

Peter Turnbull

Deliver Us From Evil

A Hennessey and Yellich Mystery



“Will appeal to fans of Peter Robinson’s Alan Banks series, and John Harvey’s Charlie Resnick novels” *Booklist on No Stone Unturned*

The Hennessey and Yellich Series

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DELIVER US FROM EVIL

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Wednesday, March twenty-fifth, 08.35 hours – 14.37 hours *in which a chilled discovery is made and murder is announced.*

Tranquillity. That was the word. He thought the word to be ‘tranquillity’. It was the only word to describe the panorama.

Everything seemed to him to fit perfectly. It seemed to the man that it all fitted so neatly and so beautifully together, like a high quality jigsaw puzzle or a well executed landscape painting. Everything gelled. Nothing jarred. Nothing was out of place. The overriding impression and indeed, he believed, the overall actuality was one of peace and stillness combined. It was, he pondered, quite possible to have peace without stillness and it was equally possible to have stillness without a sense of peace, as in the approach of, and aftermath of, violence, but here, now, was both peace and stillness combined. Tranquillity.

The water first. The water in the canal, dull, grey, dark grey, utterly uninviting in itself, was still, smooth, mirror-like surface, so still that it could in other circumstances be mistaken for a solid. It was not disturbed by a solitary ripple or wash, by a bird landing upon it, nor a pebble wantonly thrown. There was, observed the man, a certain depth, a certain maturity about the placidity of the canal water in that because there had been no wind in the night, nor during the previous day, the water had fully settled over time into a great calm. So it seemed to the observer.

Then, secondly, there was the ribbon of land at either side of the canal. Again, also so still, the cold black towpath glistened with isolated frozen droplets of water amid the grit, and the close cropped vegetation at both sides of the towpath was covered with a thick layer of hoar frost. It was solid, still, unmoving. A very late frost for the time of year, but nonetheless it was a frost-encased landscape which, like the canal, seemed to the man to be gripped with a stillness that was greater, deeper somehow, than the state caused by a simple absence of movement. The flat fields beyond the canal surrounding it, were similarly covered in a thick layer of frost, as were the clipped hedgerows which enclosed the fields.

And, thirdly, there was the sky. A great sheet of low, grey cloud that covered the scene from skyline to skyline through 360 degrees, and with no clear, definite boundary determining where the land ceased and the sky began. That was the scene which met the man and reached his soul and it was the scene which imprinted itself indelibly upon his memory. It was also the landscape wherein the stillness was compounded by the silence. No bird sang. There was no distant lowing of cattle, and, being the early twenty-first century, no unseen aircraft was to be heard flying overhead and there was no distant rumble of traffic. Perfect stillness, and also a silence so profound that the man believed he could verily hear it, for silence, he believed, does have a sound.

The woman also seemed, to the man, to gel smoothly with the calm, silent, white landscape. She was still; utterly motionless, making no sound. He had first seen her from a distance of perhaps one quarter of a mile, noticing first her dark hair which stood out against the background, the remainder of her being well camouflaged by the long white coat and the white slacks beneath the coat and by the flimsy white stiletto heeled shoes she wore. Not, in the man’s view, particularly sensible clothing or footwear to be walking in. In such conditions one’s survival might depend upon one being conspicuous. Dark clothing in a white landscape, high visibility clothing at night, or when out on the hill, that was the rule. And kit to suit the purpose; that was also the rule. The woman increased her

level of camouflage by being still, as totally devoid of any movement as her environment. The man had learned early in life that being still, just standing or sitting motionless is, in itself, a very effective form of camouflage. He had often seen how just the slightest movement can betray the presence of something, man or beast or fowl, sometimes something very large and which would otherwise have gone completely unnoticed. He later thought that, had it not been for the dark hair, distinct like a black dot on a white background, he might not have seen her until he was just a few feet distant, she being so rigidly stone-like. The woman, he noticed, sat on the coarse grass bank of the canal with the towpath between her and the water, just staring out across the flat morning landscape of the Vale of York. The man steadily approached the woman and as he did so, made the decision to contaminate the silence by deliberately treading on the grit on the towpath so as to create a little sound. Even though he was approaching from the side of the woman he felt it did not do to come upon her without advertising his presence. He was loath to pick up a stone and throw it into the water ahead of him, knowing that the splash would, in that state of natural serenity, be easily heard by the woman if she was of normal hearing, but stepping from the grass on to the towpath and thus causing the soles of his hiking boots to 'crunch-crunch-crunch' upon the loose grit was, he thought, sound sufficient and a sensitive announcement of his presence.

The woman, however, did not turn at the sound of his footfall as he had fully expected her to, in fact she did not move at all but continued to remain sitting upright with slightly bent legs and hands resting together in front of her, staring with wide eyes across the patchwork of flat, whitened fields. As the man slowly, and with growing curiosity, approached the woman, something caused him to halt to stop in his tracks. For a few seconds there was just him and her and the stillness and the silence. He then, with growing concern, broke the silence by saying with a slightly raised voice, to ensure that he carried the ten or fifteen feet which separated them, 'Good morning,' and the instant that he said it he realized that he was looking at the first corpse he had seen.

The man had, in recent years, often thought that it had been quite an achievement for him to have reached his mid sixties without ever having seen a dead body. He had avoided military service and had gone on to lead a pleasingly quiet life. His two older brothers had undertaken the unpleasant duty of identifying first their deceased father, and some time later, after years of pining, the corpse of their mother. So that all he had seen of his parents upon their death were highly polished pine coffins being carried into a church, then each out again before being lowered into a neatly dug hole. He was a man wholly appreciative of and grateful for his achievement, though he conceded that 'achievement' might not be the correct word. His 'good fortune' might, he thought, be better, and a more appropriate description. Not for him warfare or survival in a war zone, nor fighting for his life amid dreadful natural disasters of hurricane and flood and fire, but a quiet life, unadventurous, unimaginative, sometimes mind-numbingly routine, and now it was as if some greater power had deemed that he was not going to escape the experience that was the lot of so many millions worldwide. Here was a dead body for him to gaze upon and yet who, despite being deceased, was nonetheless wholly in keeping with her surroundings. A woman in her early middle years, who had just the slightest trace of a smile about her mouth and who also displayed a look of peace. It all seemed to gel, as he had at first thought, so utterly completely, like a jigsaw puzzle. Not a piece missing nor out of place.

The man quickly glanced at his watch: eight thirty-five hours. He did so because he thought the time of his discovery might be of some significance. He walked on with a profound sense of reverence as he passed the corpse, even though it might seem that he was leaving the seated woman to her reveries, but the onward path was known to the man as being the speediest route to the nearest public telephone.

Fifteen minutes later the man, having dialled three nines from a classic red Gilbert Scott telephone box, stepped from the box and viewed the buildings of the village of Middle Walsham which he very rightly enjoyed conservation area status: grey stone cottages with slate roofs, a village green, a pub with the intriguing name of the 'Shepherd's Retreat', a row of shops with convex windows made up of small, individual panes of glass. He groped into his pocket for his pipe and was standing by the telephone box contentedly drawing on his favourite dark shag mixture when the police patrol car arrived, slowing to a halt beside him. After the preliminaries the man gave the constables his name and address and told them where they could find the corpse of the middle-aged lady. He was quietly amused when overhearing one of the constables who spoke on the car radio describing him as 'seeming to be genuine'. The constables then walked from their car towards the towpath and the man hurried home. He had quite a story to tell his wife.

