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Vengeance in Mind

Written by N. J. Cooper

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VENGEANCE IN MIND

N.J. Cooper



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Chapter 1

1 February

Day One: Before dawn

Something crashed into Karen's dream. She heard the ring of smashed glass falling on a hard surface. Fear pinned her to the mattress and kept her swollen eyes closed as she lay, heart hammering, breathing high and quick, listening for clues.

Behind the almost musical sound of broken glass came the roar of wind and heavy drumming from rain on the skylights overhead. A wetter, splashier noise told her the rain was inside her bedroom, too. Traffic coughed and grunted from further away, split by shrill insistent sirens. Linking all the different noises was the continuous low-level grumble of the sea. But there was nothing human.

Opening her eyes to star-lightened darkness, Karen slid out of bed and felt the cold tighten her muscles and scrape at her skin. Her brushed-cotton pyjamas were no match for the savagery of the February weather, and she was shivering as she stumbled towards the French doors that led out to the balcony.

The patchy light glittered on broken glass all over the floor,

but the warning came too late. Her bare foot had come down on one sharp piece and she felt it slice into her skin.

Backing away on her heels, she dropped onto the bed again, seeing she'd left a trail of scarlet blood drips. Starlight caught on them too and made them look like jewellery. Gusts of wind kept sucking the doors shut, then smashing them open against the walls. She'd have to fix them before any more glass broke, but she couldn't do that until she'd dealt with her foot.

Careful probing with her fingers suggested the shard hadn't cracked inside her flesh. She pulled at the protruding piece, gritting her teeth against the small pain as the glass moved. The warm rush of blood that followed comforted her. She let it flow unchecked for a while, hoping it would be strong enough to wash out any dirt or tiny chip left behind.

The sweet metallic smell of the blood mixed with hints of lavender from her newly washed sheets and the muddle of petrol, seaweed and salt that always rose to her top-floor flat from the city below.

While the French doors continued to swing back and forth, expelling more chunks of broken glass each time, she reached for the box of Kleenex by her bed and made a pad of tissues, tucking the edges between her toes, then stuffed her feet into her old leather slippers for safety. Her dressing gown was draped over the chair at the foot of the bed, and she dragged it over her shoulders.

Thick Shetland wool, woven in a mixture of greys and blues, it wasn't beautiful or alluring, but it had been made in a place where wind and cold were a lot worse than anything Southampton could offer, even on a night like this. Karen hoped it would be enough to keep her from hypothermia. As

she tied the cord around her waist, her engagement ring caught in the coarse fabric.

Diamonds glittered like the broken glass. Karen looked down at the stones for a second or two before pulling the ring painfully over her knuckle. If Will no longer wanted to marry her, why should she wear this uncomfortable symbol of his ownership?

Naming him, even in silence, opened the way to a dark cold patch in her mind, but she couldn't deal with it now. Not when she had to do something with the French doors, clear up the mess, put a proper dressing on the cut in her foot, and warm up enough to get back to sleep.

Thick towels and some masking tape should cover the gaps in the glass, Karen thought, and she ought to be able to knock out the last few splinters from the glazing bars without cutting herself again now that she was properly awake.

When she crunched over the broken bits in her sturdy slippers, she saw why the doors had blown open. She hadn't clicked down the catch properly, let alone turned the keys at top and bottom of the frames, as she would once have done. A grim little laugh forced its way out from between her bitten lips.

That was the trouble with being a psychologist. You could never let your own motives alone.

Sometimes analysis helped; more often it made you feel even worse.

Karen had had to fight a long battle with her fears of how marriage might confine her and how Will might try to impose his sometimes weird world-view on her. She'd won, but the victory had been hard. Then yesterday, barely a week after he'd given her the ring, he'd told her he'd changed his mind

and didn't want to commit himself. Hurting and angry, she could see any number of reasons why her subconscious might have set up this icy mayhem for her first night alone again.

'Freedom,' Karen muttered to herself as she crouched with the dustpan and brush to scoop up all the nuggets, splinters and chips of glass she could find. 'Cleansing cold. Rebirth. Cracking through the barriers. Opening the way to a new life. Destruction. Fury. *Punishment*.'

But who did she want to punish? Will? Or herself? In that moment, she couldn't be sure.

Ten minutes later, standing under the powerful jets of her shower and revelling in the sensation of wet heat melting her gelid skin, she stopped being a psychologist and let go once again. She hadn't cried in front of Will when he'd said he was leaving her. Nor had she sworn at him. She was still glad of that. But now, with the shower washing away the evidence as quickly as it emerged, she tipped back her head and let go. Hot water coursed down over her throat, which still felt tight and sore from the stress of keeping back the words she could never have said to him.

