel said.

"It doesn't fit the profile for a domestic." Grace sighed. "Any weapon found?"

"Not yet," Dave said.

"A thief gets their hands cut off, eh?" Grace whispered. "But there's no sign of a struggle and judging by the lack of blood from the wound, he was dead before being mutilated. So, are we looking for someone he knew or someone who knew where the backdoor key was kept?"

"There's a garage beyond the back garden. The access road is at the side of the house," Dave said.

Grace frowned. "No one lets someone do this to them without a fight unless they've been subdued. By what? Who did he piss off, who he would willingly let into his house?"

Johnny Franton wasn't a small man, and despite his age, he appeared to have well-toned abs beneath his T-shirt, broad shoulders, and thick forearms, consistent with the hard grind of labouring on a building site day in and day out.

"Waikes didn't seem to think Franton had any enemies. But when do they ever?" Dave led her into the kitchen and showed her the fifty-pound note on the worksurface. Five cans of beer remained unopened from the pack of six. "If the motive was money, that wouldn't be here," he said.

There was nothing special about a few cans of beer and money lying around. Grace studied the rest of the room. "It's tidy, and there are no dirty dishes. It doesn't look like he'd eaten anything before starting on the beer." She opened the fridge. "No rotting vegetables, milk is in date, pack of fresh steak, and a half-filled bottle of orange juice."

The contents were minimal, and he'd kept the place clean. The state of the house said a lot about the man, but it also led her to question even more why Franton had been butchered.

She went back into the living room and stood with her hands on her hips. The decoration was sparse. A series of family photos were on the mantelpiece. Several sports trophies had the name Ellie Franton written on them: under eleven's rugby winners, fifteen-hundred metres silver, a hockey finalist, and a couple of others without any engraving. A black rucksack with a yellow reflective strip was hooked over the back of a chair. The bookshelf stored a couple of large, hard-backed cookbooks and a few smaller books, a well-used box of board games, and a pack of playing cards. Nothing stood out as unusual. The furniture was well cared for, though not new, and there was a light cover of dust on the surfaces.

"I assume Ellie Franton is his daughter. That might be her in the pictures, perhaps with her mum," she said.

"Yeah. Eyes is tracking his next of kin."

If the pictures were of his daughter and wife, Grace was glad they hadn't been the ones to discover his mutilated body. That was an image she wouldn't wish anyone to be left with.

"I don't understand why there aren't any signs of resistance. Nothing." Dave took in the scene, shaking his head.

"Or why his hands have been cut off," Grace said. It was an aggressive act, and it had been conducted carefully.

Dave studied the books and pointed at the one with a white cover and gold lettering embossed on its spine. "It's a religious punishment based in the teachings in the Quran and the Bible. Maybe Franton wasn't such a good Christian after all."

There were many people who didn't qualify as good Christian's, but that didn't make them candidates for this kind of attack. "Are there any other signs of disturbance? Anything that might suggest something's been taken?"

"Not that I've seen."

The scenario niggled Grace. Here was a well-kept home in a quiet part of the town tucked down a country lane where all the houses advertised neighbourhood watch stickers in their front windows. It was the sort of area that Grace might have chosen to live in, low on crime stats and high on neighbour vigilance. The killing was aggressive and potentially ritualistic. There was nothing random about it.

"What's this about, Dave? Sex? Revenge?"

"God knows."

If this was a religious punishment, then they were looking at revenge. But killing him before cutting him didn't make sense. "Any idea when it happened?"

"Waikes said they went from work to the pub at lunch time and then walked home late afternoon. So, between about 16:30 yesterday after Waikes left him and sometime today before Waikes showed up. The pathologist will narrow it down. Waikes could have been the last person to see him alive though. He only turned up today because they were supposed to go fishing."

“Fishing for what? It’s Baltic, and the heavens are coming down out there.”

“Yup, that was my gut too.”

Grace smiled. “That was a pun, wasn’t it?”

Dave shrugged. “I do my best under deathly circumstances.”

