

**YOUR
DEEPEST
FEAR**

David Jackson

ZAFFRE

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*This one's for Peter,
Who deserves much more*

1

The regrets will come later.

She will wish she had responded to the light more quickly. The tiny blinking light, insistently proclaiming the reason for its existence.

But then she will reason about this, and accept that it would have made no difference. The outcome would have been just as devastating.

If she had come home a day earlier, though – yes, that might have been a completely different matter. Or if she had not gone at all. She hadn't really wanted to go. If the situation had been happier here, she wouldn't have left. Either way, she would have been here to take the call, and maybe, just maybe, she could have intervened.

But then she will realise that real happiness would have meant not needing to take the call in the first place. He would have been here, with her.

She will wish she had tried much harder with him. She will wonder if she surrendered him to his fate too easily.

Those thoughts will haunt her for ever.

But before the regrets will come the anger.

And before the anger will come the tears.

Sara Prior smiles when the house comes into view. It always has this effect on her.

It's a small detached cottage on the outskirts of Halewood, long neglected by the previous owners when she and Matthew bought it. She visualised the potential as soon as she saw it. Its isolation worried her a little, but Matthew craved the peace and quiet.

The house can hardly be called grand or even noteworthy in appearance, but it is her home. *Their* home. She and Matthew put a lot of effort into getting this place into shape. Hour upon hour each evening. They made it perfect.

Matthew is here. He is everywhere in this house. He is in the doors he stripped, the floorboards he mended, the wiring he installed. When they met, he knew nothing of DIY. When he left, he had become an expert.

When he left . . .

She sighs. Wishes he were inside the house as he always used to be, waiting excitedly at the window for her return, then racing to the front door to greet her, all wide eyes and daft grin.

One day soon, she thinks, it'll be like that again. If only he could use his DIY skills to fix himself.

She parks the car on the patch of gravel in front of the house and gets out. She opens up the boot and takes out her case. Cabin baggage, to avoid having to wait at the airport carousels.

She locks the car and drags the case to the house. Finds her key and opens up. Picks up her post and free newspapers from behind the door.

Inside, the smell is familiar and welcoming. A Molton Brown diffuser on the sideboard in the hallway. Next to that, a light on the telephone is winking at her, notifying her that she has messages on the answering machine.

They can wait. They will be automated sales calls, or reminders to pay bills. That's all they ever are.

She leaves her case in the hall and proceeds to the kitchen. Tea is her top priority. The lukewarm brown muck they served her on the flight didn't qualify.

While the kettle boils, she takes off her coat and opens her mail. Junk, mostly, but also two tickets for *West Side Story* at the Liverpool Empire. A surprise for Matthew. She expects him to say no, but she's going to try anyway. He likes musicals. And if he does say no, she'll find someone else to go with her.

No. She won't do that. It's Matthew or nobody. If he says no, she'll give the tickets away. That's the truth of it.

Her father wouldn't understand. He has never hidden his dislike of Matthew. He regards her husband as weak and spineless. He wanted her to marry someone more stereotypically macho.

She nearly did, of course. It wasn't to be.

She thinks that sometimes these things happen for a reason. Good can come out of bad. Matthew was the good.

'Why are you even going back there?' her father asked last night. 'He left you. You could come back to live with us. Or I'll buy you a place of your own. What has Liverpool got to offer you now?'

She made it clear to him that she has no intention of moving back to Copenhagen. She has her own life now. She likes it here.

Besides, this is where Matthew lives, and she's not giving up on him just yet. Tomorrow she will call round to his place with the tickets. She will talk to him, because she thinks that's what he really needs. It has been four months now, and she still doesn't fully understand why he felt the need to move out.

She thinks he needs her. She brought him out of himself. She taught him about life, about living. She gave him purpose and happiness. She even schooled him in sex.

And then something happened to him. Something he won't talk about.

She has made it her mission to find out what it was.

She drinks her tea and tries to recall the contents of her freezer. She doesn't really want to go shopping. The four-day trip to Copenhagen has drained her. She knew it would, which is why she put it off for so long. Her parents had wanted her there for Christmas and New Year, but there was no way she was going to be so far away from Matthew then. The festive period is a trigger for so many to commit suicide.

No shopping today, she decides. I'll make do.

She heads back into the hall. As she reaches for her case, she notices the blinking white light on the phone again.

She reaches across and jabs the play button on the phone's base station. A voice tells her that she has three new messages.

She lays the bag down and starts to unzip it.

The first message plays. It's the tail end of a recording informing her of the benefits of a boiler replacement scheme.

She shakes her head, then starts pulling her dirty clothes out of the case.

Second message: the gas company, asking for the householder to call them back. Their phone number is announced twice, just in case she has forgotten how to replay messages.

She makes a mental note to pay the gas bill. Gathers up her clothes. Walks back towards the kitchen.

Halts when she hears the next voice.

What stops her is not just that it's Matthew's voice, but also that his words are being fired at her in a tone of sheer unadulterated terror.

'Sara! Remember! Victoria and Albert. All I can say. They're here! They're— Sara, I love you. I—'

It is interrupted by a fumbling noise, and then what sounds like the beginning of a blood-curdling scream . . .

And then the line goes dead.

2

Sara turns slowly on her heel, the clothes still clutched in arms that are now dotted with goose pimples.

What the hell was that?

And then she is flinging the washing onto the floor, racing to the phone, scanning the infernal device for the buttons that will make it replay the latest message.

She stabs out what she thinks is the correct sequence, praying that it doesn't delete anything. She holds her breath . . .