Later, when the water pouring down from the over-sized shower head was cooling and her tears had stopped, she yanked the handle to turn off the flow before it undid all its earlier good work. Her thick towel was warm from the pipes when she hugged it around herself. She even smiled a little as she dragged off the ludicrous plastic shower cap she would never have worn in front of Will, dropping it onto the floor.

If he'd seen it, he'd have pounced at once to pick it up, shake off the water, and fold it away on a shelf. He was a neat-freak, as well as a control-freak.

Is it the control-freakery that drove him away? Karen asked herself as she rubbed the towel across her slim back. Maybe he has to be the strong one, the successful one, the rich one, in any partnership. Maybe he can't bear the thought of owing me anything. Taking's harder than giving for some people, and it needs a lot more grace. Maybe he just hasn't got that grace.

Anger was always easier to bear than vulnerability. Karen felt more like herself as she towelled the last of the water off her long legs, surprised at the way some of last summer's tan was still there, even though it was mid-winter now and she hadn't been out of jeans or thick black tights for months. She should probably moisturise her legs to keep the faint golden colour going, but that would have to wait until tomorrow.

Back in her pyjamas, she shook out her hair and stuffed her feet into the slippers again for safety. She had switched on the electric blanket before she'd showered, so there was more warmth awaiting her under the duvet.

She glanced at the clock and swore. Three-thirty. Only four hours until the alarm woke her again.

She did not get even four hours. Hugging one of Will's pillows and breathing in the fading lemony smell from his skin, she was torn out of sleep, this time by the buzzing of her intercom. Swearing and pushing a tangle of hair out of her mouth, where she must have been chewing it in her sleep, she rolled out from under the duvet and stumbled across the cold floor to pick up the receiver.

'Yes?' she said, letting herself sound tough enough to frighten off any unauthorised caller.

The clock over the kitchen worktop told her it was only

six-thirty. Less than three hours since she'd turned off her light for the second time. No wonder she felt as though she'd been drinking all night, with burning eyes, headache, and a throbbing nausea to add to her sore throat and puffy eyelids.

'Yes?' she said again.

'It's Charlie.' The voice was so familiar and so dangerously welcome that Karen sagged against the wall as though someone had cut her tendons.

The last thing she needed now was an encounter with DCI Charlie Trench of the Hampshire Police Major Crimes Team.

'I need you over on the Island,' he said. 'Buzz me in. I'll brief you while you dress.'

Karen had worked with him several times before, liked him more than she cared to admit, and had come perilously close to the kind of involvement that could have destroyed her peace for ever. And that was before Will had left her.

'Karen.' His Geordie voice was rough with urgency. 'Let me in. This is important.'

'So's my sleep,' she said, fighting all kinds of emotions she hadn't time to sort out.

'Not now it isn't. We've got a body. Bad one. Crucified and castrated. I'm the SIO and I need you. Now buzz me in.'

Karen weakened. Once she knew something of the victim's life and character she would have to fight off all the normal human feelings about what had been done to him, but now all she could think was how well a body killed and violated in such an extreme way could fit into her new research project into post-mortem mutilation. Besides, the case might provide just the kind of distraction she needed to put all her feelings about Will into a virtual box, where they couldn't contaminate

her life. And with Charlie as the Senior Investigating Officer, she might even be able to do the work he wanted in a way that suited her own timetable, switching in and out of his inquiry when she had to be somewhere else.

Her cold finger pressed down hard on the door-release button for long enough to admit half a football team. Then she crashed down the receiver, unlocked the door of her flat for Charlie and ran back into her bedroom, planning to pull on jeans, T-shirt and a warm sweater before he arrived. He had five flights to climb if he ignored the lift as usual. That should give her enough time.

Her right foot ached, reminding her of the night's dramas, but the pain was dull enough to reassure her that there was no glass left in her flesh.

'What the hell happened here?' Charlie's deep voice was sharp with shock as he stood in her bedroom doorway. 'You're not . . .'

Karen turned to face him as she zipped up her skinny black jeans and tucked the soft cream T-shirt into them. The unmade bed and her half-dressed state were far too intimate, but Charlie hadn't even noticed. His attention was riveted to the trail of blood that led from the broken window to her bed, where it had broadened into a fair-sized puddle. Who would have thought a smallish cut in a foot could produce so much? Karen had forgotten to wipe it up last night.

'It was the wind, not a human being,' she said and watched his tense face relax.

His dark eyes were very round under the strong eyebrows, and he looked more than ever like a taller thicker version of Robert Downey, Jr.

‘Thank fuck,’ he said, rubbing both hands over his face and through his spiky dark hair. ‘For a minute I thought . . . Never mind. Hurry up.’

‘What’s so urgent?’ she said, bending down to zip up her red ankle boots.

