

Chapter One

It was seven o'clock on a warm May evening, as Jean Marchant pushed open the door to the lounge bar and looked around, just three customers at tables contemplating their day. The Red Lion had been home to the Barborough Book Club for ten years, their monthly meetings a regular entry in the pub's events calendar.

Barborough, a small community of around fifteen hundred people, nestles comfortably in the Vale of York. Many of the inhabitants, mostly professionals, would commute daily into the city. The Red Lion had been the hub of the village for over two hundred years.

"Evening Jean, think you're the first." It was the welcoming voice of landlord, Peter Varnes, who greeted the book club's chair from behind the bar. "How many are you expecting tonight?"

"Well, if everyone turns up, all eight."

"I've set the room up for you; you won't be disturbed. Give us a shout if you need anything."

"Thanks, Peter, will do. Can I have a glass of red wine while I'm here?"

"Large?"

"Yeah, why not; it's been a long day."

"Sure thing. I'll bring it through."

Jean paid for the drink and walked across the lounge bar to a door leading to a short corridor, nodding to one of the three customers whom she had seen in the pub before. The greeting was acknowledged with a smile.

There was a room, just along the corridor, next to the toilets. Jean entered. It wasn't large by any means, known locally as a 'snug', but comfortable enough for the meeting. There were four tables with chairs at each; Jean moved one or two to suit her set-up.

She was carrying a large bag which she placed on one of the tables and proceeded to take out the two books she would need for tonight's meeting, then checked her makeup in a small hand mirror from her handbag.

At forty-six, she dressed fashionably, a smart, light-weight jacket over her top; a pair of dark, slim-fit slacks and casual shoes completed her outfit. The room was warm and she took off the jacket, folded it neatly, and put it on an adjoining chair.

“Hello, Jean.”

Jean turned around and greeted Brenda Powell. At fifty-six, she was the oldest member of the group and an avid reader.

“Hello, Brenda. How are you?”

“Not bad, thanks. How many have we got coming tonight?”

“A full house, should be. Terri said she might be a few minutes late, but to go ahead, and she’ll join us as soon as she can.”

“Oh, really? I wonder what her hold up is.”

“The twins have some do at school, she said.”

“Hmm.” The response was quizzical but Jean ignored it.

Brenda found herself a seat, “Have you heard about Viv’s new car?”

“No,” replied Jean. She was looking down a checklist she had compiled, and was not totally concentrating.

“A Porsche, apparently.”

Jean looked up. “Well, she should be in a good mood then. Another present from Jeffrey, no doubt.”

“I expect so. They’ve got more money than sense, those two. Mind you, I often wonder what she sees in him; he’s old enough to be her father.”

“Ha, yes, and more besides. I think Jeffrey’s youngest is older than Viv.”

“Hmm, that wouldn’t surprise me.”

“How’re things at school?” asked Brenda, as she settled in her seat. Before she could reply, the landlord brought in two drinks and handed them to the two women.

“Oh, you know, plenty of challenges. There’s an OFSTED inspection in a couple of weeks. The Head’s panicking a bit, but I think we’ll be ok.”

“How long have you been there now?”

“Three years as Deputy Head, but two years before that.”

Just then two more member entered the room.

“Hello Linda, Viv. How are you both?” enquired Jean.

Linda Drury was dressed casually, but smart, in line with the rest of the group. Viv Sellers, on the other hand, was always over-the-top. A willowy blonde, her fingers were bejewelled with enough diamonds to fund a small country, Cartier wristwatch, white trousers, and a top with a prominent designer label under a matching jacket; her hair and makeup were immaculate, as if she had just come from a beautician.

“Hi, Jean, fine thanks,” replied Linda, as she got herself comfortable.

“Hello Jean,” said Viv.

“I hear you’ve got a new car,” said Brenda, sipping at her glass of wine. She was being polite; she was not really that interested.

Viv wiped the seat down with the back of her hand before sitting.

“Yes, they delivered it this morning. I do hope it will be all right; I’ve parked it in the corner, away from the others. I don’t want to get it scratched.”

Brenda looked at Jean and smiled.

“Is Fiona coming tonight?” asked Brenda.

“Yes, I think so; she messaged me to say she was coming.”

“I wonder what’s happening there?”

“What do you mean?” replied Jean.

Brenda lowered her voice; her eyes appeared to be checking she was not being overheard. “Well, I heard all was not well. Rumour is, she’s playing away.”

“Hmm, I’m not totally surprised, mind; her husband’s always working, apparently,” she half-whispered.

“American isn’t he?” replied Brenda.

“Yes, works up at that listening place over Harrogate way, all very hush hush. Fiona never mentions him.”

“You must let me know if you get anymore gossip.”

On the other side of the room, Viv took off her jacket. Her designer tee shirt seemed several sizes too small for her; she never missed an opportunity to promote her ‘boob-job’. The rest of the group took little notice; it was old news.

She picked up her white wine. “Oh, before I forget, Jean. I won’t be able to make the next meeting; Jeffrey’s booked another cruise.”

Jean acknowledged. “Oh, thanks for letting me know.”

There was no further enquiry, but Viv continued. “Yes, the Caribbean, this time. We fly out to Miami on the third.”

“Nice,” replied Jean.

Another member arrived, Fiona Johnson, the owner of her own fitness club. Fair, shoulder-length hair, which had been tied back into a pigtail, she was wearing a black zip-up tracksuit top, jogging bottoms, and trainers, as though she had come straight from the gym. However, she had applied her makeup.

By five-to-eight, Jean looked around. All but two of the attendees had arrived and were engaged in a catch-up; the room was buzzing with conversation. Peter the landlord was back and forth supplying beverages.

