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In Bitter Chill

Written by Sarah Ward

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In Bitter Chill

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Prologue

Blade clanked on flint. Again. Causing the man to recoil. He turned, looking for reassurance from the woman whose stone-coloured eyes gave as little relief as the hard ground he was trying to part. Small fissures lay in a criss-cross pattern over the unforgiving soil, made by ineffectual glances from the blade. The woman nodded for him to continue. He shrugged off his tweed jacket, the smell of his own acrid sweat mingling with the lanolin to create a nauseating aroma of toil and, much worse, of life. Stepping back, he felt his heel sink into softer, more yielding ground covered by a smattering of twigs and decomposing leaves. He moved back further, the ground still soft. Panic had dulled his senses; he had wasted important minutes trying to break ground that his ancestors knew to leave well alone.

Their burden lay to one side, the winding sheet beginning to part, and the man could see golden threads of hair spilling out onto the drab ground. The woman followed his gaze but did nothing, her eyes challenging him to stop their task. He imagined the small body beneath its makeshift shroud. In another, parallel world, the tiny heart would still be beating and his wouldn't have frozen at the moment he realised that it was all over.

He shifted position and began again. The organic matter crackled and groaned but parted to the touch of the blade.

The pit widened and, when it was finished, the man looked down and remembered the wicker cradle that he had recently placed his newborn daughter into so carefully. A nudge on his shoulder moved him out of the way. The woman laid her load into the makeshift tomb and, with her shoe, began kicking over the leaves and twigs and other fruits of that ancient forest. Angry, he picked up his spade again and used it to sweep his toil back over the body. His white shirt slapped against his chest and damp oozed into his shoes, turning the pale fawn leather a brackish brown. When he was finished, he looked down and the ground swam before his eyes. The cold earth had accepted its new charge and even now he doubted he could locate the exact position of the damp grave. His body twitched with the impulse to start digging again.

He felt a chill ripple over him as the woman touched him on the arm. The eternal pull of her presence was now turning into a fear that he could not succumb to. The bile rising in his throat must be ignored and conquered. It was she who, once more, would need to help him out of the crisis that threatened to overwhelm them both. He allowed her to lead him back through the wood: he, stumbling slightly, his heavy limbs trying to root him to the ground; she, guiding the way with her gloved hands. As the trees parted, they came to the entrance and light began to trickle through the overhanging branches. Gradually he could make out the shape of the white car sitting in the car park. There, inside, the other girl waited for him.

'Stop!' The command, unfamiliar on his lips, halted them both. She turned around, her mouth a line of displeasure.

'I need to do this. Alone.'

She let him go and he walked slowly towards the car.

Chapter 1

Detective Inspector Francis Sadler watched the heavy clouds gather through the window and cursed the role that central heating had played in dislocating him from the elements. In his childhood home, his frugal father had banned switching on the radiators until the first day of December. It meant that, as a boy, he had become to used to connecting the weather outside with the sensations of his body. His memories of getting dressed wrapped in his still warm duvet, the icy crispness of the air mixing with the comfort of the breaking dawn, could never be entirely banished. Now, looking down at his dark trousers and pressed shirt, no need to wear a jacket in this overheated office, he wondered if he could ever feel that physical connection again.

The door opened, letting in a swift blast of cooler air.

'Is it the Wilton Hotel that's haunted?'

Sadler looked up and frowned at Detective Sergeant Damian Palmer. He wondered, once again, if he'd employed someone in his own image. It was what you were warned against on those interminable police training courses. But all the boxes that had to be ticked and the forms to be completed failed to eliminate the pull of subjectivity. When you were choosing a member of your team, what you wanted was someone a little bit like yourself. You might recognise your own flaws, but you were rarely prepared to condemn them.

And Palmer, with his cropped hair and stocky build, might be physically worlds apart from his own rangy restlessness, but at the heart of them both was the need for success.

His silence was making his sergeant nervous. Sadler wondered about this. Perhaps this was where they differed. Because it was a long time since Sadler had felt fear or even the tingling of nerves. Maybe it was the difference in their ages. Fifteen years was a long time, especially in this job. But the day would come, Sadler had no doubt, when Palmer would be inspiring his own brand of fear in his subordinates.

'Sorry. I've just had a call. The body of a woman's been found there – at the Wilton Hotel, I mean. Discovered by the chambermaid or whatever they call them now. Maid, cleaning staff, room valet.'

Sadler swallowed his espresso.

'A murder?'

'The forensic team's there now. There's something they want you to look at.'

'And did the forensic team give any clue why they might require our presence?' Sadler threw the small paper cup across the room towards the grey metal bin. It missed. 'Or are they hoping that we build up a sense of anticipation as we travel down to the scene?'

