

One

Lizzie marched along the unlit towpath. She was angry, hurt. She wiped tears from her eyes and the warm blood that streamed from her swollen nose smeared across her hand and coated her lip.

The town was quieter now; the New Year fireworks had finished and people were starting to queue for taxis home. Not Lizzie though. She'd bolted for the darkness, just to get away, too ashamed to head into the bright lights. The canal, brought in on an aqueduct, curved high above the town, clinging to the steep side of one of the many hills that surrounded Highford, before it disappeared into the valley on the other side and made its way across the Pennines.

The glow of the town-centre streetlights didn't make it this far. The water was black and still, catching only the gleam of the moon. Canal barges were moored in the distance. The smell of their wood smoke in the air told her they were occupied, and another one cruised towards her, its headlight just like a torch beam, but too far away to illuminate her path.

She was alone in the dark.

Then she heard a noise.

She stopped, looked back, strained to hear it again, needing the reassurance that it was just rubbish, like the rustle of a plastic bag blown against a fence. It was more than that though, more like the crunch of footsteps on gravel. She peered into the



darkness, a tingle of fear making her senses keen. Only shadows and silence greeted her.

Lizzie turned around, panic rising, looking for a way off the towpath, but she knew it was pointless. High fences that protected the scrapyard and small workshops that lined the canal kept her from a quick exit, razor wire in rolls across the top. She couldn't go back, she knew that. He'd be waiting for her. She was there because of him.

She quickened her step. Her heels rang loudly on the cobbles, the sound skimming across the water and echoing from the wall on the other side. Dread tightened her chest, made her breath come faster.

All she had to do was keep going. There was a low bridge ahead that would take her to an estate on the other side, built on a hill that rose steeply. She could aim for that and find a way home.

She cursed him. It had been just another stupid argument.

He'd started it, as always, too much booze fuelling his jealousy, the beast that was always lurking. He'd accused her of looking at someone else. The idiot just didn't get it. He was pushing her to leave, with his snide remarks, the put-downs, saying how she'd let herself go, but then accused her of tarting herself up for other men whenever she made an effort. Didn't he get the irony?

She went to wipe more tears from her cheek but stopped herself. Let them fall.

It had been good once. Beautiful Liam. Kind Liam. The flowers. The messages. The lies.

There'd been punches before tonight, digs into her back that made her cough in pain, leaving bruises only he saw. There'd been the late-night beatings, of course, blurred by alcohol,



where she'd called the police but had backed down by the time they arrived, somehow persuaded that he'd change, that the good times made up for the bad.

This time had been different, because it had been in public, outside the pub, people seeing her go down, the stars blurring into white streaks as she went backwards, ending with a thump on the ground of the car park. Another night out ending in pain.

No more. She'd had enough. This time she wasn't going back.

All she could think of was to get away, to keep running. Customers from the pub had blocked his way as she pushed herself up from the ground, but that wouldn't last. No one could take him on; he was too big, too angry, his shoulders hunched, his body tensed, fists clenched, his shouts loud. She'd fled to the sanctuary of the towpath, hoping he wouldn't see where she'd gone.

There was a dark shape ahead, making her slow down, but it resolved into a bench as she got closer. There'd been no more noises. It had been her imagination.

She stopped to sit down. She needed to calm herself and work out what to do. She couldn't go back to his place, but she had clothes there, and jewellery. He had photographs of her, intimate ones. He'd use them against her.

That shouldn't matter. Leaving didn't have to be harder than staying. Get her stuff. Go. Stay out of town.

The streets on the other side of the low bridge weren't far away, lining the higher slope on the other side, the town centre just a swirl of orange lights below. The streets meant safety, but she needed to steady her nerves, to work out her next move. It got dark ahead before it got brighter and there was something about the shadows ahead that made her nervous.



She took a cigarette from her packet, and was about to light it, when there was another noise. A bottle kicked over, rolling along the towpath.

He was following her. He'd seen where she'd gone, would know that she either had to keep going into the darkness or turn back towards him. He'd said too many times that he'd never let her leave him. He was waiting for her in the solid blackness of the towpath, she knew it.

She put her cigarette away, left the bench, increasing her pace as she went, not caring now that the click of her heels echoed like loud cracks along the path. She looked over her shoulder as she ran, straining to see who was there.

The bridge was getting closer. Shadows underneath.