“Has anyone heard anything from Carrie?” shouted Jean, to be heard over the hubbub.

“I spoke to her this afternoon. She said she was coming; she’s on days this week,” replied Lisa, a bubbly owner of a training company, dressed in jeans, tee shirt, and smart trainers, with wild, auburn hair in ringlets.

“Well, we can’t wait; we’ll get going. Terri will be along when she gets here. Has everybody got drinks?” There was no response. “Yes?” She looked around; the conversations had died down. “Ok, let’s get started. Has everyone managed to read the book?”

There was a rustle as the members extracted their copies from various bags and put them in front of them.

“Who wants to start?”

“I’ll start,” said Lisa Harris. She was no stranger to leading conversations.

She pulled out a pristine copy of the book of the month, ‘The Perfect Murder’ by G H Fordham, ‘a thrilling murder mystery’, it said on the front cover.

“I quite enjoyed it.” Her opening remarks and tone of voice indicated damning by faint praise. She continued. “It was reasonably pacy and the characters were ok, but, I don’t know, I thought the plot was a bit... Cluedo-ish, if I’m honest.”

Fiona Johnson interjected. “Yes, yes, I agree. The murder in the kitchen with a hammer was very predictable, I thought; we just needed Professor Plum.”

Lisa looked annoyed at being interrupted in full flow, but said nothing.

Just then, the door opened and Terri Duckett walked in. “Sorry I’m late; had an after-school event with the twins, then I had to sort out a babysitter; Mike decided he was going out. Have no idea why; he knew it was my meeting tonight.”

Terri’s frustration was plain to see, and appeared flustered as she took one of the vacant seats and started to unpack her bag.

“It’s ok, Terri, don’t worry; we haven’t long started. Have you got a drink?”

“Peter said he would bring it through. Actually, I could do with a large gin and tonic, but I’ve got the car.”

“Lisa was just giving us her thoughts on ‘The Perfect Murder’. Do you want to continue, Lisa?” said Jean.

She was about to start when the landlord came in with a glass of white wine - a further delay. Terri apologised once more.

“I would give it no more than three stars if I were marking it,” continued Lisa, eventually.

“Thank you, Lisa. Who would like to go next?”

The group members gave their verdicts on Mr Fordham’s work in turn, and were unanimous in their verdict; it didn’t live up to the billing.

“Actually, I don’t think there is such a thing as a perfect murder,” said Linda Drury. “It sounds like an oxymoron.”

“Well, what defines a perfect murder?” asked Jean.

“One you can get away with; it must be,” said Lisa.

“I know how I would do it,” replied Brenda.

“Please enlighten us,” said Jean.

“It would have to be a gradual process. I’d go with poison mushrooms; serve them in a casserole.”

“Well, I won’t be coming round to your place for dinner any time soon,” said Lisa to much laughter.

The group continued to debate the merits of 'The Perfect Murder' until gone nine-thirty, when Jean called time and introduced the book for the next month, 'The Wood Pyre', by Annette Filby. She produced a copy for the group to see.

"According to the description, it's a steamy romantic drama," she explained to the group.

"Should be right up your street, Fiona," said Terri.

"I couldn't possibly comment," replied Fiona and laughed.

They made notes of the title. Jean continued. "Don't forget to order your copy from Miles Brandon at the Book Shop; he's promised all members a ten percent discount."

There was a gradual exodus from the room with the usual 'goodbyes'.

"I wonder what happened to Carrie," said Brenda to Jean as she was packing away her bits and pieces.

"Yes, I was wondering that; she's not usually late," replied Jean.

"I'll text her later; make sure she's ok."

"Thanks, let me know, will you?"

"Yes, will do."

Viv walked up to Jean.

"Don't forget, I won't be here next month," said Viv.

"No, I won't," said Jean. "Enjoy your cruise."

"Oh, I will," replied Viv, as she put on her jacket and picked up her handbag.

Linda Drury seemed particularly keen to leave, and had been looking at her watch for ten minutes.

The road outside the pub was a cul-de-sac, which meant that most visitors on quiet evenings tended to park on the road rather than use the carpark.

Linda stood at the pub entrance, illuminated by the arc-light shining on the pub frontage. She saw the familiar Hyundai SUV pull out of a parking space just down the road and slow to a halt outside the front door.

Linda walked down the steps, opened the car door and got in.

“You’re late,” said the driver. “You said nine-thirty.”

“It’s only twenty-to-ten,” replied Linda, as she buckled up.

“Hmm, well, you know I’m on earlies tomorrow.”

“It’s only ten minutes; what difference is that going to make?”

“Have you been drinking?”

“Only a glass of wine.”

“It smells like a fucking brewery.”

He pressed down on the accelerator and the car sped away, causing dirt and gravel to be thrown in the air.

Several members were leaving the pub and saw the aggressive driving.

“Oh dear,” said Lisa to Brenda, the librarian, standing next to her. “I hope Linda will be ok.”

“I don’t know why she puts up with him; he’s a dreadful beast. Can’t believe he’s a police officer,” commented Brenda.

“Hmm, has she said anything to you?” asked Lisa.

“No, but I heard he hits her.”

“Really?”

“Well, according to David, she turned up at work with a black eye. Rumour was they’d had a fight,” said Brenda.

“Of course, she works for Marshall’s; I’d forgotten.”

“Yes, she’s in procurement.”

“Hmm, office gossip. Can’t always rely on it.”

“On good authority, she confided in one of the secretaries, apparently.”

“When was this?”

“Just after the last meeting.”

“Oh, how sad. How is David, by the way? It’s his last week, I think,” said Lisa, changing the subject.

