

Deadfall

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If Lincoln Tremayne's reactions had been even a fraction slower the speeding vehicle would have hit his car head on.

There was no warning; just blinding headlights, a dark bulk careering past and a jolting, metal-tearing impact as the side of his car hit the wall.

Braking to a screeching halt, Linc knew he was lucky not to have been killed. The vehicle had come round the corner on the wrong side of the narrow lane, leaving him no option but to run into the brickwork. If it hadn't been for the buttress he might still have made it relatively unscathed but that extra ten inches or so proved decisive. When the Morgan finally came to rest, he was alone in the lane. One headlight was clearly no more, and there was the depressing sound of loose metal vibrating to the pulse of the powerful engine.

Linc swore. Repairs to a Morgan Plus Eight were a specialist job and consequently cost the earth.

He shifted into first gear and straightened the car up. There was nothing to be gained by staying. The maniac in the other vehicle wasn't likely to return - and frankly he'd rather they didn't. It was too dark to inspect the damage to the Morgan or the wall, and they would both have to be settled through his insurance company. Not much hope of the premium coming down next year then.

He wondered briefly where the vehicle had been going to in such a hurry. The lane was merely a loop coming from, and leading back to, the main village street of Farthing St Anne. It wasn't a busy road at any time, and at ten-past eleven on a Friday night he hadn't really expected to meet anything.

Linc remembered the time guiltily. He was on his way to plait up Noddy, his intermediate event horse, ready for an early start the next morning, and he'd told the Hathaways, whose stable he rented, that he'd be over about half-past nine. It wasn't his fault that work commitments had kept him far longer than he'd foreseen, but young Abby Hathaway had offered to help him plait and she was at that tricky age where such relatively unimportant things seemed to matter a lot.

The truth of it was that Abigail had a king-sized crush on him. Linc had discussed it with her mother just a couple of weeks before, and they had agreed that in the absence of adult opposition the fifteen year old would soon grow out of her infatuation and doubtless look back on it with acute embarrassment in due course.

Something on the front of the car was rubbing on the wheel and Linc was glad when he pulled into the Vicarage's driveway. Immediately, thoughts of the damaged sports car were banished. Underneath the welcoming lanterns the double wooden entrance gates were open and swinging in the breeze. On the rare occasions when they were left open, they were invariably fastened back. With a frown, Linc edged the Morgan through and into the stableyard beyond.

It was a small, L-shaped yard with five loose boxes, a feedstore and a tackroom bordering concrete and pea-shingle, and shaded by several majestic copper beeches. When Linc drove in the area was in darkness, the only light coming from the open tackroom door. The car lights swept briefly across the wooden half-doors as he swung round to park but the expected motion-sensing security light failed to operate. In that brief moment of illumination, he could see that all three of the stabled horses were alert and staring out over their half-doors.

Seriously alarmed, Linc was out of the Morgan almost before it stopped rolling and heading for the tackroom, hoping against hope that his fears were unfounded.

They weren't.

He stopped short on the threshold, his hand on the splintered edge of the door where the padlock had been wrenched away. On the walls of the familiar cosy, cluttered room five metal saddle racks stood empty. The hooks where seven or eight bridles normally hung were bare, as was another larger rack that Linc knew had held the two sets of harness belonging to Abby's driving ponies, Syrup and Treacle.

His mind registered the stripped walls even as his eyes were drawn to a greater tragedy. On the thin rug that adorned the concrete floor, half in the shadow of a ransacked chest of drawers, a girl in hipster jeans and a grey, hooded tracksuit top lay sprawled on her side. Her eyes were closed and blood oozed from her dark hair to run in a thin trickle down her white face and drip slowly off her jaw.

Abby Hathaway, who should by now have been in bed; and who, Linc thought with a stab of guilt, had probably been waiting the best part of two hours for him to arrive.

'Oh, dear God!' he muttered, stepping forward and dropping to his knees beside the motionless figure. 'Abby? Abby, can you hear me?'

There was no sign of life from the unconscious girl but Linc's shaking fingers searched for and located a regular, if weak, pulse below the jawline. Shallow breaths warmed the back of the hand he held to her slightly parted lips, and he forced himself to calm down and think rationally.