'Sara! Remember! Victoria and Albert. All I can say. They're here! They're— Sara, I love you. I—'

And then the noises again. As though someone snatched the phone out of his hand. And as though they . . .

They were hurting him. Someone was hurting my Matthew!

Her brain is filled with questions about what the message might mean, but right now is not the time to dissect it. The pleading in Matthew's voice overrides all that. Now is the time to respond, to act.

She plucks the receiver from its cradle. Flicks through her contacts until she finds Matthew. Presses the call button.

She listens to the maddening chirrup as Matthew's phone rings.

'Come on, come on!' she urges.

But she gets no answer.

She ends the call as another thought occurs to her. She replays Matthew's message again, but this time she is more interested in what the answering machine has to say about it.

Just after ten o'clock this morning. That's when the call came in. And now it's – she checks her watch – past two o'clock.

That's four fucking hours!

She races back to the kitchen. Grabs her coat and keys. Dashes out of the house and leaps into the car.

As she drives, she makes use of the hands-free to call Matthew's number. Again and again she calls him, and each time she fails to get a response.

This is bad, she thinks. This is so, so wrong.

I knew it! I knew I shouldn't have gone to fucking Copenhagen. What the hell has Matthew got himself involved in?

She breaks all the speed limits, and yet still the journey to Matthew's house seems to take far too long. Why did he have to move all the way to a shitty little terraced dump in Aintree?

She knows the answer to that one. It wasn't just because it was all he could afford. It wasn't, as he claimed, that it was closer to his place of work in Bootle. It was because it put distance between them. That was the real reason.

When she finally screeches to a halt, she leaps out of the car and dashes up to the white PVC front door. She rings the bell, pounds the knocker.

There is no response.

She drops to her knees, flips open the letter box and looks inside.

It is eerily quiet in there. No sign of life whatsoever.

She brings her mouth to the letter slot. 'Matthew! Are you in there? Come to the door!'

Again nothing.

And now she's not sure what to do. Call the police? Get them to knock the door down?

Maybe. But first . . .

The house stands next to a beauty parlour, shuttered and closed now as it's a Sunday. On the other side is an alleyway.

Trust Matthew to pick somewhere without immediate neighbours!

Sara moves down the alley to the rear of the house. She tries the yard door. It's locked.

She looks up and down the alleyway. Nobody watching. The other buildings visible here are mostly shops, their walls topped by broken glass or barbed wire. Sara walks away from Matthew's wall, turns.

And then a sudden sprint. A leap. Her hands just manage to grasp the top edge of the wall. She clings there as she walks her feet up the brick wall, wishing she were wearing jogging bottoms and trainers instead of the smart trousers and shoes she still has on.

She swings one leg over the wall, straddling it for a second, then brings the other leg over and drops down on the other side.

Matthew's backyard is tiny. Mostly concrete, but with a rectangle of lawn so small it seems pointless.

The house appears lifeless. Sara steps up to the kitchen window and peers inside.

It's a wreck.

Many of the drawers and cupboards are open. Much of their content – cutlery, tins, household cleansers – has been pulled out and is littering the tiled floor. Boxes of cereal have been tipped out onto the counter.

Sara continues up the yard, stopping at the window looking into the living room. It's just as chaotic in there. Cushions have been sliced open. Books have been taken from the shelves and tossed to the floor. Pictures have been ripped out of their frames.

She turns to the back door, and that's when she knows for certain that the madness inside wasn't caused by Matthew in a fit of rage.

One of the panes of glass in the door has been smashed.

Someone broke in to this house.

Sara feels the goosebumps returning. She reaches for the door handle. Turns it. The door opens.

She steps inside, hears the fragments of glass crunching beneath her feet. She pauses there for a second, listening, alert to any signs of danger.

She looks again at the devastation in the kitchen. The freezer door has been left open, and the appliance is emitting an irritating beep as it complains about its temperature. On the floor in front of it is a pile of boxes and packets of food, sitting in a puddle from a bag of melted ice cubes.

The sink is full of a mixture of pasta and rice and flour, the empty bags tossed aside onto the draining board.

Sara sees a knife block on the counter. She moves quickly across to it and slides out the biggest knife it contains.

Her heart pounding, she exits the kitchen. In the hallway are two doors to her right and a stairway to her left. She steps quietly up to the first door, which is partly open. It leads to the living room she observed from the yard, so she knows there's nobody in there. All the same, she pushes the door open and gives it a quick once-over.

The next room is a different matter. Again, the door is slightly ajar, and she can hear nothing from inside, but she's taking no chances.

She brings her eyes to the narrow gap, checking for moving shadows on the other side. As she does this, she searches her memory in an effort to build a mental map of the room before exposing herself to possible danger.

She flattens herself against the wall so as not to present a clear target in the doorway. Knife tightly clutched in one hand, she nudges the door with the other.

It opens more swiftly than she expects, but then stops with a thud, followed by the clatter of objects tumbling to the floor.

Shit!

She risks a glance inside. Then another. Finally she steps in, knife at the ready.

There is nobody here.

Sara sees that the door has hit a small table that had been shifted away from its usual position. The collision caused a lamp and wooden ornament to topple to the floor, but that's the least of the turmoil in here. Matthew has an extensive collection of CDs, collected over many years, but Sara can see that every CD case that once sat on the shelves has been opened and flung onto the floor.

Sara stares down at the heap. Sees album covers that unreel threads of memory in her mind. Those were good times. Seeing all those shared songs tossed away like this brings a lump to her throat.

But now is not the time for sentimentality. There may be people in this house. People who have heard the noise she has just made, and who are now awaiting their opportunity to break her skull open.

