

# Paradise Exhumed

By

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For information on my writing, including future projects, visit my website:

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This book is dedicated to my father,

Leonard J. Thompson.

Never forgotten, always loved.

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## Prologue

It was a slow, terrifying ebb back to consciousness.

The first thing she was aware of was that *something* had happened. She remembered that one moment, she had been talking and laughing, the next... *What?* ...Memories were obscured. A feeling of overwhelming tiredness. An unnatural loss of control of her body. And sickening fear...

The memory of fear ignited panic in a mind that was devoid of sensory information. She was dangling between deep unconsciousness and waking. *What had happened? A heart attack? An embolism?* Neither of these seemed to fit. Then something worse occurred to her. *Could she now be dead..?*

The gradual return of her senses rebuked this dreaded thought.

She could smell burning.

She could hear pacing. *A doctor?*

And there was strange discomfort. She was face down, her head hanging in open space, her body on a hard surface. Her limbs were securely tied.

Whatever was happening, it was more awful than her limited imagination had been able to conjure up.

A voice reached her hearing. She recognised the speaker, but not the hideous malice that twisted every word...

## 1: A Favour

I had been back at my apartment for an hour when the doorbell rang. In the slim sixty minutes of peace, I had showered off the smell and feel of the hospital, eaten a sandwich and drank two cups of sugary coffee. Company wasn't expected and I'll admit, that as I'm a somewhat solitary person, company wasn't really welcomed. I would rather have spent the evening forgetting the last two days by watching old sci-fi movies, than entertained a guest.

I was only half-dressed, so I put on a T-shirt and trod barefoot to the door. After flipping back the locks, I opened up.

It was my editor. Fitzgerald MacKintyre by birth, Fizz to everyone he knew. He had never visited my home before.

Fizz was in his sixties, about twice my age. Although my six foot two height towered over his five foot seven, he had a manner that made me feel it was him looking down at me – not just authority, but wisdom too. Decades behind a desk had made him overweight and the suit he wore was tatty and ink-stained. His shirt was striped and there was the ever-present black bowtie at his neck. He had a ruddy complexion, a narrow moustache and his hair was a wild, unkempt grey mass. To me, Fizz always looked like an ageing professor.

“Gonna let me in, Ray?”

I grinned and allowed him to pass. “Okay, but I’m bound to regret it.”

He stepped into the main chamber that served as my living and dining room, and surveyed his surroundings. I didn’t find it nosy. When you work in News, you instinctively take note wherever you are.

The layout was simple. Large windows in the wall opposite the door. A two-seater dining table off to Fizz’s left and the kitchen door beyond. A couch and an armchair the other way, facing a flat screen TV on the nearby wall between two of the windows. Behind the couch, a cluttered desk served as my home office. Two doors in the right-hand wall led to the bathroom and my bedroom.

Fizz approached a tall bookcase near the television. It was crammed with DVD’s and novels.

“Sci-Fi buff, eh?” he judged from the titles. “Never woulda guessed.”

I closed and locked the door.

“Grab a seat, Fizz. Want some coffee?” My curiosity was piqued. I fought the urge to ask him why he was here.

Fizz sank heavily onto the couch. “Do you have anything strong—?”

My editor let the question die. Awkwardly, he went on. “Sorry. You just sit yourself down, Ray. Tell me how things went.”

I dropped into the nearby chair. “Went is about it. I book into hospital, waiting for them to slice me open and take a look. Things get delayed. Then delayed again. And again. Finally I’m told to leave and re-book in a few months, because the staff are too busy and they need my bed.”

Fizz shook his head. “City Hospital. You’re lucky you got out alive.”

“Yeah.” I considered. He was one of the few people I could open up to, who I regarded as a true friend. “It just continues the uncertainty, you know.”

Automatically, I reached for the coffee table beside my chair. I scooped up two sugar cubes from a bowl there and tossed them into my mouth. Fizz smiled as I crunched.

“Think of what you know, Ray, not what you don’t. They’ve already run loads of tests. It isn’t diabetes related. It isn’t cancer of the pancreas – which you’d convinced yourself of for months. Those are two bad things and you’re clear for both. Plus, you can deal with the symptoms...”

“Yeah,” I cut in. “Take the meds. Check my blood sugar regularly. Keep my sugar level good. Do that and I can fake being normal... Trouble is, it’s in my nature to want to get to the bottom of it. Doc Wilson says it could be a harmless lump in the pancreas. Doc Howard’s a believer in stress being able to cause anything. But I don’t want maybes, I want something concrete, even if it’s not so good.”

“My lad, if Howard’s right and it’s stress, you aren’t helping yourself. You know that. You need to relax, look after yourself and maybe even have some fun.”

Anger flared in my mind. I wanted to tell him to mind his business. Ask him how he would feel if one day he started feeling ill – symptoms a little like flu, weary and run-down – then after an hour

he collapsed and fell into a coma for a weekend. I let the anger subside, knowing it was fuelled by fear of the intimate unknown.

"So, Fizz, why'd you come all this way?" I said instead.

He pretended to be shocked. "Can't an editor be compassionate?"

"In your case, only for a headline." I frowned. "What is it?"

He gave a crooked smile. "I have an assignment for you. An interview. You'll have a photographer going with you. They'll pick you up outside here at half past nine tomorrow morning and do all the driving. The interview's booked for eleven. It'll last an hour. You can be back after lunch and write it up. All in all, you get a late start to the day and can have half the afternoon off. Sound good?"

I was instantly suspicious. During my life, whenever someone had used one of those championed phrases – "*You'll be okay*", "*It's perfectly safe*", "*Sound good?*", "*I love you*"... – I had ended up suffering. It was like an alarm bell. Or being given a red shirt one morning on the Starship Enterprise.

Unfortunately, Fizz was shrewder than me. He knew of my distrustful nature and knew how to misdirect me.

"No, it doesn't sound good," I said. "It sounds like Ray Hammett wasn't around when a lousy job came up, so his name went on it."

Fizz sighed. "Fine. There's a catch. But I'm hoping that as a favour to me, you won't object."

"You're a good manipulator," I said and wagged a finger comically, "but maybe not good enough."

He sighed again. "Okay. The photographer is Jessica Summers..."

"Summers as in 'Owner-Of-Our-Newspaper' Summers?"

"His daughter."

"And no one else wants the job in case they upset her and she complains to daddy?"

"Pretty much."

I laughed. "Then it has to be me. I'm perfect. I'm a people person after all."

Fizz stood up. His mission was complete and it was time to go. Abruptness was as much a cornerstone of his nature as his geniality. He thanked me and headed for the door. On the way, Fizz withdrew a sealed envelope and placed it on my dining table.

"There's your details for tomorrow. Read them in the morning, you'll have plenty of time before Miss Summers arrives... Have a good trip."

Like a damn fool, I let him leave without further questioning.

## 2: Boss's Daughter

I opened Fizz's envelope at around eight the next morning, during breakfast. It didn't contain the information on my interview subject – it held a handwritten letter, revealing what Fizz hadn't wanted to explain the night before.

*Interview – Gemini Hart.*

*'Okay, Ray, reach for a sugar cube.'*

I obeyed, but crunched the cube viciously and swore.