Remembered lessons in first aid reassured him that her position on her side was as close to the ideal as could be hoped for, and that his most immediate priority was to keep her warm. To this end he pulled a thick horse blanket from one of the opened drawers to spread over her body and legs, and a thinner one to fold and ease beneath her head. The grey top and jeans may have met when she was upright but now they

gaped about six inches apart and, feeling irrationally like a Peeping Tom, Linc noticed a small jewelled ring sparkling in her navel and wondered if her mother knew it was there. He covered her with the blanket, tucking the edges round her, and reached into the inner pocket of his leather jacket for his mobile phone.

He made two calls: one to request an ambulance and the police, and the second to the Vicarage, just a hundred yards away up the drive.

Abby's older sister, Ruth, answered the phone and barely two minutes later was running across the gravel of the yard, breathlessly calling her sister's name.

'Whoa, whoa, whoa! Steady! She can't hear you,' Linc said, slowing her down in the doorway. Ruth, at nineteen, was a slim and very attractive five foot eight, with long wavy red-gold hair and large hazel eyes that were at this moment wide with panic.

'What happened?' she demanded in bewilderment, side-stepping him to go to Abby. 'Oh, my God, is she going to be all right?'

'The ambulance is on its way. Were you able to reach your parents?' He knew they'd been dining with friends.

Ruth was on her knees, smoothing Abby's dark fringe away from her brow. 'Yes. They were already on their way home. Dad said twenty minutes at the most. But I don't understand . . . What's she doing here? She should have been in bed.'

'You've had your tack stolen. I imagine Abby disturbed the thieves. I passed a van or something, going like a bat out of hell. They ran me into the wall just up the lane there.'

'Oh, my God!' she said again, noticing the empty walls for the first time. 'But why would she come down here on her own? Why didn't she tell me?'

'I'm afraid she might've seen the light down here and thought it was me,' Linc admitted. 'She was going to help me plait up.'

Ruth frowned. 'But I assumed you'd been and gone ages ago. I've been in the studio all evening.'

'Yeah, I'm sorry about that. I didn't intend to be this late but I got held up. I'd have rung ahead to let you know, but I knew your parents were out and the gate would still be open.'

Ruth looked down at her sister's ashen face with its cruel streak of crimson, and her lips quivered. 'Abby, hold on, d'you hear me? Please be all right!'

Several long minutes passed, during which Linc silently cursed the circumstances which had led to his lateness and fought the temptation to tidy up the mess left by the thieves. No doubt the police would want everything left strictly alone.

Ruth knelt on the rug, stroking her sister's hand and murmuring a stream of desperate entreaties. After a while she looked up at Linc, eyes swimming. 'We were quarrelling earlier. I said some horrible things. I wish I hadn't!'

'She'll be all right,' Linc soothed her, with a confidence he was far from feeling.

The sound of an approaching ambulance forestalled any further self-recriminations on either side and he moved thankfully out into the yard to meet it.

It was barely five minutes later, while the paramedics were still in the tackroom with Abby, that her parents, David and Rebecca Hathaway, arrived, parking their ageing Mercedes a little way up the drive so as not to block the ambulance in.

Rebecca hurried down to the lighted doorway to be met with a tearful hug by Ruth. Following, her husband cast a glance at the already overcrowded tackroom and paused beside Linc, worry creasing his brow and fear in his eyes.

'How is she?' he asked urgently. 'Will she be all right? Ruth was incoherent on the phone. What happened?'

Linc repeated what he'd told Ruth, adding that so far the ambulance crew hadn't said a lot.

The Reverend David Hathaway listened gravely. At fifty he was four years older than his wife, a big-built, imposing man, six foot two in his socks, with grey hair and a neatly trimmed beard.

'And you think you saw their getaway vehicle?'

'I think it must have been, but other than saying it was a large one, maybe a van, I can't tell you a lot. I was too busy trying to avoid being creamed on the wall. They were travelling pretty fast. I guess they panicked.'

'Bastards!' Abby's father said with sudden explosive fury. 'She's only a kid! Why couldn't they leave her alone?'

