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CORE OF EVIL

**NIGEL
MCCRERY**

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Nigel McCrery

Quercus

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Nigel McCrery worked as a policeman, until he left the force to study at Cambridge University. He has created and written some of the most successful television series of the last ten years – his credits include *Silent Witness*, *New Tricks*, *Born & Bred*, *All the King's Men* and *Back-Up*. He is also the author of five internationally bestselling Sam Ryan mysteries. Nigel lives in North London.

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For Nelly with all my love

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Summer, 1944

‘Granny, what are these?’ shouted Kate.

Iris Poel sighed. The sun was a white-hot eye in the centre of a bright blue sky, staring at the back of her neck. Her head felt leaden, and it hurt when she moved. The prickling of sweat on her arms and back made her feel as if ants were crawling all over her skin.

‘What are what, darling?’ she said for the hundredth time that morning. Putting her secateurs down, she turned away from the rose bush that she was pruning and looked over to where her granddaughter was supposed to be playing with her brothers and sisters.

‘These.’ Kate was standing over by a shrub on the other side of the garden. It was covered in glossy leaves and small red berries. Kate was cradling a cluster of the berries in her hand.

‘Leave those berries alone,’ Iris said sharply. ‘They’re poisonous.’

‘I know that, but what *is* it?’ Kate repeated.

‘It’s called a daphne,’ Iris snapped, feeling spikes of pain lance through her temples with each word. ‘Now leave the berries alone and go back to your game.’

‘That game is boring,’ Kate proclaimed with the weariness that only a six-year-old child could manage. She turned away and ran across the garden to where Iris had set out a low table for the children, covered with a white cloth. An entire toy tea set was arranged on the table, along with plates of cakes and biscuits.

Nobody was sitting at the table. Three of them were kneeling on the grass playing with Kate’s dolls. Two more were running around a small tree that Iris had planted in the middle of the garden the previous spring. The rest were probably in the house – Iris’s daughter-in-law’s house. Or rather, her son’s house, but Frank was in Africa, fighting for his King and his country, and Judith went to work in a factory every day, making parts for aircraft. And Iris was left to look after the children. Every day. Every single day that God sent to try her.

Iris sighed, and turned back to the rose bush. There were dark splotches on a couple of the leaves. She snipped them off. It looked like blackspot, and there was no point taking chances.

‘Are these blackberries?’

Iris jerked her head around. ‘Kate, I thought you were supposed to be having a tea party with your friends?’

‘That tea tastes funny,’ Kate said. ‘Are these blackberries, Granny?’ She was closer to Iris now, gazing up at a yew tree that cast a little shade across the lawn.

‘No, they’re not. Leave them alone.’ The pain in her head intensified. ‘That tea, as you call it, sarsaparilla. You *like* sarsaparilla.’

‘I don’t like *that* sarsaparilla.’

Iris’s hand was shaking, holding the secateurs. She closed her eyes. She had spent all morning making those cakes and biscuits. She had put the best tablecloth on the table as well, just to make it look nice, and the girl was ruining it.

Iris looked over at the table, and the food that was going to waste. Wasps were crawling on the jam tarts.

Iris closed her eyes, but she could still feel the sun glaring down on her. The pounding in her head was making her sick. It felt as if something was coiling and uncoiling in her stomach. She couldn’t

keep still; her fingers were twitching and her head kept flicking left or right, like she had seen something out of the corner of her eye.

She took a deep breath, and opened her eyes again. The garden was too bright; the incandescent blazing sunshine made her eyes ache.

She reached out with the secateurs for another leaf that was showing signs of blackspot.

‘Granny!’ Kate yelled.

Iris’s hand jerked, and the secateurs cut through the stem of the rose. The plant toppled into Iris’s face. A thorn caught her cheek as she turned her head, catching the skin just below her eye and ripping a long graze.

The pain seemed to rip through her soul.

‘You stupid child!’ Iris shouted. Kate stepped backwards in shock. ‘Look what you’ve done!’

Iris lashed out and caught Kate’s shoulder with her hand, dragging her closer. ‘Do you know how long I spent making those cakes, you ungrateful little bitch? I’ll teach you to wander around the garden touching stuff you shouldn’t when you ought to be having a tea party with your sisters and brothers.’

The words were spilling uncontrollably from her mouth like a stream of vomit, and she couldn’t stop herself. She didn’t know where it was all coming from. All of the boys and girls were staring solemnly at her. Her head was pounding, and the shimmering heat in the garden was making her disoriented and nauseous.

‘You want to disobey me? I’ll show you what happens when you disobey me.’

Before she knew what was happening, Iris had closed the secateurs on the thumb of Kate’s right hand. The child screamed, eyes distended with horror. She tried to pull herself away, but Iris’s grip was too strong.

The handles of the secateurs were held apart by a powerful spring, and Iris had to put all her effort into forcing them together. The blades sliced through Kate’s thumb like they had through the rose stem. The thumb fell away. Bright blood spurted across the glossy green leaves.

The pitch of Kate’s screams went up and up. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she started jerking.

Iris closed the secateurs on the girl’s index finger, and brought the sharp blades together. The finger swung down, but a flap of skin still held it on to the palm. Iris cut again and the finger vanished.

The next three fingers were easier. Kate’s hand looked so small when she had finished.

Iris turned around. The other children were rooted to the spot. Their gaze was fixed on Iris as if they couldn’t believe what they had seen, and they were waiting to see how the trick had been done.

Iris straightened up and concentrated on the nearest girl. Her name was Madeline.

‘Come here, Madeline,’ she said calmly, although the inside of her head was a raging torrent of incoherent thoughts. ‘Come here now, or I will come and get you ...’

The sky above the rooftops was a misty grey-blue, a wash of unbroken colour from one end of the street to the other. Hidden behind the half-cloud, the sun was just a brighter patch in an already bright sky. No shadows darkened the pavement or the road. Something about the diffuse light made the cars, houses and lamp posts seem as if they had been cut out and placed onto a perfect picture of the street, barely connected to reality, able to be repositioned at will.

The delicate, almost translucent quality of the sky put Violet in mind of the duck eggs she used to collect as a child: a colour so unusual, so textured, that it almost seemed like the product of a deliberate act, rather than the randomness of nature.

Now where had that thought come from? She remembered the duck eggs perfectly – the weight of them in her hand, heavier than chicken eggs, and she also recalled the way tiny scraps of feather would still be stuck to their shells – but she couldn't quite place when or where. The detail was there, but the background was absent.

She tucked the thought away. There were more important things to worry about today. She had a job to do.

