

“Martin Edwards writes terrific crime novels”
- Guardian -

MARTIN EDWARDS

First Cut is the Deepest



FIRST CUT IS THE DEEPEST

by

Martin Edwards

Publisher Information

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The quotations on the title page of each part of the book are taken from *Dracula* by Bram Stoker

Dedication

Dedicated to my Helena

Introduction

Martin Edwards is a solicitor...and so is his creation, Harry Devlin. But there the similarity ends a fortunately for Martin (who specialises in employment law - a branch of the law hardly noted for its danger and violence), his encounters with murdered corpses are confined to the printed page.

The author of over forty short stories – and the winner of the Crime Writers' Association Short Story Dagger – Martin Edwards is the editor of the CWA's annual anthology. He is also the author of legal books and more than a thousand articles. Recently he has become deservedly well known for his excellent crime series set in the Lake District featuring Daniel Kind and Hannah Scarlett. However, as a native of Liverpool, I find I have a particular affection for his Harry Devlin novels, the seventh of which is *The First Cut is the Deepest*.

Harry Devlin operates in the insular world of Liverpool's legal profession and the Liverpool of his investigations is certainly the Liverpool I recognise. From city centre offices, to the Dock Road with its dilapidated warehouses awaiting 'redevelopment' and the swish new apartments near the Albert Dock; from the run down, seedy districts to the affluent suburbs, this is the city I was brought up in and rarely has anybody captured its unique atmosphere as well as Martin Edwards. Liverpool's many notable features are used to wonderful effect in his stories – even the more peculiar ones such as the Williamson tunnels, a labyrinth dug through the red sandstone beneath the Edge Hill area of the city in the early 1800s on the instructions of a retired tobacco merchant, possibly to create work for the unemployed of the time. The tunnels make a dramatic appearance in *The First Cut is the Deepest* but to say any more would be spoiling the surprise.

It's not an easy matter to create a credible amateur detective but somehow Harry Devlin is completely believable. Harry himself is a damaged, all too human character, a man who is far from perfect but who is driven by a love of justice – a humane and likeable lawyer with good intentions. His estranged wife, Liz, died in tragic and suspicious circumstances in *All the Lonely People*, the first novel in the series - which was shortlisted by the CWA's John Creasey Memorial Dagger - and although Harry has a great liking for women, he has never had much good fortune with the opposite sex.

In *The First Cut is the Deepest* Harry embarks on a torrid and ill-advised affair with Juliet May, the wife of one of Liverpool's greatest villains. In a memorable early scene Harry and Juliet discover the decapitated body of a crown prosecutor during one of their steamy trysts. Then another member of the legal profession is murdered so Harry is forced to ask the inevitable question - who is killing the lawyers? And why is Harry being stalked by a sinister Welshman with an equally sinister agenda of his own?

This is one of Martin Edwards' darkest books, well plotted, intelligent, thrilling and totally enjoyable.

Kate Ellis

Strangers in the Night

...he can direct the elements, the storm, the fog, the thunder: he can command all meaner things; the rat, and the wolf; he can grow and become small; and he can at times vanish and come unknown. How then are we to begin our strike against him?

How long have you been afraid of me? Last night I noticed your glance in my direction when you thought I wasn't looking - and I saw the dread deep in your eyes. I kept my secret for so long, but in the end you were sure to learn the truth. Perhaps you guessed sooner than I realised. After all, it's so simple when you know: you recognise the clues which were there all the time, make sense at last of so many oddities, things that didn't quite add up. And now that you know, you are being eaten away by fear.

Do you remember telling me once why the law drew you like a moth to the flame? All of us need rules, you said, and we must believe in rules. Rules which draw a line between right and wrong. What is left for us if we don't have faith, if we can't cling to the belief that life is more than chance and accident? Without justice, the world is wild and dangerous. But the law's a lousy mistress, we should have learned that by now. She's fickle and shameless. Each time you put your trust in her, she lets you down.

So let's forget the law; it can't deliver us from evil. The time has come to face reality. Inside your heart, you know I'm killing you.

No more deceit: the choice is simple. One of us has to die. And I'll be honest with you, I'm scared too. Yet there's no escaping our destiny. My flesh tingles as I close my eyes and picture in my mind the darkness that lies ahead of us.

Chapter One

‘Forget it, it’s too risky.’

‘That’s half the fun, isn’t it?’ asked the voice at the other end of the line.

‘What if he finds out?’

‘No-one need ever know,’ Juliet May whispered, ‘apart from you and me.’

Outside in the corridor, someone banged on Harry Devlin’s door, made him jump. ‘The last client who said that to me,’ he muttered, ‘finished up with five years for money laundering.’

‘Then thank God it’s your body I’m after, not your legal advice.’

Harry tightened his grip on the receiver. ‘Hey, whatever happened to safe sex?’

‘Overrated, don’t you agree? Listen, there’s nothing to worry about.’ She was amused, her tone persuasive. She’d have made a good advocate, he thought, could have persuaded a hanging judge to let her off with a neck massage. ‘Casper is in London until tomorrow evening. Everything’s perfect. The house is in the middle of nowhere. This may be the best chance we ever get.’

The door rocked on its hinges. Jim Crusoe was standing outside, hand on hips, forearm raised to show the face of his wristwatch. Harry saw the time and gave his partner a caught-in-the-act grin. He could feel his cheeks burning. Cupping his hand over the mouthpiece, he said, ‘Sorry, I forgot. Will you be in half a minute.’

Jim grunted and slammed the door. Harry said into the phone, ‘I’m late for a meeting at our bank. I’ll have a date with the Loan Arranger.’

A giggle. ‘Don’t tell me, he’s got a sidekick called Tonto. Does this mean you have to take out a bank overdraft to buy the champagne for tonight?’

It was a bitter day in November. The morning news had warned of gales and now he could hear them roaring in from the waterfront. The office heating had broken down at lunch-time and the cold was seeping into his room through cracks in the window frames. Yet his palms were damp and his anticipatory lust wasn’t entirely to blame.

‘I haven’t said I can make it tonight.’

‘Don’t play hard to get,’ Juliet said. ‘You want what I want.’

Was that true? He was breathing hard, conscious of the pounding of his heart. ‘Adultery isn’t good for your health.’

‘You’re not committing adultery. It’s years since your wife died.’

This wasn’t the time to quibble about matrimonial law or the proper interpretation of the Book of Leviticus. He didn’t want to finish up like a discredited politician, arguing that his deceptions were ‘legally accurate’. ‘If Casper hears about this,’ he said, ‘we’ll both finish up in intensive care. Maybe even worse.’

‘Forget him. You ought to relax. The trouble is, you’re too uptight.’

‘He’s dangerous. You’ve said so yourself.’

‘I can picture you tensing up,’ she said softly. ‘Don’t worry, we can have a nice soothing bath together.’

He couldn’t help imagining her arms as they stretched around him, her long fingers probing the cavities beneath his shoulder blades, the sharp red nails starting to dig into his back. Closing his eyes he could smell her perfume, taste the champagne on her lips, feel the thick mass of her hair brushing

against his cheeks, then his chest.

