



**'Fast-paced
and enthralling'**
C. L. TAYLOR

The Girl Who Had No Fear

MARNIE RICHES

Marnie Riches

The Girl Who Had No Fear

«HarperCollins»

Riches M.

The Girl Who Had No Fear / M. Riches — «HarperCollins»,

** Praise for Marnie Riches: ‘Gritty and gripping’ KIMBERLEY CHAMBERS ‘Fast-paced, enthralling and heartrending; I couldn’t put it down’ C. L. TAYLOR **The fourth gripping thriller in the Georgina McKenzie series. Amsterdam: a city where sex sells and drugs come easy. Four dead bodies have been pulled from the canals – and that number’s rising fast. Is a serial killer on the loose? Or are young clubbers falling prey to a lethal batch of crystal meth? Chief Inspector Van den Bergen calls on criminologist Georgina McKenzie to help him solve this mystery. George goes deep undercover among the violent gangs of Central America. Working for the vicious head of a Mexican cartel, she must risk her own life to find the truth. With murder everywhere she turns, can George get people to talk before she is silenced for good? A pulse-pounding race against time, perfect for fans of Stieg Larsson and Jo Nesbo

Содержание

The Girl Who Had No Fear	6
Copyright	7
Dedication	8
PROLOGUE	10
CHAPTER 1	13
CHAPTER 2	15
CHAPTER 3	16
CHAPTER 4	20
CHAPTER 5	23
CHAPTER 6	27
CHAPTER 7	31
CHAPTER 8	33
CHAPTER 9	37
CHAPTER 10	40
CHAPTER 11	42
CHAPTER 12	45
CHAPTER 13	48
CHAPTER 14	50
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	51

The Girl Who Had No Fear

MARNIE RICHES

avon.

Copyright

Published by Avon

An imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers Ltd*

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins 2016

Copyright © Marnie Riches 2016

Marnie Riches asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

A catalogue copy of this book is available from the British Library.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins.

Ebook Edition © March 2016 ISBN: 9780008203993

Version 2018-01-24

Dedication

For Christian. May your salsa always be extra picante and your cerveza always cold.

[Table of Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue: Cambridge University Library, 30 March](#)

[Chapter 1: Amsterdam, an Apartment in Bilderdijkkade, 25 April](#)

[Chapter 2: Bilderdijkgracht, 27 April](#)

[Chapter 3: Hmp Belmarsh, Thamesmead, Southeast London, 27 April](#)

[Chapter 4: Mexico, Chiapas, 29 May](#)

[Chapter 5: Amsterdam, Police Headquarters, Then, Bouwdewijn de Groot Lyceum, Apollolaan, Then, Floris Engels' Apartment in Amstelveen, 28 April](#)

[Chapter 6: Cambridge, Huntingdon Road, Then, Stansted Airport, 29 April](#)

[Chapter 7: Amsterdam, Mortuary, Later](#)

[Chapter 8: Amsterdam, Police Headquarters, Later](#)

[Chapter 9: Amsterdam, Van Den Bergen's Apartment, Then, Melkweg Nightclub, Later](#)

[Chapter 10: Amsterdam, Melkweg Nightclub, Then, Leidsegracht, 30 April](#)

[Chapter 11: Amsterdam, Sloterdijkmeer Allotments, Later](#)

[Chapter 12: Amsterdam, Reguliersdwarsstraat, 1 May](#)

[Chapter 13: Amsterdam, Keizer's Basement Nightclub, 14 May](#)

[Chapter 14: Amsterdam, Police Headquarters, 15 May](#)

[Chapter 15: Mexico, Chiapas Mountains, Then, the Border With Guatemala, 29 May](#)

[Chapter 16: Amsterdam, Academy of Architecture, Waterlooplein, Then, Police Headquarters, 18 May](#)

[Chapter 17: 35,000ft Above Germany, 20 May](#)

[Chapter 18: Czech Republic, Prague, Žižkov District, Later](#)

[Chapter 19: Amsterdam, Keizersgracht, 21 May](#)

[Chapter 20: Mexico, Yucatan Jungle, 30 May](#)

[Chapter 21: Amsterdam, IJselbuurt, Then Keizersgracht, Later, 21 May](#)

[Chapter 22: Amsterdam, Police Headquarters, Later](#)

[Chapter 23: Amsterdam, Van Den Bergen's Apartment, 22 May](#)

[Chapter 24: Mexico, Cancun Airport, 26 May](#)

[Chapter 25: Honduras, Tegucigalpa, Later](#)

[Chapter 26: Mexico, a Cancun Police Station, 27 May](#)

[Chapter 27: Honduras, a Barrio in the Mountains Above Tegucigalpa, at the Same Time](#)

[Chapter 28: Amsterdam, Onze Lieve Vrouw Hospital, 28 May](#)

[Chapter 29: Mexico, Yucatan Jungle, 30 May](#)

[Chapter 30: Mexico, Hotel Bahia Maya, Cancun, Then, the Yucatan Jungle, 30 May](#)

[Chapter 31: Mexico, Elsewhere in the Yucatan Jungle, at the Same Time](#)

[Chapter 32: En Route From Tegucigalpa, Honduras to Palenque, Mexico Via Guatemala, 27 May](#)

[Chapter 33: Amsterdam, Red-Light District, 30 May](#)

[Chapter 34: Mexico, Hotel Bahia Maya, Cancun, 1 June](#)

[Chapter 35: Mexico, Palenque Town in Chiapas, 28 May](#)

[Chapter 36: The Caribbean Sea, Just Off the Coast of Mexico, 1 June](#)

[Chapter 37: The Netherlands, a Warehouse in a Dockside Location, at the Same Time](#)

[Chapter 38: The Caribbean Sea, Off the Coast of Mexico, at the Same Time](#)

[Chapter 39: Mexico, Hotel Bahia Maya, Cancun, a Little Later](#)

[Chapter 40: Mexico, Chiapas Mountains, 29 May](#)

[Chapter 41: Groningen, Chembedrijf Corporate Head Office, 1 June](#)

[Chapter 42: Mexico, Yucatan Jungle, 30 May](#)

[Chapter 43: Mexico, Cancun Airport, 1 June](#)

[Chapter 44: Mexico, Hotel Bahia Maya, Cancun, Later](#)

[Chapter 45: The Middle of the Caribbean Sea, Later](#)

[Chapter 46: Mexico, Yucatan Jungle, 1 June](#)

[Chapter 47: Amsterdam, Paradijs Restaurant, Amstel, 2 June](#)

[Chapter 48: Mexico, Hospital Galenia, Cancun, 2 June](#)

[Chapter 49: Amsterdam, Schiphol Airport, 4 June](#)

[Chapter 50: Amsterdam, Van Den Bergen's Apartment, at the Same Time](#)

[Chapter 51: Rotterdam, Dockside, the Port of Rotterdam, Later](#)

[Chapter 52: Amsterdam, Van Den Bergen's Apartment, a Short While Later](#)

[Chapter 53: Amsterdam, a Houseboat on Prinsengracht, at the Same Time](#)

[Chapter 54: Amsterdam, Van Den Bergen's Apartment, Then, the Red-Light District, at the Same Time](#)

[Chapter 55: Rotterdam, a Dockside Warehouse, Port of Rotterdam, a Short While Later](#)

[Chapter 56: Amsterdam, the Cracked Pot Coffee Shop, at the Same Time](#)

[Chapter 57: Amsterdam, Onze Lieve Vrouw Hospital, 5 June](#)

[Chapter 58: Onze Lieve Vrouw Hospital, Moments Later](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Keep Reading ...](#)

[About the Author](#)

[By the Same Author](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

PROLOGUE

Cambridge University Library, 30 March

When the lights went out in the University Library stacks, George held her breath. Looked around in the murk. But all she could see from the vantage point of the rickety desk where she had been reading was the glow from outside. The setting sun, pregnant with demonic menace, reflected on the Cambridge spires some way off to the east of the library, making the jagged rooftops look like the gaping, reddened maws of giant prehistoric beasts. Behind her were only the long shadows cast by the bookshelves; row after claustrophobic row, stacked to the ceiling with dusty old books. Anyone could hide among them in this twilight. The arsehole that had been following her ... could he be lying in wait?

‘Who’s there?’ she shouted, her voice quivering. Her breath steamed on the sharp air.

No answer.

She picked up a heavy Old High German dictionary that had been left behind on the desk by some undergraduate. Held it high above her, poised to bring it crashing down on an attacker’s head, should she need to.

The lights came back on suddenly, making her squint. She shrieked at the sight of a flustered-looking librarian, who in turn yelped at the spectre of a combative George, wielding the tome.

‘Dr McKenzie!’ the woman said, taking a step back and clasping her hand to her fleece-clad bosom. Almost tripping over her own feet, shod in the utilitarian leather flats that were popular with senior citizens and the bunion-afflicted.

Horried, knees buckling with embarrassment and relief in equal measure, George set the dictionary down on the desk beside her. She smiled apologetically at her would-be victim. ‘Mrs McMahon. I’m so sorry. The lights went out. I got spooked.’ She clutched her purple mohair cardigan around her, shivering with adrenalin as much as the cold. ‘You know how it is.’

The ageing librarian pursed her lips and tapped on the face of her watch. Spoke with stretched out East Anglian vowels that belied her haughty attempts at received pronunciation. ‘It’s 7 p.m. The library’s closing in fifteen. And after all these years, a Fellow, of all people, should remember that the lights are on timers in the stacks.’

‘Sorry,’ George muttered, gathering her own books into a neat pile. ‘It gets pretty creepy up here when the sun goes down.’

Mrs McMahon looked her up and down, eyeing George’s ripped jeans and wild curls with obvious disapprobation. Clearly the type of old-timer who didn’t think the University academic staff should dress like the students. But then, unexpectedly, her pruned mouth stretched into a kindly smile. ‘Ah, well Spring has sprung! It’s only going to get lighter of an evening.’

