

INSIDE HER HEAD

by

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Novel. Psychological thriller

“Men lie. Men cheat. Men should be very afraid.”

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FIRST

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

February Green had to go in, it was her job. If she was ever likely to trade her lowly police constable uniform for CID wear-what-you-please freedom of choice (oh, how she craved 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, according to the radio controller. Female, no name given, her explanation concerning exactly what had occurred within the property nothing more than confused, disjointed babble.

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 the gutter press would be running a very different story.

The last headache February needed in her life right now was a second lecture from an irate forensics nerd on trashing a crime scene, last month's mistake, double facepalm, so she slipped on a pair of latex gloves before nudging the door wide open. And there she hovered by the entrance, peering 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 before asking in a firmer tone, ‘Are you okay in there?’

Ice-cold, deathly hush.

Then, a child’s voice, female, from behind. ‘What’s the matter, February, are you scared?’

She twisted around. Nobody there. Rolling self-scolding eyes, she shrugged it off.

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 shuffled into the house, gradual, cautious, ever alert. Back against the wall, a poised hand hovering over the telescopic baton hooked to her belt, she inched along the hallway.

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

A tiled floor dirtied with blood.

February unclipped her baton and flicked it to full size, her breath quivering upon every exhale. A proper copper for four short months, this was her debut performance in this type of situation. Sure, she’d encountered her fair share of mouthy binge drinking, middle finger extending, buttocks flashing idiots on a rowdy Friday night, 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 to her left, the lounge. Defence stance initiated, baton raised, she 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 crimson. In one quivering hand, she held a damaged steam iron, its electric cord dangling limp, missing its plug, clearly wrenched from the wall socket with great force, its plastic-coated body cracked and distorted, the ex-shiny surface of its metal soleplate smudged with smears of scarlet.

Bloody hell.

A sub-zero chill shot up the length of February's spine, then danced a merry jig upon her heart before abseiling gutwards 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.

As the police constable approached, the woman shrank into herself. February 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, 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.

Aha, now she was getting somewhere. 'Are you hurt in any way?'

The woman shook her head. A definite no.

PC Green indicated to the claret on the woman's clothing. 'Do you know whose blood this is?'

Back to no reply.

'Did you disturb an intruder?'

Stubborn. Mute.

February 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.'

February certainly hadn't expected that. Nevertheless, masking her surprise and maintaining eye contact, slow, steady, gradual, February 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.

Revisiting the hallway, February 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, 'Classy.'

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 scolding iron in her list of regular pastimes. February 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 scarlet. As such, through the swollen vessels of both temples, she could feel her pulse quickening, badoom, badoom, badoom, badoom. She attempted to step forward, but both feet refused to shift. And then that sub-zero chill returned to her spine, ready to sing its encore.

Oh, that child's voice once more, whispered close to her right ear. 'Bet you don't go in, scaredy-knickers.'

Again, February twisted around. Again, nobody there. Frigging imagination running riot.

The police constable returned her attention to the ajar kitchen entrance. That's when she heard it. A child's giggle. And that's when she felt it. A presence standing behind her.

In an unhurried motion, a fearful February turned her head enough to spot in the very corner of her eye a young schoolgirl. Blue and white gingham summer dress. Blonde hair tied in pigtails. And a wide gap between her two front teeth.

Back to facing forward, the young copper gasped. She didn't need to fully aim sight upon the child to verify her identity, choice of attire, hairstyle or dental abnormalities. She knew exactly who it was.

Numbed by sheer alarm, her bloated eyes fixed upon the kitchen door and whatever horror lay beyond it, February croaked to the chilling entity who stood behind her, 'It's you.'

At that moment, a hand clasped the rookie policewoman's shoulder. Jumping out of her skin, she spun around to find –

– fellow police officer Jamie Philips.

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

February glanced past Jamie. The girl, the presence, the whatever had vanished. That is, if said girl, presence, whatever had actually existed in the first place. Bloody mind playing stupid tricks.

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

'You were taking ages. I had to respond to the call.'

