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The Art of Deception

Written by A. J. Cross

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ART OF DECEPTION

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CHAPTER ONE

He took a single, quiet step in the failing afternoon light, watching the solitary figure raise its arm and point two joined fingers at the glossy rooks and large-beaked raven across the water. Hearing the single ‘*Bam!*’, he saw the birds rise as one, then continued on, soundless despite his heavy build – so close now he could almost touch the back of the pale grey Stingray ski jacket. Another silent step and he reached out, gripped the shoulder. ‘*Yar!*’

The figure in the ski jacket spun on mud. ‘What you playing at, you fat *idiot?*!’

Bradley Harper grinned and pointed. ‘Look up there, Stuey. Look at that!’

Stuey ignored the directive. He’d seen it. He didn’t need another look at the low-roofed structure squatting on its foundations, flanked by trees, the gnarled trunks twisting away. He was intent now on scraping his muddied trainer soles against the coarse grass. ‘These cost a hundred and fifty quid, you *moron.*’ He pointed at a nearby sapling. ‘Break off a couple of those thin branches so we can set some snares.’

Harper gave the sapling a reluctant glance. He was well aware of his companion’s interest in wildlife. And the not-so-wild. Teachers at their school still didn’t know all that had happened to the three guinea pigs that used to live in the science block but Harper knew: Stuey had happened. Persisting with his own agenda, he pointed again. ‘It’s one of them summer houses. My mom told me there used to be some big old houses around here before they turned the land into a conservation area. It probably belonged to one of them.’

But Stuey was on the move, mercurial mood darkened by this further reference to the brooding structure and now the arrival of sudden heavy raindrops. ‘Yeah, and your old lady’s a fat slag and her bloke’s an on-the-rob thicko,’ he called over his shoulder.

‘No she’s— Where’re you going?’

‘Catch me hanging about here in the cold *and* rain. I’m off. If *you* want to stop here till it’s dark and the nonces come out to play, suit yourself.’ He turned to deliver a parting sneer: ‘Maybe *that’s* your scene.’

Harper’s round pale face flushed as he stared after the departing back. ‘That was ages ago.’

Stuey was continuing to put distance between them. ‘They come anywhere near *me* they’ll be wearing their balls for earrings. They’ll—’

Tuning out sentiments he’d heard many times before, Harper gazed after the pricey trainers and jacket, deciding to play to Stuey’s fine-tuned acquisitiveness. ‘*Think* about it, yeah?’ he shouted. ‘There might be stuff inside there that we could—’ Without warning the raindrops increased to a sudden torrent. Pulling his hood over his unkempt blond hair Harper turned and ran, scrabbling the incline towards the small structure. Pounding up the steps to the doors, he grabbed the handles with a rough push-pull movement then whirled, breathless. ‘It’s locked! Come on! Give us a hand.’

Shed or summer house, it was shelter and Stuey was already retracing his steps. Clawing his way upwards he arrived at the doors to deliver a practised shoulder-shove. Hinges shrieked as the outward-opening doors quivered then wavered inwards.

They stepped inside where Harper broke the silence, whispered words drifting on cloudy breath. ‘This is great, Stu. It’s dry. Nobody will know where we are and—’

Stuey mooched across the floor, blowing on his hands. ‘It’s *effing* cold and there’s nothing here.’ Belligerence was replaced by quick craftiness. He turned. ‘Know what it needs?’

‘. . . No, what?’

The smooth face beneath the neat dark hair split into a grin, the words slow and deliberate. ‘A – nice – warm – fire.’

Harper shot his friend a quick glance. He slowed his words. ‘Leave it out, yeah? Just . . . calm down a bit. I *know*—’

‘Shut the fuck up. You know nothing.’

‘Okay . . . okay,’ soothed Harper, plump hands batting the tense space between them, watching the restless prowl start up again, guessing the lack of medication. ‘We stop in here for a bit, yeah? Nice and quiet. Have a coupla fags and then the rain’ll— *No*, Stu, *don’t*!’

The expensive trainer made destructive contact with the drab wall. ‘Fires need wood. See that? Dry as anything.’

‘Leave it, Stu. I don’t—’

Halting the sudden vandalism, Stuey fixed his companion with a look. ‘What? You don’t *what?*’ Without warning he lunged at Harper and both fell to the floor, a mass of flailing limbs halted by the harsh crack of fracturing wood as a heavy boot made contact. They sat up, eyes converging on an area of flooring close to the wooden wall. ‘Look at what you’ve done!’ Stuey crowed.