George nodded. ‘Roll on summer, eh?’ Shovelled her books into her bag. Pulled on her duffel coat and slung her bag over her shoulder, glad of the librarian’s company on the long walk back down to the main entrance.

By the time she had left the imposing phallic bulk of the University Library, the glow of the sunset had been replaced by a melancholy full moon that cast an eerie glow on the car park. That feeling of being watched still hadn’t abated, George acknowledged reluctantly.

Unshackling her old mountain bike, she started the cycle ride back to St John’s College down Burrell’s Walk, feeling vulnerable as her malfunctioning bike lights flickered weakly in the darkness. No helmet, either. She was annoyed at her own negligence.

Anyone could pull me off my bike down here and not a fucking soul would be any the wiser, George thought as she pedalled hard enough to make her heart thump violently and the sweat start to roll down her back.

Scanning every dense evergreen bush for signs of the long-haired old rocker with those idiot mirror shades that covered his stalking, watchful eyes, George repeated the mantra in her head: *If I see him again, I'll kill him. Four sightings is more than just a bloody coincidence or paranoia. Nobody stalks George McKenzie and lives to tell the tale.*

Suddenly, she was blinded by a dazzling headlamp probing its way down the secluded path. A throbbing engine made the ground beneath her tremble. She felt like she was being sought out by an enemy searchlight. This was it. Whoever was after her was on a motorbike. Heading straight for her. He was going to take her out. *Fight or flight?*

Wobbling and uncertain now, she steered her mountain bike into a bush, falling over painfully into the barbs of holly leaves. The motorbike was upon her. But its rider was not the long-haired rocker George was anticipating. In the saddle was a fairly elderly woman, wearing a crash helmet covered in graffiti, whom George recognised as an eccentric engineering professor from Robinson College ... or was it Girton? Not her stalker.

'Get off the path, you disease!' George shouted after the Professor.

With a defiant middle finger raised in the air, just visible in the red glow of the motorbike's tail-light, the Engineering Professor accelerated away.

George was safe, for now.

As her breathing and pulse slowed to an acceptable rate, she continued her journey with nothing more than a dented ego. She checked her watch, realising she was running late. No time to stop off at college to grab a coffee with Sally Wright in the Fellows' Drawing Room to discuss the imminent publication of their criminology tome. She'd have to make straight for the station if she were to catch the train to London. Auntie Sharon was expecting her before she went out to work. The bed in Tinesha's old room had been made up as usual, making George's regular scheduled early-morning journeys to HMP Belmarsh to conduct her research among its violent inmates that bit easier.

The cycle ride along Trumpington Street was uneventful, with the Fitzwilliam Museum, spotlighted in the darkness, the only thing of note, apart from the couple making for Browns restaurant. George ploughed on to the left turn at Lensfield Road, pedalling past the three-storey Victorian houses that comprised student accommodation, mainly owned by Downing College. It was only once she had reached the junction with Hills Road, where she paused to get special fried rice from the Chinese takeaway opposite the big Catholic church, that George felt certain a car had been following her. A VW Golf that she had noticed pull in as she had pulled in.

Was that the long-haired rocker behind the wheel?

She blinked. Blinked again and peered with narrowed eyes into the darkness. Considered approaching, throwing her scalding rice into the driver's face.

But what if she was wrong, as she had been with the motorbike on Burrell's Walk? What if she was going mad and merely imagining that Bloom, the now-incarcerated transnational trafficking crime boss, known by his contemporaries as 'The Duke', had sent someone after her? As if he hadn't already tortured her enough.

'Fuck this for a game of soldiers,' she muttered under her breath.

With her foil container of food swinging in its plastic bag from her handlebar, she pedalled with as much haste as her out-of-shape legs could muster to Cambridge train station, praying the busy, brightly lit main road would afford her some safety.

Finally, leaving her bike locked in the overcrowded bike racks, she boarded the train to King's Cross. Two minutes to spare. And she even found a seat with a table.

When persistent beeping heralded departure and the doors slid shut, George's body was flooded with almost jubilant relief.

'Jesus, man. This is bullshit,' she told her laptop as she booted up. 'I've got to calm down.' She breathed in deeply; breathed out slowly. Conjured an image of her missing mother, Letitia, imagining her happily ensconced in a high-rise somewhere, maybe in Den Haag or Bruges or Southend-on-Sea,

using some gigolo as a sticking plaster to nurse the wounds left by having been given a bad prognosis by that Dutch consultant. For all George knew, Letitia was bending this younger lover's ear about her 'pulmonaries' and 'sickle cell anaemics' while she pounded his body with her middle-aged bulk. George reassured herself that the enucleated eye in the gift box in Amsterdam's Vinkeles restaurant had just been a prank, care of Gordon Bloom, designed to freak her out and make her think that her mother was dead. Somehow, he'd got hold of Letitia's phone. People got mugged all the time, didn't they? She reminded herself that the emails from her father were crap, sent as a wind-up by one of Bloom's lackeys, no doubt. She hadn't genuinely heard from her father in over twenty years. Mommie Dearest, Letitia, had seen to that. Why would he start contacting her now?! This was the stance George preferred to take when she could feel herself being pulled into a downward spiral of nihilism and anxiety: Brush it under the carpet. Hope for the best.

Good. Let's crack on, you paranoid arsehole.

Clicking her emails open, chiding herself for being so foolish and uptight, George scanned the new arrivals in her inbox. But in among the late essays from second-year undergrads and correspondence from her editor about the forthcoming book and some bullshit about having to reapply to the Peterhulme Trust for research funding, there was one unread email that made her curse out loud; an email that caused the coursing, hot blood in her veins to slow to an icy trickle – another missive, ostensibly from her estranged father.

From: Michael Carlos Izquierdo Moreno (Michael.Moreno@BritishEngineering.com)

Sent: 30 March

To: George_McKenzie@hotmail.com

Subject: I've still got my eye on you.

CHAPTER 1

Amsterdam, an apartment in Bilderdijkkade, 25 April

The naked, dark-haired man dropped the tiniest amount of liquid into the drink using a syringe. He flung the syringe down onto the granite kitchen worktop. Treated him to a smile that was loaded with promise. Lips, a little on the thin side, perhaps. But his kindly eyes were long-lashed, at odds with his almost gaunt face and bull neck. Floris tracked the thick cords of sinew that flanked the man's Adam's apple down to his collarbone, beneath which the curve of his pectoral musculature began. He had the ripped torso of a body builder. This dark-haired stranger was everything he desired at that moment, all right. Floris anticipated how he would feel inside him. Tried to remember where he had put his lube and condoms.

He took a deep breath. Was he ready for this?

He peered down at his almost painfully erect penis. Half an hour since he had taken the Viagra and he was good to go. Yes, he was ready.

The man winked. Pushed the drink into his hand.

'Go on, then. Get a little Gina down you,' he said, caressing Floris' navel hair. Starting to kiss his neck.

Floris stared into the bubbles of the now-narcotic lemonade, fizzing upwards to greet him. Rising and popping. Rising and popping. Like the men at this party. G wasn't normally his drug. Sex parties weren't normally his thing. It had been Robert's idea. Robert, who had earlier been full of assurances that he'd have his back. Now, Robert was elbow-deep inside some big blond bear, off his face on mephedrone.

'I'm not sure,' he whispered. 'I've already taken a couple of things.' He closed his eyes to savour this stranger's touch. Nagging doubt started to creep in. Should he have stayed at the club? Familiar turf. Familiar faces. Familiar routine. He could stick to his boundaries there. Now, he was in uncharted territory, wondering if he should drink from this possibly poisoned chalice.

'Go on. Everyone else has had some. It makes you horny as hell. And more relaxed.' The stranger pointed to his own sizeable engorged cock. 'You'll need it.'

Floris batted away encroaching thoughts of the end-of-term marking that was sitting on his kitchen table in his apartment. Pushed aside the stress that came with disgruntled parents who couldn't quite believe their perfect progenies could perform so badly in their tests. Nearly the holidays. Fuck them.

'Drink!' the other man said. Insistent. Excited. 'I want you.'

What the hell was his name? Hell, it didn't matter anyway. Abs. That's what he would call him, on account of the six-pack. Abs.

Floris drained the glass. Started to reciprocate the man's sexual advances, feeling suddenly bolder and wanton, though he knew it would take longer than that for the G to kick in. On the worktop were four lines of mephedrone. His new mate broke off to snort two. Gasp and grinned. Indicated that he should follow suit.

'Why not?'

Not the first time for Floris. Not with miaow miaow. That, at least, was his regular weekend treat. Now he was in the mood to party. He glanced over to the living area – a sickly feast for the senses. At least twenty men, maybe more, caught up in a writhing tangle of tanned, toned bodies in that slick, studio apartment in Amsterdam's Oud West district. Their lascivious grunting and shouted instructions still audible above the thump, thump, thump of the sound system. The smell of aftershave, sex, poppers and lube on the air. Punctuated by laughter of those who were taking a break and having a smoke on the balcony.

‘Come on,’ Abs said, taking him by the hand and leading him towards the naked throng of tumescent revellers.

Abs was less skilled with his hands and mouth than anticipated, but Floris didn’t care. He had promised himself he would be more daring. Had promised Robert he would try harder to be more sexually adventurous to keep their relationship fresh. And this was as good as it got, wasn’t it? Being screwed roughly by a hot guy whose name he couldn’t remember. Cheek by jowl with other rutting casual lovers. All of them utterly uninhibited, like something out of a gay porno flick.

Except Floris was starting to feel sleepy. And sick.

He tried to make eye contact with Robert, who was blowing his blond bear with clear enthusiasm.

‘Rob,’ he began. ‘I don’t feel good.’

