

1

Friday 31 August

A DEAD WOMAN WAS LEANING AGAINST MY CAR. Somehow managing to stand upright, arms outstretched, fingers grasping the rim of the passenger door, a dead woman was spewing blood over the car's paintwork, each spatter overlaying the last as the pattern began to resemble a spider's web.

A second later she turned and her eyes met mine. Dead eyes. A savage wound across her throat gaped open; her abdomen was a mass of scarlet. She reached out; I couldn't move. She was clutching me, strong for a dead woman.

I know, I know, she was on her feet, still moving, but it was impossible to look into those eyes and think of her as anything other than dead. Technically, the body might be clinging on, the weakening heart still beating, she had a little control over her muscles. Technicalities, all of them. Those eyes knew the game was up.

Suddenly I was hot. Before the sun went down, it had been a warm evening, the sort when London's buildings and pavements cling to the heat of the day, hitting you with a wave of hot air when you venture outside. This

was something new, though, this pumping, sticky warmth. This heat had nothing to do with the weather.

I hadn't seen the knife. But I could feel the handle of it now, pressing against me. She was holding me so tightly, was pushing the blade further into her own body.

No, don't do that.

I tried to hold her away, just enough to take the pressure off the knife. She coughed, except the cough came from the wound on her throat, not her mouth. Something splashed over my face and then the world turned around us.

We'd fallen. She sank to the ground and I went with her, hitting the tarmac hard and jarring my shoulder. Now she was lying flat on the pavement, staring up at the sky, and I was kneeling over her. Her chest was still moving – just.

There's still time, I told myself, knowing there wasn't. I needed help. None to be had. The small car park was deserted. Tall buildings of six- and eight-storey blocks of flats surrounded us and, for a second, I caught a movement on one of the balconies. Then nothing. The twilight was deepening by the second.

She'd been attacked moments ago. Whoever had done it would be close.

I was reaching for my radio, patting pockets, not finding it, and all the while watching the woman's eyes. My bag had fallen a few feet away. I fumbled inside and found my mobile, summoning police and ambulance to the car park outside Victoria House on the Brendon Estate in Kennington. When I ended the call, I realized she'd taken hold of my hand.

A dead woman was holding my hand, and it was almost beyond me to look into those eyes and see them

trying to focus on mine. I had to talk to her, keep her conscious. I couldn't listen to the voice in my head telling me it was over.

'It's OK,' I was saying. 'It's OK.'

The situation was clearly a very long way from OK.

'Help's coming,' I said, knowing she was beyond help. 'Everything's going to be fine.'

We lie to dying people, I realized that evening, just as the first sirens sounded in the distance.

'Can you hear them? People are coming. Just hold on.' Both her hand and mine were sticky with blood. The metal strap of her watch pressed into me. 'Come on, stay with me.' Sirens getting louder. 'Can you hear them? They're almost here.'

Footsteps running. I looked up to see flashing blue lights reflected in several windows. A patrol car had pulled up next to my Golf and a uniformed constable was jogging towards us, speaking into his radio. He reached us and crouched down.

'Hold on now,' I said. 'People are here, we'll take care of you.'

The constable had a hand on my shoulder. 'Take it easy,' he was saying, just as I'd done seconds earlier, only he was saying it to me. 'There's an ambulance on its way. Just take it easy.'

The officer was in his mid forties, heavy set, with thinning grey hair. I thought perhaps I'd seen him before.

'Can you tell me where you're hurt?' he asked.

I turned back to the dead woman. Really dead now.

'Love, can you talk to me? Can you tell me your name? Tell me where you're injured?'

No doubt about it. Pale-blue eyes fixed. Body motionless. I wondered if she'd heard anything I'd said

to her. She had the most beautiful hair, I noticed then, the palest shade of ash blonde. It spread out around her head like a fan. Her earrings were reflecting light from the streetlamps and there was something about the way they sparkled through strands of her hair that struck me as familiar. I released her hand and began pushing myself up from the pavement. Gently, someone kept me where I was.

‘I don’t think you should move, love. Wait till the ambulance gets here.’

I hadn’t the heart to argue, so I just kept staring at the dead woman. Blood had splattered across the lower part of her face. Her throat and chest were awash with it. It was pooling beneath her on the pavement, finding tiny nicks in the paving stones to travel along. In the middle of her chest, I could just make out the fabric of her shirt. Lower down her body, it was impossible. The wound on her throat wasn’t the worst of her injuries, not by any means. I remembered hearing once that the average female body contained around five litres of blood. I’d just never considered quite what it would look like when it was all spilling out.