

Prologue

June 1995

The woman could see the full sweep of the bay despite the dark and the absence of street lights where she stood. Sometimes it felt as if her whole life had been spent in the half-light; in her dreams, she was moonlit, neon-lit or she floated through the first gleam of dawn. Night was still the time when she felt most awake.

She was waiting for footsteps, for the approach of the person she'd arranged to meet. In the far distance, she caught the noise of the town: cheap music and alcohol-fuelled high-pitched laughter. It might be Sunday night but people were still partying, spilling out of the bars and clubs, lingering on the pavements because this was June and the weather was beautiful, sultry and still. The funfair at Spanish City was closed for the day, and quiet. She could see the silhouettes of the rides, marked by strings of coloured bulbs, gaudy in full sunlight, entrancing now. The full moon shone white on the Dome, on the tower of the lighthouse behind her, and on the seductive Art Deco curves of The Seagull. *If only you knew*, she thought, *you sophisticated customers in your dinner jackets and glittering*

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dresses, sitting on the terrace drinking cocktails and champagne. If only you knew what really goes on there.

Lost in thought, she'd stopped listening out for him. She only knew he was there when she felt him behind her, the breath on her neck, the hands on her shoulders.

Chapter One

John watched the door from his wheelchair and wondered who'd be dragged in to speak to them today. An orderly carried through a mug of tea and left it on the floor beside him, though he must have realized it would be impossible for John to reach it from his chair. John considered yelling at him to show a bit of respect but decided it wasn't worth the effort. Because there was a visitor, there were chocolate biscuits on a plate in the chaplain's office, but they wouldn't be brought out until after the lecture. A treat released only if the group behaved well. They'd formed a circle in the chapel, a group of elderly men with the same grey skin and ill-fitting clothes, and John wondered how it had come to this. He had no place here. When he'd first arrived he'd been consumed by an anger that had kept him awake at night, planning revenge, dreaming of hurt. But the routine had become reassuring, and now he lived from meal to meal and he was drowsy for most of the time. He seemed to pass his days in aimless half-sleep, waiting for the stretch to be over and for life to begin again, for those small occasional moments of joy that made everything worthwhile. At one time he'd looked forward to these meetings as a break from the everyday boredom of the wing; now

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he resented them for reminding him of the world outside.

Around him the men were chatting, but the sound washed over him and, despite the background noise, he still heard the visitor arriving before the rest of them. The sound of the key in the lock at the other end of the corridor, the heavy bell sound of the gate opening, then being locked again, and of the keys being returned to the belt pouch. One time *he'd* been the visitor being shown through the door, but that had been so long ago that it felt as though he was remembering another person. Or a character in a story. There were footsteps on the polished lino, then the keys were out again. Now the other men could hear the sound and there was a murmur of anticipation. *Poor suckers. Each week they thought there'd be someone interesting. A bonny young woman or a lawyer who might have ideas to get them out. A journalist who might want to buy their story and make them a fortune. And each week they were disappointed.*

The chaplain came through first. He was a pleaser with a nervous laugh and bad breath. John had had yes-men like the chaplain on his team and had got rid of them as soon as he could get away with it. John thought this would be a cushy number for a God-botherer. In prison, you had a captive audience and when people were desperate, you could convince them to believe in anything. Bribe them along to the services with tea in china mugs and chocolate biscuits. Listen to their stories of hardship and innocence. *Then* they'd get religion. Some of them might mean it; they'd read the Bible in their cells even when the screws weren't look-

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ing, walk away from fights on the landings. But John would bet that it wouldn't last once they got out.

The chaplain stood aside to let the visitor walk through, before turning to lock the door again. John sensed the waiting men's disappointment before he looked up. There was obviously nothing to catch their interest in the new arrival. Nothing glamorous to bring a touch of colour to their grey lives. No young lass in tight jeans or flimsy top. No pretty young man for those who were that way inclined. He shifted his wheelchair so that he could see round the men who'd already shifted their attention back to their neighbours. The woman stood just inside the door and was caught in a patch of coloured light; sunshine coming through the one stained-glass window made it look as if she was standing in a pool of red water. She was big and she wore a tent-shaped dress covered in purple flowers. Her legs were bare, and on her feet were the kind of sandals that walkers and climbers might wear. He could tell just from the way she stood and stared back at them that this was the last place she wanted to be. She was impatient, and she wanted this over.