“Yes, they’re letting him go on early retirement. He’s been with Marshall’s for thirty-five years, but he wants to do something different from retail.”

“He’s finance director, isn’t he? Has he any thoughts about what he’s going to do?”

“Not at the moment. His first project’s going to be converting the spare room into an office. That’ll at least keep him from under my feet, ha! Actually, I’m changing my hours at the library. They’re cutting costs, and I’ve asked if I can reduce my hours to three days, which would actually suit me now David won’t be working.”

“Well, I’ll be interested to hear how things go. Give David my best,” said Lisa, and they said their goodbyes.

They had both parked opposite the pub.

Just then the throaty sound of a Porsche 911 could be heard exiting the carpark. The noise reverberated around the cul-de-sac as it headed out of the village to the main road.

Inside the pub, Jean was packing up the rest of her things and tidying the room. Fiona Johnson was the only member still there, checking her text messages. She’d been waiting impatiently for Terri to leave.

‘Hi, babe, parked up, usual place.’ It was timed at nine thirty-seven.

She messaged back. *'Meeting just finished will be there in ten minutes. Don't start without me, lol.'*

There was an emoji of a pair of lips returned. Fiona smiled and put her phone in her handbag.

“See you next month,” said Fiona. “Thanks for a great meeting.”

“My pleasure, Fiona, mind how you go.”

Fiona left the pub and crossed the road. The sense of excitement was heightened by the anticipation.

She walked to her VW Golf and got in, then checked her makeup and applied a layer of lip gloss.

Exiting the village, just before the main road, there was another turning which led to a farm, and about a hundred yards along, there was an open gate. Fiona turned in and pulled behind the dark Range Rover which was parked close to the hedge.

She got out of her car. The field was muddy and she tip-toed to the passenger door of the four-by-four. There was a click as the door opened and she got in.

“Everything ok?” said the driver.

“Yes, coast clear. I had to wait for Terri to leave. How long have we got?”

“I said I'd be back by ten-thirty.”

“We better not waste any time then.”

Fiona unzipped her tracksuit top, and slipped off the bottoms. She was naked. Moments later, the Range Rover was rocking to the time of urgent coitus.

“God, that was good,” said Fiona on conclusion.

“Yes, amazing,” said the driver who was extracting himself from his connection.

“Do you want some tissues?”

“Thanks.”

Fiona reached into her handbag and split open a cellophane package. She handed a couple of tissues.

“I wish we could get some quality time together,” said Fiona.

“I’ll see what I can arrange. I may have a conference at the end of the month; just waiting confirmation.”

“Oh, that would be great. Where?”

“Norwich, the company’s training centre.”

“I’ve never been; I heard it’s nice.”

“Yes, it is. I’ve only been a couple of times.”

The pair started kissing again. “How was the meeting, I forgot to ask.”

“It was ok. We had a book called ‘The Perfect Murder’.”

“Really? I’ll have to read it. There may be some tips.”

“Ha! Things still bad?”

“Yes, it’s terrible, and when I think what we’ve got, I get so frustrated.”

“Hmm, I know what you mean, but I told you I won’t leave Gene.”

“No, of course, and leaving Terri and the kids would be hard, despite everything.”

The atmosphere had started to get gloomy.

“Mike, can I ask you something?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Do you love me?”

“Very much. I can’t imagine my life without you in it.”

Fiona leaned forward and kissed Mike again.

“I better go. I told Gene I would only stay for one drink. That’s if he’s back.”

Fiona slid her tracksuit bottoms back on and zipped up the top.

“Message me when you get back, yeah?” said Mike, looking across at her in the passenger seat.

“Yes, of course. Drive safely,” Fiona kissed him. “Let me know when you have any news about the conference. I’ll need to make arrangements.”

“As soon as I know, I’ll message you.”

Fiona left the car and returned to her Golf. She checked herself in the mirror and started the engine, then slowly reversed out of the field.

Mike started his car and put the demister on full blast to clear the condensation from the windows.

It was just a five mile journey for the new Porsche as it arrived at the ornate entrance of Viv’s, or more correctly, her husband’s, mansion. She took out the fob from the glove compartment and aimed it at the ten-foot-tall iron gates. They slowly parted allowing the car to go through.

There was a large garage to the side of the house, and again, Viv used a device to raise the door. Inside was a top-of-the-range Mercedes S Class saloon. The Porsche slid gently in next to it leaving a six feet gap so no doors would be scratched.

Viv locked up and went to the front door, took out her key from her handbag, and entered the house.

There was a small entrance and a closet to the left where coats were hung and footwear deposited. Viv walked through into the large hallway. The lights were on but no-one appeared to be about, but she could hear voices coming from the lounge.

She tip-toed to the doorway and was able to listen to one side of the conversation. “Yeah, right, I’ll call Marty in the morning, see what the damage is... Yeah, I’ll sort it.”

She raised her eyebrows and turned away.

To the left was the kitchen. Viv headed in that direction and opened the large, American-style refrigerator. Several bottles of white wine were stored in a bespoke storage space. She took out the nearest and unscrewed the top.

She was about to pour some wine into a glass when a figure appeared at the kitchen door.

“Oh, fuck, Jeffery, you made me jump!” she exclaimed.

Her husband was stood in the doorway. “Yeah? I heard you come in; I’ve been on the blower.”

Viv finished pouring her drink and took a large sip. “It’s gone ten; who’ve you been calling at this hour?”

“Oh, nothing for you to worry about, just a bit of business.”

“Not another one of your deals?”

“As I said, nothing for you to worry about. How was your meeting?”

“Boring, boring, honestly.” She took another slug of wine.

“I don’t know why you bother to go; I mean, it’s not like you read the books.”

