

SHARDS OF GLASS

by

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Novel. Crime / psychological thriller

“Men lie. Men cheat. And now they should be very afraid.”

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SHARD 1

The voices in her head, they kept shouting, yelling, screaming, warning her not to step foot inside the house. Voices she vaguely recognised, somewhere, somehow, somewhen, but couldn't quite place. Young voices. Children. Boys and girls. Far too many to count. Calling her name. And calling it loud.

Kaitlyn Green was first on the scene. She had to go in, it was her job. If she was ever likely to trade her lowly police uniform for CID wear-what-you-please freedom of choice – and boy, did she crave the opportunity to play detective rather than faceless minion – she'd need to pay her dues, earn respect from above and shut away those frigging relentless cries of caution.

The front door of the house stood ajar. Whoever had dialled 999 was openly inviting company. Strange call, even stranger caller, female, no name given, sounding neither youthful nor elderly, aged somewhere in-between, her vocal tone meek and distant, yet at the same time laced with a splash of satisfied closure.

'Don't bother sending an ambulance. It doesn't look like he'll need one.'

Whatever crap had kicked off in this household, it seemed that the caller had got her own way in the end.

From the vague information at hand, the best-guess assumption was a burglary gone wrong. The scenario: Thieving scrote helps himself to the family silver. Homeowner makes an unexpected return. Said homeowner clobbers said thief over the head with the nearest available heavy ornament. Thief is out for the count. Homeowner calls the police, looking forward to seeing her face in the newspaper alongside a local hero headline.

Unless she'd killed the bastard, in which case said newspaper would be running a very different story.

The last headache Kaitlyn needed in her life right now was a second lecture from an irate forensics nerd on trashing a crime scene, last week's mistake, double facepalm, so she slipped on a pair of latex gloves before pushing the door wide open. The female police constable hovered by the entrance and peered into a stark, narrow hallway. Wallpaper age-browned and peeling. Woodwork naked and unglossed. Floor uncarpeted, no haven for sensitive bare feet. If this place could speak, it would cry out for emergency redecoration.

'Hello?' she called into the building.

Silence. Weighty, like a sodden blanket.

'Police.' More of a timid squeak than the valiant voice of authority. Shame on you, girl. She cleared her throat, then asked in a firmer tone, 'Are you okay in there?'

Ice-cold, deathly hush.

Hmm, the situation didn't look too rosy.

Then, a child's voice, female, from behind. 'What's the matter, Kaitlyn, are you scared?'

She twisted around. Nobody there.

Rolling self-scolding eyes, she almost emitted a chuckle. It was official. Kaitlyn Green had finally gone bonkers.

Back to the matter in hand, she needed to do something, and fast. Standing alone on the doorstep like an ignored double glazing salesperson was doing nobody any good. She stepped inside the house, gradual, cautious, ever alert. Back against the wall, one hand hovering over the telescopic baton hooked to her belt, she inched a snail's pace along the hallway.

Five feet ahead, the kitchen door stood partly open. Through the gap, the aftermath of chaos. An overturned ironing board. Various items of clothing scattered around it like some kind of laundry war zone. And... shit.

A tiled floor dirtied with blood.

Kaitlyn tentatively unclipped her baton and flicked it to full size. Fearful was an understatement. She was totally bricking it. A proper copper for four short months, this was her debut appearance amid this type of situation. PC Green had been most fortunate. On her beat, extreme violence hadn't reared its ugly head. A few mouthy binge drinking, middle finger extending, arse flashing idiots on a rowdy Friday night, yes, but nothing like this. Nothing potentially life threatening.

And there she stood. Alone and vulnerable. Like a lost lamb ready to be picked off by a hungry predator. Hmm. Maybe she should have listened to those voices.

Then, a sob, adult, female, coming from the room on her left. The lounge. Defence stance initiated, she raised the baton, stole a moment to prepare herself, then went in.

A lone woman in her thirties sat on the floor, lost and distant, her back propped against the far wall, her face pale and tear-stained, her clothing once virgin white, now spattered with hectic spots of dark crimson. In one quivering hand, she held a damaged steam iron, its electric cord dangling south, missing its plug, clearly wrenched from the wall socket with great force, its plastic-coated body cracked and distorted, the shiny surface of its metal soleplate smudged with smears of scarlet.

Bloody hell.

A sub-zero chill shot up the length of Kaitlyn's spine, then danced a merry jig upon her heart before abseiling south and twisting her intestines with all its might. It was obvious, code-name frigging blatant. The iron had been used as the mother of all weapons. Again. And again. And again. And again.

As the police constable approached, the woman shrank into herself. Kaitlyn lowered her baton and bent into a squat. With gazes levelled, she offered an affable smile to gain trust.

'It's okay, I'm a police officer.' Measured and unhurried, she reached for the iron. 'Mind if I borrow that?'

The woman hesitated. Then she surrendered the bloodied appliance.

‘Thank you.’ To signify zero threat, she placed both the iron and the baton a safe distance away on the floor. ‘I’m PC Green. Can you tell me your name?’

No reply.

‘Okaaaaay. I take it you live here. Am I right?’

The woman nodded. A definite yes.

Ah. Now she was getting somewhere. ‘Are you hurt in any way?’

The woman shook her head. A definite no.

She indicated to the claret. ‘Do you know whose blood this is?’

Back to no reply.

‘Did you disturb an intruder?’

Stubborn. Mute.

Kaitlyn sighed, tired of the constant flip between compliant and defiant. ‘I can’t help you unless you tell me what happened.’

The woman narrowed her eyes with odious scorn, now a different person. ‘He had it coming.’ More of a hateful growl than a casual remark.

‘Who?’

With the venom of a serpent, she hissed, ‘My husband.’

Well. This plot was certainly thickening.

Maintaining eye contact, slow, steady, gradual, Kaitlyn rose to her feet. ‘You sit tight, okay? I’m just going to check the kitchen.’

The woman said nothing, did nothing, simply stared into space, a return to her former lost and distant demeanour.

Kaitlyn revisited the hallway and spotted a discarded business card on the bare floor. She picked it up and read to herself the opening heading, bold lettering. ‘All Men Are Bastards.’ Stunned by such a damning statement, she followed through with, ‘Charming.’

The card advertised a local support group for female victims of infidelity and abuse, enticing women to stand tall against their men. For sure, this was evidence. There had to be a connection. After all, the lady in the lounge didn’t look the type to include husband bashing with a loaded iron in her list of regular pastimes. Kaitlyn slipped the card into a clear plastic evidence bag and in turn into one of her pockets. Then it was back to creeping towards the kitchen, slow and wary, unsure of what she would uncover there.

