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Opening Extract from...

The Killing of Polly Carter

Written by Robert Thorogood

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Prologue

Detective Inspector Richard Poole sat on the verandah of his beachside shack looking up at the cloudless Caribbean sky in inarticulate outrage.

A passing parrot had just crapped in his cup of tea.

It didn't seem possible, but Richard had watched the little bugger fly in over the sea and defecate in mid-air, the little ball of released guano flying in a perfect parabola only to land in his English Breakfast Tea with an accuracy, Richard realised, that Barnes Wallis could only have dreamed of.

In a spasm of disgust, Richard sloshed the contents of his china cup over the balustrade and tried to return his attention to the book he'd been reading. It was an old hardback he'd found at the back of the police station called *A Field Guide to the Insects of the Caribbean*, and he'd been fascinated by what he'd so far been able to learn

from it. For example, he'd had no idea that the brightest bioluminescent insect in the world wasn't in fact the firefly, but was a species of click beetle that lived in the Caribbean called the Fire Beetle.

But it was no good, Richard couldn't settle back into his book, and instead he found himself glancing nervously back up at the sky every few seconds. After all, what if another parrot came for him out of the sun? Richard sighed heavily to himself. Honestly, when you got down to it, the Caribbean was a bloody nightmare from start to finish.

It didn't help that he had already been in a bad mood that morning, even before the aerial bombardment. This was because Richard had a secret. A deep and dark secret he'd not even dared mention to his team yet. In fact, as he went through to the little galley kitchen at the back of his shack to wash up his tea things, Richard decided that there surely couldn't have been another person on the whole island of Saint-Marie who was having as miserable a morning as him.

But he was wrong. There was someone.

This was because, just a few miles further along the coastline, a woman called Polly Carter was sitting in her kitchen wearing a bright yellow summer dress, drinking a freshly pressed glass of mango juice, and smoking a cigarette—and although she didn't know it yet, she only had a few minutes left to live.

Polly was forty years old and a fashion model famous the world over for a look that in person could come across as gawky inelegance, but, in photographs, translated into

a gap-toothed beauty. Her face had adorned billboards, magazine covers, and a rock group had once written a chart-topping record lionising her looks. Not that Polly took much notice of the hubbub that surrounded her life any more. She'd been trawling up and down catwalks since she was twenty-two years old, she'd earned more money than she'd ever dreamed—had spent even more—and all she wanted now was a break from it all. Which, ironically, she was about to get.

The door to the kitchen banged open, and Polly's wheelchair-bound sister Claire was pushed into the room by her nurse, Sophie.

Claire and Polly were twins, although Claire was the older of the two by a few minutes. This should have created a special bond between the two sisters, but Claire was one of those older siblings who felt that it was her seniority that defined her entire relationship with her sister. So, because Polly was naturally impetuous, irresponsible, and had a wicked sense of humour, Claire was superior, overly responsible and felt that life was nothing to laugh about. This outlook was sharpened further by the fact that, following a riding accident ten years ago, Claire no longer had the use of her legs. It was no consolation to Claire that although she and her sister were non-identical, she was blessed with an uncanny beauty very similar to her famous sister's. But then, as Claire would remark to anyone who cared to listen, her and her sister Polly's supposed good looks only ever seemed to become apparent in fashion photographs, and who ever took fashion photographs of a cripple?

‘Well this is a first, you’re already up,’ Claire said to Polly as Sophie finished pushing her over to the breakfast bar.

‘Is that so surprising?’ Polly asked, briefly thrown by her sister’s tone.

‘Well, you don’t normally get up before lunchtime, so yes, I’d say it was a surprise.’

Polly was affronted.

‘I don’t just laze about all day, you know.’

‘Oh you don’t, do you?’ Claire said with a disdainful laugh, and Polly looked at her sister a long moment before—very slowly—plucking another cigarette from the battered pack on the table and lighting it.

Once she’d taken a long, rasping drag from her cigarette, Polly said, ‘Look, if you must know, I only got up this morning so I could spend some time with you.’

‘Ha! Well, that’s a first,’ Claire said, still unable to take her sister at all seriously.