‘I told you: I need you,’ he said, sounding so impatient that she might have thought he was angry with her if she hadn’t known him so well. Before she could do more than look at him, frowning, to work out why he was in such a state this time, he added more calmly: ‘It’s Sir Dan Blackwater, see. Body found just over an hour ago, lying on the kitchen table, knives driven through his wrists and ankles right into the wood of the table. Like I said, he was castrated.’

‘Who found him?’ Karen asked, hoping it wasn’t the dead man’s wife or child. That kind of trauma would be hard to heal.

‘Woman called Sheena Greves.’ Charlie’s voice was unemotional. ‘No help at all. Claims she doesn’t know anything. Not even what she was doing in his house or what made her go down to the kitchen in her pyjamas at dawn.’

‘Sounds like post-traumatic amnesia,’ Karen said, even more interested. ‘The sight of a body like that could shock anyone’s brain into all kinds of self-protective denial. What’s her connection with the deceased?’

‘Worked for him in London but claims she’d never been to the Island before and doesn’t know why she was there this time. Or if he said anything before he died. Or if she heard anything in the night. Or where his wife was, or why there was no one else in the house. You can see how that’s all going down.’

‘So you want me to assess her condition?’ Karen suggested,

pulling on the long soft scarlet cashmere sweater that had been Will's last Christmas present.

Charlie wagged his head from side to side in a way that was so familiar it made her heart drum in her chest.

'And help with the interview.'

'But you've got specially trained officers for that,' Karen protested.

'Yeah. They're good too, but they're not psychologists. I need *your* skills. You'll know how to get round the memory loss – if it's real – or tell us if she's faking. We've got to sort this quick.'

'Quicker than usual? Why?'

Karen was dragging a brush through her hair as they talked, feeling the bristles catch in more tangles than she usually had.

'Don't you know who Sir Dan is?' Charlie sounded surprised, and impatient.

'Businessman?' she said vaguely, much more curious about what had been done to the man – and exactly when and why – than how he might have earned his living.

She finished dealing with her hair and rummaged in her cupboard for the old flying jacket she'd bought from an army surplus shop years ago. It was going to be freezing on the ferry across to the Island, and none of her usual clothes would be warm enough. She reached past them, then felt the hard, cracked leather graze her palm. Pulling out the old jacket, she registered the strong smells of lanolin and petrol and something spicier that was probably no more than ancient dirt. She hadn't worn it for a while because Will had hated its shabbiness and had often begged her to get it dry-cleaned.

Charlie didn't seem to notice the smell, or the shabbiness, as

he grabbed it from her and held it out so that she could stuff her arms into the thick sleeves. She realized she hadn't concentrated on his answer and asked her question again.

'Giant of the high street,' he said, the impatience sharpening his voice into an attack. 'Not as big as Philip Green but nearly. To make it worse, he's just agreed to "spearhead the government's new charitable-giving taskforce". Got that now?'

Karen nodded, offering a guilty smile to placate him.

'Great,' Charlie said with all his familiar sarcasm. 'He's also one of the richest men in the county. Powerful. Important. Supporter of a whole bunch of charities himself. Hobnobs with the Prime Minister and all that, which is why he's leading this new quango thingy.'

'Ah, him. Yes. I know who you mean,' Karen said, zipping up the jacket. 'But I still don't understand this extreme rush.'

'Somebody kills a bloke like that and castrates him, we got to find out who quick. Before the press start harassing us and whipping up the public so we lose it and bag some poor inadequate who didn't do it and makes us look like vindictive arseholes. Come on.'

'I can't leave the flat like this.' Karen pointed to the smashed glass in her French windows, where her makeshift repair looked even more pathetically inadequate in daylight than it had in the night. 'Anyone could get in.'

Chapter 2

Day One: 7.00 a.m.

Twenty minutes later Charlie parked on the ferry's almost empty car deck and the two of them climbed the steep companionway to emerge into the freezing wind for the twenty-minute voyage to the Island. However cold it might be, the fresh sea-smelling air was preferable to the stuffiness indoors, scented as it usually was with throat-catching cleaning-fluids.

Karen tugged the flying jacket more tightly around her body and leaned over the rail to stare down at the grey sea. Churned up by low fat waves, it looked uninviting and grubby. The idea that it had ever sparkled in bright sunlight, decorated with the dancing yachts of rich visitors, seemed impossible to believe. Karen raised her head to watch the slowly approaching Island she knew so well.

Through the woods away to the right, she could almost make out the plot of land where her own small house was being built on the site of her late grandmother's shabby bungalow. It was supposed to be finished by the summer, but the

project had taken so long to get this far she couldn't believe the house would ever be ready for her.

