

1

A FLASH OF MOONLIGHT touched her hair with silver as she scurried along the street into town. It wasn't safe to go back yet. She had to allow time for his temper to subside. Another half hour should do it. After walking fast for about fifteen minutes, she was more than a mile from home. The night air was chilly on her face, the side streets peaceful. There was no one around to see that she had been crying. Once, she thought she heard footsteps behind her. Fearful he had followed her she looked round, but the street was deserted. Shoving her hands into the pockets of her woolly jacket, she hurried on.

'What are you saying?' he had asked, so softly she had failed to notice the warning signs.

Too late, she had registered the heightened colour of his face. Apologies were no use once rage took hold of him. She had stared, mesmerised by the spittle on his lips as he shouted obscenities at her.

'It's only a Hoover,' she had whispered when he quietened down. 'We can get another one –'

As soon as the words left her mouth she had realised her mistake, but his anger made her panic so she couldn't think clearly.

'Only a Hoover? So I'll just go and buy another one, shall I?' He had leaned forward until he was so close she could feel the soft spray of his saliva on her face. 'Do you think we're made of money?'

'No. No.'

This had nothing to do with money.

It was pointless to protest once he lost control like that. All she could do was protect herself until she was able to escape. Reaching

the deserted Memorial Park she stumbled along the path towards the pond. In the darkness she found a bench, and sat down facing the water. It was still February, too cold to stay there for long. She was about to stand up when something struck her on the back of her head. Soundlessly she slumped forward and keeled over sideways on the hard seat. For a moment she lay quite still, stunned. Whimpering quietly she twisted her head round until she was looking straight up, blinking, struggling to make sense of her situation. She remembered her husband's fury, his eyes bulging with the effort of shouting at her. Now she was lying on a hard surface in darkness with a pounding headache, and the sour taste of vomit in her throat. She had no idea where she was.

In the darkness a blurred moon hovered far away, while close up a face shifted in and out of focus. Her terror slipped away.

'Thank God you've come.'

She reached out to touch him, but his features dissolved like a reflection in water.

'Help me.'

As he raised his arm, moonlight glittered on the blade he was clutching.

2

IAN PETERSON TIDIED UP his desk, checked the time, and set off for the car park at a trot. He had hoped that Bev would be more relaxed about his work relationships now they were married, but two months had passed since the wedding and she had become, if anything, more carping and suspicious than before. If he was home late, she was bound to kick off. It was driving him nuts. A detective sergeant in his mid-thirties, successful in a career he loved, he was reduced to an apologetic coward by one sharp word from his wife. They had been together, on and off, since they had met at school. He hadn't been alone in his infatuation. All the boys in his year had fancied her. His teenage crush had developed into a serious attachment when they started dating. After they left school he had driven long distances to spend time with her whenever he could. It was thanks to his determination that they had stayed together.

The first time he had asked her to live with him, Bev had refused outright to move away from Kent.

'All my family are here, and my friends. And there's my job. I know you think your work is so important, but I happen to value my job too.'

When he had joined the Kent constabulary and she had finally agreed to move in with him, he had been blissfully happy. For a few years they had lived together harmoniously but somehow, since the wedding, Bev had changed. She complained more and more about the long hours he worked.

'You knew about my job when you agreed to marry me,' he had protested more than once. 'Working on murder investigations isn't a nine-to-five job. If I'm on a case, I can't drop everything just because you're expecting me home.'

‘So I’m supposed to wait here by myself while you hang around in the pub until all hours –’

‘What are you talking about? When I’m not here, I’m working. Whatever gave you the idea I was out drinking to all hours?’

‘I don’t know *what* you’re doing. You don’t tell me anything. I never know where you are, or who you’re with, do I?’

‘Don’t be stupid.’

‘So now I’m stupid.’

It baffled Ian that someone as beautiful as Bev could be so insecure. He did his best to reassure her, but it was wearing.

‘You know I love you.’

‘So you say.’

‘I married you, didn’t I?’

‘Well, thanks for doing me a favour. How kind of you, taking pity on me –’

‘Now you’re being ridiculous.’

‘So I’m ridiculous as well as stupid.’

He just couldn’t win. Sometimes he wondered if he’d made a mistake. ‘Marry the girl,’ his father had advised him. It had worked well for the previous generation, but the world had been a different place when his parents were young. He had hoped to encounter a security like his parents enjoyed in marriage, but now he wondered if Bev would ever really feel settled with him. Looking back, he wondered if they had ever been happy, after the initial excitement of the relationship had worn off. He felt as though he had always been hanging on, waiting for the good times to come.