She leaves the room and approaches the staircase. Slow, careful steps.

She pauses there for a few seconds, listening intently. Then she begins her ascent, her gaze glued to the landing above.

When she reaches the top of the stairs, she halts and performs another scan. The door to the small bathroom is wide open, and she can see that nobody is in there. That's one room down, two to go.

The door to the rear bedroom – the spare one that Matthew uses as an office – is fully closed; she can't get in there without making further noise.

She decides to leave that room till last.

She treads softly along the landing. When she gets to the front bedroom, she takes some deep but quiet breaths, then repeats her earlier manoeuvre of squashing herself against the wall while she pushes the door open. It opens with a slight creak, but there is no sudden rush of intruders towards her.

She slides silently into the room. Sees that it's like the others. Sheets and mattress on the floor; clothes dragged out of the wardrobes; drawers tipped upside down.

So, on to the final room.

She retraces her steps along the landing, then stares long and hard at the closed door. She presses her ear to the varnished wood, but hears nothing on the other side. She stares at it again, then grabs the handle and takes some deep breaths.

Here we go, then.

She turns the handle, pushes the door open.

Straight ahead is Matthew's computer desk. The drawers have been turned out, and there is no sign of his laptop.

Sara leaps into the room, knife arm in front of her. She is ready. If they are here, she is ready to fight, to maim, to—

No.

She is not ready for this.

Please, God, not this.

Matthew is here.

She goes to him. Puts the knife down, freeing up hands that she doesn't know what to do with in this situation. She doesn't know how to help. This is beyond anything she has ever experienced, and she has experienced much.

Matthew is on the floor. He is naked and spreadeagled.

And dead. Very dead. She has seen enough of death to know that.

For Matthew, it is probably a blessing. He has been nailed to the floor. Huge steel nails have been driven through his arms, his legs and even his genitals. Rivulets of bright blood have coursed across his pallid flesh and pooled beneath him. His mouth is open, as if in a final agonising scream, and his eyes have rolled back in their sockets.

He must have suffered greatly. There is no pretending otherwise.

'Matthew,' she says. 'I am so sorry. So sorry.'

She reaches a hand to his face and closes his eyelids. And then she cries. And when it hits her yet again that tears accomplish nothing, she digs deep and finds the anger, the drive, the essence of survival, and she picks up the knife and stabs it again and again into the floorboards.

3

Detective Sergeant Nathan Cody isn't certain how he's going to play this, but he's willing to give it a try.

He pulls up behind one of the many marked police vehicles, then gets out of his car and strides quickly along the street. When he gets to the house, he sees the figures of Webley and Ferguson, familiar even through their white protective Tyvek suits.

'What took you so long?' says Webley. 'We were beginning to think you'd decided not to bother.'

Megan Webley gets away with quite a lot when it comes to her sergeant. It has nothing to do with Cody being a soft touch, and everything to do with the fact that she was once the love of his life. That was years ago, but since she and Cody were thrown together again on the Major Incident Team they have endured much turmoil, both physical and emotional. Through choice or not, bonds have been re-formed and continue to strengthen. Most of the time, Cody chooses to bury his head in the sand about it, but sometimes his strength of feeling for Webley surprises him.

'Had a few matters to attend to,' says Cody, although he knows it's a crap answer that isn't going to convince anyone. 'The boss here?'

Webley eyes him with suspicion. 'She's inside. Are you okay?'

'Yeah, fine. Why shouldn't I be?'

Webley exchanges glances with the towering figure of Neil 'Footlong' Ferguson next to her.

'No reason,' she says.

It occurs to Cody that this isn't going as planned. 'You been in there yet?'

‘No. Weird one, apparently. Bloke’s been nailed to his floor.’

‘Jesus.’

‘No,’ says Footlong. ‘They used a cross for him. Similar idea, though.’

‘Who is he?’

‘Name’s Matthew Prior. He lived here alone, separated from his wife. She’s the one who found the body and called it in.’

‘Possible crime of passion, you think?’

Footlong shrugs. ‘Maybe. Her story is she was on a flight into Manchester when it happened. Doesn’t mean she didn’t get someone else to do it for her, though. I always get suspicious when people have airtight alibis, forgive the pun.’

Cody nods. ‘Right. I’ll get suited up, then.’

He starts to walk away. Halts when he hears the bellow behind him.

‘Cody!’

He turns around again. Sees the stocky figure of DCI Stella Blunt coming out of the house towards him.

‘What are you doing here?’ she asks him.

Cody contorts his features into his best look of innocence. ‘Ma’am?’

‘Don’t play games with me,’ she says. She turns to Webley and Ferguson. ‘You two, get inside and do something useful.’

Cody sees how his two colleagues look at him before reluctantly abandoning him to his fate. Their faces hold the promise of a barrage of questions later.

Blunt waits until they have disappeared, then pulls down the hood of her white suit. ‘I thought I left you with plenty of things to get on with.’

‘You did, but I thought you could do with me here.’

‘You did, did you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Cody, we’ve already had this conversation. I thought I made it perfectly plain that you are not to go anywhere near crime scenes involving fatalities until I give you the all clear.’

‘Ma’am, I’m not a child. If I didn’t think I could cope with this, I’d say so.’

‘No. That’s just it. You wouldn’t say so. You’d keep it to yourself, just like you always do. You have just returned from leave after a pretty traumatic ordeal that landed you in hospital.’

‘It was precautionary, that’s all. There was nothing wrong with me.’

‘I think the doctors would disagree. By all accounts you were in pretty bad shape. And anyway, it’s not the physical injuries I’m talking about.’ She taps her own temple. ‘It’s what’s happening up here that concerns me.’