As she toiled along the street from where she had parked her car, pushing her wheeled shopping bag ahead of her, she kept casting glances up into the sky. No aeroplanes, no helicopters – just a deep, translucent blue. For a moment the world was timeless. With a small effort she felt as if she could be six again, or sixteen, rather than sixty.

But the effort would have been too much. That's what happened when you got old. Things that were easy were suddenly hard. Energy that had once seemed boundless was something to conserve in a miserly fashion.

With relief she realised that she had arrived at the front door of number 26. She stopped for a moment to gather her breath. There was a chill in the air, but the long walk from where she had parked her car had left her feeling hot and flustered.

She glanced at the front of the house. The paint was cracked in a pattern of small scales across the top half of the door, where the sun caught it every morning. Scratches marred the surface around the keyhole. The letterbox had been repaired with sticky tape on more than one occasion. The bricks were a faded red, pitted with small holes and scabbed areas, and the mortar holding them together was powdery.

Her gaze wandered to the small front garden, barely large enough to accommodate the dustbin and a few tired geraniums in pots. Weeds had found their way through the paving slabs and around the circular metal cover that led down to the coal cellar. The bottom few bricks of the garden wall were half-hidden by dusty cobwebs and old snail shells layered one upon another like an outbreak of boils.

It really was time to move on.

The seaside, perhaps. She could do with some fresh air, and a change of scenery.

One of the geraniums was badly overgrown and dehydrated. A few of its leaves were brown and wilted, giving up their life so that the other leaves could soldier on. Violet reached into her shopping bag and removed the small pair of secateurs she always carried with her. Taking one of the dying leaves, dry and papery, in her hand, she snipped it off close to the stem, then repeated the pruning with the others. There, wasn't that better?

Making a mental note to bring a jug of water out later to moisten the soil, she pushed the shopping bag up to the front door and delved into her handbag for the key to the door. Slotting it into the lock

she forced the stiff mechanism round and pushed the door open.

~~Darkness, and the smell of old lavender and boiled vegetables reached out to embrace her.~~

‘Dear – I’m back!’ she called.

No answer. She moved into the house and shut the door behind her. ‘Daisy? I said I’m back!’

The small hall was carpeted in linoleum patterned with small diamonds. Stairs to the left led up the bathroom and the bedrooms, while the walls were papered in a floral pattern that looked almost tired as the geraniums outside. A barometer hung opposite the stairs, massive and pendulous. According to the indicator there was a change ahead.

The house had an air of neglect, of something that was sagging into dust and decay. Violet could tell the first time she walked in that nobody visited any more. That nobody cared any more.

She pushed the shopping bag ahead of her, past the parlour and the dining room, and pushed open the door to the kitchen. Bordered by slide-door cupboards and melamine-covered work surfaces, it was more like a split-off section of the hall than a room in its own right. Tucked to one side by the cooker just next to a china teapot, was the kitchen’s sole concession to the modern age – a cordless electric kettle. A small refrigerator wheezed asthmatically in one corner, next to the door that led out into the conservatory. It gave the impression that it was about to fall over and die at any moment, but it had been working away for the nine months that she had been visiting the house, and for many years beforehand. It would almost certainly outlast Daisy Wilson.

Placing her handbag on the corner of the kitchen counter, she folded the handle of the shopping bag down and unzipped it. She hadn’t picked up much shopping – the important items she had collected from her own flat that morning – but Daisy didn’t seem to need much to keep going. In her experience, older people could subsist perfectly well on cups of tea, slices of bread, boiled carrots and the occasional biscuit.

Slipping on a pair of thin cotton gloves that she always kept in her coat pocket, she unpacked the bag. Bread, butter, bleach, rubber gloves, tea towels and a caddy of tea leaves that rustled as she put them down on the counter.

She reached across, switched the kettle on at the mains and clicked the button down to boil the water. The initial *whoosh* settled down into a steady murmuring as the water heated up. She opened the top of the tea caddy and let the smell of the leaves drift up to her nose. She closed her eyes and her mouth, and breathed in. Dry, slightly spicy, and overlaid with the delicate floral notes of the Christmas rose petals and leaves that had been mixed in with the Darjeeling. Perfect.

The fragrance was mesmerising. For a long moment, she wasn’t in the kitchen at all. She was standing in her own garden – her private, secret garden, not the one belonging to the ground-floor flat she rented – breathing in the mixed scents of the foxgloves, the delphiniums and the corn cockles.

No. That thought needed to be tucked away as well. She had a job to do. Once today was over, she could relax for a while. Go away. Move away. By the sea. A change was as good as a rest, they said.

While the kettle was talking to itself she walked back into the hall and took her coat off. Before placing it on one of the hooks just behind the door – so reminiscent, she always thought, of a row of butchers’ hooks waiting for the meat to be hung from them – she took a look around the hall, committing it to memory. The lino. The wallpaper. The stairs. The whole thing so rooted in the 1950s when the street had been built to replace ones lost to Hitler’s bombs, that it was almost possible to hear the laughing voices of *Children’s Hour* drifting on a wave of static from the speaker of a bakelite radio set.

She shook herself. Stay in the present, Violet, she told herself. Stay focussed.

She pushed open the door of the parlour. The curtains were half-closed, and in the turquoise light of that strange sky the room could have been underwater. The fireplace dominated the room on one side, cold now, as it had been for some years, and flanked by two metal andirons. A massive bureau

dominated the other side of the room: the marquetry almost invisible in the dim, aquatic light. Over the window recess a television set stood mute.

Daisy was sitting in the armchair with the curved wings, grey hair still curled from her last visit to her hairdresser. Her eyes, nestled in puffy, criss-crossed flesh, were closed. She didn't seem to be breathing.

'Daisy?' Violet reached forward to shake her parchment hand. 'Daisy?'

Daisy jerked awake with a cry. She flinched away from Violet like a dog expecting to be struck.

'It's only me. I'm back from the shops.'

Daisy was still twisted in her chair. She gazed suspiciously up at Violet. Slowly the suspicion receded, and she smiled. 'I was only resting my eyes,' she muttered.

'You dropped off,' Violet said, moving across to the window, beside the television, and pushing the curtains open.

'I was thinking. Remembering.'

'I'm making a cup of tea.' Violet turned and smiled at Daisy. 'I was remembering too, walking up the road. Duck eggs. Do you remember duck eggs?'

Daisy laughed. 'I haven't had a duck egg in an age. Not since the War. Used to have them all the time, then. Blue, they were. Tasty as well.'