Claire’s nurse, Sophie Wessel, was used to how Claire bickered with her sister Polly—and vice versa—so she tuned the two women out while she made some coffee for herself and Claire. It wasn’t in her job description to make drinks for her client, but Sophie had soon learnt that Claire was one of those people who not only expected her nurse to push her wheelchair and help with all of the tasks she wasn’t capable of doing herself, but she also felt that Sophie should act as her personal assistant and lackey.

Once Sophie had pushed the plunger down on the cafetière, she turned back to the room only to see Polly wheeling Claire out of the kitchen door and into the garden.

‘Would you like a coffee?’ Sophie asked the sisters before they left the room.

‘No thanks,’ Claire said. ‘Polly says she wants to take me for a walk in the garden.’

‘You do?’ Sophie said, surprised. She and Claire had been house guests of Polly’s for the last ten days, and Polly hadn’t once offered to push her sister’s wheelchair in all that time.

‘I do,’ Polly said with a tone that made it clear she expected Sophie to back off.

Sophie didn’t want to get in between the two sisters, but pushing a wheelchair wasn’t easy.

‘No, really,’ she said. ‘Let me push Claire for you.’

‘I said I’d be fine,’ Polly said, irritation flashing in her eyes.

Sophie looked at Claire for guidance, but Claire just shrugged. She didn’t seem to care one way or another. So Sophie kept silent as Polly pushed her sister out into the garden.

Once she’d been left on her own, Sophie finished pouring herself a cup of coffee, left the kitchen and went into the main hallway of the house. It was a large space with a wide wooden staircase that swept up to a minstrel’s gallery that went around all four walls of the house, and led onto the various bedrooms, bathrooms and private suites upstairs.

But as she entered the hallway, Sophie hung back in the shadows because Polly’s agent, Max Brandon, was already heading up the stairs, a bunch of files and papers clutched in his hands. Max was a thin man in his early

fifties who was wearing round sunglasses with yellow lenses, a midnight-blue velvet jacket and burgundy cord trousers, and Sophie suspected he dyed his hair to keep it so lustrously black.

Sophie didn't much like him, but she made herself say, 'Good morning, Max,' to his retreating back. Fortunately for Sophie, Max didn't hear her—or pretended that he didn't hear her—and she watched him head up to the top of the stairs and disappear, she presumed, to his bedroom. Sophie was about to head for the stairs herself when she heard a shout from outside.

It sounded like a woman's voice.

Sophie looked through the large picture windows that overlooked the garden and saw Polly standing at the far end of the lawn shouting at Claire in her wheelchair. Sophie couldn't hear exactly what was being said, but it was clear that Polly was angry with her sister about something.

Sophie knew that while it was one thing for the sisters to be irritable in each other's company, it was quite another for the able-bodied Polly to take her wheelchair-bound sister into the garden and then start shouting at her.

There was a doorway in the corner of the hall that led straight onto the garden and Sophie went through it to see if she could intervene, but as soon as she crunched out onto the gravel path outside, Polly looked over at her. She then grabbed hold of the handles of Claire's wheelchair and pushed her further into the garden, soon disappearing beyond a large clump of bushes.

Sophie briefly hesitated. Polly's house—mansion, really—was built high on a bluff above the ocean, and

Sophie knew that the direction that Polly had taken Claire led to a sheer cliff face that protected a horseshoe-shaped bay and private beach far below. Sophie started across the lawn, but before she'd even gone half a dozen steps she very distinctly heard Claire shout 'Stop it!' from beyond the bushes.

Sophie looked back at the house. Had no one else heard or seen anything? It was hard to see if anyone was even looking out, such was the glare of reflected sunshine from the windows, but Sophie caught a movement at one of the upstairs windows. *Someone* was looking out at the garden, even though this person was in shadow, and she couldn't quite tell who it was.

A woman's scream pierced the air. Sophie's head whipped round. The scream had come from beyond the bushes in the direction of the cliff.

Sophie then very distinctly heard Claire shout, 'Oh dear God, someone help!'

Sophie broke into a run, and, as she got past the bushes, she could see Claire sitting in her wheelchair over by the top of the cliff where steps led down the cliff face to the beach below.

As for Polly, she was nowhere to be seen.

'Help me!' Claire screamed as Sophie approached. 'She just jumped!'