Reginald Webster carefully considered the body. He saw a small woman. Perhaps, he thought, about five feet tall, certainly not much taller. He saw a round and well nourished face beneath the neat, kept dark hair and a slightly opened mouth. He saw rings upon her slightly stubby looking fingers and an expensive looking gold watch on her left wrist. He noted rings on the fingers of both her hands. He glanced to his left at the police surgeon.

'Life extinct,' Dr Mann spoke softly in response to Webster's questioning glance, 'but no obvious cause of death that I can detect except that she perhaps froze to death. It is a distinct possibility. It's getting a little warmer now, the frost is beginning to thaw as you see, but during the night it was well below freezing . . . well below . . . a late frost, but a frost just the same. She, the deceased, has nothing but her clothing to separate her from the ground, no useful groundsheet, for example. It was a still night and so there would have been no chill factor to aggravate matters but it would have been quite cold enough, sufficiently cold to separate her body from her soul.' Dr Mann paused and glanced around at the white-coated fields, still devoid of any movement and sound. 'She appears to be insufficiently clothed for this weather and this level of exposure. We see nylons below the slacks but nylons are not thermal underwear and who here is not wearing thermals? I certainly am.' He looked at Webster and then at the two constables who had responded to the three nines call. None replied. 'You see all four of us are in thermals and speaking for myself, and myself only, it still feels damn cold.' He paused. 'Well . . . the deceased might have walked here, just walking along the canal towpath, she stopped, perhaps feeling fatigued and in need of a rest, she sat and . . . and that's all it would have taken, just sitting down on cold ground in sub-zero temperature wearing nothing but flimsy fashionable clothing. Frankly, this could even be a suicide: such is not unknown.'

'Really?' Webster again glanced at the tall turbaned police surgeon.

'Oh, most certainly, yes, deliberately inducing hypothermia is a tried and tested means of suicide and has a number of advantages: it's clean, certain, doesn't involve anybody else. The pain of the cold is intense, that is the one drawback . . . but only initially so . . . the feeling of the cold passes as the body becomes numb and the blood is pulled from the extremities to keep the inner organs insulated but the body doesn't recognize the brain as a vital organ and so drains blood from the head into the chest cavity. Thusly the person begins to experience light-headedness and a wholly unfounded sense of euphoria and consequently the last moments of consciousness are of emotions which are deep, happy and content. You see the good lady's mouth? That might even be a smile we see, formed as she sat here feeling deeply content and at peace with the world as her body stiffened. I can think of worse deaths. Much, much worse, as I imagine you can.' Again he paused. 'Well, I can do no more . . . death is hereby confirmed. She is life extinct. I asked for the pathologist to attend before you arrived, M

Webster, and . . .’ Dr Mann fell silent as he looked along the length of the towpath, ‘I do really believe I see Dr D’Acre coming now . . . this is her, is it not?’

Webster turned and saw four figures walking as a distinct group with determination and a sense of purpose, he thought, towards them from the direction of the village of Middle Walsham. Webster made out the tall, slender figure of Dr D’Acre in the lead, behind her was the well set figure of Dr Hennessey, and behind him two constables walked, one of whom carried Dr D’Acre’s black leather Gladstone bag. Four dark figures striding strongly against a white background beneath the low, grey cloud cover.

It took fully a further five minutes for Dr D’Acre’s group to reach Webster and Dr Mann, the first two constables and the corpse. After acknowledgements, Webster said, ‘Deceased adult of the female sex, sir. No apparent injuries. Life extinct confirmed just now by Dr Mann. Could be misadventure but I don’t think we should be closing any doors on other possibilities, certainly not this early in the piece.’

‘Quite right.’ George Hennessey also considered the body and he too saw, as Webster had seen, one short, early middle-aged lady who sat as if smiling and was yet deceased. He also noticed her to be woefully ill-dressed for the weather and the remoteness. ‘No handbag,’ he commented, refraining from mentioning her inappropriate clothing, believing it to be too elementary and obvious a comment to pass, ‘an unusual absence since her watch and jewellery have not been removed by her or by another. Did you see a handbag anywhere?’

‘No, sir,’ Webster spluttered.

‘Strange, don’t you think?’

‘Very strange, sir . . . confess I did not notice the absence of one but as you say, strange. Why a woman who dresses like this lady is dressed would not have a handbag with her? Very strange.’

‘It’s a suspicious death.’ Dr D’Acre, who was not at all concerned by the absence of a handbag, had knelt and had been carefully examining the deceased. She leaned forward and pulled the silk scarf further away from the neck and exposed linear bruising. ‘They are ligature marks,’ she announced in a calm, matter-of-fact manner. ‘Do you see?’ She knelt closer and pulled the scarf still further from the neck. ‘Very clear . . . see them?’

Hennessey and Webster advanced and stood either side of Dr D’Acre and looked at the linear bruising which seemed to them to fully encompass the neck of the deceased. ‘Yes,’ Hennessey murmured, ‘yes, I see.’

‘Not misadventure at all,’ Webster added.

‘Could still be . . .’ Dr D’Acre turned and smiled warmly up at him. ‘The bruising may not have been fatal; it could even be a few days old and utterly unconnected with what it was that brought her to die at this lonely place. There is suspicion but all avenues still remain open.’ She looked around the immediate vicinity. ‘There is no sign of a struggle that I can detect, no sign of her being taken by force here. So, if the bruising is relevant, it means she was attacked in some other location and carried here in an unconscious state and left for dead, or left to die in the cold. She possibly regained consciousness and sat upright but was by then dangerously hypothermic and would have rapidly succumbed to hypothermia. If I am correct, she would have survived if she had been left here on a warm summer’s night . . . unless, of course, unless the murderer knew what he was doing and left her out here for the frost to finish the job for him . . . or for her. So . . . I have seen all I need to see, little point in taking any temperature either of the deceased or the ground because both will show a reading of zero.’ Dr D’Acre stood. ‘If you have taken all the photographs you wish to take, Chief Inspector, you can have the body removed to York District Hospital for the post-mortem.’

Hennessey turned to Webster. 'SOCO have still to arrive, sir,' Webster said, responding to Hennessey's silent question. 'No photographs have been taken at all, as yet.'

'As yet,' Hennessey groaned. He turned to one of the constables and said, 'Radio in, will you, find out where SOCO is . . . they're probably driving round looking for us . . . damn canal isn't difficult to find.'

'Yes, sir.' The constable reached for the radio clipped to his lapel.

'Tell them it's the long blue line on the map,' Hennessey growled with shortening patience. 'That's the one just to the south of York and not to be confused with the railway line.'

'Sir.'

'Well, I'll make my way back to York District and await the arrival of the deceased.' Dr D'Acre spoke calmly. 'Will you be observing for the police, Chief Inspector?'

'Probably,' Hennessey sighed, feeling acutely the embarrassment at the non-arrival of the Scene of Crime Officers without whose photographs of the corpse, said corpse cannot be moved.

'Well, the frost will preserve any evidence so the delay will not create problems, and the issue of the missing handbag . . .' Dr D'Acre raised an eyebrow, 'well, my penny to your pound that it is whether she was strangled if the strangulation is relevant . . . or . . . or . . . it's in there.' She nodded to the motionless ice-cold water of the canal. 'Rather you than me,' she added with a brief smile.

