Lovereading.co.uk

Midnight Murders

Katherine John

Published by Accent Press

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

Click here to buy this book and read more

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

PROLOGUE

The clouds hid the moon. The only light in the garden came from the muted glow of the street lamps above and outside the high walls that enclosed the grounds. Their rays cast an eerie, pyrotechnical tinge on the tips of the Victorian iron spears that crowned the brickwork. A cool night breeze rustled the spring buds on the trees, and rattled the skeletons of the dead leaves deep in the undergrowth that had escaped the gardener's rake.

Buildings loomed, a massive Gothic silhouette surrounded by rectangular blocks of ebony; black cut-outs in a world of grey shadows. Occasionally, a pencil-thin line of light glimmered from beneath a blind and at the end of long rows of gleaming blank panes, squares of soft amber shone in kitchens, bathrooms and ward offices, testimony to those who had to work through the hours of darkness.

A phantom rippled through the garden. Softly, stealthily, it floated within the shadows that fell from the trees and the encircling wall. Occasionally it paused, but always close to a tree, or in the shelter of bushes that masked its presence. Its spine was curved into a hunchback. The shade it cast, malformed, a swollen mass crowning gangly legs. It continued to drift, bush to bush, tree to tree and when it was motionless, there was a sense of ears and senses strained to their utmost.

A clock struck, its chimes crashing raucously, disturbing the rustles of field mice and voles. A barn owl swooped low, screeching when it missed its prey. A dog barked somewhere on the suburban estate outside the wall, that sprawled on what had, until recently, been hospital land.

A car engine roared on the road outside the wall followed by the siren of a police car. The phantom crouched in the undergrowth, waiting for the clamour to die. Later – much later – it inched forward, faltering on the outskirts of a patch of gleaming lawn. A low hillock of soil loomed to the left. In front of it, the lip of a puddle, blacker than any ink, wavered as wind blown trees swayed above it.

Hesitation, caution, then a quick scurrying movement. The hunchback stood poised. It leaned forward, bent double, and was hunchback no longer. It stood tall and broad on the skyline. The stencil of a shovel protruded from the mound of earth. The phantom stooped, took it, and began to transfer the earth from the hill into the pit, with steady, rhythmic movements.

Silver light bathed the scene in frigid wintry beauty when the moon edged out from behind soft, grey billowing clouds. The phantom worked faster, pausing only to pass its left arm across its brow. The mound began to diminish at the right-hand edge, and still the figure worked. Ever alert, ever watchful. Pausing between each load, listening and waiting.

The bottom of the pit was dark, damp, and colder than ice.

The air stank with the mouldy reek of rot and decay. A figure bound rigidly in a sheet, resembling more giant chrysalis than human, stared relentlessly upwards. Only its eyes remained within control. It was a strain to keep them unblinking and open, gazing at the oblong of textured blue night sky, misted by clouds and punctured by the pinpricks of a million tiny stars. In the left-hand corner shone a brilliant segment of silver light. Pitted and scarred it had to be the moon. To the left Orion shone

down, recognised from schooldays and the one astronomy lesson that had graced the entire geography course.

Cold – and something else – paralysed. No matter how strenuously the brain willed limbs to move, they remained limp and leaden; log-like appendages to a lifeless body where only the mind roamed free, painfully and acutely alive. All strength and power that remained was focused, concentrated desperately, but in vain. The paralysis that reigned supreme denied the body even the dubious comfort of shivering.

The mind worked feverishly as the eyes stared upwards, collecting thoughts, arranging them in a logical, coherent order. The last memory was of walking from the consulting room to the gate. Feet sinking into fresh, glutinous tarmac; the smell had come too late to give warning. Newly laid, and softened by the spring sunshine, the sticky black substance had ruined brand new green leather shoes. But, as well as anger over the spoiled shoes, there had been exhilaration.

The final appointment had come and gone. The gate symbolised freedom. The walk ahead was towards liberty and independence. The depression that had resulted in incarceration, if not totally cured, could be dealt with while life was lived in the outside world.

Walking towards the gate – a shout – a cry… iron-tinged, icy darkness. Confinement by something other than paralysis and constricting cloth. Blazes of light, pinpricks that hurt overly sensitive skin, darkness… more darkness… then sky. Exquisitely beautiful, crystal-clear night sky.

