A Fatal Silence (extract)
A Detective Kay Hunter crime thriller
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Chapter One

It was the morning after the night before when they found the mutilated body.

The park was quiet at seven o'clock, a stark contrast to the bright lights and pounding music that had filled the air until six hours ago.

The two enormous stages that had been built over two days last week were silent, the U-shaped lighting rigs arcing above them darkened, and – mercifully, given the antics of the Australian band that had taken to the international stage and delivered a Friday night headlining act that was all over social media this morning – scrubbed clean of dried-up exploding foam and streams of toilet tissue.

Now, the soft chirrup of larks carried on the light summer breeze at the far end of the undulating parkland, punctuated by the rhythmic *tap-tap-tap* of a woodpecker.

A soft hue of pink and blue hugged the horizon, muting the harshest of the sun's rays for a few hours and casting a soft dew across long grass that threatened to wither if the heatwave continued any longer than the weekend.

Lilac and ghost-like white petals dotted the grass, with wild clover thriving alongside vetch and yarrow to create a heady scent that attracted a myriad of insects that happily buzzed amongst the foliage despite the dive-bombing antics of swifts and chaffinches. Tall horse chestnut and beech trees cast dappled shadows across the old carriage paths that criss-crossed the undulating landscape of the old country estate, the bases of their sturdy trunks littered with empty beer cans.

In the distance, over by the car park, a dozen or so uniformed police officers fresh out of training milled around one of the food wagons that was doing a brisk trade in strong coffee and bacon sandwiches, the aroma of Arabica beans and grease wafting over the slumbering festival-goers.

A thin line of ragtag T-shirt-clad twenty-somethings eyed them suspiciously from their position next to the opening of a drugs advisory charity's tent until their attention was taken by a young woman emerging, her slight frame enveloped into a reassuring hug by the nearest male before she was led away.

The campsite next to the car park began as a sprawling rainbow of polyester tents in all different shapes and sizes that, after a few hundred metres, gave way to the more expensive pitches and purpose-built luxury end of the accommodation options. Here, billowing white canvas housed double beds and en suite bathrooms, bespoke thick woollen rugs lining the waterproof flooring.

The police constables were soon joined by a group of St John's Ambulance volunteers, a mixture of bright orange and yellow high-visibility vests jostling for position next to the trestle tables laid out with complimentary sugar sachets and wooden stirring sticks.

More crap to pick up later, then.

Andrew Bressett turned his back on the temporary stages and towering lighting rigs, clucking under his breath as he used a pair of extendable aluminium tongs to fish another spent cigarette butt out from under a thorny shrub.

He wrinkled his nose, then dropped the offending article into the black bin liner he carried.

The gloves he wore provided a modicum of protection from sharp objects and germs but, like yesterday, he would slather his hands with antiseptic soap once he and the other volunteers were done here.

'Jesus, another bloody needle.'

He turned at the woman's voice, and saw Susie Hinsen clasping a spent syringe carefully between her gloved fingers.

'Lewis has got the biohazard bin,' he said. 'I've already found three this morning.'

'I'm winning – this is my fifth.' She beckoned to a stooped man in his sixties farther along the path and waited until he joined them. 'Thanks, Lewis. I thought everyone was taking pills these days anyway?'

'Different generations,' said Andrew. 'I heard one of the first aiders saying yesterday that the older ones still go for needles, and the younger ones are too scared. They think the pills are the safer option.'

Susie rolled her eyes in response, then popped the needle through the letterbox-shaped hole in the top of the box and gave Lewis a grateful smile. 'How's your back holding up?'

'Okay.' The sixty-something shook the biohazard bin, rattling the contents. 'I'm going to go and empty this.'

Andrew watched while the older man shuffled away, shielding his eyes against the glare off the car windscreens. 'Remind me again why I agreed to do this? I could be in Brighton, windsurfing right now.'

'Because you love me.' Susie raised herself on her tiptoes, kissed him and then grinned. 'Besides, there isn't enough wind.'

'Not here.' He wiped his forehead with the back of his arm, then eyed the path snaking off around two beech trees before disappearing over a slight rise in the grass. 'Another twenty minutes, then we'll head back and get some water, sound good?'

'Works for me. The first band won't be on until ten anyway so we could probably get another hour done before then.'

