

# **A House of Lies**

**DI Tom Blake, prequel**

**by J. F. Burgess, ...**

**Published: 2022**



## **Table of Contents**

**Dedication**

**Prologue**



**Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 30**

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All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidence.



*Dedicated to the wonderful memory of my dad, Francis Burgess,  
who we miss dearly.  
A great family man who loved to read thrillers.*

## **Prologue**

### **Stoke 2008**

“Trudy, have you seen my car keys?” Tom Blake shouted down the stairs of their three-bed 1930s semi in Milton, a lovely village, three miles from Stoke city centre, that bordered the hauntingly beautiful Staffordshire Moorland Peak District.

“Shush, you’ll wake the kids. You and keys,” his wife said standing at the bottom of the stairs, shaking her head.

It was the half-term holidays and, as much as he had tried, the Chief Constable had only allowed Blake two days leave due to their DI being off with a broken leg and collarbone after a nasty motorbike crash on the dangerous A53 Leek to Buxton road: a notoriously sharp left-hand bend on one of the highest points in the Peak District. Blake had been standing in for him until the replacement DI was appointed.

Heading down the stairs, he lowered his voice, “Swore I hung ’em up in the key cabinet last night?”

“For a copper, you’re crap at finding things, Tom. Let me have a look,” she said padding down the hallway and disappearing into the kitchen.

Blake stood facing the long hallway mirror. He straightened his shirt collar and brushed down the sleeves of his navy suit jacket.

“Found them yet, hun?” he said entering the kitchen.

She came over to him and put her arms around his waist. “Where do you reckon they were?”

“God knows. Hand them over, cheeky, or I’ll be late.”

“Take a guess?”

He sighed. "I dunno. In the fruit bowl?"

"Nope, you'd chucked them on the table and one of the kids must have knocked them under it whilst doing their homework. I've just spotted Jake scratching at something in the gap under the legs," she said, fishing his car keys out of her towelling dressing gown pocket.

"Good old Jake," Blake said patting the Labrador's head as he sidled up to his leg.

"What time you in?"

"Depends what's occurring in good ole Stoke. I'll try not to be late. What's for tea, hun?"

"I'm treating the kids to homemade lasagne."

## Chapter 1

Blake arrived at the station around 8 a.m. and the duty sergeant informed him PC Haynes wanted a word about a prowler call.

"He should have called me."

"He didn't want to mither you at home."

"Where is he now?" Blake asked.

"In the CID room."

"OK, cheers." Blake headed to the key-coded door leading to the stairs.

As he entered the CID room, Haynes stood talking to DC Murphy.

Turning, Haynes said, "Just the man. I took a call from a distressed pensioner at Chapel Road Hartshill this morning. She heard glass breaking and then from her bedroom window saw a prowler enter an empty property around five this morning. I wasn't going to bother you, but after going up there and finding fresh blood on the inside of the windowsill, I thought it best you take a look."

"Any sign of the intruder?" Blake asked.

"He was gone when I got there around twenty past six. Another resident saw our man exit the property and dart across the road around quarter to six. Apparently, it's an old bowling club. Naturally, with him legging it, I didn't want to contaminate the scene."

"OK. Anything else come in, Murph?" Blake asked his DC.

"Nowt pressing: residents moaning about kids vandalising some old council garages on the Heath Hayes estate."

"Nothing new there then. We'll get a plod over there when the next shift starts." Looking back at Haynes, Blake said, "You did the right thing. Let me have the address. Murph and I will head up there now."

Apart from the broken side window where the intruder had entered, leaving footprints and blood splatter on the windowsill where he'd cut himself on shards of glass, the exterior of 28 Chapel Road, although boarded up to keep intruders out, still looked in reasonable repair. There were no large damp patches

running down the walls, no rotten woodwork or fallen roof tiles. It looked to have been maintained over the years; by whom and why was a mystery to Blake.

“Don’t you think it’s odd someone’s been maintaining an empty house?” he said to DC Murphy.

“Now you mention it, yeah. Even odder someone burgled it. I’d imagine there’s nothing worth nicking.”

“We need a sample of the perp’s blood from the windowsill. If our man’s got previous we may get a hit?”

“Could be inquisitive kids, but then again at 5 a.m. more likely a homeless druggie looking for a place to doss down.”

“Let’s get in there and have a look around,” Blake said heading down the side toward the rear of the property.

Murphy followed.

They stood staring at a padlocked wooden gate fixed between the house and a six-foot garden fence.

“That lock looks fairly new. Someone’s been here recently,” Murphy said rattling it.

Blake leaned in to look more closely at the heavy gauge brass padlock. “It’s not a cheap one either.”

“A job for Haynes and his bolt croppers?”

“That could take a while. Give me shin-up?”

“Is that wise, Tom, given how anal the brass are on protocol?”

“Just want a closer look. We don’t wanna waste police man-power unnecessarily,” Tom winked conspiratorially.

“OK. Check your shoes for dry dog shit first?” Murphy said, clasp ing his fingers into a stirrup.

Inspecting the soles of his brogues, Blake sniggered. “Classic.”

Murphy hoisted him up. Blake grabbed the top of the gate and hung like a schoolkid whose mum had forgotten to leave the bolts off. He dropped onto the ground on the other side.

“Ah, shit,” he groaned as he landed awkwardly.

“You OK?”

“Bastard rock. I’ll live. Give me a minute?” he said, now up on his feet, hobbling.

Rubbing his ankle, he moved gingerly over to the back entrance: a black wooden door which wasn’t boarded up. He tried the handle; predictably locked.

“Murph, you still carry that tool on your key fob?” he said, glancing at a huge square of overgrown grass bordered by rotten wooden edging: a long-neglected bowling green.

“The lock picks?” Murphy said through the gap between the gate and the fence.

“Yeah.”

“Good job one of us is prepared.” Murphy fished in his coat pocket, pulled out his keys, turned the lock pick around the key ring and unhooked it. “Dropping it over now.”

Blake caught the small stainless steel handle. “Top man.”

“Thought you said you were just looking?”

“Too late now,” Blake said, inserting the first of the thin-tipped rods into the lock.

“Try the long hook first. Looks like the end of one of those Arabian swords,”  
Murphy said.

“Got it.”

“Hurry up, though?”

“We’re in luck. Padlock’s not as good as the one on the gate. It’s almost open,”  
Blake said, rattling it loose.

He laid the lock on the ground and opened the weather-worn door.

“What’s happening, Tom?”

“I’m gonna take a quick look inside. Keep watch?”

“So much for Haynes contaminating the scene. Bloody hurry up before you drop  
us both in the shit.”

It was too late: Blake had already entered the property. The latest round of  
budget cuts meant it was unlikely they’d be able to get a CSI visit without  
badgering the Chief Constable.

A few minutes later, Murphy’s phone rang. He grabbed it from his pocket.  
“Anything?”

“We’d better get that CSI over here ASAP,” Blake said.

“Really?”

“There’s faint blood splatter on the skirting boards, so I lifted the hallway  
carpet. There’s a large pool of dried blood on the floorboards. Looks like it was  
there long before the intruder.”

## Chapter 2

Blake organised a few plods and did a house-to-house of Chapel Road.  
According to several of the elderly neighbours, the old bowling club hadn’t been  
occupied since the late seventies, which seemed odd. Surely, a property developer  
would have been interested in converting the large three-storey Victorian house  
into multiple occupancy apartments?

“Can you remember the last people to live there, Mrs Nilson?” Blake asked the  
occupant of number 45, a woman who he’d put in her mid-seventies.

“Now you’re asking. No one’s lived there for a long time; late sixties, early  
seventies if memory serves me well. My husband might remember better than me.  
Hang on, I’ll ask him.” She disappeared down the narrow hallway.

Seconds later, an elderly gent in a wheelchair inched down the hallway, cussing  
his wife as she tried to push him. Clearly, he wanted to appear independent.

“How can I help, officer?”

“As I said to your wife, we’re trying to establish who owns the boarded-up house  
down the road. Was it a family or...?” Blake asked.

The old man scratched his chin. “My wife’s memory’s not so good these days.”

“Sorry to hear that, Mr Nilson,” Blake said.

“We’ve been here since about 1970. Old Mrs Taylor and her husband Richard  
owned the place then; don’t know who had it before them. Last I heard, she was in  
a care home. The place fell into disrepair before being converted into a bowling  
club: one of those members’ places.”

“That’s very helpful, Mr Nilson. Can you remember what year that was?” DC Murphy prompted.

“Now you’re asking.” Pushing his glasses up on his nose, Nilson paused in thought. “Mid-seventies, I think.”

“Do you remember anyone one from this bowling club?”

“Sorry, no, it was over thirty years ago.”

## Chapter 3

CSI Jeff Foxhall arrived at 28 Chapel Road thirty minutes later. The perimeter of the house was cordoned off with crime scene tape and DC Murphy had brought along PC Haynes to man its perimeter.

Inside the house, Jeff Foxhall got on his knees to take samples of the blood on the floorboards.

“Any idea how long it’s been there?” Blake asked him.

“I can’t say until I’ve done more tests, but it’s not an exact science. See these tiny splatter marks above the skirting board?”

“Yeah, I did wonder if they were the same blood, given how faded they are.”

“Correct. Someone has tried to clean this up, but if you consider the human body carries eight or nine pints of blood, all this pointless exercise does is spread it around and, with softwood being porous, it’s stained these floorboards deeper than surface level.”

“So it’s definitely human blood then?”

“No doubt. The pink reaction stain proves it,” Foxhall said holding out the Kastle Meyer filter paper he had rubbed on the boards.

“You reckon someone could survive this much blood loss?” Blake asked.

“Depends on the wound, I can’t be sure, but looking at this I’d say it’s unlikely. Crime scene blood stains reveal a lot. Stabbing, but particularly slashing, can result in much heavier surface staining and distribution of blood, especially if our victim’s wound is arterial.”

“Arterial?”

“Main artery blood pressure is high, so any serious cuts cause the claret to spurt everywhere.”

“So this victim’s heart was still pumping when the attack occurred?” Blake asked.

“I’d say so.”

“The whole house will need processing, then?”

“Definitely.”

“OK, I’ll get suited and take a look upstairs,” Blake said.

Foxhall nodded. “It’s going to be a long day.”

“Oh, Jeff, almost forgot: have you swabbed the *fresh* blood in the windowsill around the side?”

Foxhall saluted. “Sorted that first. I’ll get back to you later on that one.”

“Cheers. Unlike the poor sod that spilled this lot, I’m hoping our burglar is still alive and kicking.”

Outside, a woman stopped and watched the cops darting in and out of 28 Chapel Road. She felt her stomach lurch as if a stone had dropped into the pit of it. A cold sensation crept over her shoulders. Mrs Cooper, who lived next door, said she'd seen an intruder in the early hours and spread the rumour the police had discovered blood in the windowsill where he'd forced entry. She turned and walked back home troubled by the thought that someone had broken into an empty property on the otherwise safe road.

Upstairs, in what looked like it had once been a bar, Blake began to scour the room for evidence in the dull light. The brown velvet curtains were still drawn and sunlight seared through a chink in the centre, casting a pool of light onto a pile of gold stackable conference chairs and round Formica-topped tables. On the rear wall, backrest panels were upholstered in studded red plastic.

Moving over to the small wooden bar, he fished into the bag attached to his pocket with a clip, withdrew a first-responder yellow evidence marker and laid it next to an old Double Diamond ashtray full of used cigarette butts encrusted in dust.

He laid a second marker behind the bar below a row of optics. The corked bottlenecks were all that remained of the smashed short bottles clinging to their chrome holders. Blake smiled with nostalgia as he read the *White Horse* nametag printed on cream plastic above the tap showing 1/6 Gill.

The decor screamed out workingmen's club from a bygone era.

## Chapter 4

"These are spot on, love. You could set up a stall," Blake smirked as he tucked into his second Staffordshire oatcake filled with cheese and bacon: Trudy had grilled them to perfection.

"One aims to please," she said turning off the grill. "Early start this morning?"

"Yeah, strange one: pool of blood, but no body. Not sure if we're looking at murder or a malicious wounding at that old bowling club I mentioned."

"How long's it been closed?"

"According to council tax records, since '78."

"Cold case, then?"

He nodded. "I've got a meeting with Jeff this morning to assess our findings."

"How is he? Not seen him or Pearl since the Christmas bash."

"You know Jeff, matter-of-fact as always; looks in fine fettle, though."

"Been meaning to give Pearl a call and ask about their new static caravan."

"Oh, he didn't mention it; a recent purchase?"

"She shared pics on Facebook the other day. Looks lovely; we could do with a break. How you fixed for heading off to Anglesey next weekend?"

"Love to. Heavy schedule at the minute, though. Upstairs are on our backs again. Shit rolls down hill and all that."

“No surprise there. Please, it’s been ages since we had a weekend away. We could take the kids crabbing and have a chippy tea,” she put her arm around his shoulder and kissed his cheek.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Brill, I’ll pull out that dress and skinny jeans you like,” Trudy said smiling.

“Can’t promise, love.”

She steepled her hands, “I’ll take some wine and we can do that thing you like when the kids are asleep.”

Blake’s eyes lit up like a kid at Christmas. “Oh, that’s naughty. Go on then, but don’t book anything until I’ve had a word with Coleman.”

“After the hours you’ve been working, he can’t refuse, surely?”

“Let’s just see, eh?” he said turning his chair and pulling her onto his knee.

“Down boy. All good things come to those who wait,” she winked.

## Chapter 5

Blake parked his ’67 Jaguar Roadster in the street outside the forensics lab, exited the vehicle and made his way into the lab with thoughts, clear in his mind, of the smashed optics and half-full ashtray sat on the bar at 28 Chapel Road.

“What have we got then?” he asked Jeff Foxhall.

“Mixed bag really. The blood is definitely human, but it’s degraded over time as the protein has aged.”

“Any DNA recovered from the spent fags in the ashtray?”

“Surprisingly, yes. Because the curtains were drawn and the house was dry, sunlight and damp haven’t totally degraded the saliva from the filters. Doubtful you’ll get any match’s though, given the timeline.”

“Pre DNA database, you mean?”

“Exactly, but because of the time elapse, results on those are going to take days to come back. Sorry.”

Blake sighed. “Don’t they always? How about the fresh blood our intruder left on the windowsill?”

“Ah, now you’re in luck there, hang on,” Foxhall said moving to a lab table on the opposite side of the room. He retrieved an A4 print-out from a folder and waved it. “Got your burglar, a scrote named Terrance Bennault. According to the database, his father Bob is a paedophile. He was sentenced to ten years in 1998.”

“Wow, that’s great work, Jeff. Bob Bennault’s name has cropped up on our latest prisoner releases list. The fact he’ll be out on licence anytime soon means we will have to pay him a visit.”

The CSI nodded. “The wonders of familial DNA matches still leave me in awe, even today.”

“Incredible. So many crims would walk without it. Son’s behaviour is strange, though.”

“Different criminality. I’ll get him up on the office PC if you like. Mainly petty theft and dodging fines.



"Thanks for the offer; I'll take a look when I get back to the station if you don't mind?"

"Not at all," Foxhall shrugged.

"Going back to the blood; would you say this was the primary crime scene?" Blake asked.

"I can't be certain, but based on the pool size and the splatter patterns that had been poorly cleaned off the hallway walls, I'm of the opinion our victim was killed on that spot. No one could have survived such a violent attack."

"A razor-sharp blade the most likely weapon?"

Foxhall nodded. "Definitely an arterial wound. You just don't get that amount of blood from an internal stab or surface wound."

"So the killer either slashed the victim's throat, neck or wrists?" Blake speculated.

"I'd have said so.

"What about gender?" Blake asked, hopeful.

"Blood's a connective tissue. Apart from a number of cells, there is no difference between the sexes. Having said that, there are differences in the circulating chemicals, such as testosterone or oestrogen. However, there is limited medical data to support a difference between male and female blood. It can be done on a living person by testing the haemoglobin carried in the red blood cells. Men's blood RBCs are higher than women's. Given this pool's a good few years old and degraded, we can't tell.

"Suppose I did ask. Any trace or prints?"

"Afraid not, our killer wore gloves. Thank god for the wonders of *Blue Star*."

Blake shot him a puzzled look.