A shower of earth fell, dry, dusty, powdery, rattling against the taut, drawn cloth. The sound triggered a single, devastating flash of realisation – and panic. Another shower came. There was a fierce struggle to force open

glued lips, to formulate a scream; but the lips, gummed tightly shut, refused to obey, and no sound was born in the throat, not even a whimper.

The frantic effort, conceived in the mind, withered and died. Terror crawled, dry, insidious, and foul-tasting. Snakes of fear slithered from the spine, saturated with the certainty of impending death.

This pit had to be *somewhere*! Perhaps people were close by. People who couldn't see the hole, but would hear a cry.

Force, concentration – skin ripping noisily, agonisingly, from raw lips. The pain diminished with the realisation that the body had finally succeeded. The mouth opened. A large damp clod fell into it, weighing heavy on the tongue. There was no more thought of sounds, only a frenzied struggle to draw breath. Tongue and teeth heaving to spit out chunks of earth. Lungs burning, bursting, with the need for air. But dirt lay crushing, choking, against the back of the throat.

Had to remain calm – had to fight – stay calm – live. Hysteria subsided as air inflated scorching lungs: air that travelled in through the dirt beginning to pack the nostrils. Another shower of fine dust was followed by yet more moisture-laden clods, they blanketed one eye, stinging, searing – filled the nose – dry – suffocating…

Someone would come. They had to. If only they would hurry. There was no air, no breath… couldn't breathe… couldn't…

Then a silhouette. Tall, wide, wielding a spade, it blocked out the light and the stars. Blackness hovered in the pit, darker than any night; its depths wavering with a rich red glow, smouldering with an intensity that scoured ineffective lungs.

The figure moved back. Another shower followed – and another – and another –

For the first time since that walk along the newly tarmacked path, there came warmth. Warmth and comfort. There was no more fight for air – for anything. Only a quiet drifting. Floating on a soft grey cloud of down that gently caressed and enveloped. Carrying the whole body downwards into deep, relaxing sleep.

The spade once again stood upright in the earth. The mound had lessened but not so much that a careless glance would notice, particularly the glance of a disinterested trainee. A few scuffs of the shoe, a few pats to loosen and spread the drier topsoil over what was left of the mound. One more studied glance down into the pit. There was only darkness, stillness and silence. No gleam of white betrayed the sheet that lay hidden beneath the earth.

The phantom flowed back towards the trees. A triangle of light shone briefly across the lawn, dimming when the door that had been opened closed in a room in the nearest block. Its glow had burned only for an instant, but it had been long enough to outline the figure of a woman. A woman who stood stiff and straight, hands planted on the glass pane before her, one on either side of her head. The phantom in the garden looked up, and saw.

As did the woman. And even when the light faded behind her, the white lace nightgown could still be seen by someone who knew she was there.

An unseen hand pulled down the blind. It was easy to imagine the nurse gently leading the protesting patient back to bed. A patient who had seen – how much? All? Enough to talk? Enough to – the phantom smiled as it once again retreated into the shadows. Who would believe

the woman? Or any other patient who reported seeing strange happenings in the night.

Psychiatric nurses and doctors were obliged to listen to their patients. They were paid to. But sooner or later they learned to ignore the inmates. Patients who resided in Compton Castle frequently had difficulty in distinguishing between reality and fantasy.

Even if that particular woman hadn't claimed to have seen visions and apparitions before, there was always a first time. After all, she was mad. And who'd believe anything that a mad woman had to say?

CHAPTER ONE

Peter Collins thumped his horn impatiently at an old man who was dithering between the left and right turns at the entrance to the hospital visitors' car park. Hearing the horn, the elderly man panicked, pressed his foot down too hard on the clutch and stalled his car. Cursing loudly, Peter accelerated swiftly. Mounting the kerb, he drove across a neatly trimmed bank of lawn and executed a fast, furious, perfect three-point turn, which landed him in prime position to make a quick getaway once visiting was over.

Picking up two plastic carrier bags from the passenger seat of his car, he slammed the door, locked it and stormed off towards the main building, noting with grim satisfaction the queue of irate motorists building up behind the old man. Short tempered at the best of times, Peter was seething and not only because of the driver. Despite his hatred of the place, here he was visiting Compton Castle Psychiatric Hospital – yet again.

