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Deadlight

Graham Hurley

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Extract

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Prelude

SAN CARLOS WATER, 21 MAY, 1982

All the training, all the waiting, all the unvoiced speculation: what it might feel like, how you might cope. And now, all too suddenly, this.

The first bomb fell aft. His face an inch from the mess deckplates, he could feel the ship lift, shudder, and then settle again. Helo deck, he thought. He'd been out there only hours ago, marshalling Lynx ops in the bright, cold winter sunshine. Now, in the neon-lit harshness of the Delta Two mess he raised his head a little, adjusting his anti-flash, trying to picture the scene above.

'*Second aircraft. Red two zero.*' The PWO's voice on the main broadcast Tannoy.

The Argie Skyhawks normally came in pairs. Concentrating on a single ship was favourite because it narrowed the odds on a sinking. Nice one.

'*Brace! Brace! Brace!*'

The ship heeled savagely as the Captain tried to throw the Argie pilot's aim. Then came the fairground boom-boom-boom of the 20mm Oerliken and a sudden whoosh as a Seacat engaged. Even with target lock at three miles, Seacats were famously crap. Loosing one at six hundred metres, you'd give its little electronic brain a seizure. Even the PWO admitted it.

The sudden roar of the Skyhawk overhead ground his face into the deck. He shut his eyes and began to count, but he hadn't got past one before the mess erupted around him. Thrown upwards by the blast, he had a moment of absolute clarity before the world closed in around him. Small things. The long-overdue bluey he'd

started this morning, finished except for a couple of lines at the end. The bet he'd taken a couple of days back with the XO, the date they'd all be home again. And the boy Warren, adrift in the South Atlantic, so much gash.

Smoke, everywhere. And the roar of water blasting out of a ruptured main. Voices yelling, and the clang of metal on metal as men took a Samson bar to the heavy secured doors. All that, plus a licking flame from the yawning gap below.

For a second or two, pure instinct, he checked himself over. His ears were still ringing from the explosion and when his hand came down from his face it was sticky with blood, but he could get up, no problem, and his mind was clear enough to latch itself on to the emergency drills.

According to the book, he was to return to the flight deck to assess the situation. His instincts, though, told him that the ship was finished. Already she'd taken a heavy list. Port? Starboard? He couldn't work it out but the smoke was getting thicker by the second, and judging by the thunder below the fire was spreading towards the Seacat magazine. Situation like this, any sailor with half a brain would be binning the Damage Control Manual and thinking about an orderly evacuation.

On his hands and knees, hunting for clean air, he began to move. Already the deckplates were uncomfortably hot and the upward blast of the fire below drove him to the edges of what remained of the Two Delta mess. Seconds earlier, he dimly remembered three other guys with him in this cramped little space. Where were they now?

He found one of them sprawled beside a yawning locker. Surrounded by packets of crisps, bits and pieces of civvy kit, plus assorted copies of *Mayfair*, the man was rigid with shock but still alive. He slapped his face hard, hauled him into a half crouch, and pushed him towards

the jagged hole where the door had once been. A final shove took the man through.

'Out!' he shouted. 'Get out!'

Back inside the mess, the smoke coiled into his lungs. It had a foul, greasy, chemical taste. He could feel his throat burning, his airways beginning to tighten. This is how you die, he thought. This is what the Fire School instructors at Matapan Road meant by suffocation.

He found the next body beside the fridge. Jones. Definitely. He tried for a pulse, spared a breath or two for mouth-to-mouth, all he could muster, then gave up. Taff was very dead.

Two down. One to go.

'Anyone there?' he yelled.

There was a movement in the half-darkness. Someone staggering uncertainly to his feet, shocked but still mobile. He moved towards the man, meaning to help him out, then stopped. Away to his left, beyond a gaping hole in the forward bulkhead, he could just make out the shape of another body.

He ducked low again, sucking in the last of the good air, picking his way through the debris. The casualty was face up. His anti-flash gloves were charred where he'd tried to protect himself, and one of his legs was bent out at a strange angle, but his eyes were open and he blinked in response to the upraised thumb. Yes, I'm still alive. And yes, for Christ's sake get me out of here.