'They're coming back in the shops now,' Violet said. 'Speciality items, they're called. Did you want a cup of tea?'

'Speciality items,' Daisy said scornfully. 'That's supermarkets for you. Make you pay more for food that tastes the way food is meant to taste anyway. I remember when ordinary eggs weren't just ordinary eggs, they were Norfolk Greys, or German Longshanks, or Dorkings. All different sizes and colours. Some of them with freckles and some plain, some rough and some smooth. Not like now. They're all plain and brown and the same size now.' She suddenly caught up with what Violet had been saying. 'Tea would be nice, ta.'

Violet went out into the kitchen. The kettle had just boiled, and the air was tropical. She poured a little water into the teapot and sloshed it around, warming the china, then she poured it out in the sink and scooped two spoonfuls of tea from the caddy into the pot. She poured water from the kettle carefully, watching it froth as it hit the leaves. The smell wafted up to her nose again: that wonderful aroma of age and spice and roses. She closed her eyes and luxuriated in it, feeling the steam turning to moisture on her cheeks and forehead.

'I'll tell you another thing I remember,' Daisy called from the parlour. 'The coal man, making deliveries, wearing that cap with the leather back on it, reaching down his neck. Black with the coal dust, he was. Three sacks of anthracite every Tuesday fortnight, poured right down into the cellar. She paused. 'He always had a smile for me, he did. Called me his little flower.'

Violet slid open one of the cupboards and retrieved two cups and two saucers. Placing them on the counter, she turned to the wheezing fridge and got the milk from the shelf in the door. A splash in each cup, and she returned the bottle to its place.

'Did you ever get the scissor-man coming around?' she called.

'The scissor-man? With his bicycle and his grindstone attached to the back?' She chuckled. 'Haven't thought about him in a while. Whatever happened to the scissor-men? Don't scissors and knives need sharpening any more?'

'I think people just buy new ones nowadays,' Violet said absently as she poured the tea into the cups, one after the other.

'Wasteful,' muttered Daisy. 'That's why there's so much clutter. Too much stuff being made, not enough stuff being kept.'

Violet reached down to where a tray was resting on its edge against the side of the fridge. She

carefully lifted the cups and saucers onto the tray and carried it into the parlour.

~~‘Here’s your tea,’ she said as she placed the tray carefully on the side table beside Daisy. The elderly woman glanced down at it, then up at Violet.~~

~~‘Thank you, dear,’ she said with sudden hesitation.~~

Violet crossed to the window again and gazed out. The skin on her cheeks and forehead was prickling from the steam, and she could feel a slight pressure in her throat. No matter. Every road has its potholes. Hadn’t someone told her that once?

The street outside was peaceful. Most of the houses were unoccupied during the day. Husbands worked and wives worked too: Violet still found that a little disturbing, but she supposed the world had changed and people changed with it. Wives so rarely stayed at home, these days. It was term-time, school was well, and the children were still safely at school. The best thing about the street as far as Violet was concerned was that it didn’t lead anywhere. People or cars never cut through on their way to somewhere else. If you were in the street then you were visiting one of the houses, and during weekdays that was rare.

From behind she heard a slurp as Daisy drank her tea. She smiled.

‘I picked up your pension from the bank,’ she said, the thought just popping randomly into her head. When Daisy failed to reply, she turned around. Daisy was staring at her, eyes defensive, teacup poised in her hand.

‘You don’t have to do that for me,’ Daisy said. ‘I used to be able to pop down to the post office myself, when I still had a pension book. The bank’s not that much further.’ She paused, judging Violet’s reaction. ‘In fact, I was thinking a walk wouldn’t do me any harm. Might be nice to get out into the fresh air ...’

Violet let Daisy’s words hang for a moment. She deliberately kept her face impassive. They’d had this discussion about once a week for the past two months, and there was no point getting angry. The decision was made and the river that was life was already flowing on, except that Daisy hadn’t quite realised yet. Or still had some hope of reversing the current and taking back some small measure of independence.

‘Not with your leg,’ Violet said. She knew Daisy couldn’t see her expression, with the light from the window behind her, but she kept her expression neutral. ‘Those ulcers still need dressing every day. You don’t want to make them any worse.’

‘Maybe I should make an appointment down the doctor’s,’ Daisy wheedled. ‘The ulcers don’t seem to be clearing up, and Doctor Ganz was always so good about looking after me.’ She sighed. ‘I used to be a dancer, you know? Now look at me. Can’t even walk down the shops.’

‘I told you,’ Violet said, ‘I talked to the chemist. The cream will clear up the ulcers if we keep using it. What you need is rest. I can get all your shopping and your prescriptions, and now you’ve written to the bank I can make sure your pension is drawn out on time as well. Now, don’t let your tea get cold.’

‘I’m very grateful to you, m’dear.’ Daisy took a noisy sip of tea, spilling some into her saucer. ‘You look after me properly. Don’t know what I’d do without you.’

‘Everyone should look after their friends and neighbours.’ Violet grimaced. The skin on her forehead was feeling tight and warm. ‘There’s not enough of that around, these days.’

‘You know what I really miss?’

Violet wasn’t sure whether Daisy was going to keep on about her lost independence or go back to duck eggs and anthracite, so she just said: ‘What’s that, then?’

‘Whist drives down at the church hall. Once a week, Friday mornings. Used to see all me friends have a chat and a cup of tea and some biscuits. Used to look forward to it, I did.’

‘I’m not sure they do whist drives any more.’

‘They do – I’m sure I saw it in the local paper.’

‘Well, you don’t want to strain your eyes. You’ve got to be careful at your age.’

‘I can read the paper all right.’

‘Daisy!’ Violet let a tart edge slide into her voice. She was getting tired of this bickering. ‘I’m only trying to help out. If you don’t want me to do things for you – if you don’t want me to get you shopping, and your prescriptions, and whatever else – then just say so and I’ll leave you to it. I’m sure there are lots of other ladies your age who’d be grateful for the help.’

‘I’m sorry, Violet, I didn’t mean—’

‘That’s okay.’ Soothing. ‘Least said, soonest mended. Now did you want a refill?’

Daisy looked down into the dregs of her cup. ‘Don’t mind if I do,’ she said. ‘That was a nice cup of tea.’ She swilled the cup around in her hand, staring intently at the tea leaves as if she was trying to see the shape of her future in them. ‘What’s these white bits?’