Before the wedding they had lived about two miles away from the police station. Bev had insisted on moving. The property they were buying was a stretch, even on their joint salaries, although the area was certainly pleasant.

‘I want to feel safe coming home after dark on my own,’ she had told him. ‘It’s not as if you’re always around in the evenings. I never know when you’re going to be called away unexpectedly, and I can’t rely on knowing when you’ll be home. You know I don’t like being on my own in the house at night.’

Ian had caved in, even though the move meant he spent at least an hour a day driving in to work and back.

This evening the traffic was light and he was home relatively early. Even so, Bev's car was already in the drive and lights were on in the house. He hoped she would be in a good mood with him. Constantly worrying about his wife's moods wasn't how he had envisaged married life. Sometimes he arrived home to find her in tears, for no apparent reason. He tried to find out if she was depressed or just unhappy. Either way, he was prepared to do anything in his power to help her, but she clammed up when he asked her about it. He hated the fact that she wouldn't confide in him, but he couldn't force her to talk. When he pressed her, she would snap at him.

'You're not at work now. I'm not one of your suspects.'

Steeling himself, he went inside and found her busy in the kitchen. Her short blonde hair looked shiny and neat, and she was wearing make-up. She turned to him with a welcoming smile. With a pang, he recalled how loving she had been in the early days in their relationship. Always an optimist, he dared to hope they had come through a rocky patch. Moving house and organising a wedding, not to mention making a lifelong commitment to another person, was bound to be stressful. She had probably needed time to adjust to her new life as the wife of a detective.

'Dinner's nearly ready,' she smiled.

'It smells great,' he said, wary of upsetting her.

'You look tired.'

'I'm knackered.'

'Go and sit down and I'll pour you a drink. There's some beers in the fridge.'

Ian went into the lounge and pulled off his tie. He leaned back in an armchair, stretched out his long legs, and ran a hand over his light brown hair in an attempt to smooth it down.

When they had finished eating, Bev came and sat beside him on the sofa to finish her glass of wine before clearing up in the

kitchen. She often complained that he never talked to her about his work, so he decided to try and explain his passion for his job, although he hardly understood it himself.

‘I’ve never told anyone this before, but when I was a kid I wanted to be Superman.’

‘You wanted to be Superman?’ she repeated, laughing, ‘so you could fly around in a cape with your underpants over your trousers?’

‘No. I’m being serious. He was my hero because he was always fighting injustice, and that’s what I wanted to do. What I still want to do. I know one person can’t really make a difference, but there are so many wrongs in the world, I just feel I have to do what I can.’

He didn’t go on to say he had dedicated his life to the pursuit of justice, for fear she would sulk. She would have liked him to dedicate his life to her alone.

Instead, he launched into a description of his new detective inspector. Tall, thin and grey-haired, Rob Wellbeck looked older than his forty years.

‘He acts it too. I mean, he’s a decent enough bloke, but he’s so serious, all the time. If he’s got a sense of humour, he hides it up his arse crack when he comes into work. I know you think I’m obsessed with my job but he’s far worse than me, honestly.’

Bev chuckled, but there was an edge to her voice. ‘Worse than you? You’re pulling my leg! Please tell me he’s not married.’

‘He is.’

‘His poor wife!’

Uneasily, Ian joined in her laughter.

3

THE FRONT DOOR SLAMMED behind him and Mark ran into the living room. His long dark fringe flopped over eyes that flicked rapidly round the room. His father was lying stretched out on the sofa.

‘Where’s mum?’

His father merely grunted without raising his head.

The young man dropped his jacket on the floor and flung himself down on an armchair. Long and loose-limbed, he took after his father. The chair was well padded, with a matching footstool, but he fidgeted uncomfortably.

‘What are you watching?’

Henry stared at the television without answering.

‘What did you have for supper?’

Mark glared at his father sprawled along the length of the sofa, eyes fixed on the screen. He paid no attention to his son’s petulant expression, if he even noticed it.

‘Dad, where’s mum?’

‘I don’t know.’

Mark scowled at the screen. Holding onto the remote control, his father was watching a gardening programme he had recorded earlier in the week. It was too much hassle to try and persuade him to change channel. Mark was stuck watching some dreary old bloke drivelling on about compost. It was so unfair. He was eighteen. It wasn’t as though his parents didn’t have enough money to help him to buy a place of his own. His father might not earn very much, but his mother was a seriously wealthy woman. Yet however much Mark had nagged her to cough up for a deposit, she had flatly refused.