Andrew groaned. 'Great.'

He trudged after her, the steel-capped safety boots she insisted he wore scraping the dry earth and weighing down his feet that were already sweating in the morning heat.

If he were honest, the chance to volunteer at the music festival in return for subsidised tickets had been a good one – he just hadn't factored in the early starts on top of partying along with all the other revellers and then trying to sleep while most of the other festival-goers continued their celebrations.

When his phone alarm had gone off at six, he had nearly tossed it out through the tent flap in disgust.

He wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Susie.

They'd only been seeing each other for four months but already he was captivated by her, and she knew it.

Hence why, when they missed out on securing tickets through the online agency and she suggested an alternative way to get through the gates and see their favourite bands, he'd gone

along with the idea.

He stabbed at a foil crisp packet, wondering for the nth time why salt and vinegar flavour was in *that* colour these days, and exhaled.

If this morning's clear-up was anything to go by, then tomorrow would be worse.

Raising his head to peer across to the far side of the park, he could see cars already queuing to enter the festival site, adding to what would be a full capacity crowd for the headlining act tonight.

'They're going to be awesome,' said Susie, pausing to shield her brow with her hand. 'I just know it.'

'Hope they've been practising. It's been fifteen years since they were last on a stage together, and that didn't go well.'

'Wasn't that Frankfurt, where Joey punched Thommo after the fourth song?'

'Yeah. Apparently Thommo tried to trip him up for a laugh.' Andrew grinned. 'I wouldn't have minded being a fly on the wall when this tour was suggested.'

On cue, the sound of a drum kit being thumped at odd beats carried across to where they stood, the gentle rise of the hill providing a clear view to the stages. A guitar technician started noodling up and down a fretboard, the well-known riffs and fills providing a potent concoction of memories.

'Like you said, maybe they all need the money.' Susie jerked her chin towards the hedgerow lining the path in the distance. 'Come on, the sooner we get this done, the sooner we can get back to the tent and get changed.'

'Having second thoughts about volunteering?'

She moved closer to the tangled hedgerow, the sound of her aluminium picker stabbing at the ground carrying across to where he worked. 'My head hurts. I'm staying off the cider today, that's for sure.'

He laughed. 'I told you it was strong.'

Pausing beside a thicket of tangled holly and a blossoming blackthorn bush, he reached out with the pincers and snatched up a pair of discarded knickers, turning his face away as he dropped them into the bag. 'Jesus, some people.'

'Hey, do you think I should hand this in?'

He looked up at Susie's voice to see her holding aloft a blue cotton scarf, the sort he'd seen a lot of the women wearing in the evenings to keep the chill off their shoulders while strolling around the various food and beer tents.

Wrinkling his nose, he wandered over, noting the dirt-streaked material. 'I don't know, it could've been there a while. Where was it?'

'Right here, on the ground.' She gave it a shake, loosening some of the dirt. 'It's good quality. I reckon someone's lost this recently. Even if they haven't, the lost property lot could bundle this up with the rest to donate afterwards.'

'Go on then.' He watched while she tied it around her waist for safekeeping, then peered over her shoulder, his gaze taken with something catching the sunlight beyond the tangled trunks of the hedging.

He brushed past her, unwilling to take his eyes off the glistening item in case he lost it.

Something like a tin can or a discarded crisp packet, or—

'Jesus Christ,' he managed, before spinning around, the back of his hand to his mouth as he gagged.

'What's wrong?' Susie started to walk towards him, concern etched into her features.

‘Babe?’

‘Don’t come any closer,’ he said, his voice trembling. He tugged his mobile phone from his pocket with a shaking hand, the other grabbing hold of her wrist and pulling her away, putting as much distance as possible between them and the thorny brambles. ‘Don’t look.’

‘Andrew, what’s going on? You’re scaring me.’

He let go of her as the call went through, his stomach lurching as the operator answered.

‘I-I need the police,’ he said. ‘There’s a woman… There’s so much blood… I think she’s dead.’

Chapter Two

Detective Inspector Kay Hunter drummed her fingers on the steering wheel of the scratched and dented silver pool car and fought back the first words that sprang to mind.