‘But...’

‘No buts, Harry. Remember the Tarot reading I gave you? You’re in for a life-changing experience

That’s what I’m afraid of. He sucked air into his lungs. It was supposed to be an aid to rational

thought.

‘Seven thirty,’ she said, filling the silence. ‘It’s less than four hours away. I can hardly wait, can you?’

Another angry knock at the door. Harry let out a breath. So much for rational thought. Well whoever chose as an epitaph - ‘he was always sensible’?

‘No,’ he said. ‘I can’t.’

Carl Symons swallowed the last loop of spaghetti and wiped his mouth clean with his sleeve. He turned up the volume on the portable television on his kitchen table. The bellow of the wind outside was drowning out even the determined cheeriness of the weather forecaster.

‘Not a night to be out and about, with storms across the region and the likelihood of damage to property. And a word for all drivers from our motoring unit: don’t travel unless your journey is absolutely essential.’

Carl belched. The wind and rain didn’t bother him: he wasn’t going anywhere tonight. He’d left work at five sharp so as to get home before the weather worsened, the first time in months that he hadn’t worked late. Even so, it had seemed like a long day. Unsatisfactory, too. He’d emailed Suki Anwar, asking her to come to his office at four, and the bitch had sent an insolent reply, refusing on the pretext that she had an urgent case to prepare. As if that wasn’t enough, on his way to the car park he’d caught sight of Brett Young behind the wheel of his clapped-out Sierra. For a moment he’d thought Brett was putting his foot down, trying to run him down as he was crossing Water Street. He’d had to skip through the traffic to gain the safety of the pavement on the other side. He’d felt himself flushing and he could picture Brett giving a grim smile at his alarm. *Bastard*. A lying bastard, too, one who had got what he deserved. Carl wasn’t sorry about what he’d done.

He laughed out loud and sang in a rumpled baritone, ‘*Je ne regrette rien.*’

It made him feel better. He’d forget about Suki and Brett. Better to spend a couple of hours working on his report for tomorrow’s meeting. It would assuage his conscience for that prompt departure from the office. And he did have a conscience about it. His parents were long dead, but they had inculcated in him the puritan work ethic; he prized diligence above all things. Not even his worst enemy, whoever that might be; he suspected that he was spoiled for choice - could accuse him of laziness. Later, he might relax with a film. Channel 4 was showing an old black and white movie called *Nosferatu*.

He wondered whether to have a Mars bar and decided against it. The lager had better stay in the fridge as well. Tomorrow he intended to wear his best suit and he’d noticed that the trousers were getting tight. He’d always nourished a deep contempt for people with pretty faces, people like Suki and Brett. Only fools judged by appearances: good looks were a mask for weakness. Yet he’d always secretly prided himself on his flat belly. He’d lost his hair young and he’d never been a Robert Redford, but at least he wasn’t overweight. Truth was, he needed to look the part at the meeting nowadays presentation mattered in everything, including the prosecution service. So - how best to present the latest conviction rates? The figures were looking good; the trick was to make sure everyone got the message that the credit belonged to him. No-one could deny he’d justified his promotion. A Principal Crown Prosecutor owed a duty to the taxpayer. He’d told the appointment board that it was vital to be selective. No point in pursuing the ones who were sure to get away. The

secret was to target cases where the evidence was cast-iron so that not even a Liverpool jury could fail to bring in a verdict of guilty.

A deafening crash outside almost knocked him off his feet. He swore loudly. A roof tile gone, but the sound of it. He'd already spent a fortune renovating this place. Trouble was, it was too exposed. He'd bought it after receiving confirmation of his promotion in the summer, intrigued by its setting on the bank of the Dee, looking across to the Welsh hills. Once upon a time, before the silting of the river had destroyed the old Dee ports forever, there had been a small anchorage here. This house had once belonged to the harbour master. Now its isolation was part of its charm to Carl; he liked his own company best. Over the years, he'd realised that he didn't have much time for his fellow human beings. So often they whined about being used, when in truth they had asked for it. The prospect of evenings alone held no terrors for him: he was no longer his own boss during the working day, but still he preferred to do as he pleased. But if the cost of maintaining the house continued to rise, rising further in the hierarchy would no longer be merely an ambition. It would be a necessity.

He turned on the outside light and opened the door which gave on to a York stone courtyard at the side of the house. The wind stung his cheeks and blew the rain into his eyes as he stood on the threshold. Shivering, he blinked hard and finally made out the fragments of slate scattered across the paving and the grass beyond. On the other side of the low wall, the waves were lashing the shore like flails on the back of a galley slave. He had never seen the Dee so wild. A sudden gust caught the wooden door and almost snapped it off its hinges. He swore, then heaved the handle and shut out the night.

Why did I say yes?

Harry killed the engine of his MG and sat hunched over the steering wheel, staring through the rain-streaked windscreen into blackness. On his way over here, radio reports had told of the gales leaving a trail of destruction from the mountains of Snowdonia all along the north coast of Wales. A woman swept away in a swollen river, a dozen caravans tossed into the sea. Now the storm was ripping through Wirral. He couldn't help shivering, but it had nothing to do with the elements.

He should not be here. Not so much because of guilt, more because he was sure that one day his affair with Juliet would end in tears. Perhaps worse. Casper May had betrayed his wife a hundred times, or so she reckoned. He beat her too: Harry had seen the bruises and his tears of rage had trickled over them. Casper had, it was true, come a long way since his days as loan shark, charging rates of interest that would have made Shylock's eyes water. His security firm was due to go public soon and nowadays he saw more of government ministers than pleading debtors. The politicians were keen to build bridges with business and to wine and dine an entrepreneur famed for his charitable fund-raising: he might be persuaded to volunteer a donation to party funds. But respectability was only skin deep. If he realised he'd been cuckolded by a small-time solicitor, honour would need to be satisfied.

Harry had heard the story of a rival security boss who had undercut Casper for a contract to locate after a dockside container terminal. A week after he'd gone missing, he'd been found inside one of the containers with a hood over his head and a gag in his mouth. The body was discovered on the same day that Casper was lunching with a task force from the Regional Development Agency, sharing ideas on how to make the north-west a better place to live in. He'd sent flowers to the widow, a woman he slept with in his younger days. The names of the scallies who had kidnapped the man and left him to die were common knowledge in the pubs of Dingle, but no-one had ever been charged. When Casper May was involved, it made sense to look the other way.

It still wasn't too late. He could turn the MG round now and set off for home. Why not settle for beer rather than the bottle of Mouton Cadet he'd stashed in the boot, maybe watch the late vampire film on Channel 4 and admire Max Schreck's uncanny impersonation of an inspector from the Inland Revenue? He could call Juliet tomorrow and make an excuse. Even if he said something about seeing her around, she'd guess that it was over. No great loss for her: she would soon find someone else to amuse herself with.

But as he buttoned his coat up to the neck to keep out the cold, he realised that for him it was too late after all. No longer was it a matter of choice. She was waiting for him in the lonely cottage. He could not help but seize the chance to be with her again.