Catching his breath, Harper looked to where Stuey was pointing: a newly created hole near the crumbling skirting. He watched as Stuey went to it, dropping to one knee to grab and pull at the damaged floorboards. Harper was tired now. He felt cold. He didn’t want more trouble. He’d had enough of Stuey and he didn’t want to be here any more. He wanted to go home. When he got back he’d ask his mom to put some chips on. ‘You’re right. Let’s go. You know what?’ He glanced over his shoulder towards the darkening windows. ‘I thought I heard something.’

Stuey was still occupied with the hole, running his fingers along the ruined wood, showing the fixed concentration which always provoked nervousness in Harper, and anyone else in close proximity. ‘This stuff’s dead dry. Come on! Let’s rip up some more.’ He seized another of the broken boards which gave a high-pitched screech then split. He clicked his fingers. ‘Give us that torch your old man nicked.’

Harper struggled to his feet, anticipating trouble. ‘No. He said not to take it out of the house. He’s coming round to see my mom tonight so I’ve got to put it—’ He watched as Stuey approached him, blue eyes unwavering, felt the small torch being lifted from his back pocket, knowing resistance was pointless.

He watched as Stuey returned to the hole, placed the torch on the floor and pulled at more boards. As another resisted with a piercing screech Stuey glared at him. ‘You gawping or helping?’

Reluctant, he moved closer, grasped one of the floorboards then let it go again. ‘What if somebody comes? What if . . .?’

Stuey shook his head. ‘You’re such a *wanker*.’

Harper allowed himself to be pushed to one side and watched as Stuey seized one of the longer boards, releasing it almost immediately – ‘*Shit!*’ – saw the finger and the red bloom on its tip go into Stuey’s mouth.

Within minutes and with no assistance from Harper the hole had grown to over a metre at its widest point. Harper watched as Stuey kicked broken flooring to one side then lay down and lowered his head into the hole's dark mouth. He edged closer, thinking of a likely deflection, a motivational carrot. 'How about the community centre, Stu? We could go there, have a laugh, a game of pool, shake things up a bit. How about it?'

He heard the soft click of the torch, followed by Stuey's voice. 'There's something . . . I can . . . almost . . . *reach* . . .' His words were cut short by a ragged intake of breath and the wild gyration of all four of his limbs as Stuey reared, propelling himself backwards across the floor, torch still clamped in his hand. He halted, eyes stretched, breath rasping.

Harper looked from him to the hole and back. 'What's up? What's in there?' Uncertain, he watched as Stuey, ashen-faced, wiped his mouth on his sleeve and got quickly to his feet, the forgotten torch falling from his hand. Slow to act, Harper saw it hit the floor, marked its steady progress towards the raw, broken edge where it teetered then disappeared. He moved too late. 'Oh, man, I'm *dead*. When my dad—' He whirled round. 'Where're you *going*?' He watched Stuey make a rapid exit through the doors and away in the fast-diminishing light, listened to the sound of his retreating feet. And something else? He frowned, listening hard. No. Nothing. Only silence.

With Stuey's departure the lake house felt calm. '*Tosser!*' yelled Harper, confident now in the distance Stuey was putting between them. He took a tentative step to peer into the void. It wasn't about to give up its secrets easily. That's *if* it had any. Stuey was just trying to spook him. Stuey was a dickhead. Everybody said so, although not to his face. Harper got down onto his broad knees, head low, trying to discern something within the blackness. Stuey was a liar. You couldn't count on anything he said. Stuey was a head case. Everybody said that as well. He sat up, eyes still on the pool of blackness. His dad's torch was somewhere down there. He had to get it back.

Lying down he extended an arm, playing his fingers within the space, brushing against something smooth and leathery. Jerking his hand he reached to one side, the tendons in his arm screaming, locating the slender tube where it had settled. Light-headed with relief he grasped it. Now his old man couldn't get on his case. All he had to do was get home before him.