Violet took the cup from her hand and walked back into the kitchen. ‘I took some Christmas rose petals from my garden and sprinkled them in with the tea,’ she replied as she sloshed the remaining tea into the sink. ‘I always think it gives it a nice, flowery taste. And it’s meant to be good for you.’ She paused for a moment. ‘Who knows – if you drink enough of it, maybe you’ll be able to *run* down to the shops and the bank!’

Daisy laughed, and Violet felt herself relax slightly. Crisis over.

She poured another cup for Daisy, and brought it back into the parlour, placing it carefully down on the tray next to her own cup. Daisy had drifted off again, and Violet sat quietly watching her breathe and thinking about her garden. Her beautiful, bountiful garden, filled with the most marvellous flowers. She didn’t visit it as often as she should, but she knew she would be making another trip very soon.

After a while, Daisy stirred. She blinked a few times, then smiled hesitantly at Violet.

‘Your tea’s still warm,’ Violet prompted.

Daisy smiled her appreciation, and reached for the cup. As she glanced down to see where it was, she noticed Violet’s still full cup beside her own. ‘Don’t you want your tea, dear?’

‘I’ll wait for a while. I’m still out of breath from going to the shops. The pot’s still hot: I can get another cup if that one goes cold.’

Daisy nodded, and sipped at her tea.

‘Can you play whist?’ she asked eventually. ‘I really fancy a game, right now. Make a change from the telly, and the local paper.’

The question caught Violet by surprise. ‘I’m ... not sure,’ she said eventually. ‘I *think* I can.’ She tried to remember. There were flashes of memory, like images cut from photographs, of her hands holding cards, but there was no context, no background. The memories were isolated, barely connected to reality and able to be moved around at will throughout what little she could recall of her life.

And there was another memory, another image. A table. A long table, set for tea in a darkened room.

Push that memory away. Push it away *fast*.

‘I’m sure there’s a pack of cards somewhere,’ Daisy said, gesturing vaguely to the bureau. ‘Perhaps we could have a game later. Just a short one.’ She smiled hesitantly.

‘Perhaps,’ Violet said, still feeling unsteady after the intrusion of that unwelcome memory.

‘And then I could—’

Daisy stopped, her words gurgling into incoherence. Spittle flew from her lips, spraying the air. Her lower lip suddenly glistened as saliva spilled across her dentures and down her chin. ‘Violet—!’ Another explosion of spittle as she coughed. ‘What’s happening to me?’

Violet backed away, her heart fluttering lightly but rapidly. The world seemed suddenly bright and pin-sharp. She could see red streaks in the saliva as a thick glistening string of it dribbled out

Daisy's mouth.

'Not to worry,' she heard herself saying. 'It'll all be over soon.'

Daisy's hands clutched at her throat, clawing the sagging parchment skin. Her lips were crimson and puffy. A deep flush spread across her throat and thick, guttural noises emerged from her mouth with every burst of spittle. 'Gra – geh – helgh—!'

'You know, I'm amazed how quickly the blistering has come on,' Violet said, taking a deep breath to calm herself down. She backed away from Daisy and perched herself on the edge of the sofa. 'I had expected it to take a lot longer. I wasn't sure of the dose, of course, so I probably erred on the side of extravagance.'

She leaned forward and looked into Daisy's eyes. Normally the whites were yellowed and the irises were a faded porcelain blue, but now they were heavily bloodshot and weeping profusely, the tears rolling down her cheeks to join the red river of saliva streaming from the gaping cave of her mouth.

'I realise it must be alarming,' Violet murmured as Daisy fell back into her armchair and her eyes rolled up in her head, 'but it will all be over soon, I promise.' She leaned forward and patted Daisy's hand, which was clawing at the arm of the chair. One of Daisy's eyes fixed on Violet with desperation. The other seemed to have taken on an independent life, and was pointed away toward the ceiling. She broke wind: a long, wet sound that seemed to last forever.

'You're probably wondering what has caused this,' Violet went on, chatting to block out her reaction to what was happening. 'Christmas rose sounds so charming, doesn't it? Or winter rose which it's also referred to as in the gardening books. Black hellebore sounds much more forbidding but I don't suppose you would have drunk so much of the tea if I told you that it had black hellebore in it. Not just the flowers, but powdered root and bark as well. Funny, the different names that people give to the same things.'

Rolling over the lavender and boiled vegetable smell of the house came a darker, nastier smell. A smell of faecal matter, cloying with foul sickness. Violet winced and turned away on the sofa. 'It'll all be over soon, she told herself. All over soon.'

Daisy was sitting in a spreading pool of her own watery, bloody-soaked faeces now, squirming in it, convulsing in it, grinding it into her dress and the fabric of the armchair. Violet was going to have to burn that chair in the back garden later, along with Daisy's clothes and a lot of garden waste to cover the smell. And the remaining tea leaves, of course. She couldn't leave those lying around. What if she forgot, and made herself another cup of tea while she was cleaning up!

Violet giggled to herself, covering her mouth politely with a delicate hand. Despite the mess, she really did enjoy this part of the game.

'There are all kinds of horrible things in the Christmas rose,' she said, watching to see whether Daisy could still hear her. 'Helleborin and hellebrin are both like digitalis, which I've also used before, but there's saporin and protoanemonin as well. It's a very nasty cocktail.'

Daisy's hands were both clutching at the armchair now, levering her body forward as if she was going to stagger upright and totter over to where Violet was sitting. Violet raised a hand to ward her off, but Daisy convulsed, falling backwards into the chair again as a thin waterfall of muddy vomit cascaded from her mouth and into her lap. Some of it splattered onto the floor. That, Violet thought ruefully, would be difficult to get out.

She decided not to use the Christmas rose again. It was certainly quick, and definitely easy to prepare, but it was too messy for her purposes. Cleaning up was bad enough at the best of times without all those bodily fluids to worry about. Foxglove, perhaps, or bryony. Or perhaps oleander. She liked the smell of oleander.

Daisy's arms were flapping around now. The end was very close. Very close indeed.

'Your throat will have closed up almost completely by now,' Violet murmured, 'and your heart will

have slowed down quite dramatically. I don't know whether you will suffocate before your heart actually stops beating of its own accord, but either way you will be dead within a minute or two. I don't even know if you can still hear me, but if you can I'd like to tell you that you are a selfish, stupid old woman, and I've hated every single moment of the time I've spent with you. Apart, of course, from the last few minutes. Those I have enjoyed very much.'

Daisy was silent and motionless. Her eyes were dull and sunken, and the saliva dripped slowly from her slack mouth.

Violet leaned forward, trying to see whether her heart still fluttered in her chest, whether the blood still pumped sluggishly around her veins, but she couldn't tell. She would come back later and check Daisy's pulse, she decided. After she tidied up. And if Daisy wasn't dead now, well, she would be within the hour.