'It was a bit like that.' Palmer slid his eyes towards the bin. 'Shall I get you another to drink in the car?'

Sadler felt the caffeine hit his empty stomach and a warmth spread through him. It didn't extend to his mood. Ignoring Palmer, he grabbed his overcoat and led the way out of the station, noting the quiet around him. The weather was clearly putting the town's regular drunks and other miscreants off their

stride. The desk sergeant was flicking through a copy of *The Sun*.

They hurried to Palmer's car as the stinging wind whipped across the police compound. Sadler glanced at the clouds moving quickly across the sky, mimicking the speeded-up images you sometimes saw on television. No need for artificial trickery in the Derbyshire Peak District though. That spine of rolling hills and gritstone edges that traversed the middle of England ended in Derbyshire, in a landscape of heart-stopping beauty. When you could see it, that was. Because winter mornings in Bampton were, more often than not, shrouded in mist and dusk fell in the mid-afternoon when the shops were still trying to attract reluctant customers. Don't like the weather? Wait five minutes and it will have changed was the maxim here, although Sadler, who had endured the unrelenting cold of the last three winters, was tempted to disagree.

Palmer drove to the hotel with his foot hard on the accelerator as they battled through the wind, the car buffeted by large gusts that caused Sadler to reach for the grab rail above the passenger door. His father's watch clanked against the window and Sadler turned his wrist to protect the precious timepiece.

'Did they really not tell you why they wanted us there?'

Palmer, concentrating on his driving, shook his head and kept his eyes on the road. 'Other than to inform us that the scene had been secured, they wouldn't tell me anything over the phone. Connie's already there, but her phone's engaged.'

'Why didn't she call and tell us what to expect? I don't come into work in the morning to play "guess my latest victim".'

Palmer shrugged, presumably happy to let a detective constable take some of the flak, and Sadler felt his anger subside. The diminutive DC Connie Childs had arrived at Bampton

CID five years earlier with an attitude that more than compensated for her tiny frame. She was local to Derbyshire, which was a bonus when dealing with some of Bampton's residents. Sadler has seen Palmer's Hampshire accent wind up some of the suspects they'd interviewed. Which could be useful on occasions. But equally effective were Connie's local knowledge and recognisable Derbyshire accent. The downside was that both Connie and Palmer recognised their respective strengths, or perhaps weaknesses, and jostled for position within the team. The fact that Palmer was Connie's superior only added to the air of competition that was evident when they were together in his presence. And Sadler occasionally wondered if he didn't need a more easy-going detective on his team to mitigate the egos of both Connie and Palmer. But then a laid-back attitude wasn't what you wanted in a policeman. And certainly not a detective on a murder investigation.

He glanced at Palmer, who was wearing his usual uniform of pale blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up and dark trousers. No jumper. Christ. He must be freezing. Even the expensive-looking coat draped over the back seat wouldn't protect him from the elements.

They reached the centre of town and the wind dropped suddenly, as if they had reached the eye of the storm. Bampton had started off, like many others in England, as a place of trade. Tourists were often surprised to find that the picturesque Peak town also supported working businesses, a continual gripe with locals trying to find parking spaces during the summer. A cattle market had been in existence since 1309, but Bampton's pinnacle had been during the nineteenth century when a canal had been built to facilitate the movement of goods in and out of the

town. The canal had carried coal from the mine thirty miles south and limestone from the nearby quarries. The fact that it had now become a tourist stop had only added to Bampton's image of itself. An air of self-satisfaction was the legacy of its affluent Victorian heritage.

At the main square, Palmer switched off the engine and in the silence they watched as light snow began to fall, the now fragile breeze teasing the flakes up and around the gloomy afternoon, not allowing it to settle. Sadler could see the wind sweeping snow off the hills to the north of the town and people were hurrying through the streets trying to reach their destinations before the weather worsened.

'It's depressing. Winter here, I mean. You should have mentioned it as a disclaimer when you interviewed me for the job. Something along the lines of "working hazards – coping with Derbyshire in the winter"'.

Sadler smiled as he looked out of the window. 'You know what it's like when tourists arrive in the summer. You won't be driving like that behind a car full of sightseers.'

Through the frosting glass, Sadler watched a man in a suit standing outside the Wilton Hotel looking anxiously around him, oblivious to the weather. Sadler could see no evidence of any police cars. They must have put them round the back of the hotel, suggesting a lack of urgency. But if it was a natural death, why were they calling in CID? In his experience, people often died in hotel rooms, in the same way that they frequently died in their beds elsewhere.

Palmer was looking up at the facade of the building. 'It's a nice hotel.'

'It was once. It was called the Needham Arms and you could

go and have a pint or a cup of coffee with your walking boots on. There was a quiz night on a Monday, too.'