Grace glanced at the body again. “Okay, I’m assuming all his devices have been seized. Let’s get them to Digital Forensics on a quick turnaround. I want DNA, toxicology, and wound analysis back ASAP. And get a background check on any other friends, family, and anyone he knew who he would willingly let through that front door. Visit his local pub, find out who else he had contact with. If someone came in through the back door, they would have to know about the key. Get onto house-to-house and find out what the neighbours saw. We need to know who, if anyone, visited Franton after Waikes left him yesterday.”

Dave nodded. “Eyes is already running the checks. There’s no CCTV close to these houses.”

“Of course there isn’t. That would make our lives so much easier. See what we can get from the main roads leading in, cross match with the local vehicles on this road, and see if anything stands out.”

“I’ll liaise with Eyes and start on the house-to-house,” Dave said.

Grace nodded. “I have a briefing statement to write for the press office and the Detective Super. The media will be all over this quicker than the bloody flies can settle in.”

She took a deep breath. Detective Superintendent Jane Simpson wouldn’t breathe down her neck too much as long as the team delivered, but the nature of this killing was cause for deep concern, and the super would want answers to keep the chief at bay.

“It’s going to scare the shit out of residents, Dave.”

“Yup.”

Grace turned to Nigel. "I'll see you at the post mortem. Can you ask Anita whether she needs videos and photos beforehand?"

Nigel stopped writing and pocketed his pen. "Will do."

As they left the scene, Grace's mind switched back to her need to call Holly. "How are your girls?" she asked Dave.

"Carla's fifteen going on thirty-nine, a constant worry. Lou is absorbed with her sports, and frankly, I hope she stays that way." He pulled out a cigarette and started to smoke.

Grace understood his concern for his eldest daughter. It was reassuring to know she wasn't the only paranoid parent in the world. "We should grab a drink sometime and chat. Meg wants to spend more time with me. I need some tips from the expert."

He huffed. "Don't ask me, Grace. I'd never let my two out of my sight if I had my way."

"That's exactly why I need to talk to you. We think the same way."

His laugh was strained, and she squeezed his arm. His daughters were lucky to have him. Her father had deserted her, and while she didn't think about him often, when she did, the sense of abandonment left her feeling as though she'd missed out. "You're a great dad," she said.

He huffed as he exhaled. "Tough job though, right, Grace?"

Anguish and love spoke to her through his tight smile and the hint of a sparkle in his eyes. "Caring is the toughest," she said as they walked quickly towards her car. "I'll go and talk to Waikes."

Dave went to the first house in the row, drawing deeply on his cigarette and blowing out thick clouds of smoke. He flicked the stub to the ground and stamped on it as he stepped up to the first door.

Grace's thoughts oscillated between the dead man and her own daughter as she drove back to the station. Judging by the photographs of the woman and child in his house, and the name engraved on the trophies she'd spotted, he had a daughter too. A daughter who was going to find out very soon that her dad had been butchered. And from what Grace had seen so far, there didn't appear to be an obvious motive behind his death. Data would roll in from the scenes of crime team in due course, and maybe they would strike lucky with it being an angry husband taking revenge. Her instincts told her it wasn't going to be that simple.

This didn't have the hallmarks of a random or out-of-control attack. While the cuts were imprecise – un-surgeon-like, Nigel had said – that might be indicative of the type of blade used and having to navigate the bones. The blood spill from the wounds was neat, dripped not spurted, and the rest of the scene was too clean.

Either the killer showed compassion by drugging Franton so he felt no pain, or it was just an easy way of managing the kill with the minimum amount of fuss. Either way, their killer knew what he was doing, and she'd seen nothing that indicated he'd been in a hurry.

She'd missed another call from Holly, and there was no answerphone message, which meant Holly was really pissed off with her. She tried calling her, and the answerphone clicked in. She didn't leave another message.

She would have tried Meg's mobile, but Meg would be at school, and aside from not wanting to disturb her during her class, she couldn't get into a conversation about visiting arrangements with her daughter without having first spoken to Holly or Holly would accuse her of going behind her back and creating a wedge between them. Meg would either talk Grace into making more promises she would almost certainly end up breaking, or she would go silent when Grace wouldn't commit.