'We have frogmen,' Hennessey followed her gaze, 'but I know what you mean. Confess, it's times like this that I'd rather be a dog handler than a diver. If we can't find the handbag anywhere we might look . . . no . . . we'll have a look. We'll have to look in there but at least it's a canal, not a river, it can be closed off section by section and drained. That will make things easier. Much easier.'

'Well . . . I will see you later.' Dr D'Acre picked up her bag and walked back along the towpath.

'So, who found the body?' Hennessey turned to the constables, two of whom had been at the location when he arrived, and who now stood reverently some feet away.

'Member of the public, sir,' the constable consulted his notebook, 'one Mr Cookridge . . . he lives close by. We have cordoned off the canal towpath, sir . . . one tape at Middle Walsham . . .'

'Yes, I passed it.'

'And the other at the road about a quarter of a mile in the other direction, where the towpath can be accessed.'

'I see, well you two walk back to the village and do a careful search of the towpath, mark anything that might be suspicious, then return here.'

'Yes, sir.'

'You two do the same in the other direction, as far as the road . . .' Hennessey paused as one of the constables answered his radio. The constable said, 'Understood', and clicked the 'off' button. 'SOCO is on its way, sir. They did get lost, as you thought . . . ten minutes they said.'

'Yes . . .' Hennessey growled. 'Webster.'

'Sir?'

'Go and talk to the gentleman who found the body.'

'Sir.'

From a small stand of black trees in the middle distance a lone unseen rook cawed. Webster, for one, found himself deeply grateful for the sound.

'I do the walk daily, that lovely old walk; have been doing it daily for the best part of five years now.' Charles Cookridge spoke softly and did so with what Webster felt could fairly be described as an undisguised pride. 'Not bad for a sixty-six year old, five miles a day, rain or shine, leaving the house

at eight a.m. fortified by a cup of tea and a bacon sandwich.'

'~~And him never a sporty type in his youth,~~' Mrs Cookridge chimed from the kitchen, inviting herself into the conversation despite being out of the line of sight. 'And I should know.'

'Childhood sweethearts, we were,' Charles Cookridge explained with a wide grin. 'We both used to be truants each Wednesday afternoon, her from her school and me from mine, winter and summer, when our classmates were heaving and grunting and exerting themselves trying to shave a second head or add an inch there, me and her were in the woods doing a bit of heaving and grunting and exerting on our own. That tended to be in the summertime though. In the winter we just went for long walks if it was dry. If it was wet or snowing we just sheltered somewhere.'

'And then only latterly,' again the chime came from the kitchen, ' . . . when our bodies were old enough.'

Webster smiled. 'Good memories . . . very good memories. You are lucky to have them.'

'Better memories than throwing a javelin half an inch further than anyone else or jumping higher or running quicker,' Charles Cookridge's eyes gleamed. 'Sporty types can damn well keep their playing fields. They are welcome to them.'

The Cookridge's home was a small owner occupied house on an inter-war estate on the edge of the city of York. Webster found their home to have a warm and a cosy feel to it. The living room in which he and Charles Cookridge stood was pleasingly softened by books in a bookcase by the fireside, by plants in vases and by a neatness which stopped short, it seemed to Webster, of fastidiousness. One or two items had not been put away, some of the books on the shelves were on their sides rather than upright, the rug on the carpet had ridden up against the tiles of the hearth. Homely, in a word, Webster thought. It was made more and especially homely by a live fire in the grate burning faggots. Webster had been welcomed into the house upon production of his ID and had received an instant assurance that 'wood is all right . . . can't burn coal, they get upset about coal smoke but wood is permitted. Smokeless zone means no coal fires – but wood is all right' and from the kitchen his wife had added 'No complaints so far . . . tea, sir?'

'So you do the walk daily?' Webster asked, finding himself rapidly relaxing in the Cookridge house.

'As I said . . . ' Cookridge sank into an armchair and indicated for Webster to do the same, adding 'please' as he did so. 'Five miles from here to the road bridge over the canal and out along the towpath as far as Middle Walsham . . . lovely village . . . then get the bus to York and another bus out . . . pensioner's bus pass you see, doesn't cost anything, not a single penny piece.'

'So I understand,' Webster replied with a smile. 'Age has its compensations.'

'Indeed it does . . . so, out by eight a.m. each day . . . that way I get to walk by myself, that's pleasant and much less dangerous.'

'Dangerous?'

'There's the real danger of being pushed into the canal. Not funny, especially in winter time. It has happened. Youths round here think it's funny to push people into the canal if they're vulnerable . . . like elderly or a bit soft in the head . . . or cyclists. Cyclists are another easy target but youths like that sleep late, real couch potatoes. So I think I am safe, and in fact I am safe, in the early mornings. Done the walk since I retired and never had a bad experience because I rise early to do it. Only taken to exercising late in life . . . never really been one for it before.'

'Yes, so you said. So, you saw nothing yesterday?'

'No . . . of the woman, you mean? No I didn't. She could have been there for a couple of days in that weather without being found had it not been for me. No traffic on the canal in the winter, occasional

tourist narrowboat in the summer and quite a few people walk the towpath then. So she was not the yesterday, at least not at about eight thirty a.m. which is when I get to that part of the towpath. It early on in my walk you see. The whole walk takes an hour and a half. I am one third into it when I get to where I found the lady.'

'Rum do.' Mrs Cookridge emerged calmly and confidently from the kitchen holding a tray of tea and two cups. She set the tray down on the coffee table and said, 'I'll let you do the honours, Charlie' and ambled back into the kitchen, leaving a trail of perfume behind her.

'That's useful to know, helps a lot.'

'It does?' Charles Cookridge carefully stirred the tea in the white porcelain flower patterned teapot.

'Well, yes . . . the freezing conditions and the remoteness mean that it is possible that she could have been there for a day or two, but your daily morning routine means she arrived there alive or dead but we think alive, sometime after you did your walk yesterday. It narrows down the time frame very nicely, very nicely indeed.'

'Well yes, I see what you mean . . . and I often get the impression that I am the only person to walk the towpath during this time of the year. In fact I came across my own footprints last week . . . it was quite strange. Just before this cold snap the towpath was muddy in places and I walked in the mud leaving about a dozen footprints, and the following morning I did the walk as normal and there were my footprints but no other footprints or bicycle tyre tracks over them. So not one person, not one single solitary person, had walked or cycled along the towpath in the twenty-four hours since I had left my footprints in the mud.'

'That is hugely interesting. As you say, it clearly illustrates how much traffic uses the towpath at this time of the year.'

Cookridge handed Webster a cup of tea. 'Yes it does . . . not much used at all in the winter. In fact you have to live locally to even know it's there. Sugar?'

'No, thank you. Now, that point about local knowledge, that is very interesting indeed. It could be hugely significant.'

'Well, by local I mean York and the surrounding area . . . but it's not a well advertised canal for tourists, in fact it isn't advertised at all. You could stumble across it if you're a stranger to the area but it's not signposted or anything and you can't see it from the road until you are going over the bridge or you see a cyclist riding steadily over the fields and then you realize that he's cycling along the towpath.'

'I see, still very interesting though, very interesting indeed.' Webster paused. 'So you saw nothing or nobody of suspicion . . . other than the deceased?'

'No, I am sorry, nothing else at all. No person, no thing . . . just the lady . . . dare say that suspicious enough.'

