No Lovelier Death

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Published by Orion

Extract

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Chapter one

SUNDAY, 12 AUGUST 2007. *02.29*

Craneswater is the best address that money can buy in Portsmouth. Tucked away at the bottom of the island, with a Southsea postcode and regular calls from the Waitrose home delivery service, it offers privacy, neighbourliness and a certain peace of mind. Handsome Edwardian villas behind high brick walls. Ample space for the Volvo Estate and the wife's Porsche. Invitations to tennis tournaments, with the promise of a poolside barbecue afterwards. Craneswater, Faraday had always believed, was the one corner of Pompey that somehow belonged to another city. Respectable. Civilised. Safe.

Faraday pulled his rusting Mondeo to a halt. It was half past two in the morning. Beyond the *No Entry* tape at the end of Sandown Road, he could see a line of white minibuses. On the other side of the road, two uniformed patrol cars and three white Ford Transit vans. Two of the vans, with their heavy metal grilles, belonged to the city's Police Support Unit. The third, an incomer, was badged with the logo of the FSU.

The presence of the Force Support Unit was the clearest possible evidence that Detective Chief Inspector Gail Parsons hadn't been joking. On the phone, summoning him from a hard-won sleep, Faraday's immediate boss on the Major Crime Team had sounded shaken, even alarmed. Something substantial had clearly kicked off.

There were coppers everywhere: FSU guys in the full ninja gear, little knots of officers staring up at a big house on the left, an obviously harassed uniformed Inspector muttering into a mobile. Further down the road, a guy with a boisterous Alsatian was locked in conversation with a couple of blokes in forensic suits from Scenes of Crime.

Faraday produced his warrant card for one of the uniforms behind the tape. As he lowered the window, the music engulfed him, hammer blows of drum and bass, loud enough to make his bones ache. The uniform bent to the window. Parking was already tight. There might be spaces round the corner. Faraday nodded, still gazing at the scene

in Sandown Road. The big house on the left, he thought. Party time.

The car parked, he found DCI Parsons round the corner in a huddle with Jerry Proctor. Proctor was a Crime Scene Coordinator. He rarely attended for anything less than homicide. The music, this close to the big house, was deafening, the shuddering bass line overscored with the drunken yells and whoops of partying adolescents.

'What's going on?' Faraday mouthed. Windows in the house were all curtained, occasional chinks of light framing a glimpse of faces peering out.

Proctor spared Faraday a nod of welcome, then bent again to catch something Parsons was trying to say. She was a small squat woman with a huge chest and a definite sense of presence. Faraday had yet to draw his own conclusions but she'd arrived in the Major Crime Department with a reputation for ruthless self-advancement. Thirty five was young to have made Detective Chief Inspector.

He stepped back into the road. An investigator from the Scenes of Crime team hurried past with a couple of lamps on lighting stands. Faraday watched him as he disappeared into a driveway further down the street. This property, equally grand, was next door to the party house and something familiar about the heavy metal gates snagged in Faraday's memory. He stared at them a moment, blaming the lateness of the hour and a lingering befuddlement that went with the best part of a bottle of Côtes-du-Rhône. Then he had it.

'Bazza. Our old mate. Wouldn't believe it, would you?'

Faraday, recognising the gruffness of the voice, turned to find a familiar looming presence beside him. Jerry Proctor was a big man, slightly intimidating in his sheer bulk, a veteran of countless crime scenes. Faraday rated him highly, trusted his judgement. DCI Parsons had disappeared.

'So what's the score?' Faraday shouted. 'What's going on?'

'Bunch of kids. Hundreds of the little scrotes. The party kicked off early and it's got worse ever since. If it was my house, and you came back to that, I'd be suicidal.'

'Who owns it?'

'Some judge. He's away on holiday, poor bastard.'

'And that's it?' Faraday was looking at the line of police vehicles, the suited SOC guys, the heads bent to mobiles. Even a riot didn't merit a response like this.

Proctor shot him a look. 'No one's told you? About Baz?'

'No.'

Proctor studied Faraday a moment, then gestured down the road towards the still-open gates. Somewhere quieter. Somewhere they could have a proper conversation.

Faraday fell into step beside him, picking his way between the mill of officers. Bazza Mackenzie was a career criminal who'd turned his monopoly on cocaine supply into a major business empire. On one famous occasion Major Crime had tried to bring him down. Operation *Tumbril*, largely covert, had been blown to pieces by Mackenzie himself and Faraday was one of the CID officers who'd been hurt in the subsequent post-mortem.