The body weighed a ton. Every time he tried to heave the deadweight towards the mess, towards the passageway and the ladder beyond, the man screamed in agony. Getting him through the tangle of debris would be a joke unless he could find another pair of hands.

The guy he'd glimpsed earlier was still in the mess. He could see his bulk, pressed back against the surviving partition. He had his hands out, trying desperately to follow the billowing smoke, up towards the chill sweetness of the open air.

'Hey you!' he managed. 'Come here! Give us a hand!'

The man turned and stared at him. From the main broadcast, faint along the passageway, came a shouted order, repeated twice. The Captain's voice. Abandon ship.

The figure beside the partition was on the move again, faster this time, lunging towards the passageway. Feeling a hand on his shoulder, he spun round. The eyes were wide, letter-boxed in the anti-flash hood.

'There's a guy back there. Give us a hand.' It wasn't a polite request. It was an order.

The man stared at him for a moment, then shaped to take a swing.

'You're fucking joking,' he snarled. 'Piss off, will you?'

One

TUESDAY, 4 JUNE, 2002, *07.00*

It took a while for Faraday to make sense of the shape swimming up towards him in the fixing bath. A structure of some kind? Big? Small? He didn't know.

J-J stood beside him, a tall, thin shadow in the tiny darkroom. Despite the pressures of the last three days, he'd been up with his camera before dawn, patrolling the crust of driftwood and debris as the tide fell, and the bitter-sweet saltiness of the harbourside still clung to him.

'Recognise it now?' One bony finger put the question, circling in the gloom.

Faraday rubbed his eyes and peered down as the greys slowly thickened and the ghostly smudge that overlooked the foreshore began to resolve. The big glass doors downstairs, ablaze with the first low rays of the sun; Faraday's study above, still curtained; and a careless arrangement of clouds behind, framing the square, sturdy shape of the Bargemaster's House. The boy must have taken the shot way out on the semi-sunken causeway that dried at low tide, a suspicion confirmed by his mud-splattered Reeboks. Faraday could think of better reasons for this seven a.m. summons but just now he couldn't muster the energy to argue.

J-J reached for a pair of plastic tongs. He gave the fixer a stir, then pointed at another upstairs window on the emerging photo.

'You.' He pillowed his head on his hands, a faintly accusatory gesture. 'Asleep.'

He lifted the dripping print from the fixing bath and

held it up between them, a trophy from his morning's work. Then he turned to one of the lines he'd strung across the cramped little space and pegged the Bargemaster's House amongst the dozens of other prints already hanging in the half-darkness: old, weather-roughened faces; shy smiles; gnarled hands on brass wheels; and Faraday's favourite: an armada of tiny ships, harshly backlit against the June sun, rolling in past the Round Tower, butting against a lumpy ebbing tide.

Faraday gazed at the photo a moment or two longer, aware of J-J's eyes on his face. Then he raised an approving thumb.

'Nice,' he murmured.

Back in bed, enjoying the lie-in he'd been promising himself for weeks, Faraday let himself drift into sleep. The decision to give J-J his mother's camera hadn't been easy, but the pictures he'd managed to conjure from the battered Olympus they'd shared for years had been more than impressive and in the end the decision had made itself. Since then, months back, the photos had got better and better. His deaf son had discovered a new language through the viewfinder of Janna's treasured Nikon, and the installation of the darkroom had given J-J's black and white prints a hard-edged clarity that Faraday found both startling and eerie. These were images that bridged the years, echoes of another life. Just looking at them, he felt nineteen again.

It was gone eleven before his mobile rang. He recognised the voice at once.

'Dave,' he muttered wearily.

Dave Michaels was one of the two DSs on the Major Crimes team. Last thing yesterday, leaving the office, Faraday had made a point of mentioning his rostered rest day, keenly awaited for what felt like weeks. Already, he knew he shouldn't have bothered.

'We've got a body down in Southsea,' Michaels was saying. 'Uniform rang it in thirty minutes ago.'

'What's that got to do with me?'

'Guvnor wants you down there, ASAP.'

'Why can't someone else take care of it?'