George Hennessey sat somewhat uncomfortably on a small swivel chair beside the desk in Louise D'Acre's cramped office and, as he glanced quickly round the room, which was so small that it made him feel larger than he actually was, he noticed little alteration since his last visit. The cramped confines were made even more claustrophobic, he felt, by an absence of a source of natural light. In Louise D'Acre's desk with its small, ludicrously so, he believed, working surface, the photographs on the wall of her family, Daniel, Diana and Fiona, standing with Samson, the family's magnificent black stallion. He also glanced once, very quickly, at Louise D'Acre herself, slender, short dark hair very close cropped, a soft face, yet a woman who, it seemed to Hennessey, carried authority as quietly and as naturally as she breathed and who wore no make-up at all save for a slight trace of a light shade

lipstick. He then looked at the piece of printed paper within the self-sealing cellophane sachet. ‘She knew she was going to die.’

‘So it seems,’ Louise D’Acre replied calmly, quietly. ‘The lady was leaving you a present and she showed some considerable presence of mind, if you ask me.’

‘Yes, I agree . . . inside her shoe you say . . . ?’

‘Yes, we were removing the clothing prior to beginning the post-mortem, standard procedure for which the police presence is not required so long as we save and secure each item and of course anything else we find.’

‘Yes . . . of course.’

‘Eric slipped off the shoes and did so with his characteristic gentleness . . . he has a sincere reverence for the dead, a real respect. Didn’t pull off the shoes with a rough and ready “she’s-past-caring” attitude as many pathology laboratory assistants might well have done but slipped each one off as if the lady were still with us. I mean to suggest nothing untoward, it is just that I think Eric is a particularly conscientious young man and I believe that we are lucky to have him.’

‘Understood,’ Hennessey smiled, ‘and I assure you, I didn’t suspect you meant anything else at all. We too in fact have formed the same impression of him. A very good man to have on your team.’

‘Good. Well, the paper slid out from between the bottom of her nylons and her shoe, so that it was compressed by her weight as she stood and/or walked. It was neatly folded, as you see. We picked it up with tweezers and put it straight into the sachet . . . that was about thirty minutes ago.’ Louise D’Acre glanced at the small gold watch which hung loosely on her left wrist, ‘nearer an hour in fact . . . time is going quickly today.’

‘OK . . . an hour ago . . . about.’ Hennessey carefully turned the sachet over and over as he examined the paper within. ‘Seems like a utility bill.’

‘So we also thought. In fact that is exactly what it is although in my report I will have to write “what appears to be a utility bill”. Dare say we all get enough gas or electricity bills to be able to recognize one when we see one,’ she added with a smile.

Hennessey grinned. He thought Dr D’Acre to be clearly in a good mood, even that modest injection of humour in her working environment was, he thought, a little out of character for her. ‘Shall we see?’

He opened the sachet and carefully extracted the paper, holding it by the edge, and gingerly unfolded it. ‘Electricity bill for Unit Five, Ryecroft Glen Road, York . . . and it’s two years old . . . but it does give an address for us to call on. Sounds like an industrial estate though; I cannot say I am even remotely familiar with the address. It rings no bells at all.’ He took his mobile phone from his jacket pocket and jabbed a pre-entered number. ‘Hate these things sometimes,’ he said apologetically, ‘but there’s no denying their frequent usefulness.’

‘I know exactly what you mean . . . all those ruined train journeys.’

‘Hennessey,’ he said as his call was answered. ‘Is that you, Somerled? I did get the correct number. Good . . . listen . . . take someone from the team with you plus a couple of constables, get over to Unit Five, Ryecroft Glen Road, York . . . no, I haven’t heard of it either. Secure the premises on the assumption that it is a crime scene . . . it is in respect of the victim discovered this morning, the lady on the canal bank . . . frozen to death. As Dr D’Acre has just said, the deceased left us a present in the form of an electricity bill for that address folded up inside her shoe . . . two years old, but the address is clear . . . the link is significant. She evidently wanted to tell us something. She would not have hidden it in her shoe otherwise. Doubt if we’ll get any relevant prints off it . . . two years old . . . but I’ll send it to Wetherby anyway. OK, thank you . . . I’ll observe the PM and then come and join you.’

there directly afterwards.’ He switched off the mobile and slid it back into his jacket pocket.

‘Suggest with respect that you look at the clothing before I send it to the forensic science laboratory.’ Dr D’Acre held eye contact with Hennessey.

‘Oh?’ Hennessey was puzzled.

‘Yes, I think you’ll find it interesting. They are not British.’

‘No?’

‘No . . . North American sizes, and with both English and French labelling.’

‘English *and* French?’

‘Canadian,’ Louise D’Acre spoke matter-of-factly. ‘It’s your area of expertise and I am reluctant to encroach but I am familiar with your “encroach all you like” attitude . . . which I value and admire and wholly agree with.’

‘Yes . . . that way we don’t leave any gaps.’

‘No . . . none at all . . . anyway madam was clothed head to foot in Canadian outer clothing, coats, shoes, blouse, slacks . . . all Canadian . . . her underwear was British. So, as a woman myself, and knowing how nylons and underwear wear out much more rapidly than outerwear, I would guess that she is a Canadian woman who has been fairly medium to long term resident in the UK.’

‘Long enough to have had to replace her underwear but not her outer garments . . . so not a visitor . . . on holiday or a business trip?’

‘I would think not, depending upon how much she had brought over here with her, but we could still be talking about a few months . . . possibly even a couple of years. I have a coat that is ten years old . . . also slacks and shoes of that selfsame vintage . . . hardly worn these days I concede, and readily so, but ten years old nonetheless. At least ten years old, come to think about it.’

‘Thank you, that is a useful observation.’ Hennessey again looked at the utility bill. ‘Dirty and grubby . . . as though it has lain on a floor for a long time. You know, Yellich is going to find an empty industrial unit which has had no tenant for a quite a while but where some person, or persons as yet unknown, forced entry and used the premises to keep this lady against her will long enough for her to realize that she was going to be murdered, but with such lax supervision that she was able to pick up this electricity bill and hide it about her person, leaving us a present, as you say.’

‘You can deduce all that from a utility bill?’ Louise D’Acre smiled briefly.

‘Well . . . I’ve been a copper for a long time, whether I am right or not still remains to be seen but I think it’s a pretty straightforward and reasonable deduction. It’s not a domestic dwelling, Unit Five and the bill itself is grimy and two years old. The premises have not been cleaned in that time by somebody, somebody, will own the building, someone will have a record of the last tenant, so, thank you for this.’

‘Very welcome. We didn’t search the pockets; the people at Wetherby will do that, of course.’

‘Of course.’

‘So, shall we get into our party clothes?’

Hennessey stood. ‘Yes. I’ll see you in there.’

Some few minutes later DCI Hennessey, having removed his outer clothing and changed into green lightweight disposable coveralls which included slippers and a comfortable to wear hat with an elastic rim, stood calmly and quietly against the wall of the pathology laboratory. Also in the room and similarly dressed were Dr Louise D’Acre and Eric Filey, the pathology laboratory assistant. It did not surprise Hennessey to hear that Dr D’Acre had nothing but praise for Filey for he too, as he had said he had, over the years, warmed to the man, finding him not only respectful of the dead but also, unlike any of his calling Hennessey had ever met, a warm and a jovial young man. The deceased lay upon one

of the four stainless steel tables in the room with a starched white towel draped stiffly over her ~~genitalia so as to preserve her dignity, even in death. All other parts of her body were open to full view~~ and Hennessey saw a woman in her middle years, a little short in stature but not remarkably so. Perhaps she had thought herself to have been a little overweight but again not remarkably so, especially given her years.