He loathed hospitals, sickness – anything that reminded him of his own mortality and potential weakness. And as he'd discovered over the past few weeks, he had a particularly strong aversion to psychiatric wards; but a nagging sense of guilt and loyalty to his long time colleague and friend, Trevor Joseph, drove him to this place whenever his free time coincided with visiting hours.

He'd been dragging himself to and from hospitals for a long time – too bloody long. He jumped over a low wall to take advantage of a short-cut across the lawns. He'd sat beside Trevor's bed while Trevor had hovered close to death during three long weeks in the intensive care ward.

He'd visited daily while Trevor had spent four and a half months on the Neuro ward in the general hospital with dedicated nurses willing and able to care for his every whim, let alone need. And despite regular visits from a *very* shapely, blonde physiotherapist, and a pretty brunette psychologist, Trevor had still failed to pull himself sufficiently together to avoid a transfer from the General to what their superior in the force, Bill Mulcahy graphically, if tactlessly, referring to as the 'The Funny Farm.'

Granted, it wasn't Trevor's fault that he'd had his head hammered to a pulp by a psychopathic serial killer, but to play the Devil's Advocate, if it had been him, not Trevor who'd faced the murderer, he was confident that he would have had the sense to handle himself differently. And fractures, even skull fractures, and infected wrist fractures, heal given time and expert medical care and Trevor'd had more than enough of both. Most injuries could be overcome if the person concerned made a determined effort to pull themselves together. Which in Peter's opinion, Trevor wasn't.

He passed the gardener and a boy who were planting a newly dug flowerbed with rose bushes. The lawn around the bed was thick with soil, and he remembered a crumbling stone cupid that had stood there when he had first visited Trevor in the Castle – was it really only three weeks ago?

He wondered where the cupid was now. It was the sort of thing he wouldn't have minded putting in his garden, if he'd had one. Home, when he went there, was a flat in a crumbling Edwardian terrace next to the sea.

'If it isn't my favourite man. Sergeant Collins, how lovely to see you.' Jean Marshall, the sister in charge of Trevor's ward, greeted Peter in the hearty voice she used

to address everyone in the hospital – patient, visitor and doctor. It was a voice that reminded Peter of knots, campfires and brisk girl guiders, and it invariably set his teeth on edge.

'How is he today?' he jerked his head towards the door of the private room Trevor occupied, courtesy of his status as injured policeman rather than clinically ill patient.

'Good.' Jean nudged his ribs and he caught a heady whiff of Estee Lauder. 'He went to Spencer's art class this morning.' She left the word "therapy" out before art. 'Perhaps he'll show you what he's done.' She frowned at his plastic bags. 'Is that a clanking I hear?'

'Non-alcoholic beer and crisps. Trevor needs decent nourishment to counteract the junk you feed him.'

'Just as long as it is non-alcoholic,' she warned.

'Do you want to check?' He gave her his most winning smile.

'And if I say yes?'

'I'll owe you one if you say no.'

'I'm still waiting for you to buy me that drink in the Green Monkey, you promised me the last time I turned a blind eye.'

'One day I'll surprise you.'

'Make sure you take the empties with you,' she murmured, before running after Vanessa Hammond who was wandering down the corridor in a scarlet negligee. Peter knew from past experience that Vanessa was apt to act out the oddest bedroom fantasies.

Jean was a smart, imposing woman. She'd once mentioned a son at university, so Peter put her age at roughly forty to forty-five, but she looked younger. Tall, well built, with a majestic figure, red hair and green eyes, Peter could not deny that she was attractive. And she'd

made it clear that her attractions were at his disposal. Divorced and frequently lonely for female company, he rarely turned down the kind of signal that Jean was transmitting, but something about her put him off. Possibly her efficient manner coupled with the hint of hospital antiseptic that invariably overpowered her perfume. Or, the overwhelming confidence she had in her power to attract, which took away any hint of chase or conquest.

Either way, he flirted mildly with her when she made overtures in his direction, but was careful never to go near the Green Monkey, the pub opposite Compton Castle, where the staff congregated in their off-duty hours, unless he knew she was working.

Turning his back on Jean, Peter pushed open the door to Trevor's room. To his dismay Trevor was sitting in exactly the same position he'd left him after visiting two days ago. In fact, if Jean hadn't mentioned that Trevor had gone to art that morning, he could have believed that Trevor had remained slumped in the chair for two days and nights. The beard growth certainly suggested it.