'Okay, so I needed more than a piss,' came Jamie's uncomfortable confession. 'There was a queue. One cubicle available. All the rest in that pub were out of order.'

Jamie was twenty-two, just like her. Uniform, just like her. They'd known each other since they were ten-year-olds, although nothing romantic ever developed between them. Just good mates. Mates in the traditional sense, not friends with benefits. The pair had lost contact during the wild and reckless latter half of the teenage phase, only then to be reunited four months ago on her first day on the job. February put it down to fate. A sceptical Jamie blamed a small world.

PC Philips peeked into the lounge at the pallid, trance-like woman whose burgundy-mottled attire gave the impression that she'd taken up butchery as a hobby. 'Is she hurt?'

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

Jamie grabbed her arm, preventing the girl from entering the scene of the crime.

'Shouldn't I be the one going in first?'

'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 sitting upon it, before losing consciousness halfway through the journey. Calling for help had clearly been his ultimate goal.

Clocking the victim's face, February turned away, repulsed. 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,’ yelled Jamie, forgetting his professional status.

To which February remarked, ‘This was certainly no lover’s tiff.’ Placing two fingertips upon the victim’s jugular, her eyes bulged with pleased disbelief. ‘Jamie, I can feel 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 bastard. I’ll radio in for an ambu—’

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

February ducked for the love of safety as the already mangled husband took further blow after blow after blow. 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 blubbing woman did as she was told, the baton going into freefall and clattering as it made contact with the tiled floor. Jamie whipped out a pair of handcuffs and shackled his prisoner. Then he looked across to February.

‘Are you all right?’

The young copper nodded, a little shaken up. ‘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: An oversubscribed rendezvous of emergency 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 an illegal rave, but without the pill popping, the glowsticks, the apple eyes and teeth-grinding super-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 big wide 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 cordoning off the immediate area.

February 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 impromptu husband clobbering.
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 thirty minutes right up until bedtime?

She watched as two paramedics stretchered the victim into one of the three ambulances, wondering what the man had done to deserve such a brutal attack. Actually, thinking about it, brutal seemed too soft a word to describe violence of this calibre.

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

February managed a faint smile, then found herself intrigued to learn that he was the proud owner of two takeaway beverages, one of which he handed over.

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

'Where did you get this?'

Jamie grinned as he pointed beyond the frantic flurry of flashing lights and fluorescent yellow jackets. 'From the burger van that's set up shop twenty metres down the road.'

'British business acumen,' she observed.

To which Jamie replied, 'Can't be beaten.'

February 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.' He threw her a funny look, then continued quoting from the card. 'Is he cheating on you? Beating you up? Hurting you in any way? Do not suffer in silence. Join us and together we will stop the abuse dead.' Quote spent, he returned the item to February, shaking his head in astounded disbelief at the sheer gall of the message it gave out. 'Bloody hell.'

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

The shadow of their superior officer 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 February had noticed on many an occasion that the woman still possessed the allure to turn heads. 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 lost their war with gravity. To February, this was most surprising. The woman's general

appearance, that is, and not only 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.'

February peeled 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 two months alone, we've seen three equally 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 community centre and chaired by, of all people, Meredith Payne.' The DCI paused to swallow hard. From her pained expression, the quoted name had left a sour taste in her mouth. 'That woman certainly has a lot to answer for.'

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

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

SECOND

The police station's visuals room sounded (to fresh-faced officers who hadn't yet stepped inside its hallowed four walls) somewhat sexy and futuristic. In reality, however, it was a basic set-up 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, both hands placed flat upon the desk. February, Jamie and DCI Blanchard observed as she awaited her fate and did nothing of any real interest. Gone was the shrinking violet February had met back at the house. The woman now held her head high, cool, calm and collected, and in a way, perversely content.

The door of the visuals room swung open. DI Adrian Telford tottered in, lost somewhere in his late forties, the owner of fingertips tarnished by a lifetime of nicotine addiction, and if his inflated spare tyre of an abdomen was anything to go by, no lover of fitness.