Straight ahead was Cowes itself, with its yacht clubs and marinas and sharp boundaries between rich and poor. Charlie had once lived in a flat on the outskirts of the town, with a great view over the Solent towards the green Hampshire countryside. Then he'd been promoted to the Major Incident Teams, which were based on the mainland, and he'd rented a place in Southampton, quite near her flat.

'Tell me the truth about why we're in such a rush.' Karen turned away from the wind as a particularly vicious gust blew her hair across her eyeball, scratching it and making both eyes water. 'And don't pretend it's because the corpse is such a celebrity. It's still not seven o'clock. You could have waited a couple of hours to break into my sleep.'

Charlie turned his back to the wind, too, leaning against the rail with one heel hooked over to the lowest bar.

'It's Eve,' he muttered, not looking at Karen.

'This is Detective Sergeant Eve Clarke, I take it,' Karen said, laughing with real amusement. 'What's she done now?'

A vivid picture shot into her mind of the resentful, scrawny woman, who disliked her so much. Eve was thinner than Karen and had far better legs and was always flaunting both attributes when they were anywhere near each other, unable to believe Karen wasn't interested in the competition.

Charlie glowered. Embarrassment had flicked a little colour across his broad cheekbones. He knew as well as Karen that Eve had some powerful fantasies about him and believed she would make them come true if she could only make him look at her properly.

‘What’s her part in all this?’ Karen added, even more amused to see how much irritation Charlie was trying to suppress. He’d always been loyal, but Eve was enough to test the most patient of colleagues.

‘Sheena found the body around 5 a.m. and phoned us.’ His voice was clipped, but informative, too, even though he kept leaving out words he thought irrelevant. ‘Eve’s on nights; responded as the most senior officer around. All doors to Sir Dan’s place bolted from the inside. Security alarm on its night setting. No sign of forced entry. No one else in the house. When Sheena unbolts the front door for Eve, she sets off the alarms. Housekeeper has to come up from her cottage to turn ’em off. Whole thing so obvious Eve arrests Sheena, and . . .’ Charlie broke off, apparently unable to speak and control his feelings at the same time.

‘Started interviewing her?’ Karen suggested, knowing all about the strict time limits the police were given to dealing with suspects.

The clock started with the first question asked, however casually. If Eve had set it off before calling in help from the mainland, she’d gone a long way to screwing up the whole process. No wonder Charlie was so irritable.

He caught Karen’s sardonic expression and smiled reluctantly. The affectionate light that crept into his black eyes made her stomach contract and she had to look away again for safety.

‘She just didn’t think,’ he said, anger fighting his usual tolerance of Eve. His voice and speech patterns were easing up a little. ‘Brought the suspect into an interview room, set the video and recording equipment going, and asked her questions about who’d bolted the front door and when. Makes me want to

grab her by her hair and chuck her in the sea. But I can't. Got to make the best of it. Which is why I had to drag you from your bed like this. Lucky Will wasn't with you.'

'I'll do what I can this morning,' Karen said, keeping her professional mask intact with care, 'but after that you're on your own.'

'I told you before we left that I'd get your windows fixed. Hurry up and phone your mate Stella to warn her we'll need the keys, and I'll sort it. You won't even need to be there.'

'I can't disturb Stella till at least eight. But that's not the point. This has nothing to do with my windows. I've got to be somewhere else.'

'Bollocks to that. You're needed here.'

'I'm not employed by the police,' Karen reminded him. 'You call when you need me, and if I have time I'm happy to help. But I've got students . . .'

'Who can wait a day or two,' Charlie said, as though discussing something wholly trivial. 'They usually have to.'

'And the last chunk of my book, which is due to go to the publishers in June, and some research for the next one,' Karen said, hiding from the guilty conscience her students always generated.

She never had quite enough time to give them all the attention they wanted. The thought of the debts they were clocking up to study with her made her conscience even sharper.

'I'll lose my job if I don't publish at regular intervals, and I can't publish if I've nothing to say. I've spent weeks building up a relationship that's just got a result, and I'm due to set off for Norfolk this afternoon. I can't chuck the chance even for you.'

‘Relationship with who?’

‘Your colleagues in Norfolk caught a particularly interesting serial killer a couple of years back,’ Karen said, adding more lightly: ‘I’ve been stalking the Chief Constable for permission to ransack his records and grill his people. He’s succumbed at last.’

‘I’m not surprised.’ Charlie put his big, rough-skinned hands on either side of her cold face for a second, then let her go. ‘But he can’t have you. Not yet. I need you here.’

‘But . . .’

‘Shut up, Karen, and . . .’ He broke off, his dark-brown eyes losing focus as though he were listening to some interior voice, then they sharpened again. ‘No, first tell me, why the Norfolk killer?’

Karen was reluctant to say any more, but she knew Charlie too well to think she could fend off his curiosity for long. He could always tell when she was withholding information – or lying.