“That’s not the point; they are my friends, and I wanted to try out the Porsche.”

“Yeah? Anyhow, I’m off to bed.”

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

It was twenty-to eleven by the time Fiona Johnson returned home to their smart four-bedroom detached house on a new development on the outskirts of the city. She checked herself in the mirror before getting out of the car; her face was still flushed from her recent exertions. The house was in darkness; just the porchlight shone. She sighed, then quickly texted a message to Mike to say that she had returned home; a ‘kiss’ emoji returned.

She let herself in, dropped her kitbag in the hall, and put on the light, then walked into the lounge and drew the curtains. It was a large room with little clutter; the wall lights gave off a warm glow. Fiona went to the drinks cabinet in the corner of the room and poured out a measure of vodka and added a dash of tonic water. She took one sip then knocked back the rest in one go; she shook her head as the alcohol hit the back of her throat.

She looked at the time, nearly eleven o'clock, then left the lounge and went upstairs to the bathroom. She checked herself in the mirror over the sink, then took off her tracksuit, entered the shower, and turned on the taps. As she washed, her mind returned to her recent tryst. She was suddenly awakened from her daydream, alerted by the sound of the front door opening.

"I'm in the shower, Gene; I'll be down in minute," she called out. There was no reply that she heard.

A few minutes later, Fiona returned to the lounge wearing a dressing gown; her hair was damp, just towel-dry.

Gene Johnson was seated in an armchair drinking a large glass of whiskey. His casual jacket was discarded to the hall coatrack, and he was just relaxing in a shirt and Chinos.

He looked up as Fiona entered the room. She was carrying a towel, and continued to rub her hair. She looked at him with disapproval.

"You're late."

He took a sip from his fine cut-glass tumbler. "Yeah, it's been hectic." His accent was East Coast USA, but not distinctively New York.

Fiona stopped rubbing her hair and looked at him. "It's always hectic, Gene. I don't know why you don't move your bed to your precious job, you and your secrets."

He glowered. "I'm sorry, but what I'm involved with is important."

"Yeah, so you keep saying. You're always wrapped up in some panic or another. When was the last time we had a holiday? A proper holiday, I mean; you know, beaches, parasols, suncream."

Fiona walked over to the drinks cabinet and poured herself another vodka.

“I’ll make it up to you; just this present issue I need to deal with.”

“Oh, that’s alright then. But there will be another; there usually is.”

“It’s what I do Fi, you know that... Anyway how was the meeting?” Fiona took her drink and sat opposite her husband.

“It was ok, a bit dull.”

“Did you actually read the book? What was it called?”

“The Perfect Murder... Well, I skimmed through it.”

“I can’t see the point if you’re not going to read it. How are you going to review it?”

“But that’s not why I go. They are my friends.”

“But you don’t see any of them outside the book club.”

“At least I’ve got some friends,” reposted Fiona. She downed her vodka. “I’m going to bed.”

Earlier, around six forty-five, Carrie Shepherd was adding the final touches to her makeup. The blue uniform of a staff-nurse was lay on the end of the bed. She left the master bedroom and pushed open the door of her daughter’s room opposite.

“Have you got much more to do, Jess?” enquired Carrie.

Fourteen-year-old, Jessica was in front of a laptop. She looked up from her desk.

“Just finishing off this assignment; then I’m done. What time will you be home?”

“Not late, around ten I expect.”

“Oh, hope you have a good time. What was the book like?”

“It was ok; I’ve read better... I won’t interrupt you. Don’t work too late, goodnight.”

“No, mom.”

Carrie turned and walked downstairs into the kitchen. Husband Mark was clearing the rest of the washing up. Just a couple of years older than his wife, but was looking older than his forty-one years due to inherited premature balding.

“I’m off now.”

He put down a plate he was drying. “Hope you have a good time.” He leaned over and kissed her.

Carry picked up her handbag; the top of the novel they were reviewing was sticking out.

“I’ve got my keys, but I won’t be late.”

“Yes, earlies tomorrow.”

“Oh, don’t remind me.”

She left the kitchen and headed out of the three-bedroomed detached house. She pointed her key fob at the two-year-old Ford Fiesta on the drive. The indicators flashed as the locks disengaged.

Carrie opened the rear door and placed her handbag on the back seat, then got in and started the car. Out of habit, she took out her phone from her handbag and placed it in the cup-holder in the central consol, in case she received any emergency messages. She did get called in from time to time when the hospital was short-staffed.

It was a seven mile journey to Barborough, one that she had made many times before. The evening was bright and warm. After a particularly stressful shift, Carrie was please to get out and unwind.

She was approaching a T junction with the main York road. Suddenly a message alert pinged on her phone. Instinctively, she looked down to try to read the message.

Momentarily distracted, she missed the junction, and before she could react, found herself spinning. The Fiesta had been hit broadside by a white van. There was a loud bang as the airbag inflated, wrapping

itself around Carrie's head. The Fiesta was being carried by its own momentum. The approaching tree would ensure its progress was halted.

Bang.

The car was embedded in the trunk by the force of the collision.

The road from Barborough to York was not a particularly busy road, especially after seven o'clock when most of the commuters were safely back from their labours. It was several minutes, therefore, until a 4 x 4 came around the bend in the road and spotted the road was strewn with debris. The driver saw the debris and slowed, then spotted Carrie's car embedded in the tree.

The SUV stopped in the middle of the road with its hazard warning lights flashing to warn other drivers. The driver got out and immediately could see Carrie unconscious in the driver's seat. He quickly called the emergency services and managed to get the door open to check her injuries.