Carl turned the key in the mortice lock, but there was no escape from the wind in the living-room chimney. A frantic sound, he thought, the sort a beast might make if caught in a trap. He shook his head, surprised at himself. He wasn't given to flights of fancy. Imagination was a nuisance. It played no part in the preparation of a case for court, in the effective prosecution of criminal offenders.

He cursed as the picture on his television began to flicker and the actor's voices in the Fiat commercial became garbled and discordant. Suddenly the programme cut off and the fluorescent overhead light went out.

Blindly, he stumbled towards the hall, cracking his knee against a cabinet as he crossed the uneven floor. He had to remember to duck his head under the low beams as he went through the doorway. Everything seemed unfamiliar in the dark. He tried the light switch next to the stairs. Nothing. The power line must have been brought down in the storm.

Shit, shit, shit.

At least he was prepared for a black-out. He prided himself on his organisational abilities and he always had supplies to enable him to cope with a crisis. Experiences like this, he told himself, proved the wisdom of such foresight. He crept back into the kitchen and found a packet of candles and a box of matches in a drawer. The flame was weak and the room was full of shadows, but anything was better than pitch darkness.

He tried the transistor radio. The Meteorological Office was issuing another warning of severe gales. *Tell me something I don't know.* He retuned to Radio 3 for a bit of background Beethoven while he pulled the paperwork for tomorrow's meeting out of his briefcase. Perhaps if the power didn't come back on, he would only work for an hour or so. He'd already done the hard graft. It wouldn't do any harm to turn in early and make sure he was fresh and ready for the meeting. If all went well, he could hope for another promotion marking at his next performance appraisal. His sights were set high. A move to another office wasn't impossible if no vacancy cropped up in Liverpool. He wasn't prepared to waste his life away, waiting to step into dead men's shoes.

A knock at the front door. For an instant he confused the noise with the rage of the storm. After all, no-one in their right mind would be out on a night like this. But it came again, the sound of the heavy brass knocker hammering against oak.

It must be one of the Blackwells. Either the mother who lived at the cottage up the slope, the only person he could possibly describe as a neighbour, or her drink-sodden son if he happened to be around. Perhaps they weren't equipped to deal with a power cut. He toyed for a moment with the idea of driving a ruthless bargain for a candle and a couple of vestas. The mother looked as if she had a decent body, considering her age. She hadn't let herself go, he liked that in a woman. The thought made him smile as, carrying the candle in its holder, he unlocked the door.

It was freezing outside and so dark that it took him a moment to focus. Then he saw the light

glinting on the blade of the axe in his visitor's hand.

The cottage belonged to Linda Blackwell, personal assistant to Juliet in her public relations business. Harry couldn't face the prospect of sleeping in Casper's bed and his own flat was out of bounds because one of his neighbours was a client of Juliet's and they couldn't run the risk that she'd be recognised. In the past, their trysts had taken place in anonymous hotels in places like Runcorn and Frodsham, where they could be confident they wouldn't bump into anyone they knew. Tonight was supposed to be different. Special. She had given him directions, detailed and specific, warning him that the place would be difficult to find in the dark.

'It's called the Customs House, but it's only tiny and you could easily miss it. She bought it after her husband died. Once you've branched off the main road, ignore the signs to the country park. Carry on for half a mile past the nursery and the tumbledown cottage until you come to the end of the lane. Tucked away underneath the trees are a couple of lock-up garages. The one on the left is Linda's. She's let me have the key, so I'll park my Alfa inside there. You leave your car in front of the door. For God's sake don't block her neighbour's access. She can't bear him. I don't know why, but I can't guess.' A laugh. 'He's a lawyer and you know how difficult they can be.'

Harry wished now that he'd asked the neighbour's name. The last thing he wanted was to bump into someone he knew. What could he say? 'Can't stop, I'm just off for a tryst with the wife of a gangster.' In theory, it might do wonders for his image - as long as Casper May never got to hear of it. He checked again to make sure that even the most pedantic conveyancer could not complain that his right of way had been obstructed and set off down the path which led into the spinney which bordered the lane.

'For God's sake, don't forget to bring a torch,' she'd instructed him. 'There are no lights and the path twists and turns on its way through the wood.'

Good advice, he reflected, as he shone the pencil beam through the darkness. Without the help of light, he would soon be hopelessly lost amongst the trees. Juliet obviously knew her way here of old. Had she explained this route before, to a previous lover he'd heard nothing about? If so, was it any of his business?

The path was muddy underfoot and he found himself wondering why anyone would want to live here, in the back of beyond. The city he had left behind twenty minutes earlier seemed already to belong to a different world. He could imagine that in the height of summer this wooded walk might be idyllic, but only a fool would trade the warmth of home on the wildest night of winter for the rain drenching his hair and the wind stinging his cheeks.

The gale dropped for a moment and he heard a rustling amongst the trees. He shone his torch and could dimly perceive dark shapes above his head. What sound did bats make? He was a townie and natural history had never been a strongpoint. To think he might have been in his flat this evening watching a vampire film on the box, rather than experiencing the Grand Guignol of a date with a murderer's wife. If ever there was a night for the un-dead to rise, this was it.

He tripped over a tree stump but somehow managed to keep his grip upon the holdall which contained the champagne and a few overnight things. The torch slipped from his other hand and rolled away. He scrabbled around in the darkness and when he picked it up, found that the bulb was smashed. In a fit of temper, he hurled the thing away into the undergrowth before squatting on his haunches and cradling the bag with the bottle whilst he told himself to calm down. Pity it wasn't full of whisky. He'd have brought a hip flask if he'd realised the scale of this endurance test. Perhaps Juliet had dreamed up the assignation as a challenge, a measure of the scale of his obsession with her. When he

arrived at the Customs House, he'd probably find that there was a dual carriageway running straight past the front door. He inched forward and realised that the path was beginning to fall away beneath his feet.

'When you reach the edge of the cliff, the track starts to wind down. There's a hand-rail and you better cling on. It will be slippery with all this rain.'

She was a mistress of understatement, he decided. Unable to see where he was going, he clamped his left hand around the wet wooden railing and put one foot gingerly in front of another. He knew that, ahead and below, flowed the river that divided England from Wales, but he could see nothing of it. On either side of him, trees swayed like monstrous exotic dancers mocking his timidity.

'Soon the path forks. Make sure you follow the left branch. Steps lead down to the Customs House. The other way takes you to the lawyer's cottage.'

He missed his footing and almost fell again. These must be the steps. He told himself that he was almost there. Inching down the pathway, he saw the dark outlines of a house loom in front of him: this must be the place. Yet why were there no lights? He felt suddenly sick and wondered if, for some unknowable reason, she had betrayed him. If he walked in, would he find himself greeted by Caspary May, rather than his wife?

'I'll leave the door ajar. You won't need to ring the bell.'

He found himself on a cinder path running up to a small porch. As he moved forward, he saw the front door open, framing the slender figure he couldn't stop thinking about.