For a start, the air conditioning in the vehicle had ceased working two days ago when she and her colleague, Detective Sergeant Ian Barnes, had been stuck on the Sittingbourne Road after a four-hour meeting at Kent Police headquarters in Gravesend.

Then, the electric window mechanism had refused to work when they left the Palace Avenue police station this morning, encasing them within a metal canister that was slowly cooking them as the queue of traffic inched forward.

A dismal May had given way to a blistering June, the county town heaving with tourists and the pubs and nightclubs full to brimming every night as people began their summer holidays.

Another few weeks, and the schools would close as well, adding another disruptive element to the town centre as bored teenagers hunted in packs for easy distractions.

Kay huffed her fringe from her forehead and eyed the junior constable beyond the windscreen who was manning a hastily erected security cordon, his face flushed while he tried remonstrating with a drunken festival-goer who was old enough to know better.

‘Go on, say it,’ Barnes murmured. ‘I dare you.’

The older detective put his mobile phone in his shirt pocket and rolled up his sleeves, a waft of whatever deodorant he was wearing these days carrying across to where she sat.

‘They’re doing the best they can in the circumstances,’ she said.

‘Spoken like a true leader.’

‘Hmm.’

The junior constable spotted her then, his eyebrows shooting upwards before he waved two more cars through and stooped to her window.

Kay sighed, opened her door and waited while he stepped back in surprise.

‘Don’t ask,’ she said. ‘Where’s the outer cordon?’

He turned and pointed beyond the park’s permanent snack bar. ‘If you park over there, guv, and follow the path taking the right fork, you’ll find DC Piper at the crime scene beside a copse of trees at the top of the hill. The pathologist got here fifteen minutes ago.’

‘Good, thanks.’

Kay slammed the door shut and eased the car forward, weaving it carefully around a party of forty-somethings wearing a variety of branded T-shirts that echoed her own musical tastes.

‘Jesus, I thought that lot broke up years ago,’ said Barnes, craning his neck to stare at one of them as they passed.

‘Maybe the pension coffers needed a top up.’

‘Don’t tell me they’re playing here this weekend?’

‘They were. They’re meant to be the headline act on the main stage tonight.’ Kay grimaced. ‘I’m glad I’m not going to be the one telling their manager they’ll be rescheduling for another year. If they last that long. Did you see the drummer’s photo in the paper last week?’

Barnes chuckled. ‘Don’t tell me – you gave Laura the job of telling them, didn’t you?’

‘I figured her charms would perhaps soften the blow.’ Kay turned the car into a space beside a plain off-white van and switched off the engine. ‘Christ, Ian – what a way to start a weekend.’

She reached over, plucked a lightweight grey-coloured summer jacket off the back seat and climbed out, falling into step beside her colleague as they walked past the snack bar.

A crowd had gathered beside the serving window, all eyes turning to watch them accusingly, as if it were their fault that the weekend had been ruined.

A woman in her twenties with tangled brunette hair down to her waist, denim shorts and a green tank top stumbled over to them, a half-empty alco-pop bottle in her grip and a smouldering roll-up squished between the fingers of her left hand. ‘You sha be gettin’ shome-one to sor’ this out. We paid ’undreds for our tickets, y’know.’

Kay reeled back from the stench of alcohol and unwashed skin, and waved the woman away. ‘There’ll be an announcement from the main stage in due course. And you might want to go easy on that stuff. It’s going to be a long day.’

‘Feck off.’ The girl snarled, then pirouetted and wobbled back to her friends.

Kay gritted her teeth. ‘At times like this, I wish we could tell them. At least then they might be more cooperative.’

‘It’ll be all over the news before long,’ said Barnes.

She peered over her shoulder to where a television crew were setting up beside the queuing traffic, the presenter thrusting her microphone under the noses of infuriated ticket holders who were being turned away. ‘Christ, this is going to go national too, isn’t it?’

Her mobile phone trilled in her pocket, and she pulled it out, sighing at the familiar name on the screen. ‘Hold on, Ian. I’m going to have to take this. Guv?’

‘Are you on scene yet?’

The familiar bark of Detective Chief Inspector Devon Sharp carried easily over the phone’s speaker, and she hastily turned down the volume before following Barnes towards the path leading away from the snack bar.