She made a groaning sound as the rescuer gently moved Carrie off the steering wheel and back in her seat. Blood was pouring from a cut above her eye. Just then, another car arrived. The driver got out and joined the first rescuer.

"Hello, can I do anything to help? I'm a doctor," said the new arrival.

"I don't know. I've called for an ambulance. She was unconscious when I got here. Looks like a hit and run."

The doctor peered into the car. "Hello, can you tell me your name? I'm Peter Steadman; I'm a doctor."

The medic did a quick check and turned to his co-rescuer. "There's a nasty gash on her head; she's certainly got concussion."

"Hello, what's your name?" the doctor repeated.

Carrie's eyes flickered, then opened, then closed them again. "Carrie," she managed to whisper.

"Don't worry, Carrie, the ambulance is on its way; we'll soon have you more comfortable."

A police car was first of the emergency services on the scene and set up 'road closed' signs.

"Do we know what happened?" asked the officer, dressed in full kit and hi-vis jacket, as he approached the two rescuers.

"No, I was first on the scene. Looks like a hit and run. I came around the corner and found the car just like this. It looks like it's been hit and spun round."

The officer took out a notebook. "What's your name, sir?"

"Seymour Davies... I live in Barborough."

"Thank you, Mr Davies." He walked to the medic who was continuing to assess Carrie's injuries.

"I'm a doctor, Peter Steadman, York General," said the medic before being asked by the officer.

"What have we got?"

"Name's Carrie, she has a deep gash to her forehead, and concussion. She keeps slipping in and out of consciousness. There may be internal injuries. I don't want to move her until the ambulance arrives; they'll have the right equipment."

It was another ten minutes before the ambulance approached with sirens blaring. The police officer, in the meantime, was doing an assessment of the debris on the road with the benefit of a torch. He called in back-up on his walkie-talkie; it was a potential crime scene.

Within half an hour, the ambulance had arrived, together with a small accident investigation team from police headquarters. They soon recognised there was a second vehicle involved, and officers started taking measurements and collecting fragments of debris as evidence to try to establish the make and model of the other automobile.

Chapter Two

The driver had seen the Fiesta overshoot the junction and frantically flung the steering wheel to the right in a vain attempt to avoid a collision, but it was too late. He hit the brakes and the van screeched to a halt on the quiet stretch of road a few yards from the impact. The engine had stalled and the dashboard was lit up with all kinds of warning messages. Inside the cab, the air was heavy with anxiety and unspoken panic. The driver, Phil, wiped his forehead with a shaking hand. "Damn it. I told you this was a bad idea. We should never had done this run."

The man in the passenger seat, broader and older, grimaced as he looked back at the Fiesta half-obscured by the curve in the road. Its hazard lights blinked weakly, a mournful pulse in the darkness. He massaged his neck, whiplashed in the crash.

"No one saw us, Phil. Stop worrying."

"Worrying?" Phil's voice cracked. "She might be dead! We... we should called someone or—"

"Shut it!" The other man's irritable growl cut through the small cab like a blade. "We don't have time for heroics. If she's alive, someone'll find her. If not..." He left the sentence hanging.

Phil gripped the wheel tighter, his knuckles white, his foot hovering above the accelerator.

"This ain't right, Mike. This whole thing stinks. I said we shouldn't have got involved."

Mike leaned back, his eyes narrowing as he studied Phil. "You want to stick around? Have the filth sniffing about? You think they won't figure out what's in the back of the van?"

Phil hesitated, his throat working as though he wanted to argue, but couldn't. Instead, he nodded and looked down, his face pale in the dim instrument light. "Yeah, right."

Mike gave him a sharp clap on the shoulder.

"Good. Now start fucking driving. The sooner we're clear of this mess, the better."

"I need to check the motor first," said Phil.

"Well, be quick about it, yeah?"

The van had hit the Fiesta just behind the driver's seat, more a sideways glance but enough to send the smaller car spinning. Phil got out and looked back at the stricken Fiesta seemingly embedded in a tree; its hazard lights still blinking forlornly. He stooped and examined the front of the van, then started pulling on the bodywork; it was not looking good.

He shouted up to the cab. "Mike, give us a hand, mate, The front wing's bent against the wheel. If we can free it, I reckon we could be in business..."

Mike heard the message and exited the passenger side. Between them, they pulled the wing, gradually freeing the tyre. They stood back and had another check.

"What do you reckon?" said Mike.

"Tyre looks ok, some scrape damage, but no puncture... Only one way to find out; let's get out of here."

The pair climbed back into the cab. "Ok, Phil, give it a try; see if it works."

Phil started the van; the exhaust rattled. He gently pressed the accelerator and slowly the van pulled away. "The steering's not brilliant," said Phil, as he turned the wheel.

"Will it get us back?"

"We can give it a try," said Phil.

"Ok, just get us out of here."

The road was littered with debris from Carrie's car, pieces of plastic, metal, windscreen wipers. Phil took a last look at the stricken Fiesta. The van crunched as it gingerly moved away from the scene.

As it moved off, the two men were considering the implications of the collision. The van was making strange grinding sounds, coming from the left-hand front of the vehicle.

"What's that noise?" asked Mike.

"Don't know," replied Phil "Wheel bearings, probably, or could be the steering mechanism. Control's all fucked up. I reckon we need to dump the gear and get rid of the van."

“Let’s see how it goes,” said Mike. “If we can get it back to the compound, we’ll be in the clear.”

“What about the stuff?” asked Phil.

“They can get someone else to fucking dump it; I ain’t going through all this again.”

“Yeah, you’re not wrong there.”