Even though letting Meg down made Grace feel like the worst parent in the world, the silence at the end of the line cut the deepest. Grace's protective instinct towards Meg was as strong as it had ever been, but with the physical distance between them now, she was powerless to exercise any influence over her daughter. Divorce had been challenging, but watching Meg walk away from her less than a year ago had broken Grace's heart.

She switched radio stations to avoid the sappy music that tugged at the ache in her chest. She missed Meg so much. When she gave it any thought, she still worried about Meg having boyfriends or girlfriends – less about the girls than the boys, in fairness – but the threat of harm coming to her baby girl was always at the forefront of Grace’s mind.

If Meg stayed for a bit, and Grace could manage to spend time with her, at least she would be able to keep a proper eye on Meg again. She shook her head. She couldn’t think that way. She had to trust that Holly would do a good job on that front; she had no reason to doubt her. Besides, the job needed Grace’s undivided attention, and anyway, she didn’t have the first idea how to manage a teenager without clipping their wings or grounding them just to keep them safe.

She parked up at the station and was greeted in the office by Eyes frowning at the screen and rhythmically tapping the tip of her pen on the pad on her desk.

“So, your victim, Johnny Franton,” Eyes said, scanning the data.

“Yes.”

“He’s an ex-con. He was convicted for a string of burglaries that took place from 2008 to 2016. He was released on parole ten months ago and had just come off licence. Waikes also has a previous for assault. They were both detained at Aylesforth Prison, and their time overlapped before Waikes was released three years ago.”

Grace rubbed her neck. What was this? Some beef between cons while locked up?

“Okay. Speak to Prison Liaison about Franton and Waikes. Who did they mate with, fight with, and work for? Did Franton owe anyone anything? Check everything, and let’s start ruling out.”

Eyes was already clicking the keys. They called her ‘Eyes’ for good reason. She wasn’t just a great cop, she was a tech geek and didn’t say anything unless it was important. And she didn’t miss a trick. If there was someone behind this inside the prison, which was entirely feasible, then Eyes would find out who it was.

“Any joy on his next of kin? I’m going to speak to Waikes,” Grace said.

“His daughter is twenty-two and lives in Canada with her mother, Franton’s ex-wife. They moved there twelve years ago, but he still has his ex-wife listed as his next of kin,” Eyes said. “I’ve briefed the Canadian police.”

Grace made her way towards the interview room. She put a coin in the vending machine and waited for the can of Coke to drop. Why they put fizzy drinks at the top of the machine was a mystery. She tapped the top of the can, gathering her thoughts and taking a couple of minutes to breathe. *Fishing, my arse*. What were two ex-cons doing going out fishing on a day like today? She finished the drink, threw it into the bin and entered the room.

“Mr Eddie Waikes,” she said, “I’m DCI Parks. Thank you for waiting. I believe you were good friends with Johnny Franton. I just need to ask you a few questions to help us build a picture of Johnny, if that’s okay?” She sat opposite him.

Waikes crossed his arms tightly against his chest. “Am I under arrest?”

Grace tugged her seat closer to the table. “No, you’re not. You’re here voluntarily and free to leave at any time. I’d just like you to tell me what you know of Johnny’s movements in the last twenty-four hours, if you don’t mind?”

“I told the other guy. I showed up at Johnny’s to go fishing and walked in on him like...” He turned his head and scrunched up his nose, recoiling into his seat.

“Can you tell me about your movements yesterday? What time you started and finished work? What time you got to the pub?”

He loosened his grip and rubbed his arm. “I arrived at eight, and we finished at midday. I drove home and then walked to the Carpenter’s Arms. Johnny did the same. We got there about one.”

“Was Johnny involved in any incidents at work yesterday?”

“No.”

Grace leaned back in her seat. “When you met at the pub, did Johnny seem in the same mood as when you’d left work?”

Waikes shook his head. “He was happier. Not having to lug bricks and blocks around in the pissing rain.”

Grace could relate. The rain made her job harder and more uncomfortable. “And while you were at the pub, what happened?”

He shrugged. “We drank on our own. Some of the locals were there. It was busy, with a load of hikers eating and drinking. It’s a village pub, but it’s on the trail routes so they get a lot of passing trade. I don’t take any notice.”