'Come in, quick,' she urged. 'You'll catch your death out there.'

As consciousness returned, Carl Symons became fuzzily aware that his head was hurting. Hurting as he had never hurt before. The haft of the axe must have struck him on the temple, a blow so sudden that he'd not even had time to raise his hands in an attempt at self-defence. He forced his eyes open, trying to blink away the tears of pain. The skin of his cheeks and hands was grazed and sore. He'd been dragged inside and laid out on the floor of the kitchen. The stone was cold against his flesh. By the flickering light of the candle, he could see a pool of blood. It had leaked from the wound in his temple and on to the ground.

The candle wavered. With a desperate effort, Carl tried to shift his head so that he could follow the pool of light. Even the slight movement made him want to squeal.

A face emerged from the shadows and bent down towards him, as if to judge the extent of his suffering. Carl could see two hands as well. One held the axe, the other a sharpened stave.

The face was familiar to Carl but there was a strange light in the eyes that he had never seen before. The face came closer still but did not answer. Hypnotised, he watched as a tongue appeared and began to lick the pale lips. The axe was held aloft. White teeth bared in a savage smile.

Carl tried to form a single word and heard his own voice, croaky and pleading.

'Please.'

But even as he spoke, the axe began to move towards him. Carl knew it was too late to beg for mercy. His bowels loosened.

Chapter Two

‘Think of it this way,’ Juliet said as she slipped his shirt over her own bare shoulders. ‘What could be more romantic?’

Harry gave her an exhausted grin. His body was aching and he was still breathing hard. The flesh on his back stung where she had raked him, but he didn’t care. They were lying with their arms wrapped around each other in semi-darkness, listening as the wind roared through the trees.

‘You mean just you and I together with a bottle of champagne to finish off by candle-light?’

She snuggled back under the duvet. ‘Exactly.’

He gestured at the redundant lamp and the wet towel on the bedside table. ‘Forgetting the storm, the power cut and the imminent likelihood of pneumonia?’

‘You’ve nothing to worry about, darling. I’ve dried every bit of you and you can see everything you need to see.’ She moved so that the light from the flame fell on her breasts. Her nipples were glistening from his kisses. ‘I’ve kept the promise the Tarot made. What more could you wish for?’

As they had bathed together before making love, he’d noticed the dark stain of a fresh bruise on her upper arm. So many questions lacked answers. Why did she stay with Casper? Surely it wasn’t simply through fear? She’d once told him that the sex she and her husband had when he was ready to make up after giving her a beating was the best she’d ever known. The day she’d said that, he’d been sure her relationship with her would die before it had come fully to life. But she always confounded his expectations. That was one of the reasons why he could never resist her.

He said quietly, ‘I wish he’d never hurt you again.’

‘Don’t worry about me. I can take care of myself.’

‘Are you sure? What if he finds out about us?’

‘Stop fussing,’ she said, punching his stomach. ‘Casper will be tucked up in the Waldorf with some leggy teenager even as we speak. No-one’s going to spoil our fun. Right now, this is the safest place on earth.’

Not for the first time, the thought slid into Harry’s mind that he might be her revenge against Casper for all those leggy teenagers. But he was intoxicated, and not just because he’d downed a few glasses of champagne. If he was being used, he wasn’t sure that he really cared.

‘And what about Linda Blackwell? Can you trust her to keep her mouth shut?’

‘Linda and I go back a long way. She’s never let me down.’

‘She knows about you and me?’

Juliet put a warm hand on his thigh. ‘She knows there’s someone. Obviously. But no names, no parades. I’ll drill. I gave her a call this afternoon, just before I rang you, to see if she could spare this place for the evening.’

‘What did you tell her?’

The hand became adventurous. ‘If you must know, I said that Casper had gone to a meeting in London, all to do with getting more Lottery money for Liverpool. He’s in good citizen mode at the moment, you know. Reckons there’s a knighthood in it for him at the end of the day. I told her that while the cat was away, this particular mouse was in the mood to play. She said no problem, she’ll sleep over at Peter’s.’

‘Peter?’

‘Her son. You met him once when you came round to the office, remember? He’d popped in to see his mum.’

‘Right.’ He remembered a big surly man in his early thirties. ‘We didn’t really talk.’

‘Peter may seem a misery guts, but he’s been a good son to Linda, he took care of her after his husband died. She said she’d go round to his place tonight. She stays there sometimes, she didn’t even need to go home to pack a case. She said he doesn’t get out much, he was sure to be around.’

‘She sounds like the perfect personal assistant,’ he murmured. Her fingers were teasing him and he wasn’t finding it easy to concentrate, didn’t really want to concentrate.

‘She’s always been loyal. I was sure she’d help me out. Though when the power was cut, I started wondering whether my idea was quite so clever.’ She sat up and grinned at him. ‘Luckily, it’s all worked out for the best.’

‘I’m glad you found the candles,’ he said, unable to drag his eyes away from her lean body. The pale flesh was marked here and there with chicken pox scars, but he liked the blemishes that weren’t made by her husband. Each little imperfection reminded him that she was a real woman, not a fantasy he’d conjured up in a lonely dream.

‘Tell you the truth, I rang Linda to let her know what had happened. I had her son’s number in my bag. Only trouble was that not only are the phone lines down, but the battery of my mobile was just about to pack up. Luckily I managed to get through to her on the second ring and we had a quick word before the battery ran out. She told me where one or two things were. The rest I was able to work out for myself.’

‘Never stayed here before?’ he asked softly.

She bent forward and started to kiss the hairs on his chest, looking up only to say, ‘Does it matter?’

He patted her rump. ‘No. Besides, it’s none of my business.’

‘Then everything’s fine ... Christ! What on earth was that?’

At first he thought a bomb had gone off outside the front door. The noise was so loud and close to hand that he was sure it must have been an explosion. Instinctively he closed his eyes and tightened his arms around her, fearing that the house was about to erupt in flames. But what followed was silence.

They looked at each other. Her eyes were wide with astonishment. ‘A tree’s fallen,’ she said, gently disentangling herself from him. ‘I can’t think what else it could be. Hang on a minute, I’d better go up and see what’s happened.’

She had left a towelling gown and slippers on the floor. Climbing out of bed, she slipped into the hallway and blew him a kiss before disappearing downstairs. He stared at the timbered ceiling of the bedroom as his thoughts in a jumble. Soon he heard her footsteps hurrying back up the creaking wooden staircase. She was breathless, her hair and shoulders drenched.

‘I had a look out at the front,’ she gasped. ‘Do you remember seeing a huge sycamore as you came up the path? It’s toppled over on to the utility room at the side of the house. It’s smashed the roof in. God knows how bad the damage is. I haven’t dared go into the kitchen yet. If anyone had been there, they’d have been killed. Poor Linda, it’s heartbreaking!’

‘Let me see,’ Harry grunted.

He struggled into his boxer shorts and picked up the flashlight that Linda evidently kept for emergencies. As soon as he entered the kitchen, he realised the scale of the calamity.