*Ms Hart rang yesterday and asked to arrange an interview specifically with you. She wants to put past bad feelings aside and give us a nice piece for The Gazette.*

*Ms Hart is celebrating her sixth breast enhancement and wants us to get pic's of her re-amplified figure. That will be Miss Summers' job. You ask a range of questions, about the surgery, her work and her future plans. Nothing serious – it's a feel-good piece you're going to write.*

*'Smile your way through it, son. Think how many extra copies we'll sell with the first pic's of the new Gemini!'*

*Your Loving Editor – Fizz'*

My loving editor, I thought. Fizz hadn't just suckered me into interviewing the most obnoxious, self-loving woman on the planet, but also my mortal enemy. I had never met her face-to-face and had hoped never to do so. Our mutual hatred was of a very special calibre.

I abandoned breakfast and tried phoning Fizz. Of course, he had anticipated this. The Gazette switchboard told me Fizz would be out of the office all day and there was no forwarding number to reach him at. Complete lies. I tried to get him on his mobile phone and found he had switched it off.

I could have simply not gone. I could have said I was ill after my hospital visit. By nine o'clock I was resigned to going. This was an assignment and I was a reporter, it was what I did. And to not go might suggest to Hart that I was afraid. Plus, there was Jessica Summers arriving at nine-thirty. She was an innocent in this and I didn't want her caught in a row between Fizz and myself. Remembering her father, upsetting her might also be career suicide.

So I got ready, steeling myself for the worst day of my life.

And, strangely, things got better. Before they got downright macabre.

\* \* \*

My home was on the third floor of a five-storey apartment block. The front of the building let out onto a main city street, whereas the back led to the car park and was my normal way of access. I descended in the single, central lift. I was dressed in a grey suit, white shirt and a sombre tie. I liked to think that the body inside my suit was lean and that the clean-shaven face above it was ruggedly handsome; an ex-girlfriend once said I had an average build, with the face of an Irish poet and the curly hair of a black poodle. Since I've never liked briefcases, my gear – from notepads to laptop and cables – was in a large shoulder bag.

I re-checked my suit pockets as I left the lift. Medication in the top inside pocket; paper bags with sugar cubes in lower pockets; digital recorder concealed in my outer top pocket, in case I decided to record my encounter with Ms Hart for posterity.

Heading out, I met the Alfred Hitchcock clone who lived on the ground floor – who I greeted merrily. The portly gentlemen gave a "*Hmph!*" which could have been '*h?*', '*leave me alone*' or something cruder. I had him pegged as a solitary beast like me. He probably couldn't name any of his neighbours either.

Double doors led out into glorious summer sunshine and a gentle breeze scented by traffic fumes.

My ride was just a few paces away. Jessica Summers stood waiting for me.

Last night, unaware of my impending meeting with Gemini Hart, I had searched for information about Jessica on the internet. To my surprise, she was an information-void – a mere reference in records about her widower father and his rise to success. Ten years ago, Ralph Summers had been

the owner of a small, failing patch of Canadian forest, always on the brink of bankruptcy, barely able to pay his few labourers and feed himself and his teenage daughter. Then, as if by magic, he had discovered a gold vein in the side of a hill. In less than a year, Summers was a millionaire and investing his new fortune smartly. He brought prosperity to all his neighbours and funnelled most of his profits into charities. Three years ago, he left Canada to fulfil a personal dream – to buy and run a British newspaper. The National Gazette, with its head office in Prestford, was his target of choice and he moved to Prestford once his ownership was established.

Ralph Summers was private and almost elusive – but his daughter was more so. Millionaire's daughters often thrive on publicity. I hadn't found a single picture of Jessica, and that made her unusual in my somewhat cynical view of rich humanity.

The first thing that struck me about Jessica when I saw her was how normal she looked. There was no Armani, diamonds or gold. She wore unbranded jeans, a plain T-shirt and a denim jacket; on her wrist was a black plastic digital watch; her feet bore worn unbranded trainers. The second thing I noticed was her smile. Warm, radiant and infectious – it made me smile back and dissolved my lousy mood. Few people could have seen her smile and not returned it.

Jessica was pint-sized, maybe five foot four tall on tiptoes. Her build was an athletic balance of slenderness and graceful curves. Her face was strikingly attractive, slim and almost elfish with dark, caring eyes and a button nose. If she wore make-up at all, it was a hint of lipstick – she preferred to look natural and I could hardly disapprove. Long auburn hair was drawn into a ponytail and hooked over her left shoulder in a question mark. Although I knew Jessica was around twenty-six years old, her fresh-faced look suggested her to be no older than twenty.

I had wondered what kind of character she would be. The smile had welcomed and relaxed me, so I no longer felt on edge.

I offered my right hand.

"If you're not Jessica Summers," I said, "I'll be really disappointed."

She gave a lopsided grin and shook my hand. Her grip was surprisingly strong.

"Your chauffeur and bodyguard from the evil Gemini Hart," she returned; her accent held a rich, almost singsong quality. The girl gave a mock-bow. "I hope the carriage meets with your approval, sir."

I cracked up. It was the first good laugh I had had in days and it warmed my soul.

Jessica beamed. Laughter and joy were obviously things she relished.

I walked around towards the passenger seat of the Gazette pool car. "You're certainly not what I expected, Ms Summers."

We got in the car together. There was a devilish look in Jessica's eyes.

"It's Jessica... And you'll have to tell me what you expected. I'd love to hear that."

I put my bag on the back seat and fastened my seatbelt.

\* \* \*

Jessica drove with cool efficiency. Every movement was smooth and controlled. She anticipated other drivers and acted early, so reaction was hardly ever necessary. And she offered courtesy and consideration to those around her.

After a few minutes, I realized I was even more relaxed. Not a usual thing when I'm a passenger.

"You really are the best driver I've been with," I offered.

"Thank my dad," she replied, eyes still on the road. "He insisted I take road survival courses after I passed my test. And he taught me the golden rule of driving."

"Which is?"

"Assume every other driver is going to do the most stupid, dangerous thing possible."

As if to prove this, a driver in the oncoming traffic realized he had missed a turn, so shrieked to a halt and threw his vehicle into reverse. I looked away, wincing.

"So, what did you expect of me?" Jessica asked, amusement in her voice.

I replied honestly. "That you wouldn't be so normal."

"So rich people are abnormal?"

"Lots are. Especially the one we're going to visit."

"But not me?" she teased.

"I'm undecided, but you're case looks good."

"So does yours," Jessica said. "It seems you're one of those 'fourth kind' of guys working at my dad's paper."

I didn't know where this might be leading. "So?"

"Well, I've been with the paper for about two years now. My dad wanted me to get experience of how it worked. I spent six months in despatching, watching forklift trucks whiz by. Then six in the print works. Then six in advertising, which almost melted my brain. Now I'm the scourge of the News Offices, supposedly learning the ropes there."

"And?"

"And I've met four kinds of guys so far. Butt-kissers, who fear I'll go crying to daddy if I'm actually made to work. Haters, who think I'm incapable because my dad's rich, so gave me all the lousiest jobs in the hope of breaking me. Pervs, who think that because I'm female they're entitled to 'score' with me... And Type Four, the ones who treat me like another human being."

"I'd like to be thought of as a Four," I said. "Or maybe a Five."

"Oooh, I hope you are a Five" she laughed. "I love discovering new types."

"Are you thinking of going into the News business?"