"Luminol. We've identified them as washing-up gloves from the surface contact patterns. We found ridged finger patterns on stair bannister, bathroom door, sink and in one or two other places. Those match a popular brand of gloves that has been around for years."

"Marigolds?"

"The very ones. According to our database, they patented the grip pattern years ago: a bit like Adidas and Nike did with their trainer soles."

"Those transfer stains indicate the killer's movements after the attack. Whoever did this has made things much worse whilst desperately trying to conceal their tracks. Must have been running up and down the stairs to fetch water to scrub the walls and floor boards?" Blake theorised.

"Perp used bleach."

"Marigolds and bleach: classic DIY crime scene cover-up kit."

"Yeah, we've seen plenty over the years. Also, there was a stain-free gap in the blood, which suggests something was on the floor and it was moved, or someone left that behind after fleeing the scene."

"What sort of shape?"

"Curved like the sole of a shoe, take a look?" Foxhall said, retrieving an A4 crime scene photo from his lab table.

Blake scrutinised it. "I agree. Any discernable sole pattern?"

"No, it's not a trainer or anything with a distinctive tread. Maybe a smooth leather or plastic sole?"

“Hm, where the hell are the human remains then?”

Foxhall passed another print-out over. “See, the drag pattern’s leading through the kitchen door,” he said, pointing to Luminol-sprayed marks.

He glared at the contact and footwear marks the killer had tramped in a line across the marble tiles. “Shit, looks like someone’s disposed of the body?”

“Yes, but see here.” Foxhall pointed to the area close to the door through which Blake had entered the property.

“What am I looking at?”

“Exactly. Nothing much. I think our killer realised they couldn’t get the body out of the property unnoticed and laid something on the floor: something like a rug or curtains. My money is on carpet. The edge is too jagged to be curtains.”

“Shit, I think you’re right. The drag marks end in a line of fibres, as you say, something like carpet. So it’s possible this nutter could have wrapped up the body and disposed of it somewhere else on the property?”

Foxhall hesitated before answering. “Although we found blood in various places, we didn’t find any evidence to suggest that: the cadaver dog would have picked it up.”

“What about the overgrown bowling green?” Blake said.

“Again the dogs didn’t detect anything, but maybe it’s worth getting a ground-penetrating radar search done.”

“As in radar search for a burial site?”

“Yes. Costly though and, given this is a cold case, will your CC sanction it?”

## Chapter 6

Blake arrived back at the station ten minutes later, logged onto the database and had good look at Terry Bennault’s file. He logged off and called a briefing in the major incident room.

He addressed his CID team. “OK, we now have something to work with, but it isn’t much, I’m afraid to say. It’s likely the killer slashed the victim’s throat, neck or even wrists. Forensics has revealed our killer tried to clean up the scene with bleach whilst wearing washing-up gloves. The perpetrator wiped down all the surfaces they touched, but gave up on scrubbing the floorboards; probably realised it was making things worse.”

“Do we have any evidence pointing to where the victim’s remains might be?” DC Brogan asked.

“Now there’s a question. Sadly not, but the blood patterns show the body was dragged into the kitchen and laid onto what we think could be carpet or some other fibrous material.”

“So the killer may have removed the body from the property and buried it elsewhere?” DC Brogan asked.

“That’s the theory we’ll be working on. CSIs also retrieved DNA from the cigarette filters I found in an ashtray in an upstairs bar.”

“Have those been run through the database yet?” DC Wardle asked.

“Those will take days to come back. Besides, it’s pre-database DNA and, given this was a late seventies bowling club, its unlikely members were a bunch of thieves and toe rags, but we’ll take a punt and run those through the system to be sure.”

“Disappointing that,” Wardle said.

Blake nodded in agreement.

“John, anything back from the council on a list of owners of 28 Chapel Road?” Blake asked.

“Yeah, records date back to the old rates system which went on for donkey’s years. As those of us longer in the tooth can remember, rates were replaced by Thatcher’s Poll Tax before being replaced by Council Tax in ’91. So with number 28 being Victorian, it’s had fourteen owners since 1882. Thankfully Father Time has shortened that list considerably, leaving just three people left to look at,” DS Murphy said philosophically.

“A trip down Memory Lane: good work, John. Who owns the current deeds to the house, anyone with form?” Blake asked.

“No, Henry Nilson was spot on: ninety-year-old Edith Taylor and her husband Richard owned it between 68 and 75. As Mr Nilson said, she’s in a care home. Solicitor Albert Machin, also deceased, purchased number 28 for a group using the name North Staffs Crown Green Bowls who took it over in October ’74 and they used it until it closed down in ’78.”

“Again, superb coppersing that, fella: definitely something you pups can aspire to,” Blake said, looking at DC Brogan and DC Wardle. ‘Did you get the care home address for Edith Taylor? Long shot, but if she’s still compos mentis I’d like speak to her.’

“Still working on it, boss,” Murphy grinned.

“Any names for the Crown Green club members?”

“Just the groundsman: a Mr Nilson.

“Fuck, coincidence or just my copper’s radar twitching with Henry Nilson living in the same road?”

“Shit yeah, too much of a coincidence that,” Murphy said.

“Let’s go and have another chat with him.” Blake said.

“Boss, can’t we get the current owner from the house’s deeds?” DC Wardle asked.

“Good point. John can you try and trace those through the Land Registry?” Roger scour the database between ’68 and ’78. See if there’s anyone with a record connected to 28 Chapel Road. I’m fairly certain some of the earlier years are still paper records. Get Murph to show you where those are in the archives.”

Brogan sighed at the thought of hours of sifting through archives.

Blake continued, “DC Wardle, can you head on over to the council records and archives department? See if they have any info on this North Staffs Crown Green Bowls. Maybe they had to provide a list of members in the past; got to be worth a punt. Failing that, get over to the library; see if they can help us trace them through old *Sentinel* news on the microfilm machines in their archives department?”

“What about the break-in at the bowling club?” Wardle asked.

“I was just coming to that. We are in luck. Guess who our dimwit burglar is?”

“Haven’t a clue, boss,” Wardle said leaning forward in her chair.

“Bob Bennault’s son, Terry. Bizarre, I know. His DNA is on the database. Petty stuff mainly, no child abuse like his pop: which begs the question, why did he break into 28 Chapel Road? Something’s off about it.”

“Does seem suspicious, given who his dad is,” Wardle said.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be visiting Bennault senior in Stafford nick when we get back from speaking with Henry Nilson and his wife.”

DS Murphy eased off the gas, hit the brakes and pulled up outside the Nilsons’ house on Chapel Road.

“Let’s try and keep things low key. This pair looks pretty vulnerable,” Blake said from the passenger seat.

“Could be just a coincidence, same surname as the groundsman,” Murphy said.

“Maybe, but you should know by now I don’t hold much faith in coincidences.”

They exited the pool car and knocked on the Nilsons’ door for a second time.

Henry Nilson answered. He gave them a puzzled look. “Back again?”

“Mr Nilson, there’s been a few developments since we last spoke. To further our enquiries, we have a few more questions you may be able to help us with,” Blake said.

“OK, but my wife’s out shopping, so you’ll have to put up with me,” he said nervously backing up his wheelchair.

As they entered the doorway, Murphy’s foot clipped the doorstep. He knelt and replaced the large wooden ball with chrome ring through it back holding the door. “Sorry, didn’t see that.”

Nilson ushered them to sit on the brown velour sofa in the front room.

“How can I help?”

“Mr Nilson, when we first spoke to you and your wife, you told us about Edith Taylor selling number 28 and it being converted into a crown green bowling club,” Blake said.

“That’s right; she did as far as we know.”

“Fair enough, but Detective Constable Murphy here has been looking through the council archive records and discovered the North Staffs Crown Green Bowls club had a groundsman with your surname. This could just be a coincidence but, given you’ve lived in the street all these years, we thought you might have seen this guy coming and going to cut the grass. I believe it has to be done almost daily during the summer bowling season?”

Nilson’s face flushed and he fussed about flicking imaginary crumbs off the seat of his wheelchair. “Sorry, bloody sandwich bits. It’s no fun having your meals in this bloody thing.”

Blake sensed he was trying to deflect the question by distracting them. “Did you ever play bowls, Mr Nilson?”

His complexion reddened even further. “Not me, bloody boring old man’s game that.”

“Only I couldn’t help notice that upcycled bowling ball DC Murphy stubbed his toe on. Unusual item. Was it once part of a set?”

“Oh, that. The missus’ sister thought it would help. She bought it from an antiques market,” he said impulsively.

“Really? You sure you haven’t played bowls? A green at the end of the street would have been very handy?”

“Don’t mean to be rude, but what are you implying, Inspector?”

Blake glanced at DC Murphy.

“You were the groundsman, weren’t you, Mr Nilson. I mean look at that birthday card in the window. It’s got a silhouette figure of a bloke bowling.”

Blake stood up and moved over to the TV. He knelt and picked up a VHS video tape from the centre of a pile of three tapes stacked on top of a video player. “For someone who considers bowling a boring old man’s game you seem to have a bit of memorabilia?”

The sound of the front door opening interrupted Blake’s flow.

“That’ll be the Missus. Back in a min,’ Henry Nilson said wheeling toward the door.

“Sorry, Mr Nilson, I’d like you stay where you are, if you don’t mind,” Blake said.

Mrs Nilson walked in and placed two carrier bags of shopping onto the floor. “Hello again,” she said.

Henry Nilson looked at her mournfully. “The detectives wanted to know more about the bowling club at the end of the street, dear. They reckon the groundsman had same surname as us, isn’t that strange?” he said, leading her.

“Oh, that is a bit odd.”

“Mrs and Mrs Nilson, we don’t want to push you, but I think you know more than you’re letting on, if I’m being honest. DC Murphy and I will only have to come back if we don’t clear this up now. One of my officers is at the council archive office now, digging about. If you don’t come clean, we may have to arrest you for obstructing our enquiries, Mr Nilson,” Blake said forcing his hand.

Mary Nilson glanced at her husband nervously and then turned to Blake sternly. “Enough. This is very distressing for my husband. He’s a disabled man, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“I can assure you that’s not our intention at all,” Murphy said.

“Well, you’re doing a good job of upsetting him,” she rebuked.

Blake had had enough of their charade. “Mrs Nilson, I’m only going to ask you this once more. After that, we may have to take things further.”

“Why is this so important, Inspector?” Henry Nilson asked.

“I’m afraid at this stage in our investigation I can’t say any more, but it’s pretty serious,” Blake said, not wanting to reveal his hand.

“Damn it, Henry, just bloody tell them,” she said, shaking her head at her husband.

He held his hands up in mock surrender. “OK, I was the groundsman.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” Blake said. “During your time working there did you witness any altercations between club members?”

“Altercations? It was older blokes playing bowls and having a few pints after.”

“You didn’t see anything suspicious going on?”

“Like what?”

“After-hours parties or visits from outsiders at odd times? We’re interested in a man called Bob Bennault?”

He turned to his wife as if about to confess to something. “You mean that paedophile coach who’s in prison?”

Nilson seemed surprisingly well informed, Blake thought. "That's him. Where did you hear about that?"

"I read the Sentinel most nights; it was on the front page when he got sent down."

"You've got a good memory. That was almost ten years ago."

"Well, when you've spent years trapped in this bloody thing you read a lot of news. When you mentioned him it jogged my memory."

"And you never saw him at the club back in the day?"

"Not as far as I know. It was just local blokes playing bowls."

"We'll need some names off you?" Blake said.

"Will you tell the inspector, please, Henry?" Mary Nilson interrupted.

Disgruntled, the old man looked down at his lap.

"Henry just cut and rolled the green, took the bins out and made sure the place was locked up three days a week. He barely knew any of the members, and since his accident, despite what he says, his memory hasn't been good. It was over forty-six years ago," she said, the annoyance in her voice recognisable. "He's told you everything he knows. Now I'd like you to leave please. All this stress is not good for his health."

"Come on, Mr Nilson, you must have played bowls regularly with some of these blokes. Surely you'd know a few names?" Murphy insisted.

Seeing her husband's distress, his wife objected. "Henry's told you everything he knows. We've had enough traumas in our lives and really don't need this along with losing our Millie."

"I'm sorry to hear about your daughter, Mrs Nilson. Was it through illness or...?"

"Our daughter went missing in June 1978; broke our hearts, Inspector. Then when Henry was run over by a maniac in a hit-and-run, I just wanted to end it all. We searched for our Millie everywhere, but it was all to no avail. Even the police couldn't find her."

Judging by the look on his face, Murphy appeared as shocked as Blake was by her revelation. "I'm so sorry to hear that, Mrs Nilson. Sounds like you've suffered terribly. I hate to drag up the past, but how old was Millie?"

Clutching the arms of her chair, she became noticeably distressed.

"Take your time. The last thing I want to do is upset you," Blake said, feeling guilty.

She lifted her glasses and dabbed her tearful eyes with her cardigan sleeve. "Fourteen and a half. Since the initial investigation all those years ago, no one has contacted us with any news. Will you be able to find out what happened to our Millie?" she said, regaining a little composure.

Blake felt deeply sorry for the poor woman. He couldn't possibly imagine how painful losing a child must be. His chest tightened as an image of his own kids flashed through his mind. "Can't promise anything; I'll speak to the Chief Constable about looking into it, but unless there's new evidence it's unlikely we'll re-open the case. Sorry, Mrs Nilson. We've taken up enough of your time," he said, standing and nodding to DC Murphy.

"Thank you," Mary Nilson said steeping her hands.

“I’m sorry to say this, but given you lied to us about Henry working as the groundsman at the bowling club, we’ve reached a threshold, so I’d like you both to come to the station later this afternoon to give us DNA swabs?”

## Chapter 7

HMP Stafford had been Britain’s only prison dedicated to housing sex offenders. Like several older UK prisons, it harked back to the Regency period and had the appearance of an imposing castle from period drama. In 2014, due to increased demand for prison places, things changed and the jail was segregated to house non-sex-offenders. Famous kids’ TV artist, Rolf Harris served a five-year term in 2017 after been convicted of twelve counts of indecent assault on teenage girls.

Blake had called ahead and the governor set up a 10 a.m. interview with convicted junior netball coach, Bob Bennault, a man once described as a ‘pillar of the community.’ But the seventy-seven-year-old was in fact a predatory paedophile who preyed upon the young girls he trained.

The two detectives were led to the reception by a prison officer and dumped their mobile phones and keys into a plastic tray before passing through the metal detector into the entrance to the main prison wing.

“Prisoner Bennault is waiting in interview room four. If you’d like to follow me, I’ll take you down there?” the officer said, opening the barred gate with keys attached to a chain on his belt. “At Stafford, inmates have to come from other prisons first, mainly those with segregated populations of prisoners convicted of sexual offences,” he continued. “They don’t come straight from court.”

The two detectives nodded in agreement.

Bob Bennault looked crest-fallen when they entered the room.

“I’ll be outside if you need anything,” the prison officer said, addressing Blake.

“I think we’ll be OK, but thanks.”

“Hello Mr Bennault,” Blake said pulling up a seat next to Murphy facing the disgraced coach.

“Lovely to see you too,” Bennault said sarcastically. Murphy smiled at him, but he was having none of it. “What’s all this about? I’m missing my art class.”

“We’d better keep this brief then,” Blake said. “Your son Terry has broken into an empty property on Chapel Road, Hartshill, Stoke; a former bowling club. He kindly left us a pool of his blood so we could identify him. Seems he’s a chip off the old block, Bob, although according to his record he’s not into teenagers like his dad.”

“And you’ve come all the way here to tell me this?” He shook his head in disgust. “I don’t see how Terry’s fuck up has anything to do with me. He’s a stupid bugger.”

“Were you a member of the North Staffs Crown Green Bowls club between 1974 and 1978, Bob?” Blake asked him.

“What the hell are you on about? Never played the ruddy game in my life, it’s for old men.”

“Stating the obvious, but you are an old man.”

“I wasn’t back in the seventies.”

“You don’t say, and here we are thinking you’re immortal, Bob. Thing is, you’re the second person to say it’s a game for old men in the last twenty-four hours,” Blake said, planting the seed.

“Very droll. This is annoying. Just get to the point or sod off and leave me alone?”

“OK, we think you’re lying and when the forensics come back in from the bowling club I’m convinced we’ll get a hit for your DNA as well.”

“What DNA? I’ve never been to this bowling club in my life.”