Something stirred in his memory. It was the way she stood there, legs planted apart as if it would take a bulldozer to shift her, brown button-eyes scanning the room. He was in a house in the hills drinking whisky. Sitting here, with the background smell of onions and disinfectant that permeated every space in the institution, he could taste the peat in the whisky and feel the heat from an open fire on his face. He could remember the shared obsession that had lost him his job and had ultimately landed him in this hellish place, away from one of the few people who'd ever needed him.

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He'd seen this woman since then, of course, but that was the memory that stuck with him. And he sensed a wisp of hope, of an idea, the possibility of escape. The appearance of the newcomer was almost miraculous. He wasn't a religious man, but occasionally, here in the chapel, he'd prayed for divine intervention and now it seemed that his prayers had been answered. Because this was Vera Stanhope. This was Hector's daughter, a police inspector. And he had information to trade.

Chapter Two

Vera was at the prison because her new boss was a graduate fast-track, with a mind of his own and a charm that could manipulate. He had this thing about sharing the victim experience. She wasn't sure if he'd dreamed up the mantra by himself or if it had been directed from above. She didn't have a clue what it meant and she suspected he didn't, either. His name was Watkins and since his arrival she'd had the uneasy suspicion that he was out to get her. That he felt threatened by her and depended on her, all at the same time. And that he hated her just because he needed her. He'd called her into his office the day before.

'We've had a request from the chaplain at Warkworth for a speaker.' Warkworth was a Cat. B prison; it had enough security to keep in the scallies and the lifers coming towards the end of their sentence – a former army barracks with a series of accommodation blocks surrounded by a wall and barbed wire. In the winter it was all mud and the wind eddied around the site, chilling the inmates like freezing water. It was September now and it had been a dry summer, so the officers and men might be able to cross the site without overcoats and wellies. 'They want someone to talk to the men on the EDW.'

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‘EDW?’ They changed acronyms as often as Joe Ashworth’s wife gave birth.

‘Elderly and Disabled Wing.’

Vera knew what that meant. It meant historical sex abuse. Old guys who’d committed rape when they had the sense of power and entitlement that went with celebrity. Vulnerable prisoners who’d be beaten up for messing with kids, if they were on the wing with the other prisoners, but who’d grown so old in prison that they needed carers to get them out of bed in the morning. And it also meant bent police officers who’d avoided prosecution for so long that they’d thought they’d got away with it; until a new generation with a different take on the job had thrown them to the wolves. Put *those* guys onto a wing with a bunch of cons, some of whom they might have put away for years, and they’d be literally torn apart.

‘You can’t send Ashworth.’ Vera knew Joe would hate it. He had kids of his own and turned green whenever children were involved in abuse or neglect. ‘He’s needed here.’

She was thinking hard. She’d have to give the boss someone. Once he got an idea in his head, you could never get rid of it. No good trying to distract him and hope he’d forget all about it. There was something about him that was pitiless; he’d never give up. ‘What about Clarke? She might learn something and it’d be good for her CV. We’ve always had her down as promotion material.’ *And it might do our Holly good. Meet a few of the old lags. Make her realize where she’s sending men to, when she wants to lock them up and throw away the key.* These days Vera felt better disposed towards

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Holly, but she still felt her colleague lacked the human touch.

'I've told them you'd do it.' He looked over his desk, met her eyes. A challenge. Implacable. 'A senior officer sends the right message.'

She could have made an excuse, but he knew they weren't busy. And she knew he'd reorganize her whole week, to get his way. Just to prove he could. In the old days she would have dug in her heels, but she was old and canny enough to realize there was no point starting battles you could never win. Not power-struggles like this. Not with a man this cold. She told herself he must have a very small dick, if he saw her as any kind of threat, and nodded. 'Why not?' she said. 'An afternoon out of the office and a nice drive up the coast. Why not?' She gave him her best smile and walked out of the office.

The bairns had just started back to school, so the road up the coast was quiet. She stopped in at the Drift Cafe at Druridge for an early lunch. Crab sandwiches and home-made lemon-drizzle. A bite of bliss. She felt as she'd done when occasionally she'd bunked off school, and it occurred to her that she could take early retirement. Then there'd be no need for guilt if she wanted a day to herself. She was in her mid-fifties, with full service, so she could go whenever she liked. She wouldn't be forced to leave yet, but maybe the boss wanted rid of her early and forcing her to talk to elderly cons was all part of the message. *Sod him! I've dealt with harder than him in the job, and I'll leave when I'm ready.* She was tempted by the ice cream but

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thought she'd stop for that on the way home. There was nothing to rush back to the office for.