She looked back again. There was movement on the towpath behind her, a dark mass flitting across.

The bridge was just twenty metres away. She was almost at the steps.

She took off her shoes, holding them in her hands like weapons, the heels long and pointed. 'Leave me alone,' she shouted, just to attract attention, her eyes going to the windows of the houses opposite, trying to make someone open a curtain or turn on a security light.

There was no response.

The steps were just there. The sharp stones between the cobbles made her wince, slowed her down, but once on the bridge she could run, make it to the tarmac on the other side. To the streetlights. To where people would see her.

Someone stepped in front of her. She let out a scream, but he rushed her, one hand going to her throat, choking it quiet, his other hand pulling her back by the hair.



She gasped and searched for air, but there was none to be had. She flailed her arms, heard him cry out as a heel dug into his head, and for a moment she thought she was able to fight him off, but she was thrown off-balance.

He pushed her towards the water. Her arms thrashed at him, but she dropped the shoes. Her bag fell off her shoulder and became tangled round her legs. Her feet couldn't get a grip as she tried to push back, the stones tearing at the soles of her feet. He was too strong.

He kept on pushing her until one of her feet was in the air, the ground no longer there, and then she started to fall backwards.

The splash of the freezing water made her gasp in shock, but it was drowned out as the dirty water filled her mouth. She spluttered, fought to keep her head above the water. Her feet scrambled for something to push against, but the canal was too deep.

She floundered up, her head above the surface, and coughed out the water, dirty and acrid, her hair plastered across her face. She snatched a gulp of air before he pushed her down again, holding her this time, pulling her body against the wall of the canal and her head under the surface

She pushed against the stones but she couldn't fight him, the water providing too much resistance. Her mouth was clamped shut. Images flashed into her head. Her mother, raising her on her own, tough but loving. Liam, those early days, tender and doting. The later months. Bullying, spiteful, drunken.

If he would only let her up, she'd try harder. She'd understand him better.

Her arms splashed in the water, tried to reach for his head, but he was using the strength in his arms to hold her under the surface.



Her lungs ached, her lips pressed together. She was tired, cold, couldn't struggle any more.

Just hold on. She needed to breathe, but she had to fight it. Why didn't he let her go? He loved her.

No more struggles. Her strength had gone. Her chest was willing her to take a breath, her brain telling her she needed the oxygen even though she knew what would happen when she opened her mouth.

She gave in.

The water rushed in, cold and dirty. She coughed, her lungs fighting, but there was just more water.

Then there was darkness.



FOUR MONTHS LATER



Two

Dan Grant set down the expert witness report he was reading and massaged his temples.

He lived in one of eleven apartments squeezed into the stone frame of an old wharf building at the end of a cobbled yard. Highford had been built on cotton, a small northern town hidden in a valley, with the skyline once dominated by mills and high chimneys that belched out smoke so thick that the streets became lost in the gloom. Soot coated the lines of terraced houses, the town laid out in tight grids. The cotton industry had died in the eighties and, as the smog cleared, the remains lay scattered across the valley floor as vast empty stone blocks, the windows broken, rough grass sprouting between the cobbles.

Some of the wharf buildings had been resurrected as office spaces; the canals that once fed them, no longer clogged by the queues of barges that had sailed from Liverpool, were now home to canal cruisers and wildlife. Others, like the apartment block Dan lived in, had been converted into modern living spaces, with the old wooden canopy that had once provided shelter for the cotton bales as they were winched inside now broken up by steel balconies.

Dan's apartment gave him a view along the water and a base in the town he'd grown up in. It usually felt like a sanctuary from his work pressures, but the following day he'd be defending a client in a murder trial and his home had turned into an extension



of his office, every surface covered in papers as he reviewed all the evidence he had, obsessed over every detail, worried that he'd missed something crucial. It was only mid-morning and his head felt already clogged by facts.

He went to the window, knowing the view would relax him. The water glistened, the hills in the distance brightening as late spring brought fresh life to the countryside.

His mind went back to a freezing night in January, to the phone call that had started it all.

'Dan Grant,' he'd said, tucking the phone into his shoulder and picking up a bottle of wine.

'This is Highford custody office. We've got someone here who wants someone from Molloy's. We called Mr Molloy but he said he's been on the whiskey and I should call you.'

Dan paused with the corkscrew. 'Just a phone call or an interview?'

