

## CHAPTER 1

The naked body of a young woman lay face down on the double bed like a discarded doll, a towelling cord wrapped tightly around her neck.

"Dressing gown cord," explained Donovan. "The 'otel supplies gowns for their guests. The room's been checked and photographed. Mr Wallace said everything should be left as it was found till you arrived. The doctor's been and gone, and Forensic are waiting to move in when you've finished."

Ray had no idea why he had been summoned. He had only received news of his promotion a month ago and was due to take up his new post in the Serious Crime Squad in two weeks. The previous night he'd been out with the lads from the Flying Squad celebrating his promotion. The evening had started well, then some bastard had put something in his drink. Now his head was pounding and his tongue felt like an old dish-rag. He had no track record of leading a murder inquiry. However, investigating a suspicious death was part and parcel of police work, and he'd seen far too many corpses in his career - more than he cared to remember. At least this one was relatively fresh and thankfully there was no blood.

"When was she found?" he asked

"About nine o'clock this morning, by the cleaning maid."

Ray looked at his watch. It was one p.m. He bent over the body, hoping he gave the impression he was an expert. The girl was a brunette with short straight hair, cut in a bob, and may have once been pretty, but the blue and swollen face had

changed all that. He checked her fingers. There was a silver ring containing a semi-precious stone on the right hand. Her left hand showed no sign of jewellery, past or present.

"Has her next of kin been informed?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Was she married?"

"I don't think she was. We're checking 'er background - boyfriends etcetera. The room was registered in the name of Mr and Mrs Roberts. The receptionist says the register was signed by a man who was probably in 'is forties. She thinks she recognised him from somewhere but can't think where."

Ray straightened up, glad that the examination was over and he had not felt sick. He surveyed the scene. A pile of clothing lay in an untidy heap on the floor. His eyes registered a smart-looking black dress, black tights, black bra and pink panties. He knew better than to touch anything. They were in a double bedroom, expensively furnished with oak panelling, matching furniture and a marble en-suite bathroom. In the bathroom, the towels were neatly folded and it looked unused. The weather outside was hot, the hottest spring ever recorded, but both rooms were cold and he found himself shivering.

Donovan noticed. "I turned the air-conditioning up. The doc suggested it - we didn't know when you'd get 'ere."

Ray nodded, relieved that it wasn't the proximity of death that chilled the air. He spoke quickly to maintain

his air of professionalism. "Okay, tell me what you know."

Donovan opened his pocket book. "The victim, as yet not formerly identified, is thought to be Mary Rayner, a twenty-two-year-old white female - up until the end of December, last year, she was a Detective Constable here at Wellstone."

Alarm bells were triggered in his head. The death of a police officer, even an ex-police officer, meant his superiors, and every local copper, would be looking over his shoulder. "Did you know her?"

"Slightly, but I never actually worked with 'er."

Donovan was good looking, well over six foot, with carrot-coloured hair and appeared to be only three or four years older than the girl. Perhaps he knew her better than he cared to admit.

"Go on."

"Since she resigned she's been working as a private inquiry agent."

"For a local agency?"

"Yes, sir - with another woman, Annette Crossley, also a former police officer. They ran the agency together."

"Has Crossley been interviewed?"

"Not yet. Mr Wallace has had 'er picked up. She's at Wellstone Central now." He returned to his pocket book. "Receptionist says she saw Miss Rayner in the bar earlier that evening with the man known as Roberts. She knew Miss Rayner - apparently she's been here before."

She also knew she was a private dick. The doctor has estimated that the time of death was between nine and ten o'clock last night." Donovan closed the book. "That's all I 'ave, sir."

"Okay, tell your Forensic team to move in, then join me in reception." Ray trod carefully out of the room, removed his disposable gloves and the hooded white paper overalls he wore over his charcoal suit, and gave them to a uniformed constable. Then he flexed his slim six-foot-two-inch frame and patted down short peat-brown hair that had become ruffled under the hood.

At the reception desk, he showed the grey middle-aged woman behind it his warrant card. "I gather you knew the lady found dead upstairs."

"Yes, sir, I've already told the other police officers." She nodded towards the approaching Sergeant Donovan.

"Did she come here a lot?"

"Now and again - she sometimes asked questions about guests. Not that I'd tell her anything, of course, we respect our guests' privacy."

"Tell the Chief Inspector what you know about last night," instructed Donovan.

She looked Ray squarely in the eyes. "I saw Miss Rayner in the bar with Mr Roberts."

"What time was this?"

"About eight o'clock."

"Did she and Mr Roberts arrive together?"

"I didn't see, sir. Mr Roberts registered earlier."

"What time was this?"

"I'm not sure, about half an hour before I saw them together. It could have been twenty minutes - I'm not sure. I think I've seen Mr Roberts somewhere before, but I can't place him. I told the other policemen." She shook her head. "I keep racking my brain but it hasn't come back to me."

Ray smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, take your time. If you should remember, contact us immediately. In the meantime, I'd like to book a room."

"Sir, I think. . ." Donovan began. Ray turned to him. "No matter."

"Would that be a single or a double room, sir?"

"Single. On the same floor but not right next to the one booked by Mr. Roberts."

"Room 34, sir? It's three doors along."

"That'll do fine."

She passed him a registration form, which Ray duly completed. "I noticed on my way in that you seem to be using a lot of water on the grounds outside," he remarked. "I'd thought there'd be a hose-pipe ban here."

"We have a bore hole and our own underground supply. It's a big plus for our guests and I'm told quite legal."

"I'll pick up the key and drop my luggage off later," he told her. "Thank you for your help." He and Donovan moved off towards the exit. "I know, your budget probably doesn't run to a place like this," Ray told him, "but her seeing me around might help jog her

memory. What hell hole had you lined up for me anyway?"

"There's a room reserved for you at the police 'otel, sir."

Ray congratulated himself on his quick thinking. At least he had been spared that.

Outside, they sauntered back to the grey Vauxhall that Donovan had used to convey Ray directly from the railway station. Ray gestured towards the lush vegetation and the spouting sprinklers. "What's the water situation like in this region?" he asked.

"Pretty dire, like most places. There's been talk of rationing if we don't get rain soon."

"Is what she told us about the bore hole true?"

"I expect so, or some local know-all would have reported it," replied Donovan, "although I understand the 'otel is either owned or part owned by Michael Adams, a local builder with influence. 'E's also a local councillor."

"You're not suggesting local corruption, Sergeant?"

"Course not, sir - wouldn't dare."

Ray stared in dismay at the jets of water issuing skyward. "What a waste."

"You think it's true, sir, what they're saying about the global warming problem getting worse?"

"I haven't the foggiest. Your governor, Mr Wallace, I knew a Superintendent Jim Wallace - he was in Complaints Investigation. That wouldn't be the same man, would it?"

"E's a Chief Super sir, but don't most senior detectives do a stint in CIB at some time or other?"

Ray grimaced. "Not if they can help it, they don't. I had my one and only spell there as a Detective Sergeant and didn't enjoy it one bit."