The utility room had, he guessed, been tacked on to the house in recent years. It was a single-storey extension which led from the kitchen and contained a washing machine, tumble drier and freezer. The trunk of the tree had torn through the roof and wall. Through the gaping hole he could see the starling

sky. The window sills, the quarry-tiled floor and every work surface were covered in rubble and sheared-off branches. A large lump of masonry filled the sink. All the equipment was filthy and dripping wet.

He went back to the front door and put his head outside. The rain had eased to a steady drizzle. Even the wind was moaning more quietly, as if chastened by the scale of the wreckage it had caused. He walked across a patch of sodden lawn and shone his light on to the tree. It must have been fifty feet tall. Now it was leaning at an acute angle, its root mass ripped from the ground, its crown hidden behind the devastated utility room.

He trudged back to the bedroom. Juliet was sitting on the carpet, with her back to the bed. He saw his dismay that she'd put her bra and pants back on underneath the gown. Her face was red with temper and she was gripping the mobile phone as if she hated it, punching numbers at random in frustration.

'Useless bloody thing!' She sent the mobile skimming across the floor.

'You were trying to reach Linda?'

She nodded. 'I have to tell her, Harry. I owe her that, at least.'

'Can't it wait until the morning? There's nothing anyone can do tonight.'

'Have you seen the damage?'

'It's bad,' he admitted. 'Like you say, it's a miracle no-one was hurt.'

'Well, then. Harry. We must do *something*. I mean, we can't just climb back under the covers and forget about it.'

Harry wanted to do precisely that, but care was needed if the evening were not to disintegrate into squabbling anti-climax. 'Okay, I see your point. But what do you have in mind? Let's face it, the place isn't overflowing with telephone boxes.'

'What about your mobile?'

'Left it at home. Pager ditto.' He groaned. 'I didn't want us to be disturbed.'

She shrugged. 'I suppose the only option is to try the neighbour. His house is only about a hundred yards away. We can throw ourselves on his mercy.'

'Not a good idea,' he said quickly. 'Remember, you said that he and Linda don't get on.'

'I hardly think he'd refuse to let us use his phone in view of what's happened.'

The icy note in her voice made her sound like someone he'd never met before. A warning sign. Yet he couldn't help pressing. 'Who's to say he's got a mobile?'

'Come on,' she snapped, 'how many solicitors do you know without one? Besides, I should have thought it would be mandatory to have a portable back-up in an out-of-the-way spot like this. At least there's no harm in asking.'

'Are you sure about that?' Harry's heart was thudding. 'This solicitor, you don't know anything about him, do you? He might turn out to be someone I did battle with in court today. The cat would be well and truly out of the bag then, wouldn't it? How long before word got around? You know what Liverpudlians are like. Their idea of a secret is something you mustn't tell to more than three people. Who's to say that Casper wouldn't get to hear of it, sooner or later?'

'All right, all right,' she said sulkily. 'I'll go on my own. I'll tell him I turned up here because I needed to call on Linda urgently. Something to do with work. Then I saw the tree had come down.'

'What if he offers his help, wants to come over here to take a look-see?'

'Don't worry. It won't be hard to put him off.' She waved a hand. 'I'll make up a story.'

The throwaway remark jolted him. He realised that she enjoyed making up stories, took it in her stride. Her creative imagination ought not to have come as a surprise, he supposed. She did make

living from promoting the image of solicitors, after all. But he felt like a fly caught in a web.

‘Okay. If you think it’s for the best.’

‘Yes, I do.’ She stared at him, her eyes narrowing. ‘I’m not just some old nympho, Harry. I have some idea about doing the right thing. I’d never let Linda down.’

‘I only meant...’

‘Oh forget it.’ She pulled on her suspender belt and stockings. ‘If you like, you can go home now. Let’s face it, the evening’s been ruined.’

‘I’m staying,’ he said doggedly.

‘Up to you.’ She finished dressing in silence. When she spoke again, her tone had softened. ‘Harry, I’m as sorry as you are about this. We were doing fine, weren’t we? Too good to be true, I suppose. It won’t be long, promise. Ten minutes should do it. You’ll probably be proved right and there’ll be nothing much Linda can do about this until the morning. But I won’t be able to take it easy until I’ve broken the news. I owe her that.’

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘I’ll be waiting for you. And whatever happens, we can finish the champagne, can we?’

Left alone in the candle-light, he padded around, trying to get his bearings in the unfamiliar house. He’d often spoken to Linda Blackwell on the phone and he’d met her at Juliet’s office. He recalled a smart woman with metal-rimmed spectacles and blonde hair in a bob. She was a widow, he gathered, in her early fifties but looking ten years younger. Her manner was always crisp and business like. It came as no surprise that her home contained neither chintz nor clutter.

The bed he’d shared with Juliet had a hard mattress and a plain British Home Stores duvet. The furniture was functional pine. There weren’t many personal touches apart from a symmetrical arrangement of framed photographs on the dressing table. Linda on her wedding day; she looked about nineteen, slim and pretty. Her late husband had been a tall handsome man with a mane of long fair hair. There were snaps of the couple with a baby in dungarees, who became an awkward gap-toothed schoolboy, a young man standing proudly outside medical school and finally a morning-suit bridegroom kissing a blonde in a low-cut white dress. It took Harry a moment to identify him as the gruff chap he’d met at Juliet’s office. Another picture showed Peter, a few years older, standing next to a signboard at the front of a low-level industrial unit bearing the legend *Blackwell Prosthesis*. Perhaps Peter would be useful to know, Harry thought, if Casper chopped his legs off. Although he hadn’t taken to Peter on brief initial acquaintance, he was uncomfortably aware that the Blackwells had done Juliet and him a favour by allowing them the opportunity to spend the night together. And now it had all gone wrong.

Linda’s bed was a double, presumably for comfort rather than company: there was no evidence of any boyfriend and only a single toothbrush in the bathroom. There was a cardboard box marked in neat lettering *Peter’s school reports*. Linda Blackwell was a devoted mother and Harry sighed, composing a mental picture blurred by time of his own long-dead parents. Would they have kept souvenirs of his childhood? How different would his life have been if they had survived?

Even from glancing round the cottage, he could guess that Linda was the perfect secretary, someone who took pleasure in filing things in their proper order. Thank God he’d never married someone so obsessively tidy; she’d have filed for divorce on the grounds of messiness within a matter of months. The downstairs rooms were equally neat, except for the sofa cushions which he and Juliet had sweated aside during their first embrace of the evening. Women’s magazines filled a rack; Delia Smith and Catherine Cookson dominated the bookshelves; the cd tower was stacked with Enya and Phil Collins.

The vinyl of the kitchen floor gleamed; the place would have suited a photo-shoot for an article about ideal homes if it were not for the tree trunk making the utility room look like a stage set for theatre the absurd.

Perhaps Juliet was right. This did not feel like a gossip's home. He could persuade himself that the person who lived here could be trusted with the secret. But even if Linda kept her mouth shut, what future could he and Juliet possibly have together? She was a woman who had fads. Reading the Tarot more recently Feng Shui. He didn't deceive himself; he was one more short-term craze, a change from the usual run of well-heeled men she fancied. Some day soon she'd find someone else who amused her more.