'Interview. Peter Box.'

He sighed and put the bottle down with a clink. As a defence lawyer, he was used to the clock meaning little, because crime doesn't happen only during office hours. He answered the phone every time though. If it rang, someone needed him.

'He's been arrested for murder,' the sergeant continued.

That got his attention. A murder case trumped everything. He put the wine back in the fridge and headed out into the night.

DI Murdoch was waiting for him, pacing by the automatic doors, despite the cold winter wind, her police ID swinging from a purple lanyard, her shirt creased, although in Murdoch's case that was probably more to do with lack of an iron than long hours at a desk. She was part of the Major Incident Team, a small



unit that investigated serious cases all over Lancashire, using local officers for the mundane tasks.

Dan liked Murdoch, but it was a feeling borne out of respect rather than affection. She was tough and tenacious, and honest. He suspected her integrity had stopped her being promoted beyond inspector; from Dan's experience, the higher up the ladder he looked, the less he could trust those looking down. He trusted a grafter like Murdoch, though, because she'd always listened to him. A detective who can change direction is one who'll usually end up in the right place.

Murdoch seemed impatient. He hadn't seen Tracy Murdoch for a few months. Her hair was long and dark, but unnaturally so, with an inky tint to it, and her skin showed the ravages of chain-smoking, with lines around her mouth that aged her much more than her fifty years.

Dan followed, acting weary, but he was alert, looking out for any hints that he was not getting the full picture. Whatever Murdoch told him would shape Dan's advice to his client, and he ran through the options in his head.

If the case against him was solid, Dan might tell his client to stay silent. Admitting a serious offence never improves a client's situation and it buys time to think of an excuse. The same went for a weak case, because Dan couldn't allow his client to fill in the gaps for the police. It was those cases in the middle that were the hardest, where his client had a story to tell that he'd need to repeat later, and Dan had to judge whether he should tell it straightaway. A misreading of the case might send him the wrong way, and in a murder case, the stakes were even higher.

'What have you got?' Dan said, as they approached a solid wooden door that led them to the custody suite.

‘You know it’s a murder?’

‘So I was told.’

‘You heard about the woman found by the canal on New Year’s Day? Elizabeth Barnsley? Attacked and drowned.’

Dan had seen the news reports and remembered the name, Lizzie to her friends. He felt a twinge of guilt, because when he’d seen them he’d thought the same as every criminal defence lawyer thought when they heard of a murder: he’d hoped he’d get the case.

‘Why do you think Peter Box did it?’

‘Ah, the evidence.’ She opened the door into the custody suite. ‘Simple. When Lizzie was fighting for her life, she must have used her shoe to defend herself with, because her stiletto heel had blood on it. Peter Box’s blood.’ She held out her hand. ‘After you.’

Dan grimaced at the glare of light. The custody suite used to be dank and dark, with an old wooden desk, high and scarred, opposite a holding cell and by large steel doors, through which the prisoners were brought from the police cars and vans that parked just outside. A gloomy corridor beyond led to a set of stairs that rose into one of the courtrooms in the next building. A recent revamp had made everything brighter and shinier, but the process was still the same: prisoners came in through the large steel doors from the back of a van, usually kicking and screaming; they were catalogued, stamped, and taken into the court the following morning, and the court would send them somewhere else, either back out onto the streets, or into a van with tiny dark windows for a trip along the motorway to the nearest prison. For many, it was a regular occurrence. They might call it a ‘custody suite’ but it was merely the first stop in a small factory

that processed raw material to be repackaged further down the line, a little more dented, and a lot more broken.

‘Any more evidence? Doesn’t sound like much on its own.’ Dan was trying to sound unimpressed, knowing that what lay ahead was a series of interviews meant to wear the suspect down, but a DNA link to the victim was a good start for the police. If Murdoch was hoping to rattle him though, she’d better not keep him up too late. Tiredness increased his desire for the fight.

‘He sought hospital treatment for a wound to his temple. That’s how we traced him, asking around the hospitals, because we knew from the blood on the heel that Lizzie had hit someone hard. And in case you’re wondering about the wound, it’s the same shape as Lizzie’s heel.’

They had arrived at another wooden door, which led to the ‘bubble’, a small enclosure where lawyers were expected to make notes with their knees pressed up against a narrow desk, leaning in towards the tiny holes in the glass screen through which their clients could give instructions.