Since then, years down the line, Bazza had gone from strength to strength. Twenty million quid's worth of washed narco-loot had given him a portfolio of businesses from tanning salons and seafront hotels to property developments in Dubai and Spain. Faraday had never believed in the inevitable triumph of virtue and justice but Bazza Mackenzie, in his new incarnation, was the conclusive evidence that crime paid.

They were standing across the road from number 13, denied access by more tape. The Crime Scene Investigator must have set up his stands in the garden because the back of the house was washed with a hard bluish light. Faraday looked up at the rooftop balcony with its apron of smoked glass. The beach and the Solent were barely half a mile away. From his Craneswater chateau, Faraday thought, Mackenzie was King of the City.

'He's still living there?'

'Yeah. Though just now he's down at the Bridewell.'

'We've arrested him?'

'Too right, we have.'

'What for?'

'Sus homicide. Two bodies. Both beside his pool.'

Winter was asleep when his mobile began to trill. He groped on the floor beside the bed and struggled up on one elbow to check caller ID. Sweet Marie. Bazza's missus.

'Paul? Are you there? Speak to me.'

'It's two in the morning.' Winter rubbed his eyes. 'What's the matter?'

'It's Baz, Paul. He's been arrested. In fact we both have.'

'Where are you?'

'The Bridewell. I haven't seen him yet, not to talk to, but he's definitely here.'

'The *Bridewell*?'

Winter had a sudden vision of the custody suite at the city's central police station. On a Saturday night, about now, the evening's mayhem would be coming to the boil: drunks from the clubs, infant drug dealers nicked on supply charges, predatory psychos who'd handed out a

beating to some passer-by. Most weekends the queue for the Custody Sergeant stretched round the block. Where did his new employer fit into all this?

'It's complicated, Paul. Baz has phoned Nelly. She's coming down from Petersfield. We need you here too.' Nelly Tien was Bazza's solicitor, a ferocious Hong Kong Chinese.

The tremor in her voice told Winter she meant it. The best part of a year working for her husband had, to Winter's surprise, cemented a real friendship. Marie was a strong woman. Coping with Bazza Mackenzie, you'd be nothing less. Whatever had taken the pair of them to the Bridewell deserved Winter's full attention.

'I'll be there in ten.' He tried to raise a smile. 'Put the kettle on.'

Old times, Winter thought. He parked his new Lexus in front of the Magistrates Court and sauntered the fifty metres to the adjacent police station. A white minibus had just arrived and a couple of uniforms were shepherding a line of preppy-looking adolescents across the tarmac and into the station itself. One glance told Winter that most of them were pissed. He watched until the last of them, a gangly youth in surf shorts and flip-flops, disappeared inside, wondering what might have brought middle-class kids like these to the attention of Pompey's finest. They didn't look violent. They'd didn't look sullen. Since when did an evening on cheap lager get you nicked?

Winter gave the kids a minute or two to clear the front desk before making his way inside. He hadn't been inside a police station for over a year, not since the night they arrested him on the drink-drive charge, but the moment the door closed he felt his former life close around him. The same smell of unwashed bodies and over-brewed coffee, the same queue for the fingerprint machine, the same lippy drunks shouting their innocence from the cells along the corridor, the same waste-paper bins, overflowing with copies of the *News* and grease-stained all-day breakfast boxes. An informant of his, an old lag with loads of previous, had once told him that the custody suite on a Saturday night was your first real taste of life inside, and one look at the sweating turnkey beyond the desk told Winter he'd been spot on.

The Custody Sergeant was a forty-something veteran called Frank Summers. The last time Winter had seen him was up in the bar when one of the Major Crime D/Is had scored a big result and was shouting everyone a drink.

'Well, well.' It might have been a smile but Winter wasn't sure. 'Can't keep you away, can we?'

Summers stepped across to the PC on the desk and it was a second or two before Winter realised he was about to be booked in.

'Not me, Frank.'

'No? Shame. What can we do for you, then?'

Winter explained about Marie Mackenzie. He understood she'd been nicked. He was here to lend a hand.

'In what respect?'

'Legal representation.'

'But you're not a brief. Not last time I checked.'