She mused. "I dunno. The deal with my dad is I learn about his paper for two years, then choose a direction for myself. Any direction, with as much or little help from him as I want. Sadly, I haven't found anything at The Gazette that makes me think my future lies there. But I'm going to do something, somewhere."

"Why not start with a world tour? You know, see all the most beautiful and exciting things the world has to offer."

"I could and I'd like to, but... Well, it might sound mad, but I see that kind of thing as a reward for having done something. I learned as a kid, you should earn your rewards. I won't just be a rich brat enjoying my dad's wealth."

There was a level of personal responsibility in her that I knew was absent from so many people. Also, in the last few things she said, I glimpsed the young girl before her father's good fortune – a hard worker as a child in the forest, used to tough living. I couldn't help hoping she would find her direction and find happiness in it.

\* \* \*

After navigating a roadworks, Jessica gestured at the glove compartment.

"There's sugary snacks in there if you'd like some."

The word 'sugary' gave her away.

"So Fizz told you about my... condition?" I opened the compartment and found fifty bars of chocolate crammed inside.

"I asked around. About your work, your likes and dislikes. Someone mentioned your blood sugar problem, so I thought I'd make sure you were okay. Hope you're not offended."

"I'm grateful, thanks." I took a bar to prove so and fought the glove compartment door shut.

"There are more in the boot if you need them," Jessica added.

I grinned. "I get low blood sugar sometimes. I'm not a chocolate vampire."

I unwrapped the bar as she went on.

"No one said much about you and this Hart woman. Except you wrote a story about her and she hates you."

I took a bite of the bar before answering with a question: "What do you know about Gemini Hart?"

"I'm not into gossip. I know she's famous. Mainly I know that Fizz wanted me along in case she tried to rig an assault charge on you or something. Fizz said I'm not to leave the two of you alone."

"Again, I'm grateful. So: Gemini Hart, the condensed history. Eleven years ago, she features in one of those 'Big Brother' type shows. Over ten weeks she rose to fame and the adoration of millions of people..."

"How?"

"Trash talk, walking around naked and bedding all the other contestants. She came second, but received the greatest attention afterwards: an instant celebrity on talk shows, opening events and advertising. There have been bit-parts on TV, countless nude photoshoots for magazines and porn movies in Sweden. Plus, she makes the tabloids every week for something or other. Plastic surgery on some part of her anatomy. Staggering out of parties drunk or stoned. Throwing up at a gala evening. Or my personal favourite, passing Gonorrhoea and Chlamydia to dozens of her latest sex-partners."

Jessica giggled. "Such a model of virtue. I see why people admire her."

"That's what amazed me: why people liked her. So last year I did some research and found there were a lot more things covered up. I put together an article. How she had been a prostitute when she was chosen for the reality show. That she had access to more drugs than the NHS. Drunk-driving arrests she had weaselled out of. And some very dodgy stuff about her association with charities – namely that, on one occasion, all the money raised got 'lost', and that every charity has her blacklisted."

"Man," my companion said, "she must not have been happy to read that."

"Not happy at all. Threatened to sue The Gazette, but couldn't because I had evidence to prove everything. I even passed my information onto the police, but they took no action."

"It explains the hate."

"It gets worse," I went on. "Two weeks after the report, my car goes missing. When I get home, it's in my parking space... crushed into a cube. There was a message on the side: *'Love - GH'*. I called the police, but Hart denied any involvement. She said it must have been a loyal fan of hers who had been insulted by my story."

"What a witch. And now she wants to do an article with you and show off her new breasts?"

"Yeah. And Fizz agrees to sell some extra copies." I got out another chocolate bar. The first seemed to have vanished and my stomach felt sickly. "Actually, this is very low-key for Hart. After a boob-job, she usually does nude photoshoots for all the top-shelf magazines, to get maximum publicity. The National Gazette is an ordinary newspaper. A simple interview and a couple of glamorous pic's just isn't what she normally goes after."

Jessica was silent for over a minute, then she spoke with determination.

"Okay, we'll get through this together. You can rely on me completely. I'll bust her nose if she steps out of line. We go in, do the job, get out and have a good lunch to celebrate."

"Thanks." Her reply made me feel better than the chocolate did.

"There's just one thing," Jessica added uneasily.

"Yes?"

"I can't take a photograph to save my life. I'm utterly hopeless."

### 3: Good Samaritans

Prestford is home for over a million people. It is sliced in half north-east to south-west by the River Tarlop. Generally, whatever is south of the Tarlop is poorer than whatever is north. The southern industrial estates are dirty, outdated and failing; there are expanses of old tenement blocks and regions under the shadow of local gangsters. North, the ‘business parks’ are modern, clean and profitable; there are sports centres, parks and amenities; housing ranges from apartment complexes, like mine, to avenues of houses and the odd mansion. To reach the really rich of Prestford, you have to go beyond the city’s northern boundary – to converted farmhouses or manor houses, or to one of the satellite communities.

Our assignment drew us to the largest satellite neighbourhood, Goodman’s Haven. I recalled it was less than ten years old and set in a natural basin, nestled on three sides by higher land. A district with a village-sized population reserved for millionaires.

After twenty minutes, Jessica got us to the city outskirts. Traffic thinned as we progressed, and we finally reached open countryside. City car fumes were replaced by the stink of a farmer laying manure into his fields.

During our journey, we had chatted about articles I had written and the wintry climate where Jessica had been born. Her admission that she couldn’t use a camera had led me to concoct a plan for our arrival. She would wrap her right wrist in a bandage from the first aid kit. When the time came for the photos, I would have to take over because of her ‘injury’. Jessica was surprised that I didn’t mind.

A road sign came up – ‘Goodman’s Haven 12 Miles’

“Not far now,” my new friend said. “Soon be over.”

“What will they have you doing tomorrow?” I asked.

“Depends who gets the short straw. I’ve mostly been twiddling my thumbs down in Research. It was Fizz who promoted me temporarily to photographer.”

“I’ll speak to him, suggest you work in the our office. You’d still be a general assistant, but at least you’d be in the heart of things.”

“You think Fizz would go for that?” she said.

“After today, he owes me a huge favour. And it isn’t fair to just dump you out of the way.”

“Any change might relieve the boredom.”

We ascended an incline that led to a series of rolling hills, between which the road snaked gracefully. Tranquillity reigned here in the form of lush grass undulating in the breeze and occasional stands of trees reaching towards the cloudless sky. I couldn’t see any other vehicles now and there were few junctions as we drew towards our destination.

The next sign told us six miles to go.

\* \* \*

It was three more miles before we saw another car.

Jessica tensed in reaction.

“Oh God... what’s happened here?”

We drew closer and I took in the details quickly. A big black suburban car had skidded to a halt whilst coming from the opposite direction. Its front left wheel was on the grass verge and about a metre from the ditch running alongside the road. The driver was out and knelt beside another man lying on the tarmac.

I have a built-in instinct for seeking the ‘story’ of a situation. *The driver had been coming from Goodman’s Haven and struck a man crossing the road. That made the victim the world’s unluckiest pedestrian. Open road for miles and this happens...*

The driver stood at seeing the approach of our car. He was at least six foot six tall and his muscular form distorted his dark suit: this could have been the Incredible Hulk going for a job interview. His hair was bleached-white, short and gelled to stand vertical. When the giant waved for us to stop, his spread hands looked like large dinner plates.