“You seriously want us to believe your son breaking into 28 Chapel Road is a coincidence?” Murphy said.

“Whatever he’s up to, it’s got nowt to do with me. I’ve done my time and I’m out soon, so I wouldn’t jeopardise that, would I?”

“And you expect us to believe that?”

“It’s the truth.”

“Bob, 28 Chapel Road has been empty since ’78 and your son has uncovered a serious crime. Don’t worry: Terry’s arrest is imminent and we’ll find out his motive for the break-in. We’ll inform the governor to monitor your calls after this, so any attempts to warn him will push back your release date months. Do I make myself clear?”

“This is utter bollocks. You’re on a fishing trip, trying to derail my release,” Bennault groaned.

Blake ploughed on. “Do you know a man called Henry Nilson?”

“Nilson,” Bennault said, trying to recall. “Doesn’t ring any bells.”

“He was the caretaker and groundsman at the bowling club between ’75 and ’78,” Blake said.

“I don’t know this Nilson bloke, or anything about this bowling club, end of,” Bennault scoffed.

“How about a solicitor called Albert Machin and a teenage girl, Millie Nilson, who went missing in 1978?” Murphy asked him.

“Never heard of either of them,” Bennault said dispassionately.

Blake stared at him. “Given your taste for young girls like poor Millie Nilson, are you certain you didn’t know her?”

“Yes. For god’s sake, just tell me what all this is about?”

“We found a large pool of blood under the hallway carpet at the bowling club which someone had desperately tried to clean up. The CSIs are certain this is the aftermath of a fatal arterial wound. Someone’s been killed in that property, and the fact your wayward son happened to burgle the place recently seems very suspicious,” Blake said.

“This is bullshit, Inspector.”

“I repeat: the fact your name is potentially linked to the bowling club, and you’re serving time for crimes against underage girls raises serious questions,” Blake said.

“Whatever,” Bennault said, throwing his hands in the air.



“Rest assured, we’ll get to the bottom of this, and if we discover you’ve got connections to this bowling club, or Millie Nilson, we’ll be back for round two,” Murphy said.

“Next time I’ll have a solicitor present,” Bennault warned them.

Blake had managed to get Chief Constable Coleman’s approval on an expensive ground-penetrating radar scan. The Yorkshire-based company had arrived around 7.30 a.m. and had set to work scanning the bowling green behind 28 Chapel Road.

Whilst this was going on, he had arranged to visit Edith Taylor at her care home. After plenty of digging and some confusion, DC Wardle had managed to locate her through council care system records. She had reverted to her maiden name: Gerard.

Heathlands, situated on High Lane, Burslem, had been serving the community since 1980. It was one of a handful of council-run homes left in Stoke-on-Trent since the roll out of private operator licences that had made so many unscrupulous individuals rich.

Parking the pool car outside the front entrance, Blake turned to DC Wardle. “Let’s keep this very informal. Mrs Gerard is ninety and probably hasn’t spoken to anyone in authority for donkeys’ years. We don’t want her to feel intimidated.”

Wardle nodded.

The care home manager, Mrs Brierley, led them down a glossy magnolia corridor to the old lady’s room.

Brierley knocked on the door before entering. “You decent, Edith? We’ve got some visitors to see you,” she said standing in front of the old lady’s chair.

Blake stood in the doorway, Wardle behind him. The old lady sat in one of those high-backed wipeable chairs with her legs up on a stool, listening to what sounded like an audio book.

“Visitors, to see me, whoever could that be?” Edith Gerard squinted through her thick-lensed glasses at them.

“Mrs Gerard, sorry to interrupt you. I’m Inspector Blake and this is DC Wardle from Hanley CID.”

“Come closer, I can’t hear you, lovie. Ann, can you stop the CD?”

“No problem,” the owner said, leaning into the windowsill to the micro stereo system.

“We’d like to ask you a few questions about your old house on Chapel Road, if that’s OK?”

“Blimey, we sold that back in 1974, I think it was.”

“Yes, we’ve checked council records, but wanted to ask if you remember anything about the people who bought it?” Blake said.

“Er, give me minute?”

For a ninety-year-old, the woman seemed spritely.

“That’s it: two men. One was well dressed in a suit. I remember because one of them said he was a solicitor, and he offered us cash at first, but we waited and the bank advised us to do the sale properly through them in case of any come-backs,” she said, sharp as a tack.

“That’s extremely helpful, Mrs Gerard. You’ve got a great memory,” DC Wardle said.

The old lady smiled. “If only my legs worked as well as my brain, dear.”

“I know it’s such a long time ago, but I don’t suppose you remember any of their names?” Blake asked her.

She shook her head. “No, sorry.”

“We’ve only managed to trace the solicitor Albert Machin so far, but he passed away a while back. Is it possible the others may have used fake names?” Blake said.

“Blimey. The bank never mentioned anything.”

“Unfortunately, checks back in the seventies weren’t that thorough. Everything was paper-based, easier to forge,” Blake said.

She tutted. “Well I never. Seems my daughter and I were conned.”

“I suppose that depends if they paid the asking price for the house,” Blake said.

“We were surprised when they didn’t ask for a discount even though some repairs needed doing. My husband left us in debt, you see. Things were OK in the first few years of our marriage, but after his business failed he started to drink heavily and became an aggressive alcoholic. Luckily, the house was in my name because he had previous debts he hid from me. By the time I found out, we were madly in love. He agreed to work hard and clear his debts, so the mortgage was put in my name,” she said dolefully.

“Sorry to hear that. Sounds like you’ve had a troubled life. What happened to your husband?”

“One day he walked out on me and Beatrice, and never came back. He deserted us, left us with debts we couldn’t pay, forcing us to sell the house,” she said bitterly.

“Have you or your daughter heard from Richard since?”

“Beatrice died from cancer five years ago. But no, we never heard from Richard again. It was a very sad time for Beatrice and me, but we got through it and had many happy years together before she married.”

“Sorry for your loss, Mrs Gerard. Do you have any other living relatives?” Blake knew how his mother was never the same after his dad passed away. He hoped they were re-united after her years of suffering.

“No. Why, what’s happened at number 28, Inspector?”

“Unfortunately, we can’t go into details because our investigation is ongoing, but we have evidence that suggests there’s been a suspicious death at the property,” Blake said, keeping it vague.

“Oh that’s awful. You mean like a murder mystery?” Edith Gerard asked.

Blake glanced at DC Wardle then at Edith’s audio and book collection neatly stacked on a floor-standing wooden shelving unit next to her chair. “I can see you’re a fan of detective stories,” he said, his eyes skimming some authors familiar to him.

“Cataract stopped me reading, but I can’t bear to part with my books. This is how I get my fix now. Sorry, I didn’t mean any disrespect to the dead,” she said solemnly.

“Don’t worry about that. You are right: it is a mystery at present, one we are hoping to solve.”

The old lady nodded and wished them good luck.

“Just out of interest, do you keep in touch with anyone from the old days?”

“No. At my age, friends are either infirm or have passed away,” she said glumly.

“Did you ever go back to the old house after it was converted into a bowling club?”

“We were tempted but never got around to it. Richard’s drinking caused us a lot of pain. We just wanted to put everything that had happened behind us and make a new start.”

“I understand, Mrs Gerard. It was lovely to meet you, but we’ve taken up enough of your time. We’ll call Mrs Brierley if we need to speak with you again.”

As they crawled through the traffic heading back toward the station, Blake said, “What do you reckon about Richard Taylor? Surely it’s got to be worth a Misper punt?”

## Chapter 8

The next morning at 28 Chapel Road, the radar scanner team discovered several patches of ground that had been disturbed. Retrieving his phone from his pocket, the anthropologist Lewis Harvey called Blake.

“Yesterday we did our initial site investigations, focused on the suspect areas, identified the soil type and other environmental data. There are some suspicious shadows. I’ll explain in detail when you get here,” he said.

Twenty minutes later, Blake stood next to him behind his field table. Upon it lay radar scan print-outs, a laptop and a bucket with a selection of trowels and brushes.

The anthropologist pointed to the strange squiggles and zigzagging lines on the laptop screen. “These lines represent definite signs of soil disturbance; digging to be precise.”

“You think there’s something down there?”

“Proof is in the digging, Inspector. Our findings rarely turn out to be human remains. That’s rare unless, like the Saddleworth Moors murders, there is a definite burial site known beforehand. We’re about to dig that plot deeper,” he said, pointing to a large white rectangle edging a hole about two feet deep in the newly cut grass. “If you want to grab a coffee and hang about, it shouldn’t take more than forty minutes.”

“OK, my sergeant and I will take a walk and come back.”

The detectives returned to find the anthropologist and his two colleagues on their knees in the plot at the front of the bowling green. As they got closer, the anthropologist carefully continued to remove soil from around the sides of what looked like a carpet.

“I take it that carpet shouldn’t be there?” Blake said as he and Murphy looked on in anticipation.

“Ground-penetrating radar works best with bodies that have been wrapped in something. The wrapping either provides a reflective surface or a shadow. I’m not saying that’s the case here. This could be something the ground workers left down there, but... carpet?” He brushed more soil from the edges and carefully peeled back the hessian-lined floral carpet.

“Good god,” Murphy said, staring at a human skeleton partially submerged in the soil.

The detectives barely had time to process the awful sight before the anthropologist spoke. “I’m afraid your concerns were justified in this instance, Inspector. It’s an unmarked grave. We’ll know more once we’ve had a chance to process the scene properly.”

“I know it’s too early to say, but do you have any idea what sex the skeleton is?” Blake asked impatiently.

“Like I say, we’ll know a lot more once the bones are back in the lab, but bone size along with more intricate details can provide some clues to gender,” the anthropologist said, not being drawn.

“If you were to stick your neck out, unofficially, of course?”

Harvey looked at the skeleton carefully for a few seconds. “See this area in the middle here?” he said, pointing to the pelvic inlet.

Blake nodded.

“It’s larger in females in preparation for childbirth. This pelvic inlet isn’t wide enough to suggest childbirth has occurred, but I’d say this is the body of a young woman. Don’t push me for an age as I can’t tell without further tests.”

## Chapter 9

Blake stood in front of his team in the CID room. “Morning everyone, hope you all managed to get some sleep?”

“Knackered. We all stayed till about half-ten last night, boss,” DC Brogan spoke for them all.

“How did your delve into the archives go? Anything on Millie Nilson?” Blake asked him.

“I did locate the original files on Millie. Poor showing by our predecessors. DS Nailer and his boss DI Alan Crawford investigated her disappearance but they were less than thorough and when the trail, if you can call it that, went cold they shelved her like a piece of missing stock at a warehouse. Very sad.”

“Shit, I know DS Nailer passed away a while back. Not sure about Alan Crawford?”

“Brown bread, boss. Nasty DIY accident back in ’91 apparently. Fell from a ladder and smashed his head open on a wall,” Brogan said.

“Jeez, seems the old boys are dropping like flies. That’s about six since I’ve been here,” Blake said. “So there weren’t any links to Bob Bennault mentioned in the reports?”

“No. The Nilsons said Millie had been on edge for a few weeks, but put it down to teenage hormones. Naturally, her disappearance came as a huge shock to them, as it would to any parent,” Brogan said.

“Of course, it’s very tragic. Having spoken to the Nilsons, I can tell you they are still distraught. Now we have their DNA we can rule the body found on the bowling green in or out.”

“Isn’t that going to take while, boss? I mean. to extract DNA from the bones?” DC Wardle asked.

“Yes, I would assume so, but we’ll see. I’ll speak to Harvey later. Did you find anything in the council archives?”

“Yes and no. Nothing solid; more suggestive than anything. The bowling club was registered in 1975, but there were no members named. The treasurer was the deceased solicitor Albert Machin, and Henry Nilson was down as the main keyholder-cum-groundsman.”

“No mention of Bob Bennault anywhere?”

“Ah, now we might have a slight association with him.”

“In what way?” Blake asked.

“A *Sentinel* news report on microfiche Bennault attended an unofficial opening evening in April 1978. Whether he went back or joined the club after that is anyone’s guess.”

“I knew that bastard was lying. So now we need to get hold of his son Terry and find out what his motive was for breaking into 28 Chapel Road. How’s that going, DC Wardle?” Blake asked.

“Nothing yet, I’m afraid. Looks like he’s gone to ground. I’ve got a woman at the council double-checking his council tax records, but he’s done a runner from his last council flat so he could be anywhere, boss.”

Blake sighed. “Bloody typical now we have him banged to rights on the break-in. Roger, you got any updates on Richard Taylor?”

Brogan shook his head. “Nowt, boss, total dead end. His wife reported him missing but it all amounted to nothing. Again DS Nailer and Alan Crawford were on the case. Like the Millie Nilson Misper, they did the minimum legwork, according to the case files. Useless pair of tossers.”

“Sodding good job they’re both six-foot-under, else I’d be hauling their arses in the station for an explanation,” Blake said shaking his head. “OK, great work everyone. Given his record for grooming teenage girls, let us work on the theory that Bob Bennault’s connected with Millie Nilson’s disappearance. We need to pick up some speed on this though: that bastard is due to be released soon.”

“Boss, in the absence of solid forensics linking Bennault to Millie Nilson, isn’t that going to be difficult to prove conclusively?” DC Wardle said.

“I know it’s going take a while to identify, but we now have a body, so let’s keep digging in the hope something more conclusive turns up, either anecdotally or in the archives. You never know, Bennault’s DNA may turn up on the carpet the bones were wrapped in.” Blake said with optimism.

## Chapter 10

Something had been bugging Blake for a couple of days; a niggling feeling that Nilson lying about being the groundsman at the bowling club back in the seventies wasn't the only thing the couple was hiding. Whatever they were holding back, he intended to find out. According to council plans, the Chapel Road allotment covered an area the size of half a football pitch and was divided into ten equal plots owned by several residents of Chapel Road and the surrounding streets. Some were much better kept than others. Henry Nilson's fell into the neglected category. Hardly surprising given he had been in a wheelchair for the last thirty-two years and his wife was seventy-eight.

The burning question on Blake's mind was why did they continue to pay the annual fees for a plot they had no intention of gardening? It didn't make sense, even though the fees weren't excessive. Ten minutes before he was due to re-interview Henry Nilson, he shared his concerns with DC Murphy, who agreed it did seem odd.

"Mr Nilson, can you tell us why you've kept an allotment you can't manage for so long," Blake asked Henry Nilson who sat opposite him in interview room three.

"Er, we used to grow the most delicious leeks and potatoes there back in the seventies when these buggers worked," he said, bitterly tapping his thighs with his fists.

"I understand that but surely it makes sense to let it go now. I'd imagine there are dozens of green-fingered pensioners who would love to work your plot?"

"Maybe but we still go down there at weekends and several times a week in the summer to do a bit. It's a place for us to relax and chat with the other allotment owners. Some of them help us when they can."

"That's all well and good, but I'm afraid to say DC Murphy and I are struggling to believe that's the only reason you keep the allotment on. Bearing this in mind, we'll be going there after this interview. I hope that's clear enough for you?"

Henry Nilson's complexion reddened and his eyes darted around the room like a frightened rabbit's.

With the Nilsons still in custody, the two detectives took a patrol car and headed straight for their allotment.

"What do you reckon he's hiding, Tom?" DC Murphy said as he drove through the lights on Hartshill Road on the approach to the site.

"Not sure, but clearly something's not right. I mean the Nilsons have had more than their fair share of bad luck over the years."

Murphy nodded. "You're not kidding. Their daughter's disappearance and the husband's accident would have destroyed most people long ago."

"Can't even imagine how painful that must be, but the pair are hiding something from us and it could be linked to the bowling club."

"Definitely. You saw his face: he's shitting it about something."

Murphy killed the engine as he drew level with the kerb. "Let's go and see if we can find out what's making him so nervous."

They exited the car and made their way through an old wooden front door fixed to fence posts by strap hinges in the middle of a neatly trimmed privet hedge edging the urban allotment.

“Which plot is the Nilsons’?” DS Murphy asked a pensioner who was neatening the edge of a square of freshly laid turf with a rounded turf-cutter.

Startled to see two official-looking blokes in suits, the pensioner asked, “You from the council?”

“Police,” Blake said.

“Oh, has there been another break-in?”

“Break-in?” Blake said puzzled.

“Sorry, yeah, we reckon kids have been getting into the sheds.”

“Have you reported this to us?”

