

Prologue

I

So this is how it ends.

It is clear to me now: one of us has to die.

Some deaths are inevitable. Others can be prevented. And then there are those tragedies that are driven by their own momentum, that once begun will gather force, causing harm after harm, loss after loss.

Yes. It is time to end this.

II

Finally it was quiet in the car. Stephanie had managed to silence Jason by telling him that if he didn't stop talking she would pull over and throw him out. He could walk back to the station. It wasn't a comfortable silence, and Stephanie gripped the steering wheel tightly. She opened the window a crack to let out some of the hot air and breathed in the moist sea breeze, catching a vague scent of the waves crashing onto the rocks below.

Relax, a voice in her head said. It won't be like last time.

'So you think it's a domestic then, Sarge?' Jason said, his voice intruding into her thoughts. 'It's a bit posh up here for that, isn't it? They can't be rowing about money, that's for sure.'

Jason folded his arms as if that said it all, and Stephanie wanted to ask if he had listened to anything during his training. She hated taking probationers out, particularly when they were as opinionated and misinformed as this one.

'There was a 999 call and a woman was screaming for help – that's all we know. Then the line went dead. The security company that keeps an eye on the place says it's like bloody Fort Knox so it's unlikely anyone's broken in.'

Stephanie knew all too well what that meant. Whoever the woman needed saving from was known to her.

'The security patrol car is at the scene already and their guy's waiting to let us in, so we'll find out soon enough,' she said.

Too soon. She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

The gravel of the track crunched beneath the tyres, the bright light of a full moon illuminating the shrubbery that lined the narrow driveway as the clouds cleared. As she turned the corner she saw a long white wall ahead of them, about twenty feet high with a huge double wooden doorway in the centre.

'What the hell is this place?' Jason asked, his voice quiet as he took in the unusual sight.

'It's the rear wall of the house.'

'There aren't any windows. Why would you build a house without windows?'

'Just wait until you get inside, Jason.'

Out of the corner of her eye she saw his head swivel towards her. 'You know this house, then?'

Stephanie nodded. She didn't want to think about the last time she was called here and was hoping and praying that tonight wasn't going to be anything like it. But a cry for help was never a good sign, and despite its beauty this house gave her chills.

She pulled the car to a halt next to a vehicle with the badge of a security company on the side. A skinny young guy with a severe case of acne jumped out.

Oh Lord, she thought. *Two babies for the price of one.*

'Sergeant Stephanie King,' she said. 'Have you got the key?'

The young man nodded. 'I'm Gary Salter. From the security firm.'

Nothing like stating the obvious.

'Did you try ringing the bell?' she asked. Gary's eyes darted nervously from left to right.

'I didn't know if I should or not.'

'Probably the right decision,' Stephanie said. 'We don't know what's going on in there, and you'd have been vulnerable all on your own. Get back in the car, Gary. Until we know what's what we can't have you trampling all over the place.'

Stephanie pressed her finger hard on the bell and bent her head to listen for any sign of movement inside. It was completely silent. She tried once more for luck and then pushed the key into the lock and turned it.

She heard Gary jump out of the car behind her.

'There's an alarm,' he said. 'Code's 140329.'

Stephanie nodded and pushed the door open. The alarm box was inside the porch, but it wasn't armed. She opened the inner door and stepped into the house, Jason hot on her heels. The corridor was dark, and there wasn't a sound. The silence had the thick quality of a heavily insulated house, and as she called out her voice seemed flattened, dead.

A fragment of light spilled through a partially open door that led into what Stephanie knew to be the main living room of the house. With one hand on the wall to guide her, she inched forward, calling out, 'Hello? Police!' as she went. She pushed the double doors at the end of the hall fully open and suddenly they were out of the gloom.

'Bloody hell!' Jason said, and Stephanie knew exactly what he meant. The impact of the view in front of her was every bit as staggering as the last time she had seen it. There may have been no windows on the entrance side of the building, but the far wall of the vast living space was a single sheet of glass. Bright moonlight was reflecting on the black sea far below and it felt as if the house was suspended high above the ocean.

'No time to look at the view, kid. Hello!' she shouted again. 'Police. Anyone home?' There wasn't a sound. 'Come on, Jason, let's check the place out.'

The whole of the cavernous space they were in was open plan, with an ultra-modern kitchen, a dining table for about twenty people and an array of sofas. Just then the moon went behind a cloud and Stephanie reached out to switch on the lights. Nothing happened.

'Shit,' she muttered. 'Go and get the torch – and be quick. I'm going downstairs to the bedrooms. Come and find me.'

Jason turned back towards the door and Stephanie slowly made her way to the top of the stairwell and grasped the smooth steel bannister for support. It was cold under her fingers.

'Police!' she shouted. 'Mr North – are you here?' She could hear the lack of confidence in her voice, and cursed her memories of this place. 'Mr North?' she shouted again.

Although the caller had been a woman, the only name Stephanie had was North's and to the best of her knowledge he hadn't remarried.

The moon suddenly reappeared, drawing her gaze to the mesmerising sight of its reflection on the dark water, but she turned back to the stairs and drew her baton in her right hand. Holding tightly to the bannister with her left she stepped carefully down the glass staircase, calling out as she went.

Something had happened here. She could feel it.

She knew the bedrooms were on this floor, and at the far end of the corridor there was another staircase that led to the basement. She didn't want to have to go down there again.

She heard clomping feet behind her and turned into the full beam of a strong flashlight, lifting her arm across her eyes to protect them from the glare.

'Sorry, Sarge.' Jason's voice sounded slightly uneven, as if he was either scared or excited. She didn't want to know which.

Stephanie called out again into the silence. She remembered where the master bedroom was. Last time she was here the door had stood open and North had been sitting on the bed, his head bowed, his shoulders shaking.

She reached out with her foot and gently pushed the door open.

They didn't need the torch. Moonlight flooded through the room's floor-to-ceiling windows, supplemented by the flickering yellow glow of a dozen candles strategically placed around the room.

'Jesus!'

Jason's whispered blasphemy said it all. The bed was a mass of tangled sheets wrapped around the legs and arms of two people – Stephanie couldn't tell whether male or female from where she stood. The metallic smell confirmed what she was seeing. Both bodies were still, and the white bedding was drenched in thick, dark blood.

Despite the warm night, Stephanie felt a shiver run across the back of her neck and she swallowed hard. What the hell had happened here? She felt an abrupt urge to run from the room, away from the brutal sight in front of her.

Forcing herself to take a deep breath, she turned to Jason and quietly asked him to go back upstairs and call it in. She didn't need a mirror to know that the round-eyed look of horror on his face was a reflection of her own.

As he left the room, Stephanie heard a sound that made every hair on her arms stand on end. It was the cry of a very young child. She spun towards the door, trying to work out where it was coming from. She needed to find the child, but it didn't sound like a cry of pain or distress, and before she could leave this room, there was one thing she had to do. She was going to have to walk over to the blood-soaked bed and touch both bodies to check if they were dead, although in her mind there could be little doubt. The spatter pattern on the wall resembled a weird abstract painting and viscous red splodges decorated a larger than life black and white photograph of a blonde-haired woman, hanging in pride of place above where they lay.

Stephanie took a deep breath and forced herself to put one foot in front of the other, inching towards the bodies.

At first she thought she was seeing things. A leg twitched. Then a moment later the distant sound of the crying child was accompanied by a lower, deeper sound. It was a groan of pain. And it was coming from the bed.

One of them was alive.

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