‘He mutilated the bodies after death,’ she said casually, as though the statement could have no possible relevance to this urgent new case. ‘I’ve always been interested in that. Why bother, when you wouldn’t get any sadistic satisfaction from the victim’s pain? What’s the psychology behind that kind of drive? What’s the pay-off? Obviously there’s the release of some kind of anger, but is it cowardice that makes them wait until their victims are dead? Or conscience? Surely not. If they had any kind of conscience they couldn’t kill . . . You can see how much there is here – and how useful it could be. If I can analyse why they do it, then that’s going to help your colleagues whenever they’re faced with a body mutilated after death. I can

point them towards the likeliest suspects. Well, the likeliest kind of suspects.'

Charlie's face looked as though he'd been fattened on satisfaction, even though he'd obviously stopped listening long before she got to the end of her explanation. 'First impressions say Sir Dan's killer did the castrating and crucifying after death, so you'll get a hot fresh case instead of cold records. Hang with me, and you'll get everything you ever wanted. You'll be closer to your students, too.'

The ferry hooted; its deep roar lifted Karen's spirits a little. What he'd said was true enough. So long as she could phone the chief constable in East Anglia and explain, she shouldn't lose anything too important. She'd have to cancel the B&B she'd booked, of course, and that would mean writing off her £25 deposit. Not much to most people maybe, but every pound counted for her now that she'd taken on huge debts to buy the land for her new house and have it built. Maybe she could charge the deposit to Charlie's investigation.

'You have got enough in the budget to pay me, I trust,' she said, following him down the companionway to the car deck. 'I can't afford to do *pro bono* work any longer, even to raise my profile or help my research.'

'I can pay,' he said, without looking at her.

Thinking of the money she owed made her grateful she wasn't taking her own car to the Island. The ferry charges had always seemed extortionate. Once her little wooden house was ready, she would probably have to keep a beat-up old banger over there and travel as a foot-passenger until they finally got round to building a bridge across the Solent.

One of the tattooed deck hands waved them forwards and

Charlie's quiet dark-grey car rolled off the ferry ahead of the small queue that had built up behind it.

Eve was nowhere to be seen when they walked into the old police station in East Cowes. The desk sergeant's face lit when he saw Charlie and he leaned across the counter to wring his hand.

'Great to see you, boss. You here for Sheena Greves?'

'That's right. Along with Doctor Taylor here. I'm the SIO this time. Can you tell DS Clarke?'

'Will do. I'll buzz you in, and get her up out of custody to the interview room, soon as you're ready to start.'

The automatic lock clicked open on the door between the public and official parts of the building and Charlie pushed through, leaning against it to allow Karen to walk past him. The space was too narrow for comfort and she caught the familiar smell of the Pears soap he always used and something more exotic that might be rosemary shaving oil. His breathing changed and she could feel herself responding. You're at work, she told herself furiously, speeding up to get properly past him and focus on the coming interview.

'I'll let you talk to her alone,' he said from behind Karen, before reaching over her shoulder to shove open the next door. The leather sleeve of his jacket brushed her cheek. 'That way you'll get a better feel for her state than if she's being scared off by a cop. OK?'

'Fine.' Karen took off her own jacket and hung it over the back of one of the bentwood chairs to the right of the table. She pointed towards the recording equipment. 'Presumably I don't have to tape this session?'

‘Yup, you do. Everything better be on record. That way no wanking defence brief can cause trouble. Don’t fret, I’ll set it up before I leave you to it. You’ll be on camera, too.’

‘What will you do?’ Karen asked and saw his face tighten. She assumed he was planning what he’d say to Eve.

The door opened again and a uniformed constable brought in a woman of about Karen’s own age of thirty-six. She was considerably shorter than Karen, though, and must have weighed a good twelve pounds more. Her face was strong and square, although one cheek had an ugly pink mark, as though she had been lying on her side with her skin pressed into some harsh fabric. Her black wide-legged trousers and loose camel-coloured woollen top were creased too, but they hadn’t come from any high street store like the kind Sir Dan had owned.

Karen was surprised the woman was still wearing her own clothes. Surely Eve would have been professional enough to take any suspect’s clothes for scientific testing, even if she had been careless enough to start the questioning too soon.

Filing her own question for later, Karen stood up to introduce herself to Sheena and offer her hand for shaking. The other woman touched it briefly with a palm that was damp and cold.

‘I’m DCI Trench,’ Charlie said in his kindest voice, which surprised Karen. ‘And I’ve asked Doctor Taylor here, who is a psychologist, to talk to you to see if she can help you with your memory problems. She won’t be interviewing you about Sir Dan’s death, and you’ll be alone with her. If at any time you want to stop the discussion, all you have to do is say so. She’ll call the officer and he can take you back downstairs. OK?’

