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Strangers

Written by Paul Finch

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For my Dad, Brian, who never lived to see any of my published novels, but who if he had would have been 80 this year. You were always the spark, Dad. You lit the flame that burns in these books.

Prologue

Four years ago . . .

Michael Haygarth didn't look much like a man who'd raped and murdered two women, but then Lucy had already learned that there was no set physiology for the deranged. He sat on the bench opposite her in the rear of the unmarked police van. Throughout the journey here he'd remained perfectly still, his head hanging low as though the muscles in his neck and shoulders couldn't support it.

It was an awkward posture. Haygarth was tall, about six-four, but lanky too, and, folded into this confined space, his sharp-tipped knees came almost to his chest. He was somewhere in his forties, she surmised, though she couldn't be sure exactly, and balding, what little hair he had left around the back and sides shaved to grey bristles. His skin was brownish, tanned – as if he'd spent time abroad or maybe was of mixed-race, though apparently neither of those applied. With his weak chin, snub nose and buck teeth, he had a rodent-like aspect, and yet there was something oddly innocent about him. From his glazed eyes and vacant expression you'd have wondered if he wasn't all there. There was

certainly no hint of violence in his demeanour. Rather than a murder suspect, he looked the sort of hopeless, unemployed oddball who'd sit on park benches all day.

And yet he'd confessed. Under no duress whatsoever.

With a *crunch* of brakes, the van ground to a halt, presumably on the unmade track leading into Borsdane Wood, though it was impossible to be sure because the only windows in the rear of the van were small, mesh-filled panels set in its back doors, and only gloom penetrated past these, unaided by their dim, smeary glass. There was muffled movement as the other detectives crammed into the back of the vehicle stirred. Metal bumped and clanked as they sorted through the pile of spades and picks lying along the riveted steel floor.

The van's back doors were yanked open from the outside. Frigid air flowed in, smoky breath weaving around the tall, lean form of DI Doyle and the shorter, stumpier figure of DS Crellin. They'd already donned their white Tyvek coveralls and disposable gloves, and now stood with torches in hand.

'Michael, it's your time,' Doyle said, flipping open her pocketbook. 'I've got all your instructions written down. But I want to confirm them with you. We're at the end of this track now, where the bollards are . . . so we go on foot from here, approximately forty paces north, yes?'

'Yes, ma'am,' Haygarth replied in his wavering, flutelike voice, still not looking up.

'We go that way until we come to an old rotted log lying crosswise on our path, correct?'

'That's right, ma'am.'

'From there, we walk thirty paces west . . . until the ground slopes upward?'

'Yes.'

'We don't ascend the slope, but navigate along the base of it for another fifty paces . . . until we come to a clump of silver birch.'

'They're not all silver birch, ma'am.' He still didn't look up, but his words were slow, thoughtful. 'But there's a few silver birch in there. You won't be able to miss it.'

'Let's hope not, Michael . . . for all our sakes. There's a clearing in the middle of this clump, somewhat unnatural because you cleared it out yourself some time ago. And that's where the two graves are?'

'Correct, ma'am.'

'How deep did you say you buried them again?'

'A foot or so. You'll find both bodies in a few minutes.'

The officers pondered this in silence. Haygarth was in custody for the rape and attempted murder of the seventy-five year old woman who lived next door to him. The admission that he'd raped and strangled two prostitutes three years earlier and had buried their bodies out in Borsdane Wood was unlooked for and had come completely out of the blue during the course of his very first interview. At the time, no one had known what to make of it, but a rapid-fire check on the system had revealed that in roughly the same time-zone two Crowley-based sex workers, a Gillian Allen and Donna King, had been listed as missing persons. No trace of them had been found since.

'One final thought on this, Michael,' Doyle said, voice clipped and stern. 'If we get lost, we'll come back for you so you can show us the location in person. But I warn you now . . . I won't be impressed if that's the case. These directions had better be good.'

'They're right, ma'am. You'll find it.'

Doyle backed away, Crellin alongside her as the rest of the team lumbered to the doors. Lucy, who was handcuffed to the prisoner, had to change position first, switching across the interior to sit next to him. One by one, the rest of the team, now armed with shovels and spades, jumped down outside, where Crellin handed them each a set of overalls.