‘I hope you’re not planning on hanging around to accidentally overhear,’ Dan said. ‘I’ll be wanting the custody footage if I hear anyone outside.’

‘Don’t be a prick, Dan.’

‘Ditto.’ And he went inside, closing the door behind him.

Sounds echoed in the bubble. The rustle of his papers. The shuffle of his shoes. The tap of his pen on the desk. The footsteps along the corridor on the other side of the bubble and then the rattle of keys.

He closed his eyes for a moment and breathed deeply through his nose. Dan had been a defence lawyer for ten years and the nerves around murder cases had long since gone, but

that didn't mean he could relax: whatever advice Dan gave now would affect what happened once the case started going through the courts. Cases were often won and lost in these weary visits to the police station, advice doled out after a long day in the office, the eye on the clock more than on the evidence presented by the police.

Dan opened his eyes as he heard a lock turn. A civilian guard appeared in the far doorway, a chain hanging from her belt, and ushered Peter Box in. She locked the door behind him, leaving them alone together.

It was hard to reconcile Peter with the image of a murderer, someone who would brutally attack a woman on a dark towpath. He was scrawny, an oversized blue paper suit hanging from him, his own clothes seized for forensic examination. The neck gaped wide, his shoulders thin. He rustled as he moved. His eyes were wide and scared.

'Sit down, Peter.'

He looked at Dan for a few seconds before he shook his head. 'No, I'll stay standing.'

'Why?'

He stepped closer to the glass. 'If I sit down, I'll relax and slip up. No, I've got to stay alert. That's why you're here, to protect me, to stop them from getting inside here.' He jabbed the side of his head, close to where some of his hair had been shaved away, revealing a small horseshoe of stitches.

There it was, the anger. Was that fury the last thing Lizzie Barnsley had seen?

Dan closed his folder and leaned back in his chair. Peter was framed against the light in the ceiling, a bright panel, so that he

appeared almost in silhouette, dark and glowering, his hair high and lit up like a halo.

‘Tell me your side of it,’ Dan said. When Peter stayed silent, he held out his hands. ‘I’m not writing anything down and if you decide you want to tell me a different version later, we can pretend we’ve never had this conversation.’

‘You can’t do that.’

‘Who’s going to know? But if I’m staying up late for this, you’ve got to make it good.’

Peter shook his head and wagged his finger. ‘I knew you’d do this. It’s a trick to get me talking.’

‘If you don’t talk to me, I can’t give you proper advice.’

‘I’m not saying anything to you, to them, to anyone.’

‘So why the hell am I here?’

‘To protect me, to be my shield. Otherwise,’ he paused and closed his eyes and clenched his fist before continuing, ‘they’ll do anything to get me talking. I’m not doing that. Not ever.’

Dan looked down and thought of the evening he’d planned for himself: a bottle of wine and a film. ‘How did you get your injury?’ He pointed towards Peter’s head.

‘I don’t have to tell you. Nor them. They’ve got to prove everything, right?’

Dan shrugged his agreement. ‘But if you don’t explain away the obvious, like how your DNA ended up on Lizzie’s shoe and how your head looks like it once had a stiletto heel stuck into it, you’ll be found guilty.’ Dan watched him for a few seconds. ‘Is there an explanation?’

Peter leaned forward, his hands on the small desk in front of the screen between them, his mouth so close to the glass that he



misted it up. 'I'm not talking. Your job is to keep it that way. No tricks. No stunts. Just silence.'

'What about some neutral questions, just for my sake?'

Peter thought about that before he nodded. 'Try me.'

'Do you know the part of the canal where Lizzie was murdered?'

Peter was about to say something when he stopped himself. 'Very clever.'

'I don't understand.'

'They haven't told me where she was murdered, so how can I know whether I go there?'

Dan sighed. 'I'm not your enemy here. Whatever you tell me today stays between us. That's how it works, the client-lawyer privilege.'

Peter considered that and sat down. He softened, and for a moment he looked scared, as if he'd just realised what lay ahead. 'I go there sometimes, mostly at night. I like the darkness. It protects me. You can't know if you've never truly felt the darkness around you, but the sound is clearer, every footstep, every drone of a car, every bit of birdsong.' He raised an eyebrow. 'That surprised you, didn't it, that birds sing at night too? But they do. I hear them, sharp calls from the trees.'

'Why the canal though?'