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

He plonked his posterior upon the chair closest to Blanchard and lobbed the woman an all too reverent smile. His gesture had suck-up written all over it. Sure, just like everybody else, February was keen to better herself by climbing the slippery ladder of promotion. Only, she hoped she could manage the task by using a combination of hard work, guts and determination rather than strategically placed arse licking.

'Now we are all present and correct...' Blanchard lobbed Telford enough of a pause and glare combo to warn him to favour stricter punctuality 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 past 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 February. '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. Does she have any previous?'

The woman in charge shook her head. 'Not even the obligatory parking ticket.'

Blanchard's mobile phone decided the time was right to whinge for attention. She took the call straight away, her face stiffening in response to the incoming message. Thanking the caller for letting her know, she 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.

It was Telford who remarked, 'A grievous bodily harm charge upgraded to murder.'

Not wishing to waste any time, Blanchard stood up. 'Let's get some answers from the wife.'

As if rehearsed, Telford and February both rose from their chairs.

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

'To assist in the interview of Tara Jenkins.'

Telford snorted his utmost derision. 'I don't think so.' Blatant scorn. 'This is a job for experienced officers.' Blatant piss-taking. 'I suggest you park your posterior and watch the experts in action. Who knows? You might even pick up a few tips.' Blatant patronising of the highest order.

Inside, February seethed. Outside, she tried her hardest not to display such pot-boiler frustration. Ever the reluctant diplomat, 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 frigging names under the sun.

Blanchard and Telford made their departure from the room. As soon as the door closed behind them, February 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.'

'Jamie, I haven't just arrived here on the first plane from Idiotville. I've been an official plod now for four months.'

'That's still rookie territory in his eyes.'

February decided to concede. Further debate wouldn't change anything. Telford was a cock. One flaccid, impotent, useless human-sized penis. The twat revelled in treating fellow work colleagues (and most likely friends and acquaintances, hah, if he had any, oh, and not forgetting the poor bitch who had been stupid enough to accompany him down the aisle) with the same amount of contempt that 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.

February managed to come off the boil and ease to a gentle simmer. Life was too short to fret about that loser. Instead, she made herself comfortable and aimed her eyes at the monitor, watching as Blanchard and Telford filled in their suspect with all the usual introductions, 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. Most unexpected. And unduly inappropriate.

In response, Blanchard asked, 'Do you not grasp the seriousness of this situation?'

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

Back in the visuals room, February 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? Jesus, if she was that unhappy, the stupid woman could have easily packed her things and left. Much simpler. And a method which didn't carry a custodial sentence. That's what February would have done, most definitely. A Dear John letter, a wardrobe of scissor-damaged clothes and one hell of an extended middle finger.

Didn't Tara Jenkins realise? No frigging man was worth doing time for.

Meanwhile, in the interview room, Blanchard continued with proceedings. 'Earlier, you turned down the offer of legal representation. Would you now like to change your mind?'

'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, her short-lived joy waving goodbye as her demeanour returned to its previous sober state. 'But he didn't listen. John was never one to take any notice of a word I said... 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 regularly used me as a human punchbag. 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 and shook her head. 'Let me ask you a question. Have you ever lived in total fear of the man who's supposed to love you?'

Blanchard averted her eyes, as if laden with guilt of lacking the relevant experience. 'No. I haven't.'

‘Then you will never truly understand.’

An awkward hiatus heavied the air.

And then Telford chose to intervene. ‘Mrs Jenkins. Did your husband assault you today?’

‘No. For once, he didn’t touch me.’

‘So what was it that prompted you to...’ He wrestled for the most apt phrase.

Too late, beaten by a now-grinning Tara. ‘Demolish his face with a steam iron? I did it for the greater good.’

Telford raised an intrigued eyebrow. ‘Care to elaborate?’

‘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. The bastard was never short of female company. 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 that fucking smile to pieces.’

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

Seat shifting over, 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?’

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

The suspect 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 shitless of the wanker. I can imagine how they felt in his presence. Trapped like caged animals in their own homes. Just like me.’

Blanchard brushed fingertips upon her chin, attempting to piece it all together. ‘Are you trying to tell us you killed 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. Forced to live with their own personal nightmares for the rest of their lives. Once again, just like me.’