“Were there any arguments in the pub? Did Johnny get into a conversation with anyone?”

“No.”

“How much did you drink?” Grace studied his face for any indications he might be lying.

“We’d had a few pints, six, maybe more, and shots. And we played cards like we always did after work on a Friday.”

“Would you say Johnny was drunk when you left the pub?”

He leaned back in the chair. “He was a bit more out of it than usual. He could take fifteen pints or more and not look drunk.”

She sensed his admiration for Franton’s ability to consume heavily conflicted by the fact that Franton hadn’t responded as he normally would. “Did anyone approach your table? Is there a chance his drink could have been spiked?”

He scratched his head and recrossed his arms. “I didn’t see anything. It was busy.”

“Okay, did you leave the Carpenter’s Arms together?” Grace asked.

He nodded. “Johnny was unsteady on his feet, so I walked him home and got him settled in the seat in front of the TV. He wanted another beer, so I opened a can and left it by the chair. He was nodding off when I left the house about half four.”

“What time did you turn up today?” Grace asked.

“About twelve.”

“And was Johnny’s back door locked when you arrived?”

“Yeah. He leaves a key under the plant pot.” He shrugged. “I told him not to, but he’s old-fashioned like that.”

Grace couldn’t help noticing Waikes’ use of the present tense when referring to his friend. He seemed genuinely in shock. She took a slow deep breath. “Thank you, Mr Waikes. That’s very helpful.” He didn’t appear to register her appreciation. She softened her tone. “Do you have any idea who might have done this to him? Anyone he had a beef with, owed something to? Someone he stole something from?”

He lowered his head. “Not that I know of. He worked hard since getting out. He’d gone straight. We both had.”

“And no one from prison that he’d pissed off? You know, behind the scenes. Did he have sex with someone’s wife, brag, argue?”

“Johnny had sex with a lot of women, if you believe what he said.” He half-smiled then became serious again. “I don’t know if he fucked anyone over in prison. Maybe, after I got out. He didn’t say anything.”

Grace leaned forwards. “Did Johnny take drugs?”

He shook his head and ran his tongue across his teeth. “Never. He liked his booze but that was it. He didn’t even smoke. We used to take the piss out of him at work for it.”

Grace tapped her finger on the desk as she processed her thoughts. Either someone had spiked Franton's drink or they'd both consumed more than Waikes had said. "Did anyone come back from the pub with you both yesterday?"

He shook his head.

"Did he talk to anyone new in the pub, chat anyone up?"

"No. I told you. We drank, went back to his place, then I went straight home. I fell asleep on the sofa watching TV and turned up today, as planned."

He was getting annoyed with her questioning, but there hadn't been any indication in his body language that he might be lying. "And you turned up to go fishing?"

He sighed and looked directly at her. "Yeah. We were heading to the canal."

One last push. "Shitty weather for fishing, isn't it?"

"It's quieter when the weather's bad and the fish don't care. We sit under the bridge. It's peaceful, and it's dry."

Grace withheld a smile. She didn't know quite what they were up to, but whatever they had planned to do together and whatever this man might be hiding from her, if anything, she didn't think it had anything to do with Franton's death.

"Is there anyone who can verify your whereabouts yesterday evening through to this afternoon?"

He shook his head. "My cat. I live alone."

Grace eased her chair back from the table and stood up. She had nothing more to go on and no reason to detain him in custody. "Thanks again for your help. If you think of anything else, anything at all, please call me directly." She slipped her card across the table.

He stared at it for a moment before picking it up. "Can I go now?"

She nodded, as her phone pinged and started to vibrate. "Excuse me, I have to take this. I'll get someone to show you out." She accepted the call and stepped into the corridor.

Chapter 4

Wednesday 19th January

Peeling the prawns, I can't help but notice the difference in texture between the muscles and tendons within the human body and the soft, pink flesh beneath the crunchy shell of the delicate crustacean. I would have bought fresh prawns of course, the grey ones, if they'd had any in the supermarket and enjoyed watching them transform under the heat. My mouth waters as I squeeze the lemon, and I suck on a slice. It sharpens my thinking. A little garlic and onion and a few thinly sliced mushrooms should do it.