'It's where the true darkness is. Don't you know that? Go there during the day and what can you hear? Not much, that's what. Then go later, past midnight, and listen again. To the ripples against the banks, where the water settles against the grass growing along the side, or the way it reacts against the moon shining across the surface, pulling the water towards it. You won't be able



to tell that, but I can, because I'm attuned to it. I've been in the darkness all my life.'

Dan had tried to remember all that Peter was saying, because he'd known he'd need to recount it later, to look for some clue as to what was driving him.

'Did you know Lizzie? Were you meeting her there?'

'No, I don't know her. I saw her name in the papers, that's all.'

'Were you there on the night she died?'

He sat back in his chair and looked towards the ceiling. 'I can't talk about that. Not ever. Just get me out of here. I can't go to prison. It wouldn't be right, or fair.'

Dan let out a long breath. This was the worst part of the job, knowing something and trying to keep it from the police, but it was what he'd signed up for. He was a defence lawyer. He believed in the justice system, that everyone deserved a fair trial, because it was about fairness. Sometimes though, when his career choice helped to keep murderers or rapists or child molesters on the streets, things didn't seem quite so noble. If Peter Box had murdered Lizzie Barnsley, and it was due to a compulsion he couldn't control, any success Dan had defending him would always be clouded by the knowledge that he could kill again.

Sometimes, that weighed heavily.

'You've got the right to silence,' Dan said. 'Let the police do their job and see if they can prove it against you. If you won't talk to anyone, that's the best we can do.'

'Don't let me talk. That's all I ask.' Peter turned to bang on the door.



‘Last chance to talk to me before the interviews start.’

‘I’m ready.’

He banged again until the same civilian guard appeared.

Peter bolted through the door and screeched when he got into the corridor, like the sound of a wounded and cornered animal. Someone else thumped on a cell door and shouted.

*

That had been four months ago. Peter had maintained his silence, even during Dan’s visits to the prison, which meant that it was up to Dan to find a defence.

He’d scoured his medical records, hoping to find a history of mental illness, an abnormality that could account for a random attack on an innocent stranger. It wouldn’t secure his release, but it could replace murder with manslaughter and get him transferred to a hospital rather than a prison.

The only entries he’d found were some periods of anxiety years before, and they were wide apart. The first one was around fifteen years ago, and then a few years later.

For reasons Dan couldn’t fathom, Peter Box wanted to go into his trial in the hope that saying nothing would save him. Dan knew that wouldn’t work, because jurors like to have a reason to free a murder suspect, and Peter wasn’t giving them one.

Dan was jolted from his thoughts by the sound of his door buzzer. He wasn’t expecting a visitor and he didn’t want any distractions. When he went to the security panel, he saw it was his boss, Pat Molloy.

Dan frowned. He loved to spend time with Pat, he had been Dan’s boss and friend and mentor since the beginning of his career, but this visit was unusual. Pat had never been to his



apartment. Dan had been to Pat's home often enough, a large old redbrick, ivy on the walls, in a small village nestled in a steep valley a few miles from Highford. Pat had never been the sort of person to hang around other peoples' houses though. He was the genial host, never the happy visitor.

Something wasn't right.

Three

Jayne Brett sat in her old Fiat Punto. Pale blue, with a passenger door that was dented from a crash a long time ago and a passenger window that didn't shut properly.

She was in a car park of a small supermarket. She'd been there for two hours and the rear seat was already covered in drinks cans and wrappers from a fast-food breakfast. She was too tired to laugh at her situation, the so-called glamour of the private investigator. It wasn't how she'd imagined it would be when she first started out. It had been Dan Grant's idea: stick around Highford and he'd feed her work, he'd said.

Yeah, he'd tried his best, but he couldn't manufacture investigations for her. He'd given her work but it was often too far apart, and his scraps didn't pay the rent. She'd touted herself around the other local law firms and it had led to work like this, spying on cheating spouses. It made a change from serving court summonses or injunctions to angry recipients, but she was becoming aware that she shouldn't have drunk so much coffee. Her bladder was full but there was nowhere for her to go discreetly. There was a take-away cup somewhere; she might have to use that and tip it out of the window.

Jayne was helping a law firm in a divorce case, looking for evidence of the husband's adultery, which the wife had started to suspect at the appearance of the usual unsubtle signs: sharper clothes, too much aftershave, an attempt to dye his hair. It was

up to Jayne to complete the picture. She was intruding on someone else's life but she had her own problems: she had no money left on her electricity card and her rent was two weeks overdue.