‘Why would you want to go and live all by yourself? You’re only just out of school. You might want to go to university next year –’

‘I’m not going to university. I’ll get a job – when I have my own bills to pay. There’s no point in my hanging around, living here with you forever.’

‘Well, you’re too young to live on your own, and in any case, the house is big enough for us all.’

‘Far too big. What do you need such a massive house for? You could sell it and have enough to get yourselves a really nice modern place.’ And have enough money left over to buy him a flat of his own.

‘Are you hungry?’ he asked.

His father didn’t stir. He looked half asleep. Mark swore under his breath. He knew perfectly well what had happened. He couldn’t help overhearing their constant arguments. It was just one of the reasons he was so desperate to get a place of his own. They were at it all the time, his father yelling, his mother crying. Afterwards he would see his mother creeping around the house, her head turned to one side in a pointless attempt to hide her inflamed red eyes. Over the years he had become hardened to the sounds of their fighting, and the frustration of being powerless to intervene. Although his father was the aggressor, his mother wasn’t blameless. In its own way her passivity was provocative. There were times when he wanted to slap some sense into her himself. He had given up trying to understand why she put up with it.

When he was thirteen he had challenged her about it.

‘Why don’t you stand up to him?’ he had demanded.

At first she had pretended not to understand what he meant. It was impossible to believe she was stupid enough to think he didn’t know what was happening right under his nose.

‘You don’t have to put on a show with me. I know dad shouts at you all the time.’

‘What are you talking about? That’s a wicked thing to say. Your father is a kind and considerate man, and you should treat him with more respect.’

‘For God’s sake, mum, the whole bloody street can hear him.’

If he hadn’t felt so sad about it he would have been tempted to laugh at her for defending his father’s tantrums. It was ridiculous.

‘He doesn’t mean to upset anyone,’ she had insisted. ‘You don’t understand. He can’t help himself. Now, I don’t want to talk about it again.’

In spite of her rebuff, he had tried again a couple of weeks later, in the aftermath of another fight. He not only came up against the same blank refusal to acknowledge the truth, but this time she had been angry with him which was grossly unfair. He had only wanted to help her. She had threatened to send him to his room if he brought the subject up again, and something inside him had just given up. He wondered if she actually liked being abused. After that he had resolved to ignore it when his father raised his voice against her – and sometimes his hand. If his mother was prepared to put up with it, then it served her right. There was nothing Mark could do about it however desperate he was to help her. He had tried.

He hadn’t raised the subject again until he was seventeen, when he had asked her directly why she didn’t leave his father.

‘Leave him?’ she had repeated, as though he had been speaking to her in a foreign language. ‘He’s my husband.’

‘He’ll kill you if you let him carry on treating you the way he does.’

‘Don’t speak to me like that.’

‘But you can’t be happy with him. Why don’t you get a divorce? You’ve certainly got grounds –’

She had been genuinely shocked.

‘Just because I don’t go to church regularly doesn’t mean I don’t know right from wrong.’

When he was small, he used to accompany her to church every week. Confession had been important to her, but he hadn’t minded when his father had arbitrarily put a stop to the weekly outing.

‘No son of mine is going to be indoctrinated with all that claptrap.’

And that was that. She hadn't protested, even though he had heard her crying a lot. That was when he had begun to despise her, although he felt sorry for her at the same time. As a child he had found it very confusing. Now he was eighteen, and an adult, he still couldn't understand why she stayed with his father.

It was growing late and his mother still hadn't come home. His father was glued to another anodyne television programme.

'Where did mum go?'

No answer.

'When's she coming home?'

'How the hell should I know?'

Mark was starving. He couldn't go all night without anything to eat.

'I'm going out to get something before the takeaway closes,' he announced, leaping to his feet. 'Do you want anything?'

Half an hour later he was back home, scoffing sausage and chips in front of the television with his father.

'I said no vinegar,' Henry grumbled.

Mark took no notice. Instead he asked again where his mother was.

'Do you think she's all right?'

'What?'

'Do you think something's happened to her?'

'Stop yapping, will you? I'm trying to listen.'

'But -'

'She'll come home when she's ready. Now shut up about your bloody mother, will you, I'm trying to listen to the news.'