He sprawled on the sofa and flicked through a magazine he'd pulled from the rack. There was a double page spread about addiction, aimed at mothers with problem children. The snippets of information in the sidebars struck a chord: there was talk about shopaholics and binge eaters, cases where enjoyable activity became compulsive. The causes of addiction, a psychiatrist was quoted as saying, were usually emotional. A period of stress rooted in unhappiness was almost always to blame. It made sense. Time had passed since his wife Liz had been murdered, but the wounds had yet to heal.

He'd met Juliet after Jim had asked her if she could improve the firm's profile and he'd been smitten at once. At first he'd tried to fight his instincts; it was easy to come up with a dozen good reasons why an affair was doomed. But the excitement of finding that she reciprocated his interest had drowned the still small voice of common sense. Their affair had begun one night in the spring and now he found it increasingly impossible to imagine life without her. Whenever he felt lonely, he needed to pick up the phone and talk to her. Once when he'd called her at home, Casper had answered and he had to pretend to be a market researcher for a timeshare company. By the time Casper had said, 'I've already got a five-bedroom villa on the Algarve, so why don't you stop wasting my time and just fuck off?' and banged the phone down, his shirt had been wet through. The health warnings didn't need to be spelled out: sleeping with a violent man's wife could seriously damage your health. The trouble was that he couldn't bring himself to give her up.

The magazine article didn't offer much help. A doctor advised that the only way to conquer the problem was to avoid temptation. The best course for addicts was to supplement an avoidance strategy backed-up with regular self-help group meetings. Somehow Harry couldn't see that working. Nicotine skin patches and chewing gum were no more use than hypnotherapy, acupuncture or methadone. No one could he rely on family support. He didn't have a family, it was as simple as that. He'd been an only child and his mother and father had been killed in a car crash when he was a teenager. With no-one around to reinforce his memories, sometimes he found it hard nowadays to remember much about them. Liz had left him for someone else and been stabbed to death a couple of years later. It seemed natural to him to be alone. Only on odd occasions, when Jim spoke about his own wife and children, did Harry wonder what he might be missing. Jim might not be quite the textbook family man - Harry had once caught him *in flagrante* with a woman police officer - but he did have someone to go home to. Maybe there was something to be said for a conventional way of life, if the alternative was sleeping with the wife of another man who might kill you if he ever discovered the truth.

'Harry!'

He heard her call his name at the same moment that the front door crashed open. Her voice was breathless and frightened. His skin tingled.

'What is it?'

He raced into the hall. Juliet was standing on the threshold, gasping for air. Her face was streaked with tears. As he put his arm around her, she began to weep. It was a dreadful sound, desperate and

afraid. Her body heaved and he hugged her urgently, whispering words of comfort.

~~'It's all right, darling. I'm here. You're safe.'~~

'It's - it's not all right,' she wept.

'For God's sake, what's happened?'

'He's dead! He's dead! And - his head ... oh Christ!' She gulped in air as greedily as if she were drowning. 'It's ... it's been cut off.'

Chapter Three

Twenty minutes passed and still she sobbed. Her body rocked against him as again he raised the tumbler to her lips.

She winced as the brandy burned her tongue. 'Thanks,' she said in a muffled voice.

'Have some more.'

Straining hard to smile, she said, 'Sorry, I'm not usually hysterical. But it was so vile...'

They clung to each other. He brushed her cheek with his lips. 'You're not being hysterical. It's only natural.'

'His head,' she said thickly. 'The eyes were staring at me. Oh God, Harry, I - I've never seen a corpse before. Let alone ... shit, it was so horrible ... you can't imagine, you just can't imagine.'

He ground his teeth, wishing he could say something to help. There were no words for comforting someone who had just seen a decapitated corpse. When he spoke, it was less gently than he'd intended. 'I've seen a dead body more than once, remember?' He paused. 'Including my wife's.'

She flinched as if he had slapped her face. 'Oh, Harry, I'm sorry. I remember you once told me about going to the mortuary after she was stabbed.' The words were starting to come a little more easily now. 'God, how could you bear it? I know you were head over heels in love with her. This is a man I've never even met, but even so ...' She touched his hand. 'Guess I'm not as brave and devil-may-care as you thought, eh?'

He squeezed her fingers and said quietly, 'So much the better. I suppose it *was* the neighbour?'

'No idea.' She frowned and pulled away from him. He realised how strong she was; already the shock was beginning to give way to the first stirrings of speculation. It would take time for the full enormity of what she had witnessed to sink in. 'I - I assumed it was him. If it's someone else, Linda *bête-noir* has a lot of explaining to do.'

'That's for sure. Okay, then. You left here...'

'The storm was dying ... oh Christ, what a choice of words!'

'Doesn't matter, doesn't matter. You took the other fork in the path, found the house not far away?'

'Yes, I was afraid I might get lost, but the trees thin out. The place is near shore level, I couldn't miss it. There's a brass knocker on the door, much the same as the one here. When I lifted it, the door opened. Not properly shut. So I stepped over the threshold, flashing the light and calling, "Anyone there?"'

'Did the house seem empty?'

Her eyes widened as a fresh terror swept over her. 'You're not suggesting that - whoever did it was still there when I walked in?'

'Just asking.'

'Oh Jesus.' She hesitated, her eyes glazing for a moment as her imagination worked. 'I heard nothing. That bothered me. I thought someone must be there, if the door wasn't locked - so why weren't they answering? I remember shivering, but I walked into the hallway. I could see a mobile on an occasional table. Perfect. But I could hardly make my call there and then. It would have been too embarrassing if the owner had popped out of the loo or bathroom and found me standing there chatting away on his portable phone without a by-your-leave. So I shouted out two or three more times.'

‘Still no answer?’

‘Nothing. Then I noticed that the floor was covered in pieces of broken glass. Bits of mirror. There was an empty hook on the wall. It was as if someone had grabbed it from the hook and smashed it on the ground. I was scared by now. Even if the man had gone to bed early in some kind of temper, he surely couldn’t have slept through that storm.’

Through her thin clothes, he could feel her heart beating faster as she relived the scene. ‘I’m amazed you didn’t turn round and leg it back here.’

She nodded. ‘I thought about it, believe me, but I told myself not to be such a coward. I looked round one door. It was the living-room. No-one there. Same with the little dining-room. At the end of the hall was the way into the kitchen. I peered inside. He - he was lying there.’

She shed more tears, burying her face in his chest. He increased the pressure of his grip on her. ‘You’re safe with me, love.’

She looked up at him. ‘How can you be sure?’

Harry moistened his lips. ‘Whoever did this will be long gone. Promise. Now - did you see any weapon of any kind?’

‘Nothing. But I wasn’t looking out for one. The sight of the body hypnotised me. He’d been stabbed for good measure. At least I think so. His chest was soaked in blood. Saturated. I hated it, I wanted to throw up, but I was paralysed. I couldn’t tear my eyes away. It felt as though I’d been staring at it for hours. Really, I suppose it was a minute at most.’