‘We had to straighten the body, as you see,’ Dr D’Acre turned to address Hennessey, ‘but that will not affect the post-mortem procedure or any findings.’

‘Thank you. I understand.’ Hennessey smiled briefly as he replied.

‘So . . .’ Dr D’Acre turned her attention to the deceased and, as she did so, she carefully adjusted the height of the microphone which was attached to an anglepoise arm which in turn was bolted to the ceiling. She spoke for the benefit of an audio typist who would shortly be typing the post-mortem findings. ‘So, we have a deceased who is an adult of the female sex and who is in her middle years of life. At the moment the deceased has yet to be identified. She is clearly a lady of Northern European or Caucasian, extraction. She appears to be very well nourished and is without tattoos or any other form of distinguishing marks to her anterior aspect. If you’d take the shoulders please, Eric?’

Eric Filey, short and rotund, moved quickly and efficiently from where he was standing by the bench which ran the length of the pathology laboratory to the head of the dissecting table and took hold of the shoulders of the deceased while Dr D’Acre took hold of the feet. When Dr D’Acre counted ‘one-two-three’, they turned the body over on to its front in what Hennessey saw to be a skilful and evidently thoroughly practised manoeuvre. ‘No distinguishing marks are to be seen on the posterior aspect,’ Dr D’Acre continued. ‘What is noted is a reddening of the buttocks caused by lividity. As she died the blood drained according to gravity and settled on the lowest point of the body at the time of death. She died therefore in the sitting position in which she was found.’

Hennessey nodded, uncertain as to whether or not the observation was meant for his ears or for the microphone. It was, though, an important observation. The police could now eliminate the possibility that she died elsewhere and her body was relocated post-mortem.

‘Back again please, Eric . . .’ And once more the body of the deceased was turned skilfully and with minimum effort on to its back. Without being bidden Eric Filey readjusted the towel to cover the genitals of the deceased.

‘Rigor was established and was subsequently broken by myself in the presence of Mr Filey. There is no indication of tissue decay. Time of death has to be determined but will likely be within twenty-four hours of the present which is . . .’ she glanced at the clock on the wall of the laboratory, ‘Eleven twenty-seven a.m. There are ligature marks to the neck of the deceased, fully encircling it, which seem to be twinned. That is to say, two distinct lines of bruising encircle the neck . . . such bruising being consistent with a rope or similar, such as a length of electricity cable being coiled twice or double around the neck and then tightened.’ Dr D’Acre lifted the eyelids of the deceased and continued ‘Petechial haemorrhaging is noted . . . small dark spots in the whites of the eyes . . . which is fully consistent with death by strangulation.’ Dr D’Acre then closely examined the wrists of the deceased and then the ankles. ‘Both wrists and both ankles show clear signs of bruising indicating that the deceased was restrained peri-mortem.’ Dr D’Acre then examined the fingernails of the deceased and then looked at Hennessey. ‘Bad luck.’

‘Bad luck, ma’am? In what way?’

‘No defence wounds, no split fingernails caused by fighting off her attacker, or attackers, so no useful flesh and blood samples for you . . . sorry.’

‘No matter,’ Hennessey inclined his head to one side, ‘such material would have been useful but

am confident that we'll get there without them.'

'I'm sure you will. I'll scrape anyway, of course, but I do not expect to find anything of interest. will be a somewhat futile gesture but I'll do it.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'There are no other injuries in evidence so let us look in the mouth. The mouth is a veritable gold mine of information. Here rigor is still established. Eric, can you please pass . . .' Dr D'Acre allowed her voice to trail off as Eric Filey, anticipating her request, handed her a length of stainless steel. 'Give me a place to stand and I will move the world . . .' she said as she accepted the lever. She worked the lever into the mouth and then determinedly prised the mouth open and so causing the jaw socket to 'give' with a loud 'crack'. 'So useful being a pathologist,' she said as she handed the lever back to Eric Filey who immediately placed it in a tray of disinfectant. 'We are the only doctors whose patients do not feel pain.'

It was a joke that Hennessey had heard her make many times before but he chuckled anyway. It was, he believed, the diplomatic thing to do, the only response to make.

'She has a reasonably good set of teeth . . . some decay . . . certainly western dental work but which looks a little different to British dentistry and so could be Canadian. She seemed to care for her teeth only adequately. She didn't floss, there is a build-up of plaque . . . she seems to have had a sort of "five out of ten, could do better" attitude towards her teeth. You know,' Dr D'Acre straightened up, 'I once conducted a PM on a young woman in her mid twenties . . . tragically young to come here . . . everybody comes here before their time but mid twenties, that really is being short-changed. She was a Russian girl and I kid you not she had a perfect set of teeth, caused by the bland, sugar-free eastern European diet she had lived on, you see. I do so worry when I see my son pour sugar into his tea . . . but will he be advised?'

'They won't at his age.'

'Sadly, and then it's too late once your second teeth arrive and you have by then acquired a taste for sweet-tasting food and drink. Well, to continue,' Dr D'Acre returned her attention to the corpse, 'the lady lived in the west all her life and had a diet high in sugar content. Her teeth have been quite heavily filled. You don't yet know her name do you?'

'No, ma'am, not yet,' Hennessey glanced up at the ceiling. The filament bulbs that illuminated the room were covered by opaque Perspex sheets which efficiently screened their potentially dangerous shimmer. 'Not yet . . . in point of fact there might even be a missing person's file already open and awaiting to be matched to the deceased. That is something for me to check.'

'Yes, seems likely if she was local but the dentistry may well confirm her ID. Dentists have to retain their files for eleven years by legal requirement. Some retain them for longer. This lady has had dental work done within the last eleven years, though not necessarily in the United Kingdom. Once I have taken casts of the upper and lower teeth, I'll remove one and cut it in half. That will provide the age of the deceased plus or minus one year, but I can say now that she is in her mid to late forties. She paused. 'I don't think I have to disturb the face; there is no sign of head injury, none at all.' She felt gently and painstakingly round the circumference of the deceased woman's head. 'No, no injury at all.' Dr D'Acre then ran her fingertips through the scalp hair. 'No, none, don't even have to arrange an X-ray. So . . . fortunately I can leave this lady to be identified by any next of kin who might come forward. She has clear nasal passages. I'll check all other body cavities for you in case she has left you other gifts . . . such is not unknown. Now, let's see what and when she ate last. The stomach contents thereof is always another good and useful source of information.' She patted the stomach and she reached for a scalpel from the instrument trolley. 'There will be some gas but not a great deal. S

deep breath, gentlemen.’ Dr D’Acre also took a deep breath. She then turned her head to one side and punctured the stomach with the scalpel. The gas within the stomach escaped with a mercifully brief ‘hiss’. ‘Smelled worse,’ she said after exhaling and taking another breath, ‘dare say we all have. I still remember the bloated floater they found in the river, pulled him from the Ouse when he was about ready to burst of his own accord. It really was so very kind of the police to bring him here when he was in that state but I cleared the lab, put all the extractor fans on full, took an almighty breath and stabbed the stomach, then ran for the door, slamming it behind me, only then did I breathe. Remember, Eric?’

‘Like it was yesterday, ma’am,’ Eric Filey grinned. ‘Like it was yesterday.’