Lifting out the torch he hesitated then pressed. The soft click delivered a dim, puttering light. Directing it downwards he moved it steadily, his eyes following the tiny beam as it moved over the uneven, sandy floor and onwards to a tiny object which glinted in the meagre light. Excitement surging, he peered at the small—

His lifted his head and he looked towards the doors. ‘Stuey?’ Silence. He called again, louder this time. ‘That *you*, Stu?’ More silence. Earlier talk of the area’s after-dark clientele surged into his head. Harper responded as he did to most troublesome information which came his way. He closed a mental door on it. As a shadow drifted past the windows his head was back inside the hole, lower this time, to reapply the failing torch, trying to relocate what he’d seen. If he could reach it . . .

He shot upright, emulating Stuey’s earlier backwards scabble across the floor, stopping several feet away, heart pounding. Now he knew what Stuey had seen. Waiting for the blood thud in his ears to stop, he stared at the black void, his head full of the conflict of wanting something yet fearful of getting it. It could be worth a few quid. He might even keep it. To do that he had to go back to the hole, reach down inside. Brow creasing, he thought of the time he’d walked with his mom to visit his nan. He remembered his mom swapping the flowers she was carrying to her other hand, putting her arm around his shoulders, telling him dead people couldn’t hurt you.

With a single-minded determination not displayed in any area of his sixteen years to date, Harper returned to the void, activated the dying torch and lowered his head into the hole, gaze averted. No way he wanted to see that again. Locating what he was seeking, he stretched until his fingers closed on it.

Pulling himself upright, sweat coursing, breath coming in harsh gasps, he held it, small and cold against his palm, then moved across the floor and sat, hand fisted, his eyes on the pool of blackness. People had to know. The police. He frowned. He didn’t want more trouble. No. He wouldn’t tell anybody. Ever. Wouldn’t even tell Stuey he’d seen it. Opening his hand he looked at the item in the torch’s minimal light. He brushed sand from it. Nice. Maybe he could get it to—

His head whipped round. ‘Who’s there?’ he whispered, eyes on the doors. Had to be Stuey, come back for another look. Come back for *this*. Unzipping the concealed pocket of his parka he placed it inside, rezipped it then ran his fingers over the coat’s surface. Confident now,

he called again, louder this time. ‘How about it, then? The community centre, yeah?’

Fractured hinges squealed as dank mist and cold air drifted inwards. He got to his feet, eyes wide, and started to back away, hearing a voice unrecognisable as his own, a tremulous quaver at panic’s edge. ‘I didn’t do nothing . . .’

In the minutes that followed, wings flapped and the mist, the trees and the smooth, dark water absorbed all sound from the lake house.

CHAPTER TWO

‘**H**ere, boys!’ The man in the Barbour clicked his tongue, looping the plaited-leather dog leads over one arm to clap his hands. He got only muffled barks in response. Where the *hell* were they? He pulled back his sleeve to look at his watch: six fifty a.m. Tuesday was always a busy day at work. To have any chance of getting to the office on time he needed to be back home, showered, breakfasted and ready to leave the house by eight thirty at the latest. He scanned the area, intense cold filming his eyes. Irritated now, he headed in the direction of the barks, calling again. ‘Barney! Zac! *Here*. Now!’

He reached the lake where he’d half expected to see them, hoping he wouldn’t. He didn’t have time to dry them off. They weren’t in the water. Nor were they anywhere else in sight. He listened. Their barks were coming from inside an elevated wooden building on the other side of the lake. Picking up speed he walked towards it, wondering how they’d managed to get inside. He scrutinised the doors as he neared, one of them half open, both showing evidence of damage. Reaching the top of the small flight of steps he pushed on the half-open door. It resisted. A second push and he walked inside.

Barney and Zac were poised over an area of wooden flooring, their compact bodies quivering, tongues lolling, tails up. He moved towards them, watching them execute little leaps on their front paws. He recognised the behaviour, knew what it meant: extreme frustration. ‘*Here*, boys. Come *on*.’ They remained where they were. Going down on one knee he rubbed and patted Zac’s shoulders and Barney’s flank. ‘Hey, hey, what’re you two up to? What’s got you so hot and bothered?’

His eyes drifted over the area of wooden floor immediately in front of them. A small piece of it was missing. He guessed that the dogs’ frustrated pawings had loosened it, causing it to fall beneath the floor.

Curiosity piqued, he leaned towards the hole and the dogs' excitement spiralled as another, larger piece of flooring disappeared. Hooking a finger he raised a section of board, pulling it to one side as both animals whimpered and circled on either side of him.