She locked her phone and her purse in the glove compartment of her car and strolled to the prison gate. There was a queue at the visitor centre. Young lasses who looked too young to be mams ignoring the babies in buggies, to fiddle with their phones before having to hand them over at the gate. Women, old before their time, visiting layabout sons. Vera didn't think anyone was here to see the elderly and disabled. The wives would have had a Zimmer frame, and the kids would have disowned their parents years before, just out of embarrassment. She showed her warrant card to the officer in reception, walked through one of the automatic doors and waited in no-man's-land until the next one opened.

The chaplain talked all the way from the gate to the chapel. Inane burbling that told her the man was nervous, but it didn't make her any more sympathetic. The one thing she'd inherited from Hector – besides the house in the hills and a freezer full of animal corpses – was a distrust of all things religious. She caught the word 'redemption' and that stopped her for a moment in her tracks.

'You think this place will redeem them?'

'They're old men,' he said. 'Some of them so close to death that they want to take stock.'

Vera thought that wasn't much of an answer, but she'd decided to give her talk, tell the criminally elderly and disabled a few stories about the effect they'd had on their victims, then piss off home early, via an ice cream at the Drift Cafe. The men would take no notice and she didn't care one way or another.

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It was a game. No point engaging with them, with the chaplain or with any of the officers. After an hour she'd be on her way.

They'd crossed a concrete yard to a newer building. The education-and-admin block. In here the civilian workers didn't suffer the draughts and discomforts of the old barracks. It was protected by a locked gate that swung behind them with a bell-like clang, and then by a locked door. The chaplain walked ahead of Vera here, pointing out the library and the classrooms, praising the facilities. A woman with short grey hair was standing in front of four men, reading from a book. They all seemed surprisingly interested. 'That's Hope, our head of education, with the A-level English class. We have a remarkable success rate in exams.' The chaplain was a walking advertisement for the prison and its governor. Then they came to another wooden door. He unlocked it and stepped aside to let her in ahead of him, and for a moment she was blinded by the splash of sunlight that came as a shock after the dark corridor.

There were no pews, and about a dozen easy chairs had been arranged in a semicircle. Vera had been expecting old men, but not men with the variety of disabilities that were displayed here. Two of them used wheelchairs. One skeletal prisoner looked as if he should be in hospital; his face was gaunt and the hand gripping the arm of the chair was all bone. A couple of the men were already asleep. A few were rather more sprightly, hardly older than her, tidier than the others, shaved. She thought she recognized one as the headmaster of a private school who'd been convicted of abusing the young boys in his care

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more than thirty years previously. Another had been a reporter on the local television news – he'd been a fund-raiser for several police charities, jolly and witty, so they'd used him as MC at dinners and auctions. Until women had come forward to allege that he'd raped them while they were still teenagers. It had been hard for the chief constable to squirm out of that one.

She wondered what those victims would make of the concept of redemption.

Then she looked more closely at the men in the wheelchairs. One was asleep, his chin on his chest, so all she could see was the top of the head, his grey thinning hair flecked with dandruff. Occasionally he snored and made a spluttering noise, like a dog dreaming of rabbits or a wide beach with gulls to chase. The occupant of the other wheelchair stared back at her. Not with the kind of vaguely polite interest that the rest of her conscious audience had shown, as she walked in to the chaplain's over-enthusiastic introduction, but with a fierce intensity. He was demanding to be seen.

She recognized him at once, despite the withered legs and the bloated face. John Brace. Former Superintendent with CID, before Vera had helped to put him away. Egg-collector, obsessive and dealer in stolen birds of prey. Corruptor of lawyers and poor lads from the estates. Hector's deputy and one of his Gang of Four, his get-out-of-jail-free card, the reason why her father had died at home and not in a place like this.