Trevor was painfully, almost skeletally thin, and was wearing the crumpled pair of once black, faded grey slacks he had worn every day since he'd been told to dress. His navy sweatshirt had unravelled at the cuffs and neck, and would have been rejected as a donation to a charity shop. Peter couldn't recall Trevor ever dressing so down-at-heel, even when they'd worked undercover in the down-and-outs and junkies' habitat of Jubilee Street.

'Brought you beer.' Peter dumped the carrier bags on Trevor's lap. 'It's cold. Straight from my fridge.'

'Thanks,' Trevor murmured mechanically.

'Open the bag,' Peter badgered. 'There are crisps in there too. Smoky bacon.'

Trevor fumbled with the top of the carrier bag.

'Not that one.' Peter snatched the bag irritably. 'That's your clean washing. I got my woman to do it for you.'

'Thanks.' Trevor didn't look up when Peter opened the wardrobe door and threw the bag on to the floor.

Peter took two of the four cans he'd thrown on to Trevor's lap. He ripped one open, and drank. 'Can you open yours, or do you want me to do it for you?'

'I can manage.'

'Can I watch?' Peter questioned caustically.

'Can you what?'

'For pity's sake man, I've come to visit. I've brought a goody bag… '

'Thank you,' even Trevor's voice sounded distant.

'It's not your bloody thanks I want, it's your companionship.'

'I'm sorry. I'm not feeling very sociable these days.'

'I can see that,' Peter retorted, before polishing off half of his can in one thirsty gulp. 'So, don't you want to know what's happening down at the station?'

'Not really.'

'Doesn't the thought of rejoining the drug squad in a week or two excite you?'

'No.' Trevor showed the first sign of animation Peter had seen since he'd been injured. He even ripped the ring pull back on his can. Perhaps the threat of work was what was needed to get him going.

'We're doing the clubs this month. Good beer, good whisky, sex-starved divorcees throwing themselves at any and every male in sight, music that'll deafen you, and all on expenses. What more could a man want?'

'A quiet life.' Trevor's gaze flickered towards a sketch pad that lay face down on the cabinet next to his

bed. Peter leaned over and before Trevor could stop him, picked it up.

'Florence Nightingale out there told me that you'd been to art.'

'That doesn't mean I want you to see that,' Trevor snapped.

It was too late. Peter had already peeled back the cover. He let out a long, low whistle as he studied a sketch of a woman with large sad eyes, and long hair that tumbled around her face.

'The girl of your dreams?' He tossed the book contemptuously on to the bed. 'Isn't it time you grew up and started looking at real life women who can kiss back?'

'Always got to reduce life to the lowest common denominator, haven't you?' Trevor retorted savagely.

Peter was elated, but was careful not to show it. After months of trying, he'd elicited a response. Maybe not the one he wanted, but a response nevertheless. 'And the lowest common denominator is the pub. How about I persuade the warden out there, to let you out long enough to enjoy a quick one with me.'

'No.'

There was a firmness in Trevor's refusal Peter hadn't detected since Trevor's incarceration in hospital.

'Everyone at the station sends their regards. Bill told me to tell you that he's saving the best jobs for when you come back.'

'I might not come back,' Trevor threatened.

'Haven't you heard? There's not enough jobs to go round for well-qualified, intelligent people, let alone ex-coppers who were stupid enough to get themselves mangled in the line of duty.

'Here, drink up.' Peter emptied his can. 'So what's new around here?'

'Not a lot.'

'I spoke to Harry Goldman about you.'

'Why?' Trevor demanded suspiciously. His opened can remained untouched in his hand.

'Because your brother and mother are stuck in Cornwall and haven't the time to come up every weekend. And, because they asked me to keep an eye on you. Whether you like it or not, doctors do not like assuming total responsibility for their patients. They like to discuss their charges with someone. Family, friends, and, unfortunately for you, in the absence of anyone better, me.'

'What did Goldman say?' For the first time since Peter had entered the room, Trevor raised his head, and met Peter's eye.

'That you're fit enough to go out. All you need is a push in the right direction.'

'And I suppose you volunteered to do the pushing.'

'You can't hide in here forever, with,' Peter jerked his thumb at the sketch pad, 'memories of what might have been.'