She stopped dead by the doorway and spied through the gap. Like a dropped bottle of merlot, splashes of blood fanned out across the kitchen floor in a vivid explosion of crimson. Her eyes widened, her jaw hung loose. Through the swollen vessels of both temples, she could feel her pulse quickening, badoom, badoom, badoom. She swallowed hard. Harder than ever before. Both feet refused to shift forward. They were stuck fast. The only signs of movement registering on her body were involuntary trembles. And then the sub-zero chill returned to her spine, ready to sing its encore.

Oh, that child’s voice again, whispered close to her right ear. ‘Bet you don’t go in, you scaredy cat.’

Kaitlyn turned towards the voice. Once again, there was nobody there. Shaking her head, she dealt an idiot curse. Frigging imagination running riot. ‘Quit this insanity, girl,’ she whispered to herself, ‘or you’ll be sectioned before the day is done.’

She returned her attention to the ajar kitchen entrance. It was then when she heard it. A child’s giggle. And then she felt it. A presence behind her. A young schoolgirl. Aged ten and three quarters, almost eleven. Blue and white gingham summer dress. Blonde hair tied in pigtails. And a wide gap between her two front teeth. Kaitlyn didn’t need to turn around and

lay eyes upon the child to verify her identity, precise age, choice of attire, hairstyle or dental abnormalities. She knew exactly who it was. Oh, God, she could almost taste her very presence. But how could it be her? It was physically impossible.

Numbed by sheer alarm, eyes fixed forward on the kitchen door and whatever horror lay beyond it, Kaitlyn croaked to the chilling entity that stood behind her, 'It's you.'

A firm hand from behind clasped the rookie policewoman's shoulder. Argh, she jumped out of her skin and spun around to find –

– fellow police officer Jamie Philips.

'Of course it's me,' he said. 'Who were you expecting?'

Kaitlyn glanced past Jamie. The girl, the presence, whoever, whatever had vanished. That is, if said girl, presence, whoever, whatever had actually been there in the first place.

Probably not. No doubt her mind playing stupid tricks.

Jamie added, 'I thought I told you to wait for me.' It was almost a stern, finger wagging scold of the father to wayward daughter genus.

'You were taking ages,' she replied, defiant. 'I had to respond to the call.'

Jamie had been caught short on the beat and had nipped to the toilet of the nearest pub.

'It was a long queue,' came his response. 'There was only one cubicle available. All the rest were out of order.'

Jamie was twenty-two years of age, just like her. Uniform, just like her. Oh, and rather cute. At least that's what she reckoned. Sod anybody else's opinion. Of course, nothing had ever developed between them. Just good mates. Mates in the traditional sense, not friends with benefits. The pair, however, had lost contact during the wild and reckless latter half of the teenage phase, only to be reunited four months ago on her first day on the job.

Kaitlyn figured it must have been fate. A sceptical Jamie blamed a small world.

Jamie peeked into the lounge at the pallid, trance-like woman whose scarlet-mottled attire gave the impression that she'd taken up butchery as a hobby. Open-mouthed, he returned his attention to Kaitlyn, not quite knowing for a moment what to do, say or think.

'Is she hurt?' he finally managed to ask.

'Not that I can make out.' She indicated to the kitchen. 'But I think hubby will be.'

Kaitlyn stepped forward. Jamie grabbed her arm.

'Shouldn't I be the one going in first?' he said.

'Why? Because you're the proud owner of a penis?'

Jamie had no response prepared for such a random rejoinder, so he simply shrugged his shoulders, fair enough, whatever, and allowed the girl to take the lead.

They found the husband on the kitchen floor, laying on his side in a ruby pool. It looked as though, post-attack, he'd managed to crawl a short distance towards the dining table, or rather the mobile phone that sat upon it, before losing consciousness halfway through the journey. Calling for help had clearly been his ultimate goal.

Clocking the victim's face, Kaitlyn turned away in a fusion of horror, dread, revulsion and everything related. The steam iron had dealt serious damage to the man's features. Eyes blackened. Nose smashed to pieces. Skin torn, bruised and burnt. Oh, and almost all front teeth missing. For sure, this guy was officially unrecognisable, probably even to close family.

'Fuck me,' glurked Jamie, forgetting his professional status.

'You took the words right out of my mouth,' remarked the female copper. 'This was certainly no lover's tiff.'

Kaitlyn placed two fingertips on the victim's jugular. Probably no point, but protocol needed to be followed. Then oh, her eyes bulged with pleased disbelief. 'Jamie, I've found a pulse. It's pretty faint, but the main thing is, he's still alive.'

Her partner in crime prevention looked equally stunned. ‘The lucky so-and-so. I’ll radio for an ambu—’

The iron lady exploded into the room, eyes wild, teeth bared, brandishing Kaitlyn’s baton high above her head. ‘Noooooooo! Diiiiiiiieee!’

Kaitlyn dived for the love of safety as the already mangled husband took further blow after blow after blow from his hysterical wife. Quick-thinking Jamie slammed the frenzied female against the wall, her weaponed arm held tight by the wrist, her free arm locked behind her back.

‘Drop that baton!’ he yelled, in control, authoritative, meaning business. ‘Now!’

The blubbering woman did as she was told. The baton went into freefall and clattered as it made contact with the tiled floor. Jamie whipped out a pair of handcuffs and shackled his prisoner. He then looked across to Kaitlyn who lay on the floor, shaken up, disorientated.

‘Are you all right?’

Kaitlyn nodded, a little unsure. ‘I think I’ll live.’

It didn’t take long for the authorities to break the tranquillity of leafy suburbia. Or rather trash it to oblivion. The road outside the house now staged a chaotic symphony of activity in four movements.

Movement 1: A substantial yet pointless rendezvous of emergency services vehicles. Six police cars, one police van, two forensics 4x4 monstrosities and three ambulances. Talk about overkill.

Movement 2: A continuous and unnecessary neon-esque lightshow of blue flashing lamps. Why keep them blazing? Nobody needed reminding that the cavalry had arrived. Such a

needless display of blinding illumination could probably be seen from space. It was like a rave party, but without the pill popping, the glowsticks, the apple eyes and idiot grins.

Movement 3: A herd of diligent spacemen in their brilliant white all-in-one jumpsuits, busying around and doing their thing. They looked more like cute children's television characters than forensic pathologists.

And finally, Movement 4: The constant jabber-jabber, hiss, crackle, jabber-jabber of hectic back and forth radio exchanges. No wonder the whole world, his brother and their second cousin twice removed had turned up to pursue their favourite hobby of rubber-necking, all participants herded like factory-farmed cattle behind the police tape that cordoned off the immediate area.