Jessica was already slowing. She crossed the dividing line in order to park in front of the

accident.

“Stop about ten feet away and stay in the car,” I said. “Be ready to get the hell away if—”

Our car came to a halt, ten feet from the giant. Jessica unfastened her seatbelt and was out of the car before I was. So much for doing as I asked.

Glancing sideways at me, the woman explained. “I’m a First Aider. Are you?”

I shook my head and we paced towards the suburban.

From a closer distance, the details were more worrying than before.

First of all, there was the driver. His face could have been made from granite – a heavy brow, a thick jutting jaw, a nose that had been broken so often it finally decided to stay flat, and dark narrow eyes. This Godzilla could not have been more obvious if he had the word THUG tattooed on his forehead.

Second, was the front of the suburban. It was as clean and polished as if it was in a show room. No indentations, no blood, no evidence at all of impact. *That meant either the ‘victim’ had been found lying on the road by Godzilla, or...*

Third, was the victim himself. A tall, skinny man in his mid-twenties, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. No coat, no rucksack. He lay on his back, face directed towards the SUV and hidden by a mop of long black hair. There was no blood on the ground and his body was not distorted from impact.

“What happened?” I asked the big man. I was pleased to see that Jessica had decided to move to my side rather than rushing to the victim. She evidently felt something was wrong too. We halted six paces from the driver.

Godzilla’s gaze locked onto me and I felt it like the hot, murderous breath of a lion. He opened his mouth, considered and evidently changed what he had been going to say.

“You were supposed to be alone, buddy.”

The victim rolled over and rose to stand beside his colleague. They made a nasty pair. Godzilla was all brutish physical threat. Skinny had the face of a young college kid – a big grin, gaunt hawkish features and some hairy fuzz on his face which might someday become a beard. However, the kid’s eyes were more threatening than his friend’s strength. The pupils were such a pale grey, you could hardly see them and the look in those eyes was that of a soulless, evil thing.

“Ya shudda stayed at home, miss,” Skinny told Jessica in a guttural drawl. He was on the verge of erupting into gibbering laughter. “Woulda been betta for ya.”

I put a hand out and touched Jessica’s arm, trying to guide her behind me. If she could get into the car and lock it, maybe...

Godzilla forced a hand into a pocket of his suit and withdrew a small device. He switched it on and placed it onto the bonnet of his car. A digital video camera.

“You’re going to kill me and then put a video of it onto the internet?” I said. Fear edged my voice and twisted my insides. I was afraid for myself and for Jessica, who wasn’t responding to my guiding hand.

“Just a personal memento.” Godzilla drawled. “You won’t be getting famous.”

“How about you let the girl go?”

“Witness,” Skinny replied coldly. Then he giggled.

They stepped forward together. And I witnessed an act of violence that left me stunned.

Jessica rushed across the open gap between killers and victims-to-be. In a blur, I saw her left hand strike out and upward into Skinny’s face – there was a fleshy snap, a crunch and a scream of agony. Before I could take a breath, she was upon Godzilla and sending her right foot deep into his crotch. The giant managed a grotesque gurgling grunt and collapsed...

“Holy—” I began.

The millionaire’s daughter returned her attention to the broken-nosed youth, who was leaning against the SUV and trying to staunch the blood pouring from his face. She grabbed his closest arm, used herself as a pivot and spun him off the side of the road onto the grass. Skinny bounced down into the ditch.

“—shit!” I finished.

When Jessica turned back to the giant, he was on the tarmac, throwing up. The woman didn’t hit him again. All she had done was eliminate the danger, not strike vindictively.

“So,” she said to me, smiling like a schoolgirl, “we ready to go?”

I cleared the dumbstruck expression from my face. “Let me guess: you’re a Canadian ninja?”

That sweet laugh resounded as she headed for the car. “Nah. It’s just PMT. I had to take it out on someone. Count yourself lucky.”

I stepped around Godzilla’s form, reached into the SUV and took the car keys. Then I took the video camera and directed it in turn at Godzilla, Skinny and the suburban’s license plate before switching it off. A moment later I was sitting down beside Jessica.

She already had her mobile phone in her hand and was dialling 999.

“Won’t be a signal,” I told her. “If you’re making a hit, you’d choose a black-spot area.”

Her frown proved I was right.

“I’ll call in a few minutes,” I said, and gestured to my confiscated items. “This should keep them in place until the cops arrive and offer some good evidence.”

Jessica didn’t say a word. She put her seatbelt on and drove us away.

#### 4: Goodman's Haven

When we had been confronted by the two killers, I had been sick with fear. Only adrenaline had kept me from panicking. Jessica's whirlwind of action had left me astonished. It took two more miles of travel before the adrenaline started to leave my system and I began to return to normal.

Something similar had happened to Jessica. We hadn't spoken since she took off in the car and she had driven slowly and extra-carefully. At a mile from Goodman's Haven, the woman pulled us to the side and stopped the car.

"You okay?" we asked each other in unison.

Stupid grins lit our faces as replies.

"Just need a breather," Jessica said. "That was a little scary."

"Yeah. I owe you my life."

Jessica drew the side-window right down to allow fresh air to draft through the car. "You're welcome. Does this happen to you often?"

"God, no. Not hit men. I've been threatened, had my apartment trashed, had my car cubed, even been put in hospital once... but this is new."

"Do you think Hart could have hired them? Would she go that far?"

I had already considered it. *Gemini Hart knew I was coming here and few others did. And the two thugs were expecting me. Coincidence?*

"We'll find out when we interview her. If she faints with amazement at seeing me alive, it's her all right."

"And if not?" Jessica had a reporter's inquisitive manner.

"I've upset a variety of people. Including murderers, gangsters and other undesirables." I shrugged. "It might be a fairly long list."

"Lucky you."

"How about that stuff you used on those guys? Your dad make you take karate lessons?"

"Karate, Jujitsu, Judo, Aikido... and my personal favourite, dirty fighting."

"That style, I recognised."

I realised I would never look at her again in the same way. She was a pint-sized weapon of mass destruction.

Withdrawing my mobile phone, I tried it. There was a low signal, but enough to use. While I made the call, Jessica reached into the glove compartment and retrieved a couple of chocolate bars from her stash. She ate her own slowly; I wolfed mine as I spoke to the police.

A thumb of the Off button prevented any calls back. I said to Jessica: "They're on their way. Hopefully you won't be charged with assault."

She smirked at that. "And we're just going on with our day?"

"The cop I called is a friend. I'm allowed a little flexibility. They'll catch up with us at Goodman's Haven for statements. In the meantime, we don't want to be late."

"I actually meant 'And we're just going on with our day?' as in 'people just tried to murder us, do we need more than a two-minute timeout before going merrily on?'"

I winced at that. My brain was reacting to the *story* of what had happened. Reporter's curiosity had jumped into gear.

"Sorry, what do you want to do?"

She considered, her tongue squirming around the inside of her lips while she did. "We should have asked those creeps—"

My eyebrows arched at the idea. "You wanna go back to them after getting us safely away..?"

Jessica shrugged. "No. Definitely not. But I want to know who sent them."

"Not as much as me. So why not go visit the prime suspect?"

"You win." She gave me a mock salute and set us off once more.

\* \* \*

After ten more minutes, we reached the majestic entrance to Goodman's Haven.