'I still get headaches. I'm weak… ' Trevor repeated the catalogue of excuses he'd been reciting for months, but for Peter, they'd long lost any validity.

'When was the last time you left this room?' Peter went to the window and opened the curtains, flooding the gloomy cell with bright afternoon sunlight.

'You know I went to Spencer's art class this morning,' Trevor screwed his eyes against the light.

'Big deal, you walked down two corridors,' Peter mocked. 'Come on, you and me are going out, mate.'

'No.'

'Yes.' Peter looked at Trevor's worn carpet slippers, opened the wardrobe door and lifted out a pair of canvas trainers. 'Put them on.'

'No.'

'I'm not taking you to the pub, only a turn around the grounds. There's no one out there,' he lied, eyeing a procession of patients and visitors as they walked down the lawn.

'I can't stand sunlight.'

'Borrow these.' Peter pulled a pair of dark glasses from the top pocket of his blazer, pushed them on to Trevor's nose and yanked the door open. 'Either you walk out of here, or I carry you out,' he threatened. 'And given your present state of health, I could do it with one hand tied behind my back.'

Trevor stared at him for a moment. Peter thought he'd lost yet another battle, when Trevor slowly kicked off his slippers and reached for the trainers. However, Trevor's reaction was anything but positive. Lacking the energy to fight Peter's bullying tactics, Trevor had decided to take the easy way out and capitulate. After all, the man never stayed long. And when Peter left, he'd be able to return to his room, his chair, his sketch pad, and – most important of all, his "memories of what had never been" as Peter had so scornfully put it.

'One more step and you'll actually be somewhere other than this cell.' Peter laid a hand across Trevor's shoulders and propelled him out of the room.

'I need my stick,' Trevor cried as he staggered precariously on his right leg, fractured, healed, but weak from lack of exercise.

Peter took the cane from behind the door and thrust it into Trevor's hand. Much to his annoyance, he stepped out of Trevor's room only to find he'd pushed Trevor into

a physical altercation between Jean and the petite, sharp featured Vanessa, whom he chiefly remembered for her constantly changing hair colour. Today it was black, but it had been auburn on his previous visit and blonde before that.

Jean was lecturing Vanessa in the firm matronly voice she tended to employ whenever one of the patients was being difficult, which if his visits were anything to go by, was more often than not.

'You can't go outside until you've changed out of that negligee, Vanessa. If you walk down the ward with me I'll help you choose something… '

Vanessa slithered out of Jean's clutches. Before Jean could stop her, she pushed open the door to a narrow, shelved storeroom where a drugs trolley was being stocked by Lyn Sullivan, a stunning, six-foot, slim student nurse whom Peter lusted after and regretfully left alone on the premise that teenagers, even those heading for their twenties, were too young for him.

'Out of there, Vanessa,' Jean commanded.

'You can't order me around, bitch,' Vanessa retorted.

'No one is ordering you around, Vanessa.' Lyn clasped Vanessa's arm. 'We're concerned for you and we don't want you to get hurt.'

'You think I'm stupid' Vanessa peered into Lyn's face. 'You think I don't know about you and my Ian. You're all the same. Bitches!' Vanessa's eyes rolled in her head as her final words pitched high, ending in a screech. She flailed her arms wildly. Catching the edge of the trolley she flung it back against a shelf, forcing Lyn into a corner. Sweeping her hands over the trolley, she picked up and threw everything she could lay her hands on. Bottles and jars flew into the air, landed on the tiled floor and

shattered in a crescendo of splintering glass, pills and potions.

Lyn tried to duck past Vanessa and out through the door, but she wasn't quick enough. An enormous jar filled with small white pills thumped between her shoulder blades. She fell heavily, crying out in pain when she landed on the carpet of broken glass.

Laughing crazily, Vanessa grabbed a set of cast iron scales. Long since obsolete, they'd been relegated to the back corner of the shelves, but she found them. She waved them above Lyn's head. Peter and Jean both ran towards the cupboard and, like a bad comedy sketch, jammed alongside one another in the doorway. It was left to Trevor to crawl between their legs and offer a helping hand to Lyn. She grasped his fingers, but he gripped her wrist and heaved her forward, ignoring her cries as shards of glass sliced into her flesh through her thin uniform.

When Jean stepped back to allow Lyn through the doorway, Vanessa quietened. She stood for a moment in the midst of the wreckage, surveying the havoc she'd created. Peter seized the opportunity to make a move towards her.