“Nothing worth reporting. They just messed up a few of the sheds. Nowt worth nicking.”

“Only vandalism then?” Murphy asked.

The pensioner nodded.

“Thanks, Mr... ?” Murphy asked.

“Clive Mellor. The Nilsons’ plot is the one with the dark green shed,” he said, pointing to the bottom right corner of the plot.

The two detectives navigated the broken slab pathway winding through the allotment. At the bottom, they stopped and peered inside the shed: an array of garden tools hung from hooks on the opposite side.

“Nothing much in there worth investigating,” Blake said.

“Doesn’t look like it. What about that lot?” Murphy said, pointing at the plot’s neglected raised beds and barren soil.

Blake looked around the allotment. “The fact the Nilsons lied from the moment we met them and continue to put up barriers sets alarms bells off. What do you reckon?”

“Not entirely sure, but something is very off about the pair of them. What the hell are they hiding?”

Blake shook his head. “I think we should give the shed the once-over, you never know.”

“What about him?” Murphy said, nodding toward Clive Mellor who was now sitting in a deck-chair and casting cursory glances in their direction.

“He knows we’re coppers. It’s a shed, let’s flirt the padlock off?”

“OK, keep your eyes on him, Tom.” Murphy looked around for something to prise out the screws holding the hasp and staple across the door. Seconds later, he found a metal stake in the ground. Slipping it behind the fixings, he levered hard and forced the lock off. “Easy when you know how,” he smirked.

“Luckily Mr Mellor had his back to us.”

Murphy stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

“Anything jumping out?” Blake asked, peeping through the filthy side window.

“Not a lot in here. Give us a minute?”

Blake took his coat off and hooked it on a nail protruding from one of the wooden shed boards. He went over to the raised beds and inspected the concrete slabs they sat on: they appeared to have been down a long time. No one made slabs with pebble chatter in anymore, he thought, remembering breaking dozens up with a sledgehammer and filling a skip full of them at his parents’ old house when he was a young man.

“Tom, take a look at this,” Murphy said, popping his head out of the shed.

Inside, Blake glared at a strip of soil-stained carpet under an old milk crate. “Fuck, that looks like the same carpet our bowling green victim was wrapped in.”

“I think you’d better get Harvey and the radar team over here sharpish.” Murphy said animated.

An hour and a half later, Blake and Murphy reconvened at the allotment to find the radar team and anthropologist at work. On Blake’s prompt, they’d brought a mini digger and operator with them to quickly remove the raised beds. Clive Mellor stood at a safe distance watching all the commotion.

“Sorry to throw this at you so soon after the bowling green site,” Blake said to Harvey.

“It’s not a problem. The carpet in there is a potential connection we simply can’t ignore.”

“Any idea of the timeline on this one?” Blake asked.

“My colleague is still working the bowling green site. I’m hoping to get up to the local lab later for my first assessments of the victim’s bones. Bearing this in mind, I’d be happy if we made progress on this site before dark. Can’t promise, though.”

“So we’re looking at tomorrow before you know anything?” Blake asked.

“I’d say so, but again, no promises.”

## Chapter 11

Due to lack of evidence, the Nilsons had been released without charge pending further investigation, but Blake was concerned they posed a flight risk: even though Henry was in wheelchair, his active wife held a full licence and drove an adapted Citroen Berlingo.

He glanced at his watch: 11 a.m. Grabbing his phone off the desk, he called the anthropologist for an update. “Mr Harvey, hi, sorry to badger you again.”

“Morning, Inspector. Good timing, I was about to call you. We’ve removed all the raised beds, scanned the allotment and got a hit. My colleague is getting down to the substrate layer as we speak.”

“And you’re thinking... ?”

“I’ll reserve judgement. Rest assured I’ll call you immediately if we find anything.”

Half an hour later, Harvey called back. “Inspector, you’d better get over here,” he said ominously. “We’ve found a shoe with foot bones in it.”

“If this is a grave, we consider the infill because it’s been modified by humans and therefore it’s evidence.”

“Even the soil?” Blake asked.

“Yeah, that needs analysing. We’re looking for the shape of the grave and what it was dug with: usually a spade in these types of rushed burials. If the rest of the bones are down there, this gives us an overview of how the victim was placed in the grave.”



“But you’ve only found a foot so far; does that indicate the bones are dispersed?” Blake asked.

“We won’t know until the skeleton is fully exposed, but yes, it’s likely the victim’s body has been dismembered and scattered.”

Blake sighed. “Bloody hell.”

“Give us a couple of hours and we’ll know for certain what we’re dealing with,” Lewis Harvey said.

Blake thanked him and made his way back along the broken-slabbed path. He was about to exit the allotment when Harvey called him back.

Facing a hole the width and length of a small car, Blake looked on as Harvey’s assistant peeled back a layer of soil-encrusted floral carpet to reveal a skull and arm bones with the hands still attached.

“I think it’s safe to say this is a burial ground,” Harvey said, climbing into the hole and firing off several shots with his digital camera. He then passed the camera to his colleague, and examined and measured the skull.

Climbing out, he came over to Blake and proffered up the camera. “OK, initial thoughts: given the chin is fairly square and the forehead slant is prominent, I’d say we’re looking at a male.”

“Any ideas on the age?” Blake asked.

“I’ll know more once I run tests in the lab.”

Keen to push on, Blake asked, “Your best estimate?”

“I’d say anywhere between early twenties and late thirties.”

“Carpet looks a match for that at the bowling green deposition site?” Blake said.

The anthropologist navigated through the library on the camera. “Seems you might have a serial killer on your hands.”

## Chapter 12

Blake passed the Nilsons’ terraced house and took a cautionary glance at the Citroen Berlingo parked outside; an indication they were home. He arrived at the station fifteen minutes later, picked up DS Murphy and they headed back to the Nilsons’ house in earnest.

“This time dispense with the niceties. We’ve shown that pair plenty of courtesy. Time to get tough,” Blake said, pulling kerbside.

“You’re not kidding. They led us a right merry dance with the ‘nice old couple’ act: question is, are they capable of murder? My money’s on the old man; kept if from his Missus all these years?”

“You could be right. Refresh my memory, when did he say he was paralysed?”

“Seventy-eight, I think.”

“Either way, we’ll soon find out when we turn up the heat. Haynes will be here any minute. I want them separated straight away. Mary can go with Haynes and we’ll get Henry loaded up in the Citroen in his wheelchair. I’ll toss you for who drives him back to the station,” Blake smirked.

“Since you drive an old banger, I’ll let you take the chariot, boss.”

“Thanks, look forward to it, you cheeky sod.”

Haynes arrived and they proceeded to arrest the Nilsons for conspiracy to conceal a body.

“You’re out of order, man, handling my wife like that; seems my disability means bugger all to you bully boys. I’ve a good mind to call the Evening Sentinel about this; I’m sure they’d love to hear about police brutality.” Henry Nilson protested, clutching the armrests of his wheelchair in interview room four.

Blake shook his head. “So far we’ve shown you and your wife every courtesy. The fact I drove you here in your own vehicle re-enforces that. Anyway, you do what you have to. In the meantime, we’ll be dealing with the small matter of a body found buried under your allotment.”

“This is bullshit. My wife and I have no knowledge of that. We took over the allotment in good faith in 1972. Maybe the previous owner put it there?”

Blake gave him a wry smile. “You can’t be serious, Mr Nilson?”

“Anyway, you promised to look into the original investigation into Millie’s disappearance: should have known you were fobbing us off.”

“That’s not true, Mr Nilson. Two of my officers have looked into the case. All I can say is the investigation was handled badly by my predecessors, but at this stage we don’t have any new evidence regarding poor Millie.”

“I’m saying nowt else until my lawyer arrives; he’ll be here any minute.”

“That’s your prerogative, Mr Nilson, but I can tell you now, you and your wife aren’t going anywhere until we get to the bottom of this,” Blake warned him.

Nilson’s complexion became ruddy as he desperately tried to hold back another outburst.

Almost on cue, the lawyer arrived and requested a few minutes in private with his client.

“Mr Nilson, I’m going to ask you to account for several facts relating to how a body ended up buried on your allotment. Avoiding the questions or failing to answer them honestly will go against you in a court of law. Do you understand?” Blake stressed.

He nodded.

“Can you speak for the recorder, please?”

“I understand,” Nilson said, raising his voice.

“OK, today forensic anthropologist Lewis Harvey and his team performed a ground-penetrating radar search of the allotment you and your wife have managed since 1972. The radar picked up shadows and signs of a disturbance in the soil under the raised beds. This led to them being removed and an excavation of the ground directly below them, which eventually turned up the dismembered skeleton of an unidentified male. What do you have to say about that, Mr Nilson?”

“Like I said earlier, my wife and I know nothing about this.”

“We don’t believe you. In fact, we have evidence that suggests you were involved with this illegal burial.”

The lawyer made a brief note, and then looked up. “Inspector, please disclose what you’re talking about.”

“The skull, arms and hands of a dismembered male were concealed by a piece of floral carpet; the same carpet used to wrap the body of an unidentified female

discovered in another illegal burial site, the redundant bowling club at 28 Chapel Road, a few hundred yards from Mr Nilson's house and allotment. The same carpet was also found inside the shed on Mr Nilson's allotment."

The lawyer leaned into Nilson and spoke in hushed tones.

"That carpet was in the shed when we took over the allotment," Nilson said.

Blake sighed. "Don't take us for fools, Mr Nilson. That shed is never thirty-eight years old, the wood is far too intact. Forensics tests show the carpet is the same as both bodies were wrapped in, so please stop lying and wasting our time."

"I'm telling the truth. How could I possibly bury a body, I'm in a frigging wheelchair."

"That maybe the truth, but we're convinced you're involved in covering up this wicked crime, so that would make you an accessory to murder."

"Inspector, that's mere speculation. Produce some clear forensic evidence linking my client to this crime or I'll be taking him home ASAP," the lawyer warned.

At this stage, Blake knew they didn't have enough to hold the Nilsons for a further twenty-four hours without an extension. "Given Mr and Mrs Nilson lied to us about several key facts regarding this case, they'll be kept in custody overnight," Blake said.

Raising his hand, the lawyer objected. "I think you'll find it's a breach of human rights to keep a disabled person locked up in a conventional cell, Inspector."

"You're right, we can't. However we can detain him in a specially adapted facility we have at our disposal, and we have a warrant to search Mr and Mrs Nilson's address."

Henry Nilson slammed the arms of his wheelchair with his fists. "You can't go through all our personal stuff. You bastards, I'll sue for police harassment."

"Interview terminated at 12 p.m.," Blake said, hitting the stop button on the recorder.

## Chapter 13

In the car journey over to the Nilson house, Blake and Murphy discussed their interviews.

"Did Henry Nilson's Missus let anything slip?" Blake asked.

"Hard to say. She's pretty shaken by all this. I gave her a couple of comfort breaks to ease the sobbing. Felt a bit guilty, with her being a pensioner and everything that's happened to her over the years."

"Understandable, with their daughter's disappearance and his accident. You think she's covering for him or an accomplice?"

"When I asked her about the skeleton she denied all knowledge of it: blamed it on the previous allotment owner."

"See what I mean? Stinks of collusion."

Murphy nodded and killed the engine outside the house.

They exited the vehicle and retrieved protection suits and shoe covers from the boot.

“We’ve only got a small window, so let’s get this done. Forensics should be here any minute,” Blake said slipping his hood up.

Once inside, they separated. Blake took the living room, Murphy the kitchen.

Blake sifted through the DVD collection under the TV first, and then tackled an old hardwood sideboard in the right-hand chimney breast recess. He dumped the top drawers onto the large coffee table and sifted through their contents. The usual detritus most people hoarded: broken stationery, batteries and other crap. Fifteen minutes later, he had finished but found nothing remotely incriminating so moved into the dining room, which had been converted into a bedroom for Henry Nilson. On the opposite wall, four storage boxes sat on shelves. Blake emptied them onto the adjustable hospital bed and carefully rummaged through an assortment of cast resin animal ornaments, old car magazines and other useless bits and bobs: still nothing.

He made his way into the kitchen. “CSIs not turned up yet?”

“No. Give ’em a call. Maybe something more important came up?” Murphy said.

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” Blake said fishing his phone from the pocket of his protection suit.

Murphy carried on rummaging through the kitchen cabinets. “Sod all in here,” he said as Blake stood with the phone to his ear.

“Jeff, you been delayed?”

“Sorry, yeah, a woman’s been attacked in Burslem.”

“Serious or... ?”

“Domestic. She’s got a knife wound, thankfully not life-threatening. I can leave my colleague to finish up here and be with you in half an hour.”

Their search of the living room, downstairs bedroom and kitchen proved fruitless. A knock on the door interrupted them as they were making their way upstairs past the electric stair lift: the CSI had arrived.

“Jeff, good to see you. Wife and kids all good?” Blake asked him as he entered the hallway.

“All well, thanks. Your brood OK?”

Blake nodded.

“Anything turned up yet?” the CSI asked.

“Sadly not. We’re gonna give upstairs the once-over; take a room each,” Blake said.

“Where do you want me?” the CSI asked.

“Murph’s going to do the loft; we’ll take the bedrooms and bathroom.”

Murphy shot Blake a look. “Am I?”

“Only if you can gain access.”

The CSI said, “I can help you there. Got a telescopic ladder on the van,”.

“Top man,” Blake said as the CSI went to fetch it. He turned to Murphy. “Hope you don’t mind, mate.”

Murphy held his hands up.

Minutes later, the CSI was sifting through the wardrobe in the back bedroom whilst Blake emptied the divan drawers under Mrs Nilson’s double bed, when DS Murphy poked his head out of the loft hatch and called them.

“Got something up here.”

Blake and the CSI stood on the landing looking up at the gaping black hole.

"I'll pass the box down, but you need to stick your head in to see what's up here," Murphy said, animated.

Blake climbed half way up the ladder, reached up for the box then laid it down on the landing before climbing back up.

Peering into the loft, Blake said, "Cut to the chase, Murph. What am I supposed to be looking at?"

The DC shone his torch into the rear of the roof space where the tiles joined the soffit board running the width of the back of the house.

"Bloody hell," Blake said, glaring at a large offcut of floral carpet laid across the beams. The same carpet used to bury the two victims.

"I'll come down so Jeff can take a sample," Murphy said as Blake backed down the ladder.

Now on the landing, the two detectives made their way into the back bedroom.

"Jeez, this is sad. Must have been their daughter's bedroom before she disappeared," Blake said.

"It's like a shrine, nothing's changed," Murphy said glancing around at the purple walls covered in posters of the band that drove teenage girls wild in the seventies: the Bay City Rollers.

With two kids of his own, Blake couldn't possibly comprehend the grief and pain the Nilsons must have gone through never knowing what happened to their daughter all those years ago.

"Let's get this processed," Blake said, emptying the contents of the tatty cardboard box onto the yellow quilted bedspread.

Murphy spread out ten photo wallets, school achievement certificates and other memorabilia.

Sitting on opposite sides of the bed, they sifted through family holiday snaps, and several taken in the back garden from much happier times before Henry Nilson's accident.

"Ever likely they've put these up the loft. Must be too painful to look at," Blake said, holding a six-by-five inch matte photo of Henry Nilson building sandcastles with his daughter on Blackpool beach, the tower looming large in the background. It felt like they had committed sacrilege, using Millie Nilson's room to rake through these cherished memories.

"What do you reckon?" Murphy said, moving on to the faded brown A4 envelopes.

"Who knows? The carpet is undeniable now, that's for sure," Blake said, opening a similar envelope.

"Well, would you look at that," Murphy said, proffering up an award certificate:

***Winners of the North Staffs Crown Green Bowls team competition***

***May 1978***

***Awarded to***

***Henry Nilson and Richard Taylor***

***by***

***Youth Sports Coach Bob Bennault***

“Bingo, a link between Nilson, the missing Richard Taylor and Bob Bennault. Anything else?”

Murphy fumbled another brown envelope. Three Polaroid pictures dropped into his lap. Two were of a group of spectators sitting around the bowling green on Chapel Road; the other was of three men in the upstairs bar proudly raising pints of ale above a mahogany trophy shield on the table in front of them. Two of the men were in their mid to late twenties; the other was in his thirties.