‘I’ve been through worse.’

‘Yes, I know you’ve been through worse, and that’s my point. Anyone experiencing what you’ve been through cannot be unaffected. I have a duty of care, Nathan. Much as I’d like my best detectives on this case, I have to think about their welfare too. I am not risking causing you permanent mental damage.’

‘So what does that mean? You’re keeping me tied to a desk?’

‘Of course not. I want your assistance. I just don’t want to put you slap bang in the middle of a scene that might turn you into a gibbering wreck.’

‘For how long? I mean, how long will it take for you to believe I can do my job properly?’

‘Again, we’ve discussed this. Have you booked yourself in yet?’

Cody looks away. Taps his foot.

‘Not yet. I’ve been a little busy with all that paperwork you’ve given me.’

‘I thought as much. Good job I’ve done it for you, then, isn’t it?’

He turns to her again. ‘What? Ma’am, I do not need to see a shrink.’

‘Yes, Nathan, you do. That’s exactly what you need if you’re to remain on my team. Your first session is tomorrow morning, nine o’clock.’

‘*First* session? How many—?’

‘Her practice is on Rodney Street. The street where you live. That means there’s no excuse not to be there. The force uses her a lot for this type of thing, and she doesn’t come cheap, so if I find out you’ve skipped the meeting, you’ll be out on your ear. Is that understood?’

Cody looks into the distance again. He’s fuming now. But he’s been given little choice.

‘And until then? How do I occupy myself while you’re all in there doing what I should be doing?’

‘Don’t be petulant, Nathan. It’s not an attractive quality in anyone. You can help to organise the house-to-house. After that, you can head back to the station and interview the victim’s wife.’

‘Great,’ says Cody.

Blunt takes a step closer to Cody and lowers her voice. ‘Look, Nathan, I’m not doing this as a way of getting rid of you. That’s the last thing I want. But you and I both know that this was always on the cards. You have to admit that your behaviour can be a little . . . *erratic* at times. Do this for me, get yourself signed off as fit for duty, and I won’t bother you again. Deal?’

Cody looks at her. ‘Fine,’ he says. ‘Whatever it takes.’

But he’s still angry.

And more than a little scared.

4

‘First impressions, Rory?’

Rory Stroud turns his vast bulk towards Blunt, his inquisitor. ‘I can do a mean Cary Grant. *Judy, Judy, Judy*. What do you think?’

‘Don’t give up the day job. Besides, Cary Grant never actually said those words.’

‘He didn’t?’

‘No. Now can we stick to impressions of the case in hand, please?’

‘For you, Stella, anything.’

Webley can tell that behind Stroud’s face mask he is wearing a huge grin. The forensic pathologist is famed for his way with the ladies.

Stroud waves a gloved hand towards the corpse on the floor. ‘Not a pleasant way to go. Someone has made damn sure this fellow didn’t die quickly.’

‘How quickly?’

Stroud sucks air noisily through his mask. ‘Hard to say. Could have been hours. You see the way most of the nails have been driven through the fleshy edges of the limbs, rather than the head or torso? That suggests the attackers were trying to avoid hitting major arteries and internal organs. They wanted him alive and in pain.’

‘So what killed him?’

‘Again, not easy to say before I do the PM. There’s a lot of blood here, so could be exsanguination. It’s also perfectly possible that his heart just gave out. His system would have been under an immense amount of stress. To be honest, I think he would have been praying for a way out.’

Webley keeps her eyes on the body. She has seen some shocking sights, but this one is way up in the rankings. How could anyone do something like this to another human being?

Blunt says, 'I know how you're going to answer, but for the sake of completeness I'm going to ask you anyway. Do you have anything to contribute about time of death?'

Stroud laughs. 'Let it never be said that you aren't thorough, my dear Stella. You know the pathologist's standard response to that, yes?'

'It's engraved on my heart. Find out when the victim was last seen alive, find out when the body was discovered, and voila, the time of death was somewhere between the two. Are you going to surprise me today?'

'Depends. Am I right in thinking that this man's wife received a phone call from him this morning?'

'A message was left on her answering machine at about ten o'clock.'

'And she found the body at . . .?'

'About two forty-five.'

'Then my answer is no – I am not going to surprise you. Those timings are consistent with my preliminary assessment of the deceased.'

Blunt sighs heavily. 'What about the number of assailants?'

'Difficult to say. The house looks like a rugby team has rampaged through it, but it's possible that one person could have done it all. You see these marks on the victim's head? If they were the initial blows, they may have been enough to subdue him, perhaps even render him unconscious. Once the first few nails were pounded in, he'd have been unable to move.'

Blunt stares again at the body. 'Poor bugger.'

Stroud nods. 'Problem I've got now is unsticking him from the floor so I can get him back to the mortuary.'

'Good luck with that,' says Blunt.

Webley watches as her boss scans the room. She wonders what's going through Blunt's mind. All those years of expertise brought to bear on her surroundings. What is she seeing? What conclusions is she already drawing?

Webley has huge admiration for Blunt. More so since she learned about her greatest vulnerability. Even Cody doesn't know about that particular skeleton in Blunt's closet.

Although something's going on between the pair of them, she thinks. Why was Cody prevented from coming into the house? And where is he now?

Blunt moves carefully across the stepping plates to another white-suited figure. 'Dev? What can you tell me?'

Dev Chandra, the crime scene manager, turns to Blunt. 'On the face of it, it seems that someone was looking for something and wanted it very badly. Clear signs of a break-in through the back door, the ransacking of the house, and then the torture of the victim, as though they were desperate to get information out of him. That said, appearances can be deceptive.'