Except the words hadn’t come out properly. And he was struggling to catch his breath.

What was Abs doing?

Floris tried to look behind him at Abs. Make eye contact. Tell him that he was feeling weird. Tell him that he was no longer enjoying this. Was Abs even wearing a condom? Floris couldn’t remember. He hadn’t even asked if the man was taking PrEP or what his HIV status was. Shit. That was no good. The last thing he wanted was an unsafe encounter. He needed to extricate himself from the situation, fast. Get out of that apartment. Get some air.

But his clarity of thought was slipping away. Breath coming short, he found himself gasping for air, as if oxygen was suddenly in scant supply. His heart pounded uncomfortably in his chest; so hard that it blended with the rhythm of the thudding dance music that played on the stereo and the unforgiving rhythm of Abs as he took him roughly and remorselessly. Only dimly aware of what was happening to him, in a still-lucid corner of his mind he at least realised he had been given a dodgy dose of drugs. Was he going to be sick? The wave of nausea was suddenly intense and unbearable. Was he vomiting or just dreaming it? Fear somehow managed to reach in amongst the dull-witted drowsiness and pulled out the single, unwelcome, sharp-edged incontrovertible truth that he, Floris Engels, might die that very night.

Then, everything went blank.

CHAPTER 2

Bilderdijkgracht, 27 April

‘Pull him from the water,’ Van den Bergen said, standing beneath the golfing umbrella in a vain attempt to shield himself from the torrential spring rain. Shifting from one foot to another at the canal’s edge, he registered that his toes were sodden where the rainwater had started to breach the stitching in his shoes. Damn. His athlete’s foot would almost certainly flare up. George would be on his case. That much was certain.

‘He looks rough, boss,’ Elvis said at his side. Standing steadfastly just beyond the shelter of the umbrella. Water dripping off the end of his nose and coursing in rivulets from the hem of his leather jacket, the stubborn idiot.

Van den Bergen glanced down at the bloated body in the canal. Now that the frogmen had flipped him over, he could see that the white-grey skin of the man’s face was stretched tight; that his eyes had taken on a ghoulish milky appearance. There were no ligature marks around his neck, just visible as its distorted, waterlogged flesh strained against the ribbed collar of his T-shirt. No facial wounds. There had been no obvious blows to the back of the head, either. The only visible damage was to the man’s arm, which had been partially severed and now floated at an unlikely angle to his body. The torn flesh wafted in red fronds like some strange soft coral in the brown soup of the canal water.

‘It was a bargeman that found him, wasn’t it?’ Van den Bergen asked, picking his glasses up at the end of the chain that hung around his neck. Perching them on his triangular nose so that he could read the neat notes in his pad. ‘He was moving moorings round the corner from Bilderdijkgracht to Kostverlorenvaart, and the body emerged when he started his engine. Right?’

Elvis nodded. Rain, drip-dripping from the sorry, sodden curl of his quiff. ‘Yep. That’s what he said. He had pancakes at the Breakfast Café, nipped into Albert Heijn for milk and a loaf of bread—’

‘I don’t want to know the bargeman’s bloody shopping list, Elvis,’ Van den Bergen said, belching a little stomach acid silently into his mouth. ‘I’m trying to work out if our dead guy’s arm was severed in the water by accident by the blades on the barge’s engine or as part of some fucked-up, frenzied attack by a murderous lunatic with a blunt cheese slice and an attitude problem. I’ve had enough nutters to last me a lifetime.’

‘I know, boss.’ Elvis sneezed. Blew his nose loudly. Stepped back as the frogmen heaved the waterlogged corpse onto the cobbled edge of Bijlдерkade. ‘This looks like it could just be some guy got drunk or stoned or both and stumbled in. Maybe he was taking a piss and got dizzy. Unlucky.’ He shrugged.

Still holding the golf umbrella over him, Van den Bergen hitched up his raincoat and crouched by the body. Watched the canal water pour from the dead man’s clothes back to its inky home. ‘No. I don’t buy it. We’re not that lucky. It’s the fourth floater in a month. All roughly in the same locale. We normally get ten in a *year*, maybe.’ He thumbed the iron filings stubble on his chin. Was poised to run his hand through the thick thatch of his hair, but realised Marianne de Koninck would not thank him if he contaminated her corpse with white hairs. ‘What do you make of this, Elvis?’ he asked, staring at the dead man’s distorted features. He stood, wincing as his hip cracked audibly.

But Elvis was speaking into his mobile phone. Almost shouting to make himself heard above the rain that bounced off the ground and pitted the canal water like darning needles being flung from heaven. Nodding. He peered over at the Chief Inspector. Covered the mouthpiece. ‘Forensics are three minutes away,’ he said. ‘Marianne’s with them.’

Van den Bergen nodded. ‘Good. I don’t believe in coincidence. Something’s going on in my city. I don’t like it one little bit and I’ve got a nasty feeling this is just the tip of the iceberg.’

CHAPTER 3

HMP Belmarsh, Thamesmead, Southeast London, 27 April

‘I’ve already told you at least five times, I don’t know where she is.’ Gordon Bloom’s perfectly enunciated speech sounded thick and sluggish with boredom. He rolled his functioning eye whilst the prosthetic remained unmoving in its socket. Straightening the sleeves on his crisp shirt, as though he were holding court from behind his desk in the City instead of from the other side of a scuffed table inside one of Belmarsh Prison’s interview rooms. ‘I’ve never met the woman in my life. I know nothing about your mother *or* an eyeball *or* your father *or* any of the slanderous nonsense I was convicted for.’

Studiously ignoring the photograph of Letitia that George had pushed in front of him – all sequins and cleavage, with a black marabou feather boa wrapped around her fat neck at Auntie Sharon’s fortieth – he examined his diamond-studded cufflinks instead. These were the adornments of criminal royalty, appropriately worn by a minor royal. The fact that they hadn’t been stolen by one of the other inmates told George exactly how ‘The Duke’ was regarded on the inside.

‘Anyway, I thought you were interviewing me as an academic study subject,’ he said. ‘Not grilling me yet again about your fucking mother, you tedious bitch.’ He prodded at the image disdainfully. ‘Why on earth would I have the first idea of the whereabouts of some low-life old has-been from the ghetto? I’m an innocent man!’

Sitting back in his chair, he flashed George with a disingenuous smile. She could see where the dental cement that plugged the hole in his incisor, once occupied by a diamond stud, had yellowed with neglect and too many cups of low-grade black tea.

‘They don’t let the hygienist in, I see,’ she said, leaning forward in her chair; pointing to his tooth; wanting him to see that she remained unruffled by his insult.

Bloom closed his mouth abruptly. Folded his arms. ‘I’m not saying another word to you. Uppity cunts like you, little Miss McKenzie, think a scroll of paper containing a qualification from a good university puts you on a par with the likes of me.’ He leaned forwards, scowling. The cosmetic enhancements and adjustments to his face, which had allowed him to remain unrecognisable for so long, covering up some of the damage George had inflicted on him with her well-placed punch from a makeshift knuckle-duster, were now beginning to show signs of deterioration. His prosthetic eye was sinister and staring. ‘Well, it doesn’t. And you aren’t.’ He turned his attention defiantly to her ample bosom, though her simple black polo neck was anything but revealing. ‘Your kind are only fit for one thing.’

Suppressing the urge to reach over and hit the arrogant, entitled prick yet again, George wrote the notes, ‘Poor self-esteem. Possible sexual dysfunction.’ on her pad, legible enough for her interviewee to read. She savoured the rancorous grimace on his face as he read it upside down.

Gordon Bloom turned around to the prison officer who stood sentry in the corner of the interview room. A mountain of a man, wearing a utility belt full of riot control knick-knacks that could stop even The Duke in his tracks.

‘Get her out of here!’ he yelled.

The prison officer looked quizzically at George, as though she had spoken and not his charge. ‘You finished already, Dr McKenzie?’ His voice was friendly. Polite.

‘No, Stan. I’ve still got a few questions, if you don’t mind,’ George said. She sat tall in her seat. Took out her new tortoiseshell glasses. Watched Bloom’s irritation out of the corner of her eye as she carefully, methodically, slowly polished the lenses with their special cloth and some lens cleaner. Perched them on the end of her nose. Folded the cloth neatly into perfect squares and placed it inside her case, which she snapped shut, making Bloom flinch. ‘Relax, bae. I is being well gentle with you,

innit?’ Watched as her Southeast London street-speak visibly rankled with the toff. She shook out her curls dramatically with work-worn hands that were devoid of any adornment.

‘This is ridiculous.’ Bloom slapped the table top like a defiant toddler. ‘I don’t want to be here. My solicitor says I shouldn’t speak to you. We’re going to appeal, you know? And I’m going to get this absurd verdict overturned and reclaim my impeccable reputation as a pillar of the City of London’s business community.’

George could see from the glint in his good eye that he believed his own hype. She fanned her hand dismissively in front of her face. ‘Spare me the bravado, Lord Bloom. You wanted to be in my next book. You fancied the infamy. I could smell it on you – that desperation to fill the public with horrified awe. It’s everything you ever wanted, isn’t it? It’s all men like you ever want.’ She peered at him over the top of her glasses like an indulgent, knowing schoolmarm. Winked.

Bloom stood abruptly. Thumped his fists onto the table, making his cufflinks clink. ‘If that’s true, how come I kept my identity secret for decades, you presumptuous, ignorant whore? I’m not the attention-seeker you think I am, Miss McKenzie.’

‘Sit down, Lord Bloom,’ Stan the prison officer said, assuming the wide-legged stance of a man who was alert and ready for confrontation.