Blake stood. “Given the certificate, it doesn’t take much of a leap to identify these men as Henry Nilson, Bob Bennault and Richard Taylor. Along with the carpet, I think we’ve got more than enough to apply for a custody extension for the Nilsons,” Blake said standing.

As Murphy swung the pool car into the station car park, Blake’s phone rang: it was the anthropologist.

“Inspector, we’ve found the other shoe, but more importantly a man’s gold bracelet. The back of the name plate is engraved with the words *To Richard cherish this, love mum and dad.*”

Blake was speechless for a second. “OK, that’s hugely helpful. Can you email me some pictures?” he said ending the call.

Killing the engine, Murphy turned to him. “Problem?”

“Far from it, I think Richard Taylor never left Chapel Road back in ’78.”

“Because?”

“They’ve just found his gold bracelet buried under the Nilsons’ allotment.”

“Fuck, we’d better get this custody extension sorted and confront the lying pair ASAP,” Murphy said.

“Yeah, and I want to speak to Edith Gerard before the day’s out,” Blake said, swinging his door open.

## Chapter 14

Blake spoke to the custody sergeant as soon as they entered the station and requested Henry Nilson be brought immediately to interview room two again. Within fifteen minutes, the worried pensioner sat across the table from him with a concerned look on his face.

“Mr Nilson, as you know, we’ve just searched to your house. Can you tell me why you lied about knowing Bob Bennault?”

Nilson shot him a puzzled look. “I *don’t* know the bloke. What are you on about?”

“Well, seems you won a bowls competition in May 1978 and he presented your trophy.”

Judging by the colour of his complexion, this line of questioning unnerved him. “As if I’d remember that. It was bloody donkeys’ years ago. But that still doesn’t mean I know him.”

“Really? What about this then?” Blake slid a clear evidence bag containing the Polaroid picture of the three men celebrating with the trophy across the table.

Henry Nilson glanced at it before shoving it back as if it had burnt his fingers.

His lawyer shook his head. "Can we dispense with the cryptic games and get to the point, Inspector? My client has suffered enough being incarcerated unnecessarily like this."

"Nothing cryptic about this, Mr Marshall. Your client and his wife have lied about several key facts regarding this case. In fact, they've blatantly perverted the course of justice, which you are fully aware carries a lengthy sentence."

"This is ridiculous. My wife and I haven't done anything wrong," Nilson protested again.

"Continuing this charade will only dig you and your wife into a deeper hole. Speaking of holes, the forensic anthropologist's team have uncovered new evidence buried under your allotment. So, along with the mutilated human remains in that illegal burial site, there's also something we feel can identify the victim."

"Feel, Inspector? I implore you to disclose any new evidence," the lawyer insisted.

"Until that evidence has been processed properly, I'm afraid I can't. Mr Nilson, can you tell me why you have an off-cut of the carpet both the body at the bowling green and the body at your allotment were wrapped in, laid out in your loft?"

Nilson shook his head. "Is he blind?" he said turning to his lawyer. "I've never been up in that loft, how could I?" He banged the arms of his wheelchair again. A trick Blake noticed he had used once too often.

"So who put it up there? Your wife?"

"Oh, this is ludicrous. Neither of us has ever been up in that loft. Over the years, we either chucked stuff or put it in the shed."

"Really? You must have chucked plenty over the years, because your shed is practically empty. I've seen inside," Blake disputed.

"I hope you and your bully boys haven't trashed our house," Nilson snapped.

Blake stood to stop the recorder. "I can assure you we left everything as we found it, Mr Nilson."

## Chapter 15

In need of some answers, Blake drove to the pathology lab to speak with Lewis Harvey.

"Can you tell us any more about the bones from the allotment? We have two suspects in custody, but need more evidence to charge them. The clock's ticking."

"Isn't it always? Unfortunately, these specialist tests can take days to come back."

Blake sighed in disappointment.

"As I said before, when we excavate graves like this our aim is to show how the body was disposed of. Reconstructing what the perpetrator would see before burying the victim. Sadly, because our victim was dismembered, we can't do that."

"The gold bracelet's presented us with an opportunity to ID the victim. A middle-aged couple, the Taylors, owned the house before it became a bowling club. The husband Richard Taylor disappeared in 1978 and hasn't been seen since. Through

photographic evidence we've linked him to two suspects: one of whom has served time for sexual offences against teenage girls."

"And you're thinking our bones belong to Richard Taylor?"

"Doesn't take too much of a leap but, like I said, we need more evidence."

"Any living blood relatives? I've requested DNA extraction from the teeth and femur."

"We've contacted his younger brother to come in and give us a sample."

"Familial DNA would definitely do it."

"Let's hope so."

The anthropologist continued, "There's some good news. My colleague discovered the hyoid bone: it was broken. This indicates our victim suffered a major trauma to the neck."

"Hyoid bone?"

"The hyoid is situated at the front of the neck between the jawbone and the thyroid; it's held in place by ligaments. Take a look at this," he said, hitting the space bar on the laptop on the lab table in front of him.

Blake studied the 3D video of the human head and neck as the layers of skin, muscle and cartilage were peeled back to reveal the u-shaped hyoid bone.

The anthropologist continued, "We re-united the skull with the upper neck vertebrae in a reconstruction. Even though the hyoid is a small bone, it is rarely fractured because of the layers protecting it. However, I've discussed this with my colleague, and we're of the opinion that some kind of sharp tool or something similar has been launched into his neck, thus breaking the hyoid bone and severing the common carotid artery, leading to huge loss of blood in the hallway."

Blake let out a low whistling sound. "Launched, as in swung?"

"Hard to say as we're speculating. Hacked, launched, rammed even, we'll never know. But look at this," the anthropologist said opening an enlarged photo of the broken hyoid bone. "The edge of the fracture that caused the bone to break is rounded."

"And that's unusual because...?" Blake asked.

"Well, if the instrument used to attack him was for example a machete or large hunting knife, we'd expect to see a straight fracture," he said drawing his finger in a line across the screen. "This is concave as if the tip is half-moon shaped."

A sudden coldness spread through Blake's core. "You think a spade or turf-cutter could have done this?"

"Most certainly."

## Chapter 16

Back at the station, Blake called an urgent meeting in the major incident room to relay the new evidence to his team.

"Listen up everyone: as you know the clock is ticking on this one. We've only got a window of fifteen hours left to charge or release the Nilsons so I'm afraid to say we need to go over everything again to double-check if anything has been missed. But first, Murph, after this can you go to the allotment and bring in the turf-cutter



we saw Clive Mellor using when we first visited the place. I have a hunch one like it could be the murder weapon used to kill allotment man,” Blake said animated.

“As in chopped his head off?” Murphy said.

“According to the anthropologist it sliced his carotid artery.”

“Shit. So the killer must have taken his head off after he was dead?” Murphy continued.

“It’s looking that way. Roger, go back down the archives and see if you can find anything else relating to Richard Taylor’s disappearance?”

“Tough call that, boss. The *Sentinel* covered it in ’78, and there was also a small piece in the *Mirror*, but I was pretty thorough,” DC Brogan responded.

“I know, but it’s got to be done,” Blake urged.

“What about the gold bracelet, boss?” Murphy asked.

“I’d be surprised if the skeleton doesn’t turn out to be Richard Taylor.”

“I agree, it’s too much of a coincidence,” Murphy said.

“Exactly, but opinions count for nothing; we need hard evidence. So, I’ll be heading off to speak to Edith Gerard again after this briefing.”

“Any lab results back on allotment man’s bones, boss?” DC Brogan asked.

Blake shook his head. “If only. Could take days. Have you managed to trace his younger brother yet?”

“Still on it, boss.”

“OK, but push on with that?”

Brogan said, “Surely the Nilsons have reached the threshold, what with the carpet and everything else we have on them?”

“CPS wants more. Because Henry Nilson’s in a wheelchair, they are being overly cautious. That mad old bugger’s already threatening to sue us for police brutality.”

“The bloody cheek of it,” Brogan said.

“Anything back on the girl’s skeleton at the bowling green?” DC Wardle asked.

“The anthropologist reckons the DNA is imminent. Then we can run familial tests with that taken from the Nilsons.”

## Chapter 17

Blake wasn’t happy about badgering the old lady again but needs must and with the clock running down on the Nilsons in custody, he was forced into a corner. Again, he took DC Wardle so as not to appear intimidating. This time the questions were far more probing and likely to upset Edith Gerard.

They arrived at the care home to find an ambulance dumped on an angle by the entrance, its lights still flashing, so they hung back. Minutes later, two paramedics rushed out of the building pushing a trolley with an elderly female resident blanketed on it, an oxygen mask over her mouth.

Blake moved to take a closer look. That’s when he noticed the familiar white hair and blue velcroed slippers. Shit, it looked like Edith Gerard. Knowing time was of the essence for the woman, he waited until the ambulance had left before heading toward reception to find out what was going on.

As he and DC Wardle entered, Mrs Brierley the owner dashed past them.

“Was that Edith Gerard we just saw being rushed to hospital?” Blake shouted after her.

She stopped and turned. “She’s suffered a heart attack. Whatever you want will have to wait,” she said abruptly.

“Sorry to hear that, hope she is OK? Mind if we take a look at her room? We believe we may have found Edith’s missing husband,” Blake said.

“Speak with my manager; she’s in charge whilst I’m away. Now I must get to the hospital. Edith is one our oldest residents and we’re all very concerned about her,” Brierley explained.

“OK, thank you. I’ll call later to see how she is,” Blake shouted across the car park but she had already climbed into her Mercedes.

Blake asked a passing care worker where the manager could be found. She directed them down the corridor to room six.

After gaining permission, the two officers entered Edith’s room in search of anything that might shed light on her husband’s mysterious disappearance all those years ago.

“Is this entirely legit, boss?” Wardle asked.

“Got a warrant in my coat but, given the medical emergency, I thought it inappropriate to lay down the law. Don’t worry, it’s a subtle rummage more than an official search, but I agree we need to cover our backs,” he said placing the warrant down on the bedside cabinet and taking a picture of it with his phone.

“OK, what exactly are we looking for?”

“Any evidence of communication and financial documents: a will, old photographs or legal paperwork relating to Richard Taylor or them as a couple.”

She shot him a look.

“I know, it’s an outside chance. Needs to be done, though.”

“OK, I’ll take the wardrobe.”

Blake nodded, knelt and started with the bedside drawers.

After a few minutes of sifting through the old lady’s underwear, tights, vests and thermal socks, he moved on to the bookcase under the window. One by one, he removed each book and quickly thumbed the pages; then moved onto the audio book boxes: nothing.

Turning to Wardle, Blake said, “Anything?”

“Just nighties, blouses, skirts and cardigans.”

“Her legal stuff is probably with a solicitor. Expected to find some bank statements, though,” Blake said, glancing around the room.

“Does she have any kids? I’d imagine they’d be looking after her legal affairs,” Wardle said.

“No living relatives.”

“Ah, could be tricky then.”

“Bloody typical. If poor Mrs Gerard pops her clogs it could take months if we have to go through the legal channels. The manager will know how she pays her bills. These places cost a fortune. You saw the owner’s Merc. Forty grand’s worth of motor, that.” Blake was aware of the care sector’s less than scrupulous charges.

“How about that, boss?” she said, pointing to a mobile charger plugged in the socket under the TV.

“Well, bugger me; the old dear’s got a phone.”

## Chapter 18

Blake was surprised to learn Mrs Gerard had a mobile, albeit an older pay-as-you-go job. The care home manager said the staff topped it up for her and as far as she knew, Edith called a friend once a week: a Mrs Claremont. Yet, to the best of their knowledge, the mysterious woman had never visited Edith at the care home.

Picking his phone off the desk, he called Royal Stoke. “Hello, I’m Detective Tom Blake of Hanley CID. I want to check on an elderly patient. She was admitted about two hours ago?”

“What’s the patient’s name?”

“Gerard, Edith. Paramedics rushed her in after she suffered a heart attack.”

He listened as the receptionist hacked away at the keyboard.

“Yes, Mrs Gerard is under observation on Ward 220.”

“Thank you. Can you put me through or give me the extension number to the ward, please?”

“I’m sure you’re well aware that patient confidentiality still applies, even to law enforcement. What’s this about?”

“She’s helping us with our enquiries into a double murder case.”

“I see. Hold the line a minute. I’ll try to put you through.”

Blake listened to the crappy muzak loop for almost a minute before a nurse answered.

“Hello, I’m Sister Evans, how can I help?”

“I believe you have a Mrs Edith Gerard on your ward. How is she?”

“She’s recovering from an angina-related heart attack; because of her age surgery isn’t an option, so she’s being treated with blood-thinning meds to prevent further clots.”

“Does that mean it’s not as severe as a sudden heart attack?”

“Yes, but given she’s ninety it’s still traumatic and could lead to complications.”

“Let’s hope not. I’m sure Reception told you Mrs Gerrard’s been helping us with our enquiries?”

“Yes, but you’ll need to wait until she’s made significant improvement, Inspector.”

Blake challenged her. “I don’t want to appear heartless, pardon the pun, but this is a murder enquiry. Can you confirm she’s unable to speak at all at present?”

“If you leave your number I’ll call you when her condition is more stable. Stress wouldn’t be wise at present,” the Sister said.

“I fully understand. Apologies, I didn’t want to hound you. It’s just she’s maybe the missing link we need to bring a killer to justice.”

## Chapter 19

“Listen up everyone: later today I’m hoping to speak with Edith Gerard. Poor lady’s had a heart attack,” Blake said, and relayed what had happened to the three detectives sitting in front of him in the incident room.

“You really think she knows more than she’s letting on, boss?” DC Wardle asked.

“The fact she’s been communicating with a friend via an old pay-as-you-go mobile doesn’t ring any alarm bells, but she clearly said she didn’t have any friends or living relatives outside the care home, signalling she may be covering something up. I can’t tell without speaking to her,” Blake said.

“Surely she won’t be up to an interview?” DC Brogan said.

“It’ll be a very brief chat, to see if she’ll tell us where this mystery woman Mrs Claremont lives.”

“We need a break, or the Nilsons are likely to walk,” Brogan said.

Blake shook his head. “Don’t I know it?”

“What about the bracelet, boss?” Brogan asked.

“Of course, I’m going to ask her if it belonged to her husband Richard.”

“Thing is, it may have done, but our victim could easily have stolen it from Richard Taylor,” Brogan cautioned.

“Possible but, given Richard Taylor hasn’t been seen or heard from in over thirty-two years, and the archive search and DVLA records didn’t come up with a new address for him, we may never know. Also, I’ve just had the DNA results back from the cigarettes in the ashtray I found at Chapel Road. Sadly they don’t match any of our suspects.”

“Isn’t that just typical,” DC Murphy said.

“Did you manage to get hold of Clive Mellor’s turf-cutter?”

“Dropped it off at the forensics lab. They said it will take a few days to analyse, and guess what? Clive Mellor told me he’s had it years. Mary Nilson gave it to him after Henry’s accident.”

“Shit, seems my theory could be right after all. Cheers, fella. If you could follow up on that for me it’d ease my workload,” Blake said.

## Chapter 20

Blake hated having to sit on his hands. It was four hours until Sister Evans was due to ring, so he decided to catch up on some paperwork and look at the staff rotas for the coming week. Twenty minutes into it, his mobile rang.

“Inspector Blake, you’ll be pleased to know I have some results back on the victim from the bowling green,” the anthropologist said.

“That’s great news, so...?”

“The bones have been put through a scintillation spectrometer to count the number of decays, and then carbon-dated.”

“Tech speak aside, is it possible to know how long they’ve been in the ground?”

“Around thirty years plus.”

Blake’s stomach lurched. “Shit! What about the DNA?” he asked.

“It’s a familial match for the Nilsons.”

## Chapter 21

Even though they were still in custody, Blake knew it was the right thing to inform the Nilsons their daughter had finally been found after thirty-two years. Not relishing the prospect, he headed down to the cellblock.

The custody sergeant opened Mary Nilson’s cell door. She sat hunched with her elbows crossed, leaning on her raised knees on the three-inch thick blue mattress with her back to the wall.

“You’ve held us here for over twenty-four hours. When can we go home?” she complained.

“I’m not here to discuss that. I’m sorry to have to tell you we’ve found your daughter Millie,” Blake said somberly looking at the desperation in her eyes.

Mary Nilson jumped off the mattress and raised a hand to her mouth.