Kaitlyn sat on the bonnet of one of the six police cars, taking stock of the situation and scolding herself inside for the trio of fuck-ups she'd made today, namely:

1. Going into the house alone.
2. Allowing a civilian free use of a police baton for an impromptu episode of husband clobbering.

And 3. Crawling out of frigging bed this morning.

Oh, why had she shut off the annoyance of her alarm clock when she could have so easily hit snooze every ten minutes right up until bedtime?

She watched two paramedics stretcher the victim into one of the three ambulances, wondering what the poor man had done to deserve such a... such a... The only relevant word that sprang to mind was beating, but even that particular B-word seemed far too tame and insufficient to describe a horrific attack of this calibre.

Jamie appeared, indicating to the heavy surrounding traffic. 'How many emergency services vehicles for one victim, one assailant? Some onlookers are taking bets on whether the fire and coastguard services will come a'calling, just to make it the full set.'

Kaitlyn managed a faint smile. She then noticed that he was the proud owner of two takeaway beverages, one of which he handed over.

'There you go, Kaitlyn. Coffee. Extra strong. Just how you like it.'

She dealt a puzzled frown. 'Where did you get this?'

Jamie grinned as he pointed beyond the frantic flurry of flashing lights and fluorescent yellow jackets. 'Would you believe a burger van has set up shop over there?'

'British business acumen, huh?' she observed.

To which Jamie replied, 'Just can't be beaten.'

Kaitlyn passed him the evidence bag containing the business card she'd found on the hallway floor. 'What do you make of this?'

Jamie read aloud the text. 'All Men Are Bastards.' To those four words, he looked as stunned as his police partner had been upon first read. 'Is he cheating on you?' he continued to quote. 'Beating you up? Hurting you in any way? Do not suffer in silence. Join us and together we will kill the abuse dead.' He returned the clear bag to Kaitlyn, shaking his head in astounded disbelief at the sheer gall of the message it gave out. 'Bloody hell.'

'My sentiments exactly,' remarked Kaitlyn. 'Talk about an extremist self-help campaign.'

The shadow of their superior officer then darkened their sun. DCI Ruth Blanchard. Just into her fifties. Three decades on the job had greyed the majority of her locks and carved noticeable lines on her face, but the woman retained an adequate degree of attractiveness. Oh, and judging by the way the cut of her blouse revealed far more cleavage than the average fifty-something would dare to bare, her breasts hadn't yet plummeted south. To Kaitlyn, this was most surprising. The woman's general appearance, that is, and not just her bosom

rigidity status. After thirty years of dealing with murders, rapes, serious assaults and whatever else the bustling town of Jillingford chose to vomit all over the senior plod's official threads, it was a wonder the Detective Chief Inspector didn't look another two hundred years older.

'Nasty business.' The half-eaten hotdog in Blanchard's hand betrayed the upkeep of regal authority. 'Excuse the junk food. I haven't eaten since breakfast.'

Kaitlyn removed her buttocks from the car bonnet and stood up straight. 'Ma'am, I found this in the house.' She handed over the evidence bag. 'Figured there might be a connection.'

Blanchard examined the find with interest. 'Indeed there is. Or at least that's what we believe. In the last month alone, we've seen three other violent assaults by women against their partners. On each occasion, the aggressor has been a member of this support group. The meetings are held at the local community centre and chaired by, of all people, Meredith Payne.' The DCI paused to swallow. Rogue saliva, it seemed, and not the devilish work of the hotdog. From her pained expression, it looked as though the quoted name had left a sour taste in her mouth. 'That woman certainly has a lot to answer for.'

Kaitlyn had to ask. It was bugging her badly. 'Who's Meredith Payne?'

Blanchard offered across the gravest of looks. 'Your worst nightmare. Quadrupled.'

SHARD 2

The police station's visuals room sounded (to officers who hadn't yet stepped inside its four walls) somewhat sexy and futuristic. In reality, however, it boasted a pretty basic set-up, consisting of two desks kissed together, a scattering of plastic chairs and a family of widescreen monitors, beaming in sound and pictures live and uncut from any of building's stark, almost clinical interview rooms.

The image of the woman with a penchant for striking quite literally while the iron's hot filled the screen of the active monitor. She sat alone in one such interview room, facing forward, both hands placed upon the desk. Kaitlyn, Jamie and DCI Blanchard watched as she awaited her fate and did nothing of any real interest. Gone was the shrinking violet Kaitlyn had met back at the house. The woman now held her head high, cool, collected and in a way, almost content.

The door of the visuals room swung open. DI Adrian Telford tottered in, lost somewhere in his late forties, the owner of fingertips stained by a lifetime of chain smoking, and if his inflated spare tyre of an abdomen was anything to go by, no lover of fitness. Oh, and he was also a bit of a dick. Or at least that's what Kaitlyn reckoned, not only for being brash and vindictive, especially to female uniformed officers, but for the fact that he laid claim to post-ironic retro fashion taste, all because he chose to bypass conventional retail avenues and purchase his suits from charity shops. As such, Kaitlyn and most likely the rest of the world viewed him as a miserly collector of bargain-basement ex-threads of the dearly departed.

'Sorry I'm late, Ma'am. Traffic was mental.'

He plonked his posterior on the chair closest to Blanchard and lobbed the woman an all too reverent smile. Kaitlyn rolled her eyes toward the heavens. His gesture had suck-up written all over it. Sure, just like everybody else, she was keen to better herself by climbing

the slippery ladder of promotion. Only, she hoped she could manage the task with hard work, determination and guts rather than the odd arse lick here and there. Did they still welcome rank advancement via merit alone in this establishment? She certainly hoped so.

‘Now we’re all present and correct...’ Blanchard lobbed Telford just enough of a pause and glare combo to warn him to be more punctual in future. ‘...our subject’s name is Tara Jenkins.’ She consulted a scrawl of handwritten notes on a clipboard. ‘Housewife by trade. Oddly, no children. Has been married to the victim of the assault, John Jenkins, for the last fifteen years. According to our records, not one single report of domestic violence has ever been made from that household.’

‘She told me he had it coming,’ contributed Kaitlyn. ‘So something must have been going on behind closed doors.’

A sympathetic pout from the DCI made itself known. ‘Then one can only assume she was suffering in silence.’

‘I must say,’ chipped in Telford, ‘she looks remarkably calm for somebody who’s just stoved in her husband’s face. Has she got any previous?’

‘Not a sausage,’ Blanchard replied. ‘Not even the proverbial parking ticket.’

Blanchard’s mobile phone decided the time was right to beg for attention. She took the call straight away. Her face stiffened in response to the message. She thanked the caller for letting her know, then killed the handset and turned to the others.