Faraday waited until Michaels' soft chuckle began to subside. The last month or so, Portsmouth had become Murder City, the peace of the early summer disturbed by killing after killing. Most of it was rubbish, three-day events, domestic disputes turned into murder by booze or frustration, but every next body in the mortuary fridge triggered a mountain of paperwork as Faraday, above all, knew only too well. There were undoubted benefits to a divisional DI like himself winning a place on the Major Crimes team but a conversation like this wasn't one of them.

For a moment he toyed with having the full ruck, if only to satisfy his own disappointment, but knew there was no point. The rules of homicide – who, where, when, why – took absolutely no account of the rest-day roster.

Michaels was telling him what little he'd gleaned from the uniformed inspector who'd passed on the first report from the attending PCs. Guy in his fifties dead in his Southsea flat. Body discovered by a mate sent round from work. Chummy was naked on the floor, stiff as a board, and someone had given the rest of the room a good seeing-to as well.

'Where's the flat?'

'Niton Road. 7a.'

'Witnesses? Neighbours? Anyone upstairs?'

'Too early to say. Scenes of Crime are there already and they've sealed the premises. No response from the top flat.'

Faraday peered at the alarm clock beside the bed. 11.36. Given the timescale, events had moved extraordinarily fast. How come the referral to Major Crime had come so soon?

'Willard's decision.' Michaels laughed again. 'He can't wait to get his hands on this one. He's talking twenty DCs. He's going to blitz it.'

'Why?'

'Bloke was a prison officer.'

Faraday found J-J bent over the toaster in the kitchen, still enveloped in the harsh, chemical tang of the developing fluids from the darkroom. In a flurry of sign, Faraday explained about the summons to work. Their planned trip to London would have to wait for another day.

J-J was less than happy.

'When?' he wanted to know.

Faraday spread his arms wide. The temptation was to gloss it, to pretend that this latest spasm of violence would be sorted in days, just another settling of domestic accounts, but something in the conversation with Dave Michaels told Faraday to expect a more complex challenge. Detective Superintendents with Willard's experience seldom called out the cavalry in such numbers without due cause.

'I can't say,' Faraday signed. 'Could be next week. Could be next month.'

'What about this woman we're meeting?' J-J's hands shaped the question, then left it hanging in the air between them. He was seriously upset and Faraday knew it.

'I'll phone her. Sort something out.'

'But she's going back next week. You told me.'

'I know. Maybe she can come down here.'

'Really?' A sudden smile brightened J-J's face. At twenty-three, there was still something childlike about the way his mood could change in an instant. Thunder one moment, sunshine the next.

Faraday nodded at the toaster. Smoke was curling from the thick slice of granary that J-J had wedged inside. J-J ignored it.

'When?' he insisted. 'When can she come?'

Faraday signed that he didn't know. He'd arranged the afternoon's meeting months back, after Janna's parents in Seattle phoned with the news. London's Hayward Gallery were planning to mount a major Ansel Adams exhibition, a centenary celebration of the American photographer's finest work, and one of Janna's long-ago college friends had been charged with liaising between the Hayward and the Adams family trust. J-J had inherited his mother's passion for Adams's landscapes, and the offer of a sneak preview – the best prints a month before the exhibition was due to open – was a dream windfall for a young novice photographer as eager and ambitious as J-J.

Faraday rescued the remains of the toast and scraped the worst of the damage into the bin. J-J was looking thoughtful.

'I could go by myself,' he signed at last. 'Go up and meet her.'

'Yeah?' Faraday was checking his watch.

'Of course. You can tell me where and when. And then you can phone her and explain you won't be there.'

'What if she doesn't know sign?'

'Doesn't matter. We're looking at photographs, aren't we? No need for anything else.'

Still preoccupied with what awaited him in Niton Road, Faraday found himself staring at his deaf son. There were moments when J-J astonished him and this was one of them. The boy was right. The whole point of images as dramatic and artful as Ansel Adams's was the way they transcended language. Who needed mere words when a photograph could say it all?

Faraday reached for the butter dish.

'I'll ring her in a moment.' He tapped his watch. 'And then I must go.'

*

Niton Road was one of a series of streets that webbed the eastern reaches of Southsea. The houses were terraced, but generous bay windows gave them a hint of gentility, and a dozen or so trees – recently planted – had so far escaped the attentions of Friday night drunks.