It was obvious that Telford was growing tired of travelling all the way round the headache of a virtual one-way system to arrive at the house next door. ‘Mrs Jenkins, this is all very sad, but we’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.

In the visuals room, the senior policeman’s harsh manner stunned February. Empathy College graduate? No chance.

Blanchard must have been thinking the very same thoughts, for she scowled at her colleague. In response, Telford shrugged his shoulders, oblivious. He didn’t need to utter, ‘What did I say?’ His distinct lack of compassion and awareness was written all over his face.

‘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 burned a bloody great hole through it.'

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

Tara chuckled to herself, casual, carefree, as if reciting an amusing anecdote to close 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.' Humour lost, return of the sneer. 'That's when I snapped.' Goodbye sneer, hello to reflective self-disbelief, surprised, shocked, astounded by the enormity, the extent, the sheer power of her snapping moment. 'The rest is all a blur.'

Telford's nose wrinkled. 'You destroyed your husband's face over a string of obscenities?'

Tara shook her head, baring teeth, clenching fists. 'It's staring you both in the face, but you're just not getting it.'

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

The good cop strategy seemed to work. Tara allowed her steeled body to relax, exhaling an unhurried wisp of air, as if letting out built-up steam from an overworked valve.

'I murdered my husband to save Cindy... and all the others yet to fall for his charm. Now do you understand? I did what I did to prevent all future suffering.' Her mouth warped into a disjointed 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, February leaned back in her chair, lost in her thoughts. 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 unlikely that she knew he was married. To this girl, it was a first date like any other. An evening 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. The only way was up. What could possibly go wrong? Hmm, if it hadn’t been for the enraged wife and a steam 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 set to play out tonight. Cindy would turn up at the pre-arranged time and place. Brimming with anticipation, she’d wait patiently for her date to arrive. And wait some more. And some more. John’s puzzling 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, Cindy’s concrete faith in the guy with a killer smile would convince the woman 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 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 slow and painful death!’ Next, Cindy would make an emergency trip to the toilets where she’d 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,

stinging her eyes and swelling her reddened eyelids. All cried out, the girl would then veer towards a couldn't care less attitude. 'Ah, fuck it, I don't need him anyway,' she'd growl to herself whilst rebuilding her tear-ravaged face with cosmetic camouflage. 'I don't need anybody.'

Onwards and upwards, she'd gravitate towards a late bar or nightclub and drown her sorrows by getting hopelessly bladdered. Eventually and inevitably, she'd find herself thrown out of the establishment for swearing at anybody within earshot, after which she'd up-chuck the spoils of her binge-fest 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 arrive forty-six minutes later. Once home, she'd collapse onto her lonely bed, still fully clothed. Or failing that, face down on the bedroom carpet. Cue the inevitable thunder of monster snores.

Sunrise. A new day. 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 the girl 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 utter hatred of womankind. 'Pig.' And then she'd learn all about the person who terminated the monster's existence.

John's 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, still enveloped in the evidence bag, and placed it upon the desk. 'Care to explain this?'

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

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

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

The interviewee immediately closed and locked all doors to her world, cagey, guarded.

'You leave Meredith out of this. She's done nothing wrong.'

'Then you won't mind telling us 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 dealt the narrowed eyes of scrutiny. 'Know what I think?'

Tara shrugged, not fussed.

'You don't look the violent type. I believe today was the first time 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 harboured such irrepressible malice within you.' No more good cop, it was now quick-fire 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?'

Tara looked away, stubborn, unwilling to cooperate.

Not prepared to concede, Blanchard tapped the card with her finger. 'This line here bothers me. "Join us and together we will stop 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.’

‘Did she plant the idea in your head? Is that what “together we will stop the abuse dead” means?’

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

‘That woman is nobody’s friend,’ Blanchard hissed in the harsh tone of somebody who had given the suspect plenty of chances, but now enough was enough. ‘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?’

At once, silence ensued. Cold. Hollow.

Tara 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.’