The woman turned to peer into his face. After a while, she

sighed as though something had reassured her, and nodded. Her unbrushed brown hair swung across the stain on her face.

‘Sit down now,’ Charlie said, looking over her head towards Karen with his eyebrows raised, clearly asking whether she felt comfortable enough for him to leave.

She nodded. He walked out without looking at her again. The click of the closing door sounded very loud, but it released Sheena Greves from her submissive expression and she faced Karen, revealing hazel eyes and long, thick, dark lashes. Blobs of yesterday’s mascara clung to them and smears of it marked the skin, but her eyes were clear and intelligent.

‘Where do you want to start?’ she asked in a voice that suggested she came originally from the East End of London but had worked to make her accent softer, less identifiable.

‘Maybe you could tell me who you are?’ Karen said, with a warm smile. ‘That’s usually the easiest way into a blocked memory.’

‘You know my name. I’m Sheena Greves. I am . . .’ She stopped, clenching the muscles under her eyes for a second, as though she had a sharp headache as well as everything else. ‘I was Sir Dan’s personal press officer.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Karen said, careful to put herself in an unfrightening and subordinate position. ‘What do you mean by “personal press officer”?’

Sheena’s lips twitched in a gesture that suggested impatience rather than amusement or politeness. ‘He has other people who deal with the media over his work and over his and his wife’s charities. My job is to manage his personal profile and field press enquiries that have nothing to do with his professional life or the actual work his charities do.’

‘Right. I see now. Thank you.’ Karen wondered whether the job description included any more intimate contact with Sir Dan. Something about the possessive confidence with which Sheena had talked about fielding the press enquiries suggested a closer link. If there had been anything, her shock at seeing what had been done to his body would have been even more acute. ‘How long had you worked for him?’

‘This is all on record,’ Sheena said, still impatient. ‘Why d’you need to ask me?’

‘I don’t have access to any records,’ Karen said in a peace-making tone. ‘And I’m here to see if I can help you remember. Talking about yourself may be a useful way in to whatever is blocking you.’

‘Sorry.’ Sheena’s shoulders lifted under the camel wool. ‘I started working for him, in the main PR office, nearly seven years ago. Then he gave me this new job about a year after that.’

‘Is it just you in the personal PR office?’

‘No. I have a secretary these days.’

‘So you’re quite senior,’ Karen said, letting admiration seep into her voice.

‘That’s right.’

‘Which means Sir Dan must have relied on you. Trusted you, too.’

A hint of colour warmed Sheena’s cheeks for a second. As she brushed back her hair, Karen could see that when she was not in a state of shocked distress she must be quite attractive.

‘Did you often come to see him here on the Island?’

‘Never.’ Sheena lowered her head again and began to pick at her cuticles. The nails themselves were well kept, Karen saw, neatly shaped and unvarnished. ‘That’s why I don’t know what

I'm doing here. You see, I . . . can't . . . I can't remember getting here or deciding to come here, or anything. All I know is that I was standing in that huge kitchen, staring at . . . at his dead body.' Tears welled in her eyes.

Karen felt her own ache in sympathy. It was easy to imagine how you'd feel if you'd had to look down at a stranger lying naked and castrated, spread-eagled on his kitchen table with sharp knives through his wrists and ankles. If it was a friend or lover . . .

'What did you do then?' Karen asked, pushing her own feelings out of the way.

'I looked round for a phone. There was one on the worktop – on its docking station. I grabbed it, then dropped it because my hands were so sweaty. I felt sick when I bent down to pick it up. I can remember all that, you see. I was silly too – you know, stupid. I couldn't remember how to get a dialling tone. Then I did and I phoned 999 for the police. They told me to wait where I was, so I did. Till I heard them banging on the door.'

'Right,' Karen said. 'This is great. Do you remember anything about the hours before you got to the kitchen this morning? Were you in his house last night?'

'I must've been, mustn't I? That policewoman said *all* the doors were bolted from the inside. The security alarm was on its night setting, too. Someone must've locked me in and set up the alarm. But I can't remember anything. And they haven't found anybody else in the house, so I don't understand how it can've happened. I don't . . . I can't see why . . . Oh, you know.'

'Could it have been Sir Dan's wife?' Karen suggested. 'She's the natural person, isn't she?'

Sheena's face paled. 'Olga? No. It couldn't have been. The

officers wouldn't have missed *her*. She's not the kind of woman you could overlook.'

'OK. So tell me what happened when you heard the police banging on the door.'

'I ran out of the kitchen and unbolted the front door to let them in, and all the alarms went off. I screamed when the noise started. It was such a shock. I didn't expect it. You could've heard the alarms in Cowes, I should think, but still nobody else appeared inside the house. And when the police looked, they couldn't find anybody. Not anybody, anywhere in the house. I can't understand how . . .'