He gazed into the small hole, unable to discern anything in the blackness. Straightening, he pushed a hand into one of the Barbour's pockets, drew out his torch then leaned forward to apply it. It took him some seconds to process what he was seeing as the dogs bobbed and whined. ' . . . Easy . . . easy, you two. It's . . . okay . . . okay,' he soothed, knowing that it wasn't.

Pulling air into his chest he switched off the torch and swapped it for his phone. The early-shift operator responded almost instantly. 'Emergency. Which service do you require?'

'Hello?'

'*Emergency*. Which service do you require?'

He shushed the dogs, passing a hand over his damp forehead. 'I wouldn't describe it as an emergency exactly . . .'

The operator's weary voice persisted. 'What's the nature of your situation, caller?'

'My dogs . . .'

He sensed impatience on the line, imagined the operator's lips thinning. She was probably fed up of people calling to report some cat stuck up a tree. 'They've found . . . I think . . . I think they've found a body.'

The sound, followed by the significant mass of Chief Superintendent Gander coming at speed through the door, got Detective Sergeant Bernard Watts's immediate and undivided attention. Eyebrows climbing towards greying hair, Bernie glanced across the table to Lieutenant Joe Corrigan, his colleague on secondment to Rose Road's Headquarters from Boston, Massachusetts.

'Where's Kate?' Not waiting for a response Gander ploughed on. 'A body's been found at Woodgate Country Park. Near the lake.'

Bernie gave Gander a speculative look. 'And it's one for us? For UCU?'

'Initial reports suggest it's been there a while. It could be connected to one of half a dozen cold cases on the system. Get to the scene. Pathology and SOCOs are already out there. Find out what they know.' He was on the move again but turned, surprisingly quick on

his feet, finger pointing for emphasis. ‘Contact Kate. If she’s available I want her down there as well.’

Bernie seized the phone as the chief’s massive bulk disappeared through the door.

Kate Hanson was in deep water, that first day of a new term in a new year. Scent from a nearby candle joined steam wisping upwards to the ceiling and the humming extractor fan. Immersed to her shoulders, thick, dark-red hair secured on top of her head, she lifted the sponge and watched the water’s hypnotic fall, ambushed by a sudden memory of her ex-husband Kevin’s nine p.m. phone call on Christmas Eve. Citing overwork and an imminent departure for Paris, Kevin wondered if Kate would *please* give Maisie money on his behalf? With a sigh she’d hung up on the sounds of airport announcements and a soft female laugh, gone to her bag, got cash, placed it inside a card, mimicked his signature and his love and sealed it all inside an envelope on which she’d written their daughter’s name.

Releasing the sponge into the water Kate took a deep breath, switching her focus to the day ahead: a gentle segue into the university’s new term, beginning with a morning of admin. Her first lecture wasn’t until— *Relax. New year; new me . . . All of my responsibilities well-organised—*

There was a urgent knock on the bathroom door and one of those responsibilities spoke. ‘Mom?’

—well-managed, and to hell with Kevin and his—

‘Mom!’

Kate sat up, sending a bow-wave of water to the end of the bath where it swelled then cascaded to the floor. ‘Stop shouting, Maisie.’

‘Phone! For *you*.’

She sank back into wet warmth. ‘It’s too early. Tell whoever it is to ring back.’

‘It’s *Bernie*. He wants to talk to you. He said it’s important.’ Kate heard quick feet scampering away.

‘Oh, for—’ She stood and seized a towel. Wrapping herself inside it and stepping out of the bath she thrust her feet into the pink slippers Maisie had given her for Christmas. Pulling open the bathroom door, Kate padded across the landing and downstairs to lift the hall phone. ‘*What?*’

‘Happy new year, Doc!’

‘Same. What do you want?’

‘You got anything on this morning?’ Clutching her towel, goose-flesh forming on her bare shoulders and arms, she gazed upwards. ‘Me and Corrigan are on our way to a scene. Goosey wants all three of us there.’

Kate was on immediate high alert. ‘I’ll be there. Where is it? What—’

‘The lake at Woodgate Country Park. Know it?’

‘I’ll find it. What do you know?’

‘Nothing beyond Goosey saying it’s a likely cold case.’