The minibus that does the hospital runs stops outside, and I watch Mum slowly make her way the short distance up the garden path supported by her walking frame. The front door clicks, and my heart thuds gently while the vehicle moves away. "Mum?" I want to hear her voice, to discover whether she sounds as weary as she looks. I grab the tea towel and rub my hands as I go into the hallway. "Mum." She looks up at me with a steely glare, and I smile. She doesn't respond. Her complexion is grey, and there's no sparkle that gives life to her dying eyes today. "How did it go?" I ask.

She shakes off the help I offer, abandons the frame in favour of her cane, and walks through to the living room without a word.

I take a deep breath to stem the anger that tightens the knot in my head as I make my way back into the kitchen. I'll be happier when her radiotherapy sessions are over. It is cruel to put her through a course of treatment when the chance of any improvement in her condition is so slim. Data doesn't lie. Every session is harder on her, and it's raising her hopes when the situation is futile and unfair.

Eventually, having finished preparing the linguine, I make a cup of tea and take it through to the living room. She's slumped in the chair with her eyes shut and her mouth wide open.

My heart tries to escape my chest. "Mum."

She snorts, blinks, opens her eyes, and lifts her head.

I sigh. "How are you feeling?"

She drags herself up in the chair. "Is your dad home?"

"No, Mum. He's not coming home." He's been dead more than thirty years. I don't know whether it's the dementia that makes her forget, or the effect of the tumour. Probably a combination of both.

I hand her the cup of tea.

She sips it quickly with trembling hands and jolts. "It's too hot."

I take the cup from her. "I'm sorry. I only just made it. I should've said."

She mumbles, "Fucking useless," then picks up the remote control and flicks on the TV.

"I made prawn linguine for you," I say, and her attention fixes on the screen. I fight the urge to throw something at David Attenborough and draw in long deep breaths, then kiss the top of her head.

She doesn't mean to be nasty. Today isn't a good day.

"I'll get you some dinner," I whisper.

"I'm not hungry," she says.

"Okay. We can have it later. I've got some work to do."

The food will be ruined. I bite my lip until the metallic taste soothes me.

It hasn't always been this way with her. But when she's lost inside herself – in a world I can't access – and punching out, it ignites old flames inside me. I know what I need to do to release the pressure I've lived with since I first realised as a young boy that my father was beating her.

Picking the most deserving men and getting hold of their details was easier than I'd anticipated. The local newspapers did me a great favour, printing their stories with as little regard for the offender as the offender gave to their victim.

I admire the candid approach of the press. It's amusing to me that they shy just short of giving a full-on profile of the criminal while sharing just enough that anyone with an ounce of intelligence could find out the rest. The press is designed for people like me, and I appreciate their desire to reveal the truth.

Not that I've needed their help. It pays to live locally, of course, but it's the detailed planning that makes the real difference. I've put in the hours since those unfortunate earlier incidents to make sure that everything happens perfectly. I've even considered failure, because I've learned that every project plan needs to account for all scenarios.

That weasel Ingram is next. I saw him with Christopher in the park one time, while I was with my son, Aide. Our paths have crossed many times since, though I'm a stranger to him. He can't see me because he's not looking. I'm far too old for his taste.

Hiding in plain sight almost feels like cheating, an unfair advantage in the war against crime, but it's simple and terribly effective. Like my internet username, I'm there but can't be found. We've been chatting for some time now, building trust, and we're close to agreeing to a meeting. I'm sure he'll go for it. It's too tempting, the promise of access to an underage boy. My son. I click and send the message.

"Andrew?"

I stretch my neck, relax my jaw, close my eyes, and take a long deep breath. "Yes, Mum. I'm coming."

My heart softens at the smile on her rosy-cheeked face.

"Darling, what are we having for dinner?" She shifts herself up in the chair. "I'm starving."

I rub my hands together. "I made prawn linguine."

"Oh, that sounds nice. My stomach's grumbling. Can you hear it?" She chuckles like a child that's discovered something tickling their imagination.