It was around eight o’clock, still broad daylight; the weather cloudy but warm; visibility was good. They had gone about a mile; the road was still very quiet; they had only seen one car going in the opposite direction. Suddenly there was a bump as the van hit a pothole. The noise from the front of the van increased, then there was a horrible grating sound, metal on metal, and the van started drifting to the left.

“What’s happened?” asked Mike.

“The steering’s fucked,” replied Phil as he tried to negotiate the vehicle to the side of the road.

The van came to a halt.

“We better call Jeff.”

The call came through to Jeffrey Sellers just after eight-twenty. He was in the lounge of his mansion, having just concluded a deal. Viv was at her book meeting, and he had the house to himself. He settled down in front of the TV and aimed the remote control at the screen, then flicked through to the sports channel. Although living in York, his allegiance to his boyhood team, West Ham, was still strong. Tonight was a league game being shown live. The match had started, just over halfway through the first half. Seeing the one-nil scoreline in West Ham’s favour, he smiled. He could watch the replay of the goal in the break at halftime.

His concertation was disturbed by his phone’s ring tone. “Fuck!” he exclaimed and muted the TV.

He looked at the phone screen, a mobile number he didn’t recognise.

“Yeah,” he growled. “Phil...? What’re you ringing for? Thought you was on a run tonight... You what? When was this...? How bad...? Fuck! Ok, sit tight; I’ll make some calls and get back to you. Can you

dispose of the stuff? I don't know, in a field or summat...? The filth could well be having a nose round... Yeah ok. I'll call you back."

Sellers dropped the call and tapped in some numbers.

"Marty, it's Jeff, need a favour, one of the vans has had a bump and is stuck on the Barborough Road, can you go and sort 'em out? You'll need a tow truck or summat... That's great, you're a star. Send me a bill, I'll settle up."

While they waited, the pair went to the back of the van and Phil opened the door. In front of him were four oil drums, behind that three fridges and a cooker. Mike scanned the hedgerow running parallel to the road.

"There, Phil, that gate, we can dump the stuff in that field; nobody'll notice," said Mike, seeing a small gap about twenty yards away.

Phil walked over to the gate. There was no defined track leading to it from the road, although it had clearly been used at some point, evidenced by a pair of tractor tyre prints. It was a standard four bar wooden gate with a large up-and-over latch securing it. Phil lifted the latch. The gate dropped fractionally and Phil pushed it open half way.

He returned to the van, and between them they managed to negotiate the oil drums from the back of the van onto the roadside verge, then dragged them through the gate into the field, and hid them behind the hedge out of sight.

The first two fridges were fairly straightforward with the pair taking an end each. The third fridge had a padlock securing it and was particularly heavy. It dropped from the back of the van onto the muddy ground.

"Jesus, what's in this?" said Phil as they took the strain.

"Fuck knows, no wonder they want to get rid," said Mike, the strain causing his neck muscles to bulge. "Look, we ain't carrying it; we'll need to drag it."

Between them, after a great deal of effort, they managed to negotiate the fridge to the field, leaving a long trail in the soft earth. Once safely hidden, Phil bent over holding his knees getting his breath back.

With the contents suitably dumped and the gate secured, they locked the back of the van and waited for Jeff's call.

Ten minutes later, Phil's mobile rang "Phil...? It's Jeff... Marty's going to get one of his lads over to you. Have you managed to get rid of the stuff...? Good. Sit tight, you may have a bit of a wait. Let's hope the Filth don't find you, before Marty."

Jeff dropped the call and went back to his game. Manchester City had equalised; the evening wasn't going so well. He went to the drinks cabinet and poured himself a small whiskey.

Meanwhile, back in the van, Phil and Mike were peering through the windscreen, waiting for their rescue. They were parked half on the grass verge; Phil had not bothered to use the hazard warning lights. They were still adjacent to the field which now contained the contents of their van, all intended for an illegal tip about five miles away. Ironically, the items were now dumped illegally, just not in the intended destination.

It was over an hour and almost dark, before they spotted a tow truck coming around the corner towards them, its amber revolving hazard light illuminating the gloomy countryside. Phil flicked the van's headlights to alert the driver and it pulled over in front of the stricken vehicle.

Phil and Mike got out to greet their rescuer. The driver of the tow truck also exited his vehicle. He was large man, over six feet tall and sporting a beard. Illuminated by the lights of the truck as he approached, he presented an imposing figure.

"What seems to be the problem, gents?" he asked, without any formality.

"Steering's fucked," said Phil. "We had a bit of a shunt earlier."

"Ok. Marty said to take it to the compound. Jeff'll sort it out tomorrow. I'll reverse and hook up."

Ten minutes later, the stricken van was being towed to the truck compound where several wagons were parked up waiting for their next run. It was another one of Jeffrey Sellers' enterprises.

“I’ll call Jeff and let him know what’s happening,” said Phil as they headed back, and took out his mobile phone from the pocket of his jeans.

The call rang out and was answered on the third ring.

“Jeff, it’s Phil. Just been picked up by one of Marty’s guys; we’re on our way to the compound.”

“Yeah, right, I’ll call Marty in the morning, see what the damage is.”

“You may want to think about a respray; the Filth’ll be all over it.”

“Yeah, I’ll sort it.”

He had heard Viv come in and left the lounge; she was in the kitchen.

Meanwhile, back at the crash site, there was a great deal of activity. Carrie had been sedated, and was on her way to hospital. The road had been closed and a small team of forensic officers were examining the scene searching for evidence, picking up fragments from the road under the glare of searchlights. One of the regular officers in his Hi-Viz jacket took out his mobile phone and made a call.

It was gone ten-thirty, Linda Drury was in the kitchen washing up some dishes when she heard her husband’s ringtone. His phone was connected to the charger.