‘Even with the extractors on it was still a good half hour before we returned. We never found out who that old boy was.’ Again Dr D’Acre stood. ‘They gave him a name and buried him in a shared plot but he was someone’s son once in his life, someone must have known him. His liver was completely shot to hell, little was left of his kidneys but there was no indication either way to tell us he was pushed or fell into the river and so that was it. Death by misadventure. He was named John Brown and buried in the paupers’ section of Fulford Cemetery. I think of him often for some reason. Some of our pathologists and other pathologists take a few of our patients home with us, in our heads I mean, and in the manner that poor old boy occupies a part of my mind. So he’s in Fulford Cemetery now with the contents of two other coffins for company. I will lay flowers on his grave one day soon.’ Dr D’Acre turned again and examined the stomach cavity of the deceased. ‘Well, she was very hungry when she died, I can tell you that, very hungry, the stomach is quite empty. She had had no food for probably forty-eight hours. She is well nourished so she ate well but not for the last two days of life. In her last two days she knew hunger.’ She turned to Hennessey. ‘There will . . . in fact there just must be a medical report on this lady. There must be. She is not anorexic, she enjoyed food . . . she ate. She cared for her teeth if only adequately so and she was held against her will for fully two days before being strangled. Someone must have noticed her missing by now and have reported it.’ Dr D’Acre turned to Eric Filey and said, ‘Can we turn her again, please, Eric? Something occurs to me.’ And once again Hennessey watched as she and Eric Filey turned the deceased upon her stomach as if she was of no weight at all. Dr D’Acre then took the scalpel and made two large incisions to the lower back at either side of the spine. ‘Shrunk,’ she said quietly.

‘Shrunk?’ Hennessey echoed.

‘Yes . . . shrunk. Her kidneys have shrunk, not by much, but still noticeably so, quite consistent with being deprived of fluid for forty-eight hours. Not a good end to a life which had probably run on about half of its expected span.’

‘But she was found out of doors,’ Hennessey mused aloud, ‘sitting upright.’

‘Yes, I think you need to talk to a forensic psychologist about that part, but I would think that the murderer or murderers probably posed her body, laying it out on the canal bank and scuttling home and waiting for it to be discovered, assuming that he, or she or they, had killed her, as I said earlier but in fact, unknown to them, she was still alive. He or she or they simply hadn’t done the job they believed that they had done. They had not belted and braced it by, for example, pulling a plastic bag over her head for just five minutes to ensure that she was life extinct. In fact she was still alive . . . unconscious, but still alive. She was then conveyed to the place where she was eventually found and laid there. Possibly the cold brought her back to consciousness, it can do that, it can give a body a wake-up call, but by then she was dangerously cold and entering hypothermia . . . despite being in that state she sat up feeling light-headed and euphoric and looked at the lovely white landscape under the low cloud and might even have thought she was in heaven, hence the smile which you might note here

now faded as the body has warmed. The smile was frozen on her face as hypothermia took her from us. So, no food or water, and thusly was less able to withstand the cold, but she evidently had full and unrestricted access to toilet facilities . . . her clothing wasn't soiled. I will trawl for poisons as a matter of course but I do not expect to find any. I'll send a blood sample to toxicology anyway. So, my findings will be that she was held against her will for forty-eight hours, deprived of food and fluid at that time but had access to toileting facilities, though probably not a water flush otherwise she would have drunk something. She was then strangled, removed to the place where she was found and left for dead, but briefly regained consciousness before dying of hypothermia. Murder. Without a doubt. Murder.'

Hennessey nodded his thanks, 'Appreciated, ma'am.'

Less than an hour later George Hennessey stood silently beside a sombre Somerled Yellich and an equally sombre Carmen Pharoah. 'It was', they both assured Hennessey, 'definitely the place where she was kept.'

The 'place' was a prefabricated metal building with a concrete floor, which had been stripped of all plant and machinery that it might once have contained, so all that remained were a few empty shelves, a two-year-old calendar on the wall, discarded plastic bags, a few isolated pieces of paper on the floor and a chemical toilet, without any form of enclosure, furthest from the entrance doorway, in the corner. A length of medium weight chain was attached to the wall close to the toilet. Two shorter lengths of a lighter gauge chain and four small brass padlocks lay on the floor, also close to the toilet.

'Two short lengths of lightweight chain to bind her feet and hands –' Yellich pointed them out to Hennessey, 'well, to bind her wrists and ankles, I should say.'

'Better,' Hennessey turned to Yellich and smiled – 'but I knew what you meant.'

'Yes, sir . . . and a larger length of chain to stop her wandering too far about the floor or escaping. The lightweight chain is of sufficient length to allow her a little freedom of movement, I would think.'

'Yes.' Hennessey looked at the interior of the metal shed. There was, he noted, with no small amount of dismay, no source of heating nor any form of comfort. The woman had just the cold concrete floor to lie or stand or sit on. The floor area was large enough to accommodate, he guessed perhaps five or six average size cars, and the length of chain he further guessed would have permitted her to access approximately half that area. The shed itself was one of five similar sheds, and occupied a remote location on the eastern edge of the city of York, some two or three miles from the nearest occupied dwelling, or so it appeared to Hennessey.

'All the other units are empty, sir,' Yellich spoke quietly. 'That is to say, they are not in current use. They are all solidly padlocked up. It seems to have been a small-scale industrial estate, now abandoned. This particular shed had been broken into, someone had forced entry.'

'I see . . .' Hennessey murmured and then said, 'It explains the electricity bill.'

'Yes, sir, she had quite a presence of mind, as you say.'

'Yes . . . she was kept here for two days or at least not fed for the last two days she was here . . . no allowed water either.'

'Two days?'

'Yes, so Dr D'Acre estimates by the absence of food in the stomach and the shrunken kidneys . . . no food or water for forty-eight hours. She would have been very cold and much weakened by the absence of sustenance. She would not have had the strength to shout, no one would hear her if she did and who would wander up here? It is too remote to be of interest to teenage vandals, and it is the wrong time of year anyway. Vandalism tends to be a summer and autumn activity, as we know, and

the criminal fraternity would know the sheds had been stripped bare, that is assuming that the others are as empty as this one.'

'We still have to check them, sir.'

'Yes, better make sure none of the others contain any bad news. Is SOCO on its way?'

'Yes, sir, hopefully they won't get lost this time,' Yellich added with a smile.

'Good. She died of exposure by the way, froze to death as we first thought.'

'I see, sir.'

'But strangled prior to that and then taken out of doors and left for dead.' Hennessey pointed to the length of electricity cable which lay snake-like on the floor. 'Have you touched that?'

'No, sir.'

'Don't. The person who kept her here didn't pick up after himself . . . the chain, the padlocks, it's all here and that cable was probably used to strangle her. It's all still here. It'll be much too much to hope that the murderer left his dabs on the chain or the locks or the cable, but ask SOCO to check them anyway, and then get them off to Wetherby. The scientists might get DNA traces . . . they'll certainly get hers but maybe someone else's also. Do that as soon as you can.'

'Yes, sir,' Yellich replied briskly.

'I'm going back to the station. Who's there? Do you know?'

'Webster, sir. Webster's holding the fort.'

'Webster? All right, he'll do . . . I'll phone him from here on my mobile.'