It was going to be a long afternoon, and Violet found that she couldn't immediately raise the energy to get off the sofa. The light streaming through the window seemed to have a weight all its own. It held her down, sapping her strength and sending waves of languor flowing over her body. From where she sat she could see a slice of the smoky blue-grey sky imprisoned between the top of the window frame and the roofs of the terraced houses across the street. The sight didn't quite provoke an image in her mind of a slate-grey sea eternally lapping at a stone causeway, but it provided an avenue through which the image could creep into her thoughts. Wave after wave after wave, battering against the stone, wearing it down a minuscule amount at a time.

Violet shook herself. If she wasn't careful she would fall asleep, and she might lose half the afternoon that way. The seaside could wait: tidying came first.

Despite the fact that she had been visiting the house – often every day – for months now, Violet had a very good idea of what she had touched over the course of that time. The kitchen and bathroom would have to be scrubbed with bleach, of course, to remove any fingerprints or whatever else might give her presence away. The parlour and the dining room were less problematic: Violet had been careful about what she touched, and had often wiped down a handle or a surface while Daisy wasn't paying attention. If she had noticed at all, she had just thought that Violet was helping keep the house tidy. Daisy's bedroom and the spare bedroom – used for storage for the past thirty-odd years – had nothing of Violet in them. No, removing traces of her passage through the house would be easy.

Cleaning up after Daisy's messy death would take longer, and would be less pleasant, but there Violet didn't have to be perfect. Old people were often incontinent, in her experience, and as long as all the obvious signs of diarrhoea and sickness were removed then the odd stain and the odd lingering smell would not be too disastrous. And besides, modern cleaning technology was marvellous.

Violet stood up and made her way into the hall. Her legs were unsteady – the relief of having got Daisy's death out of the way, she assumed – and she leaned against the wall for a moment before pushing open the door to the dining room.

Daisy had always kept the dining room immaculate, in case she ever had to entertain, which meant that it had been used perhaps twice in the past ten years. The centrepiece of the room was a solid mahogany table with legs turned in spirals. Three silver candlesticks sat on the table, and prints of hunting scenes were spaced around the walls.

A folded wheelchair leaned incongruously against the far chimney breast. Behind it, a large sheet of grey plastic was folded on the carpet.

Violet had brought the wheelchair and the plastic sheet into the house a few days ago, whilst Daisy was snuffling and murmuring in her sleep. Now she carried the sheet back into the parlour and looked around. Not the floor – she was going to have to scrub and Hoover that pretty thoroughly. Perhaps the sofa.

Yes. She unfolded the plastic and draped it over the sofa until it was just a grey lump, like a shirtdress.

outcrop of stone. She could lift Daisy's body – light as it was – onto the sofa, then take the chair out to the garden and clean the carpet thoroughly. Once she had done that she could undress Daisy, wash her down with flannels and towels which she could also take out into the garden, and then re-dress Daisy in some of her other clothes from upstairs. Then Daisy could be lifted into the wheelchair, covered with a blanket and wheeled out of the house and down the street: just another old lady out for a breath of fresh air, fast asleep and dreaming of the past.

Violet glanced over at Daisy. In the time since she had last looked, something mysterious and irrevocable had happened to the woman she had once called 'dear'. What had once been loose flesh and jowls was now just a covering laid on top of an ancient skull. What had once been eyes that had looked out on eighty-odd years of history were now just dull buttons upon which dust was already beginning to settle. There was nothing there any more. The miracle had occurred once again: what had once been a woman named Daisy who had loved and lost and lived was now just ... just nothing. Skin and bone and a hank of hair. And everything that she had owned now belonged to Violet. Soon it would just be money.

It would have to be done carefully, of course. One step at a time. Nothing to cause suspicion. But given a few months, it would all be hers.

Once she had cleaned the house.

Because every journey started with a first step.

When Mark Lapslie's mobile phone bleeped, the sound tasted to him like chocolate. Dark chocolate, bitter on his tongue and gritty between his teeth and on the inside of his cheeks.

It was still dark outside his bedroom window, but birds were beginning to chirp and there was a freshness to the air that told him it was almost dawn. He had been drifting for some time, dreaming of the days when his house had been full of life and laughter, so the shock of the sudden noise – and the sudden flood of flavour in his mouth – hadn't disturbed him too much. Part of him had been expecting a call. He'd been tasting strawberries very faintly all day – a sign that something unplanned was about to happen.

The bleep was telling him that he had a message, rather than an actual incoming call. If it was a call, the ring tone was an extract from Bruch's 1st violin concerto and tasted more like mocha coffee. He gave himself a few minutes to wake up fully before he reached across and picked the mobile up from the bedside table.

Pls call DS Bradbury, it said, followed by a mobile number.

Before dialling Detective Sergeant Bradbury, whoever he was, Lapslie padded into the bathroom and turned the shower on full. Catching sight of himself in the mirror above the sink, he winced. In his mind, he was twenty-five years younger, his hair wasn't grey and his stomach didn't bulge. Reflections kept catching him by surprise; the only reason he didn't take a screwdriver to the mirror and remove it for good was that shaving would be almost impossible.

'Hello?' The voice was female, tainted with lemon and lime, the accent pure Estuary.

'DS Bradbury? This is DCI Lapslie.' He walked back into the bedroom so the cauliflower hiss of the shower didn't drown out her voice. 'What can I do for you?'

'Car crash, sir,' she said succinctly.

'Car crash?' He took a breath. 'Sergeant, I'm on indefinite sick leave. I don't get called out on investigations any more.'

The voice was wary. 'Understood, sir, but there's something about the scene of the crash that, when we got called in, made your name jump up on the computer. When I tried to get a number for you I was told that you were on gardening leave, but it didn't say why, and when I put a call in to Chief Superintendent Rouse, he gave me permission to ring you.'

'Okay, what was it about the crash that made my name jump up on the computer?'

'I'd rather not say, sir. It's just ... special.'

'Give me a clue, at least.'

'There was one person in the car, sir – the driver – and there was no other vehicle involved, but when the first responders got to the scene they found two bodies. One of them was the driver's. The other had been there for some time.'

Interesting. That was almost worth being woken up for. 'And?'

'And there's something about the state of the second body that apparently links to some old case you were involved in.'

'An old case of mine?' He cast his mind back quickly, thinking of anything odd, anything out of the ordinary in his career, but he could come up with nothing. No serial killers still on the loose, no bizarre cults, nothing. 'What was strange?'