'I know what I saw,' Vanessa whispered, staring at him.

'I don't doubt you do.' He reached out, preparing to take the scales from her.

'Come on, Vanessa,' Jean crooned, easing her way into the doorway. 'You're tired. You'll feel better after a lie down.'

'I don't want a lie down.' Vanessa lifted the scales higher. 'She's there I tell you. In the flowerbed. Planted in the garden like a tulip bulb. All of that earth on top of her. Shovel-full after shovel-full. She won't be able to move,' she assured Peter gravely. Her eyes grew rounder, the

whites more pronounced. 'Do you think he wanted her to grow into a people tree?' she burst into mirthless laughter. 'She's dead,' she said finally with a sudden eerie calm. 'She would be with all that earth on top of her. Dead as mutton. She's dead and not one of you cares enough to move her to the cemetery. That's where they put dead people. I know.' She lunged towards Peter and he succeeded in sliding one hand on to the scales. 'I wanted to put my Ian there, but they… ' she glared at Jean and Lyn, who'd been helped to her feet by Trevor, '… they stopped me. If I'd put him there,' she moved closer to Peter and he took advantage and laid a second hand on the scales. 'I'd have him where I'd want him. He'd still be mine because he'd have to stay there and wait for me to visit him with flowers, wouldn't he? He wouldn't be able to do anything else.'

She heaved her hands back, intending to hurl the scales at Jean, but Peter wrenched them from her hands.

'You're in league with those bitches.' Snatching the one remaining pill bottle from the trolley she flung it in his face. Holding on to the heavy scales Peter ducked, but not low enough. The bottle hit his cheek bone, splitting the skin.

'Ian's probably still with the whore, but not the whore I found him with,' Vanessa rambled. 'She wouldn't be pretty enough for him. Not after what I did to her… '

'Vanessa!' Peter commanded. 'Look at me.' Staring into her eyes, in an effort to hold her attention, he fumbled blindly for the shelf at his side and deposited the scales on them. As soon as his hands were free, he moved like lightening. Grasping Vanessa's wrists he hauled them behind her back. 'Where do you want her?' he asked Jean.

'Out of that damned dispensary for a start,' Jean said hollowly, sickened by the chaos Vanessa had wrought in the secure drug cupboard.

'You should have locked it.' Peter yanked Vanessa into the corridor.

'The lock jammed three months ago. When we asked for it to be repaired they put a padlock on the outside, which is a fat lot of good when you're working inside. I've complained every day for three months and got absolutely nowhere.'

'I phoned security, they're on their way. I've also asked for a couple of porters and an extra nurse,' Lyn whispered from the open door of the ward office. Trevor had helped her into a chair and she was sitting, dabbing ineffectually at the glass-studded cuts on her arms and legs with a handkerchief.

Jean studied her with a professional eye. 'Phone for an ambulance to take you to casualty in the General.'

'I'm fine,' Lyn sipped the water that Trevor had brought her from his room.

'No arguments, telephone now. I'll check how "fine" you are as soon as I've dealt with this. Can you keep a grip on Mrs Hammond, Sergeant Collins?'

'I'll manage.' Peter tightened his grip as Vanessa tried to kick his shins. It was an ineffectual gesture given that she was wearing slippers.

'I thought everyone was in the garden.' Lyn apologised.

'It appears everyone was, except us and this lady.' Peter gave Vanessa a crocodile smile.

Jean retrieved the key to the padlock from the debris on the floor and pushed the door to the drug cupboard over the carpet of broken glass. 'Talk about bolting horses and stable doors.'

'I'd rather not think what could have happened if any other patients had been here, or you hadn't.' Lyn handed the glass back to Trevor.

Peter sensed Vanessa becoming restless under his grip. He saw her staring at a security guard, two porters, and a male nurse who were making their way up the corridor towards them. Jean snapped the padlock shut.

'Bring Mrs Hammond into the treatment room please, Sergeant Collins,' Jean asked.

Peter pushed Vanessa inside. The male nurse joined them.

Jean continued to speak softly while the male nurse primed a syringe behind Vanessa's back. The moment the syringe was ready, she pulled up Vanessa's sleeve. Vanessa quietened within seconds and Jean had no difficulty in leading her out of the room into a four bedded ward.