Linc shook his head and, without waiting for an answer, David Hathaway turned to follow his wife, only to be brought up short by the arrival of a police car, adding its blue light to that of the ambulance. Two officers - one uniformed, one not - spilled out on to the gravel at the same time as the paramedics emerged from the tackroom with Abby on a stretcher. They intercepted the procession, questioned the ambulancemen briefly and then the uniformed one headed back to the car.

Rebecca, following her daughter's stretcher across to the waiting vehicle, turned to look at her husband. 'David, are you coming? Ruth's going to stay with the children.'

He hesitated, looking at the approaching plain-clothes officer. 'Linc, could you . . .?'

'Sure. You go.'

There was a general re-shuffling as the police car backed to let the ambulance and the Mercedes out before joining the convoy to the hospital. As the blue lights flashed their way out of sight the sense of urgency was suddenly extinguished, leaving a flat depression in its stead.

A middle-aged, grey-haired man in a tired grey suit came over to where Linc waited by Noddy's box. He'd switched all the stable lights on while he was waiting, partly to check on the inhabitants and partly to relieve the gloom of the yard. Ruth had disappeared, presumably to resume her babysitting duties.

The grey man held out a hand, shaking his head sadly. 'It's a bad business, this. Very bad. Young lass like that, at home . . . Detective Inspector Rockley, CID. And you are . . .?'

'Lincoln Tremayne - Linc. I stable my horse here.' Linc shook the hand.

'Isn't there an outside light in this yard?'

'It's been smashed.'

'Tremayne, you say. As in the Tremaynes of Farthingscourt?'

'Viscount Tremayne is my father.'

'Yes, I know your father quite well. So you're the missing heir?'

A muscle tightened in Linc's jaw. 'Hardly missing. I've been working away, that's all. Is this part of your investigation?'

'Mind my own business, eh?' Rockley said unabashed. 'Fair enough.' He regarded Linc from under bushy brows. 'Take after the old man, I see. Could do worse.'

Linc returned his gaze, silently.

'Okay. Now tell me what happened here. David Hathaway I know. The injured girl is one of his daughters, I take it?'

Once again Linc related what little he knew; from his narrow escape in the lane, to finding Abby unconscious in the tackroom.

'And is it your normal practice to call here at this time of night?'

'No, but I'm due to ride at Andover tomorrow in a one-day event and I'd come over to plait up my horse. I intended to get here about nine but I was running late. Estate business. Why? Am I a suspect?'

For a moment Linc thought Rockley wasn't going to answer him; he was gazing at the open doorway of the tackroom, seemingly absorbed in thought.

'Until I have the complete picture, I can't see which pieces don't fit,' he said after a moment. 'It's important to ask. One should never assume. It would seem to be a bit of a security risk, having the stables so far from the house.'

'Yes - well, the gate would normally be bolted at this time of night but David and Rebecca were out this evening so I knew I'd be able to get in.'

'Are there no stables at Farthingscourt?'

'If you know my father as well as you seem to think, you'll know why I don't keep my horse there,' Linc said.

'Hmm. So the older girl . . . Ruth, isn't it? . . . she was unaware that her sister had come down here?'

'Yes, until I called her on my mobile. She said she was in the studio. Pottery,' he added, seeing the question forming on Rockley's lips. 'She's got a workshop next to the house.'

'I'll have to have a word with her later. I must ask you not to touch anything here until forensics have had a chance to go over it. The CSI team are on their way now.'

'Okay. Well, if you've done with me for now, I'll just go up to the house and see if Ruth's okay. She's had a nasty shock.' He began to move away, then paused. 'By the way, that's my car over there, if you need to inspect the damage.'

Rockley nodded. 'We'll do that. And tell Miss Hathaway I'll be along to see her in due course.'

Linc trudged up the slight incline of the Vicarage drive reflecting on the fragile balance of life. By the light of the lantern halfway to the house, his watch read ten to midnight. Less than an hour ago his most immediate concerns were a petty disagreement he'd had with a colleague, and what bit he should use on Noddy in the dressage the next day. Now a young girl was on her way to hospital, possibly gravely injured, and he had neither bridle nor saddle left to worry about. It kicked things sharply into perspective.

Ruth opened the back door to his knock and invited him into the kitchen, the hub of Vicarage life. The family's two springer spaniels, Dorcas and Sukey, looked up from their beds in the corner and sleepily wagged their tails, comfortably unaware of the night's events.