'Sir, I'd really rather not say. It would be easier if you came on down.'

'Where are you?'

There was a pause. Steam was drifting in from the bathroom, and Lapslie imagined the DS looking around her in the dark, trying to work out the local geography.

‘Out along the B1018, heading from Witham to Braintree, there’s a side road that cuts across Faulkbourne – you know it?’

‘Cuts across the river?’ He cast his mind back to the last time he’d driven up that way, for a dinner date that had ended in an argument and yet another night sleeping alone, longer ago than he really cared to remember. ‘Near the Moorhen pub?’

‘That’s the one. We’re about five miles down the road from the pub.’

‘I’ll be there within the hour,’ he said.

‘You won’t have any problem spotting us,’ she replied. ‘Look for the chunk of metal that used to be a Porsche.’ And, Lapslie thought, there was genuine sadness in her voice at the thought of a deceased high-performance car.

He showered quickly, his brain picking over the bones of his career, but finding nothing of any relevance. By the time he was dressed the sky was tinged with pink and the birds had gained confidence. He was in his car and pulling out of his drive barely twenty-five minutes from the time the message arrived.

His car was almost silent as it slipped through the narrow country lanes that led away from his isolated cottage near Saffron Walden, guided by the satnav system toward Witham and an event that was already over apart from the inevitable clean-up. He didn’t bother putting on the radio, or a CD. He could never listen to music when he drove: there was no knowing what tastes and, occasionally, smells might suddenly distract him if a particular track was played. Before his medical condition had been diagnosed, back in the time when he thought *everyone* could taste sounds rather than just him and a handful of others in the entire world, he had once been almost fatally distracted whilst driving when a Beatles song suddenly flooded his mouth with rotting meat.

Life was just a rollercoaster of unexpected sensations when you had synaesthesia.

The sun rose above the horizon, casting long shadows across the fields. He drove fast but carefully, pacing himself on the long stretches of road that cut through town so that the traffic lights were always green when he reached them, then accelerating on the bypasses and ring roads to make up time. The minutes slid away, one after the other, as the houses fell away behind him and were replaced with woodland. He drifted into a trance as he drove, deliberately trying not to speculate about what awaited him at the scene of the crash.

The fact that he’d been called in the first place was strange. Lapslie had been on special medical leave from the Essex Police for the past six months – ever since his synaesthesia had suddenly escalated and his wife and children had been forced to move out of the house because the constant noise was driving him insane. They still kept in contact, but Lapslie was becoming slowly used to the fact that they would never be a proper family again. He was between posts, in a kind of limbo, reading reports and keeping himself current on the ever-changing world of police practice, writing the occasional report or think-piece for the police hierarchy, popping into the Headquarters in Chelmsford every now and then but never actually attending a crime scene or leading an investigation. Until now.

The case – whatever it was – obviously had something to do with his previous career, but what it was he couldn’t tell. It wasn’t as if he’d ever worked on anything particularly high-profile. After joining the police, with a degree in Psychology, he’d spent some time in the Met. in North London before moving on promotion up to Liverpool and then down again to Essex. He’d spent a few years assigned to the Association of Chief Police Officers, using his background to look at better ways of profiling major criminals, then taken two years out to complete a Masters Degree in Criminal Psychology. Looking back, there was nothing that particularly stood out. Nothing that might have tied him in with any unsolved case more important than assault and battery, or low-level burglary.

Shortly after crossing the Brain, and about an hour after leaving his cottage, Lapslie turned onto the road where the crash had apparently occurred. Trees laced their fingers together above the car, and the rising sun behind him cast a deep shadow along the road.

Striped barriers blocked his way a hundred yards or so before a lazy curve in the road. Bright white light spilled through the trees. A uniformed constable with a clipboard self-consciously straightened up and walked towards him, silhouetted by the false white dawn, already shaking his head. Lapslie brought his car to a halt and rolled his window down.

‘DCI Lapslie,’ he said, holding his warrant card out.

The policeman looked at the card and then back at Lapslie. He frowned. ‘You might want to get this renewed, sir,’ he said. ‘The photograph’s a bit ... out of date.’

Lapslie glanced down at the card in his hand. Okay, his hair wasn’t brown any more, and there was a little more of it in the photo than in real life, but apart from the size of the collar on his shirt he didn’t think he looked *that* different.

But it had probably been taken while the policeman standing beside his car was running happily around a playground somewhere.

‘Happy the way it is,’ he said tersely.

The policeman noted his name and car registration on the clipboard as he spoke. ‘Shall I move the barrier for you?’

‘Don’t bother. I’ll leave the car off the road and walk.’

It wasn’t difficult to spot the crash site, just around the curve. The Crime Scene Investigators had set up arc-lamps on poles which bathed the scene with a harsh, unforgiving light, despite the encroaching day. Lapslie paused for a moment, taking in the sight.

The smell of petrol and burnt rubber still hung in the air. Twin skid marks intertwined with each other along the road surface, showing where the car had braked, skidded and spun like some demented fairground ride. He could only imagine the horror in the driver’s mind, twisting the wheel back and forth in the sure and certain knowledge that it wasn’t going to do any good and he was probably going to die. Judging by the marks, the car had been hurtling along the country road before suddenly seeing the curve ahead. What had happened? Had the driver’s attention been distracted by a boiled sweet or a phone call? Had his headlights been dipped so that he couldn’t see the curve until it was too late? Or had he just been drunk? That was for forensics to determine, but Lapslie couldn’t help speculating. Alive one moment, dead the next. The facts could be explained, but the driver’s state of mind? That could only ever be guessed at.

He’d made the mistake of saying to a colleague at another crash scene some time ago, ‘I wonder what the last thing that went through the driver’s mind was.’ The man had just looked at him blankly. ‘The windscreen,’ he had muttered, and walked off.

The melted rubber marks ended at the point where the road curved away. A stone kerb marked the point where tarmac gave way to uneven ground covered in leaves, tiny fretted ferns and bushes. The car had obviously hit the kerb side-on and the impact had flipped it into the air, spinning again before landing now around its longest axis so that when it struck the trees it was almost exactly upside down. Two tree trunks had been splintered at a point some ten feet off the ground. The car – or what remained of it – sat beneath them, crumpled like a discarded chocolate wrapper.