'Here we are, Vanessa, a nice clean bed. All we have to do is draw the curtains and you can take a nap,' there was more than a hint of irony in Jean's voice.

'I don't want to sleep,' Vanessa slurred. 'You bitch… you bloody bitch… ' she fell silent and Jean joined Peter in the corridor.

'Thank you, we couldn't have managed without your help.' She led him back into the treatment room.

'Any passing visitor would have done the same.'

'Most visitors wouldn't have been able to keep a hold on her. If you come in here, I'll put something on that cut on your cheek.'

'Shouldn't you see to Lyn Sullivan first?' Peter was reluctant to allow Jean near him.

'She needs more attention than I can give her here. Besides, I wouldn't dare encroach on Karl's territory.'

Peter looked into the office and saw the male nurse bending over Lyn while Trevor stood ineptly by, still holding the glass of water. He ran his fingers over his left cheekbone and when he withdrew them he was surprised to find them covered in blood.

'It always looks and feels worse than it is, when it's on the face,' Jean commented.

'I've discovered that the hard way.' Peter allowed her to clean up the cut and cover it with a plaster.

'Vanessa would have to choose visiting hours on a Sunday afternoon to go berserk,' Jean complained when she washed her hands. 'Weekend cover is barely half of normal, and a quarter of the few staff we have are on tea break at this time of day.'

'Sod's law.' Peter winced as the cut stung viciously back to life.

'Do me a favour?'

'I didn't see or hear anything. I wasn't even here.'

'It's not that I want to deny you a medal, but I'll never see the end of the paperwork if they find out that I allowed a visitor to manhandle a patient.'

'What visitor?' Peter wasn't slow in demanding a return favour. 'Can I come back later with a take-away for Trevor? He looks as if he hasn't eaten for months. He used to enjoy late night suppers in the station.'

'It will be a miracle if he eats it.'

'I'd like to try.'

'Be my guest.' She led the way out of the treatment room and locked it with one of the keys that hung from a belt at her waist. They passed the storeroom, where the porters were clearing the mess of broken glass and spilt drugs under the supervision of the security guard. 'As ward sister it's not my place to say this, it's Mr Goldman's. You do know there's nothing we can do for

Trevor. He's depressed, but not clinically so, at least no more than anyone who's been through what he has is entitled to be. And certainly no more than anyone who's capable of reading the daily papers from cover to cover. But he's become institutionalised. It's long past the time when he should have returned to the real world. Mr Goldman's been suggesting short solitary afternoon outings since the second day he was admitted. As far as the front gate would be a start. If Trevor doesn't make an effort and take his advice soon, we'll be putting the boot behind him.'

'We were on the way out when you distracted us,' Peter said.

'I appreciate you trying to help, but the effort has to be his, not yours,' Jean halted when they reached the office.

Peter looked inside where Trevor was still hovering behind Lyn's chair. 'He did drag Lyn Sullivan out of the cupboard.'

'So he did.' Jean watched Karl bandage Lyn's leg. 'It could be the first small step.'

'I'll give him the push he needs to make the second.' Peter felt better about Trevor than he had done since the day the doctor in intensive care had told him that his friend was going to live.

'Make sure you come in with that meal before I go off at eight,' Jean warned, artfully. 'The night sister isn't as accommodating as me.'

'I'm on duty myself at nine, so I'll probably make it around seven.'

Peter's reply wiped the smile from Jean's face. If he'd come at the end of her shift she had hoped to inveigle him into the Green Monkey.

It had been almost four years since her scrap metal dealer husband had left her for a beauty queen less than half her age. She'd picked her lawyer well and paid him enough to ensure that she'd come out of the divorce financially sound. Her share of her husband's assets included their luxurious four-bedroomed apartment on the marina, a five-berth yacht, and enough gilt edged securities to make work a pastime she could give up any time she chose.

But she had discovered that money was no substitute for emotional and sexual satisfaction. She was tired of singles groups, the bridge club dominated by obscenely happily married couples, and sleeping alone. Peter Collins was a hard man, but he was physically fit, more than passably good-looking in a clean cut, military way, and she had a shrewd suspicion that if she ever succeeded in enticing him into her bed she'd find his soft centre.

She didn't doubt that he had one. In her opinion, all men did. It was just a question of the right handling. All she had to do was make the initial breech through his defences.