'No shoe covers till we get to the actual scene,' Doyle

said. 'We'll be tramping through God knows what kind of crap before we reach it.'

In the milky twilight of this dull February evening, the wood was a leafless tangle, the unmade road snaking back away from them beneath a roof of wet, black branches. Lucy glanced at her watch. Just before five. Another forty minutes and it would be pitch-dark. Unless they'd already uncovered physical evidence by then – in which case the entire arc-lit circus would be summoned – there'd be nothing else they could do until morning, which perhaps explained why everyone was in a hurry, Crellin's voice issuing gruff instructions as the sound of their boot-falls receded.

Only Lucy and DI Mandy Doyle now remained.

She was an odd-looking woman, Doyle: tall, lean of build, pinched of face and often dressed messily in skirts, blouses and jackets that never seemed to match. She walked with a slight stoop and had longish, straggly brown hair streaked with grey, all of which combined to make her look older than she probably was, which couldn't have been much more than thirty-five. In particular, Lucy found her attitude puzzling. A woman who'd fought her way up through the ranks, one might have thought she'd welcome the arrival of a young female officer on her first CID attachment, but from the outset Doyle had seemed to find Lucy's presence frustrating.

'She just wants to get ahead,' Crellin had confided in Lucy earlier that week. 'She doesn't feel she's got the time to break in trainees.'

'I'm not exactly a trainee, sarge,' Lucy had protested. 'I've been six years in uniform.'

'Sure, sure . . . you don't have to convince me. But Mandy's a bit funny like that. She's got this idea that the team's only as strong as its weakest link. If you're going to work with us, she'll expect you to pull your weight.'

'I'll pull my weight, don't worry.'

'I know that, I've seen your record.' He'd winked. 'And I'm sure Mandy knows it too.'

Lucy was less sure about *that*. Especially at present.

'Hang onto this fella like your life depends on it, Detective Constable Clayburn,' Doyle said, her limpid gaze flicking from Lucy to the prisoner and back again. There was rarely a hint of friendship in her voice, but on this occasion her tone was especially ominous. 'Though I suppose we mustn't exaggerate . . . it isn't your life as much as your job. Because for the next hour at least this suspect is *your* responsibility. Do I make myself clear?'

'Perfectly, ma'am,' Lucy replied, straightening up dutifully, but irritated to be addressed this way in front of Haygarth, who gave no indication that he was listening but could hardly have failed to overhear.

Doyle droned on in the same menacing monotone, as if she hadn't received any such reassurance. 'Be warned . . . if anything happens while we're over there digging, anything at all – your fault, his fault, the fault of some squirrel because he distracted you by shitting on the roof – it doesn't matter. Anything happens while we're away that is prejudicial to this enquiry, *you* will carry the can. And if, by any very unfortunate circumstance, you manage to lose him, well –' Doyle cracked a half-smile, though typically it was devoid of humour '– in that case, the best thing you can do is sneak off home and send us your resignation by snail-mail.'

'I understand, ma'am,' Lucy said.

'Don't engage him in conversation. If he tries to talk to you, just tell him to shut up. If he tries anything fancy, and he gets out of hand . . . remember, you've got your radio and we're only a hundred yards away. You've also got Alan in the driving cab . . . you only need to shout and he'll come running.'

Alan Denning was one of the bigger, beefier detectives in Crowley CID. He was thinning on top, but had a thick red

moustache and beard, and the meanest eyes Lucy had ever seen. If it kicked off, he looked as if he'd be more than useful. But in truth the last thing they needed was for something bad to happen. Haygarth hadn't been charged with anything yet, but assuming it all went as planned, he'd be facing lots and lots of prison time, and though he might be acquiescent now – perhaps struggling to come to terms with what he'd done to the harmless OAP next door – in due course he'd realise the big trouble he was in. So at all costs they needed to avoid handing him something his legal reps could use as leverage, such as an injury. It didn't matter whether it was inflicted on him in self-defence or in an effort to prevent him escaping, any time police officers assaulted suspects these days it exponentially increased said suspect's chance of walking free.

'But I don't think you're going to try anything silly, are you, Michael?' Doyle said.

Haygarth didn't reply. His head still hung; his posture was so still it was almost creepy.