Another barrier had been set up fifty or so yards down the road. An ambulance was parked by the roadside beside a police Peugeot 406 – painted in the yellow and blue squares that had jokingly become known as the police to police across the country as the Battenburg colour scheme – a dusty Mondeo and a van which had probably brought the CSI team to the area. Two paramedics were chatting to a uniformed policeman, their casual demeanour indicating that their work was done, if indeed they’d had any work in the first place apart from pronouncing the driver of the car dead at the scene.

A plastic marquee had been set up just off the road, a few feet from the remains of the car. The arched lamps behind it made it glow. ~~Grotesque shadows of the people inside it were cast against its walls. Bent figures with distended hands, moving together and apart again in some strange ritual dance.~~

It was all so familiar and yet, after his time away from work, so alien. So strange.

He pulled his mobile from his jacket pocket and, after a moment's thought, dialled a number that for a moment he didn't think he would remember.

'Essex Constabulary, can I help you?'

'Superintendent Rouse, please,' he said.

'Putting you through now.'

Moments later, a new voice said: 'Detective Chief Superintendent Rouse's office.'

'This is DCI Lapslie. Would it be possible to speak to the Superintendent?'

'He's not arrived yet. Can I ask what it's about?'

'I've apparently been pulled off leave of absence on the Superintendent's orders. I was wondering why.'

The voice on the other end of the line went muffled for a moment, as if Rouse's PA had put her hand over the receiver while she sought instructions. After a few seconds, she was back. 'I can get the Superintendent to call you later. Does he have your number?'

'I wouldn't be surprised,' Lapslie said grumpily, and broke the connection.

Slipping the mobile back into his jacket, Lapslie headed for the marquee and pulled the entrance flap open. The interior was large enough to host a wedding reception or a giant vegetable competition. The CSI team – figures clad in papery yellow coveralls – were gathered in two groups, taking photographs and examining the ground for evidence. A woman was with them, chatting. Her hair was short and spiky; her make-up highlighted her sharp cheekbones. Her breath gusted like cigarette smoke in the cold morning air. When she saw Lapslie she broke away and walked towards him.

'DS Bradbury?' he asked.

'Morning, sir,' she said. Lemon, as on the mobile, but with a hint of grapefruit now. Her suit was a designer special, but it looked like she'd been sleeping in it when the call came in about the crash. 'Sorry to get you out of bed this early.'

'Not a problem. I'm just glad to be back in the saddle. Gardening leave gets very tedious after a while.'

Bradbury was obviously dying to ask him why he was on gardening leave – that wonderful catch-all term that meant someone was being paid to sit around the house all day, without actually specifying why – but she was too polite, or too political, to try. Covering the momentary lapse in conversation and remembering Bradbury's comment on the mobile about the wreck of the performance car, Lapslie nodded back to where the car was located, outside the tent. 'Sorry to hear about your loss,' he joked.

She sighed. 'Porsche. Lovely machine. Complete bloody write-off. What a tosser.'

'I presume from the tyre tracks that he lost control coming into the curve. Hitting the kerb knocked the car into the air and hitting the trees totalled the car.'

'That's the way I read it. Nothing to indicate that any other vehicles were involved. The car'll be checked out, of course, but there's no reason yet to assume mechanical failure.' She shook her head sadly. 'Some people just don't deserve to have nice cars.'

Lapslie glanced across to where the CSIs were gathered in their two groups. 'What happened to the driver?'

'Pulled himself out of the near-side window and crawled into the trees, which is where we found him.'

'Dead?'

'As a Dover sole on a fishmonger's slab.'

‘What happened?’

Emma Bradbury smiled, revealing small white teeth. ‘He must be the unluckiest sod in history. Even at the speed he was going, his seatbelt and airbag should have saved his life, but a short branch on one of the trees punched through the driver’s-side window and went right through his neck. He bled out while he was crawling.’ She indicated the left-hand group of CSIs. ‘That’s him over there. We’re waiting for the forensic pathologist to turn up. Apparently she’s been delayed.’

‘Do we know who he was?’

Emma fished in her pockets and pulled out a transparent evidence bag with a wallet inside. ‘Name of Sutherland. Businessman, apparently. Mid-forties, lives just outside Chelmsford. Looks like he might have been on his way home after a late meeting, or something. I’ve sent someone to notify his wife.’

A late meeting. A snatched dinner at a Little Chef or a Beefeater before the long drive home, dazzled by oncoming headlights. Lapslie remembered it well. Once upon a time, there had been someone curled up in front of the TV in their dressing gown, waiting for him to turn up. Someone who would have cared if he’d been involved in a car accident. Once upon a time.

He shook himself, and looked around. ‘If there was no other car involved, who called the police?’

Emma grinned. ‘A couple who were parked up and at it like rabbits just down the road heard the impact and the sound of glass breaking.’

‘So the earth really did move for them,’ Lapslie murmured.

‘They motored down – after adjusting their clothing, of course – and when they saw what had happened they called it in. Uniform took statements and let them get back to their respective partners.’

Lapslie turned his attention to the other group of CSIs, clustered around something on the ground. ‘And the real reason you woke me up and dragged me all the way here? The reason my name flagged up on the computer?’

‘The other body Uniform found near the driver when they were checking to see whether he was still alive.’

‘You said on the phone that there was something about the state of it?’

‘I think we’re dealing with *Dawn of the Living Dead*.’

He nodded. ‘Well, let’s see.’

The two of them moved towards the group. Small twigs and branches snapped underfoot, and Lapslie wasn’t sure whether the sour smell in his nostrils was due to the sounds or the crash or both. Dawn had shaded across into morning now, and the scrap of sky that he could see through the tent flap was clear and blue. All around him he could taste birds and animals moving around.

They walked past the first group of CSIs, and Lapslie couldn’t help glancing across at the figure on the ground: a man, crumpled up like his car, wearing a dark suit that was glossy with congealing fluid. A bloody write-off, to use Emma’s phrase.

The second group was clustered around something on the ground, no more than ten feet or so away from the first body. As Lapslie approached they seemed to tense, possessive of their find.

‘DCI Lapslie,’ he said firmly. ‘What have you got?’

The Crime Scene Manager stood, brushing his gloved hands on his coveralls. Lapslie had seen him at other crime scenes, years ago: a small man, mid-fifties, with a paunch pushing out the fabric of his coveralls and a quiff of white hair standing straight up from his head.

‘We appear to have a dead body,’ he said in a disconcertingly thick Irish accent, the final word sounding to Lapslie almost like ‘deed baady’. His voice tasted the way Lapslie imagined blackberry wine would taste: musty and thin.

‘Not connected to the crash?’

‘Connected, but not in the way you mean. Take a look.’