‘That was the hospital. John Jenkins died of his injuries ten minutes ago.’

Grim faces all round.

Telford remarked, ‘A grievous bodily harm charge upgraded to murder.’

Blanchard stood up. ‘Let’s get some answers from the wife.’

As if rehearsed, in complete unison, Telford and Kaitlyn both rose from their chairs.

The portly DI threw her an odd look. ‘Where do you think you’re going?’

Kaitlyn. Taken aback by his query. Was it not obvious? ‘To assist in the interview of Tara Jenkins.’

Telford snorted. Loudly. ‘I don’t think so.’ Blatant scorn. ‘This is a job for experienced officers.’ Blatant piss-take. ‘I suggest you take a seat and watch the experts in action. Who knows? You might even pick up a few tips.’ Blatant patronising gumpf of the highest order.

Inside, Kaitlyn seethed. Outside, she tried her hardest not to display such pot-boiler frustration. She tipped a respectful nod and calmly uttered, ‘Sir.’ What she truly wished to do was call him a tosser, a wanker, an arsehole, all the names under the sun, but didn’t.

Blanchard and Telford left the room. As soon as the door closed behind them, Kaitlyn turned to Jamie, disillusioned and undervalued.

‘What a dick. I don’t understand what he’s got against me.’

‘Don’t take it personally. DI Telford is no lover of new recruits.’

The statement didn’t exactly help matters. ‘Jamie, I haven’t just arrived here on the plane from Idiotville. I’ve been an official plod now for four months.’

‘That’s still a rookie in his eyes.’

Kaitlyn decided to concede. This was one debate she didn’t stand a chance of winning. Telford was a cock. Nothing would change that. One flaccid, impotent, useless human penis. Oh, and not just to her, it had to be noted. He seemed to treat all his work colleagues – and most likely friends and acquaintances, hah, if he had any, and not forgetting the poor bitch who had been stupid enough to accompany him down the aisle – with the same amount of contempt he’d display upon the discovery of a nasty surprise of canine origin on the soles of a brand new pair of shoes. That is, except for DCI Blanchard. To her, he delivered the utmost respect. Yes, Ma’am, no, Ma’am, three bags full, Ma’am.

Kaitlyn managed to come off the boil and ease down to a gentle simmer. Life was too short to fret about DI Penis. She made herself as comfortable as she could manage on her

lumpy-bumpy, rock-hard plastic chair and aimed her eyes at the monitor. There she watched as Blanchard and Telford filled in their prisoner with all the usual preamble and what's-happenings before proceeding with the interview.

'Mrs Jenkins, I must inform you,' said a poker-faced Blanchard, 'this is now a murder investigation. Your husband didn't make it.'

Overjoyed relief erupted from Tara's body like feathered seeds taking flight from a wind-swept dandelion. The two senior police officers exchanged furrowed brows of question. This woman's actions were most unexpected. And not to mention, unduly inappropriate.

Blanchard asked, 'Can you not grasp the seriousness of this situation?'

'Yes. It means I'm finally free of him.'

Back in the visuals room, Kaitlyn couldn't believe what she was witnessing. Had their prisoner truly rearranged her husband's face with the nearest available household appliance just to be rid of the guy? Fuck's sake, if she was that unhappy, the stupid mare could have easily packed her things and left. Much simpler. And it was a method that didn't carry a custodial sentence. That's what Kaitlyn would have done, most definitely. Oh, yes. A Dear John letter, a wardrobe of scissor-damaged clothes and one hell of an extended middle finger. The perfect, 'Fuck you, I'm out of here, wanker.' But no. Tara Jenkins had opted for a different approach. Namely, taking the life of the male of the species who had shared her life, her house, her bed, her everything for the last fifteen years. Idiot. Didn't she realise? No frigging man was worth doing time for, yet there in that interview room sat a fresh widow whose next abode for the next God knows how many years would be a prison cell.

It was a shame of the crying class. She wanted to feel sorry for the woman, she really did, but couldn't. The grisly outcome of what had happened in that house was Tara's own doing. She was ultimately responsible for her husband's death, and as such had to pay for her actions. After all, law and order were present in society for a bloody good reason.

Meanwhile, in the interview room, Blanchard continued. 'You turned down the offer of representation from our duty solicitor. Would you now like to change your mind?'

Tara's joy waved goodbye as her demeanour returned to its previous sober state. 'What's the point? I know what I've done and I'm guilty as charged.'

'As you wish.'

'I did warn him,' Tara explained. 'But he didn't listen. John was never one to take any notice of a word I said.' An ugly sneer contorted her face. 'Until today.' She began to fidget. Rub her hands. Clench and open her fists in quick succession. 'He was a vile man. An animal. He used to beat me regularly. Didn't need a reason. It was just his way.'

'Why didn't you come to us?' asked Blanchard. 'We could have done something about it.'

Tara scoffed in true "yeah, right, as if" fashion. 'Let me ask you a question. Have you ever lived in total fear of the man who's supposed to love you?'

Blanchard looked down at the desk, a temporary avoidance of eye contact, as if laden with guilt for lacking the relevant experience. 'No. I haven't.'

'Then you will never truly understand.'

For a long moment, an awkward hiatus heavied the atmosphere.

Telford then chose to intervene. 'Mrs Jenkins. Did your husband assault you today?'

'No. He didn't touch me.'

'In that case, what was it that prompted you to...?' He wrestled for the most apt phrase.

Too late. Beaten by a grinning Tara. 'Demolish his face with a steam iron?'

Telford looked ill at ease with her somewhat interesting choice of words. 'Yes. That.'

The prisoner's grin was lost. 'I did it for the greater good.'

Telford raised an intrigued eyebrow. 'Care to elaborate on that remark?'

'I wasn't the only woman in my husband's life. John had several bits of the side. He made no secret of his conquests. I think he got off on me knowing all the ins and outs.' She dealt an

involuntary grimace. ‘The bastard was never short of female company. You see, it was his smile. It attracted them like a magnet.’ Her face hardened, no remorse, no empathy, nothing. ‘That’s why I had to smash it right out of his mouth.’

Blanchard and Telford gave no immediate vocal response. Instead, they performed a double act of uncomfortable shifting in their seats. In the visuals room, Kaitlyn and Jamie were equally lost for words. Talk about a woman scorned.

Blanchard cast her rod and began to fish for information. ‘You mentioned a moment ago how you did it for the greater good. Can you explain to us what you meant by that?’

Tara nodded. ‘John also hit his other women. Mostly for stupid reasons. I remember him coming home one morning and bragging about how he’d busted the ribs of one of his whores for breaking the yolk of his fried egg. That’s what he was like. An evil, callous brute.’