Reginald Webster gently tapped on the highly polished wooden frame of the doorway to George Hennessey's office and entered. Hennessey, sitting in the chair behind his desk, looked up and smiled as Reginald Webster entered. Webster always found Hennessey's office to be much on the small side for one of Detective Chief Inspector's rank and he noticed again how spartan Hennessey kept it, with just a Police Mutual calendar on the wall as the only form of softening or decoration. A small table stood in the corner by the office window upon which sat an electric kettle, a box of fair trade teabags, powdered milk and half a dozen half pint drinking mugs. The window itself offered a view across Micklegate Bar of the walls of the city, at that moment glistening with rapidly evaporating frost.

'You were quite correct, sir,' Webster slid unbidden on to the chair which stood in front of Hennessey's desk. He handed Hennessey a manila folder. 'Seems to be the deceased, sir, one Mrs Edith Hemmings, forty-seven years, and with a home address here in York.'

'It's her,' Hennessey spoke matter-of-factly as he considered the photograph which was attached to the missing person's file. 'It's a match. "Dringhouses",' he read the address on the file, 'modern address, self-respecting people, privately owned homes but by her clothing . . . you know . . . I thought she'd be much more . . . more . . .'

'Monied?' Webster suggested.

'Yes, that's the word I was looking for, more monied.' He paused. 'Well, there is an unpleasant job to be done now.'

'But the post-mortem has been done, sir.'

'Yes, and Dr D'Acre had no need to disturb the face.'

'I see . . . useful.'

'Yes. Phone York District Hospital and ask them to prepare the body for viewing, then do the necessary, please. I see that it was her husband who reported her missing?'

'Yes, sir . . . two days ago.'

'Next of kin. He'll be the one to take.' Hennessey handed the folder back to Webster. 'Talk to him

afterwards . . . see where you get but don't put him on his guard.'

'You've found her and you want me to identify the body?' Stanley Hemmings revealed himself to be short, slightly built man with closely trimmed, slicked down hair which was parted in the centre as the fashion of the Victorians, so Webster understood it to have been. It was certainly, he thought, an unusual hairstyle for the early twenty-first century. Most unusual indeed. Hemmings wore dark clothing as if he was prematurely in mourning, black trousers, a brown woollen pullover, black shoes, grey shirt, black tie.

'Possibly,' Webster replied. 'But yes, we need confirmation of the identity of a body which may be that of Mrs Hemmings.'

'My neighbour told me that that would be the way of it.'

'Really?' Webster stood outside the front door of the Hemmingses' house in Dringhouses and found it to be just as Hennessey had described: modest, yet self-respecting. A three bedroom semi-detached inter-war house with a small neatly kept garden to the front, on a matured estate of identical houses.

'Yes. He told me that if two officers call, they will want information, but if one calls it is to collect you to view Edith's body, or a body which might be Edith. He said it was the first indication you'll get . . . two call, the police have questions, but if one calls it's because they have found her body.'

'Or a body,' Webster replied. 'But yes, your neighbour is essentially correct.'

'I'll get my coat . . . just a minute, please.' Hemmings turned and went back inside his house.

In the car, driving to York District Hospital, Webster broke the uncomfortable silence by saying, 'I won't be like you might have seen in the films . . .'

'No?' Hemmings turned to Webster.

'No, they won't pull a sheet back and reveal her head and face, it will be done quite cleverly, you'll see her through a glass window, a pane of glass, heavy velvet curtains will be pulled back and you'll see her. She will be lying on a trolley with her head and face tightly bandaged with the sheets tucked in tightly round her body. You will see nothing else. It will look like she is floating in space, in complete blackness. If it is your lady wife, it will be the final image you will have of her. It's a better image to keep in your mind than one of her being in a metal drawer.'

'Yes, thank you. Thank you for telling me that. I appreciate it and you are right, it will be a much better last memory, because it will be her. I know it. In my bones I know it will be her.'

Later in an interview suite at Micklegate Bar Police Station and comforted with a hot mug of sweetened tea, Stanley Hemmings said, 'She was a Canadian, you know.'

'Canadian?'

'Yes,' Hemmings nodded. Webster again saw him as small, like his late wife, but now also noticed that he was barrel-chested with strong-looking arms and legs.

'Yes . . . specifically Canadienne.' Hemmings saw the puzzled look cross Reginald Webster's eyes and so he spelled the word for him. 'It means, among other things, a French Canadian female, or as she explained to me. "*Je suis Canadienne*," she said when we first met. I remembered from school what "*Je suis*" meant, it's the sum of my French, and so she had to explain the rest. She apparently spoke French as they speak it in Quebec province, that is to say with a very distinct accent, in fact I found out that in Quebec they speak French like they speak English in Glasgow, not just a distinct accent but unique in terms of phrase and strange use of words. Just as the Scots will use "how" to mean "why", so the French Canadians have their own variation of the French language. But she and I always talked in English anyway. We had to, for heaven's sake.'

Hennessey sat silently next to Webster and opposite Hemmings in the softly decorated and carpeted

orange-hued interview suite. He felt that Mr and Mrs Hemmings probably would have made an odd couple in life, more because of their personalities than anything else. Hennessey, for some reason, thought that Edith Hemmings must have been a spirited person in life, the clothes she wore, her courageous presence of mind in hiding the electricity bill in her shoe, that, he felt, showed initiative. And she had been adventurous enough to relocate from Canada. Yet here was her husband who dressed in a dull manner, and had a monotonous tone of voice . . . almost whiny, Hennessey thought. Her hairstyle contrasted with his centre-parted style, attached to his skull with cream as if he was the very caricature of a Victorian railway booking clerk. The image of them as a couple didn't gel in his mind. He also found the job that Hemmings gave, 'an under manager in the biscuit factory', not the sort of job that would attract a woman of Edith Hemmings's taste in clothes, and he was a man who whined about having to take time off work while 'our Edith was missing' . . . again, not the sort of husband she would have thought to Edith Hemmings's taste.

'Were you long married?' Hennessey asked.

'No, sir . . . just a few months.'

'Months!'

'Yes, sir, about eighteen, that's all. Just a year and a half, if that. I was a bachelor getting close to retirement and I thought, well that's me, lived alone, set to die alone, then along comes our Edith. We met in a pub in town. It was she who started to talk to me. I was just in there for a pint to get out of the house for an hour or two . . . I get fed up with my own company now and again . . . and it changed my life. I've never been very successful with women and I wondered what she wanted at first but she seemed properly interested in me and then one thing led to another and another and another and eventually we got married quietly at the registry office and she came and settled with me in my little house in Dringhouses. She was keen to know that I owned the house and that I wasn't renting it, she just wanted that bit of security, I assumed, and that's fair enough. So, anyway, I showed her the papers about the house, the little bit of mortgage I am still paying off . . . after that she was OK about it. Quite happy. She was Mrs Hemmings. Mine . . . our Edith for me to come home to.'

'I see.' Hennessey rested his elbows on his knees and clasped his meaty hands together. 'What do you know about your late wife's background?'

'Very little, tell you the truth. It might seem strange but it really was a very rapid thing we did. One day I was alone in the world . . . not unhappy . . . lifelong bachelor, the next married and the next a widower.'

'Was she employed, or did she have any outside interest?'

Hemmings shrugged. 'Well, she was not employed when she was my wife but before that . . . well she was working as a sort of housemaid but not a maid . . . a helper . . . like a companion, she and the elderly gentleman who owned the house, somewhere in the country outside York, somewhere like that . . . out in the sticks. She didn't talk about it very much; frankly, to be honest, she didn't talk about her life very much at all.'

'Do you have the old boy's address?' Hennessey asked warmly.