There, rearing up from a pile of earth, ferns and leaves, was a corpse. And this *was* a corpse, more like a skeleton to which things had been added rather than a body from which things had been subtracted. The face was all sharp cheekbones and hollow eye sockets, the head twisted to one side and the jawbone gaping open as if in some terrible, silent agony. Whatever skin remained was as dull and as grey as the hair that was spread out around the skull. Its arms were stretched out behind it, as thin and as dry as the twigs that surrounded them. What Lapslie could see of the fingers clutched in vain in the loam of the forest.

And most bizarrely of all, the body was surrounded by dirt-encrusted plastic sheeting, bunched and draped to form two huge wings, one at each shoulder.

Half-aware of the banter between the CSI team members, Lapslie knelt down by the body, checking first that he wasn't disturbing anything that hadn't already been disturbed. All corpses looked old, of course, but this one looked like it was actually the corpse of someone old. The bottom half was still buried in the ground, the plastic tightly wrapped around hips and legs, but the torso was slanted up at an angle of about thirty degrees. The arms looked as if they were supporting the weight of the body, but that was just an illusion caused by the fact that they were hanging down, the bony knuckles resting on the ground. Although the material of the clothes had been stiffened and faded by the passing of the seasons, it seemed as if the corpse had been wearing a blouse, a cardigan and a pair of slacks in some dark material.

He leant forward to check around the back of the skull. Difficult to be sure without touching it, but there looked to be some evidence of damage. It might have been caused by predators, but it might also have been caused by an act of violence. Whatever the cause, this was certainly a suspicious death. People, in Lapslie's experience, did not wrap themselves in plastic before calmly lying down to die.

Without disturbing the twigs or the dirty plastic sheeting around the body, Lapslie made a close examination of the area around where the hands rested. The body was actually half-buried in a trench of some kind. Somehow, the trench had been disturbed – the ground around it was churned up and the ferns partially ripped out – and the body had been pushed up and out like a moth from a chrysalis. The fingers were half-buried in the loam, and—

Wait. The ground beneath the fingers was covered with a layer of detritus – leaves as skeletal as the body – and some of them appeared to pass entirely under the fingers, almost as if ...

Lapslie leant closer. The scent of damp and decay filled his nostrils, but bizarrely he could taste something decadently fragrant in his mouth, like lychees.

He was right. The fingers weren't complete. The ends were missing from about the second knuckle onwards. Although it looked at first sight as if the rest of the fingers were embedded in the earth, he could see that the ends rested *on* the leaves, rather than poking *through* them.

Somewhere in the back of his mind a memory that had been asleep for a long time began to stir. Hadn't he talked to someone about a case like this once? Hadn't he written something about it? Not that case he was working on as a policeman, he was sure, but something else. Something that was almost on the sideline.

'Is this why you called me?' he asked DS Bradbury, who was standing behind him. 'The fingers are missing. They look as if they've been removed.'

'I noticed them when I first saw the body,' she said. 'When I radioed the details in, the Duty Officer typed them into the computer system. As soon as he typed the stuff in, a message flashed up with your name attached. Apparently you've seen this kind of thing before – a body with missing fingers.'

'Not as far as I can remember. Not a body, at any rate ...' And yet, there was something. The taste of lychees, and a vague memory of someone telling him about missing fingers.

He deliberately moved the memory to one side. He could worry about that later. For now he was back at work, for the first time in a long time, and he had a body in the here-and-now to worry about.

not something vague in the past. A body that was pushing itself out of the ground as if possessed by some restless spirit.

But what had disturbed it? What had forced the earth to give birth to its dead?

Lapslie's head was turning toward where the wreck of the car sat, outside the marquee, before his mind had even formulated the obvious conclusion.

He rocked back on his heels. 'You've got to be joking,' he muttered to himself.

'We never joke,' the Crime Scene Manager said, coming over towards him.

'Are you seriously telling me that the body was buried here in plastic sheets for some ungodly length of time, undisturbed by anything, before that car came along and just scooped it up out of the ground?'

'I'm not telling you anything, serious or otherwise, until we've collated all the evidence and photographed the entire scene and assessed it all back at the lab.' He shook his head, lips twisted in a grimace. 'But if I were a betting man, which I am, I'd put a pony on that being the final conclusion. Bizarre as it may seem, I think that car crash managed to excavate a murder victim.'

Which might, Lapslie thought, explain the damage he thought he'd spotted to the back of the skull.

He glanced over his shoulder to where the other group of CSIs were attempting to slide the dead businessman into a large vinyl body bag without disturbing it too much. 'We owe you a vote of thanks,' he said to the body, a kind of final valediction as 'he' turned to 'it', a person becoming a thing to be moved around, cut up and pored over. 'If it hadn't been for you, we might never have found her. Whoever she is.'

He straightened up and turned to the CSM. 'And you are?'

'Burrows,' he said. 'Sean Burrows.'

'Well, Sean, I think you've got a busy day ahead of you. I'll make sure to get a supply of baccarat rolls and coffee sent up.'

'That,' the CSM said with a heartfelt sigh, 'would be most welcome.'

Emma Bradbury was standing over to one side. Glancing between Lapslie and Burrows, she smiled. 'What now?' she asked.

'Now we talk to the first responders,' he replied.

The two of them exited the marquee and walked back towards the road in silence. As they emerged from the tree line, Emma glanced down at the skid marks left by the car.

'Look at that,' she said, pointing. 'See the darker and lighter stripes in the rubber?'

Lapslie looked closer. She was right, there were indeed streaks where the rubber appeared to be embossed into the road's surface, and areas between them where the fine structure of the road could be seen. 'What's the cause of that?'

'ABS,' she said gloomily. 'Anti-lock Brake System – pulses the brakes automatically to maintain grip on the road. That car had everything, and the bastard trashed it.'

Walking on, they found the uniformed policeman still talking to the paramedics. 'Excuse me, sir,' he said as the paramedics melted backwards, 'but can we shift the car and open up the road yet? It doesn't get particularly busy, this time of day, but there's no easy alternative route.'

Lapslie considered for a moment. The crash was just a red herring as far as he was concerned. The old woman's body intrigued him more. 'Get the car out of here and shipped back to the garage so they can test the brakes and whatever. When it's gone, get the local authority to cordon off about fifty feet of one side of the road next to the trees and set up temporary traffic lights for traffic on the other side.'

'You sure that's necessary, sir?' Emma said from beside him.

'No,' he replied firmly. 'As my old Superintendent said, when in doubt – cover it.' He turned his attention to the policeman: a young man in a cap that kept threatening to slide forward over his head.

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