To say the Haven was fenced off didn't do the barrier justice. The steel fencing either side of the

great gateway consisted of four-metre tall shafts, all gleaming with gold enamel. This barrier looked like hundreds of perfectly-aligned golden spears and it disappeared off into the distance to the left and right.

The towering arched gateway was of white marble. Its fluted columns were inlaid with carvings of graceful angels. The words 'Goodman's Haven' were emblazoned in huge gold letters over two golden-spear gates. Even the sign 'Visitors Must Check In With Security' was in gold lettering.

"How the rich flaunt their wealth," I mumbled. Then I looked at Jessica: "Sorry."

"Don't worry. Me and my dad are nothing like these 'people'." She pointed either side of the gateway. "And look at those!"

I followed her direction. There were CCTV cameras mounted at distances of about thirty paces along the fence-tops. These too shone golden in the sunlight.

Jessica gave the horn a bleep to signal the security guards. I continued to look around.

Within ten metres of our side of the fence, all the grass had been cut low, shrubs had been removed and only stumps remained of trees. That would make it very difficult to approach the barrier unseen. I didn't doubt that the fence was alarmed too.

Beyond the fence, and parallel to it, lay another zone of short grass and then a line of dense, evergreen foliage to prevent people glimpsing any further. There was a twenty-metre gap in the greenery opposite the gateway. The road ran through this gap and expanded into a large car park. Thirty metres away, new roads led off the parking area to the left and right, both curving behind the anti-paparazzi undergrowth. The only building in sight was set between the two roads and backed by trees – a marble-formed block the size of a small bungalow. Golden lettering identified this as the 'Security Office'.

The door in the right side of the office opened. The man who strode out was around six foot four, with a gangly build and a slight swagger to his upper body. A royal blue uniform failed to hide the strength of his sinewy limbs. This was a real tough guy – I guessed at either ex-Para's or SAS. He limped on his left leg, which suggested an injury to his lower leg or even a prosthetic replacement there. A thick leather utility belt held more pouches than Batman's; I noted a heavy baton and a compartment large enough to contain a taser.

"Let's not upset this guy," I said to Jessica.

She nodded.

He took a computer handset from his belt, aimed it at the gates and signalled them to arc open towards him. Jessica drew the car up near the security office.

I saw the guard's face clearly now. Beneath the military crew-cut of his greying blonde hair, his features were gaunt and weathered. The mouth and eyebrows were like slashes of an artist's brush; the small eyes blazed scrutiny. Security Manager Tim Wagner, as his ID-badge declared, was probably in his middle fifties.

"You Hammett?" Wagner called from beyond the end of our bonnet.

I lowered my window. "Yes, we're here to see—"

"Hart," he cut in. From the edge to his voice, Wagner didn't seem to think much of her either. "You're early."

"Oh?" I checked my watch. It wasn't yet twenty past ten. "Better than being late."

"Yeah. Shouldn't be a problem."

He aimed his handset at the license plate, then at each of our faces. After a quick check to make certain his photos were satisfactory, Wagner put the device away and strode to my doorway.

"ID."

A man of few words. He took my Press Card when I offered it, glanced at it and gave it back.

From a pouch, the security manager retrieved a black box the size of a pack of cigarettes. "Place this in your windscreen and leave it there until you return here. It'll tell me where your car is inside the Haven."

I took the device and put it gently in place.

"Don't play with it or remove it," he warned briskly. "I'll know."

I smiled back. "No problem. There is something I have to tell you, though..."

Arched eyebrows bade me continue.

"We were attacked on the way in, had to fight off two men. I've phoned the police and once

they've arrested the pair, they'll come here to get statements from us. I hope we'll have done our interview before they arrive."

There was interest in his eyes, but no compassion. Still, he asked: "You both okay?"

Jessica answered for us: "Yeah. We weren't hurt."

Wagner considered again. "Okay. Cops. Great... All right, you go on in and do your interview. I'll call the Hart mansion when the cops get here." He gestured down the right-hand road. "Just follow the signs around the bend. Go there directly."

Wagner didn't need to add "*because I'll know if you don't*". There was enough warning in his eyes to dissuade us from wandering. He stepped back and waved us on.

Once she had us safely away, Jessica said simply:

"Creepy or what?"

\* \* \*

Beyond the barrier of foliage, everything was immaculate and radiated opulence. My millionaire's daughter companion was not impressed.

"This is sick," she spat. "There are people living in poverty under an hour away and here..."

I couldn't disagree. Comfort was one thing – if I became rich, I could imagine some lavish comforts I'd love to possess. The residents here would probably laugh at my minuscule imagination. They had created their own privileged paradise: an Olympus where they were the Greek Gods.

The tarmac and pavement looked brand new – untouched, untarnished, perfect. Street-lighting for night would be provided by ornately formed shafts, topped by lights that resembled metal chandeliers.

The virginal paving kissed the closest edges of mansion properties. Pristine low fencing outlined the foremost boundary of each estate. I saw automated gateways giving access onto driveways (more like runways), leading towards huge, distant homes. Smaller properties had a street access that was a simple gate, an upward-sloping path and a decorative garden in front of the house; vehicle admittance was clearly elsewhere. Every mansion was different – to an exclusive design for the owner. Some shone because of an acreage of glass; others were copied from classic historical lines (or, hell, maybe a Georgian building or two had been transferred here?), or strikingly modern (one of domes and cylindrical towers), or more functional (such as a sprawling mansion of rectangular blocks and slate roofing, with countless rooms inside).

There were no road signs in Goodman's Haven. People Signs led directly to resident's homes. Gold-enamelled, of course. We paused beside a giant board that depicted the layout of the Haven. It was a general grid-system, miles in diameter, with around thirty to forty homes. So much for my idea of a small community nestled in a valley basin. The community might be small, but the Haven itself was larger than Prestford.

Jessica found the listing we needed. Hart was located towards the back of the Haven, in one of the 'smaller' properties.

As ordered, we went to the Hart mansion directly. At the signposted maximum of twenty-five miles an hour, it took us fifteen minutes.

## 5: Hart Broken

"It looks like Barbie's house," Jessica said with disbelief.

"Well," I replied, "scientists say that Gemini Hart is 17.6% plastic now."

"Really?" she answered, her gaze still on the distant monstrosity.

"No, but it was pretty convincing, wasn't it?"

The house was a sprawling two-storey structure. Wood had been the primary material of choice, with gorgeous panelling and florally engraved beams. This could have been a beautiful sight, except for Gemini Hart's obsession with pink. The panelling was gaudy bright pink, darker pinks were seen in the beaming and windowsills; the slated roofs were of pale red. Even the guttering was a sickly shade of pink. Through arched windows, we could glimpse white net curtains and blazing-pink drapes. Oddly, the double doors that formed the front entrance were of vivid orange.

Between the building and the gateway was an open garden. Manicured lawn, a few trees and a scattering of statues. All the statues were of men, naked and highly aroused. A long driveway of pink cobbles led to a roundabout near the front doorway. At the centre of the roundabout was a great fountain, surrounded by life-sized crystal figures. This time the naked figures were both male and female, and I have to admit, this was the first pornographic fountain I had ever seen.

There were routes leading left and right from the crystalline orgy, and these turned around the sides of the building. Ample parking room lay near the entrance – presumably for visitors who would not be staying long. That definitely included us.