Tara exhaled a long-trailing sigh. For what exactly was anybody’s guess. Was it the regret of not leaving the man years ago and instead putting up with all his shit? Or sympathy for those who had warmed their beds and opened willing legs for the bastard, only then to take his punches as thanks for their gifts of lust? Probably an equal fusion of both.

‘I didn’t know any of his women personally. But I guarantee they were all scared stiff of the wanker. I can imagine how they felt in his presence. Trapped like caged animals in their own homes. Just like me.’

Blanchard attempted to piece it all together. ‘Are you trying to tell us you murdered your husband to end their pain?’

Tara shook her head, a firm no. ‘For those women, it’s far too late. They’ve suffered at the hands of a monster. They’ll be forced to live with their own personal nightmares for the rest of their lives. Once again, just like me.’

Telford was growing tired of travelling all the way round the headache of a virtual one-way system to get to the house next door. ‘Mrs Jenkins, this is all very sad, but I’d love more

than anything to complete this interview before the next ice age. Therefore, can you please tell us as concisely as possible the reason why you topped your husband?’

Bad cop.

Blanchard scowled at her colleague. Empathy College graduate? Hell, no. In response to her glare, Telford shrugged his shoulders, oblivious. He didn’t need to utter, ‘What did I say?’ It was written all over his face. As a result, Blanchard shook her head in an incredulous manner at his distinct lack of compassion and awareness.

‘Please continue, Mrs Jenkins,’ the DCI uttered in a gentle tone. ‘In your own time.’

Good cop.

Tara appreciated her kindness and carried on with the explanation. ‘John came home at lunchtime and told me he’d met a new potential mistress. Cindy, I think he said her name was. He’d arranged a date for tonight and demanded that I iron his best shirt. So like a good wife, I heated up the iron, placed his shirt on the ironing board...’ The contemptuous sneer of the century then dominated her face. ‘...and burnt a bloody great hole through it.’

Blanchard and Telford swapped further uneasy glances, as did Kaitlyn and Jamie in the other room. A woman scorned now appeared too insufficient as a suitable phrase. A woman totally fucked up seemed far more appropriate.

Tara chuckled to herself, as if reciting a humorous anecdote to good friends. ‘You should have seen him. He went totally ballistic, banging on about how I’d ruined his future happiness. I lost count of the times he called me the C-word.’ Smile lost, return of the sneer. ‘That’s when I snapped.’ Goodbye sneer, hello to a mute moment of reflective self-disbelief, surprised, shocked, astounded by the enormity, the extent, the sheer power of her snapping moment. ‘And the rest is all a blur.’

Telford’s nose wrinkled. ‘You destroyed your husband’s face over an obscenity?’

Tara shook her head, no, no, no, no, no, and clenched both fists. 'You're not getting it, are you? Why don't you people understand?'

Good cop Blanchard contributed, 'Then help us understand. Tell us the reason why.'

The good cop strategy seemed to work. Tara allowed her steeled body to relax. She loosened her fingers and exhaled a slow wisp of air, as if letting out built-up steam from an overworked valve.

'I killed my husband to save Cindy... and all the others yet to come. Don't you see? I did what I did to stop all future suffering.' She almost broke into a smile, born partly out of the success of her quest and partly because her mind had been fractured beyond repair by years of sadistic torment. 'It's funny when you think about it.'

Telford frowned. 'Funny?'

'Yes. This Cindy girl will never get to meet me in person. But she will thank me for what I did.'

In the visuals room, Kaitlyn leaned back in her chair, deep in thought. She found the woman's statement rather odd, yet it also made perfect sense. Tara had indeed saved Cindy, whoever she was. After all, John's latest flame had no idea what she was getting herself into. Oh, and it was highly doubtful that she knew he was married. To this girl, it was a first date like any other. A night out with the owner of a beautiful smile. It could lead to something wild and romantic. Perhaps a serious relationship. Or even, somewhere down the line, a church wedding with all the trimmings. Wow. The only way was up. What could possibly go wrong? Hmm. If it hadn't been for an angry wife and an iron, the Cindy in question would have discovered the hard way that she was no judge of character.

A very different sequence of events was due to play out tonight. Cindy would turn up at the pre-arranged time and place. Brimming with excitement, anticipation and everything related, she'd wait patiently for her date to arrive. And wait some more. And some more.

John's curious absence would prompt the girl to leave a string of messages on his voicemail. The casual and optimistic, 'I guess you must be held up. See you when you get here,' would gradually morph into the rather less positive, 'Where the fuck are you? I look like a right Betty No Mates sitting here on my own.' Nevertheless, her concrete faith in the guy with a killer smile would convince Cindy to wait a little longer. Ah, but the eventual realisation of being stood up, jilted, pissed upon and made to look like a fifty million carat idiot would soon knock some much-needed sense into the girl.

One final call would be made to John's mobile. Voicemail message: 'You bastard fuck! Hope you die a horrible slow death for standing me up!' Next, she'd make an emergency trip to the toilets where she would locate a vacant cubicle, lock herself away from the world and cry her eyes out. The raging flames of hurt, frustration, anger and embarrassment would heat up her tears. They'd sting her eyes and swell her reddened eyelids. But when she was all cried out, the girl would veer towards couldn't care less mode. 'Ah, fuck it, I don't need him anyway,' she'd hiss to herself whilst masking the pink bags under her eyes with cosmetic camouflage. 'I don't need anybody.'

Onwards and upwards, she'd gravitate towards a late bar and drown her proverbial sorrows by getting hopelessly bladdered. Eventually and inevitably, she'd find herself thrown out of the establishment for swearing at anybody and everybody within earshot, after which she'd chuck up the spoils of her alcohol binge in the nearest accommodating alleyway. If by this time she hadn't mislaid her phone, she'd call for a taxi. The radio controller would promise a pick-up within five minutes. The cab would turn up forty-six minutes later. Once home, she'd collapse straight onto her lonely bed, still fully clothed. Or failing that, face down on the bedroom carpet. Cue the inevitable thunder of monster snores.

Morning would break. Cindy would open her tired, bloodshot eyes to the world. 'Shit, my head is killing me.' Emergency headache tablets. Emergency coffee, black and strong. TV

switched on. Headline news. Filling the screen, a pre-death image of John's mug. 'Fuck, he's been murdered.' Ongoing reports throughout the day would teach her more about the man with the addictive smile. For sure, the dirty laundry would all spill out. His bits on the side. The violence towards them. His hatred of all womankind. 'Pig.' And then she'd learn all about the person who terminated the monster's existence. His long-suffering wife. Only then would Cindy realise...

...she'd had the mother of all lucky escapes.