Blake knew this reaction all too well; he had the misfortune of seeing several mothers respond the same way to the heartbreaking news he was delivering. Their maternal instincts sensed the deeply painful loss.

Fighting back tears, she said, “I always knew Millie was dead. I sensed it long ago. How did she die? We need to know.”

“The sad truth is we just don’t know.”

“Please can my husband and I get out of here?”

The human inside him wanted to release them both on the spot, but the police officer in him knew it was the wrong thing to do until they were either cleared or charged.

“I’d like to go over the events leading up to Millie’s disappearance on June 5th in 1978 with you. Maybe that will shed new light onto what happened to her on that fateful day, Mrs Nilson. Do you think you can do that?” Blake asked.

Wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her cardigan, she nodded.

“OK, once I’ve informed your husband, I’ll come back for you, Mrs Nilson.”

“Please be gentle. Henry is very weak. It will kill him.”

Ten minutes later, Blake returned after delivering the heartbreaking news. He felt uncomfortable leaving the poor man sobbing in his wheelchair.

“If you’d like to come with me, Mrs Nilson, we can discuss what happens now.”

He ushered her to interview room three, got her seated and placed a cup of sweet tea for the shock on the table.

“I realise this isn’t an ideal situation you find yourself in, Mrs Nilson, but unfortunately, with you and your husband still under investigation, I was left with no choice.”

“What will happen to my Millie?”

“I give you my word her remains will be treated with the utmost respect. The anthropologist operates under the same strict code as a pathologist. Once her skeleton has been released, depending on what happens to you and Mr Nilson, you’ll be able to give her a proper burial.”

She became understandably upset again. This time Blake had a pack of tissues which he passed over the table.

She dabbed her eyes. "It's a bitter pill to swallow knowing she was on our doorstep all this time."

Blake nodded sympathetically. "I can't begin to imagine the suffering this has caused you and your husband over the years. I know it's an awfully long time ago, but it would help us if you could run through the events leading up to her disappearance?"

She blew on the tea and took a sip, then paused in thought. "She'd been working at the bowling club as a glass collector for a few weeks. Henry got her the job. She loved having some money to spend on magazines and clothes."

"Go on?"

"I'll never forget what Millie told me the evening before she disappeared. She'd kept it from us for weeks."

"And that was?"

"Men at the club had been leering at her. She said two had offered to take her to Blackpool for a good time. Made my blood boil; she was only fourteen-and-a-half."

"Did she tell you their names?"

"No."

"Unlikely you'll remember because it was so long ago, but how about descriptions?"

She shook her head.

"Can you remember if she was acting out of character during this period?"

"In what way?"

"Like something was wrong in her life. Did she mention anything?"

"No, but I did get the impression she didn't want to get her dad in trouble."

"And you told the officers investigating her disappearance about it at the time?"

"Yes, but they said it was unlikely her going missing was connected to anyone at the club because they were all respectful middle-aged blokes and pensioners."

Blake was surprised "Really, that's a pretty draconian view by today's standards. I'll be the first to admit seventies policing was lacking. But it's odd, we've found no statement to that effect in our archives. I can assure you we'll take another look at that. The problem is we only have three members' names. There is nothing in the library archives or anywhere else. Bob Bennault, Richard Taylor, and of course your husband Henry. Whilst the club was active, how many members were there?"

She paused. "I couldn't say for sure."

"Best guess?"

"Around sixty."

Blake sighed. "How many were from your street?"

"That I do know; just my husband and Richard. The other man you mentioned wasn't and neither were the others," she said with surprising clarity.

For fear of spooking her, Blake didn't disclose the engraved gold bracelet or the strong possibility the bones discovered under the bowling green belonged to Richard Taylor. They needed to find Richard's younger brother and get DNA from him to confirm that.

"Did Millie ever come home with expensive presents and such like?"

“What are you getting at, Inspector?”

“It’s possible Millie was being groomed?”

“Huh, we’d have known.”

“Kids can be very secretive and hide presents. Often in these types of cases, they are too frightened to say anything until it’s too late.”

“Just get the murdering bastard who ruined our lives.”

“We’ll do our best to bring Millie’s killer to justice, but in the meantime you and your husband need to start cooperating. Like Millie, the man buried under your allotment also deserves justice. So who is he and how did he get there, Mrs Nilson?”

Back in the incident room, Blake addressed his team.

“Look people, I know this case is frustrating us all. Two suspects in custody but no real evidence to connect them to the murder of the man found buried under their allotment, so I propose a third round of re-checks on what we have so far.”

The collective groans were audible.

“I know, it’s a pain guys, but this is where we are at the minute.”

“You can’t help feeling sorry for the Nilsons, boss,” DC Wardle said.

“Easy for you to say, not being the poor sod who had to break it to them.”

Wardle held up her hands. “Fair enough.”

“Have we managed to get an address for Bob Bennault’s son yet?”

Brogan said, “Took some bloody checking, that. The bastard must have been sofa-surfing for months. An hour ago, I spoke to the council tax office. Apparently, he’s been caught dodging council tax using a known associate’s ID. I’ve narrowed it down to two addresses; one in Burslem, the other’s on the Heath Hayes estate.”

“OK, Rodge, you take Wardle and a PC and head over to the Burslem address; Murphy, Haynes and I will head over to the Heath Hayes. I want that thieving sod in custody before teatime; it’s going to be a long day.”

## Chapter 22

Flat 12 was on the ground floor of Wade Court on the troublesome Heath Hayes estate. The 1960s low-rise council block had seen better days and, judging by the rust patches seeping through the concrete lintels above some of the front windows, it would be on the council’s forthcoming demolition list, Blake thought, leading the way for DC Murphy and PC Haynes, who was labouring behind carrying the ‘big red key’.

“Take a look through the window, John?” Blake said as he knelt and lifted the letterbox flap.

“No sign, apart from a week’s worth of dishes in the sink.”

Blake rallied, “POLICE, POLICE” as he knocked hard on the frosted glass in the tatty upvc door, but there was no answer.

He looked at Murphy. “What do you reckon, in and hiding, or out and about?”

Murphy shrugged. “Anybody’s guess.”

“OK, one more knock and then do your party piece, Haynesy,” Blake said, looking at the PC’s gorilla-thick arms.

Standing either side of the door, the two detectives watched as the burly PC caved the door in with two powerful swings of the tactical ram.

“Nice to see you’ve not lost your touch,” Murphy said as they stealthily entered the kitchen of the one-bedroom flat.

Blake signalled to Murphy to take the living room, whilst he and Haynes split the bathroom and bedroom between them. Blake was about to open a large mirrored wardrobe when a strong stench of smoke drifted through the partially open bedroom window. He looked out and saw a man in his mid-forties, wearing headphones, burning something in a fire basket.

Poking his head into the small hallway, he lowered his voice, “Fellas, outside around the back, now!”

Startled as the three officers appeared, the man removed his headphones. Murphy and Haynes flanked him as Blake looked into the basket. It appeared Terry had only just lit the fire; judging by the screwed up A4 sheets smouldering weakly below what looked like an old ledger book. Without hesitation, Blake pulled the sleeve of his coat over his hand and retrieved it. Coughing, he slapped it onto the grass to starve the flames encroaching onto the pages. Luckily, the jacket of the ledger was only slightly scorched.

“Terry Bennault, you’re under arrest for breaking and entering 28 Chapel Road, Hartshill. You have the right to remain silent, but anything you do say...” Blake read him his rights.

“This is bollocks. I haven’t broken in anywhere,” Terry protested as PC Haynes cuffed him.

“Must be your twin brother who’s left DNA all over a windowsill at the property, then?”

“Dunna know what you’re on about. Get me outa these cuffs or I’ll do you.”

Blake looked at him sternly. “You really want PC Haynes sitting on you? Shut up, you stupid dick, you’re coming with us.”

Whilst Terry Bennault stewed in a cell, Blake assessed the ledger. If their three main suspects were not in it, things would become far more challenging. After twenty minutes, he found exactly what he was looking for: multiple entries listing tournaments and bowling matches involving Henry Nilson, Richard Taylor and Bob Bennault between January and September 1978. Henry Nilson’s name didn’t appear after June: due to his accident, Blake assumed. With the evidence linking convicted paedophile Bob Bennault to the club, they now had a motive for his son’s burglary.

Blake headed straight to interview room two. The only thing the crap burglar had managed to dodge was council tax for the last five years. That carried a hefty fine but, since it wasn’t his first break-in, he was looking at a custodial. Blake thought eyeing up Terry Bennault as he entered the room.

Taking a seat opposite Bennault Junior, he got straight to the point, “Why break into an empty property, Terry? There’s nothing worth nicking in that bowling club.”



“No comment.”

“I tell what I think: your dad’s out of Stafford prison soon and he put you up to nicking the ledger because, along with two other suspects in a murder case, his name’s in there. He was a member of the North Staffs Crown Green Bowls club in the late seventies, wasn’t he, Terry?”

“How the fuck should I know? I was a little kid back then,” he said sarcastically.

Blake shook his head. “You really think we hadn’t considered that? Denial by ignorance is not a defence. It just doesn’t wash, Terry. What did he tell you about the ledger?”

“No comment.”

“We’ve got your blood and prints at the scene, for god’s sake; you can’t get away with this.”

Murphy took over with the good cop routine. “Come on, Terry, if you tell us everything, I’m sure we can have a word with the CPS; tell them you co-operated. That’ll knock six months off your sentence. With remission, you’ll hardly do any time.”

Bennault smirked and pointed at Murphy. “You can’t kid a kidder. I aren’t confessing to summit I didn’t do.”

“Seriously, Terry? Your dad knows he’s likely to go straight back inside when more of his historical crimes are outed. Stop messing about.”

“That’s a strong accusation. Playing bowls isn’t a crime as far as I know.”

“So: A, why did you feel the need to break in and nick the ledger? And B, why burn it?”

“No comment.”

“Your old man put you up to it. He’s trying to distance himself from the bowling club where the skeleton of a young girl has been found buried. Given his convictions for child sex offences and connection to that place, he knows as soon as he gets out we’ll be on him like a fat kid on cake. He’s used you as a pawn in his dangerous game, Terry.”

“Just because his name’s in the book, it doesn’t mean he committed any crimes.”

Blake sighed, “OK, have it your way, Terry. You’ll be charged with criminal damage and burglary and, because you’re a flight risk, you’ll be put on a curfew and electronically tagged as a condition of your bail.”

“This is a fucking fit-up job. You can’t stop me going down the pub.”

“Good luck with that. We’ll know if you aren’t home after 8 p.m. and we’ll send someone to come and pick you up,” Murphy said, adding to his misery.

Outside in the corridor Blake said, “John, can you help Roger take another dig into the archives? We desperately need more than the photos, ledger and certificates found in the Nilsons’ loft. Something linking Bob Bennault directly to Millie Nilson, statements or eye witness accounts, anything we can use. With his imminent release, I fear he’ll re-offend. The devious bastard may even come after the Nilsons if they’re released.”

“Ok, are you heading up to the hospital to see Edith Gerard?”

“Yeah, the ward sister called me earlier; says she’s made some kind of recovery.”

## Chapter 23

Blake entered the cardiac recovery ward on the third floor of Royal Stoke. Sister Evans warned him not to stress the elderly lady with probing questions and allocated him fifteen minutes to speak with her. If he was still around after that, she warned him he'd be frog marched off the ward.

The thought of being bossed about by a strong woman made him chuckle as he sat in the high-backed visitors' chair next to Edith Gerard's bed.

"Mrs Gerard, how are you?"

She slid up the bed a little, retrieved her glasses from her lap and peered at him through the jam-jar-bottomed lenses. "I'm feeling better, now they've got me on the right tablets. Remind me dear, who are you?"

"Inspector Blake. Remember we spoke a few days ago at the care home, about the Nilsons and your husband, Richard?" he said, still unable to get used to his temporary promotion.

She paused in thought, "Ah, yes, sorry I've been asleep a lot, it's all the drugs they're giving me. Has something happened?"

"I've only got a few minutes so I'll get to the point if you don't mind," he said glancing at the nurses' station. "There's been a development in the case. Did Richard wear a gold bracelet with an engraving on the back of the name plate?"

A sudden look of horror appeared on her face. Straightening her glasses, she sighed, but didn't reply.

Blake sensed his disclosure had deeply unnerved her. "Before he disappeared, did Richard ever mention his bracelet was lost or stolen?" He danced around the difficult subject in the hope she'd be able to offer a plausible explanation.

"He may have done. I don't remember, it's too long ago."

Aware time was running out Blake said, "You told us Richard left you and your daughter in June 1978, and has never contacted you since."

Regaining her composure she said, "That's what happened, but you're now saying he may have been dead all this time?"

"There's no easy way to say this, but we believe the body buried under the Nilson's allotment is Richard."

"I don't believe it. How can you tell from a gold bracelet?"

Blake craned his neck and glanced at the nurses' station again. Sister Evans stood and headed in their direction. He turned to face Edith Gerard. "We're hoping to get a DNA sample from Richard's younger brother, so we'll soon know."

"I'm amazed Jacob's still living. He was a troubled soul. Nobody's heard from him in donkeys' years."

"Troubled in what way?"

"Socially awkward. Richard always said he had learning difficulties or something like that."

"I see," Blake said, sensing the sister flanking him.

With a vexed look on her face, she said, "I'm afraid, Inspector, your time is up. Can't you see poor Edith is very tired? I'd like you to leave now please," she insisted.

He rose from the chair. “Just one last thing before I go. Mrs Gerard, we now know you’ve been calling a friend once a week from a pay-as-you-go mobile. Can I ask who this friend is, please?”

She hesitated. “Er, that’s old Rene Claremont. She’s in a home in Manchester.”

“Fair enough, but since this is a murder enquiry I need to take the phone with me.”

Her milky eyes darted around nervously. “It’s at the home.”

Blake glanced through the gap between the bedside locker doors. Her oversized phone sat on an empty shelf. Kneeling, he opened the doors. “You mean this phone?”

The elderly lady blushed.

Seeing her distress, the sister ushered him away from her bedside.

Outside, on the car park, he sat on one of the wooden-slatted concrete benches facing the patient pick-up point, and retrieved the old Nokia 5110 from his coat pocket. He pressed the grey power button below the clunky aerial; the screen glowed luminous green. Having seized dozens of burners over the years, he was familiar with old phone tech, so pressed the up and down arrows on the button to the right of the screen, and scrolled through the menu. There were just two numbers in the contacts: the care home’s and another. He hit the dial button and waited:

*“Hello, we’re not home at the minute. If you leave your name and number, we’ll get back to you,”* said Mary Nilson’s unmistakable voice.

## Chapter 24

As Blake entered the CID room, DC Wardle approached him. “Boss, I was just coming to find you. We finally managed to locate Richard Taylor’s brother and got two PCs to pick him up. He’s downstairs.”

“Great work. Where’ve you put him?”

“Interview room one.”

“I’ll go and have a chat. Can you make sure his DNA sample goes straight off to the lab?”

Wardle nodded.

Blake went over to Murphy’s desk.

Turning in his chair, Murphy asked, “Well, did the old lady let anything slip?”

“No, but I’ve got hold of her old Nokia. Can you extract all the texts and data? There’s only two numbers, and guess what? Edith Gerard has been calling Mary Nilson regularly. Called both numbers. One’s the care home, the other goes straight to the Nilsons’ landline at Chapel Road.”

“Seems the two women are hiding something then? Mary Nilson never mentioned she kept in touch with Edith Gerard.”

“Exactly, the old lady tried to fob me off with some story about it being a friend called Rene in a care home in Manchester.”

"I'm going to speak with Richard Taylor's brother and then confront the Nilsons about their connection to Edith Gerard. Can you get onto this straight away?" Blake said handing Murphy a clear evidence bag containing the phone.

"Will do. Maybe Taylor's brother knows something about Bob Bennault's connection to Millie Nilson. Sadly, I failed to find one going over the old files again."

In interview room one, a balding overweight man in his early sixties sat nervously tapping his foot under the table.

"Mr Taylor, thanks for coming in. Seems you're a hard man to find?" Blake said.

"Jacob, please. Sorry about that. I suffer with mental health, don't like being in public much. Bipolar, see." he said, avoiding direct eye contact.

"Not to worry. We asked you for a DNA sample because we're looking into your brother Richard's disappearance. The sample will help us with our investigation."