‘Sure. You weren’t out so very long.’

‘Long enough. The moment I was outside, I did puke. I couldn’t help myself.’

‘Best thing.’

‘Maybe. I tell you, I’ve never moved so fast as I did on the way back here.’

‘I suppose the next thing is to call the police.’

‘You - you think we have to?’

He stared at her, trying to fathom what was going on behind the tear-streaked face. ‘What’s the alternative?’

‘I was just wondering ... I mean, do we really want to get involved?’

‘Better face up to it. We are involved. It’s the last thing I’d wish for, but we can’t forget what you’ve seen.’

She shuddered. ‘Understatement of the year. Why do we have to say anything to anyone at all?’

‘I’m a lawyer,’ he said helplessly. ‘Believe me, I often wish I wasn’t. But we don’t have a choice. There’s no option but to report the death.’

‘This isn’t the right moment to go chasing a good citizenship award.’ Her face was pinched with tension. ‘We have to be careful. You and I shouldn’t be here together. Casper has friends in high places. Believe it or not, he plays golf with a superintendent once a fortnight. We could be in big trouble. People talk.’

‘Of course they do. That’s why we need to use our heads.’ He paused, then said gently, ‘Think for a moment. Suppose we do steal away into the night. What happens? Linda Blackwell is left well and truly in the shit. All of a sudden, that tree becomes the least of her problems. Sooner or later a body is discovered in the next house along the path. The police come calling on her, wanting to know if she was here tonight, whether she heard or saw anything. You told me she and this neighbour, whoever he is, weren’t on good terms. Assuming he’s the victim - and the smart money says he is - she’ll be treated as a suspect.’

‘You can’t be serious!’

‘You may think it’s crazy, but what if the two of them have been locked in some kind of dispute? The police are bound to check her out, if only to eliminate her.’

Juliet pulled away from him. ‘You’re exaggerating. I can’t see a problem. She has an alibi. She can explain that she was staying at her son’s house this evening.’

‘On a night like this, you might expect a widow who lives in a place as remote as this to stay home, keeping an eye on her property. They’ll dig around, you can depend on it.’

‘You’re worrying over nothing.’

‘It’s not nothing,’ he said, obstinacy hardening his tone. ‘If this man has been murdered, the police aren’t going to treat it like a parking offence. Their forensic people will take his house apart. There’ll be trace evidence, you’ll have left your fingerprints. You weren’t wearing gloves when you picked up the mobile.’

‘Strange as it may seem for the wife of Casper May,’ she snapped, ‘they don’t actually have my fingerprints on file. Nor my DNA.’

‘Won’t they wonder who was sick outside the house?’ He grasped her by the shoulder. ‘Listen, your husband isn’t the only one with friends in the Merseyside Police. I have a few, as well. And I promise you, they aren’t going to skimp on this one. Let’s not take too many chances. If the detectives do find out that we were here and then did a runner after you discovered the body, all hell will let loose. We’ll both be pulled in for questioning. Try explaining that to Casper. You’re relying too much on your PA’s discretion. To say nothing of her son’s.’

She eased out of his grip. Her brow was furrowed; he sensed that she was weighing the risks in her mind. ‘Peter, yes. Linda’s strong, but he’s different. He’s not an easy guy, he’s had a rough time lately. I mean, he’s no fool. At one time he was training to be a surgeon. After he gave that up, he built up a good little business. But it’s all fallen apart. His wife left him, his company failed. One of the problems is that he likes a drink. I’m not sure I’d stake my life on him keeping his mouth shut.’

‘Well, then.’

A low groan. ‘All right. You win. But what do we tell the police? How can we explain why we’re here? We can’t tell the truth, that’s for sure.’

‘When you’re in a hole, the first rule is - stop digging.’

She leaned forward and seized his wrist. ‘Harry, swear to me you won’t even hint that we’re having an affair. We have to come up with some good reason for being here. It’s for your sake as much as mine. If Casper gets the faintest hint...’

‘Okay, okay. I’ll think of something.’

‘It had better be good.’

‘You’re not the only one who can make up a story. Life as a defence lawyer sharpens the imagination.’

She forced a smile. ‘Perhaps you should have gone in for public relations. So how do we contact the police? Don’t forget, the phones are down. I’m not going back to that charnel house to use the mobile. Not for anyone.’

‘I’ll do it.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘No choice.’

‘But what about me? What if whoever did this...?’

‘Like I said, he’ll have long gone. I’m sure of it.’ He paused, realising that he was much less confident than he sounded. ‘But lock yourself in, all the same. Just as a precaution. Don’t open the door to anyone else. I’ll bang on the front window when I’m back.’

'I tell you, it's - it's not a pretty sight.'

'Dead bodies never are,' Harry said harshly.

'There's a poker by the fireplace. Take it, will you?'

'Uh-huh.'

'And when you go over there, don't look in the kitchen, whatever you do.'

He shrugged and said nothing. When she'd told him about the body next door, he had first been horrified, then fearful. Now he was becoming conscious of a familiar yearning, mixed in with the terrors. It was like an emptiness in his belly, a hunger. He realised with a shudder of guilty self-awareness that it was a pang of curiosity. Did he know the murdered man? Soon he would find out.

The wind had become little more than a sigh through the pine leaves and the rain had eased to a fine drizzle. The path was steep and narrow and as he walked, his shoes kept sticking in the mud, but he forced himself on, knowing that time was precious.

He gripped the poker so hard that he risked crushing the bones of his hand, yet he knew he could never bring himself to use it as a weapon. He hated violence and did not dare contemplate the possibility that he might need to protect himself, that his life might depend on a willingness to strike the first blow. It would never happen; he had to believe that. The killer must be long gone, surely. There were other things he ought to worry about. Like what he should do when he reached the cottage.

He must be careful not to wipe fingerprints off the mobile. He doubted that the killer had touched it, but all the same, he would use a paper tissue when picking it up. He mustn't do anything that might prevent the police from solving the crime. First he would call Linda and explain what had happened, make sure that she would go along with his plan before he dialled 999. He'd soon find out whether Juliet was right in believing that her PA had steel nerves. He needed to make sure she came over at once. West Kirby wasn't far away. If she put her foot down, she could get back home before the police arrived at the murder scene.

The police would check on calls made from the mobile. They would want to know why he'd rung the number of Linda's son. He'd have to say Linda had asked him to tell Peter what had happened, maybe see if she could stay overnight with him in West Kirby. Christ, this was going to get complicated. Should he change his mind, call the police first? No, he'd have to risk it. If Linda wouldn't help out, he'd need to come up with another story. He'd fob the detectives off, tell them that he wasn't thinking straight. Not far from the truth, actually. It would seem flimsy and they were sure to be sceptical, but he'd have to chance it.