Lucy, on the other hand, was churning inside. It wasn't just the embarrassing warning she'd been issued. Even without that, it had now dawned on her how serious this shift was turning out to be. The strange, distant man linked to her right wrist might actually be a multiple killer. It was unnerving, but it was exciting too. After several years in uniform spent ticketing cars, chasing problem teenagers and nicking shoplifters, *this* was what she'd really joined for, *this* was why she'd applied again and again for a CID post.

'Michael, can you hear me?' Doyle persisted.

'Uh?' Haygarth glanced up. As before, he only seemed half aware what was going on. 'Erm . . . yes, ma'am.'

'Yes what?'

'Yes, I'll be good.'

In actual fact, Lucy didn't think the guy would pose much of a threat even if he wasn't. He was tall, but rail-thin,

whereas she, who was about twenty years younger, was in the best shape of her life. Okay, she didn't represent the Greater Manchester Police women's hockey and squash teams any more, but she regularly ran, swam and visited the gym.

'Excellent,' Doyle said. 'That's all I needed to know, Michael. You play fair with us, and we'll play fair with you.' She turned back to Lucy. 'Remember what I said, DC Clayburn.'

'Certainly will, ma'am,' Lucy replied.

The DI made no further comment, just slowly and purposefully closed the doors to the van. For what seemed like a minute, her trudging footfalls diminished into the woods. After that, there was only stillness, though other sounds gradually became audible: a faint metallic clicking as the engine cooled; the hiss of dead air on the police radio; the dull but distinctive murmur of music and voices from the cab at the front, most likely Radio One. Beyond all that, the silence in the encircling trees was oppressive. Borsdane Wood wasn't as idyllic as it might sound, covering several hundred acres of abandoned industrial land on the town's northern outskirts, not far from the old power station and sewage plant, and ultimately terminating at the M61 motorway. In summer it was trackless and overgrown, and in winter bleak and isolated. Bottles, beer cans and other rubbish routinely strewed its clearings; more than once, drugs paraphernalia had been found. No one ever came here for picnics.

Lucy rubbed her gloved hands together. The temperature inside the van was noticeably dwindling, mainly because the engine had been switched off so the heating had deactivated. She glanced sidelong at Haygarth. Someone had given him a coat to wear over the white custody tracksuit, but if he was feeling any chill, he wasn't showing it. His head still hung, while his hands, which looked overlarge and knobbly at the ends of his long, thin wrists, were clasped together as though in penitential prayer.

This had certainly been his attitude since DI Doyle had arrested him earlier that day. It wasn't unknown for violent criminals to occasionally feel guilty, or even to turn themselves in through remorse. Others coughed because their life outside prison had become unendurable, because they needed a more stable and disciplined regime. But neither of those possibilities struck Lucy as a given where Michael Haygarth was concerned. Perhaps they might if his only offence had been to attack the lady next door, but the conscience thing didn't seem quite so likely when you considered that up until now he'd been happily sitting on the deaths of two other women.

Unexpectedly, he looked up and around. 'Ma'am . . . I, erm . . .' His eyes widened, in fact bugged, while his wet mouth had screwed itself out of shape as if he suddenly felt distressed about something.

'Best not to talk, Michael.' Lucy refused to make eye contact with him. 'It's for your own good.'

'But . . . I need to relieve myself.'

'You'll have to wait, I'm afraid.'

'Seriously . . . don't think I can. Didn't Miss Doyle say they might be an hour or more?'

'It's honestly best if we don't talk.'

'But this is ridiculous.' His voice thickened with feeling as he stared down at the floor again. It was his first show of emotion in several hours, since he'd been arrested in fact, and yet still there was that air of the pathetic about him, of the beaten.

'Michael . . . it's just not possible at the moment,' Lucy said, angry with herself for having started conversing with him.

'All I want is a toilet break, and . . . now you're not letting me have one.'

'You never mentioned you needed a break back at the nick.'

'I didn't need one then.'

'We've only been out here ten bloody minutes.'

'Sorry, but I can't help it. It's all that tea you kept pouring down my throat in the interview room.'

'Just try and wait, Michael . . . you're not a kid.'

But he now sat stiffly upright, his face etched with discomfort. 'What if I released it down my leg and messed your van up, eh? All because I couldn't hold it? I bet you'd have a right go at me, wouldn't you?'

Lucy thought long and hard.