Palmer was smiling. Sadler hoped it wasn't at him.

'What happened?'

'The family sold up.'

Sadler knew this, not because he kept pace with the town's gossip, but because there had been more concrete accusations of embezzlement levelled against one of the three daughters. Nothing proved but enough to hasten the family's departure to pastures new.

'Who owns it now?'

'The Wilton brothers, based in London.'

Sadler felt the niggle of irritation. The two entrepreneurs had stripped the building of its centuries-old name and had rebranded it after themselves, in Sadler's estimation an act of gross self-regard. His architect father would have been more appalled by what they had done to the interior, stripping the Grade II listed building bare, as far as planning had let them, and reopening it as an upmarket boutique hotel. The quiz night had found other premises.

'And it's not haunted.' He opened the car door and looked back at Palmer. 'Although God knows what that's got to do with anything.' He could see the man in the suit making a beeline for him.

'DI Sadler? I'm George Poole, the manager here. Perhaps I could have a word with you in private first.'

Sadler looked past the man to the lobby of the hotel. Connie Childs was standing just inside the doorway and was talking on her mobile.

'Not now. I'll talk to you later.' Sadler made his way up

the front steps, feeling for ice underfoot.

Connie, seeing him approach, put her hand over her mobile and said, 'Sir, a word?'

This time Sadler did stop.

'It's the body of an elderly woman. Suicide, I think. An empty packet of diazepam was found on the bedside table. Ten milligram. And a vodka bottle. Only a quarter full. If she took them together, it's no wonder she never woke up.'

'Worth me taking a look? I presume there's a reason that three of us are standing here on a freezing afternoon.'

Connie nodded towards the stairs leading to the bedrooms. 'She left something by the bedside. You ought to see that at least.'

Sadler turned and started up the stairs. Along the galleried landing, the hive of activity was centred on a room to the far right. Over the banister, he could see a cluster of guests gathered in a doorway below, gawping up at him. He took the overalls proffered by a member of the forensics team, slipped them on and entered the room. It was bathed in a claustrophobic gloom and was icy cold – someone had turned off the radiators. The small room was dominated by a huge king-size bed with the woman lying on the left-hand side. She was on her back with her mouth slightly open. Pale and very thin, Sadler guessed she was in her late sixties. She wasn't dressed for bed, wearing instead a light woollen dress that reached below her knees. Flesh-coloured nylon tights covered her spindly legs, but she had nothing on her feet. Sadler could see a pair of blue court shoes laid neatly in the corner of the room, but no evidence of an overnight bag.

The bedside table was now clear and only the fingerprint powder remained, with indentations where the pills and vodka had lain. The police photographer was taking pictures of a

large book on the chest of drawers near the window and Sadler moved closer.

'Can I take a look?'

The man stepped back and Sadler leaned over. Careful not to alter the position of the book he flicked through the pages, the latex gloves making his fingers clumsy. It was a photograph album, each page covered with thin, sticky transparent film. Instead of photos, inserted into the album were newspaper cuttings, yellowed and spotted with age. Sadler flicked through the pages, noting the content of the articles.

'Where was the book left open?'

The photographer flipped to a page near the back of the album and pointed at the headline.

*

Connie had disappeared from the reception area, but Palmer, who was still trying to placate the hotel manager, indicated with his head that she was out on the front steps. The snow was falling hard now and Connie had put on a soft beret style hat that was covered in a sprinkling of white. Sadler braced himself against the weather as he went out to join her. Connie turned round and he noticed that she was smoking a cigarette. She saw him looking.

'I've just started again. Cut out the drink and started on the cigarettes.'

'It doesn't have to be one or the other.' Sadler smiled to soften the words, but he saw a flash of annoyance in her eyes.

'Did you see the album?' Connie drew deeply on her cigarette.

'Yes.'

'Mean anything to you?'

Sadler shrugged. 'I know the case, of course. I was a boy then, but I can remember it on the news.'

'Who investigated it here?' Connie was peering around the empty square. The police cordon had just been put up and this, combined with the weather, had put off all but the most serious gawkers.

'No idea. Way before my time. Superintendent Llewellyn might know. Although it could be before his time too. I'll give him a call. I need to update him. Was there a name on the packet of pills?'

Connie stamped her half-smoked cigarette out on the ground. 'Yvonne Jenkins.'

'Yvonne Jenkins, mother of Sophie Jenkins.'

'Why do you think that she chose to commit suicide now? After all these years. Why wait this long?'

'I don't know. Maybe it was fear of facing old age alone. Maybe she just gave up. It doesn't really matter as far as we're concerned. We just need to satisfy ourselves that it was suicide.'

'What about the old case? I mean, sometimes these things are reopened, aren't they?'

Sadler looked out across the whitening square. 'I don't think it was ever closed.'