"Bloody hell, Rich has been gone years. Why now?"

"Well, we have some new leads and would like to get your side of the story. Maybe it will help find out what happened to him."

"I see."

"Did Richard ever contact you after he disappeared?"

"No. I never understood why he left like that."

"I know it's a long time ago, but can you recall if he mentioned being in any kind of trouble at the time?"

"He said nothing to me. He went a bit weird after joining that bowling club."

"Weird, in what way?"

"Er, he stopped coming to see me. His new mates took up all his time. He was always playing bloody boring bowls."

"It would be a huge help if you remembered any of their names?"

Jacob rubbed his forehead. "Can't think now, this is stressing me out."

"Take your time: anyone at all that springs to mind?"

"Have you found Rich?"

"Like I say, we're looking into several leads in connection with two murders."

Jacob Taylor looked shaken. "Murders!"

"Yes, we've discovered two bodies. One of a teenage girl and the other of a middle-aged man."

"Shit."

"So, as you can see, any information you have is important."

Jacob Taylor sighed. "Yeah, I remember now; he was thick as thieves with this bloke who was some kind of coach. Bob summet."

Blake eyes widened. "His name's Bob Bennault. He's a convicted paedophile soon to be released from Stafford prison." "Did he ever mention the club's caretaker?"

"Can't remember. Sounds like you think Rich was connected to these murders?" he said apprehensively.

"How was his marriage to Edith?"

"You mean did they have problems?"

"Yes."

"Before he disappeared he talked about divorce."

“Can you remember the reason for the marriage break-down?”

“I only got his side, but he’d been seeing younger women behind her back and she found out. Edith was quite a bit older than him, see.”

“Did you ever meet any of these younger women?”

“No. But he mentioned he’d met someone at the bowling club.”

“He never mentioned her name or anything else about her?”

Taylor shook his head. “No.”

“And that was the last time you ever saw your brother?”

“My lasting memory of Rich is he came to see me the day before he disappeared. He was very anxious, pacing back and forth about the living room of my old flat in Chell. Said something bad had happened. I never saw him after that,” Jacob said with regret.

“And he never told you what that was?”

“No.”

Blake stood to indicate the conversation was over but, seeing Jacob Taylor’s distress, he knew he owed him the truth. “I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but we found Richard’s gold bracelet at a burial site. We believe the skeleton buried under Henry and Mary Nilson’s allotment could turn out to be your brother Richard. Since you’re his only living relative, that’s the main reason for taking your DNA, to see if there’s a familial match.”

Jacob Taylor’s head dropped toward the table as he sat there in stunned silence.

## Chapter 25

Before speaking with Mary Nilson, Blake headed back up the stained terrazzo stairs of the 1960s station to the CID room and relayed his conversation with Jacob Taylor to Murphy.

“Seems Richard Taylor was in serious trouble, then?” Murphy said.

“The fact he was close to Bob Bennault sets alarm bells off.”

“His brother actually admitted he was into younger women?”

“Reading between the lines we’ve gotta assume Jacob meant *young girls*.”

“Definitely, if he was mates with that sick paedo.”

“The thesis being Bennault killed Millie Nilson then Taylor to silence him forever?” Murphy speculated.

“That’s a strong possibility, but apart from the obvious connections, where do Henry Nilson and his wife factor in all this?”

Murphy shrugged. “Maybe they’re innocent. That devious bastard Bennault got away with abusing kids for years. I wouldn’t put this past him.”

“True. Knowing Henry was the caretaker and had an allotment he could have set him up.”

“What a mess.”

“Huh, you’re not kidding. I know it’s a bit premature, but did you get anything off the phone?”

“Easiest data download I’ve ever done. Regular calls once a week to the Nilson landline: hundreds of them going back to 1998. I checked online and that’s when the Nokia 5110 came out, so they must have been communicating via landline or in person before then.”

“Shit, that’s some friendship. You want to help me question her about it?”

Since Mary and Henry Nilson’s arrests, over thirty hours ago, Blake had found it hard to get a grip on everything. There was plenty of circumstantial evidence, but nothing they could pin directly on the Nilsons. With DS Murphy behind him, he entered interview room three carrying a print-out of the data downloaded from Edith Gerard’s phone.

“Mrs Nilson, can you clear up a few things for us regarding your relationship with Edith Gerard?”

“When will my husband and I be released?” she said, looking worse for wear. Her hair was greasy and she looked in need of a decent meal; not that they hadn’t fed her.

“I’m afraid to say that unless you and your husband start talking we’ll continue to detain you both,” Blake said.

“How many more times? We had nothing to do with this murder. Besides, our lawyer says you don’t have any real evidence linking my husband and I to it, and he’s right. Just because Henry briefly knew Richard Taylor, it doesn’t mean he killed him. Now leave me to grieve for my Millie, as you’ve obviously not caught the evil bastard who took her from us.”

Before he could respond, Blake’s mobile rang. Glancing at the screen, he saw it was the care home manager.

## Chapter 26

Mrs Brierley was not happy to see the police back at her property so soon and made it clear from the outset she was too busy to let them interrupt her daily duties. She finished typing on the computer and then turned her attention to some paperwork.

Looking up she said, “I only called you because Edith insisted, Inspector. As you well know, she’s ninety years old and recovering from a heart attack. I fail to see how she can possibly help you,” she complained.

“I can only apologise for the inconvenience, but as you know this is a murder enquiry, so if Mrs Gerard wants to speak to us, it can only help with our investigation,” Blake said.

“Well, please be gentle with her?”

“Goes without saying,” Blake said before heading past the reception down the corridor to Edith’s room.

He knocked but there was no answer, so he asked a passing carer to look. She opened the door and popped her head in, “You OK in there, Mrs Gerard?” Turning back to Blake, the carer ushered him in.

He entered to find her sitting looking through the window at the sunset, listening intently to one of her audio books read by an actor whose voice sounded familiar to Blake.

“Oh, Inspector you gave me start, I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Sorry, I did knock.”

“My hearing is on the blink as well. Old age is no fun, I can tell you.”

Blake smiled, “Great to see you back here. How are you feeling?”

“Still very tired, but I was lucky.”

“Well, you’ve got another chance. Hate to appear pushy, but Mrs Brierley called me, said you wanted to talk. I’m presuming it’s about the murder case?” Blake said, thinking she looked troubled. “Would you like me turn that off?” he said pointing to her stereo.

She raised a hand and nodded. “Have you managed to identify the bodies, Inspector?”

“I had to break the awful news to Mr and Mrs Nilson that the skeleton of the young girl we found buried under the old bowling green was their daughter, Millie: the DNA from the bones is an exact match for theirs. Very tragic.”

“Oh, that’s terrible. Poor Mary and Henry must be grief-stricken. Not knowing what happened to Millie for all these years almost killed Mary.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine. I have some other distressing news. Would you like one of the carers to be with you?”

“I’ve been on my own a long time now, Inspector. You can tell me.”

“Further digging at the allotment turned up a gold bracelet. On the back of the name plate there was a message –”

Before he could finish, she interrupted him. “To Richard cherish this, love mum and dad.”

“Ah, so you also believe it’s Richard’s body?” Blake asked, treading carefully.

She sighed. “My brush with death has tugged at my conscience and the thought of taking what I know to the grave has become too much of a burden for my old heart. I want to die in peace, with my conscience clear for when I’m re-united with my daughter Jennifer,” she said, staring longingly at the small framed picture of her daughter on the shelving unit next to her chair.

Blake felt humble. “OK, I’m listening, but before we go any further, because you aren’t well enough to go to the police station for a proper interview, would it be OK to record our conversation?” he asked, knowing anything she said would be inadmissible in court unless it was recorded.

She paused a moment. “The same as you do when you’re grilling a suspect?”

She seemed sharp as a tack regarding procedures. Probably all those murder mystery audios she had listened to. “In principle. I’m going to ask Mrs Brierley to witness you signing a permission form and take a picture of you doing that in her presence; is that OK, Mrs Gerard?”

She squinted through her thick lenses at him. “You’re not trying to trick me, are you, Inspector?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, you’d see straight through me. It’s all legal and above board,” he said. She reminded him of Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple.

He went in search of the owner.

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Fifteen minutes after Mrs Brierley had protested, saying it was unethical and she wasn't happy, Blake placed his phone on top of the shelving unit next to Edith Gerard's armchair and asked her to continue.

She leaned stiffly toward the phone. "Are we live?"

Blake gave her the thumbs up, then introduced himself, adding the time and date as if it were a regular interview.

"Firstly, I want to say Richard had his demons. He tried to bury them, believe me, but his own father was an evil man who abused his family. It had a lasting effect on Richard. Sadly those demons didn't resurface until our marriage became strained."

"I know this must be painful, but when you say 'strained' what exactly happened?"

"Where to start," she said, stooping forward in the chair. "Despite his aggression toward me and Jennifer, Richard was a weak man, easily led by others. He became friends with a man who played bowls with Henry Nilson: his name was Bob Bennault. They made a good team and won plenty of matches. Anyway, early June in 1978, Mary came to me and said there was something going on in the upstairs bar of the club after hours. Richard started to come home drunk after every match and I could smell perfume on him."

Blake's brow rose. "I see. Was there anything else that made you suspicious?"

She became noticeably distressed.

"I realise this is hard, take your time," he reassured her.

"I'm ashamed to say, more than once I found underwear in his bowls bag. Small knickers, the kind that would fit young girls."

"Are you sure you wouldn't like a female member of staff to support you, Mrs Gerard?"

Coughing, she waved a hand. "It's taken me years to pluck up the courage to unburden myself. If I stop now I'm not sure I could continue. Just give me a minute," she said, reaching gingerly into the windowsill to take a sip from a glass of water with a shaky hand. She continued, "Mary said Millie had been upset for a while and she'd told her to finish the glass-collecting and general duties at the club because this Bob Bennault had been making crude remarks to her. She also said Richard had touched her inappropriately several times. Broke my heart, that did. Our daughter was the same age."

"This explains a lot. Not sure if you know, but Bob Bennault was a children's sports coach in the late seventies and eighties. He was convicted of sexual abuse against underage girls and has been in prison for over ten years for his crimes. I hate to say this but, given what you've told me, it seems Richard was involved in this abuse."

Edith Gerard sighed. "That's why I needed to get our daughter away from him. We had planned in secret to leave early one morning after Richard had gone to work. Our bags were packed and hidden in the shed, but on the morning we were going Mary rung me, she was in a terrible state. Henry had been run over by a car whilst taking their dog out, and was in hospital in a critical condition. The doctors said he would never walk again so we put our plans on hold. She was a good friend and I wanted to support her."



“And this was before Millie went missing?” Blake asked for clarification.

“Yes. I was on my way to comfort Mary, when I saw Richard messing in our garage, so I gave him the bad news and asked him why he hadn’t gone to work. He said a fox ran out on him the night before and he was trying to push a dent out of the car bonnet. He’d been to the pub with Bob Bennault and had driven.”

“So he was well over the limit?”

She hesitated before answering, “He came home very drunk.”

“And you thought he was lying?”

“At the time, I believed him, but later, when Mary said Henry went out to walk the dog after dark, I suspected it was Richard who ran him over.”

“Did you challenge him about it?”

“No, because confrontation set him off and I was scared he’d hurt our daughter.”

“And you didn’t tell Mary Nilson of your suspicions?”

“No.”

“It must have been a tough time for you and your daughter? Did the police ever question Richard about Henry Nilson’s accident?”

“No, they put it down to a random hit-and-run.”

“That’s poor policing. Then again, seatbelts weren’t a legal requirement and there were no traffic cameras, so unless someone had witnessed the accident it would have been difficult to find the culprit. Can you remember if Richard had any visible injuries?”

A concerned look appeared on her face. She gripped the arm of the chair for support.

“You OK, Mrs Gerard? Would you like me to get one of the carers?” Blake asked, worried she might be having another angina attack.

She sighed. “Sorry, raking over the past has brought it all back, but no, after one of Richard’s old school friends was killed in car accident, he began wearing his seatbelt for every journey,” she said, leaning back in the chair.

“Drunk-driving in a seat belt seems contradictory. Is there anything else you want to tell me?”

“A few days later, Millie broke down. She told Mary that Richard and Bob Bennault had locked her in the club bar and...”

Seeing her struggling, he cajoled her. “Did they rape her?”

She nodded.

“Could you say it for the recording, please?”

“Yes, the evil pair raped poor Millie on the night of her dad’s accident.”

Even though he had sensed it, the revelation still shocked Blake. “Oh god, what a predicament to find yourself in. Bennault is pure evil. It gives me no pleasure in saying it seems Richard was as bad.”

She became upset again. She retrieved a crumpled tissue from her cardigan sleeve and dabbed her eyes, then continued. “A few days later, Millie disappeared. The poor girl must have cracked carrying the burden of that around.”

“Why didn’t any of you go to the police? A serious crime had been committed.”

“It was a different era. In those days people didn’t trust the police after the ’78 miners’ strikes: the newspapers called it the winter of discontent. Believe me, Mary and I insisted, but Millie pleaded with us, she was adamant we kept quiet. She

didn't want her name splashed all over the newspapers. It was heartbreaking. I hated Richard for what he'd done and threw him out."

"Did you confront him about it?"

"He denied it, claimed Millie had got drunk, said she was a tease and sat on their laps in the club bar. His lies disgusted me."

"So you kept this hidden, all these years? Did Mary ever tell Henry?"

"Never, he was far too ill. It would have killed the poor man."

"Mrs Gerard, I'm sorry to have to tell you this: we recently got a DNA sample from Richard's brother. It's a match for the DNA extracted from the skeleton buried under the Nilsons' allotment. Do you understand?"

Blake studied her face. She didn't appear shocked.

In a hushed tone she said, "I know who killed him."

"Sorry, can you repeat that, please?"

She raised her voice for the recording. "I said I know who killed Richard."

Blake let out a low whistling sound. "How long have you known this?"

"Thirty-two years."

"Let me get this straight. You know who killed Richard and never told anyone all this time?"

"Yes."

"Why, Edith? Concealing a murder is a serious crime. What about Millie Nilson?"

"I don't know who killed the poor girl, but I'd guess it was something to do with that evil Bob Bennault," she said candidly.

"And what makes you say that?"

"It makes sense, if he raped Millie, he'd want to silence her."

Astonished, Blake asked her, "So, who killed Richard?"

"Mary Nilson. She confronted him about a week after Millie went missing. At the time, the bowling green was being dug up because it kept flooding in the autumn so they decided to have underground drains put in. It happened early one morning inside the hallway of the club house."

"Bennault could have killed Millie and buried her below the surface of the holes the ground workers dug and then replaced the soil. They would have unwittingly covered her?"

"That's awful; the poor girl must have suffered terribly."

"Definitely. Going back to Mary Nilson, did she tell you what happened?"

"I don't want to take this burden to the grave with me. I helped her bury Richard's body whilst Henry was in hospital with a broken spine."

Blake was stunned. "I wasn't expecting that, Mrs Gerard. Weren't you deeply upset she'd killed your husband?"

"Any feelings I had for Richard had waned long before. He beat me, put Henry in a wheelchair and raped poor Millie. I was glad when he was gone," she said with little remorse.

"Seems Richard's abuse has ruined several lives? I'm sorry to hear about your suffering. How did Mary kill him?"

"With a turf-cutter. I think she only intended to hurt him badly, but swung it too hard and severed the arteries in his neck. Luckily, the clubhouse was closed because of the work. The men were not due to arrive until later that day, so she

locked up and came to fetch me straight away. We wrapped his body in carpet, taped it up and frantically cleaned the place with bleach and water.”

“Can you describe the turf-cutter?”

“Half-moon-shaped with a handle like a spade.”

“It must have been very sharp to inflict that sort of trauma?”

“It was. Henry was fanatical about keeping the bowling green edges tight. He used a sharpening stone and oil after every time he’d used it.”

Blake grimaced at the thought of Mary Nilson almost beheading Richard.

“But what about when the club re-opened?” he asked.

“It didn’t. Unbeknownst to most of the members, they were badly in debt: they hadn’t been paying the mortgage. After paying the ground workers, they couldn’t re-open. Mary temporarily took over Henry’s caretaking duties and, as she was the only key holder, that gave us a few days to do a more thorough clean up and dispose of Richard’s body.”