'Friend, then. Appropriate adult. Any fucking thing, Frank. Just give me a break, let me see her. Couple of minutes and I'll be out of your hair.'

'Can't do it, Mr W. As you well know.'

Winter held his eyes for a moment, knowing it was true. The last thing these guys would do for him was any kind of favour.

'That's a no, then?' He said at last.

'Afraid so.'

'Has their brief turned up? Nelly Tien? Chinese lady?'

'On her way down, as I understand it.'

'So what's the story? Why the drama?'

Frank Summers shook his head, dismissing Winter with a wave of his hand. Behind him, emerging from an office used by the duty solicitors, Winter recognised another face.

'Jimmy …' he called.

D/C Jimmy Suttle paused. In his late twenties, he was tall with a mop of ginger hair and a dusting of freckles. He was carrying a couple of files and looked preoccupied. Spotting Winter, he stepped across to the front desk. Like the Custody Sergeant, he assumed the worst.

'Not another DUI?' Driving Under the Influence.

'Very funny.' Winter nodded towards the street. 'You got a moment?'

Suttle frowned and glanced at his watch. Then, aware of the Custody Sergeant's eyes on his back, he accompanied Winter towards the door.

'Good lad.' They were out on the pavement, walking towards Winter's car.

'That yours? The Lexus?'

'Yeah.'

'Legal, are you?'

'No problem. We took the disqual to appeal, got it reduced to a year.'

'Luck?'

'Money. Shit-hot lawyer. Chinese woman. Work for Baz and you get the best.'

'So I see.' Suttle was looking at the Lexus. 'What's this about then?'

Winter took his time. As a working detective he'd taught Suttle everything he knew, and when the scan came through on the brain tumour, three long years ago, the boy had repaid him in spades. Working with Jimmy Suttle had been the closest Winter could imagine to having a child of his own and one of his few regrets about joining Mackenzie was the loss of a relationship he regarded as precious.

'You doing OK, son?' He put his hand on Suttle's shoulder. 'Life been good to you?'

'I'm doing fine.' He looked, if anything, impatient. 'How can I help?'

'Baz and Marie are in there.' He nodded towards the Bridewell. 'They got nicked tonight and I need to know why. Is that a problem for you?'

Suttle studied him a moment, reluctant to answer, and Winter realised what was different about him. He'd aged, and with age had come a wariness he'd never associated with the impulsive, gifted, tireless D/C he'd happily introduced to the darker arts of crime detection.

'I got my sergeant's exams a couple of months ago,' he said at last. 'I'm acting D/S on Major Crime.'

'Nice one.'

'Thanks. That's pretty much what I think.'

'Waiting for a job to come up?'

'Yeah. They're gold dust at the moment. That's why I could use a result. It's been quiet lately.'

The silence between them was broken by the howl of a police car braking for the roundabout. Seconds later, an ambulance. They were both heading east, a route that could conceivably take them to Craneswater. Suttle turned back to Winter. Winter returned his look.

'Well, son?' he queried.

'I know fuck all, except we've got a riot next to Bazza's place and a couple of bodies by that new pool of his.'

'Bodies? You're serious?'

'Yeah.'

' And Bazza's down for them?'

'Dunno, boss, but if I were you I'd toddle off home.' For the first time the old grin. 'Who knows? The next address on our little list might be yours.'

Faraday finally cornered DCI Gale Parsons as she ducked into her Audi. A lengthy kerbside conference with the duty Inspector and a

middle-aged officer in a black jumpsuit had just come to an end and she had some calls to make. She gestured at the passenger seat.

'Keep the windows up,' she said. 'You can't hear yourself think out there.'

The calls were over in minutes. The first of them went to Detective Chief Superintendent Willard, the Head of CID. Parsons rarely wasted time on small talk and tonight was no exception. Faraday gathered that the guy in the black jumpsuit was the Tactical Adviser for Public Order, which went some way to explaining the Transit vans. His advice, it seemed, boiled down to containment.

By now, kids upstairs were yelling from the open windows, winding up the melee of figures below, wanker gestures supplemented with a volley of empty wine bottles. The pavement outside number 11 was littered with broken glass.

'So how does containment work?' Faraday couldn't resist the question.

'We're buying time, Joe. The kids downstairs aren't a problem. We started controlled release half an hour ago, got the first batch off to the Bridewell. Favourite is to clear the ground floor first, one minibus at a time. Then the FSU boys will sort it. You know the way it goes.'