Before the interview could proceed any further, they needed to await the return of the duty solicitor who had taken it upon himself to conveniently end his shift early. They’d managed to get in contact with the guy, but he wouldn’t be back for at least two hours. This left Telford no choice but to escort Tara Jenkins to the holding cells situated deep in the bowels of the station.

Upon the return of the DI to the visuals room, he took one look at February and Jamie and proved February's "the man is a cock" theory correct. 'Shouldn't these two uniforms be back out on the beat?'

Blanchard blew out a sigh. 'All in good time.' And then she asked him, 'What do you make of Tara Jenkins?'

'That woman doesn't realise the seriousness of her crime. It's like she can't get enough of telling us how she did the right thing. Yet the moment Meredith Payne gets a mention, she turns all jumpy and cagey and totally shuts off.'

'Looks to me like she's terrified of the woman,' chipped in February.

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

'Twenty-five years?' said both February and Jamie in unison.

'The judge felt he had to make an example of her. And I can understand why. What she did went way beyond a crime of passion.'

'Why, what happened?' asked February, keen to be enlightened.

'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 Mia, the next-door neighbour. 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 sliced off his genitalia.'

Gobsmacked owl eyes and sharp suck-ins of air all round. On 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 pan-fried his penis, served it up with a salad garnish and force-

fed him the lot...' The extended pause which followed certainly gave the desired dramatic effect. '...before sitting back and watching the poor sod bleed to death.'

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

It was February who broke the stifling hush. 'What happened to the neighbour?'

'Meredith let her go.'

'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 a suitable punishment. The poor lass must have been forever looking over her shoulder. Even when Meredith was sent down, Mia no doubt continued to fear for her life.' The DCI swallowed hard, then added, 'Last year, Meredith was finally granted her freedom. On that very same day, Mia jumped off the roof of a multi-storey car park.' The superior officer 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 cell floor awash with an ocean of dark scarlet. The lifeless Tara lay spread-eagled on her back, saturated in the blood which had showered from deep carvings in both wrists. Samuel (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 do. The prisoner had already hitched a ride out of this life and was long gone.

Repulsed, February turned away, palming her mouth tight, trying her hardest not to invite her last meal to make a return visit. She'd seen enough blood earlier. And now this.

'What the hell happened here?' barked Telford.

Pallid and distraught, Samuel 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 sliced open her neck, just to make sure.'

Telford's sharp intake of breath almost made a whistling sound. 'She slit her own throat?'

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

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

Dutiful and obedient, Samuel scurried out of the cell. Within moments, they were all blessed with the extra-soft three-ply luxury of hush.

Blanchard needed to know, 'How on earth did she sneak in a blade?'

'No idea,' claimed the returning Samuel, equally baffled.

February spotted something soft, cylindrical and very familiar to her gender close to the entrance 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 deep hole skewered into its base, definitely 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 February'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.

Holding the object aloft, February revealed, 'This is how she smuggled in the blade.'

Telford peered across, squinting to gain adequate focus. 'What the hell is that?'

'A tampon.'

Blanchard's mouth fell limp. 'You mean she had it up her...?'

February tossed across a nod and wince combo.

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

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

A 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 that bloody support group?'

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

Telford shrugged his shoulders. 'So... what now?'

The DCI composed her manner, then decided to wrap up this conversation. 'I think it's high time we paid Meredith Payne a visit.'

THIRD

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

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

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

They entered the main hall. A slim woman sporting elegant retro threads (which 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. ‘Consider me found.’

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 plastered with way too 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 work done, no doubt funded by a tabloid newspaper or glossy gossip magazine hungry for a Meredith Payne exclusive. However, there was one aspect of the former jailbird’s anatomy which no amount of tinkering, tarding up or tucking in could ever mask. The unmistakeable frosty emptiness of her cold, pitiless eyes; the act of spying into such aloof, shark-like orbs 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?'

The senior officer 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 revealing, employing weighty emphasis upon her rank.

'You have done well for yourself.'

'I have indeed.'

The back and forth exchanges between the two women seemed almost pantomime.

The former murderess then cocked a brief peek at the DCI's companion. 'Your puppy-dog looks a little rough around the edges. Chosen a name for him yet?'