Faraday parked his Mondeo round the corner and showed his warrant card to the young PC guarding the blue tape that sealed the front gate of number seven. The line of vehicles at the kerb included Willard's gleaming new BMW. Seconds later, Willard himself stepped into the sunshine, deep in conversation with the Crime Scene Manager, a youngish DS called Jimmy for whom – on the evidence of the last two murders – Faraday had a great deal of respect.

Faraday met them on the pavement. The CSM was sweating inside the hooded one-piece suit. There was evidently a problem with getting hold of the Home Office pathologist and Willard wanted to know why. The CSM stepped back towards the house, retrieved his mobile from the PC on the door and peeled off a glove to punch in a number. The pathologist lived in Dorset.

Willard turned to Faraday.

'Took your time, Joe. Half day is it?'

Faraday ignored the dig. Willard, as Detective Superintendent in charge of the Major Crimes team, was banged up in his office most of the day, walled in by paperwork, budget-juggling and a traffic jam of meetings. One glance at his diary took Faraday straight back to his own managerial days on division, and it was rare for someone of Willard's exalted rank to make a personal appearance at the sharp end. Yet more proof that dead prison officers got five-star service.

'We've got a name, sir?'

'Sean Coughlin. He's a PO over at Gosport nick. Never turned up for his shift this morning. No phone call. No e-mail. Nothing. The supervisor sent someone round and here we are.'

'He had a key?'

'Didn't need one. He banged on the door a couple of times and then found a window open at the front.'

Faraday followed Willard's pointing finger. One of the small top windows in the downstairs bay had been open overnight. Reaching in, Coughlin's colleague had managed to unfasten the bigger window beneath. The room was still curtained but the smell had been enough to warrant further investigation.

Faraday frowned. Even with the central heating on, it took at least twelve hours for decomposition to set in.

'He's been dead a while?'

Willard shook his head.

'He was at work until five last night. The smell was vomit. Coughlin had puked all over the carpet. His mate thought he must be ill.'

The CSM snapped his mobile shut. The Home Office pathologist had finally responded to his pager and would be putting a call through to the morgue to book a slot for the post-mortem. Since last month, despite the rash of local murders, all post-mortems had been transferred to Southampton General, twenty miles to the west, where the facilities were judged to be better. The fact that this transfer also halved the pathologist's journey time to the dissecting slab was – in Faraday's judgement – no coincidence.

'Today would be good,' Willard grunted. 'Where are we with the body?'

The CSM began to detail progress inside. The police surgeon had certified death and gone on to his next job. The photographer from Netley had burned through five rolls of 35mm film and was now committing the scene to video. Clear plastic bags had been secured around Coughlin's feet, hands and head, and the corpse was about to be readied for transfer to the mortuary. The guys from the undertakers were waiting with their casket in a Transit down the street and the CSM planned the

handover inside the shared hall. In the interests of good taste, the neighbours would be spared the sight of a sixteen-stone body bag.

Willard nodded, his eyes following a young WPC up the street, and Faraday realised what a difference a couple of years in charge at Kingston Crescent had made. With his sheer physical bulk, and absolute refusal to accept excuses, Willard had set new standards for the dozen or so men and women at the heart of the Major Crimes team. His insistence on painstaking detective work, allied to the incessant pressure of events, had put a couple of the weaker souls to the sword but over the last eighteen months Major Crimes had posted some famous victories.

Willard wasn't the kind of man to wear success lightly. His taste in well-cut suits now extended to an expensive bespoke tailor in Winchester, and lately – after the attentions of a hairdresser called Roz in a Southsea salon – he'd begun to look positively sleek. Gossip amongst the first-floor suite of offices at Kingston Crescent suggested that there was more to this relationship than a ten-quid tip, but Faraday had yet to be convinced.

Willard took him by the arm and stepped back on to the pavement, pausing beside the BMW for a kerbside conference. Time was moving on. He wanted Faraday back at Kingston Crescent to keep the lid on the pot as the inquiry team gathered. He'd been on to Operational Support at HQ for a couple of dozen DCs to kick-start the investigation. With luck, they'd manage twenty. House-to-house enquiries would be number one, Personal Description Forms for every address, and it would be down to Faraday to fix the parameters. He'd told the Prison Liaison Officer – a DS on division – that he wanted an interview team into Coughlin's nick and he'd just put in a personal call to the governor to smooth the way. Bloke was a hundred per cent on-side, no-nonsense guy, old school. He'd promised to make arrangements

for a secure office and would provide a list of Coughlin's work colleagues. Back at Kingston Crescent, they were already firing up HOLMES but there was a problem with the indexers. One of them was on leave. The other was in bed with a migraine. Willard wanted it sorted, priority.