'I'm just making coffee, would you like some?' Ruth looked pale and worn out.

'That'd be great. Er, the Inspector said to tell you he'll want a word later,' Linc warned her, sitting down at the table.

'Me? What about? I didn't see anything.'

'So he can get the complete picture.'

'Come again?' Ruth spooned coffee, frowning.

'He's very thorough. He'll probably want to know your life history,' Linc told her wearily. 'I suppose he's just doing his job.'

'He'll probably think it's my fault for not keeping a better eye on Abby,' she said, passing him a mug. 'I don't know how you can drink that without sugar, it makes me shudder.'

'Ruth, she's fifteen. You can't control her every move.'

'But it wouldn't have happened if Mum and Dad had been here. I was in the studio all evening. I didn't have a clue where she was.'

'You might as well say it's my fault for being late,' Linc pointed out. 'As far as I can see, the only person to blame is whoever did this to her.'

'I still can't believe it's happened,' Ruth said, shaking her head. 'I just can't take it in. Why? Why us?'

The hall door opened a few inches and a rather plain face with a mop of short brown curls peered round it.

Hannah, at thirteen, was the youngest of the three Hathaway sisters still living at home, and as the only one of them not interested in horses, was the one Linc knew the least. Toby, the baby of the tribe, was presumably still sound asleep. The eldest sister, Josie, whom he'd never met, was a model and worked away from home for the most part.

'Is Abby going to be all right?' Hannah padded in on bare feet, a grey fleece dressing gown wrapped loosely over striped pyjamas. Lace and frills she regarded with tomboyish scorn.

'I expect so,' Ruth said, almost visibly pulling herself together. 'We'll know more in the morning. The kettle's just boiled, d'you want a drink? She heard me phoning Dad about Abby,' she added to Linc.

'I told Abby not to go down there. She'd been watching the yard for ages, waiting for you to come,' Hannah told Linc, sliding into a seat opposite him.

'But you can't see the yard from here,' Ruth protested.

'You can from Mummy's room, if you stand on the windowsill. You can just see the light come on.'

'And she was standing there all that time? Why on earth didn't you tell me?' Ruth handed her sister a mug of hot chocolate with the spoon still in.

'None of my business if she wants to make a fool of herself,' Hannah observed with a touch of smugness. 'Besides, she'd kill me if I ratted on her.'

That was the crux of the matter, Linc thought, sipping his coffee. Caught somewhere between a child and a woman, Abby's erupting hormones had not improved an already volatile temper and Hannah, with her sometimes debatable tact, came in for more than her fair share of her sister's flare-ups.

A tentative knock sounded at the back door and the dogs, apparently sensing a stranger, sat up and growled.

'It's all right, girls.' Ruth went to answer it and reappeared with Rockley close behind.

'Coffee, Inspector?' she asked over her shoulder.

'Thank you. White, two sugars.' Rockley's keen grey eyes scanned the room and he nodded at Linc before turning his attention to Hannah. 'And who's this young lady?'

'My sister Hannah. She was with Abby this evening before . . .'

'Only until half-past ten. Then I went to bed,' Hannah put in. 'There's no school tomorrow, so I'm allowed.'

'So you can't tell me what time she actually went down to the yard?' Rockley said, settling himself at the table. The dogs sniffed him suspiciously, accepted his friendly advances, then went back to their beds and curled up, sighing deeply.

'I heard her go downstairs just before eleven,' Hannah said, thinking hard. 'I thought perhaps Mum and Dad had come home.'

'Are you sure that was the time?'

'Yes, because the grandfather clock in the hall had just struck and it's five minutes fast,' she said with characteristic accuracy.

'And did she say she was going to go down to the stables?'

'Yes. She wanted to see Linc. She thinks she's in love with him,' Hannah told the inspector, in a voice loaded with scorn.

'And you don't think she is?' he queried, taking the mug that Ruth held out.

'Course not! It's only a crush. Mum says she's just at that age.'

Rockley's lips twitched but Ruth wasn't amused.

'Ooh, you little horror! You've been listening at doors,' she exclaimed. 'Mum was talking to me when she said that.'