Back in the bathroom she applied a quick slick of body moisturiser, smoothing in extra to the healing ten-centimetre scar running up one thigh, a souvenir of too-close contact with razor wire during the Unsolved Crime Unit’s previous case. The scar responded with a twinge. Taking a couple of swipes at her hair with a wide-toothed comb she acknowledged defeat, snapping a band around the heavy mass to secure it. Hurrying to her bedroom she dragged a pair of warm tweed trousers and an overcoat from the wardrobe, aware of a desultory movement on the landing. ‘Maisie?’ Reprising the scant details of the telephone conversation, she took out her leather boots, put them in a bag, then pulled on glossy black Hunters. ‘Maisie!’

Maisie was on the landing, still in pyjamas, cross-legged on the low wooden chest, cereal bowl in hand, ears stopped by her iPod, head nodding beneath the chaos of deep red curls. Kate tugged.

‘Hey! Oh.’

‘I’m in a hurry and *you* should be dressed by now.’

‘I haven’t had a chance because I’ve been rushing around taking *your* phone calls and—’

Pointing to the bedroom Kate was now on the move, talking as she went. ‘I’m phoning Chelsey’s mother to say we’ll be at their house in – seven minutes, *max*.’ Maisie peered through staircase spindles to watch her mother’s urgent downward progress. Putting the bowl on the floor she ambled to her room as Mugger shot across the landing and began opportunistically lapping at the remains of the milk.

Ten minutes into the journey, Maisie and her friend Chelsey were communicating in squeals inside the small car, causing Kate’s scalp to tighten. She took the opportunity for a quick glance at the smooth-skinned picture of health in the passenger seat beside her. It was

almost a different story last year when Chelsey was abducted by the man Kate and her police colleagues in the Unsolved Crime Unit had been pursuing. Harry Creed.

She refocused her attention. If the traffic kept moving she would reach her colleagues within twenty minutes. Her attention on the road ahead, she thought of Birmingham-born Detective Sergeant Bernard Watts. Tall and heavy, he spoke as straight as he thought. Often, too straight. Coming from academe, a southerner by birth, Kate's initial impression of him was of a full-on loudmouth and politically incorrect nightmare. Now she recognised his strengths as a long-serving officer, and his loyalty, although his resistance to psychological theory still annoyed her.

Kate dropped both girls at the school doors before following the drive back onto Edgbaston Park Road. Bypassing the main gate into the university, her usual destination, Kate's thoughts drifted to Lieutenant Joe Corrigan. His main role at Rose Road was that of firearms trainer: a stark indication of the change in British policing over the last decade. He was tall like Bernie but dark-haired and in his early forties. Joe Corrigan. His name was almost a byword for calm. She grinned. Calmness hadn't been the response of females in the workforce at Rose Road when he'd first arrived.

The traffic had slowed and she tapped the steering wheel, impatient to be moving as she activated the satnav, voice clear and authoritative: 'Woodgate Country Park.'

CHAPTER THREE

Kate drove into the makeshift parking area and slid into a space next to the Range Rover parked among several official police vehicles, including a black estate car with tinted windows. Turning off the ignition she studied the low-lying area as it fell away beyond her. The lake was partially obscured by early mist, white-suited figures moving methodically around it and another focal point: a dark green wooden structure on higher ground set amid bare trees and thick evergreens.

She got out, picking up barely discernible voices drifting upwards, plus another subtle sound: the hum of heavy commuter traffic from the nearby M5. Reaching the edge of the parking area she gazed downwards, seeing the expanse of Bernie's broad back emphasised by his quilted jacket as he walked with the tall, dark-haired figure in the navy overcoat. She started down the slope.

'Bloody hell, it's cold.' Bernie Watts's hands were thrust deep inside his pockets, his words billowing ahead of him. He nodded towards the diminutive, white-clad figure just visible through the open doors of the small wooden building. 'Hope Connie's got her thermals on.' He glanced back the way they had come. 'The Doc's arrived.' Joe turned to see Kate as they continued onwards. They approached the steps leading up to the small structure and the figure inside gave them a latexed wave. 'All right if we come on up?' asked Bernie, running a hand over his hair, particularly the bit that tended to stick up if left to its own devices.

He got a nod from the Hong Kong Chinese pathologist. 'You're fine. The external area's been processed.' They climbed the steps and went inside, arms folded to avoid inadvertent contact, and on to where Dr Connie Chong was on her knees beside a cavernous hole in the wood floor. They all looked down at it as she spoke. 'A man

walking his dogs phoned it in this morning. Ah, here's your forensic psychologist. Hi, Katie.'