‘Just got here, guv. The perimeter cordons have been set up, and Traffic have officers here diverting vehicles away from the site. It’s taking a while by the look of things though, especially as people want an explanation that we can’t give them.’

‘I’ve spoken to the Chief Super. She’s agreed to release another twenty officers from Ashford and Sevenoaks to assist on scene—’

‘Guv, with respect – any chance you can make sure they’re experienced?’ Kay turned around, slowing while she walked backwards and watched the newly qualified constables who were trying to calm the increasingly fractious crowd. ‘Things could kick off any moment here.’

‘We’ll send four mounted patrols as well, then,’ said Sharp. ‘About time those bloody horses got some exercise. They’re costing us enough to feed.’

‘That’d be great, thanks.’ She hurried after Barnes, who had reached the lip of the hill and was waiting for her beside the next cordon of blue and white crime scene tape. ‘We’re about to get suited up, so I’ll give you another update in an hour or so.’

‘I’ll be waiting,’ said Sharp. ‘We’ll hold fire on sending out the press release until I hear from you in case we can share any more details to help with the investigation.’

‘Thanks, guv.’

Barnes raised an eyebrow when she caught up with him. ‘Is he sending reinforcements?’

‘And the cavalry.’

‘Blimey, you must’ve done something right in your review this week.’ He held up the tape for her to duck under, then paused while a familiar uniformed constable crossed to where they stood, a clipboard in his hand. ‘Morning, Aaron.’

‘Morning.’ Aaron Stewart removed his cap and ran his hand across short cropped brown hair that was already damp with sweat, then thrust the clipboard at Kay together with a black pen. ‘Guv, we’ve set up a second cordon around the crime scene – this one’s just to keep the rabble away. The two people who discovered the woman’s body have been interviewed, and we’ve got them down at one of the St John’s Ambulance tents to give them a bit of privacy. Gavin figured you’d want to speak to them yourself before he sends them home.’

‘Good, thanks.’ Kay scrawled her name and handed back the formal record sheet. ‘Where’s home for them?’

‘She’s from Burnham, he lives on that new estate off the Loose road.’ Aaron tucked the clipboard under his arm. ‘I’ve also had a couple of constables make a start going through the bags of rubbish that had been collected from this area prior to them finding the victim. Looks like they possibly picked up some of her clothing – a scarf – hence that extra cordon in case there’s anything else lying around. I’m just waiting for some more officers so we can start a fingertip search.’

Kay nodded. ‘Sounds like you’ve got it all under control. Where d’you want us to walk?’

In reply, Aaron pointed to a line of tape that had been weighed down with stones, its snake-like route leading across the grass towards a small white polyester tent. ‘Just follow that, guv – Gavin popped a few spare protective suits in the tent for you.’

Barnes led the way, the pair of them lost in thought as they hurried over to the tent and took turns pulling on the all-in-one white suits over their clothes.

Balancing on one leg then the other to tug plastic booties over her flat shoes, Kay paused to scratch at the trickle of sweat that was forming under the hood, making her scalp itch.

The sun was now beating a fierce path across the morning sky, and it would be several degrees warmer before she was finished here.

She heard murmured voices beyond the tent flap, and opened it to find Barnes talking on his mobile phone, his brow furrowed.

‘What’s up?’ she said when he ended the call. ‘Problem?’

‘Headquarters are only going to be able to provide an extra five admin staff from tomorrow,’ he replied, tucking the phone back in his shirt pocket and rezipping his protective suit. ‘And two of them are part-time contractors so we could lose them at any minute.’

‘For f—’

‘Guv, got a minute?’

Kay turned at the familiar voice to see Detective Constable Gavin Piper encased in a similar suit to her own, marching across the grass towards them.

As he approached, he pulled back his hood, his normally spiky hair flattened against his forehead, and there was a determined expression in his eyes.

‘Aaron told us about the couple who found the victim,’ Kay said. ‘What have you found out about her so far?’

‘Lucas reckons she’s in her mid-twenties to early thirties,’ said the younger detective. ‘Obviously he won’t commit to anything formally until he does the post mortem, but there are strangulation marks around her neck and bruising to her inner thighs…’

He broke off, his eyes troubled, and Kay frowned.

‘What is it, Gav?’
‘Her fingers, guv. Whoever did this to her, they’ve sliced off her fingertips.’