Back to the reality of the interview room, Blanchard produced the business card that Kaitlyn had found in the hallway of the house, still enveloped in the evidence bag, and placed it upon the desk.

Telford explained for the benefit of the tape exactly what had been revealed to their prisoner, exhibit so-and-so.

Blanchard then said, 'Tell me about this.'

Tara peered at the card, then back at Blanchard. 'It's a business card.'

'Yes, I'm aware of that. But I want to know exactly what goes on at these meetings.'

Tara shrunk into herself, cagey, guarded. 'You leave Meredith out of this. She's done nothing wrong.'

'Then you won't mind telling me all about her support group.'

No reply.

'I hope you realise, you're not doing yourself any favours by withholding information.'

Once again, no reply.

'Looks to me like you're covering for the woman. Why would you do that?'

'I said leave Meredith out of it.'

Blanchard leaned back in her chair. 'Know what I think?'

Tara shrugged, not fussed.

‘You don’t look the violent type. I believe today was the first time in your whole life you’d ever lashed out. I’m right, aren’t I? I can see it in your eyes. You probably didn’t even know you had it in you.’ No more good cop, it was now quickfire question after question. ‘Is that the reason why you decided to attend the meetings? To learn how to stand up for yourself? To fight your way out of an abusive marriage? To devise an escape plan? To be rid of him... permanently?’

Again, Tara fell mute, stubborn, unwilling to cooperate.

Blanchard was in no way prepared to give up. She tapped the card with her finger. ‘This line here bothers me. “Join us and together we will kill the abuse dead.” What exactly does that mean?’

‘None of your business.’

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Jenkins, but it is my business. This afternoon, you committed murder... and I’m not convinced you did it off your own back.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘Did Meredith Payne tell you to kill your husband?’

‘No way. She’s not like that.’

A stern Telford joined in. ‘Did she plant the idea in your head? Is that what “together we will kill the abuse dead” means?’

‘You don’t understand, she’s there for me. Meredith’s my rock. The best friend I’ve ever had.’

Blanchard scoffed. ‘That woman is nobody’s friend.’ It was the harsh tone of somebody who had given the interviewee plenty of chances, but now enough was enough. She wanted results. ‘Mrs Jenkins. Please answer the question. Yes or no? Did Meredith Payne lead you to believe the only way out was to end your husband’s life?’

Then came silence. Cold. Hollow. So quiet, the cogs in Tara's brain could be heard turning, clunking, grating, attempting to work things out, desperate to search for a solution. She glanced at Telford, then back at Blanchard.

Her eventual reply came calm and polite. 'If it's not too much trouble, I would now like to request legal representation.'

Kaitlyn's brief spell of time spent in the visuals room watching the Jenkins interview unfold, although a tad surreal and more than a little frightening, had been an educational experience. Uniform were rarely allowed inside these four walls. This was CID territory. She felt honoured that Blanchard had given her the opportunity to see how the other half lived. Telford, on the other hand, hadn't made her feel at all welcome. Of course, it was hardly a surprise. The guy treated criminals with more respect than rookie police officers.

Before the interview could proceed any further, they needed to await the arrival of the duty solicitor who had taken it upon himself to enjoy an overly long lunch break. This left Telford no choice but to escort Tara to the holding cells situated deep in the basement of the station. Upon the return of DI Penis to the visuals room, he took one look at Kaitlyn and Jamie and proved Kaitlyn's respect theory correct.

'Shouldn't these two be back out on the beat?'

Blanchard ignored the remark. Instead, she asked him, 'What did you make of Tara Jenkins?'

'Weird. That woman doesn't realise the seriousness of her crime. It's like she's enjoying telling us how she did the right thing. Yet the moment Meredith Payne is mentioned, she turns all jumpy and cagey and totally shuts off.'

‘Looks to me like she’s terrified of the woman,’ chipped in Kaitlyn.

‘She has every reason to be,’ responded a grave Blanchard. ‘Meredith did a full twenty-five stretch with no parole for murdering her husband.’

Kaitlyn. Stunned. ‘Twenty-five years?’

‘The judge felt he had to make an example of the woman. What she did went way beyond a crime of passion.’

‘Why, what happened?’ asked Kaitlyn, keen to be enlightened.

Blanchard reeled off the yarn. ‘She was a nineteen-year-old newlywed who thought she’d found herself the perfect man... until her illusions were shattered when she arrived home early one day and caught her husband having it away with the next-door neighbour.’ She tried her best to recall her name. ‘Diane something or other.’ Then back to the explanation. ‘To her husband’s surprise, Meredith didn’t say a word and calmly left the bedroom. But then she returned with a kitchen knife and hacked off his genitalia.’

Gobsmacked owl eyes and sharp suck-ins of air all round. Without thinking, on complete impulse, Telford and Jamie guarded their groins with both hands.

‘That’s not the worst part,’ the DCI continued, her face grey with dread as she recounted the grisly events. ‘Meredith fried his penis and testicles, served them up with a salad garnish and forced him to eat the lot.’ The extended pause that followed certainly gave the desired dramatic effect. ‘Before watching the poor sod bleed to death.’

For one long, lingering moment, her audience stood numb and speechless.

It was Jamie who broke the stifling hush. ‘What happened to the neighbour?’

‘Meredith let her go.’

Kaitlyn frowned. ‘Just like that?’

‘Not exactly. She advised the girl to pack her things and move as far away as possible, just in case she changed her mind and decided to dish out her punishment after all. The poor lass

must have been forever looking over her shoulder. Even when Meredith was sent down, Diane no doubt continued to fear for her life, thinking the woman would send somebody to get her.' Blanchard glanced at her listeners one by one. Satisfied they were all suitably captivated, she added, 'Last year, Meredith was finally granted freedom. On the very same day of Meredith's release, Diane jumped off the roof of a multi-storey car park.' She shook her head, sympathetic, compassionate, as if mourning the needless suicide. 'If you want my opinion, I'd say it was the husband who got off lightly.'

Total silence.

Followed by the urgent buzz, buzz, buzz of an alarm going bonkers.

Blanchard's jaw fell limp as she realised, 'The holding cells.'

By the time the foursome reached Tara's pen, it was already too late. The concrete cell floor was awash with a vast ocean of dark scarlet. The lifeless Tara lay spread-eagled on her back, saturated in the blood that had showered from deep slits in both wrists. Sam, the policeman who had been in charge of the lock-ups since the year dot, knelt over the body, wide-eyed and helpless. There was nothing anybody could have done. The prisoner had already hitched a ride out of this life and was long gone.