'Anything missing, as far as you can tell?'

Chandra gestures towards the office desk. 'The computer. We can't find that anywhere. Without a full inventory of the house contents, though, it's difficult to know what else might have been taken. We're searching it as best we can, but as you've seen, the place is a tip.'

'I understand. What about forensics?'

'Tons of it. Fibres, blood spatters, fingerprints, footprints, DNA – you name it. What we don't know yet is who they belong to. Could be the attackers, could be the victim, could be the wife, could be previous visitors. There is one standout item, though.'

'Which is?'

'Walk this way.'

Chandra leads Blunt out of the room. Webley follows.

'Here,' says Chandra. He pulls out a torch, switches it on and focuses its beam on the bannister post. 'See?'

Webley shuffles up behind Blunt and cranes forward for a closer look.

'A fingerprint,' says Blunt. 'In blood.'

'Certainly is,' says Chandra. 'If it's Prior's own blood from the recent attack, then there's no way he could have left the print here.'

‘Is it a good print?’

‘It’s partial, but it looks pretty well-defined to me. Let’s just hope we can match it up to a known criminal.’

Blunt straightens up. ‘Thanks, Dev. Good work. Keep me informed.’

When Chandra has returned to his evidence collection duties, Blunt turns to Webley.

‘Seen enough?’ she asks. ‘I for one could do with some fresh air.’

Webley nods, then follows Blunt downstairs and out of the house. They both pull off their hoods and face masks.

‘Okay, Megan,’ says Blunt. ‘You’ve seen what I’ve seen. What do you think?’

‘I think . . . I think Dev has got to be right about this. Someone was looking for something. They’ve gone through every room, trashing the place to find it. And they tortured Prior to get him to talk, to tell them where it is.’

‘Okay, so my next question. What is *it*? What were they after?’

Webley shakes her head. ‘I’ve no idea.’ She looks back at the small unassuming house. ‘What could this guy possibly own that’s worth that much trouble?’

‘And,’ Blunt adds, ‘why wouldn’t he tell them what he knew? I can assure you now, you’d only have to *show* me one of those nails before I started blurting out answers to everything I was asked.’

5

Cody's fear has taken a tighter grip of him since he got back to the station.

He's in a no-win situation. Until he undergoes the sessions with a head doctor, he's not going to be allowed to participate fully in investigations. On the other hand, what if the doc finds something? What if Cody finds it impossible to keep in all the things he must?

The enforced leave of absence didn't help. He has been a wreck since his last case. All his problems returning with a vengeance. The insomnia, the anxiety, the hallucinations. Blunt made a good call this afternoon; he's not sure he would have coped well with a scene that sounded like something straight out of Dante or Bosch.

So yes, he thinks. I'm ill. As bad as ever.

And my biggest worry is that a shrink will spot it from a mile away.

'Could I have some water, please?'

The voice jolts him back into the here and now. He's in an interview room – one of the less imposing ones in the station, with comfy chairs and plants and pictures on the wall. Sitting across from him is Sara Prior. Slim and blonde, wolf-blue eyes and with an accent that Cody can't quite place. And there's something else about this woman. A distancing he can't quite fathom.

'Sorry,' he says. 'Yes, of course. You wouldn't prefer tea, or coffee?'

She shakes her head. 'Water's fine.'

He picks up the jug and pours water into a plastic beaker, which he passes across to her.

She nods her gratitude.

'I know this must be difficult for you,' he says, 'but the quicker we move, the more likely it is we'll catch whoever did this terrible thing.'

‘It’s not difficult for me,’ she says. ‘Ask your questions.’

Her response surprises Cody. She seems so calm, so rational.

‘Okay,’ he says. ‘But I’ll understand if you find this upsetting. If you need a break at any point, please let me—’

‘I’m fine. Please, what do you want to know?’

He stares into those lupine eyes. She does not flinch, but sends back her own challenging gaze. Cody suspects many would crumble under such scrutiny.

He checks the few notes he has in front of him. ‘Matthew Prior was your husband, yes?’

‘That’s correct.’

‘But you haven’t been living with him?’

‘No.’ She flicks a hand towards the paperwork in front of Cody. ‘My address is on your form there. I live in Halewood.’

‘How long have you lived apart from each other?’

‘About four months.’

‘And before that, you both lived at the Halewood address?’

‘Yes.’

‘How long were you married?’

‘About three years.’

‘Were you intending to get divorced?’

‘No.’

‘Then can I ask why you separated?’

‘No, you may not. I really don’t see why that’s relevant to Matthew’s murder. In fact, I don’t see why any of these questions about my relationship with Matthew are relevant.’

Cody finds a smile for her. She’s not making it easy for him, but a smile can work wonders sometimes.

‘I’m sorry. Perhaps it would help if I explain how we do things. I’m not just being nosy. I’m trying to build a picture of Matthew’s life. How he lived, his likes and dislikes, who he came into contact with, who might have had reason to kill him. Right now, I don’t know what’s relevant and what’s not. It’s possible that ninety-nine per cent of what you tell me in

this interview won't have any bearing on the investigation whatsoever. But the other one per cent might crack the case. I'm trying to find that one per cent.'

She remains quiet for a few seconds, then nods her head. 'You're right. I can see that you're just doing your job. Please go ahead.'

Cody feels he has just been granted royal assent to enter an area not normally open to commoners. He clears his throat.

'Okay, so about the separation? If you don't mind.'