'Yes, I have it. I can let you have it. It's at home though. But yes, I can let you have her previous address.'

'We'd like to chat to him. He might help us get to know more about your wife, nothing more than that.'

'It's more his family that is likely to help you. I think that he was a bit gone in the head and difficult to live with. I think our Edith was glad to get away from there. That was the impression I got anyway.'

'I see . . . so . . . can I ask you, when did you last see your wife?'

'See? Two days ago. ~~Wednesday today, so last saw her on Sunday, so then that's three days ago.~~ She left the house to go to the shops on Sunday evening about five p.m. We had run out of milk and so she put on her white coat and said, "I'll be back soon" . . . or "I'll be ten minutes", something like that. There's a little shop just five minutes' walk away, you understand; it opens seven days a week and stays open late. It has to do that to compete with the supermarkets . . . bad position for a man to be in. I always thought. I don't earn much at the biscuit factory but at least the hours are civilized.'

'Yes . . . yes . . .' Hennessey allowed impatience to edge into his voice.

'So when she didn't come back after about an hour I went out looking for her. Who wouldn't? I went to the shop but the fella said Edith hadn't come in that evening. I said that she must have done but he said she never did. He knows our Edith, you see. So I began to get worried because she had not taken anything with her, just about enough money in her purse to buy the pint of milk she went out for. I checked when I got back, all of her clothes were there, all of her shoes, all of her documents, even her passport and her birth certificate, her Canadian driving licence, her jewellery, it was all still there. All of it. She hadn't left me. She left the house to go to the corner shop to buy some milk for herself and her husband so that we could have a nice cup of tea on a quiet Sunday evening before we went to bed for the night and that was it.'

'I see,' Hennessey sat slowly back in his chair. 'Do you know of anyone who'd want to harm her?'

'No, sir, no one, she only knew me in York. That's all, just me. She had no friends . . . no enemies but . . .' Hemmings voice faltered.

'But?' Hennessey pressed.

'But what?' Webster assisted Hennessey.

'But . . . well, I didn't know her very long, she might have been my wife but she seemed to come from nowhere . . . like she was suddenly there . . . out of the blue . . . but she did always seem to have a history. She gave the impression that she had left some sort of life behind her. But what that was I cannot say . . . I do not know. Even in marriage she was a private person.'

'She must have told you something about herself?'

'She told me that she had grown up in Quebec and moved to Ontario when she was very young. She told me that. She never mentioned any brothers or sisters . . . she said that her parents were both deceased. She did tell me that sort of little orphan Annie number but apart from that she really hardly told me anything.'

'What was your marriage like?'

'What's any marriage like?' Hemmings reacted defensively, Hennessey thought. 'We were middle aged, we settled down . . . quietly. We had an understanding, she didn't like too many demands made on her . . . if you see what I mean.'

'All right, I understand, we won't go there . . . unless it becomes relevant.'

'Thank you, sir, I appreciate that.' Hemmings paused and took a deep breath. He clearly had powerful lungs. 'She cooked the meals and kept the house tidy and did the laundry and I worked at the biscuit factory and earned our money. And that was our little house. Hardly glamorous, hardly the good life, but we ate, we were dry when it rained and we didn't fight. Never had fights . . . that I appreciated. No fights. It was just nice to have someone to come home to after years of being alone. She even warmed my slippers by the fire for me to come home to. That was a nice touch, especially this winter just gone. I must admit things could have been more passionate but it was convenient for both of us and at our age that means a lot. It wasn't marital bliss but it was better than being alone and she, like me, was beyond the first flush of youth.'

‘Understood. Did she seem worried?’

‘No more than usual.’

‘What does that mean?’ Webster asked suddenly and perhaps a little too aggressively for Hennessey’s liking.

‘Well . . . how can I describe this?’ Hemmings sat back and glanced round the interview suite. ‘It was her manner, she didn’t like the summer. She was strange like that, was Edith. In the summer she had her hair cut short, really short . . . didn’t suit her. I think the style is called “boy cut”. You know as short as a schoolboy’s hair and then when it was short she wore a long blonde wig and large spectacles but the plastic in the frames was just that – plastic, tinted plastic, not proper lenses. She had good eyesight did Edith . . . big glasses, they were more like a man’s frames rather than a woman’s choice of frame. She would also walk round York with a small British Airways rucksack, as though she was a tourist, not a resident. That’s when she did go out. Most of the time she stayed at home but she likes to go out now and again. I mean it’s fair enough. I’m in the factory all day so at weekends I like to roam. Why not? Go into York, drive to the coast for a few lungfuls of good sea air . . . maybe find an old quiet pub for a beer or two, and our Edith, she’d drag her feet but eventually she’d agree to join me but only with the wig and dark glasses and her small British Airways knapsack that made her at least look like a tourist. When I asked her about it she just cut me short and said, “It’s my image”, really snappy, bite-my-head-off sort of reply, so I stopped asking but she was always clearly relieved to go back home and tear the wig off.’

‘As if she was frightened of being seen?’

‘Yes, but only in hindsight. Only after I’d thought about it for a while. At the time I thought it was no more than her just wanting to stay at home and not liking summer because she was a Canadian and more used to the cold, but now I understand Canada can be blisteringly hot during the summer so perhaps that was not it, perhaps that was not the reason. I just put it down to the words of my Uncle Maurice when I was a teenager. “You’ll never fathom a woman, Stanley,” he once said to me, God rest his soul, “you’ll never fathom a woman”, so I put it down to her being a woman and thereby a damn strange creature. I mean there seemed to be no point in going to war over the issue . . . and I do appreciate a peaceful house. She was just much happier in winter. I knew her for two winters and one summer. She seemed to be more relaxed in the winter, always as though the dark nights were hiding from her, and the short, grey days also. Well . . . got a funeral to arrange now. I’ll ask for a simple graveside service, there will only be me there, me and the priest and the pall-bearers, can’t fill a church with friends and relatives I don’t have so I won’t try. So we’ll lay her down and follow the coffin with a shovel or two of soil and that’ll be our Edith.’

‘We’d like to take a look at your late wife’s possessions,’ Hennessey asked. ‘I hope you won’t mind the object?’

‘Of course,’ Hemmings glanced up at the ceiling. ‘All there is of them is just clothing and a few documents.’ He paused and looked at Hennessey. ‘Why? Do you think there’s something there?’ There was a slight note of alarm in his voice.

‘We think nothing yet,’ Hennessey replied quietly, attempting to calm Hemmings, ‘nothing at all’ but she was evidently kept against her will for two days, then she was left by the canal, as if her body was posed . . . that speaks of motive and premeditation and now you indicate that she seemed to be hiding from some person or persons as yet unknown. You seem to be saying that she was a woman in fear.’

‘You think so?’ Hemmings looked at Hennessey with wide, appealing eyes, ‘Not just abducted but some sicko?’

‘We think nothing yet, as I said, Mr Hemmings. All avenues are open, all are being explored.’

The man walked purposefully up to the fountain and casually tossed a coin into the pool of water surrounding it. He then stood up and glanced around him, the solid buildings, the red double-decker buses, the black taxi cabs, the crowded street, too crowded for his taste. He was used to wide open spaces and few people. He turned back to the water. ‘Well, I did it,’ he said, ‘I didn’t do what I intended to do . . . but I did something else. It seemed just as good. Just as satisfying.’

It was Wednesday, 14.07 hours.

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