'On this scale?' He shook his head. 'Never.'

'Me neither. Sign of the times.'

The Force Support Unit, she said, were on standby, awaiting the call to intervene. She was looking across at the party house. The property was surrounded by uniforms. Controlled release meant exactly what it said on the tin.

Curtains on one of the upstairs windows had been ripped down. Faraday watched a couple of kids mooning the street below.

'Jerry Proctor says the house belongs to a judge.'

'He's right. It's Ault's place. Just now he and his wife are off sailing in the South Pacific. They're in for a nasty shock, poor things.' She took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes. 'You know Ault?'

Faraday nodded. Peter Ault was a Crown Court judge. His hardline summings-up in a number of recent cases, widely publicised, had won him a devoted following amongst right-wing correspondents to the letters page of the city's daily paper, the *News*. He was popular in CID offices too, largely because he had little time for social workers.

Faraday glanced at his watch. 02.37.

'So what's the state of the place?'

'I gather it's pretty much wrecked. Not just that. One of the bodies we recovered turns out to be the Aults' daughter.'

'Shit.'

'Exactly. Total nightmare.'

Faraday looked away, trying to imagine the welcome home awaiting this luckless pair. One moment, the bluest of oceans; the next, the worst news in the world.

'These bodies were by the pool next door?'

'Yeah. We think the other one's a lad called Gareth Hughes. If we're right, he's the boyfriend.'

'Injuries?'

'According to one of the CSIs, we're looking at bruising and abrasions on both of them, plus blood beside the pool, plus multiple stab injuries on the girl. Early days, though. Jenny's still en route.'

Faraday nodded. Jenny Cutler was the on-call forensic pathologist. She lived in a farmhouse in the wilds of Somerset. Hence her late arrival.

Faraday was looking at the house again. Through the open front door he could see a couple of uniforms talking to a gaggle of kids.

'What's the plan here? Are we arresting them? Or do we treat them as witnesses? Either way, Jerry seems to think the resource implications are horrendous.'

'Jerry's right. We're estimating one hundred-plus kids. Apparently the invite went out on Facebook and half the world turned up. The girl was planning for a cosy soirée. Instead she ended up with a riot.'

'Girl?'

'Rachel.' Parsons glanced across at Faraday. 'The one by the pool.'

Faraday nodded. As the story unfolded, it wasn't difficult to track the implications. Two bodies triggered a major homicide inquiry. Next door, more than a hundred partying kids were either suspects or witnesses. Either way, they'd need to be taken to a custody suite, medically examined, and housed overnight before being interviewed in the morning.

'So are we arresting them?'

'Not in the first place, no. We're asking for their cooperation and their mobiles. If there's any difficulty, we'll go for arrest.'

'Grounds?'

'Hasn't been necessary yet. A few kicked up when we seized their mobiles but you'd expect that. If push comes to shove Mr Willard's suggesting breach of the peace or criminal damage. We're not fussy. Either will do.'

'What about transport? Jerry said he was pushing for full forensic cleaning.'

'Jerry would. That's his job. But given the situation, I'm afraid he's got no chance. I talked to the cleaning contractors a couple of hours ago. We'd be here all weekend if we went down that road so we're

settling for low-mileage minibuses. That way they might be at least half-clean. I'm afraid it's the best we can do.'

Faraday nodded in agreement. With every passenger a potential suspect, the evidential textbooks called for each vehicle to be forensically pre-cleaned to prevent cross-contamination. That would leave the Crown Prosecution Service flameproof against later defence challenges in court but Parsons was right: sorting out a fleet of minibuses to Jerry Proctor's satisfaction would bring the entire operation to a halt.

The DCI's mobile began to ring again. While she was busy with the call, Faraday tried to tally the rest of the night's implications. The booking-in process at the custody centres, especially at weekends, could itself take nearly half an hour per person. Every witness or suspect would need access to a lawyer. If they were sixteen or under, they'd require the presence of an appropriate adult. If they were foreign, they'd be calling for interpreters. They'd need to be swabbed, fingerprinted, and medically examined by a police surgeon. Their clothing would be seized, bagged, tagged and put aside for possible dispatch to the Forensic Science Service.