Feeling this was a wasted visit, revealing absolutely nothing new of any note, George capped her pen. The only thing she had managed to achieve during the last two sessions had been to antagonise the man who was almost certainly behind the disappearance of her mother and those infernal fucking emails. Beneath the table, she balled her fists. George, the woman, wanted to deck the mealy-mouthed upper-crust bastard. George, the professional, had learned to bite her tongue. How she needed a smoke.

‘Come on. Play the game. It’s *Doctor McKenzie*,’ she said. ‘And I think being in prison after being Mr Billionaire Hotshot at the top of the transnational trafficking heap has changed you. You’ve got to get the kicks where you can find them, now. What the hell do you have left apart from kudos among the inmates, who just want you to suck their cocks? The odd bit of media interest. Or me.’ She closed her eyes emphatically. Arranged her full lips into a perfect pout.

When she looked up, her study subject’s back was turned. Heading towards the door now with the prison officer at his side. She could see his upper body shaking in temper. Still the gentleman on the surface in his Jermyn Street City-wear, but the bloodthirsty criminal lurked just beneath the surface, she knew. Glancing over his shoulder, he shook his head damningly.

‘I hope your old sow of a mother *is* dead,’ he said. ‘I hope she’s mouldering at the bottom of a canal in Amsterdam, like I’m slowly decomposing in this dump when I should be a free man or, at least, enjoying an easy ride in an open prison in the Netherlands. All thanks to that bastard, Van den Bergen. Tell him to eat shit and die when you next see him, won’t you, dear?’

‘See you next week, Gordy, baby!’ George retorted merrily in reply. ‘Fuck you, wanker,’ she said under her breath, once she was alone.

On the outside, she pulled her e-cigarette out of her bag with a shaking hand. Dragged heavily on it. Sighed heavily and thumbed a text to Aunt Sharon.

Still no breakthrough re. Letitia. Do you want me to pick anything up on the way home?

The walk to the bus stop was bleak, as usual. Wind gusted across the giant Belmarsh complex, with its uniform beige brick buildings. George mused that they resembled oversized cheap motels or a 1980s commercial trading estate or perhaps a crap school – the kind where they’d invested money in a new building and nothing else, meaning it was permanently on special measures. The double-height fencing reminded her what sort of study subjects she worked with. Terrorists, murderers, violent people traffickers. Gordon Bloom. He was pretty much as bad as any other psychotic inmate the notorious Belmarsh had entertained. The only difference was, he was white, well educated and well heeled.

To her left, the modern buildings of the Woolwich Crown Court loomed, conjuring memories of a teenaged Ella, testifying against her former consorts in a closed court. George shuddered at the unwelcome flashbacks from her other life, now long gone: having to wear the ill-fitting track suits of the Victorian women's prison up north, where Letitia had left her to rot on remand; huddled in her pissy cell, fearing what the future might hold for a grass; a teenaged girl, bravely taking the punches from the other banged-up women, as they vented their frustrations on one another at a justice system that so often failed them.

As she crossed the road and ventured along a cycle path into a copse of budding trees, bus-stop-bound, she wondered why on earth she was bothering to hunt down her mother at all. Maybe the old cow had just gone AWOL of her own accord. It certainly wouldn't have been the first time.

'A year,' George whispered to the wilds of Woolwich that shot by, as the bus bounced her towards the DLR station. 'In fact, one year, one month and three days since you vanished. Where the hell are you, Letitia?' Absently taking in the rise of flashy new developments close to the riverside on her right, heralding the march of the middle class on what was traditionally an area of Southeast London on the bones of its semi-maritime arse. The low-rent, low-rise shops to her left, offering fried chicken and cheap mobile phones to the poultry- and telecoms-addicted locals. She considered the eyeball – an eyeball she had presumed to be Letitia's – which had been carefully gift-wrapped inside a fancy box, sitting on the table in Amsterdam's Vinkeles restaurant. 'The Israelites' emanating from Letitia's vibrating phone also contained within that box of delights. Now, whenever George heard Desmond Dekker, anguish tied her innards into knots.

Taking out her own phone, George thumbed out a text to Marie in Dutch. Imagined Van den Bergen's IT expert, sitting in her own cabbagey fug in the spacious IT suite that Van den Bergen had persuaded his new boss to give over to her internet research activities. Everybody had had quite enough of sharing Marie's eau-de-arpits.

Any news on eyeball-gate? Did some more googling today but still nothing on my dad.

Trudging up the road to her aunty's place, George agonised yet again over the origins of this waking nightmare: the original out-of-the-blue email from her father, inviting her to lunch at Vinkeles, apparently as a reconciliatory gesture. His name had been used as a lure to get her to that restaurant, she felt certain.

Michael Carlos Izquierdo Moreno.

Four words that conjured in her mind's eye vivid memories of a childhood fraught with parental drama. A handsome, clever Spanish man she could now barely remember. Daddy's hairy, olive-skinned arms, swinging her high onto his shoulders. The smell of toasted tobacco and aftershave coming from his black hair and tanned neck. She had clung onto his head for dear life, thinking him so impossibly tall, though next to Van den Bergen he would in all likelihood have seemed diminutive. Speaking the Catalan Spanish to her of his native Tarragona.

Swallowing down a lump in her throat, she felt suddenly alone and vulnerable on that shabby street in Catford. Hastening past the grey-and-cream Victorian terraces towards the warmth and welcoming smells of Aunty Sharon's, paranoia started to set in. The place started to feel like an artfully constructed movie set, concealing something far more sinister behind the brick façades than the mundane workings of people's family lives. Uniform rows of houses closing in on her; stretching her route to safety indefinitely. Paranoia had been a familiar visitor in the course of the last year. She was sick of feeling that she was being watched by somebody, perhaps hiding behind some wheelie bins or overgrown hedging.

Glancing around, George sought out that long-haired old biker once again. A craggy face, partially hidden behind mirror shades, that had cropped up in her peripheral vision once too often when she had been food-shopping in Amsterdam or walking from Van den Bergen's apartment to the tram stop. Hadn't she seen him over here in the UK, too? Skulking on a platform in Lewisham when she had been waiting to catch the DLR. The sense that she was being followed now was overwhelming.

She stopped abruptly. Took her handbag-sized deodorant from her coat pocket, poised to spray any lurkers in the eyes. Gasping for air.
‘Come out, you bastard!’ she yelled.

CHAPTER 4

Mexico, Chiapas, 29 May

Swigging from the bottle of Dos Equis, he peered through the dusty window of the four-wheel-drive at the brothel. Bullet holes pitted the plastered outer walls, punctuating the painted sign that marked this place out as offering the average Mexican man a good time, at a price. A Corona logo had been amateurishly daubed onto a florid yellow background with black paint. The opening hours and maximum capacity had rubbed off some time ago. But he knew it was open 24/7 for a man who had the cash. This was a Chiapas town, after all. And this club was his.

Beyond the threshold, he spied a tired-looking jukebox and several cheap white plastic chairs. A young girl sat on one of them. Overweight, like most of them were. Wearing a barely-there skirt and vertiginous platform stilettos. Couldn't have been more than fourteen. Her face shone with sweat and her long black hair hung lank and greasy on her bare shoulders.

'What's the deal with her?' he asked Miguel.

At his side, Miguel leaned forwards and squinted to get a better look at the girl. 'Oh, her? She wouldn't run,' he said in English, spoken with an accent flavoured heavily with his native Spanish, with a dash of Texan twang. 'She was the only one. She was too frightened, she said. Ratted the others out, though, when we threatened to kill her mother and sisters.'

'Good. And do we know where the dumb bitches have gone?'

'Apparently they're headed towards the landing strip hidden in the mountains. Some customer with a conscience told them about it. Said they could hire a light aircraft if they clubbed together, or maybe offer the pilot their services if they couldn't.' Miguel dabbed at his forehead with a clean white handkerchief. His black hair, thick like carpet, stood to attention in sweaty spikes.

'I want you to find the chump that gave them big ideas and feed him to the crocodiles. *Comprende?*'

Miguel wagged his head in agreement. '*Naturalmente, jefe.* I'll check the CCTV. If he's local, we will find him.'

'If he's from out of town, you'll still find him.'

'*Si. Claro.*' Miguel closed his eyes. Nodding effusively.

'And put it on YouTube. Then, make sure the whole town sees what's left. Leave it in the square or something.'

'*No problema, el cocodrilo.*'

He smiled at Miguel. Studied his pock-marked, acne-scarred face; the spare tyre that drooped over his belt and slacks. Too many cheese-laden *tostadas* and sugar-coated *churros*, no doubt. The Mexican diet was so damned greasy. He longed for the simpler fare of home but kept that thought to himself. 'Those silly whores don't realise they're running straight into the lion's den.'

The car drove on out of town and along the pitted, dusty trails that led into the mountains to the border between the Chiapas and Guatemala. Past shrines cut into the rock, containing miniature skeletons, adorned with flowers. Despite the vivid green forest that blanketed the mountains, this was a hellish, godforsaken land. Even with the air-con blowing at full pelt in the Mercedes, the inferno-like heat was still stifling. And though they had left the smell of putrefaction from the ramshackle streets far behind, *el cocodrilo* nevertheless pulled the lime from the neck of his beer bottle with a determined finger and held it to his nose, enjoying the sharp, clean tang. Remembering what it was like to be permanently cool, enjoying consistently fresh air. The smell of the sea.

'We're here,' Miguel announced, as the car bounced inside a gated complex, down a rutted drive.

To one side, maize – stalks that were taller than men – grew in obedient rows on a plateau. Women, wearing colourful embroidered peasant smocks and black skirts, hacked at the ripe crop

with machetes, some with babies swaddled and strapped to their backs. They froze, staring at the Mercedes with its blacked-out windows. Realising who was contained within. Deftly, they turned back to their work, keeping their heads bowed respectfully low.

‘Do they work for me?’ he asked.