'OK?'

Faraday didn't bother to hide his smile. HOLMES was the major inquiry cross-referencing system, a powerful piece of computer software with a huge appetite for data. It swallowed every shred of emerging evidence, filing it away for the moment when a pattern began to emerge. It was fed by the inputting indexers, civilian operators shackled to their keyboards, and migraine had become one of their milder occupational hazards. PDFs, along with House Occupants Forms and the House-to-House Enquiry Questionnaire, ran to five dense pages of hand-scribbled information. No wonder the indexers were tempted to stay in bed in the morning.

'You want me to go round with an aspirin?'

Willard, scenting a joke, changed the subject. Staffing on this one was going to be tricky. The force had two other Major Crime teams and both were working flat out. The Receiver, Statement Reader and Action Allocator – key HOLMES players – were local decisions that made themselves. Ditto the officers who would handle Exhibits and Disclosure. But Willard never settled for less than the pick of the force-wide talent and he didn't want some knobber turning up as FLO. The Family Liaison Officer mopped up the puddles of grief that every murder left in its wake. A good FLO, winning the trust of immediate family and friends, could also be a priceless intelligence source.

Willard mentioned a couple of names. No way would he give either of them house room. He also wanted a squad briefing, six p.m.

'OK?'

Faraday nodded. Conversations with Willard seldom made allowances for small talk but this morning's exchange was especially blunt. Reviewing his mental checklist – miracles to be worked over the next hour or so – Faraday began to wonder what lay behind this opening barrage.

'You're SIO?'

'Of course.'

'And me?'

'Deputy.' Willard had produced his car keys. 'I'm off on a course tomorrow. Wyboston Lakes. Kidnap and extortion.' Bending to the car door, he glanced back at Faraday. 'Be OK on your own, will you?'

The question was a joke, and Faraday knew it. Wyboston Lakes was up in Bedfordshire, a Centrex training facility specialising in senior command courses, but no way would Willard let a hundred miles come between himself and a job as high profile as this one. Senior Investigating Officers sat on top of every inquiry, responsible for keeping the investigation on track, and having Willard across the corridor at Kingston Crescent was pressure enough. Reporting to him on the phone ten times a day would be a nightmare.

'How long are you away, sir?'

'Five days.' For the first time, a ghost of a smile. 'Unless you fuck it up.'

Willard gone, Faraday stood on the pavement for a moment, enjoying the warmth of the sun on his face. He'd been on Major Crimes for four brief months but already he'd realised how each successive job banged you up in a world of your own.

The need for focus and concentration was intense. Dedicated inquiry teams and six-figure budgets were a luxury beyond the reach of journeyman DIs on division, but the sheer weight of responsibility on Major Crimes was immense. Real life – shopping, cooking, even a

snatched half day out on the marshes looking at his precious birds – became a memory. Enquire about the day of the week, and you wouldn't have a clue. But ask about alibi parameters, or forensic submissions, or arrest strategies, or the current state of the overtime budget, and you'd be word perfect, the undisputed king of a virtual world of the murderer's making.

With luck, and ceaseless attention to detail, you'd get a result. And even if you didn't, there still remained a kind of awe at the sheer reach and power of the system. On good days, it did your bidding. On bad days, it could crucify you.

'Sir?'

It was the photographer from Netley. He'd emerged from the house with a bagful of gear.

'You're through?'

'Yep.' He pulled back the hood on his one-piece suit and mopped his forehead with the back of his hand. 'Christ knows what the bloke had to eat last night. It stinks in there.'

Faraday was looking down at the bag. As Deputy SIO it was his right to inspect the room where Coughlin had died, but no detective in his right mind would hazard precious forensic evidence until the CSM declared his work done. More and more often, court convictions turned on a tiny particle of DNA recovered from the scene of crime.