Every step in this journey carried a price tag or resource implications. Would there be enough cell space county-wide? Would there be sufficient replacement clothing? And who would pick up the tab for the lab tests? Only last week Faraday had countersigned an invoice from the Forensic Science Service. For DNA analysis on just five items of clothing, the bill had come to £3460. Multiply that one hundred times and they'd be looking at over a third of a million quid. Parsons was right. Total nightmare.

She was off the mobile. Willard, she said, had been talking to the Assistant Chief Constable responsible for CID. On a busy Saturday night the force operations room had so far identified a mere thirty-seven available custody cells county-wide and a call had gone out to abandon further arrests unless absolutely necessary. Given the shortfall in custody space, the ACC had no choice but to invoke the standing mutual aid arrangements and control room staff were now in touch with neighbouring forces. Kids who'd started their Saturday night by necking a litre of Diamond White on Southsea Common might well end their evening in a cell in Reading. Or Dorchester. Or Worthing. Such was the thinness of the thin blue line.

Parsons was gazing at the house across the road. Another dozen partygoers were being escorted towards a waiting minibus. One of them stumbled and fell. Heavily gelled, he was wearing Adidas track bottoms and a Henri Lloyd top. Face down, he lay sprawled on the pavement. Seconds later he began to throw up. None of the other

kids, stepping carefully round the spreading pool of vomit, stopped to help him.

Faraday glanced back at Parsons. She looked exhausted.

'What's the story on the party?'

'Too early to tell. Word obviously got round. This city can be rough. Nice Craneswater kids? Loads of booze on the premises? Easy pickings? Who knows …'

Faraday, watching the kids again, knew she was right. In a city as claustrophobic and tightly packed as Portsmouth, the script would write itself. The invite would have spread from estate to estate. Nowhere was more than a couple of miles from anywhere else. Who fancies a trip down to leafy Craneswater? All those posh kids? Be a laugh, wouldn't it?

'Spot of social revenge, then? Is that what we're thinking? Booze? Drugs? Chance of a decent ruck?'

Parsons didn't answer. Instead, she spelled out the way she wanted to handle the coming days. Over the weekend the duty Detective Superintendent would babysit the operation, with Parsons acting as his deputy until Martin Barrie, in charge of the Major Crime Team, returned from leave. Jerry Proctor, as Crime Scene Coordinator, would be steering the forensic operation. D/S Glen Thatcher would supervise Outside Enquiries, with acting D/S Jimmy Suttle in charge of the Intelligence Cell. Jenny Cutler would doubtless be pushing for a Sunday morning slot at Winchester for the post-mortems and forensic teams would be starting on the multiple crime scenes after daybreak. The investigation already had a codename. Operation *Mandolin*.

'What about the kids upstairs?' Faraday was looking at the house again.

'The FSU lads have scoped a rear entry. As soon as we've shipped the rest out, they don't anticipate a problem.'

Faraday nodded. At close quarters, a confrontation with the Force Support Unit could be a terrifying experience. They worked in shield pairs, moving from room to room, cornering the stroppiest customers, lots of noise, lots of verbal, lots of aggression, a slap or two if needed before the cuffs went on. On special occasions, like tonight, they might even put a dog or two in. They called them 'land sharks'.

Parsons was scribbling herself a note. Faraday watched two uniforms handcuff the youth on the pavement then manhandle him into the minibus. White faces stared out as the boy tried to wipe his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt. The door slammed shut and the minibus growled away towards the seafront.

'And what do you want me to do, boss?'

'Sort out the interviews, Joe. We're talking God knows how many

custody centres. Thames Valley. West Sussex. Dorset. You name it. We need a strategy. We need command and control. We need a grip on the witness statements as they become available. We need to jigsaw all this stuff together, put it alongside the forensic and the intelligence and whatever else, recreate the party, establish a timeline, sort out what exactly happened. We might get lucky. We might even get a cough by lunchtime. But we'd be crazy to plan for that. This thing's a monster already.' She looked up from her notepad. 'So we need to get on top of it, Joe. And that's not going to be easy. I gather the duty Det-Supt will probably be handing over to me, by the way, if this thing goes into next week. If that happens, you'll be Deputy SIO. Did I mention that?'

Faraday studied her a moment. Then, unaccountably, he was back in bed, the warmth of Gabrielle beside him, wondering who'd be phoning at half one in the morning.

'Thanks …' he said drily. 'Piece of piss.'