Miguel nodded. ‘*Si*. They’re all trafficked Nicaraguans and Hondurans. Farming in the week. Brothels at the weekend. Every man and woman you see on the farm is yours, *jefe*.’ He started to laugh. ‘The farmer wasn’t too pleased, but he stopped moaning once we cut his head off.’

El cocodrilo turned away from his sniggering minion. It didn’t pay to be too familiar with men on the payroll. Even the ones only a rung beneath him. Rubbing his lime so that the zest left a stinging, oily slick on his fingers, he peered up at the mountains that rose in undulating green peaks on the other side of the road. Smothered in lush coffee crops. Fertile soil. Productive land. His was a diverse and lucrative business.

The white stucco hacienda appeared just ahead like a tired angel perched on a Christmas tree that had been left over from the days of colonialism – a double-storey affair with ornate arches fringing a balconied quad, topped off with a ridged terracotta roof. Small wonder the farmer had been reluctant to relinquish it. Two tattooed young men stood on the tiled veranda by the front door, holding AK-47s. Not so elegant.

The car ground to a halt in a cloud of dust.

‘Where are the girls?’ he asked. ‘Are they inside?’

‘No, *jefe*. They’re lined up on the airstrip,’ Miguel said. ‘Awaiting your judgement.’

Ignoring the bowing sycophants and scurrying workers, he followed Miguel through the claustrophobic stalks of the maize crop for some two hundred metres. Feeling the heat strike the parched ground beneath his feet, bouncing back up into the soles of his shoes and onto his skin. Three in the afternoon. The place was an oven. And already he could hear the cicadas starting their lilting evensong. *Chapulines*, three times the size of the crickets in Europe, click-clicked their chirruping long legs together. He stood on one and committed to memory the sound of it crunching beneath his shoe. Shithole.

When the stalky growth ended in a perfect line, giving way to the giant clearing, he could breathe again. Peered out beneath the brim of his straw trilby, squinting in the sunshine to see heat rising in mesmerising waves above a perfect white airstrip cut into the scrub. At the far end of the secret runway, a light aircraft had been casually parked. His light aircraft. Purchased to carry his coke, guns and supplies. His landing strip. Silly bitches. There they were, kneeling in the flattened dirt with coffee sacking on their heads. Naked. Hands tied behind them.

Pondering how best to deal with this insurgence, he turned to Miguel. ‘Bring all of the farm workers and the men here. Now.’

Walking towards the gaggle of hooded girls, he eyed the *transportistas* who guarded them warily. As arms-smuggling mercenaries, revered for their professionalism and impartiality by all the cartels, these *transportistas* were not women under his jurisdiction, despite being on his payroll. Dressed in dark utility clothing and carrying semi-automatic rifles. He recognised AK-47s, American issue AR-15s and German HK G36s. His storerooms would be replete with firepower if they had driven all the way north from Honduras with their ballistic payload.

‘Ladies,’ he said, tipping his hat. Making eye contact with a big bruiser of a *transportista*, wearing the skeletal figure of Santa Muerte emblazoned in white on her black T-shirt. ‘Nice guns.’ He winked.

The woman scowled at him. ‘*Hola, el cocodrilo*,’ she said, readjusting her rifle across her hips. ‘Too bad you couldn’t make it to the rendezvous in Palenque in person. That little shit behind the bar needed teaching some respect. I taught him good. Okay?’

He nodded.

‘Well, you’ve got ten cases of our finest arms in the hacienda and in Palenque. Mainly AK-47s.’ She reached out to shake his hand. Her grip was like a vice, far stronger than most of the men who worked for him. He noted the tattoos, more commonly seen on the men of the mara gangs, scrolling up her inner arm, under her T-shirt sleeve, emerging at the base of her thick neck, where the ink travelled northwards over her scarred face in a demonic tapestry of blue-black. Faux-religious images of weeping women and children. Flowers and skulls of the Maya, with numbers and letters scrawled intricately across her throat in some kind of magical code that clearly meant something to the right people. ‘Pleasure doing business with you. As always.’

‘And you’ll also take care of this problem for me?’ he asked.

The farm workers and his own men had gathered along the edge of the airstrip now. Milling around awkwardly, suspecting what was about to happen, perhaps. Visibly squirming, lest the mayhem spill over from the group of absconded prostitutes, somehow tainting them.

The *transportista* nodded. ‘*Claro*,’ she said, gabbling something to her compatriots in rapid-fire Salvadoran Spanish.

The women slung their rifles across their backs and simultaneously drew machetes in some gruesome choreographed dance. Pulled the sacks from the heads of the bewildered trafficked girls who peered around to see where they were. Wide-eyed and mouthing, ‘*No! No!*’ when they caught sight of *el cocodrilo*. Begging for forgiveness, their pleas falling on his unsympathetic ears. Weak, corruptible bitches. Why would he ever spare them? Particularly when they were so easily replaced with the next truckload coming out of Guatemala.

There was something about the high drama of the Central Americans that appealed to him. It was amusing, all this pandemonium and Latin angst: screaming, now drowning out the high-pitched sound of the cicadas, as the girls understood the fate about to be visited upon them. Weeping from the farm workers, who grasped that this too might be their method of undoing, should they cross the mighty *el cocodrilo* and dare to take back their freedoms.

‘Now,’ he said.

The *transportistas* pushed the kneeling girls to the ground until they kissed the dirt with their tear-streaked faces. All bar one raised machetes in unison and, with one forceful blow, beheaded each runaway in almost perfect synchronicity. Amid the wailing of the onlookers, the girls’ heads rolled away from broken bodies that pumped out their life’s blood. Staring but unseeing. For them, at least, it was the end.

But as *el cocodrilo* turned to walk away from the scene of execution, he felt he was being watched.

CHAPTER 5

Amsterdam, police headquarters, then, Bouwdewijn de Groot Lyceum, Apollolaan, then, Floris Engels' apartment in Amstelveen, 28 April

'What do we know about our man in the canal?' Maarten Minks asked. Neatly folded into his chair, he sat with his pen in hand and his pad open, as though he were poised to take notes. Van den Bergen could deduce from the shine on his overenthusiastic, wrinkle-free face that he was on the cusp of getting a stiffy over the discovery of this fourth body. Waiting for his old Chief Inspector's words of wisdom, no doubt. Bloody fanboy.

'Well,' Van den Bergen began. Paused. Rearranged his long frame in his seat, grimacing as his hip clicked in protest when he tried to cross his legs. 'It's interesting, actually. His wallet and ID were still on him. No money stolen, so he couldn't have been pushed into the water after a mugging.' He took the smudged glasses from the end of the chain around his neck and perched them on his nose. Wishing now that he'd had the scratched lens replaced when George had told him to. Trying to focus on the handwriting in his notebook. Hell, maybe it wasn't the scuffling. Maybe his sight had deteriorated since the last eye test. Was it entirely unfeasible that he had glaucoma? 'Ah, his name was Floris Engels – a maths teacher at Bouwdewijn de Groot Lyceum in the Old South part of town.'

Minks nodded. Pursed his lips. 'A teacher, eh?'

'Yes. I checked his tax records. Head of department at a posh school on the expensive side of town.' Removing his glasses, Van den Bergen stifled a belch. 'IT Marie's done some background research and revealed nothing but a photograph of him on the school's website and a Facebook account that we're waiting for permission to access. It's unlikely he was some kind of petty crook on the quiet, as far as I can make out, but I got the feeling he might have been dead before he hit the water.'

'And the number of canal deaths are stacking up,' Minks said, lacing his hands together. That fervour was still shining in his eyes.

Van den Bergen could guess exactly what he was hoping for but refused to pander to his boss' aspirations. 'I'm going out there with Elvis now to interview the Principal and some of his colleagues. We're going to check out his apartment too. Marianne's doing the postmortem this afternoon. She says, at first glance, she thinks maybe there's been some foul play.'

'Excellent!' Minks said, scribbling down a note that Van den Bergen could not read. 'Lots going on. I really do admire your old school methodical techniques, Paul.' The new Commissioner beamed at him. His cheeks flushed red and he leaned his elbow onto the desk. 'Will you be disappearing into your shed for a think?'

Is he taking the piss, Van den Bergen wondered? But then he remembered that Maarten Minks was neither Kamphuis nor Hasselblad. This smooth-skinned foetus had been fast-tracked straight out of grad school. At least Van den Bergen's long-range vision was good enough to corroborate that there was a raft of diplomas hanging above Minks on the wall behind his desk. A framed photo of him posing with the Minister for Security and Justice, the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations and the bloody Prime Minister. No sign of a naked lady statue or stupid executive toys. This youthful pretender to the policing throne was all business. But he could think again if he thought Van den Bergen was going to discuss the shed. 'Do you have any suggestions regarding the shape the investigation should take? Any priorities I should know about?'

'See how the autopsy pans out. But if there are any similarities with the other floaters, I think we need to consider ...'

Here it was. Van den Bergen could feel it coming. He shook his head involuntarily and popped an antacid from its blister pack onto his tongue.

‘... that a serial killer is on the loose.’

When he strode out to the car park, Elvis was already waiting for him, leaning up against the BMW 7 Series he had got the new Chief of Police to cough up for when they had broken the news to him that he was going to be overlooked for the role of Commissioner, yet again. Even the top man didn’t have a vehicle like Van den Bergen’s. But then, nobody else had legs quite as long as his, so they could all suck it up.

‘Get off the car, for God’s sake,’ he said. ‘I’ve just had it valeted. I don’t need your arse print on my passenger door. And don’t smoke near it. The ash sticks to the paintwork.’

‘Sorry, boss,’ Elvis said, exhaling and stubbing his half-spent cigarette out on the ground with the heel of his cowboy boot.

Van den Bergen scrutinised his pale, blotchy face. The signs of his psoriasis flaring up again, the poor bastard. ‘Are you up to this?’ he asked, unlocking the car with his fob. ‘You look peaky.’