As he picked his way down the path to the dead man's house, he rehearsed in his mind what he would say when the police came to take statements. He, Juliet and Linda would have to sing from the same hymn-sheet. Their version of events would need to be capable of standing up to scrutiny, not merely from the investigating detectives, but also from Casper May if need be. It was crucial to avoid arousing suspicion of any kind.

Like most lawyers, he had over the years learned the basic principles of lying. Keep it short. Keep it simple. And keep it as close to the truth as you can. The first challenge was to find an innocent explanation for his visit to the Customs House on a night when no-one in his senses would venture out of doors.

He would say that he needed advice from Juliet on an advertising campaign. Someone from *Enterprise Spotlight* had rung him that morning, urging him to participate in a feature about legal help for businesses. Trying to fob off the sales rep had been as fruitless as arguing with a doorstopper evangelist. In the end he had found himself agreeing to look at the rates for an ad in an issue focusing

on the north-west's captains of industry. The rep had pressed for a decision, offering as an incentive supposedly unrepeatable discount. So it was just about plausible that, before taking the plunge and agreeing to spend money the firm could - according to the Loan Arranger - ill afford, a prudent lawyer might wish to pick expert brains right away. And Juliet had said she would draft the advertising copy for him that very evening.

It didn't take long to map out Juliet's statement. Suppose she said that, with her husband out of town for forty-eight hours, she'd arranged to spend the evening with Linda. They had been together for years; they were friends as much as employer and employee. She might tell them she'd intended to pick up Linda so that they could go out for a drink, but when Harry rang, she suggested that he meet them at Linda's house. Since the weather was so grim, the evening would not be unduly spoiled. When the tree had crashed into the house, Juliet had volunteered to ask the neighbour for the use of her phone to call the emergency services. But then she had discovered the body and come rushing back in deep distress.

Jesus, it was thin. But what else could he say?

Everything depended on Linda. Without her help, he found it impossible to dream up any innocent explanation for his and Juliet's presence in the isolated cottage. She had to return and support them in their story. At least it was safe to assume that, tonight of all nights, she would not have strayed from her son's fireside.

Twigs cracked under his feet as he followed a bend in the path. As the trees cleared, he saw his destination immediately in front of him. The house was a little larger than Linda's. A slate nameplate bore the legend *Harbour Master's Cottage*. The house had been built just above the water's edge. Harry could hear the waves slapping against the shore on the other side of the building. The front door was swinging backwards and forwards, banging against the jamb.

Would he and Juliet get away with it? If he thought long and hard, perhaps he could come up with a better solution to their dilemma. There might be flaws in his plan that he could not foresee. He took a deep breath. Better not think about what might go wrong or to indulge in flights of fancy. In ordinary times, he and Juliet shared a fascination with mysteries. Tonight, though, he'd had more than enough of tales of the unexpected. This wasn't the time to indulge in wild guessing games - *what if the body has disappeared?*

He crunched up the wet gravel and paused on the threshold. Impossible to walk into a house in the dead of night without a second thought. But a moment's hesitation was all that he allowed himself before he stepped into the hallway and slammed the door behind him.

The flashlight revealed a stone-floored passage with a low beamed ceiling. He moved forward, his footsteps echoing in the silence. The only article of furniture was the small mahogany table; the mobile was where Juliet had left it. Shards of glass lay on the floor. He stared down into the large fragment of the shattered mirror and saw a wary, hollow-cheeked face. For an instant he did not recognise it as his own.

There was a musty odour. Rising damp, yes, and food smells, but he also caught the whiff of death. He could feel his bowels churning. Should he make the calls, then run away? It was a far cry from the mortuary, with its sweet sickly smell, where he had been taken to identify the corpse of his wife. He didn't *need* to see this body. But then, he hadn't needed to spend the night with Juliet. He clenched his fists, digging the fingernails into his palms. No time to panic, he told himself. Curiosity wouldn't kill him.

Grinding his teeth together in concentration, he shone the lamp into the kitchen. It lit on a sprawled naked figure scarcely recognisable as human. Tears of horror pricked Harry's eyes, as if to protect his

by blurring the horror. He could dimly make out that the arms and legs were stretched out wide, as if trying to escape the torso. A dark mess saturated the chest and throat. The head lay inches away from the shattered neck.

Nothing Juliet might have said could have prepared him for this. Even though he'd seen corpses before, he'd never encountered a scene so unnatural or savage. How could one person have done this to another? Easier to believe that the man on the ground had fallen victim to a wild and pitiless creature. Harry felt vomit rise at the back of his throat as he smelled the dead man's urine. His beard wavered as his hand shook; for a moment it settled upon the face staring up towards the ceiling. His mouth was open as if uttering a soundless plea for mercy. The eyes stared as though they could see through the gates of hell.

For a few seconds, his memory stalled and he could not put a name to the face, for all the familiarity of the bald scalp and black bushy eyebrows. He could not associate it with a living man who harried witnesses, glared at opponents, smirked at jokes cracked by magistrates. But as the horror soaked into his mind, he remembered.

Carl Symons, the prosecutor. Not a man he cared for: a famously ugly loner engaged in a long-term love affair with himself. But not a man who deserved to die like this. No-one deserved to die like this.

Standing outside the kitchen, gazing at the remains of Carl Symons, Harry found himself speaking aloud.

'Who could have hated you so much?'

'So,' Linda Blackwell said half an hour later, 'I've - I've never left the cottage all evening?'

'You've got it,' Juliet told her. 'We all stick to the same story, okay? Then no-one will get the wrong idea.'

'No,' Linda said. She had a dazed expression, as if someone had struck her over the head with a mallet. There was a note of bewilderment in everything she said and her eyes didn't look as though they were focusing properly. When she'd stood up to pour herself a brandy a few moments earlier she'd seemed unsteady on her feet even without the help of the alcohol. Her hands kept trembling.

Understandable, Harry reflected. Since she'd walked through the door ten minutes earlier, she'd found her house wrecked, her next-door neighbour murdered and her boss imploring her to lie to the police about it all. Talk about a night to remember. Wasn't that the title of an old film about the last voyage of the *Titanic*? This evening had turned into their own personal disaster movie.

'Are you all right?' Juliet put an arm round the older woman. 'I realise it's a lot to ask.'

'Yes, yes, I'll be fine,' Linda said, although Harry was not convinced. 'It's just difficult to take it all in. But of course I know what Casper's like. He mustn't get to hear of this.'

'I do think Harry's explanation is a good one,' Juliet said. Her cheeks were flushed, her voice a little louder than usual. The brandy had revived her, as it had Harry. They were relying on that, plus adrenalin, to get them through. 'It's not so far from the truth. We won't be misleading the detective about anything essential, anything connected with the crime. There's no point in causing unnecessary pain.'

Nicely put, Harry thought. Linda knew as well as they did that more than Casper's ego would be dented if the affair became common knowledge. But perhaps everything might work out. So far he had to admit that Linda was living up to her advance billing: a true friend who was willing to massage the truth in order to save their skins.

'Tell me,' Juliet asked. 'Had you realised Harry and I were...?'

Linda looked at him and shook her head. 'I worked out some time ago that you'd found someone

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