Open gates, the lack of a communication panel to the house and the absence of any visible staff, gave us no alternative except to enter the grounds.

Jessica eased us up the driveway and parked. We completely forgot our plan to bandage Jessica's hand. Instead, still aghast at the awful colour scheme, we got out of the car and strode for the doorway.

A few wooden steps took us to a raised level before the entrance. Four paces to the right of the orange doors lay a familiar shape... Cubic, metallic and over a metre in height; the painted message on its side – *'Love – GH'* – had faded over time.

Jessica recognised the mass from my description. "Your car?"

I nodded. I could imagine Hart patting her trophy every time she passed it.

"We should leave," my companion said. "Fizz can come interview her if he wants."

I was surprised not to be seething with anger. Instead, I felt strangely calm. "No, we'll be as nice as pie and do the job. Don't let her think we're rattled. Don't let her think she's won."

Jessica opened her mouth to disagree, then reconsidered. "Okay."

We took the last few paces to the double doors and stopped.

It wasn't the fact that the doors were ajar which surprised us, it was the doorbell pull-chain. The chain ended in a solid gold penis.

"Oh, gross," Jessica blurted.

I gestured for her to ring the bell and was rewarded with a threatening scowl.

"No way am I touching *that*."

I reached for the hanger, found myself unable to grasp it and tugged at the chain above instead. Through the ajar doorway, an elaborate chiming rang out.

We waited. I guessed it might be ten minutes before Hart had the door answered. Making us uncomfortable waiting was an obvious ploy. In the meantime, I checked my gear, from sugar cubes to pens and digital recorder; looking at Jessica – who was still scowling – I saw she had remembered the camera and had it slung over one shoulder.

"We forgot the bandage," I said softly. "Don't worry, we'll improvise."

She gave me a sly smile. "Better still, I'll take the pictures."

"But—"

"What're they gonna do, sack me?"

"You're a bad young lady."

Another minute slid by.

I sniffed. An odd odour had reached me and I sought to identify it.

Jessica eyed me curiously.

I sniffed again and recognised the smell. Something burning or burnt – quite acrid.

“Can you smell that?”

She was already trying. “It’s like when I frazzled my hair with the hair dryer.”

I placed a hand on the door.

My colleague grasped my wrist firmly. “This could be what she wants. You to be tricked into trespassing...” Jessica raised her voice and yelled: “Ms Hart? Anybody? We can smell burning – is everything okay?”

We waited, ears straining for anything.

I reached into my top pocket and thumbed on the recorder. If this was a trap, I could at least record what happened.

“Ms Hart!” I called. “We’re coming in – just to make sure you’re not hurt.”

I pushed at the door and it swung wide open.

The image of what lay beyond tore into our minds and branded itself forever on our memories. I felt myself stagger backwards, heard myself muttering something. Poor Jessica turned and vomited on the steps.

\* \* \*

The hall was five times the size of my apartment. Its walls had originally been panelled, but pink paint had obscured the rich wood. There was a wide staircase leading upwards on the right and doorways to the left, right and ahead. Covering the floor and stairs was a thick carpet in the design of leopard skin. Chandeliers twinkling high above and landscape paintings on the walls, contrasted strangely with the gaudiness of everything else. I think there was also a grandfather clock and some other wooden antiques at the edges of the vast chamber.

My attention was gripped by the heavy wooden table at the centre of the hall. It was clearly from a kitchen – solid, Victorian styled, with utensils and pans hanging underneath. Marks on the carpet showed the table had been dragged in here. A woman’s body was tied to it by the ankles and wrists, stomach-down. Her head had been severed at the neck.

A few paces in front of the hideous wound, stood a big metal bucket. Smoke still drifted up from the thing that had been burnt inside.

I backed away from the entrance, knelt, put my arms around Jessica and drew her to me.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” I whispered in her ear. “So sorry...”

Jessica looked up at me and wiped her lips with the back of one hand. There was horror in her eyes and her skin was pale. “Is it... Is it real?”

The thought that the body could be a fake, a sick joke, had never occurred to me. I did recognise the smell now: burnt hair, as Jessica had described moments ago.

My mind offered a horrible conclusion. I knew what was smouldering in the bucket.

I stroked my companion’s hair and replied: “I think so.”

She gave a sob, then stifled it by force of will and blinked hard to stop herself from crying. “I hope they catch whoever did this.”

Taking Jessica’s elbow, I walked her towards the car. My own legs were shaky, my stomach seemed to be in knots. I opened the driver’s door and got her sitting down.

“I’m okay,” she insisted, “just phone the police. Get them here.”

I left Jessica, stepped around the back of the car, got out my mobile phone and switched it on. On speed-dial, I called Detective Inspector Matt Dean for the second time. He took my news with disbelief.

“...You’re gonna need everybody you can get down here,” I said. “This killing will be a media frenzy within twenty-four hours.”

“No kidding,” came back the deep bass voice. “A celeb death brings reporters out like blood in the water brings sharks. No offence, Ray.”

“None taken. And you can count on me, as always.”

“Good. Now stay put and don’t touch anything. I’m only fifteen minutes away.”

“Do I call Goodman’s Haven Security?

He laughed acidly. “The rent-a-cops? No. I want them well away from this.”

“Sure.” I keyed the End button.

\* \* \*

When I returned to Jessica, she was shakily munching one of her chocolate bars. There was colour back in her cheeks and strength back in her eyes.

“Who would do such a thing to another person?” she asked.

“I don’t know. But I intend to find out.”

## 6: Staying Put

"Do you mind being in a lie?" I asked Jessica.

The question dumbfounded her.

"I need to look in the house. If I say I went to get you water because you felt unwell, it gives me an excuse."

"Why? For the story..?"

"Eventually yeah, but right now to try and help catch the killer. Trust me."

She nodded. "Guess I'm thirsty then."

I thanked her honestly. Jessica was a good person and I appreciated her willingness to help. I headed for the door.

"I'll beep the horn if I see the police," she told me.

She was a good conspirator too, I realised.

I returned to the hallway. My left hand moved automatically and I tasted sugar in my mouth. *Good old leftie*, I thought, *he doesn't want me to pass out in the murder scene*. I looked around, trying to be clinical in my search of information. It wasn't easy.

"Sick son of a bitch," I rasped. The sound of my voice made me realise my recorder was still on, so I reported to it. "Blood pool is large and suggests the victim was alive when beheaded. Blood is congealing, but I don't know how long ago that puts the murder at.

"No cuts or bruising on the hands. She wasn't able to put up a fight. Her rings and bracelets are still here. Must be worth thousands."

Robbery had not been an element of the killing. *Not a surprise. What kind of thief would do this?*

I peered into the bucket briefly. There was a blackened skull inside, wreathed in drifts of smoke.

Moving left of the table, I noted the form of the body. The voluptuous figure and well-endowed chest suggested Gemini Hart. She had been wearing jeans, a blouse and a jacket. One high-heeled shoe was missing.

There was nothing on the thick carpet to indicate the killer's identity. No convenient footprints, no dropped cigarette butts of a unique brand or petals from a flower found in only one garden in the country; I never did get that lucky. Those drag-marks caused by the table were the only tracks: they led through a pair of wide-open doors into a kitchen behind the hall, and I followed them. I passed two more doors on my left, the first opening into a sitting room, the second shut.