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

'This is Detective Inspector Telford.'

Meredith presented the thinnest of smiles to the pair of plods before honing her sights on the DCI. 'I'm guessing you're not here for a touching reunion.'

'Never in a million years.'

'So what can I do for you?'

'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 yet 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 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 stepped forward a pace. ‘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?’

‘Tara Jenkins committed suicide in her cell.’

‘Oh. I’m very 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,’ baited Telford.

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

‘Oh, I get it. You suspect I had something to do with it.’

Blanchard asked, ‘And did you?’

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

‘We beg to differ,’ added the DI, not done yet. ‘Once a criminal, always a criminal.’

Meredith looked down her nose at the puppy-dog. ‘Oh, I bet they loved you in Charm School.’ After which she 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.’

‘Look. I broke the law. And for that, I did my time. All of it. I didn’t even request parole.’

‘Oh, really?’ Blanchard contributed, failing to agree with the woman’s version of events. ‘Prison 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 scoffed, 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.’

The two coppers traded glances, not won over at all.

‘DCI Blanchard, did you ever get married?’ Meredith asked, changing the subject.

Unsure of where this question was leading, the cautious woman 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 fades 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 which 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 floorwards as she mechanically covered her assets with a speedy palm.

Meredith grinned, revelling with an extra portion of fries 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, Detective Chief Inspector. That's not the kind of behaviour I'd expect from a high-ranking police officer.' The Payne woman was loving it. 'I wouldn't like to be in your shoes if the tabloids mysteriously got wind of your sordid affair.'

'Is that a threat?'

Meredith's face turned to stone as she stepped right over to the DCI. Any closer and they'd be nose-to-nose. 'Your feeble attempt at inventing imaginary wrongdoings concerning my business affairs is a waste of police time and energy. I suggest you use that time and energy instead to catch real criminals.'

Blanchard stood her ground, eyes fixed upon her enemy. 'Oh, believe me, Meredith. That's what I fully intend to do.'

Blanchard and Telford emerged from the building and headed over to the neighbouring car park.

'You idiot,' hissed the DCI. '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 the woman for murder.'

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

They both climbed into the car.

'Meredith's support group,' the DCI uttered, clicking her seatbelt into place. 'I think we should send somebody in undercover.'

'You mean get an officer to pose as a hard-done-by bint?'

Blanchard tossed him a glare. 'You certainly have a wonderful way with words.' And then it was back to her plan. '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 should be able to bag ourselves enough clout to shut down her operation and prevent anybody else getting hurt.'

'Or killed.'

'Exactly.'

'Who have you got in mind?'

'February Green.'

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

'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 years of experience.'

'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.'

'With respect, Ruth, I think you're making a massive mistake.'

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

In response, a disgruntled, defeated Telford zipped his lips.

FOURTH

February sat alone in the police canteen. Silent. Expressionless. Before her, a meal lay lonely and unloved. Beforehand, unruly pangs of hunger screamed blue murder, but the girl had gone on to barely eat a morsel. No surprise there when she thought about it. The sight of so much blood in one day had trashed her appetite. Of course, her mother would never have accepted anything other than a cleared plate during PC Green's childhood. 'February,' she'd soapbox, 'there are people starving in Third World countries who would appreciate that meal,' after which her daughter would always wonder how it was logistically possible to make such a donation.

Hmm, maybe at some point, God knows when, she should pay Mum a visit. The two of them hadn't crossed paths for such a long time. So many wrong words said aloud, so many right words left unsaid. And since then, their relationship had floundered. Sure, during February's childhood, the parent fed the girl, clothed the girl, taught the girl right from wrong... but her mother was also the bitch who –

'DCI Blanchard wants to see you in her office.' It was Jamie.

February stumbled out of her dense woodland of dark musings and back to the naked concrete of reality. 'Oh, God, is it about the baton?'

'No way. She doesn't know anything about that.'

'Really?'

'My lips are sealed.'

She could feel a warm breeze of relief sweeping across her face. 'Jamie, you are the best.' Followed by a contrasting icy gale of trepidation. 'I don't get it. Why does she want to see me?'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I'm only the messenger.'