‘I was up all night with Mum,’ Elvis said. Digging a nicotine-stained index finger into his auburn sideburns – totally at odds with the ridiculous dyed-black quiff that earned him his moniker. Even that was starting to thin a little, these days, now that he was very comfortably on the wrong side of thirty.

His detective opened his mouth, presumably to say more. Van den Bergen plunged into the driver’s seat as quickly as his stiff hip would allow. Slammed the door shut, trapping Elvis and his earnest confessions outside. Programmed Floris Engels’ address into his sat nav.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said quietly through recalcitrant, tight lips, when Elvis buckled in. ‘I just can’t—’

‘It’s okay, boss. I get it.’

‘Just book leave when you need it.’ He waved his hand dismissively, switched on the stereo and enjoyed the rather less awkward silence of Depeche Mode at a volume loud enough to drown out Elvis’ attempts at conversation about his mother’s condition.

‘Floris Engels,’ Elvis said, poking at a photograph of the dead man that he’d laid on the head teacher’s desk. A flattering shot of him taken from the sideboard in his flat. Average-looking but tanned, well dressed, smiling. A shot of him dead on the canal side, his ghoulish face swollen to almost twice its normal size. He knew Van den Bergen was scrutinising his every move for signs of exhaustion. One false move and he’d be put on compassionate leave. It was the last thing he wanted. ‘Tell me and the Chief Inspector here everything you know about your Head of Maths.’ He crossed his right leg over his left knee, as he’d seen the boss do. Assumed the position of a relaxed and confident man with nothing to prove.

‘Well, Floris is—’ The head teacher was suddenly preoccupied by his hairy fingers. Frowned. ‘Was a very well-respected member of my staff.’ His voice shook with emotion.

Elvis tried to memorise everything about the man. Discreet gold jewellery. Expensive, pin-stitched suit befitting the head of a fee-paying school that catered for Amsterdam’s *bekakte* bourgeoisie – the chattering classes – where the darling Lodewijks and Reiniers and Petronellas of wealthy parents could receive their top-drawer educations in wood-panelled, exclusive splendour. Even the dust in the air smelled expensive at Boudewijn de Groot Lyceum. Elvis’ psoriasis itched beneath his leather jacket.

‘And?’

Closing his eyes, the Head pushed the photographs away. ‘Floris started working here three years ago. He is ...’ His brow furrowed. ‘... was always impeccably polite, got great results from his pupils. Popular among parents. He was a model teacher.’

‘What kind of man was he?’ Elvis asked, wishing the Head would make eye contact with him. It irked him that he kept looking over at Van den Bergen even though it was he who was asking the questions.

The Head shrugged. ‘I told you. Polite. Hard-working. Bright.’

‘No,’ Van den Bergen said, doodling absently in his notebook. ‘That tells us what kind of employee he was.’ Scratching away with his biro at a miniature sketch of his granddaughter. Finally he looked up at the Head. Put his glasses on the end of his nose and peered at the brass-embossed name plate on the desk that marked him out as Prof. Roeland Hendrix. ‘Who was Floris the man, Roeland? Did you see him socially? What was his home life like? I can see from public records that he hasn’t been married and that his parents are both dead. Did he have a girlfriend? Kids somewhere?’

Elvis checked his watch. Wondered if the carer was making his mother the right sort of lunch. *Carby snack with the meds. Carby snack with the meds*, he intoned, wishing his thoughts would somehow travel across town to his mother’s dingy little house. He’d left all the ingredients out on the side in the kitchen. Mum kept gunning for the shitty cheap ham the carer had snuck into the fridge at her request. But he had prepared her a chickpea and bean pasta salad with rocket. *Meds three-quarters of an hour before meal.*

‘Come on, Professor Hendrix,’ Elvis said. ‘I bet an intelligent man like you has got the measure of all his employees.’

The Head shrugged. Toyed with the silk handkerchief in his top pocket. His nails had been varnished.

Elvis touched the stiff gel of his quiff and wondered if it made him hypocritical to think ill of the Head’s immaculate ponce-hands. Hid his own nicotine-stained fingers inside his pockets.

‘Honestly? I know nothing about Floris at all,’ the Head said. ‘He was a completely private man. Kept himself to himself. An enigma, you might say. I invited him, along with other teachers, to dinner parties and soirées, but he would never come and always managed to sidestep any digging into his life outside work. And I did try. To dig, I mean.’

Van den Bergen rearranged himself in the leather armchair. His bones cracked audibly as he did so. Jesus. Is that what a lifetime of supervising door-to-doors in the rain did for a man? Elvis shuddered.

‘Where did he work before here?’ he asked.

‘He came from the Couperus International Lyceum in Utrecht. Glowing references. He’d been there for ten years.’

The Head glanced at the grandfather clock that struck in the corner of the room. Stood abruptly. ‘I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help, gentlemen.’

All the way to the unprepossessing apartment in Amstelveen’s Brandwijk, Van den Bergen imagined himself shaking and shuddering his way to a premature end with Parkinson’s like Elvis’ mother. The bullet hole in his hip had been causing him great pain, of late, with all the damp. Were there any signs of tremors in his movement? George would be able to tell him. By the end of the week, she would be back in Amsterdam. In the meantime, he made a mental note to visit the doctor’s to rule out some debilitating degenerative disease.

Curtains twitched as he parked up outside the three-storey block, with its garden view and balcony. This was perhaps the most suburban, nondescript place in the world, Van den Bergen mused. A place where nothing ever happened. Except something had happened to one of its residents.

‘What do you make of this, boss?’ Elvis said, running a latex-clad finger along the spines of the books on the bookshelves. Five boring-looking academic tomes about physics. *Fall of Man in Wilmslow* – a book Van den Bergen vaguely recognised as being about Alan Turing. The rest were interior design and architecture textbooks. Several British fiction titles among them that Van den Bergen had never heard of.

‘He was a maths teacher, so the physics stuff fits,’ he said. Casting an eye over the mid-century-style furniture in the apartment, he realised it was more Ikea repro than genuine Danish antiques. But there was a strong design element to it. That much he could see. Nothing like his thrift-shop dump, which was still reminiscent of a garage sale no matter how many times George scrubbed through. ‘Somebody here knows their décor onions. No photos of women anywhere apart from this.’ Using

a latex-gloved hand, he picked up the portrait of a woman who was roughly in her sixties. Perhaps Engels' mother. She had the same hazel eyes, judging by the school's online profile picture of him.

Movement suddenly caught the Chief Inspector's attention. Or was it a shadow? With his heartbeat picking up pace and his policeman's instincts sharpening, he turned towards the doorway, beyond which lay the bedroom.

'Is somebody in here with us?' he whispered to Elvis. Mouthed, 'In there.' Pointed to the bedroom.

Elvis shook his head. Continued to look at the books.

Van den Bergen strode briskly into the bedroom, his plastic overshoes rustling as he crunched on the shag pile rug underfoot. Held his breath. Scanned the neat, masculine room for intruders. There was nobody there but a whiff of aftershave hung in the air. Or was he imagining things?

'I need to drink less coffee,' he muttered, running his fingers over the pistol in its holster, strapped to his torso.

He flung open the wardrobe doors to reveal immaculately presented suiting; ties, pants and socks stowed in colour co-ordinated compartments, perhaps specifically designed for ties, pants and socks. Jumpers and tops stacked in neat piles on shelving. One set of shelves containing sombre colours. The other, less conservative combinations of teal, pink, yellow ...

'Different sizes on the right side of the wardrobes to the left,' he said. 'Two men. Our victim and a lover.'

Elvis pulled open the drawer to the bedside cabinet. 'This is always the most revealing place in anyone's bedroom,' he said. 'I've got an asthma inhaler, hair putty and a men's health magazine from 2002. What about you?' He smirked.

'Proton pump inhibitors, floss and Tiger Balm,' Van den Bergen said, grimacing at the contents Elvis had revealed. 'Jesus. It's like the storeroom in a sex shop. Look of the size of those bloody dildos. And what the hell is *that*?' He pointed to a black rubber string of balls, growing progressively larger in size.

'Anal beads, boss.' Elvis guffawed with laughter.

'And that fucking thing?' He pointed to what appeared to be a stainless-steel egg.

'You jam it up your—'

Van den Bergen held his hand high. Thought of George's middle finger inside him and blushed. A world away from this little haul in terms of adventurousness. 'Stop. You're making my prostate twitch.' He considered his intermittent suffering with haemorrhoids and snorted with derision at the anal beads. Appraised the carefully made bed and the dust that was beginning to settle on the bedroom furniture. 'Any sign of post addressed to somebody else? Check the kitchen. Everybody puts post in there.'

Elvis left the bedroom. Nobody had reported Floris Engels missing. There had been no evidence of a suicide note in the man's clothing. Who and where was his partner?

'Nothing,' Elvis said. 'Weird.'

'Unless he's left in a hurry and taken any documentation with him.' Van den Bergen thumbed at the jowls that were beginning to burgeon on his previously taut jawline, deep in thought. Jumped when a door slammed shut within the apartment.

'There *is* someone in here with us!' he shouted. He ran into the living room, gun in hand, trying to glimpse whoever the visitor was. 'Hello?!'

CHAPTER 6

Cambridge, Huntingdon Road, then, Stansted Airport, 29 April

‘You just keep a lookout,’ George told Aunty Sharon, shouting above the gusting Cambridgeshire wind. Her pulse thudded in her neck as she calculated how long it would take Sally Wright to grind and wobble her way up the hill to the student house on the Huntingdon Road. Surely a chain-smoker like her would asphyxiate before she’d be able to scale Cambridge’s infamous Castle Hill on a sit-up-and-beg bicycle. *Calm down, George. Chill your boots. You get in. You get out. You get gone.* ‘I’ll be down in ten. I’ve only got a couple of bits to get. Honk if you see an angry white woman with a bad fringe. Okay? Honk!’