'I was behind the curtain, reading,' Hannah countered. 'It's not my fault!'

'Well, thank you, young lady. You've been very helpful,' the inspector said. 'But I'd like a little word with your sister now, if I may.'

'It's time you got back to bed anyway,' Ruth told her.

As the door closed behind Hannah, Rockley sighed. 'Nice kid. What is she - twelve? Thirteen?'

'Thirteen,' Ruth confirmed. 'Going on thirty. She's a monster at times!'

'No, she's a nice, ordinary kid. It makes a refreshing change after some of the kids I come across in my line of work. You should be thankful, believe me.' Rockley shook his head, and then switched abruptly back to the business at hand, looking thoughtfully from Linc to Ruth. 'I hear you're a potter, Miss Hathaway. I'd be interested to see your studio.'

'Now?' She was surprised. 'Okay. It's through here.'

The two went out, Rockley asking questions in his deceptively soft voice and Ruth answering without hesitation.

Left alone in the kitchen, Linc sipped his coffee. He had to admire the policeman's skill in getting the girls to relax and open up. He'd probably learned as much about the family in those few minutes as Linc himself had in the five months he'd known them. And now, unless he was very much mistaken, Rockley was trying to learn a little more about Linc Tremayne.

The night ticked slowly on, rhythmically counted by the old grandfather clock in the hall. Ruth came back after ten minutes or so, carrying two empty mugs and saying that the inspector had gone back down to the yard.

'He was nice, wasn't he?' she said. 'Not like a policeman at all. I couldn't tell him much but it was odd, he seemed more interested in you than anything.'

Linc hid a smile.

'He wanted to know what your relationship with Abby was. I said you didn't have one. Honestly, does the man know nothing about teenagers?'

On the huge Welsh dresser the telephone trilled and Ruth went to answer it, picking up the receiver with a hand that shook visibly.

'Mum! How is she?'

Linc could just hear Rebecca's voice on the other end but could make out no words. He watched Ruth's face, trying to read her expression; dreading seeing the shock of bad news.

'When will they know?' she asked, and the indistinct tones answered.

'Yes . . . Yes, I'm okay. Linc's still here . . . Yes, I will . . . 'Bye, Mum.' She replaced the handset and turned back to the table.

'How is she?' Linc asked, softly.

'Still unconscious but stable, apparently. Whatever that means,' Ruth replied, her voice trembling on the brink of tears.

'I should think it means she's out of immediate danger.'

'I hope so.' She sniffed, fumbling in her pocket for a handkerchief. 'They're going to do more tests in the morning. Mum says try not to worry. Yeah, right . . .'

They made more drinks, after which Ruth was nodding over the kitchen table in spite of the double dose of caffeine, and Linc suggested she go to bed.

'I'll be here if Rockley wants anything,' he said. 'You ought to get some sleep or you'll be a zombie tomorrow.'

'But what about you? What'll you do about riding at Andover tomorrow?'

Linc shrugged. 'Not much I can do with no tack.'

'But weren't you supposed to be riding Nina Barclay's horse as well?'

'Oh, hell! Yeah, I'd forgotten about that. Look, I don't s'pose they'll be much longer down there. When they go, I'll doss down on the sofa, if that's all right?'

The Vicarage kitchen was home not only to the usual range of cupboards and appliances, but also, in addition to the table and chairs, one of the biggest settees Linc had ever seen. He heartily approved of it as an item of kitchen furniture.

'Of course. I'll get you a blanket. But are you sure? Haven't you got to get home?'

'Not much point now. I won't be missed. Besides, I'm not sure the Morgan's fit for the road.'

'I'm sorry. Oh, God, what a mess!'

'Bed!' Linc said firmly.

Rockley knocked quietly on the back door just after one o'clock to say that he was leaving but forensics would be an hour or so longer. He gave Linc a card with his number on, saying he'd probably need to speak to him again and telling him not to hesitate if he thought of anything further.

Linc had fallen asleep over a crossword puzzle by the time another officer came up to the house at something past two, with the information that the CSI unit had now finished and were heading off, if he wanted to bolt the gates.

Linc followed him down and locked up, then returned wearily to the kitchen and crashed out on his makeshift bed.

He tossed and turned for all of fifteen seconds.