“You expect me to believe you and Mary Nilson dismembered Richard’s body and buried him under the allotment on Chapel Road?”

“That’s what happened, we had no choice. My mum was a land girl during the Second World War. She taught me how to dig, and Mary had worked the allotment with Henry before his accident. We had the tools and the know-how.”

“Do you know who owns the deeds to number 28, Mrs Gerard?”

She nodded solemnly.

“Did the bank auction the house off?”

“They did.”

“That’s odd. Why weren’t the deeds passed on to a new owner, and why wasn’t the property developed?”

“I still own number 28. Bought it for a rock bottom price after the club defaulted on the bank payments,” she said.

Blake sighed. “I can see why you wouldn’t want the house developed. You were fearful Richard’s blood may be uncovered at any point?”

“Yes.”

“Our Land Registry search never revealed you as the current owner. In fact the deeds couldn’t be found.”

“They wouldn’t be. The place is registered to Richard and Jacob’s deceased granddad, Seth Marwood.”

“Who’s in possession of them?”

“I don’t know anymore. They were kept by a solicitor. He’s been dead for years.”

Realising it would waste a huge amount of time and resources tracking the deeds down, Blake conceded. “OK, I appreciate your honesty. I know it’s been painful dragging up the past. Even though we have your recorded confession, given your age and present health, I’ll have to consult the CPS and my superiors about how to proceed. Rest assured, I’ll be speaking to Mary Nilson immediately.”

## Chapter 27

It was half-nine when Blake arrived back at the station. Luckily, Chief Constable Coleman was still in the building so he filled him in on developments; even he seemed astonished by Edith Gerard's confession.

"Dear god, this is going to attract some unwanted media attention," he groaned.

Blake agreed. "They're going to have a field day when it eventually gets out."

"Get onto the CPS before you interview Mary Nilson. We don't want to shoot ourselves in the foot. I want everything double-checked before we charge her. Remind me, how long is left on the Nilsons' custody extension?"

Blake glanced at his watch. "A few hours."

"Thankfully, I'd say the threshold has been met and now, with Mrs Gerard's confession along with the carpet recovered from the Nilsons' loft and shed, and the pictures of Richard Taylor with Bob Bennault and Henry Nilson, we've got enough evidence to pursue her."

Blake sighed. "It was always going to be difficult. As you know, forensics degrade over time and anecdotal evidence changes. But the familial DNA taken from Jacob Taylor is rock solid."

"Is the old lady strong enough to stand trial?"

"No chance, she's just had a heart attack, and if this drags on for weeks she might not be around."

"OK, if the CPS clears it, charge Mary Nilson. I'll be watching from the viewing room," Coleman said.

"Mrs Nilson, I have just spoken with Edith Gerard at the care home. Can you tell me why you failed to inform us you are lifelong friends and have been calling each other weekly for years?" Blake challenged her.

"No comment."

"You can't deny it. Mrs Gerard was adamant in her confession," Blake said, planting the seed.

"Confession of what?"

"You tell me, Mrs Nilson. Seems you've been lying to us from day one and I'm now convinced your poor husband doesn't actually know what you've done."

"I haven't done anything apart from look after Henry and grieve my daughter all these years. I'm the injured party here. You should be looking at that evil paedophile Bob Bennault," she snapped.

"Now we're getting somewhere. Millie accused Bob Bennault and Richard Taylor of raping her, didn't she, Mary?"

"That vile pair had something to do with her disappearance."

"Do you have any evidence to prove that?"

"You know I don't."

"Is that why you killed Richard Taylor?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I was glad when he buggered off, but I had nothing to do with that," she said, her eyes heavy from lack of sleep.

"Sadly, that contradicts what Mrs Gerard admitted to me earlier. Listen."

He hit the play button on his phone and slid it to the middle of the table:

*"How did Mary kill him?"*

*“With a turf-cutter. I think she only intended to hurt him, but swung it too hard and severed the arteries in his neck.”*

Upon hearing Edith Gerard’s damning words, Mary Nilson swallowed hard, the colour drained from her face and Blake could see the betrayal rocked her to the core.

Sensing her resistance was now at its lowest point, he said, “I’m going to ask you a difficult question and would appreciate an honest answer. If you admit you killed Richard Taylor, dismembered his body, and buried it under the allotment with Edith’s help, the CPS will compassionately assess your case.”

Bringing a shaky hand to her forehead, she said, “In what way?”

“Helping us now will save time, taxpayers’ money and a lengthy trial, which should reduce your sentence; given Bob Bennault and Richard Taylor probably murdered poor Millie,” Blake said, trying to appeal to the rational woman he sensed she once was.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. “OK, I killed him.”

“Can you speak up for the recorder, please, Mrs Nilson?”

“I killed Richard Taylor, but it wasn’t premeditated. When I confronted him about Millie, he taunted me, said she was...” She took a deep breath then forced the hugely upsetting words out, “A teasing little slag. I just lost it and swung Henry’s turf-cutter at him in a rage.”

## **Chapter 28**

The man stood on Platform 11 of Crewe station smoking a panatela cigar. The stinking smoke cloud drifted over other passengers like a misty scarf and caused heads to turn in revulsion. He glanced down at the battered leather holdall by his feet. Inside it, a folio containing a arousing collection of Polaroid pictures of fourteen-year-old Millie Nilson’s drugged and restrained torso and her semi-naked body lying in the dirt of her final resting place. The thought of being able to finally pin them to a wall stirred a tingling pulse of excitement deep inside him. The rolled up deeds to 28 Chapel Road lay underneath the folio.

Good old grandad Seth Marwood, still affecting lives from the grave. That barbaric bastard had belted him once too often as a small child. As a thirteen-year-old, he discovered the perfect death in a book titled *The History of Poison*. The Egyptians disposed of undesirables with ground peach stones, which contained natural arsenic. The powder became deadly when mixed with calcium sulphate. The old alcoholic ate a peach a day and kept calcium sulphate in his shed to improve the structure of the soil in his garden vegetable patch. Fetching the wicked sod ale from the pub every day provided the perfect opportunity. Never bite the hand that feeds you.

His beloved Richard hadn’t been much better. Growing up, he had cowered in the shadow of his cruelty. Years of bullying, torments and beatings from other boys, as Richard stood by and laughed, had cemented his revenge from an early age. After he discovered another fascinating book titled *The Art of War* by

legendary master of his enemies, Japanese general *Sun Tzu*, he became a master in the art of deception and manipulation. Richard and that fool Bob Bennault made the mistake of continuing to underestimate him as he watched the arrogant pair win numerous bowls matches from the side lines.

The icing on the cake had been when they drugged Millie Nilson's coke and then raped the girl whilst making him watch and take pictures as if he was an unworthy pariah. Little did they know the girl's confession of their sick molestations would stoke the fire within Mary Nilson, providing him with another perfect opportunity to frame his *dear brother* for Millie's murder days after he had buried her body under the cover of darkness. Killing her had been too easy, after weeks of helping her ferry glasses from the bowling green to the pot wash in the upstairs kitchen during summer evening matches.

His lazy brother and that twisted bastard, Bennault, had leched over the teenager ever since she started working at the club. He, on the other hand, took a more subtle approach as a protective figure, an unofficial guardian, who advised her to ignore their sexist leering. But after seeing that pair rape her, uncontrollable urges had consumed him to the point of no return. Her sweet-scented skin was like silk in the moonlight. Strangling her, and then defiling her partially naked body, produced a euphoria far superior to any drug: an adrenalin rush he had experienced four times since his teenage years, a rush he longed to relive soon. To other men with his specific tastes, these urges were a source of endless complications and fear. Even the slightest miscalculation could alert the authorities.

The clacking of the 09.31 First Transpennine Express train to Newcastle approaching the platform brought him out his reverie. It was due to change at Edinburgh and Crianlarich before terminating at Fort William where he'd change for Aberdeen and then catch the ferry from there to Shetland.

Jacob Taylor boarded the First Class carriage, knowing he'd see his days out in the two-bedroomed croft, surrounded by barren acres, haloed under endless winter skies as dark as his desires. He'd read on a forensics website that peat bogs could preserve bodies. These natural chemical environments were saturated in organic acids, aldehydes, compacted moss layers and peat debris. Peat preserved cadavers by postponing water circulation and oxygenation. Lab experiments mimicking conditions also revealed, despite some levels of decay, bogs conserved hair and clothing. A kill could potentially last weeks, enabling him to relive the experience of handling his new victims' bodies.

## Chapter 29

The sound of early morning bird song eased Blake eyes open. He glanced at the bedside clock: 5.20 a.m. A wry smile spread across his face; knowing he had the day off gave him a warm glow. It had been too long since his last one. Turning, he snuggled up to Trudy and spooned her warm body.

"I think you need a pee darling," she said, feeling his morning glory pressing hard against her pyjamas.

God, he loved the bones of the woman. He climbed out of the bed, and headed to their en suite.

It was school holidays and the kids were excited to spend some quality time with their dad. They had planned a day out in the country to get some fresh air and exercise followed by lunch at a traditional pub with a huge pond full of Koi carp.

After breakfast, they headed for the idyllic Park Hall in Weston Coyney: the nature reserve was perfect for walks with its lakes, sandstone canyons, woodland, heathland and fishing facilities.

Half an hour later, they arrived on the car park near the visitor centre, exited Trudy's red BMW 3 series and climbed the winding steps leading to the gravel footpaths that streaked through the undulating grass and heathland. Ten-year-old Dylan bolted off in front like a dog off the lead.

"This is like being in the wild, Dad, come on!" he shouted from a safe distance whilst Isabel stayed close to her mum.

The mid-morning sun warmed their faces as they slowed the pace on the incline along a red ash pathway leading up to the heavily forested area overlooking Winter Field Heath. At the top, all four of them sat on a long wooden bench gazing at the prickly yellow-flowered gorse that carpeted the ground all around.

"I'd forgotten how lovely it is here, Tom."

"I know, it's been a long while since we've been," he said, keeping a watchful eye on Dylan who was looming dangerously close to a thirty-foot drop descending onto the next level of the forest floor.

He shouted over, "Son, come away from there. It's dangerous."

"I'll be ok, Dad."

Blake strode over to make sure. Dylan was looking down at several huge fallen pine trees: their root tendrils still clinging to large mounds of the sandy soil that covered the area.

"What made them fall over, Dad?"

"At a guess, I'd say the rains slowly eroded the soil and then high winds finished them off. Look." He pointed at several other giant pines clinging to the precipice. "You reckon they'll go, too?"

"Looks like the forests in my dinosaur book. This is such a cool place, can't wait to tell Joe about it," Dylan said, referring to his best mate at school.

Blake loved his enthusiasm. "Mum can take some pictures to show him."

"Ace," he said, darting over to her.

Trudy fished the digital camera from her coat pocket and fired off a few shots of the area. "Tom, are we making a move?"

Rejoining them, Blake slipped off his coat and tied it around his waist. "Working up a sweat," he said. "What do you think of it here, Izzy?"

"It's good. When's dinner, I'm starving?" she asked.

Blake looked at her and smirked. "You only had a big bowl of Cheerios two hours ago."

Trudy unclipped the backpack and slid it off her shoulders. "I've got flapjacks; one of those will keep you going until we get to the pub."

"OK, kids, get those down you and let's get moving," Blake said as Trudy handed out the snacks.

After they had eaten, Blake lead his family down through the trees toward lower ground covered in Christmas tree saplings and surrounded by prickly yellow gorse bushes. The bluebells edging the pathway looked like something from a dream; their tiny heads bowing gracefully toward each other in nature's courtship. Within fifteen minutes, they had reached the large lily pond. Blake kissed his wife and told her he loved her.

## Chapter 30

The drive to Old Gate Inn took about twenty minutes. Blake wanted to treat the kids to a unique dining experience with a vintage twist. Part of the pub's restaurant was situated inside two 1920s Pullman railway carriages.

They parked up, and headed into the restaurant. The head waiter ushered them into the railway carriage on the left and seated them.

"Isn't this cool, kids?" Blake said.

They looked around inquisitively at the vintage interior.

"What are these, Dad?" Dylan asked, wrapping his fingers around the brass shelf fixed above his seat.

"Those racks are where passengers used to put their luggage, son."

"Can this train move?"

Lovingly glancing at Trudy, Blake grinned. "So cute."

"Don't be silly, Dylan. They're fixed to the ground," Isabel mocked.

"I think they're on train lines, Izzy," Trudy said.

A young woman arrived with the meals and asked if they wanted any sauces before leaving them to tuck in. Blake commented on how tasty the steak was, accompanied by mushrooms, beef tomato and chunky chips. Trudy said her veggie koftas and mint sauce were delicious. After chocolate brownies and ice cream, they made their way into the garden at the back of the pub.

A large pond full of glorious orange, gold and silvery white Koi carp swam and writhed around as Dylan and Isabel threw the pellets they had bought from the bar into the water. They watched fascinated by how wide the fish's mouths opened as they fought over the food.

"Mum, look at that greedy mother. He's like you hoovering up Barney's kibble," Dylan said, recalling the time he tipped the large bag of dried dog food all over the floor attempting to feed the dog unsupervised.

Blake didn't have the heart to chastise him. Kids picked up all kinds of bad language from films and their friends at school, so they laughed it off. Instead, he grabbed the eight-year-old, spun him around and gave him a hug. He told both his kids how much he loved them.

Putting Dylan down, he kissed Trudy. "Love you too, darling," he said, forming a love heart with his hands in front of his chest.

"Ditto." Turning to the kids, she said, "I'm afraid that's it now, guys. We gotta get back. Dad's got a busy day tomorrow."



As they were leaving, Blake's phone rang. "Sorry to trouble you on your day off, Tom, but I thought you'd want to know straight away," DC Murphy said, animated.

"Fire away?"

"Just spoken to the lab about Henry Nilson's turf-cutter. They've taken the cutting head off the wooden shaft to check for blood. It was soaked in it."

"Ah, gruesome, and...?"

"There are two strains of the same blood DNA on the narrow part of the shaft which slots into the blade."

"Shit."

"Exactly. As well as Richard Taylor's blood, his brother Jacob's is also soaked into the wood grain."

"Good god, get him brought to the station ASAP; and John...?"

"Yeah."

"You pick him up. I'm gonna drop the family off at home and join you as soon as I can. Seems that bastard has some serious questions to answer."

Trudy looked at him, "Problem?"

"I've got to go in, there's been a development."

She shook her head. "Nice while it lasted, eh?"

It had been lovely to spend some quality time with his family, Blake thought, turning down the volume of his favourite Chet Baker CD. As they headed along a winding country road back towards Meir Heath, he pondered Jacob Taylor's reasons for lying to them. Glancing in the rear-view mirror, he checked the kids; seemed the fresh air and food had knocked them out. Dylan was curled sideways in a huddle whilst Isabel sat behind Blake's seat, her head back, mouth partially open. With one hand firmly on the wheel, he tapped Trudy's thigh with his other; drifting off, she squeezed his fingers, her eyelids drooping.

Without warning, a black Nissan Navara with bull bars flew out of a side lane, doing at least fifty. Blake hit the brake hard, but it was too late: the heavy pick-up slammed into the passenger side of the BMW, jolting Trudy violently sideways onto the middle of the dashboard so she missed the air bag completely. The car spun one-hundred-and-eighty degrees and careered into a thick dry-stone gatepost on the opposite side of the road. The Nissan swerved, then reversed and disappeared at break-neck speed into the distance.

Inside the steaming crumpled BMW, the force of the impact had knocked Blake unconscious. Trudy's neck was twisted and broken. The caved-in rear passenger door was wrapped around Dylan's lower body, cruelly shackling his little legs. Blood ran down his shins and dripped onto the footwell carpet. Isabel sat with her spine arched acutely forward, her head leaning on the back of the driver's seat in the aeroplane crash position.

No one moved.

A man in his sixties came running toward the car that had been forced onto the gatepost of his five-bedroomed house. With a shaky hand, he retrieved his mobile from his trouser pocket and called for an ambulance.

Twenty fateful minutes later, clouds rapidly pass through Blake's flickering eyelids as blurred consciousness returns to him. Lying on a stretcher moving toward flashing blue lights, slowly he reaches out, but a silicone glove touches his hand. He cries out for his family. The paramedic shakes his head. His solemn voice delivers a heart-wrenching blow. "I'm so sorry. We couldn't save your wife and son."