Claire turned her wheelchair away from Sophie and started racing off along the curve of the cliff's edge as it swept around the bay.

'What's going on?' Sophie asked as soon as she caught up with Claire.

‘I couldn’t follow her, she ran down the steps!’

As Sophie looked down to the beach far below, she finally understood why Claire had been pushing herself so desperately along. It was only this far around the curve of the cliff top that it was possible to look back and see the stone steps that ran in loose zig-zagging flights from the top of the cliff all the way down to the private beach a hundred or so feet below.

There was a body lying in the sand at the base of the cliff.

A body that was wearing the same bright yellow dress that Polly Carter had been wearing only moments earlier.

Sophie turned to look at Claire and saw that she was physically shaking, and her eyes were wide and staring as she replied, ‘She said I was evil, she said I’d ruined her life...’ Claire took a sharp intake of breath to allow herself to finish her sentence. ‘She said she was going to end her life.’

‘What?’

‘She said it was all my fault. That she was going to end her life. And then she ran down the steps and jumped!’

Sophie knew that Claire could wait. As a trained nurse, she was needed elsewhere.

‘Don’t move,’ she said, before starting to sprint back along the cliff top, her breath loud in her ears as she pumped her arms hard, knowing that every second of delay could be critical. She had to get to Polly.

Reaching the stairs that led down to the beach, Sophie didn’t stop to think, she just barrelled down them—taking the uneven stone steps two at a time as she careened

down the cliff, her arms out wide for balance, until her flip-flopped feet finally slapped onto the hard white sand far below.

Sophie took a moment to recover her breath. She then looked around to see if there was anyone nearby who could help, but the beach was entirely empty, perhaps unsurprisingly so. At this time in the morning, everyone else was almost certainly back at the house.

But Sophie could see that the body in the yellow dress was lying near the base of the cliff about thirty feet away.

It was Polly. And she wasn't moving.

Sophie strode across the sand as quickly as she could, but even as she approached the body, she could see that Polly's legs were splayed at an almost unnatural angle—she had an arm jammed under her body—and her eyes were closed.

Sophie bent down, put two fingers to Polly's neck and tried to find a pulse.

There wasn't one.

Sophie gulped.

She stepped back, looked back up to the top of the cliff and saw the tiny figure of Claire still looking down from her wheelchair.

Sophie cupped her hands to her mouth and shouted up, 'We need an ambulance! At once!'

At the same time that Claire pushed herself back to the house and Sophie turned the body of Polly Carter over to see if she could begin to administer CPR, Richard Poole

was inside his shack having a shower. Or rather, in a world where the shower mixer provided him with periods of cold water interspersed with impossible-to-judge periods of water so hot it could sear skin, he was trying to time his dips into the shower so that he could wash his hair without getting third-degree burns. And it was just as he was waiting for the next pulse of boiling water to hit him—with his eyes scrunched up against the shampoo already dripping down his face—that Richard felt something skitter up his leg and then stop at his knee.

Richard froze.

There was a creature on his leg. And he was completely naked. His hand reached ever-so-slowly for his towel so he could wipe the soap from his eyes and finally see what stinging scorpion or venomous spider had just run up his leg. But before he could reach his towel, the creature started running upwards again and Richard opened his eyes against the screaming pain of soap, saw a bright green lizard racing up his thigh—a lizard that Richard had been sharing his shack with ever since he'd first arrived on the island, and who, in more innocent times, he'd thought it would be amusing to name Harry—but before the creature could reach the danger area of Richard's groin, he grabbed up his towel, swiped, missed, slipped on some soap, and fell arse over tip to the floor.

As Richard lay bruised and panting on the floor of his shower room under a stream of water that was sometimes freezing cold and at other times boiling hot, the sting of soap still in his eyes, and with a crushing sense of defeat from being once again outwitted by a reptile only eight

inches long, he decided that yes, now he was surely the unluckiest person on the whole island of Saint-Marie that day.

And he was still wrong. Because that honour belonged to the world-famous supermodel, Polly Carter.

Because it was the day she was pushed from the top of a cliff, fell nearly a hundred feet to the hard sand below, and broke her spine and neck on impact, dying instantly.

It was the day Polly Carter was murdered.