"Yes, Mum, I can hear it."

The way she looks at me now is how I prefer to remember her, filled with kindness and love. It's in these few precious moments of her lucidity that I feel profound sadness. I know the time that we have left together is going to come to an end sooner than I'm ready to accept. When she's her old self though, I feel lighter, happy even, like when I was younger. I want her to live forever. She's all I have.

She tucks into the large bowl of pasta as if she hasn't eaten in a week, and David Attenborough's *Blue Planet* comes to an end. The news hits the screen.

Mum's frown deepens as she squints at the photo of Franton's face and the headline. "Isn't he that builder?"

"Yes, Mum."

"He worked on our extension, a few years back. I remember because it wasn't long after Aide was born. He bought a soft toy and always cooed at him. He had a daughter, I think."

"Yes, he did. Ellie was her name."

She turns to me. "Is Aide back from school yet?"

"No, Mum." She'll forget she asked long before the image she's implanted in my mind fades. My beautiful son. I eat a mouthful of pasta and find it hard to swallow.

I stare at the police photo of Franton on the TV, his balding head and serious expression, where his eyebrows almost meet, and the look in his eyes that gives him an untouchable appearance. It's that look that's indicative of the problem with people like him, because there's no conscience behind those eyes and there's no respect for the rule of law.

The photo was taken just before his spell in prison, by the look of it. In the pub on Monday, just before I slipped the roofie into his drink as I walked past his table, he looked older. He looked more at peace by the time I left his house, naturally. It's comforting to think that his spell in prison must have taken something from him, but even more so that I finished the job.

"He was a convicted burglar, Mum."

She gasps and widens her eyes at me. "No."

"He got sent down for five years." I suck through my teeth and sigh. "We were lucky nothing went missing from the house back then."

"Goodness gracious." Mum turns back to the TV, shaking her head. "He always seemed so polite."

I encourage her to eat the pasta. "People aren't always who we think they are, Mum. You taught me that. It's right that men like him are taken off the streets for good. Our prisons are too soft on them."

"I know, I know. You're right. I've always thought we should go back to the death penalty."

That makes me smile inside, because she tried so hard to convince me of the importance of turning the other cheek when I was a child. I never did understand that concept.

The pasta slips onto her chin. She sucks it into her mouth and wipes her face with a napkin. "The world isn't as it was," she says. "You're so smart, Andrew. So kind and considerate. You always have been."

She pats my hand and smiles. I watch the screen as I sip tea and wonder what became of Ollie. Dear Ollie and his girlfriend. I had liked him. I could sense his pride in becoming a father and he kept his house nice and tidy. He was a good listener, and in the end, good company. I hope his body has been found. Shelley might not realise it straight away, but she and the baby will be better off without him.

“I’m so proud of you,” Mum says. “I know how hard you work to make sure we’re safe in our own homes.”

She squeezes my wrist with all the strength she can muster. Her grip reflects her fragility. My stomach clamps around the prawn linguine. I ram a large amount of food into my mouth, chew hard, and swallow too soon. I stretch my neck and swallow again to drive the food down. “I try my best, Mum.” I hope she hasn’t noticed the break in my voice that reveals the overpowering sense of loss I feel.

She pats my arm and frowns at me. “Oh, Andrew, I know you do. And I appreciate everything you do for me.”

I swallow back the threat of tears and my throat burns. “It’s never enough, though, is it?”

She deepens her frown. “You can only do your best. That’s all anyone can ask of you.”

I wait until she’s finished her linguine and is settled in front of the latest episode in the *Magnificent Homes* series, featuring some place in Sweden made of steel, before clearing away the dishes. I sit at the kitchen table, open my laptop, and log into my profile.

The message from 34EverNice sent five minutes earlier, reads. *Want to meet?*

My heart thuds against the back of my ribs and warmth threads through my veins. The knot in my head releases, and the blissful sense of deep satisfaction drives me onwards. Oh, yes, Matthew Ingram.

I can't type my response quickly enough. *I'll bring him, but I want time to talk with you at your place first.*

Waiting for his response is killing me.

Continued....

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