Jayne had been following the husband for a week, and the most useful information she'd gathered was that he didn't like to go home and spent long hours walking in the park instead, staring straight ahead or gazing into the flowerbeds. Whatever else was going on in his private life, he wasn't a happy man.

Then it came. Last night he was supposed to be travelling to a work conference, an overnight trip. Jayne had expected to merely follow him to a railway station, but instead he'd left his car in the supermarket car park and rushed into an apartment building opposite.

Jayne had got some pictures of him entering the building, but it was dark and she couldn't risk her flash going off. She could have waited all night, but the thought of sitting in her car as the husband got warm and cosy on the other side of the bedroom curtains hadn't appealed to her. She'd got up early and waited instead, except she had to keep on wiping her windscreen as she misted it up with her breath.

The early start was killing her, especially on a Sunday. The effects of the night before clung on to her though. She'd gone out for a drink after her brief vigil, just a few drinks at one of the pubs in town, sitting in a corner and watching the locals get more drunk as they danced and sang to the efforts of an eighties cover band. There were a few of her conquests among them, men who'd filled a need, some of whom she remembered, although she'd never sought a second date.

She sat up when the door of the apartment building opened and he emerged, checking around first. He was wearing different



clothes and carrying a small bag. Jayne raised her camera and got some shots.

A woman emerged behind him, her dark hair tousled from bed, and they kissed, passionately and at length. She was wearing a silk dressing gown and his hand went behind her, to pull her close.

More clicks of the camera.

Jayne checked the images on the display screen. She had enough now. It was time to pass on the bad news. Or good news, depending on how it was received.

As she drove away, she checked her petrol gauge. Nearly empty. She hoped the firm would pay for her work promptly, because she was down to the dregs in her account and it was looking like food or petrol were her only choices.

Jayne sighed. Her life needed to amount to more than this. In her mid-twenties, she shouldn't be scruffing around a small northern town. It had been partly her choice and partly circumstances, but she was starting to feel restless. She had once expected more from her life.

Her thoughts turned to Dan, as they often did.

He'd been there for her when she was at her worst point, so it was natural that her thoughts drifted to him when she was alone. She'd been a client once, accused of murdering a violent boyfriend. Somehow, they struck up a bond, but she wondered whether she should sever it. She was a different person now. Whatever had gone before was just that: gone.

She thought of Dan too often, when she felt aimless, or lonely, her flat cold and empty, her bed only ever filled with fleeting encounters, just flurries of limbs and false affection.



It wasn't the brevity she minded, she had needs to fulfil as much as the men who passed through, but sometimes she missed having a companion. Someone to trust.

All that lay ahead for now was the report she had to write. The suspicious wife would want something to confront her wandering husband with when he returned home with tales of his non-trip out of town.

As she made her way home, she wished she had enough fuel to just drive and keep going. After all, what would she be leaving behind? A small apartment. Debts. A business that just about kept her afloat. She could drive over the hill and find a new life. Somewhere brighter, with more hope. Highford seemed to be strangling her somehow, the hills that surrounded it like a barrier. It kept the wider world from coming in, so that the residents knew only each other and too many had no thoughts of ever leaving.

She turned down the hill to begin her journey across town.

Jayne knew she wouldn't leave. Not yet anyway. The insularity of the town was her protection, her sanctuary.

Damn you, Dan Grant.

Four

Dan pressed the buzzer and waited by the door for Pat Molloy to come up. He hadn't seen his boss for a couple of weeks – he'd been caught up in his own cases and Pat had been working from home a lot more.

When the lift door opened, Pat stepped out slowly, coughing, a large brown envelope in his hand. He looked round, as if he wasn't sure where to go, before he spotted Dan in his doorway. Outlined against the lights further along the corridor, Pat looked bent with age, his walk more of a shuffle.

'This is a rare treat,' Dan said, although there was no levity in his voice, shocked by the change in his boss.

He realised how little he'd seen of Pat recently. They'd both been busy, and whenever they came across each other, Pat was in a suit. On a Sunday morning, Pat was more casual, in corduroys and a cashmere v-neck, and his frame seemed more fragile.

'Daniel, we need to talk.'

Dan showed Pat into the living room, still littered with papers from Peter Box's case.