The kitchen was a garish showpiece. It could have held a half-dozen chefs. Pink floor tiles had been scarred by the passage of the table. I crossed to the sink, snatching up a nearby glass on the way. Filling the glass, I supported my alibi.

"No evidence of anything untoward in the kitchen. Everything neat and tidy... Except for a corkscrew and a wine-cork by one of the sinks."

I retreated, conscious that I had used up around half of the ten minutes I could risk being in here. I headed for the open doorway left of the table and stepped through into Hart's sitting room.

More pink. A perimeter of antique furniture and paintings along the walls. The centrepiece of the room was a C-shaped arrangement of huge luxurious sofas, which enclosed a group of glass-topped coffee-tables.

Here was some evidence.

"Sitting room. Cushions on one couch are disturbed. One of the coffee tables has been knocked over. A wine bottle lies on its side, some wine left inside. There's a single wineglass under one of the sofas. Suggests she was alone when she was attacked – not attacked by a companion. Or that they removed their own glass. The missing shoe is here too."

I was about to leave when I spotted an expensive smartphone on one of the antique tables by a window. I could imagine Gemini Hart wanting the latest, most exorbitantly-priced tech to show off to her friends.

I took a handkerchief from my pocket and used it to collect the smartphone without leaving any fingerprints. Whatever information it held, I was sure I needed it more than the police did.

The beep of a horn almost made me leap out of my skin. I pocketed my stolen property and strode back to Jessica.

She stood beside the car, her expression anxious.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Yeah.” Some of her previous humour was back. “Will I get many years for being your accomplice?”

“Just a few.”

Three cars were turning into Gemini Hart’s driveway. The lead was a black saloon; the others were police cars with their lights flashing but their sirens silent. Someone less politically savvy than Detective Inspector Matthew Dean might have gone through a millionaires’ village sirens-blasting – Matt didn’t want to create any added aggravation for himself. He had enough trouble looming ahead already.

I gave Jessica her glass of water. She sniffed at the contents.

“Is this tap water?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Does it matter?”

“Do you know how dirty this city’s water is? How many contaminates it contains?”

I couldn’t help but be flummoxed. The police were roaring our way, there was a dead body in the house and she was concerned about the water.

“Sorry. I didn’t have time to search the kitchen or go outside and find a mountain stream.”

She poured half the water away, then set the glass down next to my cubed car.

“I’ll just pretend.”

“You do that.”

\* \* \*

The routine was as expected.

I was greeted with the briefest of questions and told to wait outside. DI Dean, his sidekick Donat, and four other cops went inside to trample evidence. To be forensic experts in Prestford must be monstrously frustrating – and they, of course, wouldn’t be here for hours.

I got Jessica to sit in the car with me while we waited. We closed the windows so our voices wouldn’t carry. I got my laptop from the rear seat as I started to explain things to her.

“What do you see wrong out there?” I asked.

She glanced outside as two more police cars arrived. “Shouldn’t they be sealing the crime scene and preserving the evidence? Aren’t they supposed to wear those white plastic suits?”

“Exactly.” I had the laptop booted up. Now I connected it to the stolen smartphone with a USB cable. “Prestford police are the world’s worst, a product of years of cutbacks and reorganisations. Corruption is rife – an estimated one in eight cops are bad. Their equipment is out of date. The best cops and most of the qualified support staff have left for better pay elsewhere. It doesn’t leave much.”

Her troubled eyes regarded me. “I didn’t know it was that bad.”

“It’s probably even worse.” I accessed a program on the laptop and it started to copy the contents of the smartphone to my hard drive, bypassing encryptions and passwords. “Fortunately, certain cops like DI Dean are good men. They aren’t bright, but they are honest and want to get the job done.”

“Not bright?”

“In the old Prestford, Matt would never have been more than a street cop. He’s often out of his depth. So sometimes I offer unofficial help. In return, he feeds me an exclusive afterwards.”

I didn’t know what answer to expect. “*You’re full of crap*”. “*This is crazy, you’re no detective*”. “*You’ll do anything for a damn story*.”

Instead, Jessica said. “Okay, I’m in.” She eyed the smartphone. “Why did you lift that, though? Won’t Matt pass you information?”

I was pleasantly surprised and I answered her question. “If I’d left it behind, either (a) someone might have stolen it or (b) it would take the police lab a full day to strip the information off it. This way we can begin digging early. And I’ll drop the smartphone back in the house.”

“Sneaky devil, aren’t you?” she commented enthusiastically.

On the laptop screen, a message read: ‘Copy Completed’. I uncoupled the smartphone without creating any fingerprints, wrapped it in my handkerchief and returned it to my pocket.

"We have three gigabytes of stuff to trawl through," I said. "Most of it might be music tracks and movies. Her address book will hopefully give us names to start looking into. A diary might be a bonus."

Jessica paused before answering. "You reckon a killing this brutal could be personal. Someone she knew who hated her. Not just some random nut."

"If it's a random nut – a serial killer type she never had any connection with – then we're sunk unless he left evidence behind. And that crime scene looked clean... So, the best I can do is assume it's someone linked to her so we have somewhere to start. A third possibility is that this was a killing designed to warn others."

"And she did have drug connections."

"You're good at this, Jessica."

"Just don't try to send me back. I know Fizz will want that, but don't." I could sense her motivation wasn't thrill-seeking; she earnestly wanted to be a part of the investigation. "Let me help."

"Okay, we're a team. I'll call Fizz now before the police want me."

\* \* \*

The Gazette switchboard put me through to my editor this time – once I mentioned a 'front page story'. Fizz didn't mince words when I gave him the details.

"Holy God! Hammett, can't I send you anywhere without a corpse turning up?"

"It's not like I'm a serial killer—"

"A damned murder-magnet!" he spat. "Sending you to interview someone is like signing their death warrant."

Despite the subject, Jessica was having to cover her face in an effort not to laugh.

"That's unfair, Fizz. Right now, we have some leads to follow. We're gonna find a local hotel to keep close-by and see what we can find."

"No. You're gonna get the boss's only daughter back here pronto. She's not being drawn into one of your investigations. No way, no how."

"Ms Summers is adamant about helping." When Fizz tried to interrupt, I carried on: "C'mon, Fizz, this is a millionaires' village and she'll be able to get to speak to people I can't. Plus, this is front page, above the fold stuff. Think of those extra sales figures."

The last sentences had him. It was like bribing an alcoholic with whiskey.

"Well, I suppose you know what you're doing. Two conditions. First, I want copy by seven tonight for tomorrow's issue. Second, you report in tomorrow with findings. Not abstract ideas, concrete findings."

"Sure."

I keyed the mobile to end the call. Then I switched it off.

"You forgot to mention the hit men," my companion noted.

"I didn't want to give him ulcers."

\* \* \*

I put the laptop away and waited.

By the time I was summoned, after over two hours, eight police vehicles cluttered the driveway. There were a dozen cops in the house, more wandering in the grounds (with police dogs, for some unfathomable reason). Two officers sat on the edge of the fountain and ate sandwiches. Forensics still hadn't turned up.