Kaitlyn turned away, palming her mouth tight, trying her hardest not to allow her last meal to make a return visit. She'd seen enough blood earlier. And now this. God, it was all too much. Her stomach knotted, her legs almost buckled. Oh, fuck, it would be so embarrassing if she passed out right here, right now. Telford would love it. 'See what I mean?' he'd taunt in full gloat mode. 'Told you she's not cut out for police work.' Therefore, the triumph of DI

Penis had to be avoided at all costs. She sucked in much-needed oxygen and went about pulling herself together.

Take a good look at the gallery of horrors, girl. It won't be your last viewing.

'What the hell happened here?' barked Telford.

Pallid and distraught, Sam pointed to a small and bloodied shard of shiny metal on the cell floor. 'She slashed her wrists with that piece of blade. And then she slit open her neck, just to make sure.'

Telford stepped back a pace, aghast. 'She cut her own throat?'

Sam nodded, dour and grim. He rose to his feet, enabling full view of the ex-Mrs Jenkins. Sure enough, from ear to ear, a cavernous crescent gash ran across her throat, gurning a macabre grin to its horrified audience.

The DI was sick of the constant buzz, buzz, buzz. 'Can somebody please kill that alarm? It's doing my bloody head in.'

Dutiful and obedient, Sam scurried out of the cell. Within seconds, they were all blessed with the extra-soft two-ply luxury of hush.

A niggling thought knocked on Blanchard's door. 'How on earth did she sneak in a blade? I thought she was searched.'

'She was,' claimed the returning Sam, equally baffled. 'Thoroughly.'

Kaitlyn spotted something soft, cylindrical and very familiar to her gender in the far corner of the cell. Donning latex gloves, she bent down and picked it up, inspecting the object with curiosity. The moist and swollen article boasted a small but deep hole skewered into its base. Strange. The incision was not part of its original factory settings. Further examination revealed that Tara must have pushed the slender fragment of blade into the spongy cylinder, a task she clearly performed prior to Kaitlyn's visit to the house. The purpose of the item, a

makeshift chamber, bloated and cushioned enough to safely accommodate the blade during internal transit.

She held the object aloft. 'This is how she smuggled in the blade.'

Telford peered across, squinting to gain adequate focus. 'What's that?'

'A tampon.'

Blanchard gawped, astonished. 'You mean she had it up her...' She found it difficult to complete the query.

Kaitlyn threw over a nod and wince combo.

'Dear God,' The DCI responded. 'Tara must have planned this all the long.'

'An emergency get-out clause,' remarked Kaitlyn, ambivalent in her view that Tara had either been very clever or very stupid. 'Just in case questioning got too hot.'

Befuddled, Telford attempted to get his head around the recently deceased woman's motives. 'Are you trying to tell me the dense bint would rather top herself than spill the beans about Meredith Payne?'

Looking more than a little distressed, Blanchard replied, 'It certainly looks that way.'

Astonished silence.

Then Telford shrugged his shoulders. 'What now?'

Blanchard caught her breath, composed her manner and decided that she needed to wrap up this conversation. 'I think it's high time we paid that woman a visit.'

SHARD 3

The very moment the two senior police officers stepped foot inside Jillingford Community Centre, they became aware of an abrupt icy chill.

‘Is it just me or has the temperature suddenly plummeted?’ asked Telford.

‘That’ll be Meredith Payne,’ came Blanchard’s grim reply.

They entered the main hall. A slim woman sporting elegant retro threads that wouldn’t look out of place in the 1980s US TV show Dynasty stood facing the opposite direction, stacking away chairs.

‘Excuse me,’ called Blanchard on her approach. ‘We’re looking for Meredith Payne.’

The woman turned around and smirked. ‘You’ve just found her.’

Blanchard’s face dropped. Meredith looked in remarkably good nick for an ex-quarter-century jailbird of... how old was she now? Forty-five, forty-six, something like that. She boasted a high-cheekboned face graced with perfect make-up and a shiny, radiant cascade of brunette locks, usually only witnessed in shampoo commercials. It was as though she’d spent the last twenty-five years locked up inside a beauty salon rather than a maximum security prison.

The years had certainly been kind to the woman. Either that or she’d had some work done, no doubt funded by a glossy gossip magazine hungry for a Meredith Payne exclusive. However, there was one aspect of the former jailbird’s anatomy that no amount of tinkering, tarting up or tucking in could ever mask. The unmistakable frosty emptiness of her cold, pitiless eyes. Spying into such aloof, shark-like orbs was akin to peering into the deepest, darkest abyss of Hell itself.

A flicker of recognition arched Meredith’s eyebrows. ‘PC Blanchard. So lovely to see you after all these years.’

Telford's nose wrinkled in a fusion of question and astonishment. 'You know this woman?'

Blanchard ignored his query, both eyes fixed upon her nemesis. 'Oh, Meredith, you're behind with the times. These days, it's DCI Blanchard,' she enjoyed admitting, employing great emphasis on her rank.

Meredith seemed impressed. 'You have done well for yourself.'

The exchanges between the two women were almost pantomime.

The former murderess then cocked a brief peek at the companion. 'Who's your puppy-dog?'

Telford looked offended by his given tag, but chose to remain silent.

'This is Detective Inspector Telford.'

Meredith presented the thinnest of smiles to Blanchard. 'I'm guessing you're not here for a touching reunion.'

Blanchard's face screamed of, 'You got that right.' However, it was not a requirement to utter the actual words. Instead, a simple, 'Hardly,' left her lips.

The 80s-esque woman asked, 'Then what can I do you for?'

'Tara Jenkins.'

'What about her?'

'She was a member of your support group.'

Meredith frowned at the queer use of past tense. 'Was?'

'She won't be coming back. Earlier today, she assaulted her husband. Violently.'

Telford contributed, 'Yeah. Smashed him repeatedly in the face with a steam iron.'

One corner of Meredith's mouth curled into a subtle but noticeable grin. 'Ouch. Bet he's got the mother of all headaches.'

‘Not any longer,’ grunted Telford, his demeanour overly mean and moody, a force to be reckoned with, no doubt a defence tactic brought on by the somewhat unsettling reputation of the woman who stood before him. ‘He’s dead.’

Meredith’s initial reaction of surprise was soon taken over by a heavy dose of admiration for the heroine that was Tara Jenkins. ‘I can’t say it’s much of a loss. John Jenkins was a two-timing fist-happy thug.’

‘Did you know her husband?’ asked Blanchard.

‘Never had the pleasure.’ Then came an afterthought. ‘Or should I say pain?’ A brief self-smirk at her witticism made itself known. ‘I only know what I was told. That’s what I’m here for. To listen. And advise.’

Blanchard spotted an opportunity. ‘Does your advice extend to the best way to create a makeshift blade and smuggle it safely into a police station?’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘A short while ago, Tara Jenkins committed suicide in her cell.’