She takes a sip of her water. 'No real reason. No affairs or domestic violence, if that's what you're asking. We just needed some time apart.'

'After only three years?'

'It happens.' She considers her answer for a moment. 'Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Matthew needed some space.'

'Space? Why? Was something bothering him?'

'Nothing specific. What you have to understand about Matthew is that he is – *was* – a very private person. He was socially awkward. He would get anxious about the smallest of things. If a taxi was a minute late he would pace up and down with worry. Or if he had a headache he would think it was a brain tumour. He was very introverted. When we met, it was me who had to invite him out on a date.'

'You found him hard work, then?'

'Not at all. I found him very easy to be with. And actually, I believe he appreciated what I brought him.'

'Which was?'

'A life. I know that sounds very dramatic, but Matthew had no real life before we got together. He was so used to his own company. Apart from work, he didn't go anywhere or do anything. He'd never had a long-term girlfriend. His only social activity was computer gaming.'

Cody chews this over and tastes the bitter familiarity. His own life now is not so different from what poor Matthew's was.

'But you changed all that? You made him happy?'

'Yes. It may sound conceited, but I think I did. We were opposites in many ways, but that's what brought us together. I wanted someone who

wasn't pretentious or ambitious or arrogant. Matthew wanted someone to bring him out of his shell and show him that life can be fun if you're willing to take a few risks.'

'Sounds like a perfect match. So when did it go wrong?'

'I suppose about the start of last year. He became very . . . morose. Very withdrawn. He stopped talking to me. He stopped wanting to spend time with me.'

'But you don't know what might have caused it?'

'No. I have no idea. I tried to get him to explain, but he refused to speak about it. I offered to go to marriage guidance counselling with him, but he didn't want that either.'

'Did you argue?'

'Not really. Sometimes I lost my temper with him, but mostly I was just upset that I couldn't help him. He could see how unhappy it was making me, and that's when he told me he was moving out.'

'What did you say?'

'What could I say? He told me he needed time to sort himself out. I had to go along with it. I wasn't given a choice. I always hoped he would come back.'

'After he left, did you continue to see each other?'

'Yes. I went to his house every couple of days. I bought shopping and gifts for him. I tried talking things over with him.'

'Did it work?'

She blinks. 'I . . . I wish I could say yes, but it wouldn't be true. He seemed to get unhappier each day.'

'But he never gave you any clues as to what was wrong?'

'No. Now I wish I'd pushed harder. I think if he'd told me, I could have done something about it. But now . . .'

'Yes?'

'Now it's too late.'

6

Cody thinks there's something wrong here. Something about the way Sara Prior is acting.

He's seen it all in rooms like this, talking to bereaved family members. The full gamut of emotions. Some wail; some go into shock or denial; some faint; some rant or become violent.

Sara does none of these things. She seems so relaxed in her chair, sipping her water and answering his questions. Cody has seen people in job interviews who are more nervous than this. She claims to have been devoted to her husband, so why isn't her severance from him causing her more distress? What is she holding back?

'Tell me about what happened today. How did you find out about Matthew?'

'There was a message on my telephone answering machine. I—'

'You'd just returned from the airport, is that right?'

'Yes. Manchester.'

'Where had you been?'

'Copenhagen. I'm from there originally. I was visiting family. My maiden name is Olsen.'

'Ah, you're Danish. I was trying to place the accent. Your English is excellent.'

'Almost everyone in Copenhagen speaks some English. My father insisted we speak it as much as possible. He had grand ideas of a future for me in global financing.'

Cody notices how she doesn't even seem to register his compliment. Not so much as a nod of appreciation.

'Okay,' he continues. 'So you got home . . .'

‘Yes, and I saw that I had messages. I ignored them at first. I made a cup of tea and just forgot about them. But then I went back to the hall for my suitcase. That’s when I listened to the calls.’

‘How many calls were there?’

‘Three, but only one from Matthew.’

‘What did he say?’

‘It was . . . It was very strange. He was clearly anxious about something. He said something like, “They’re here.” He said it a couple of times. But he also said . . .’

‘Go on.’

‘I’m finding it hard to believe now, but he said something like, “Remember Victoria and Albert.”’

Cody pauses with his pen in mid-sentence on his notepad. ‘Can you repeat that, please?’

‘Yes. He said, “Remember Victoria and Albert.” I’m sure it was that.’

Cody frowns, but jots it down. ‘What else?’

‘Nothing, really. He said he had no more time to speak, and then . . . and then it was like somebody took the phone off him, and . . .’

Cody says nothing. Just lets her find the words.

‘And then he screamed. I heard the start of a scream. That was all.’

Cody observes her for a few long seconds. Waits for tears that don’t fall, a quivering lip that doesn’t happen. All so matter-of-fact.

‘It must have scared you,’ he says. But the prompt goes unanswered.

He says, ‘This thing about Victoria and Albert. Do you know what he meant by that?’

‘No.’

‘Something to do with the Victoria and Albert Museum?’

‘I don’t think so. I’ve never been there, and as far as I know, neither had Matthew.’

‘People, then. Do you know anyone called Victoria and Albert?’

A slow shake of the head. ‘No. That doesn’t ring any bells with me.’

‘Can you think of any other reason why he’d ask you to remember those names?’

‘None at all.’

Cody taps his pen on his chin. ‘The phone message. Any idea why he left it on your landline instead of calling you on your mobile?’

‘He was terrified. I think he just panicked and picked the first number on his speed dial.’

‘Is the message still on your answering machine? You didn’t delete it?’

‘No. It’s still there.’

‘Good. I’d like to send someone over to make a copy of it, if that’s all right with you.’