‘Oh, God, I must have done something wrong. Blanchard doesn’t ask to see people in her office for good reasons. Did she look angry?’

‘No.’

‘What was her face like?’

‘Um... normal, I guess.’

‘What does that even mean?’

‘Feb. Quit fretting.’

She quit fretting. Or at least tried her best to mask her escalating anxiety.

‘Take a deep breath.’

She took a deep breath. Maybe not deep enough.

‘And go visit Blanchard. Now.’

‘You want me to what?’ gasped February, stock-still in her chair, bowled over by such an unexpected request.

DCI Blanchard sat behind the majesty of a plush mahogany desk, both hands clasped together, reminding February of a monarch about to perform the Christmas address to the nation. ‘I want you to go undercover,’ she repeated to PC Green, ‘and gain access to Meredith Payne’s support group.’

‘Why me?’

‘Why not you?’

Overwhelmed, February blew out a spill of air. Wow. Four miniscule months into the job and already she’d been offered a chance to play detective. Talk about a dream come true. Most plods waited years for such an opportunity.

‘Will you do it?’ the DCI prompted.

Was the bear with a fondness for shitting in the woods a Catholic? ‘Yes. Yes, of course.’

Blanchard matched February’s smile with one of her own. ‘Good. Now, here’s the plan. Your cover story is simple. You suspect your boyfriend is cheating on you. You’re hurt and confused. You don’t know which way to turn. You seek help and guidance, and Meredith Payne is your only hope.’ She leaned back in her chair. ‘How does that sound so far?’

February lost a portion of her smile. ‘Suddenly terrifying. I’ve never been a victim of infidelity.’

‘Lucky you.’

It was true. February had absolutely no experience of the crushing pain and heartache associated with the discovery of a cheating lover. With that in mind, how could she possibly deliver a convincing, award winning portrayal of a woman scorned?

The young copper found herself reminded of all those hammy actors in old movies (mostly cowboys in westerns) who, at the point of being shot, always seemed to clutch their wounds, grunting and groaning and staggering before hitting the ground dead. Many even completed an important closing speech before drawing their final breath. Totally unrealistic. Well, of course it was, for they’d never actually found themselves on the receiving end of a genuine bullet. Therefore, feigning a broken heart without any prior experience would prove equally demanding, right?

She thought about Darren Spencer and how happy they were together. Three years her senior, he was the only proper boyfriend she’d ever had. And definitely the only man with whom she’d shared a house. Darren would never cheat on her. No way. Their relationship, their sex life, their everything was perfect. Well, okay, so they hadn’t made love in a while, but hey-ho, they both worked funny hours. The point was, as a loving couple, they were

solid... which in this case was the problem. Could she truthfully handle her given task? Or was she taking on too much?

Back in the real world, Blanchard picked up on February's uncertainty. 'You don't look too sure. If you feel you're not up to the job...'

'No, no, no, it's fine,' leapt in February, eager to keep hold of the assignment. 'I'm totally good to go.'

'Glad to hear it.' The woman in charge cleared her throat, then explained, 'Your job will be to report on everything that goes on at those meetings. Meredith's actions in particular. Her ways and means. Her methods of persuasion. Additionally, I'd like you to keep a close eye on the most vulnerable members of the group. After all, the last thing we need is further bloodshed. Got that?'

'Yes, Ma'am.'

'For the duration of this assignment, you are not to make any contact whatsoever with this station. Your sole point of communication will be via PC Philips...'

February's face shone, pleased that Jamie would also play a part in this mission. Yes. Mission. Assignment sounded way too insignificant a word. And besides, assignments were given to students, not to February Green, detective.

'...who you will meet on a regular basis to deliver your findings. Any questions?'

February had plenty. Was Meredith Payne truly that evil? How come Blanchard held so much faith in the fledgling policewoman's abilities? Similarly, how come DI Telford didn't? Also, was she really, really, really up to the job? And finally, which question would she ask Blanchard first?

'No, Ma'am. It's all clear.'

None of them.

The DCI smiled. 'Excellent.'