“Brian, your phone’s going,” she called.

Detective Sergeant Brian Drury was in the lounge catching up with the news on television. He got up from his seat, cursed under his breath, and walked to the kitchen.

He picked up the phone and accessed the call.

“Drury.”

“Sarge, it’s Tomkins, I thought you want to know, there’s been an RTA on the Barborough Road, looks like a hit and run. I’ve got forensics here.”

“Ok, what have we got?”

“Seems like a Ford Fiesta’s been hit sideways and sent into a tree.”

“Occupants?”

“A woman driver – a Carrie Shepherd, according to her driving licence. Her hand bag and phone were found at the scene.”

“Condition?”

“Not looking good, she’s on her way to York Infirmary. I’ve notified next of kin.”

“Thanks for the update. I’ll catch up in the morning.”

The DS dropped the call.

“Did I hear you say there’s been an accident involving Carrie Shepherd?”

Brian looked at her. “Yeah, do you know her?”

“Yes, she’s a member of the book group. We were wondering why she hadn’t turned up...” There was a pause as Linda digested the information. “How is she? Do we know?”

“Not at the moment; she’s been taken to the Infirmary.”

“That’s so sad. She works there; she’s a staff nurse. They’re such a lovely family. Got two kids, a teenage girl and a younger lad. I do hope she’ll be ok. I must give Jean a ring.”

“It’s a bit late.”

“She’ll still be up.”

“Well don’t be long; I’m going to bed.”

Brian left the kitchen, leaving Linda to call the Book Club chair.

The following morning, Brian was up at six o’clock; Linda was still asleep.. He showered and dressed; he would have breakfast at the police station. He was about to leave but first went back to the bedroom.

“I’m off. See you tonight. Have you got twenty I can borrow? I won’t have time to go to the cash machine before work.”

She was still dozing. “Eh... what...? In my purse, in my handbag.”

“Thanks, don’t get up.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Ok, see you tonight.” There was no response.

Brian left the bedroom without any show of affection, and headed back to the lounge. Linda’s handbag was on one of the armchairs. He opened it and found Linda’s purse. He checked the contents. Three twenty pound notes and a five pound. He took the twenty, hesitated, then took another.

He arrived at police headquarters around seven-thirty and headed for his office. It was a small department, open plan, with six desks – each with its own workstation, assorted chairs and an incident board which was blank. As senior officer, his desk was separated from the rest of his colleagues with a partition which offered a modicum of privacy.

“Morning Simon.” He greeted DC Simon Flemming, the only other member of the team in the office.

“Morning Sarge, fancy a brew? Just going to make one.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Drury took off his jacket and hung it on a peg in the corner of the room, then opened his laptop.

A few minutes later, Flemming presented him with his mug of tea. “Cheers,” he acknowledged without taking his eyes off the screen. “Anything happening?”

“Nothing new... oh, some farmer phoned to say someone’s dumped some oil drums and old fridges on one of his fields. Told him to contact the council.”

“Ok, anything from forensics on that hit and run?”

“Not yet, they’re examining some fragments of paint from the Fiesta. It may give us a lead on the other vehicle involved.”

Drury looked up from his laptop. “Great... let me know when you’ve got an update.”

“Sure,” replied Flemming, and returned to his work station.

DS Drury was back on his laptop but the page he was reading had nothing to do with any police investigation. It was the site of a local bookmaker. He would usually make bets online but having reached his limit, any further bets would have to be made in cash. He convinced himself he would soon recoup his losses. He made a note of five horses on a scrap of paper and put it in his pocket. He would pop out later and place the bets.

Fiona Johnson enjoyed her daily run; it got her blood pumping, releasing positive enzymes. It was seven-thirty, the park was only a couple of hundred yards away from her house, an ideal area to stretch her legs. It was a warm morning; she had dispensed with the usual tracksuit and was just wearing a fashionable tee-shirt and shorts above her trainers. She had her iPod clipped to the back of her shorts. Wireless EarPods supplied music to accompany her as she pounded away around the jogging track which circumvented the park for about a mile. She would do three circuits, her usual sequence.

She approached the park entrance having completed her routine. She stopped at the gate and held onto the post. She raised her left leg behind her with her hand, stretching knees and calves.

Over the road, opposite the park entrance, an innocuous looking ten-year-old BMW was stationary. It’s occupant was filming Fiona’s exploits. Occasionally he moved away from the phone’s viewfinder to take a closer look. She was the most attractive woman he had filmed in a long time. He watched as she completed her stretching routine with the other leg, then broke into a gentle trot towards her house.

The man ducked down and turned off his phone; then drove away.

Back in her kitchen, Fiona had showered following her run and was getting ready for work. She was squeezing juice into a blender when her ringtone sounded. She dropped the fruit onto the worktop and picked up her phone.

“Oh, hi Jean...”

“Oh, that’s good news; so Carrie’s out of danger. Did they say how long she’ll be in hospital? I was thinking of visiting.”

“What time...?”

“Yes, ok. I’ll drop by after work... about five-ish.”

“Ok, see you there... byee.”

Fiona went back to her juicer and finished preparing her breakfast.

She was just finishing her bowl of muesli and yoghurt when she had a message alert.

‘Can you get away tonight about 7?’

Fiona thought for a moment. Gene would be still at work.

‘Should be ok, where?’

‘Morton Grange carpark?’

‘7 – I’ll be there’

‘Great xxx’

‘xxx’

Fiona smiled; after a day’s work at the gym, an additional workout with Mike was just what the doctor ordered.