Detective Sergeant Donat pounded out of the mansion towards our car. 'Doughnut', as everyone thought of him, was five foot eight and in his forties. He was overweight and markedly unfit, with a heavy paunch, oversized ass and thick limbs. I had only ever seen him in the same worn tan suit, complete with an unironed shirt and an askew tie. His dark brown hair was receding badly. Doughnut's face was a concoction of threatening eyes, drooping jowls and a ridiculous beard – a narrow moustache and a lump of fuzz on his chin. The redness of his face denoted his love of

beer and suggested that Doughnut was a coronary waiting to happen.

Not an unbiased description of a human being, but I hate the guy. Almost as much as he hates me.

A young woman PC followed at Doughnut's heels. I left the car to join them.

"Morning, sergeant!" I offered with excess enthusiasm. "Tell me, is that a new suit?"

The question stumped him. He stopped dead and the female officer almost walked into him. Doughnut glanced down at his clothing, which in my biased view seemed rat-eaten, and snarled.

"Oh, very funny, hazz."

Having paused, Doughnut took a once-white handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. He put the rag away.

"Funny man, with me," the DS barked. "Emma: you take a statement from the girl."

WPC Emma joined Jessica outside the car. I strode to walk alongside Doughnut.

"So, smartass," he said as we went up the steps, "you got any brilliant ideas about this yet?"

I looked ahead and was disgusted by what I saw – in addition to the previous horror.

"Yeah," I told him flatly. "Evidence suggests your killer wears size twelve police boots."

"Huh?"

I pointed to the blood. Some fool had walked into it and then headed off upstairs, leaving bloody tracks in his wake.

Doughnut fell silent. I told him what was worse.

"And you also want to check out what happened to the jewellery she was wearing when I found her. Rings and bracelets, lots of gold and diamonds."

He fumed with rage. Part of it was my insult to his staff. Part was that Doughnut, like Matt Dean, was an honest cop who hated corruption. That was the one quality I admired in him.

\* \* \*

Matt was in the sitting room, writing in a battered notebook.

The black DI was ten years his partner's senior, six inches taller, lean as a rake and bald. To compensate for his hairless cranium, he had a heavy beard, mottled black and grey. Thick, steel rimmed glasses added a look of shrewdness to his long face. Matt wore one of his range of hard-wearing suits, today's in a dark green, with a check shirt, string tie and a pair of cowboy boots. I have often wondered whether he considered himself to be a modern-day sheriff.

I liked him. He was trustworthy, honest and reliable. A real justice-seeker, determined to solve every case.

We had begun cooperating a few years ago. No agreement had been made, it evolved into a relationship where I did some poking around and passed the results back. Matt, in turn, gave me what information he could (including a lot he shouldn't) and exclusives. Doughnut, however, disapproved of the association. He saw me as interfering and was frustrated by my success rate. It hadn't taken us long to decide we hated each other.

I put my hands in my pockets as Matt caught sight of me. My right hand wrapped around the covered smartphone.

"This," Matt began, in his drawn and thoughtful tone, "is a nasty one."

He was standing behind the sofas. I walked up to him. On route, I slipped out the smartphone and dropped it soundlessly onto the back of the nearest seat. Matt and I might cooperate, but I couldn't hand him borrowed evidence.

"You're right, Matt." I paused. "It is just her, isn't it? No maids or anyone else killed too?"

"No one in the house but her. A small mercy." He got down to business: "Give me your day from the top. Everything."

They listened in silence while I spoke in detail. The first interruption was my own, handing Dean the hit men's car keys and video recorder, and showing him the evidence on the recording.

"I take it you found the guys on your way in?" I asked.

Dean shook his head. "Nope. They either had a spare key or hot-wired their own car. Still, we have its license number and their faces on video, so we should catch up with them quickly. Of course, the Hart case will take priority."

And it went unspoken that I wasn't going to get police protection in case the thugs tried again. Budgets and manpower were critical, after all.

I ended my report with a white lie. "A few minutes after calling you, I had to enter the house..."

Doughnut cut in: "To snoop? Take some snaps of the body?"

"To get Jessica a glass of water from the kitchen. I went in and out, disturbing nothing."

"How'd you know where the kitchen was?" he snapped.

"The woman was killed on a kitchen table, dragged in from the kitchen. I followed the drag marks, Sherlock."

"So you say."

"As for photographing the body, I'm not the kind of ghoul who takes such pictures."

Matt said, "I'll accept that. Anyone else, I'd confiscate their camera and check it. You, I won't." "Thanks."

"So what's your take on this?"

"Two possibilities," I replied. "One: that isn't Gemini Hart. Burning the severed head could be an attempt at disguising the victim's identity."

Matt made a note on his pad. "We'll have her fingerprints on record, from her...ahem... previous vocation. It'll be easy to check."

"Yeah," I said, "and since the hands weren't burned, it does make it unlikely the killer was destroying means of identification. That leaves my second possibility. A real evil hate crime. The killer could have shot her, stabbed her, strangled her, anything. Instead, they tied her to a table and decapitated her. They really wanted her to die a horrible death."

"So why burn the head?" Doughnut asked.

I shuddered in revulsion. "To make her suffer more. During the French Revolution, when they were guillotining aristocrats, there are records of... Well, basically, a severed head doesn't necessarily die straight away. Sometimes they could hold up the head and amuse the crowds for up to five minutes."

"Sick bastards," the sergeant muttered.

"So," Matt added, "the head may have been 'alive' when it was burned."

I nodded. My stomach was churning, so I tossed a few sugar cubes home. "That's either real hatred or real evil. Plus, whoever did it staged the killing in the hallway, right opposite the doors and left the doors ajar – to have the body found in the most shocking way possible."

We were silent for a while, our minds preoccupied with unsavoury imaginings.

"Well, we do have a prime suspect," Doughnut said finally.

I regarded him with surprise. "Really?"

Matt listened as the large man went on. "Someone who hated her. Who had suffered at her hands." Doughnut's gaze fixed on me: "You."

"Sergeant..." Matt began.

"I'm serious. Look at the facts. Smartass here wrote that story on Hart. She got revenge by crushing his car – hell, the cube's outside her front door. When he gets the job of interviewing her, he sneaks up here first, kills her and returns to the city. Then he's driven here with his girlie witness and discovers the stiff. He pays her to make up the hit men story as a distraction. Case solved."

Matt pursed his lips and I could sense him collating in his fuzzy little brain.

"If I might point out some things," I said hurriedly. "Goodman's Haven is like Fort Knox. You can only get in by appointment, so I couldn't just stroll in whenever I liked. And if I couldn't get in, I couldn't kill her. Plus, there's video-proof of the hit men. And, I couldn't afford to bribe the 'girlie witness' because her father's a millionaire and I'm not a billionaire."

They considered for a few seconds, while I anticipated handcuffs.

"Seems reasonable," Matt concluded. "That doesn't mean you're off the hook. We'll see where the evidence leads."

Doughnut wasn't happy, but didn't argue.

"In the meantime, Ray, keep in contact with us. If your own investigations reveal anything..."

"You'll get it first," I promised.

"And drop by my office in the next few days, so we can get all the paperwork sorted and signed."

“No problem. One last thing, though... I need to know what I can print. Whether you want any details withheld for now...”

Matt weighed the situation.

“Give me twenty-four hours before you print how she was killed,” the DI said. “We’re gonna have hundreds of cranks confessing once the news is out. If they don’t know how she died, I can get rid of them faster.”

“No problem.”

Doughnut gestured towards the exit, then grunted:

“We may want you back for further questioning.”

*End Of Sample*

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