Kate came inside, acknowledging Connie with a wave and nodding to each of her male colleagues. She saw Joe's eyes drift downwards, saw his grin at the trousers tucked inside the Hunters. 'Hope I haven't missed anything.'

'I was about to get into it,' said the pathologist. 'Dog walker was out here around six thirty a.m. According to the brief statement he gave PC Whittaker, this place was already open and his unleashed dogs came inside.' She held out both hands above the mid-section of the wide hole. 'The dogs started worrying this area and they wouldn't be persuaded to leave. So he came to take a look. The floor was more or less intact when he entered except for a small piece his dogs had dislodged, which I've retrieved, along with another piece from down there.' She pointed inside the hole. 'Curiosity appears to have got the better of the dog owner and he wanted to know why his dogs were fussing. So he lifted a short length of floorboard and, being a sensible type equipped with a torch, he took a look. Saw enough to phone it in.' She sat on her heels gazing up at them. 'When I arrived with SOCOs at seven thirty we lifted more boards and' – she stretched for a cardboard carton and held it out to them – 'if you put these on I'll show you what it was he saw.'

Each taking a pair of blue latex gloves, they crouched at the hole's edge, craning as Connie angled a lamp squarely into the hole and switched it on. They waited for their eyes to adjust to the stark light.

Bernie veered away. 'Bloody *hell*,' he said for the second time that morning.

Supporting herself on her hands Kate lowered her upper body closer to the hole. The shocking visual assault caused her to draw back. She met Joe's eyes as he straightened, saw him shake his head.

Connie was speaking. 'Awful, yes. And pitiful.' Kate waited as the pathologist fixed each of them with a direct look. 'I can't give a time estimate yet so don't ask but we can all see that it's been here a while.' She transferred her gaze back to the hole. 'I'll have more for you once we get it back to Rose Road but my *guess* is young and male.'

They were silent, their eyes still on the hole. Kate watched Bernie, his heavy shoulders hunched against the cold as he moved away to survey the remainder of the floor. Joe stood and went to examine the damage to the doors that Kate had noted on her arrival.

As they returned Connie continued. 'What else can I tell you? Ah, yes. The floor itself. Now *that's* very interesting. Want to know why?' This got three nods. 'I suspect these floorboards had previously been taken up and replaced prior to the dogs' visit this morning. I'd go so far as to say that *that* happened very recently, probably within the last few days, after which it was reconstructed. Like a jigsaw puzzle. Which is essentially what dogs and owner found when they got here this morning.'

Kate looked from the hole to the pathologist. 'You're saying that someone else was here recently and removed this area of flooring and then replaced it?'

'That's what I suspect. Take a look at those.' She indicated pieces of flooring of various sizes laid in neat order to one side of the void.

They moved towards them, Kate picking up one then another, running her fingers over the raw edges before replacing them and looking at Connie. 'What we've seen – down there. It's been there years?'

'Certainly has.'

'Got any guesses how long?' asked Bernie.

'I knew you'd push,' said Connie with a head-shake. 'No. I haven't.'

Kate's full attention was on the flooring, face intent. 'I'm trying to get a sense of what's happened here from what you've said and what we've seen so far.' She stretched her arms, hands spread. 'What you're saying is that all of *this* area of flooring was taken up at some point in the past so that someone could leave it – him? The floor was then replaced and remained undisturbed for years – until it was taken up *again* a few days ago then put back together again. And this morning, the dogs arrived and started the process again.' Kate took a few short steps, her attention fixed on the hole. 'And here we are.'

The pathologist looked up at her. 'That pretty much sums it up.'

Kate paced the area around the hole. 'Why would whoever placed the body under the floor come back only a few days ago and take the floor up again?'

Bernie glanced at her. 'Who said it was the same person?'

'If it wasn't, why take the time and trouble to reconstruct the floor and keep what was underneath hidden?'

That earned her an exasperated look. 'Whoever pulled up the

floorboards has probably got nothing to do with what we've just seen. It was probably the usual witless vandalism.'

She looked at him. 'And your "witless" vandal has a tidiness fetish?' She watched his eyes roll upwards and shook her head. 'Vandalism tends to be a young crime, I doubt the casual young vandal would have either the patience or the motivation to reassemble this floor.'

He sent her a sidelong glance. 'You're pulling it all apart a bit quick, even for you. How about waiting till we know more about what we've got here before you start on the theories?'