'What kind of state was he in?'

'I've seen worse. He certainly got a kicking. Here and here especially.' The photographer touched his upper body and groin. 'But you're not talking loads of blood.'

'Face?'

'Couple of bruises. Swelling. Nothing more.'

'Weapon?'

'Nothing obvious. As far as the body's concerned, I'd wait until the PM. Maybe the bloke choked to death. There's a bucketful of spew on the carpet.'

'No question about the injuries, though?'

'None. The room's a mess, too. Here.' The photographer bent to the bag and pulled out the video camera. Rewinding the tape, he shielded the tiny screen with his hand until he found the spot he wanted. Then he handed the camera to Faraday.

'Hit play.'

Faraday did his best to make sense of the image but the bright sunlight washed away the detail. Crouched in the back of the photographer's Fiesta van, he tried again.

'Starts with the body. Are you seeing the body? Big bloke?'

'Got him.'

Coughlin was lying on his side on the carpet, his knees drawn up towards his chest, his hands knotted protectively across his groin. He was a big, flabby man, a couple of stones overweight, and there were curls of black body hair across the spread of his belly. The bruising to his rib cage purpled the white flesh and there were more bruises around his thighs and buttocks. A day's growth of beard darkened his lower face and a thin dribble of vomit had caked across his swollen chin. His eyes were open, gazing sightlessly across the soiled carpet. Even in life, he wouldn't have been a handsome man.

The camera offered a couple of extra angles on the body, revealing a serpent tattoo on his left arm. Then came a slow pan around the living room. Faraday wedged himself more tightly against the wheel arch. The photographer was right. The room had been wrecked: chairs overturned, pictures smashed, a bookcase emptied, the tiny hearth full of debris from the mantelpiece above. The shot finally settled on half a dozen magazines, spread in a semi-circle around Coughlin's feet. The images were explicit, stuff you wouldn't buy in W. H. Smith's.

The photographer was squatting beside Faraday.

'Porn,' he said. 'Stuff's everywhere. He had the computer on, too. One of those premium sites. All-night wrist shandy.'

'And it's still on?'

The photographer nodded and Faraday made a mental note to talk to the CSM. The specialist Computer Crime guys at Netley would have to come out and make the disconnection. No way should Scenes of Crime touch the machine.

'Was there more of this stuff?' Faraday had paused the camera on the porn mags.

'Yeah. Whole pile down by the desk the computer's on. Bloke must have wanked for England.'

'And these' ... Faraday pointed at the spread of magazines on the screen ... 'you think someone did that little arrangement?'

'Must have.'

Faraday tried to imagine the sequence of events that might have led to this carefully mounted little scene.

'We're talking a flat here? Self-contained?'

'Yep. Two bedrooms. Kitchen. Bathroom. Usual shit conversion.'

'Any damage?'

'None the guys could see.'

'What about upstairs? Who lives there?'

'Dunno.'

'Shared front door?'

'So I'm told.'

'What about entry? Any sign of damage?'

'Not that anyone mentioned. I'd have photographed it otherwise.'

Faraday nodded, releasing the pause button and watching the tiny screen again. The shot began on a magazine cover. Then the sight of two women licking a huge erection receded as Coughlin's body wobbled into view. The camera steadied on the sprawl of dead, white flesh, and for the second time that morning Faraday

realised the power of a single image, a moment frozen in time, a man's last gasp celebrated in this sordid tableau.

In the closeness of the tiny van, the photographer began to chuckle.

'Those premium sites charge one pound fifty a minute.' He indicated the body on the screen. 'Bloke's better off dead. Would have cost him a fortune otherwise.'

An hour later, at Kingston Crescent police station, Faraday took the stairs to Hartigan's third-floor office. Recently promoted to Chief Superintendent, Hartigan was now in overall charge of the Portsmouth BCU. Basic Command Units came in all shapes and sizes, but Pompey was one of the biggest building blocks in the force-wide command structure. Heading the forces of law and order was, as Hartigan so often reminded visitors, the dream job. Not just top uniform in the county's most challenging city, but a real chance to make a difference.

'Joe . . .'