‘Yes. That’s fine.’

‘All right, so you listened to the call from Matthew. Then what?’

‘I went straight over there.’

‘That was your first impulse? You didn’t call the police?’

‘I didn’t know what was happening. Matthew had changed so much since he moved out. I thought perhaps he was having some kind of breakdown. And anyway, do you think the police would have been interested? What would you have done if I had called you and said my husband rang to say something about Victoria and Albert before screaming down the phone at me?’

Cody smiles. ‘When you put it like that . . . Okay, so you drove to his house, yes?’

‘Yes. I confess I broke the speed limit a few times. You might find me on one or two of those traffic cameras of yours.’

‘I think you had a pretty good excuse. How did things look when you got to Matthew’s house?’

‘You mean inside?’

‘No. Before then. When you got out of your car.’

‘It looked normal. No sign of anything strange.’

‘Was the front door open?’

‘No. It was closed. I rang the doorbell, and I tried shouting through the letter box, but nobody came.’

‘Do you have a key to the house?’

‘No. Matthew would have hated the thought of someone coming into his home without his knowledge. I once asked him what I was supposed to do if he had an accident or something, but he still refused.’

‘So how did you get inside?’

‘I went round to the back of the house.’

Cody consults his notes again. ‘We checked the yard door. It was locked.’

She seems unfazed. ‘Yes. I climbed the wall.’

‘You climbed the wall?’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s a pretty high wall.’

‘Yes, it is.’

Cody almost expects her to break into a laugh, to tell him that she’s pulling his leg. But she’s deadly serious.

‘All right, so you climbed over the wall. Then what did you do?’

‘I looked through the windows. I could see all the mess in there. And then I saw that the glass in the back door was smashed. Someone had broken into the house.’

‘Yes, that’s how it looked to us.’

‘So I went in.’

Cody tries to take her answer in his stride. Fails miserably.

‘You went straight in?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you have your mobile phone with you?’

‘Yes.’

‘But you didn’t try calling the police?’

‘I didn’t want to wait. Matthew might have been hurt. In his call he sounded in pain.’

‘The house had been broken into. There could have been intruders still in there.’

‘I picked up a knife in the kitchen.’ A thought suddenly occurs to her. ‘There’ll be a knife with my fingerprints on it. You should probably know that.’

Cody is dumbfounded. She keeps surprising him. He would have been satisfied with an answer like, ‘I didn’t know what I was doing. I was in a state of shock.’ But she seems to have known exactly what she was doing, and had no hesitation in doing it.

‘What did you do after you picked up the knife?’

‘I searched the house. The back bedroom was the last one I went into. That’s where I found Matthew.’

‘That must have been a hell of a shock.’

Again no response. No confirmation that she experienced emotions of any kind.

Cody still senses he’s missing something here.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Prior,’ he says. ‘Forgive me if this sounds a little insensitive, but I don’t quite get the sequence of events as you’ve described them.’

‘What is it you don’t get, Sergeant Cody?’

‘I don’t get why it took you so long to call the police. I don’t get the fact that you climbed a brick wall and went alone into a house to face possible intruders.’

And then she hits him with the question that floors him.

‘Is it because I’m a woman?’

‘What?’

‘I’m asking you whether you would find my account as difficult to believe if it came from the mouth of a man.’

Cody considers this carefully. He thinks, Is she right? Am I just being sexist?

‘To be honest,’ he says, ‘I don’t know many people, male or female, who would do what you did today. I have to take my hat off to you for your bravery.’

‘I did what was necessary. But I would like to see some bravery in return. I want you to be brave enough to believe me. I can see in your eyes that you have your doubts. I didn’t do what you expect women in my position to do, and I’m not acting now in the way you expect women to behave.’

‘Mrs Prior, I really hope you don’t think—’

‘I’m not going to cry, here in front of you. I’m not going to fall to pieces just to satisfy your preconceived notions. I won’t do any of that, Sergeant Cody. I will grieve in my own way, if that’s all right with you. If that’s something you can’t accept, then we may as well terminate the interview right now.’

Cody wants to laugh out loud. He realises he has just been told off, and that he thoroughly deserved it. He also realises that he likes this woman. Likes her a lot, even though he doesn't fully understand her.

'I can accept that,' he tells her.

'Good. Then please continue.'

'Tell me a little more about Matthew. What was his job?'

'He worked for the tax office. When I met him he was based in Newcastle, but then he was offered a promotion. It meant transferring to the Bootle office, so that's when we moved to Liverpool.'

'When was this?'

'About two years ago.'

'Did you make many friends here?'

'A few. Not many.'

'What about enemies? Did Matthew ever fall out with anybody? Anyone ever threaten him?'

She shakes her head. 'Matthew didn't get into fights. He hated confrontation. He was nice to everyone he met.'

'Any money problems?'

'No. He had a good job, and so do I.'

'What do you do?'

'I'm a personal trainer.'

'Really? I could do with one of those myself.'

She eyes him up. 'My rates are reasonable.'

Cody clears his throat again. He would have preferred an answer along the lines of, *You look in pretty good shape already.*

'You saw the house,' he says. 'Somebody searched every inch of it. Any idea what they might have been looking for?'

'No. He had nothing valuable. His money went on books and CDs and computer games.'

'What type of games?'

She shrugs. 'I didn't take much interest. They had lots of people shooting at each other. It's how he got his thrills.'

'What else did he use his computer for?'

‘I don’t know. The usual, I suppose. Email, the web – that kind of thing.’

‘The reason I ask is because there’s no sign of his computer in the house. Can you think of any reason why someone might have wanted to steal it?’