There then came a knock at the door.

‘Yes?’ called Blanchard, a tad narked by the interruption.

The door opened. A face appeared. It was one of the suits from CID. Bushy moustache, balding head, a sight for mild amusement, had it not been for the required upkeep of sober self-control amid such formal surroundings. The suit didn’t say a word. Instead, his only form of communication appeared to be a sideways tip of the head and an upward flick of three fingers. Or at least that’s what it looked like to February. Oddly enough, Blanchard seemed to identify with this bizarre form of sign language, wiggling her fingers and tipping a nod. Huh? What was that all about? Secret lingo reserved exclusively for higher ranks perchance?

Blanchard excused herself from February’s company and left the room, closing the door behind her. It was weird. Without the DCI’s presence, the sacred office appeared to grow in size, as if representative of the rookie policewoman’s meagre significance in the great scheme of things. Talk about an unsettling phenomenon.

The PC needed a distraction. And then she found one. Blanchard’s expensive looking pen sat upon the desk at an awkward angle. She reached across, aligning the pen with the straight edge of its neighbouring document folder. There. Sorted.

Moments later, the senior plod returned, holding the door wide open. ‘PC Green. Consider yourself free to go.’

Upon the young copper’s approach, Blanchard handed the girl a piece of paper featuring handwritten digits. ‘Contact number for Meredith’s support group. Save it to your phone.’

February prepared to leave the office, but Blanchard blocked her path.

‘One more thing,’ the DCI said, employing the gravest of faces. ‘This woman is a dangerously clever individual. She will try anything and everything to manipulate you. Therefore, the warning is simple. Do whatever you can to get inside her head. But don’t let Meredith Payne get inside yours.’

In the locker room, February waved goodbye to her uniform (yay, she wouldn't be seeing official togs for a while) and said hello to her civvy threads, denim jacket, tee-shirt, jeans. Then came a decision. Before heading home, she could really do with a stiff drink.

February chose a ramshackle back-street pub situated off the proverbial beaten track, the establishment's ancient oak beams and dusty collection of brass trinkets performing to a meagre audience of herself and one other customer, a prehistoric gentleman sitting alone at the bar, no doubt seeking an opportunity to offload his life story, the unabridged version.

After exchanging hellos with the lone member of bar staff, she ordered a vodka and coke. 'No, actually, make it a double.'

Drink served, debit card tapped, she ambled over to the furthest, most secluded corner of the room. Once comfortable, she figured it was an opportune time to make that phone call.

The call in question was answered by a woman in record time. 'Hello?'

'Um, hi.' Argh, the return of that dumb timid squeak, last heard when she called through the part-open front door of Tara Jenkins' house. God, she needed to get a grip. 'Am I speaking to Meredith Payne?' Slight improvement, more in control.

'Who wants to know?'

'The name's February Green. I'd like to sign up.'

Zero response for an overly long moment. Then Meredith said, 'I see. What's he done?'

'I think my boyfriend is being unfaithful.'

'You only think he's being unfaithful?'

Eh? Didn't the woman believe her? 'No, no, I actually know he is.'

'How do you know? What makes you so sure he's shagging illegal meat?'

What the hell? Wasn't Meredith supposed to be on her side? 'Well, because he's...' Think, girl, think. 'He's...' Don't crumble now.

'Because he's what?' The question, harsh, scathing, borderline ruthless.

'Um...' February had lost the use of her vocal chords, her debut detective mission heading in one direction only, tits up. She cursed herself inside for not getting her story straight before making contact. Actors learnt their lines before a performance. Why hadn't she? Idiot.

For Meredith, enough was enough. 'I believe this conversation has run its course.'

'No, please.'

'You're not ready yet.' And she hung up. Abruptly.

'Hello? Hello?!'

Fruitless. Meredith Payne was long gone.

Probably no point in hitting redial. For sure, Meredith would have blocked her number. Argh, if she could physically kick herself hard with a steel toe-capped boot in the soft and sensitive area between her legs, she would. Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit. After all the faith, belief and trust that Blanchard had invested in the girl, February Green had fallen at the first frigging hurdle.