As he took them in, Pat said, 'Are you all ready for tomorrow?'

'As much as I'll ever be.'

'You're not worried? Your first solo murder trial?'

Dan gave a small laugh. He didn't need to be reminded of that.

He was a solicitor, normally found in the Magistrates Court, but he'd acquired the qualification to conduct trials in the Crown Court, once the sole preserve of barristers, the wig-and-gown brigade. It wasn't Dan's first murder trial, but it was the first without a Queen's Counsel to handle the serious stuff. Peter had wanted Dan to do it alone, one of the few things he was specific about.

Dan tried to dismiss the pressure he felt. 'What have you always said, that a murder is just an assault with one less witness? I've never forgotten it.'

'This is different, though.'

'Why's that?'

'I'll come to that in a bit. There's something else I've got to mention first.' Pat looked down, and for the first time Dan could remember, he looked sad. No, more than that; he looked miserable.

'Pat? You all right?'

Pat didn't respond straightaway. Instead, he looked towards the window and took some deep breaths.

Eventually, he turned back towards Dan. Gone was the usual gleam in his eye, the twinkle of mischief. In its place was a grey-ness. There were dark shadows under his eyes and his silver hair was dishevelled.

'There's only one way to say this, so I'm going to spit it out,' he said. 'I've got cancer.'

The shock hit Dan like a punch in the gut. He sat down, open-mouthed.

He'd worked for Pat his entire career. When he was still a young trainee, Pat had knocked the edges off his idealism, teaching him the realities of being a criminal lawyer, and all with a touch of panache. Once he qualified, Pat taught him his best



tricks, the wise words of a seasoned professional. Pat had been more than a boss. He'd been his mentor, his teacher, a splash of colour in an increasingly drab world, with his exaggerated mannerisms and his attempts to play at being the small-town eccentric, in red braces and bright ties, his fedora keeping his head warm in winter. Dan knew it was fake, just a way of attracting attention to get the clients, or a way of distracting the local magistrates from the cold realities of the evidence, but after a while everyone becomes the person they pretended to be.

There was none of that extravagance now. Pat's pallor was grey, his eyes heavy. Dan cursed himself for not noticing that perhaps his suits hung a little looser than normal, or that his shirt collars gaped too much.

Dan swallowed before he spoke. 'How bad?'

'Can it ever be good?' He shrugged. 'I don't know. I've not been good for a while. You've heard me wheezing and getting out of breath.'

'That might be just you getting old. Come on, Pat, it can't be cancer.'

'They've done all the tests. It's lung cancer.'

Dan put his head back and blew out. Pat meant so much to him.

'I know what you're thinking,' Pat said. 'How long? They think they've caught it early but that depends on how fast it spreads. It's all those years locked in small rooms with clients smoking like it was about to be taken away from them. An occupational hazard.'

'Jeez, Pat, I don't know what to say. You need to look after yourself, fight this thing. You know I'll cover for you if you need to take time off or . . . whatever.'



Pat smiled, but it was thin and watery. 'It's not just that. It's Eileen.'

'What do you mean?'

Pat leaned forward. 'She says I should retire now, that I've got just the one shot at life and, if what I have left isn't long, I shouldn't be spending it at the office. I should be at home with my family. And she's right.'

'What are you going to do?'

Pat chuckled, despite himself, although it quickly broke into a cough. 'For once in my life, I'm going to do as I'm told. I'm going to go home and fight this.'

'I don't know what to say.'

'You don't have to say anything. My retirement was always going to happen. I've just been forced into a decision a bit earlier than I'd planned. You can ask me the question, though, because it doesn't have to be only about me.'

'What question?'

'When do I go?' Pat held up his hand as Dan started to object. 'It's only natural that you'll worry about your job.'

Dan looked out of the window as he tried to process everything he was being told. He had a murder trial starting the following day, his first one on his own. Now, his future seemed suddenly uncertain.

'The end of the month is the answer.'

That made Dan turn round. 'So soon?'

'I don't know how long I've got left. I'm going to write to my clients, perhaps have a party or two, say goodbye to a few special people, and then I close the doors.'

'And that's it?'

Pat smiled. It was weary but there was some sparkle to his eyes for the first time. 'There is another way.'

'Which is?'

'Molloys could be yours.'

'*What?* Me, buy the firm? I can't afford it, for a start.'