She sat back looking up at him. 'But this *is* UCU's next case?'

'From what Goosey said this morning and the speed he was going when he said it.'

Connie looked up at them with a grin. 'Much as I like to see enthusiasm in the workplace, right now this case is *mine*. A lot more of this floor has to come up so we can remove what we have.' They all turned at the sound of approaching footsteps. 'And that's Forensics, come to assist me.' She leaned towards the doors. 'Good morning, Adam! Come on in.'

Adam Jamison, the serious-faced head of the Forensic Service at Rose Road, came inside with a waved acknowledgement to Kate and her colleagues, speaking directly to Connie. 'How extensive do you need the hole to be?'

Connie got to her feet with a suppressed wince. 'Nobody warns you how hard pathology can be on the knees. Give me a minute and I'll mark it up.' Reaching into a metal carry case she brought out a reel of acid-yellow and black striped adhesive tape and bent to her task, gloved hand patting tape onto wood as she went.

Adam watched her progress then nodded. 'I'll go and fetch the tools. You'll be snapping it all before we remove the floor?' Connie nodded, intent on her task. 'I'll still bring the SOCO camera and recording schedules.' With a wave he was gone.

Joe had been gazing into the void during the exchange. He turned to Connie. 'There's something else down there. Looks like a flash-light.'

'Which is exactly what it is, Joseph.'

He moved to one side as Kate approached to take another look. 'Right there. See?'

She leaned at the void's edge, breathing in a pleasant mix of soap and subtle aftershave. She gazed downwards, eyes drifting over the

pale, sandy surface until they came to the small cylindrical shape. She looked up at him. ‘The killer dropped it?’ She returned her gaze to the hole for another look at the remains, her attention snagged by a tiny, well-illuminated and heart-rending detail. Dark, curving sweeps. Eyelashes. Kate straightened and walked to the door, arms around herself, to stare out at the flat, black lake. Somebody had once loved him. Missed him still? She sighed. *Focus on the job.*

Turning from the door she went back to examine the several pieces of broken flooring. On her knees she lifted and turned each piece, arranging then rearranging, interrogating each for meaning, identifying their fit. After a few minutes she stood, brushing at her trousers. ‘My working theory is that whoever took up and then replaced this flooring within the last few days already knew what was beneath it and wanted to ensure that it remained hidden.’

Bernie looked down at her, rubbing a hand over his jowls. ‘My money’s still on the usual type of idiot who was up for a bit of vandalism, got more than he bargained for and hopped it.’

She shook her head. ‘He didn’t “hop it” did he? He stayed, took time to reconstruct the floor, to conceal what was there. Why bother to do that unless he was the person who put the body there originally?’ She paced the area around the hole, voice low. ‘He assembled a jigsaw of broken wood. That would require certain specific aptitudes: visual discrimination, hand–eye coordination, good fine-motor skills.’ She looked up at Bernie then Joe. ‘A patient, methodical type of person, good with his – or her – hands.’

They turned at the sound of more footsteps heading inside and watched as Igor, Connie’s post-mortem suite assistant, entered lugging a large metallic case, breathing heavily, long hair restrained in a ponytail, his plump face flushed with exertion.

Bernie returned his attention to Connie, now lying on her side, her head below floor level. He crouched at the side of the hole. ‘When will you know more?’

She reached out a hand for the camera Igor was holding towards her. ‘In my experience UCU’s enthusiasm invariably turns to pushiness. Right now I need to snap what we’ve got down here and then give some thought as to how best to free it. I’ll ring you.’

The three left the lake house and walked the steep incline back to their vehicles, Bernie gasping words. ‘Right, Corrigan, how about

when we get back you and me pull the male MISPER cold cases going back . . . what d'you think? Five, six years?'

'Based on what we've seen, I'd say ten,' Kate interjected.

Joe turned to her. 'How's life treating you, Red?'

She grinned as they reached the makeshift parking area. 'About the same as it was when I last saw you two. Busy. Which is how I like it. When Bernie phoned this morning I was rationalising my new year approach to life and work.'

Bernie gave her a sideways look. 'And this was before breakfast?'

She looked down at the ground around her feet. 'And now there are people connected to what we've just seen who have started their new year oblivious to the bad news heading their way.'

Bernie shook his head. 'If you want my opinion, Doc, that's too much thinking too early in anybody's day.'