This was a flying visit to Cambridge, precipitated by two texts she had received the evening she had returned to Aunty Sharon’s after interviewing Gordon Bloom in Belmarsh. Relieved to find that she was not, after all, being followed through the Catford backstreet by anything more sinister than an inquisitive cat and her own burgeoning paranoia, she had hastened to her aunt’s house, walking straight through to the kitchen. She had put her bag squarely on a kitchen chair, so it had aligned with the edges. Rearranging it until it was just right. The routine had been like every other evening.

‘All right, love,’ Aunty Sharon had said. ‘I’ve made goat curry. Fancy it?’ She had lifted the lid on a simmering pan, the contents of which had smelled like heaven but had resembled diarrhoea. George had embraced her aunt, barely circling her chunky middle. Had kissed her on the cheek, feeling whiskers that hadn’t been there twelve months earlier. But at least Aunty Sharon had ditched the raggedy extensions and had covered her desperately stressed natural hair with a decent wig.

Beneath her apron, Sharon had already been wearing her clothes for the club, where she served watered-down shots to the pissed denizens of Soho’s *Skin Licks* titty bar.

‘Oh my days, Aunty Shaz! I could eat a scabby horse on toast. I only had a bag of cheese balls all day. Bring it on. It smells bloody gorgeous.’ George had flung herself onto another kitchen chair, contemplating how empty the house had felt with her cousin, Tinesha, long departed to live with her boyfriend, and Patrice who was more out than in, now that he was in the upper sixth. Once again, George – past the point where she had been the fresh young thing, out on the tiles all night long and now having reached the age where her contemporaries were married with children – had only her own company to look forward to, as the evening had stretched ahead of her. Hadn’t one of the new male Fellows at college jokingly referred to George as a spinster? Some long-legged floppy-haired arsehole in a pseudo-intellectual tweed jacket, originally from Eton. Tim Hamilton. Dickhead. He’d stared at her tits when he’d said it. George had batted the thought aside. ‘You go to the community centre today? Any news?’

Sharon had shaken her head and had plonked too much rice onto a plate with a giant serving spoon. ‘Nah, love. Nobody’s seen her. Nobody’s heard nothing on the grapevine. Not a fucking sausage. Even that nosey old cow Dorothea Caines didn’t have a clue, and I had to eat one of her rock-hard cupcakes to find that much out.’ She had put her hand on her hip and had grimaced. ‘She’d not sieved the flour. Can you get over it? I mean!’ She’d made a harrumphing noise. ‘Talk about taking one for the team. My God! If the Black Gang or Pecknarm Killaz or whatever the fuck those gangsta rareseclarts call themselves used her cupcakes as missiles, all there’d be left of Southeast London would be fucking craters. Craters, darling!’

Nodding, George had forked her curry into her mouth with the enthusiasm of the semi-starving. Surreptitiously grabbing at her spare tyre beneath the table, thinking it time she had a chat with Aunty Sharon about portion size, now there were fewer of them in the house.

Sharon had been unaware of George's dietary preoccupation. She had been waving the spoon at her with dangerous intent. 'I'd take that Dorothea Caines out like a fucking ninja if we was going head-to-head in a bake-off.' Droplets of curry had splattered the dated splashback tiles.

'So, still no news of Letitia. Or my dad?' George had asked, feeling irritation prickle at the roots of her hair. Same questions. Every. Single. Day.

Her aunty had fallen abruptly quiet, sniffing pointedly. Her eyes had become glassy without warning. 'Sorry, love. If anyone had seen your mum knocking around on the estate, that do-gooding righteous witch Dorothea would be the first to hear it and crow about it. Honest. Your mum's evaporated into thin air, like.' She had reached out and had grabbed George's hand, squeezing it in a show of solidarity. 'Nothing on your dad, either.'

Noticing the curry and grains of rice stuck to Sharon's index finger, George had pulled her hand away, stifling a sigh.

As she had crawled into Tinesha's old bed and had pulled the duvet up to her chin, she had thought about this impasse she had reached. An unwelcome tear had tracked along her cheekbone, running into her ear. Annoyed, she had poked at it, wondering if Letitia had been thinking about her; if she had even still been alive.

'Like fuck she is,' she had said to floral curtains, backlit by the yellow streetlight.

She had wondered yet again if there had been even the slightest possibility that her father had sent the untraceable emails, courting contact with her; saying he was watching her.

'Not after nearly twenty-five years of silence. No way,' she had told the glowing numbers on the old ticking alarm clock.

With sleep beckoning her towards yet another fitful night of tossing, turning and imagining the gruesome fate of her possibly enucleated mother, she had been jolted wide awake by her phone vibrating with two new emails. The first had been from Marie.

Police in Maastricht have found a man who may be of interest!

The second had been from Van den Bergen.

Come back to Amsterdam. I need you for something.

Now, Aunty Sharon was wedged behind the wheel of her old 53-plate Toyota Corolla, parked badly on Huntingdon Road, peering up with a puzzled look at the tired Gothic student house that loomed above them. Yellowing chintz curtains at the window and a broken pane of glass in the 1960s replacement front door.

'*You live here?*' she asked, curling her lip with clear disgust. 'In that dump? You having a laugh with me?'

George frowned. Shook her head dismissively and tutted. 'Save it, yeah? Beggars can't be choosers. Now remember. If you see Sally Wright—'

'What about Sally Wright?' Sally Wright asked, emerging from behind the overgrown privet that bordered the end-of-terrace. She clapped her hands together in George's face. 'Ha! Got you, you sneaky sod!'

Opening and closing her mouth, George foraged in her mental lie-box for a good, feasible excuse as to why she had kept her flying visit to Cambridge a secret. Tried to work out how the aerobically challenged Senior Tutor had hoofed it from her office in St John's College up the road to the house inside ten minutes. Ten goddamned minutes since Aunty Shaz' car had rolled into town.

'How—?'

'Sophie Bartek,' Sally explained, marching to the taxi that George had only just clocked, parked all the while in front of Aunty Sharon. She explained to the driver that she had decided to hitch a ride back in Sharon's Toyota, paid him and sent him on his way.

'Fucking Sophie,' George said under her breath. 'Shit-stirrer owes me one.'

She forced a smile for the Professor of Criminology who ruled her academic life like a benevolent dictator; the woman she would always be indebted to for having allowed her to learn her

way out of a future where petty crime or prison or stacking supermarket shelves would otherwise have beckoned.

‘Why haven’t you been taking my calls, young lady?’ Sally asked, glowering at George. Pointing with a gnarled, amber-coloured finger. ‘It’s our bloody book launch tomorrow evening, and Sophie tells me you’re bugging back off to Amsterdam.’ She folded her arms across her narrow chest, squeezing the leather of her eccentrically cut coat until she was akin to a municipal bin bag with the drawstrings pulled tight. The pruning around her mouth deepened. But that fierce gaze had lost none of its potency behind the red acetate cat’s-eye glasses. ‘I’ll never be able to show my face in Heffers again. And all because you can’t resist the pull of that old flake, Van den Bergen. The man’s like a disappointing Svengali with prostate trouble. Our big night will be ruined. Now, what do you have to say for yourself?’

‘You don’t need me to help you blow your fucking trumpet in public, Sally. You’ve got that one covered all on your own, I reckon.’ George didn’t like being indebted. And apologies were overrated. She jammed her fist onto her hip defiantly. ‘And Paul is hardly a flake, is he? He’s one of the best coppers in Europe, *actually*. And if you must know, I’m going to Amsterdam because there’s been a development regarding Letitia.’

‘What?!’ Aunty Sharon shouted from inside the Toyota.

‘What?!’ Sally Wright said, clutching George’s arm.

George pulled herself loose from the grip of the Senior Tutor. Immediately regretted saying anything, as her aunt unbuckled and started to heave herself out of the car.

‘Georgina, why on earth didn’t you say anything?’ Sally said, her brow furrowed, perhaps with genuine empathy.

Before George could retreat, Sharon had rounded on them both, booting Sally Wright aside unceremoniously with her ample bottom. She clasped George into a suffocating hug. The threat of tears audible in her voice.

‘Is she dead?’ Sharon asked. ‘Has that silly cow’s body been found in a wheelie bin?’ She sniffed hard. ‘It has, hasn’t it? Oh, sweet Jesus.’

‘I won’t know anything until I speak to Marie, one of Paul’s detectives,’ George said, disengaging herself from her aunt. ‘All I know is that there’s a man in Maastricht. A dead guy, who’s somehow connected to Letitia’s disappearance. That’s all she’s told me so far.’ She turned to the Senior Tutor, realising it would do her no favours to curry the displeasure of a woman who could have her funding rescinded at any time, leaving her broke and jobless. Sally had threatened it before, but George was older, wiser and several steps closer to having a deposit saved for her own place, now. Biting this particular gnarled proverbial hand that fed would be folly. ‘That’s why I can’t stay for the launch, Sal.’ She rearranged her features into what would pass as an apologetic smile. ‘You’ll be brilliant without me.’

Sally tugged at her blunt-cut fringe and scowled. Hooked her short bob behind her ear. ‘But all of Dobkin’s family are coming. It’s a big deal, dedicating the book to his memory.’

‘We robbed his research,’ George said. ‘I could have saved his life and I didn’t. I knew Danny was up to no good and all I could think of was protecting my own arse.’ George’s viscera tightened at the memory of her squatting behind a car, watching her academic rival, Professor Dickwad Dobkin, succumb to the brutal intentions of her backstreet drug-dealing ex-lover. UCL’s finest criminologist crumpling to the ground like a falling autumnal leaf in a quiet London WC1 square, all because he had got too close to revealing the true identities of the major players in the UK’s people-trafficking rings. A bullet, punching its way into his superlative brain, that could have been avoided, had George only been quicker to punch his number into her phone. ‘I don’t deserve to have my name on the front of that book.’