‘Oh. I’m sorry to hear that.’ Her sincerity seemed genuine. Either that or she was bloody good at acting. ‘Such a terrible and needless loss.’

‘Ah, but at the same time very convenient for you, don’t you think?’ baited Telford.

‘Agreed,’ joined in Blanchard. ‘Especially as ten minutes beforehand, we’d been trying to convince the woman to open up about the dubious little set-up you have here.’

Meredith put two and two together and arrived at the correct calculation of four. ‘Oh, I get it. You think I had something to do with it.’

Telford threw across the narrowed eyes of suspicion. ‘And did you?’

‘Sorry to disappoint you both. My conscience is clear.’

Telford wasn’t done yet. ‘We beg to differ. Once a criminal, always a criminal.’

She looked down her nose at the puppy-dog. 'Oh, I bet they loved you in Charm School.' The woman then glanced at Blanchard. 'I'll be the first to admit I'm no angel. But you truly are barking up the wrong tree with this one.'

'You murdered your husband in cold blood,' growled Telford, perhaps overdoing the bad cop routine. 'You fed him his own genitals, for Christ's sake. In my book, that makes you capable of anything.'

Meredith sighed, fed up with the accusations. 'Look. I broke the law. And for that, I did my time. All of it. I didn't even request parole.'

'Oh, really?' Blanchard failed to agree with her version of events. 'Our records state you were turned down on numerous occasions for causing so much trouble on the inside.'

'And here you are on the outside,' said Telford, quick to chip in his own money's worth, 'causing even more trouble.'

'I think you'll find what I do here is perfectly within the law.'

Telford. Unconvinced. 'What, persuading the vulnerable and the abused to violently attack their partners?'

The allegation tickled Meredith. 'What do you think I'm running here, some kind of terrorist training camp? All I do is show women how to rise above the crap dished out by their men. How they choose to interpret my advice is down to them.'

Blanchard and Telford traded glances, still not won over.

Meredith then changed the subject. 'Did you ever get married, DCI Blanchard?'

Unsure of where this question was leading, the cautious copper replied, 'Yes. Why?'

The ex-con employed sympathetic eyes, perhaps a tad too theatrical. 'Such a shame it didn't work out. What happened? Did he do the dirty on you?' Off Blanchard's thrown look, Meredith pointed to the DCI's left hand. 'The indentation on your finger where a wedding

ring once took pride of place. Not so prominent now, of course, but it never quite goes away. I believe it's there to serve as a permanent reminder.'

'Of what?'

'That all men are bastards.' She then turned her attention to Telford. 'And what about you, Mr Bad Cop? Is there a Mrs Bad Cop?'

'Not that it's any of your business, I've been married for almost twenty-four years.'

'Happily?'

'Very.'

'Is that right?' Meredith hosted a broad all-knowing smirk, the type dealt by a prosecution barrister a split second before dishing out the killer line that proves the defendant's guilt beyond a shadow of a doubt. 'Then why all those furtive glances at your superior officer's cleavage?'

Telford reddened, avoiding eye contact with both women. Blanchard's jaw headed south as she mechanically covered her assets with a speedy palm. Meredith grinned, revelling with an extra portion of fries on top in the wake of such clumsy awkwardness.

'Ooh. Have I uncovered extra-marital shenanigans?'

By the looks on their faces, the two coppers were guilty as charged.

'Naughty, naughty. Shame on you both.' She dished a mock glare straight at Blanchard. 'That's not the kind of behaviour I'd expect from a high-ranking police officer.' She was loving it. 'I wouldn't like to be in your shoes if the tabloids got wind of your sordid affair.'

Blanchard didn't look too pleased. 'Is that a threat?'

Meredith stepped right over to the DCI. Any closer and they'd be nose-to-nose. Gone was her grin. She was now deadly serious, the shark's eyes blacker than black. 'Your feeble attempt at inventing imaginary wrongdoings in my business affairs is a waste of police time and energy. I suggest you use it instead to catch real criminals.'

Blanchard stood her ground, eyes fixed on her enemy, not backing down. ‘Oh, believe me, Meredith. That’s what I fully intend to do.’

As Blanchard and Telford emerged from the building and headed over to the neighbouring car park, the DCI made her frustration towards her colleague known.

‘You idiot. Have you never heard of discretion?’

‘How was I supposed to know she’d play some kind of demented Miss Marple?’

Blanchard groaned, not bothering to grace his statement with a response.

‘You two seemed very familiar in there,’ Telford chose to mention, no doubt to take the heat off his cleavage peeking mistake.

‘Playing best pals with Meredith Payne couldn’t be further from the truth.’

‘Oh? So how come you know each other so well?’

Blanchard stopped in her tracks and looked him straight in the eye. ‘I was the officer who arrested her for murder.’

Telford found himself blown away by the revelation, but chose not to make a comment.

They both climbed into the car. Seatbelts on, engine started, the DI navigated his way to the car park exit. There he waited for a suitable gap in the traffic before pulling out to join the steady flow of vehicles. All this time, Blanchard sat in silence, lost in thought.

‘Meredith’s support group,’ the DCI eventually uttered, breaking her hush. ‘I think we should send somebody in undercover.’

Telford threw her a look. ‘You mean get an officer to pose as a hard-done-by bint?’

Blanchard tossed back a glare. ‘You certainly have a wonderful way with words.’ Back to her plan, she added, ‘At this moment in time, we have nothing concrete to suggest that

Meredith is using these meetings as a way of inciting violence. But if we can harvest hard evidence from the inside, we'll bag ourselves enough clout to shut down her operation and prevent anybody else getting hurt.'

'Or killed.'

'Exactly.'

'So who have you got in mind?'

'Kaitlyn Green.'

If Telford had been drinking coffee, he would have spat out the lot. 'You have got to be bloody joking.'

Blanchard didn't mirror his concern. 'Why not? Okay, so she's a little wet behind the ears...'

'That's the understatement of the year.'

'...but I truly believe she has all the makings of a good copper.'

Telford was in no way prepared to concur. Or concede. 'Wouldn't it be wiser to use one the girls from CID? As in, somebody with plenty of experience.'

'They're all too high profile. People know them on the streets. I can't risk an officer being recognised. The stakes are way too high. That's why we need somebody fresh and relatively new to the force. PC Green is the perfect candidate.'

The DI snorted. Louder than ever before. 'With respect, Ruth, I think you're making a massive mistake.'

Blanchard fed him a sour look. 'Is that your professional opinion, Adrian? Or is your judgement still clouded by what happened with you and her father?'

At that, a disgruntled and equally defeated Telford zipped his lips.