'Had you been sleeping there?' Karen asked, filing away for later a question about why a man as rich and powerful as Sir Dan would have had no staff living in the house. It seemed unlikely from the little she knew of the super-rich.

'I don't know.' Sheena sounded defeated rather than obstructive.

'What were you wearing when the police came?'

'Pyjamas,' Sheena said quickly, as though she was glad to be able to help with something. 'Not mine. Striped cotton. You know, superfine cotton. Thick, expensive. From Turnbull & Asser. With the bottom of the legs rolled up. I don't remember ever seeing them before. The police told me to change into something else, and they took the pyjamas away.'

'Were they his, the pyjamas? Sir Dan's? Had you borrowed them?'

Sheena shook her head, looking agonised for a second. 'I don't know.'

'All right. Forget the pyjamas for the moment. Whereabouts were you in the house when you phoned the police?'

‘In the kitchen.’ Sheena’s voice was shaking and very quiet. She looked as though forcing the words up through her throat hurt her physically. ‘I already told you: I was standing in the kitchen. Bare feet. They were cold. It’s a tiled floor. Quarry tiles, I think. Dark red anyway.’

‘Great.’ Karen noted the fact that Sheena’s story was consistent in its details, even when she was answering a differently phrased question. ‘You’re doing really well. What could you see?’

‘Dan . . . He was . . . I can’t.’ Her voice rose and lengthened into a wail.

Karen waited. Sheena covered her face with both hands and gave in to tears. Her shoulders heaved.

‘You can’t what?’ Karen said, after a pause, fighting her sympathy. She knew just how those tears felt. ‘Can’t remember? Or can’t tell me what you remember?’

‘I can’t do this.’ Sheena pulled her hands away from her face, disfigured with tears and snot.

The distress was clearly genuine. But Karen was still not sure about the memory loss: Sheena’s story seemed too coherent in spite of its artful gaps, and rather too convenient, to be real.

‘That inspector said you wouldn’t ask me about the crime and I could stop at any time,’ Sheena added. ‘I want to stop now.’

‘Are you sure?’ Karen let a little steel into her manner. ‘Giving yourself permission to tell me what you remember seeing might help you.’

‘No.’

‘If you fight it, you could be storing up all kinds of trouble

for yourself in the future,' Karen said. 'I've heard a little of what it was you saw in that kitchen and I can understand how horrific the mental pictures must be. But if you hide from them, they will do the emotional equivalent of festering, and you may . . .'

'He said I could stop at any time and that you'd get me taken back to my cell. I want that now.'

'Well?' Charlie said when they were alone again. 'What do you think?'

Karen grimaced. 'It's definitely not organic amnesia, i.e. anything to do with the physical brain. There's no damage there. She knows precisely who she is and if there were organic memory loss it's unlikely that she would. It is possible she's suffering from functional amnesia, which is relatively common in cases of violent crime. Purely psychological in origin, and often designed as a defence mechanism.'

'From the shock of finding Sir Dan's body?' Charlie asked in a way that suggested he wanted Sheena to be innocent, which was one of his most engaging habits whenever he was faced with a new suspect.

'It could be,' Karen said, with some pity because she thought this time his target was more complicated than he believed. 'But there are plenty of cases in the literature of people who can't allow themselves to believe they're capable of perpetrating any violence, which means their minds won't allow them to remember what they did.'

'So they're faking memory loss?'

'No more than people suffering psychosomatic illness are faking that,' Karen said patiently. She was fairly sure Charlie

was ensuring that he had all the information he might need in the future. She could see the machine was still recording, so she kept her voice cool and informative. 'The symptoms are real, but they're caused by psychological factors, not infections, viruses, or any kind of organic damage.'

Charlie reached across to switch off the machine.

'Bugger,' he said with such feeling that she looked at him with sharp curiosity.

'Do you know her?' Karen asked, feeling her way. 'Had you met her before?'

He shook his head, then grinned like a shamefaced school-boy. 'I don't want Eve to have the satisfaction of getting this right. She exceeded her authority, and . . . you know how she sometimes thinks she owns me?'

'I do,' Karen couldn't resist touching his hand, just above the point where his over-large watchstrap hung over the bumpy bone in his wrist. Her fingertip felt more sensitive than usual and she withdrew it with regret. 'But I don't think you'll cure her fixation like this. You'll have to take it head on and tell her you'll never be what she wants.'

His thick eyebrows twitched and his lips turned inwards, whitening as he pressed them together to display his absolute determination not to comment. Whether it was a subconscious message driven by his loyalty to Eve or a straightforward dislike of being touched in such a public place, Karen accepted it and went back to work.