'I don't mean the building. I own that; it's my pension and my children's inheritance. If I close the firm, I'll sell the place. But you could carry it on. Just pay me rent, and when I'm gone, pay it to Eileen. The rest of the firm is free of charge.'

'How do you mean, free of charge?' Dan scratched his head. 'This is all going too fast.'

'Think about it, Daniel. What do I actually own? Some goodwill from some of Highford's criminals? That's not the same as a proper client list. I've got no repeat contract work or a cabinet full of civil claims waiting to be cashed in. No, we've got the regular churn of criminals, most cases wrapped up and billed within a few months. There's no value in that, because the punters swap and change depending on how they're feeling and who's available when they make the call, or how their last attempt to avoid jail went.' He held out his hands. 'No, you've earned the firm. If you want it, I've got just one condition.'

'Which is what?'

'You keep the name of the firm as it is. If I'm going to die' – and he held up his hand – 'I'll die, I know that, because we all do, but if I die soon I want to leave a legacy, and my name on the window is just that.' He looked down for a moment. 'It's not much, I know, some gold-edged lettering on a window in a small grey town, but it's all I've got.'

'How can I think about that right now?'

'You'll need to see the books.'

‘Pat, stop it.’

‘I’m serious. Do you think I’d joke about this?’

‘It’s a big decision.’

Pat winked, some colour coming back into his cheeks. ‘Your sentiment didn’t last long.’ He put the envelope he’d been carrying on the table. ‘I’ve printed these off for you already. The balance sheets for the last ten years, and the profit and loss accounts. You can see how it grows and shrinks, perhaps even work out how to run the firm more cheaply.’

Dan stared at it. ‘Are you sure about this? Just handing it over, you mean?’

‘I’m not being that generous. If you don’t want it, you’ll leave and get a job somewhere else. Who’ll carry it on then? I’ll just end up closing the door and that will be it, my name scraped from the window and you’ll be after a redundancy payment. You’ll have earned it too. I’ll sell the building and live off the proceeds, but I want more than that.’

Dan picked up the envelope. ‘Why today, though? I’ve got a murder trial starting tomorrow, and now you throw this at me.’

‘I’ve had a long weekend with Eileen, and I made her some promises. This was going to come, cancer or no cancer. It’s just been brought forward.’

Dan stared at the envelope for a few seconds before saying, ‘When do you need an answer?’

‘By the end of the week.’

‘So soon?’

‘I’m going at the end of the month. I need to know whether I’m putting a FOR SALE sign outside.’ He smiled, more warmth there now. ‘Have a bottle of wine tonight. Think about it.’

'I might do now. I didn't want to go into court tomorrow stinking of booze, I've got the judge on my back as it is, but then you hit me with this.'

'Ah yes, the hopeless cause. How's it going?'

'It's a strange one. He won't talk to me. He stayed silent during the police interviews and won't talk about the case with me. All I can do is attack the prosecution case.'

'Have you got anything to go at?'

Dan lifted the report that he'd been reading earlier. 'The lab used for the DNA result got in trouble last year. A couple of employees were manipulating blood tests. They were caught and went to prison, so I've got an expert to describe how easy it is for DNA samples to become contaminated, talking about that lab in particular. He even found a couple of errors with the paperwork.'

'That's something then.'

'But not enough. We needed to get our own testing done. Because if Peter Box is innocent, if that blood on her shoe isn't his, the prosecution case crumbles.'

'Have you done that?'

'Peter won't co-operate. He's a man saying nothing, with an injury to his head that looks pretty heel-shaped. The jurors will want more than that to find him not guilty.'

'You can only advise, Daniel, not lead. How are you finding it, doing it all on your own?'

'Challenging, but good to be in charge, to do it all my way.'

Pat pointed at the envelope. 'There's your answer. If you want to keep it that way, make my place yours. I'm not just here about the firm, though.'

'Go on.' Dan's voice was filled with caution.

‘There is one stain on my career, which is another reason why I came today. I’m sorry about this, and I wasn’t going to tell you, but it’s about your trial.’

‘Peter Box?’

‘Yes.’ Pat leaned forward. ‘Do you remember Sean Martin?’

‘*The* Sean Martin? How could I forget?’

‘There is something about that case I haven’t told you, not told anyone, but I want you to know. This could be a long story. It might be early, but I’ll need a drink for this.’