It was just turned nine o'clock when Jeffrey Sellers arrived at the hub of his enterprise, on a business park on the outskirts of York, the legitimate front of his many enterprises. It was a large tarmac area housing fifteen lorries and ten vans, The trucks were all logoed and branded with the name 'Sellers Logistics', a frequent sight on the country's motorways. The vans were plain white, mostly a mix of Ford Transits and Vauxhalls, but with two Mercedes Vitos, used for special jobs. There was a workshop and administration centre surrounding the parking bays.

Sellers walked into the office. It was a small area, decorated in fading magnolia wall covering, with room for four filing cabinets and a desk with a workstation on top. A woman in her late thirties was rattling away on a keyboard. Around the walls there were several noticeboards with planners appended, indicating schedules of the drivers. There was an adjacent office which was his domain.

"Is Marty around?" he announced to his assistant-cum-secretary as he walked in. There was no morning greeting.

Jodie Taylor a thirty-something year old, with a lip and nose stud and tattoos down both arms, had been with the organisation for ten years since leaving college, and knew the business inside out; the legitimate side that is.

She spoke without looking up from her keyboard.

"In the workshop, I think. They're working on that Transit that broke down last night."

"Cheers, Jo."

Sellers turned and walked out of the office.

There was a pull down shutter on the front of the workshop which was fully retracted. The errant Transit was on top of an inspection pit. Someone was working on it.

"Hi Marty, you there?" Marty could see a pair of legs approaching.

Sellers stooped so he could make eye contact.

"Hi Boss, yeah, just checking on the damage from last night."

“What’s the verdict?”

“Steering’s knackered; I’ll need to get some parts but it’s fixable. I’ll soon have the bodywork sorted. I’ll give it a quick respray when I’ve sorted the dents; it’ll be as good as new.

“Cheers, Marty... What’s the situation with the clients?”

“Seem happy enough; I’ve not said anything about the bump. As far as they’re concerned, it was a successful run.”

“I’m thinking of shutting down that operation. There’s not enough return and I can’t risk another situation like last night. I want to concentrate on the Dutch enterprise.”

“Yeah, makes sense.”

“Talking of which, I was on the blower last night with our Dutch friends, seems they’ve taken another delivery.”

“Yeah? What do you want to do?”

“I’ve ordered a shipment. I’ll need you and the two lads to fetch it.”

“Sure, Boss, when do you want us to go?”

“Next couple of days; I need to make arrangements.”

Later that morning another phone call arrived at the police headquarters. DC Flemming took the call. He was making notes. His expression changed.

“Right, make sure no-one touches the scene. I’ll have someone there shortly. Barborough Road, you said? Ok, we’ll find it.”

He dropped the call and immediately walked quickly to the DS’s pod.

“Sarge, just had the farmer back on the phone.” Drury was working on his laptop and didn’t make eye-contact.

“Oh.” He continued on his keyboard, still not making eye-contact. “Which farmer?”

“The one who had the illegal dumping; I told you earlier.”

“Oh, yeah... what does he want?”

“They’ve opened one of the fridges and there’s a body inside.”

Drury immediately stopped what he was doing and looked at Flemming.

“A body...! Right, have you got details?”

“Yeah. Barborough Road. I’ll get a couple of patrol cars down there to secure the site.”

“Ok, get a forensic team too, and grab a coat.”

Within an hour, there was a flurry of activity at the crime scene. The immediate area had been cordoned off with tape and the road closed, requiring a lengthy diversion for those unfortunate to be needing the route. Two patrol cars were strategically parked to avoid access.

DS Drury and DC Flemming parked on the verge, a short distance from where the van had stopped the previous evening.

“Drag marks,” said Flemming noticing where the heavy fridge had been negotiated into the field,

“Yeah, get that taped off and keep an eye for any tyre tracks.”

Whilst Flemming was attending to that, Drury was walking through the gate and joining the activity. An officer approached.

“What have we got?” asked Drury as the man approached.

“Farmer and his son were trying to move the stuff which was dumped in the field last night and noticed the weight of one of the fridges. It was locked with a padlock. They broke it open and found a body inside, Forensics are examining it.”

“Right, let’s have a look.”

A white tent had been erected over the fridge and two men and a woman were examining the contents. One of the men had a camera and was taking photographs as directed by the woman bent over examining the body. She turned her head and noticed Drury’s arrival.

She stopped what she was doing and stood upright. “Doctor Hillary Benedict, forensic scientist, and you are?” she announced authoritively. The doctor was in full forensic kit, white gown, white wellingtons, and face mask. She was also wearing surgical gloves so there was no shaking of hands.

“DS Drury, York CID. What can you tell me?”

“Female, mid-to-late thirties, partially decomposed, hands missing. Probably dead for six months to a year. There are indications of trauma to the head, but I can’t confirm cause of death until I get her back to the lab.”

“Thanks doctor. Any identification?”

“No, nothing, no clothing, a couple of tattoos.”

“Thanks Doctor.”

Drury left the tent and started looking around; he was joined by Flemming.

“What’s the news?”

“Woman, thirties, hands missing, probably dead for six to twelve months. We’ll know more after the P.M. What about the scene?”

“Well the fridge was definitely dragged from the roadside. There are some tyre tracks but not very clear, the rain’s washed most of marks away – I’ll get forensics to have a look at them.”

Drury looked at the tent and the activity. “Is it me or are the boffins getting younger? She only looks about twenty.”

“Who?” asked Flemming.

“That Doctor Benedict. Not seen her before.”

“True, but we’ve not had much call to use them for a while. This is the first murder I’ve seen in twenty years.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“What about the press?”

“I’ll speak to the Super when we get back; he’ll want to do the briefing, I’m sure. Let’s check on the tyre tracks and get a search for any other clues. Call in some more help.”