'What Sheena saw this morning was clearly horrifying and, given how closely she'd worked with the man, there could be bereavement in the mix as well as horror. I also think they might have been more than employer and employee. But . . .'

Charlie watched her with a wary expression in his eyes. 'But what?'

'The functional amnesia might have been caused by the shock of seeing the body, or by her inability to admit that she had killed him. But it could also have been caused by something that happened before the crime. He could have shown her something – or told her something – that was so traumatising she went into a kind of fugue state, from which she emerged only at the point when she focused on the body and called 999. Was there blood on the pyjamas she was wearing?'

'Not visible to the naked eye. They're on their way to the lab now in case there are microscopic traces. Can I safely interview her in this state?'

'I'd have thought so, yes,' Karen said. 'She's in control, functioning, articulate, and shows no sign of confusion or other-than-expected distress. But she'll need a lawyer.'

'No,' Charlie said in a tone of mock amazement. 'I'd never have thought of that.'

'Sorry.' Karen met his laughing eyes and smiled back at him.

Another of his endearing habits was the way he sometimes made her feel she was in charge while she was working for him. Her particular speciality was giving evidence in court about the psychology of defendants or witnesses, but Charlie had come to respect her ability to pinpoint behavioural markers in his suspects and to interpret the evidence their actions had left on the spaces where they had lived or worked.

He often made her feel that the success of any investigation hung on her skills, while she knew perfectly well that he and his team carried out a clearly planned and minute examination of all kinds of evidence she never got to see. She assumed he

gave everyone in his team the same feeling that they were the key to his success, which probably explained why he got such consistently good results. You didn't get made SIO on the murder of a man with a profile like Sir Dan Blackwater's if you'd had many failures.

'I know you've investigated even more murders than I've had student essays to mark,' she added with real affection. 'I get carried away sometimes.'

'D'you want to sit in on the interviews? I made Eve call for the duty solicitor. Sheena says she doesn't know of any lawyers and doesn't want to phone anyone else.'

'Which doesn't sound much like someone who came here to commit a premeditated crime, does it?' Karen said. 'Which suggests the amnesia might *not* be faked.'

'Don't ask me. You know I can't see into anyone's mind. Even my own. Specially my own.' Charlie brought his hands out from behind his back and handed her a pile of photographs. 'You'd better look at these. The printouts just came through.'

From the little he had already told her, Karen knew more or less what to expect, but the reality was hard to face. Even in black and white, these pictures would have been shocking. In full colour, they were stomach-churning.

But this was Karen's job. If she were ever to finish her current research paper on the motives for post-mortem mutilation, she would have to look at others that were worse.

Sir Dan had been a big man, barrel-chested and slim-hipped. His beak of a nose jutted up from a well-defined face, and the thick mass of hair still had some gold strands among the grey. The curls on his chest and between his legs were the same. He must have looked magnificent in life. A strange,

bruise-like mark crossed the centre of his stomach in an almost straight line.

‘Well?’ Charlie said again, when he had grown bored waiting for her to comment.

‘Could she have done it physically?’ Karen asked, pointing to the big, black-bladed chef’s knives that pinioned him to the table. ‘This must have taken a lot of force. I’ve tried to cut through a duck carcass with knives like these and had to use a mallet to get through the cartilage. To hammer knives right through a man’s wrists and ankles and into the wood of the table is going to need a lot of strength. Where’s the . . . the rest?’

Charlie’s lips relaxed, as though he was amused by her reluctance to name the body parts. ‘In the kitchen bin,’ he said, handing her another photograph.

The lid of the expensive heavy stainless-steel rubbish bin had been propped open for the photographer. Nestling on a pile of packaging, two wine corks, a clutch of broken eggshells and some cheese rinds, were Sir Dan’s hacked-off penis and testicles, along with the knife that must have been used: a heavy, serrated bread knife from the same range as the chef’s knives.

‘Presumably that’s gone for finger-printing,’ Karen said, pointing.

‘Of course. The CSIs are doing their thing right now. But look there.’ Charlie’s blunt finger, with its badly cut short nail, rested on a small muddle of cream-coloured material. ‘Gloves. Rubber gloves.’

‘DNA from the inside? Sweat?’ Karen suggested.

‘Who’d be stupid enough to chuck those in a bin so close to the victim? I bet this killer was double-gloved. We’re checking, obviously.’

‘So you think it’s a set-up?’ Karen said and watched his shoulders rise up to his neat ears.

She’d never noticed how small they were. Now she couldn’t see anything else, remembering an article she’d once read that suggested ears with tiny lobes were the mark of a psychopath. She hadn’t believed it then; she didn’t believe it now. But his ears were amazingly small.

‘How do I know?’ Sounds of an arrival outside made him turn his head. ‘If this is the duty brief we can get going.’