She shakes her head. ‘Sergeant Cody, I don’t think you have fully understood what I have been trying to tell you about my husband. Matthew was kind and gentle and shy. That wasn’t a disguise. He wasn’t really a spy for MI5 or an assassin or whatever. He was just a normal man who had a few problems coping with life. I loved him deeply. And you know what?’

‘What?’

‘He loved me too. He told me so. You said something earlier about my bravery in going into his house. It wasn’t because of courage; it was because of something else he said in his phone message. He said he loved me. I hadn’t heard those words from Matthew for a long time, but he said them then. He was scared for his life – perhaps he even knew he was about to be killed – but his last thought was to let me know he still loved me. If you have ever been in love, Sergeant Cody, you will understand that that’s the only explanation you need for my actions.’

7

The house seems so empty.

Even though Matthew hasn't lived here for months, Sara feels his absence more keenly now. She has always clung to a thread of hope that he would return one day – that he would fill the Matthew-shaped hole in her life and her home.

But now that hope has gone. Matthew has been snatched away from her. And so cruelly, too.

The violence makes it so much worse. If he had died in an accident, or perhaps even taken his own life, she believes she might have come to terms with it more easily. But this! Why would anyone treat him so sadistically? What could he possibly have done?

She feels sorry for that policeman. Cody. He was doing his best, but she really couldn't help him. She told him the truth: Matthew was a lovely man who just needed someone by his side.

I should have been there, she thinks. I should have protected him.

She is standing in the hall. Her suitcase is still open on the floor, her dirty washing still heaped in the doorway to the kitchen. Cody brought her home, along with a technician who took a copy of Matthew's phone message. They have gone now, leaving her in the emptiness.

She expects that they will look into her background. They will treat her as a suspect. It's only natural, and she's not worried about it. Let them think what they like.

Perhaps I should have acted more like a distraught widow, she thinks. Perhaps I should have screamed and pulled out my hair in clumps. Maybe then they would have believed me.

No matter. I'm not a performing seal. Crying won't fix a thing. It didn't fix Svend and it won't fix Matthew.

She decides she won't ever love another man. It always leads to too much pain – for them and for her.

I must be cursed, she thinks. There's a spell on me. I am a – what is the English word? – a *jinx*, that's it.

They couldn't have been any more different from each other, Svend and Matthew, and yet the outcome was the same. Svend she can understand – the danger was always hovering on the horizon in his case. But not Matthew. Matthew was the stereotypical mild-mannered public servant. Matthew was a man whose definition of risk was shelling out for a lottery ticket, or opting for a pizza topping he'd never tried before. Matthew's only exposure to violence prior to his death was in the form of animated pixels on his computer screen.

So it must be me, she thinks. I'm the link. I'm the reason why those around me get killed.

And yet . . .

The message. On the phone.

She looks at the phone again now. It sits there, defying her to listen again to the closing words of her now dead husband.

She steps across to it. Commands it to replay the last message.

'Sara! Remember! Victoria and Albert. All I can say. They're here! They're— Sara, I love you. I—'

His terror is almost tangible. It infects her. She feels the familiar surge of adrenaline as it readies her to fight for her life.

She takes a few deep breaths. I'm safe, she tells herself. I'm at home. Nothing can get to me here.

She plays the message again, forcing herself to focus on the words rather than the emotion.

Remember! Victoria and Albert.

What the hell does that mean?

She wracks her brain for conversations – *snippets* of conversations – anything that might have related to those two names during her brief time with Matthew.

Nothing comes to mind.

But what if it's associated with the future rather than the past? What if Matthew wants her to bear the names in mind for some event that is yet to occur?

What could that possibly be? And how will she know when it's happening? How can she be sure to call up those names at the precise moment they are needed?

It doesn't make any sense.

She moves on to the next part of the message. The bit about *they*.

They're here!

Who? Who were there? And why was Matthew so terrified of them? It seems clear that he knew their identities and their aim. He knew his hourglass was running out.

Shocking images jump into her mind. She sees Matthew desperately stabbing at the buttons of his phone as he hears his attackers breaking into his house. She sees him crying, hears his sobbing when the call isn't answered immediately.

And then the sudden outpouring of words when the answering machine eventually grants its permission to talk. The rushed burble as the intruders appear in his sights, see what he is doing, and snatch his lifeline away from him.

Lifeline – ha! If only. If only she had been on the other end of that line rather than a fucking machine.

And then more images. Of torture, of interrogation, of immense unendurable agony. She sees his blood, feels his humiliation, hears his prayers for an end to his torment.

And then the pictures in her head become confused, jumbled with others. Memories and imaginings conjoin in a maelstrom of death and injury, until she doesn't know what is real and what is not.

She releases a yell. A long, drawn-out scream of fury and anguish that echoes around a house that now seems just a hollow shell.

A full two minutes pass while she sits kneeling on the wooden floor of the hallway, staring but not seeing.

She plays the recorded message again. This time she concentrates on the end of it. The part where Matthew tells her unequivocally that he loves her.

She has sometimes feared that she would never hear those words again. When he moved out of this house, Matthew seemed so damaged, so not in control of himself. She hoped that he would eventually find peace, but there was always a nagging doubt that it might be beyond his enfeebled reach.

And here it is. The confirmation of his devotion to her. It took his imminent death to squeeze it out of him, but here it is.

She plays the message again and again. She no longer hears the fear, the cries. She blots those out and hears only him assuring her of his love.

And what she produces in response is what she told DS Cody she was denying him. Tears in abundance – evidence of a fragility that she will let no man see again.