She did the talk. Described the recognized aftermath of sexual assault, the guilt and the shame. She explained that even a simple burglary could make the

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victim feel humiliated. Her audience nodded in the right places, the ones who were mentally fit enough to understand, but she thought humiliation was what had turned many of them on. That sense of power. There were a couple of questions from the floor at the end, but only from the ones who liked the sound of their own voices. If she'd been in the mood, she'd have asked them to talk about the times when *they'd* felt powerless. She'd have bet fifty quid that most of them had been abused as kids. But she was a cop, not a social worker, and her job was to bring them to court, not worry about what had made them who they were. Besides, all she wanted was for this to be over. She wanted to be out of the prison, with its institutional smell of disinfectant and overcooked vegetables, to forget all about John Bloody Brace and to eat rum-and-raisin ice cream looking out over Druridge Bay, a clean wind in her face.

At last the chaplain called time on the Q&A. An orderly carried in more tea and there was an undignified scramble for the chocolate biscuits. She was about to make an excuse when John Brace appeared in front of her, blocking her way. His legs might not be much use, but he was still a big man. Broad shoulders and thick neck. Still a bully. 'We need to talk.'

'I'm sorry?' Because she'd never appeared in court. She'd pointed her colleagues in the right direction, helped them build their case, but the prosecutors had decided she'd be toxic. Hector might have been dead by the time Brace was charged, but her father's involvement with the detective had gone back years.

Brace called over to the chaplain, 'Any chance we

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could use your office, Father? The inspector and I would like to chew over old times.'

'Sure.' A pause. 'I suppose you two must be old friends.'

'Not quite, Father.' This was Brace. Oily, confident. That confidence had persuaded his superiors that they could trust him. 'I knew the inspector's father, though. I have some information, and I'm sure she'd like to hear it.'

That had Vera hooked, as Brace had known it would. Even as a child, curiosity had been her undoing. And she still had an unhealthy interest in Hector and all his misdemeanours. Brace wheeled his chair ahead of her into the cramped office, not even looking back to check whether she was following.

She cleared a pile of hymn books and leaned against the desk, looking down at him. Outside, the men were waiting for an officer to take them back to their wing. The teacher with the short hair was there too, chatting to a couple of the men. There was a background noise of soft voices through the half-open office door. Only the chaplain was showing any interest in the two of them, and he was too far away to hear their conversation.

'What can you give me, John?'

He tilted his face to look up at her. His teeth were yellow. 'I've got MS. Did you hear?'

She shook her head. 'It's for your lawyers to use the illness, to get you out of here. Nothing I can do.'

He didn't answer for a while. It was as if he didn't think her response worth considering. 'Did you ever wonder what happened to Robbie Marshall?'

Another of the Gang of Four. A man who'd worked

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in the Swan Hunter shipyard on the Tyne. A middle manager, he'd been in charge of sourcing components. That was like putting a bairn in charge of the sweetie shop, and it had made him popular. Local firms slipped him bribes and he had access to tools and material that he could sell on. He could find lads to do anything for a few quid. So rumour had it. 'I assumed he made himself scarce when you were charged,' Vera said.

'Nah, he went missing years before that.' John Brace smiled. 'The word was somebody made him scarce.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm a con now, Vera. Cons don't give away information for free.'

'I've told you – there's nothing I can do to get you released early.'

'I don't want anything for myself, *Inspector*!' The emphasis on the title was pure, bitter sarcasm. 'But I have a daughter. Patricia Keane. Patty.' His voice softened. 'She married a maniac against my advice and he's run away. Left her with three kids and some mental-health problems. I don't want her ending up in a place like this, and the kids in care. Specially not the kids in care. You're a stubborn bitch, Vera. If anyone can get her the help she needs, it'd be you.'

'And what do I get in return?'

'I tell you where the body's buried.'

'Robbie Marshall's *dead*?' Vera hadn't realized she'd raised her voice, but the chaplain looked over at them. He frowned. Maybe he had *her* down as the bully, yelling at a poor, helpless cripple.

Brace slowly inclined his head.

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‘Did you have anything to do with that, John?’ She spoke quietly, leaning forward so she was almost touching him. ‘You do know that if I find out you were involved, there’s no deal.’

‘Are you calling me a killer, Vera?’ His voice was mocking. ‘And me an officer of the law.’

‘I wouldn’t put much past you,’ she said.

‘It was nothing to do with me. But I used to hear things, you know. I’m planning to talk to Patty at the weekend. If she tells me you’ve been to see her, I’ll point you in the right direction. You can take all the glory, Vera. My friends on the job tell me you still like to do that. You’re still a one-woman band.’