It wouldn't be the first time a prisoner had urinated on her, and quite often that had happened inside the back of a police vehicle. It wasn't always their fault; some of them were losers in so many aspects of life. And it wasn't as if clothing couldn't go in the wash or that she herself couldn't just step under a warm shower. But it always took so long to get the smell out of the car or van. This was a pool vehicle, of course, and different officers would drive it every day, so it wouldn't solely be her problem . . . except that she was the one who'd get blamed for it, and on top of that, she'd be stuck in here tonight with the stink for God knew how long.

'They probably won't be more than an hour,' she said, though it was as much an attempt to convince herself as Haygarth, and in that regard it didn't work.

Most likely they'd be much more than an hour. They might even be several hours.

He muttered something else, his voice turning hoarse. She noticed that his bony knees, formerly wide apart, were squeezed together. He'd begun twitching, fidgeting.

Could it really do any harm?

'Alright,' she said reluctantly. 'We go outside and you pee against the nearest tree, but you'll have to do it one-handed because you're staying cuffed.'

'That's fine.' He sounded relieved and waited patiently while Lucy reached down, found the release lever on the door and flipped it upright.

If Alan Denning in the cab heard the *clunk* of the rear locks disengaging, he didn't respond. Most likely, he couldn't hear it with what sounded like Rhianna blaring away. Lucy thought to call him anyway, for the purpose of extra security, but decided that Denning, being the epitome of the big, unfeeling, hairy-arsed male copper, would most likely respond with: 'Don't be so soft, Clayburn! Make him fucking wait! He can tie a fucking knot in it!' Or something similarly enlightened.

She kept her mouth shut as she climbed out onto the road, Haygarth following, grit and twigs crunching under their feet. Proper darkness now enveloped the woods, the source of the constant dripping and pattering completely invisible. Lucy's torch had been purloined by one of the others, but there was sufficient light spilling from the back of the van to show the nearest tree-trunk, a glinting black/green pillar standing on the verge about five yards away, with a huge hollow some eight feet up it, where a knot had fallen out. Haygarth made a beeline towards it, but Lucy stopped him, first peering down the length of the van to see if anyone else on the team was hanging around at the front, maybe having a smoke. From what she could see, there was no one. The glow of the headlights speared forward, delineating the concrete bollards that signified the end of the track. Those too sparkled with moisture. Beyond them lay a dense mesh of sepia-brown undergrowth. Nothing moved.

'Okay,' she said, proceeding to the tree. 'This'll do. Make it quick.'

Haygarth grunted with gratitude as he assumed the position. Lucy stood alongside him, but turned her shoulder so that, even by accident, she couldn't glance down and catch sight of anything. It fleetingly occurred to her that, given,

Haygarth's alleged form, this voluntary blindsiding of herself might not be the wisest policy, but it was done now, and he had the air of a broken man in any case – plus Alan Denning was only a shout away.

She heard Haygarth sigh as liquid splashed gently down the bole of the tree.

'That's much better,' he mumbled. 'God, I've been waiting for this.'

'DC Clayburn, what the hell's going on?'

Lucy turned, surprised. Behind the blob of torchlight approaching from beyond the bollards there was an indistinct figure, but she knew who it was. The clumsy, slightly stooped gait was the main giveaway, but the harsh, humourless voice was added proof.

'Ma'am, the prisoner . . .' Lucy's words tailed off as everything suddenly seemed to go wrong at once.

First, she sensed movement alongside her. When she glanced around, Haygarth, who was six foot four – and with one arm extended upward could reach to nearly nine feet – was rooting inside the tree-trunk cavity.

'What're you . . .?' she said, fleetingly baffled.

Next, DI Doyle ran forward. At the same time, with a metallic thud, a driving-cab door swung open in response. Then there was a plasticky *crackle*, and Haygarth laughed, or rather giggled – it was a hyena-like sound rather than human.

Lucy tried to grab his arm, but he barged into her with his left shoulder, knocking her off balance. And now the object he'd been groping for inside the tree came into view. It was only small, but it had been swathed in a supermarket wrapper to protect it, so its make and model were concealed. And it was anyone's guess what calibre it was.

As Lucy fell to the ground, he swung the object around. Its first booming report took out Doyle's torch. She was only about ten yards away, but her light vanished with a *PLOK*.