Without getting to his feet, Hartigan waved Faraday into a chair. Physically, Hartigan was small and obsessively neat, as precise and fussy in his dress sense as he was on paper. Once, in an unguarded moment in the bar, his management assistant let slip that Mrs Hartigan even ironed the great man's socks.

'Prison officer? Am I right?'

'Yes, sir. Name of Coughlin.'

'Niton Road?'

'Yes.'

'7a?'

'Absolutely.'

'Next of kin?'

'We're still checking.'

Faraday did his best to rein back his rising irritation. He'd watched Hartigan play this game for longer than he cared to remember. It had to do with knowledge and

power, and it sent a message that precious little escaped the Chief Superintendent.

'So . . . this Impact Assessment . . .' Hartigan was frowning. 'The beatman tells me it's normally pretty quiet around Niton Road. Unfortunate really, under the circumstances. No?'

Faraday added what little he could. The first of the seconded DCs, half a dozen guys from the local divisional CID strength, had already joined the investigation and four of them were working the house-to-house enquiries, toting their clipboards the length of Niton Road. So far, according to the DS in charge of Outside Enquiries, they'd turned nothing up, no surprise at this time of day.

'Most people are out at work,' Faraday pointed out. 'Won't be back until this evening.'

'Women as well? Mums?'

'Yes, by and large.'

'Typical. Time was when mums stayed at home for their kids.'

'But their kids are at school.'

'Not the toddlers, Joe. That's the age that counts.'

Faraday settled back. Soon enough, they'd come to the meat of the Impact Assessment – the precautionary exploration of ways in which they might keep the inquiry as low profile and non-intrusive as possible. Few householders fancied living in a street blackened by murder. Even fewer relished the prospect of a round-the-clock, high-profile CID operation. Hartigan would doubtless have his views on this, plus a list of neatly pencilled must-action priorities, but for now he was off on another tack.

'Volume crime can be a challenge,' he mused. 'I'm not suggesting you're missing it for one second, not in this new job of yours, but it's true, you know.'

'What's true, sir?'

'The minor key. The small print. That's where we win or lose the battle in this city. Murder? Rape?' He fluttered

a dismissive hand. 'That's where the resources go, and maybe that's the way it should be. But tell me this. We have a bunch of kids in Somerstown, tearing around from corner shop to corner shop. They operate mob-handed. They're completely upfront. They go through a shop like a bunch of locusts and nick anything they can get their hands on: money, goods, alcohol, even shop fittings. They're out beyond the law, out beyond society, and they couldn't care a monkey's. Terrifying, eh Joe? So what are Major Crimes proposing to do about that?'

'Nothing. Unless they kill someone.'

'But occasionally they do, Joe, they do. As well you know.'

Faraday ducked his head, trying to work out whether Hartigan had just paid him a compliment. A year back, still on division as DI at Highland Road, Faraday had cracked a case that ended up making national headlines. A fourteen-year-old who'd thrown herself off a Somerstown tower block. And an even younger kid – ten, for God's sake – happy to burn a house down and kill a man to revenge a separate death. The day after the boy had been found guilty, the *Guardian* had caught the mood with its page three feature analysis. 'Fallen', the headline had read.

'About Niton Road . . .' Faraday began. Hartigan ignored him.

'The kids should be at school, Joe. They should be motivated, keen. They should be committed. Instead of which we're chasing them around Somerstown at God knows what expense. Don't get me wrong. I don't resent the resource implications. That's what we're here for. But where does it lead? Where is it taking us as a society? Any ideas, Joe?'

For a moment, Faraday was tempted to believe that this was a prelude to a serious debate, that Hartigan really was keen to follow through on the events of last year, but then the little figure behind the desk gave

himself away, mentioning a speech he was due to make to the Government Office for the South-East up in Guildford, and at once Faraday realised that this little outburst of civic concern was simply a rehearsal. Real life goes on, Hartigan was saying. While you guys hog the money.

Ten minutes later, after agreeing that Major Crimes should tread as carefully as possible in Niton Road, Hartigan brought the conversation to an end. Only at the door did Faraday voice his misgivings.

'You're sure that's enough?' he queried. 'Assessment-wise?'

Hartigan, back behind the desk, glanced sharply up.

'It's all about absent mothers, Joe.' He shook his head. 'Kids go off the rails. I'm surprised you can't see that.'