Sally's mouth hardened to a thin line. 'We did *not* steal his research, Georgina McKenzie. Dobkin's trafficking database and the information we ... *you* gathered from inmates in prison developed organically under completely separate—'

'His research made it into our book,' George said, feeling shame heat her wind-chilled cheeks from the inside. Nervously looking at Aunt Sharon, expecting a look of disapprobation but seeing only confusion in her face.

'What's some geez in Maastricht gotta do with my turd of a sister?' Sharon asked.

'It's going to be a *Sunday Times* bestseller,' Sally said, pulling a cigarette packet out of her coat pocket. She offered one to George. George shook her head but took one anyway.

Sharon, clearly unimpressed by the interloper snatching George's attention in this time of family crisis, shouted at the Senior Tutor, 'Mout a massy, yuh cyan shut yup?' Jamaican patois, delivered with such venom and speed that George was convinced the paving slabs of that genteel Cambridge road might blister at any moment. Sharon snatched the cigarette off George and lit it herself. 'Listen, Professor whatever-your name is,' she said, exhaling a cloud of blue-grey smoke in Sally's direction. 'If my niece here stands a cat in hell's chance of tracking my sister down – who's been missing for a fucking year ...' Jabbing the cigarette towards the startled Fellow. '... she's going to Amsterdam if I have to put on bloody water wings and swim her there, myself. Right? And if that means you can't roll her out at your fucking boring book launch as some novelty ghetto-fabulous lackey what serves the cooking wine and flutters her eyelashes at the dirty old codgers who pay your wages, you're just going have to suck it up, darling! Cos family comes first. Right?' She turned to George, straightening her burgundy, glossy wig. Glowing with an almost religious zeal that only Bermondsey women could really pull off when vexed. 'Get your shit together, love. We're going to the airport.' A click of the fingers meant the conversation was over.

Dropping Sally Wright off outside St John's College, leaving her open-mouthed and speechless, for once, George realised she was trembling with anticipation. Would this trip yield an answer to her questions? She covered her juddering hands with her rucksack. Not quick enough for her aunt, though.

'I see you shaking there, like you've got the DTs! It would help if you ate a proper breakfast,' she said, indicating left. Pulling up at the drop-off point at Stansted Airport, forcing the dented silver car into a bottleneck of taxis and disoriented relatives who were also dropping baggage-laden holidaymakers at Departures. Sharon reached for a cool bag at George's feet.

'Shift your feet. I made you a packed lunch,' she said. Plonked the bag onto George's lap. Grabbing her face and planting a wet kiss on her cheek, which George hastily wiped away. 'Couple of nice homemade patties and some jerk chicken. That'll keep you going for a bit.'

'Ta. I love you, Aunt Sharon.' George drank in the detail of her aunt's face, feeling suddenly melancholy. She pushed aside unexpectedly negative feelings that she couldn't quite articulate. A sense of impending loss or perhaps just separation anxiety. 'Give my love to Tin and Patrice. I'll text you.'

Aunt Sharon nodded. Her face, scrubbed of the make-up she wore to the club in the evening, seemed closer to five than forty.

'Find her, George. Find Letitia, dead or alive.'

CHAPTER 7

Amsterdam, mortuary, later

‘Well, there’s water in his lungs,’ Marianne de Koninck said, carefully lifting the slippery-looking mass out of his chest cavity and onto the scales in the mortuary. ‘That much is obvious.’

At her side, Floris Engels’ milky eyes stared out from his bloated face. His scalp and legs, where Marianne’s pathologist’s blade had not yet got to work, were florid in places, yellowy-grey in others like bad tie-dye, the skin showing signs of wrinkling only at his extremities, as though it might shrug itself off his feet or hands. But the bloating made Van den Bergen twitch involuntarily. He hated floaters. They decomposed so bloody fast. He was glad of the clean, menthol smell of the VapoRub beneath his nostrils.

‘But I’ll need to test for the concentration of his serum electrolytes and examine his bones and viscera for diatoms,’ she said, observing the scales’ reading. ‘Our canal water is quite saline in certain parts of town because of the locks at Ijmuiden letting seawater in. So, there’ll be microscopic algae from the sea in his deep tissues if he’s just fallen in and met a watery end in the canal. Bones are always a good indicator.’ She took her scalpel and cut a sample of bone from the nub that protruded from his partially severed upper arm. Scraped the marrow into a test tube and sealed it. ‘It will take a couple of days in the lab. I’m due to get his bloods back any day, though.’ Pointing to his arm, she clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. Used her elbow to scratch at her belly beneath her scrubs. ‘That has been cut cleanly with the propeller of the barge, I’d say. Definitely done postmortem. My hypothesis is that our Floris here fell or was pushed in – point of entry by the barge. He sank, got trapped under the keel of the barge until our bargeman decided he needed a change of scenery.’

Van den Bergen wondered if Marianne’s muscular athlete’s arms would look so alien and ugly if she too had been underwater for a period of time. ‘So, he drowned, right?’ he asked.

The pathologist shone a light up the dead man’s nostrils and took swabs. Ever the professional, Van den Bergen wondered how she slept at night or ate after spending the working week with the dead. The last thing he needed a reminder of was his own mortality. Postmortems always left him feeling low for days.

‘He’s got froth in his air passages,’ she said. ‘Looking at his heart, I’d say it’s been subject to hypoxia and pulmonary oedema, causing ventricular tachycardia and haemodilution. There’s marked hyponatraemia. Everything’s pointing to drowning at this stage.’ Standing tall, she stretched out her back and yawned.

‘Late night?’ Van den Bergen asked.

‘You’d only be jealous if I told you.’ She winked at him. Turned her attention back to the cadaver on her stainless-steel slab.

Van den Bergen swallowed hard. Thought about the strange sexual chemistry that had historically been between them, fizzling to nothing when they had once actually found themselves in a clinch. Decided to ignore her prompt. ‘Pointing to drowning. You’re not sure?’

‘Listen,’ she said. ‘Drowning in adults is rare. You guys pull a handful out of the canals in a normal year. Right? The odd drunken tourist or some idiot who thinks it’s a good idea to go swimming. It’s rare. So, whenever someone gets pulled out of the canal, I do two things. I test the bloods for alcohol levels and narcotics – not so easy when the body has been under water for a while, as decomp and the invasion of water in the cells makes everything so bloody difficult.’ She tugged at Engels’ fingernails. ‘Luckily, our guy hasn’t been in the water for too long. He’s lost his body heat but his nails and skin haven’t started to come away yet.’

‘So, he can’t have been in there for more than twenty-four hours,’ Van den Bergen said. ‘Isn’t that right?’

‘I’d say this guy’s been in a little while longer. Thirty-six hours, maybe. Just shy of forty-eight at a push. Any longer, his nails would have started coming away.’ The pathologist loped round to the far side of the body, her Crocs squeaking on the tiled floor. She pointed to his armpit. Livid purple bruises by the shoulder joint. More tricky to see on the side with the severed arm, but there, nevertheless. ‘And in cases like this, I also look for bruising. Trauma signs, where somebody’s hit their head on the way in or where somebody’s been attacked before being pushed in. A true drowning will show hardly any signs of trauma externally. If you’ve had too much to drink or are stoned, you slide or roll in; you’re dead inside five to ten minutes. You’ve inhaled a good couple of litres of water in three. But no bruising necessarily, unless you bash yourself on the way in. But here, look!’

Van den Bergen studied the small round purple bruises. Four by each armpit in total. ‘He’s been grabbed or lifted by someone.’ Removed some photos from an A4 manila envelope that had been taken at the canal side. Sifted through them, until he found photographs of Engels’ personal effects. A photograph of his shoes. ‘These were expensive shoes,’ he said. ‘Russell & Bromley from England. Nice moccasins, but look! They’re scuffed as hell at the heel and the heels themselves have been worn down.’

Marianne nodded. ‘He’s been dragged down to the canal by someone strong and flung in. Until I get all these results through, I’d put my money on that.’ She snapped off her latex gloves and started to wash her hands at the steel sink. ‘And given the other canal drownings were badly decomposed when they were discovered, who’s to say similar hadn’t happened to them? I didn’t perform their autopsies, but Strietman said they’d all been partying too hard – drugs in the system. Who’s to say they hadn’t been forced into the water? He recorded an open verdict.’

‘Oh shit,’ Van den Bergen said. ‘You really think we’ve got a canal killer on our hands?’

The pathologist shrugged. ‘You’re the Chief Inspector. You tell me.’

CHAPTER 8

Amsterdam, police headquarters, later

‘When is he due back?’ George asked Marie in Dutch, wrinkling her nose at the foetid smell of the IT suite. Stale sweat, with an after-kick of onions. But mainly overcooked cabbage. Even the smell of the new carpet that Van den Bergen had got funding for could not mask that distinctive bouquet.

Marie narrowed her watery blue eyes. Opened the collar of her ribbed sweater and sniffed. Shrugged absently. ‘He’s at the morgue.’ She glanced at the clock on her computer monitor. ‘He’s already been gone an hour. I reckon you’ve got twenty minutes, tops, before he shows.’

George considered the white shards that covered the floor by Marie’s feet. Eyed suspiciously the empty bag of crisps next to her keyboard. Set her bag down on the desk, rather than the floor. Yawned so that her blocked ears popped with a deafening squeak.

‘Ow.’ She rubbed her ears. Sniffed her fingers and was pleased to discover they smelled of the Moroccan oil she had used to tame her hair. Better than Marie’s stink.

‘How was your flight?’ Marie asked.

‘Yeah, OK. So come on, then. Tell me about this Maastricht man.’ George folded her arms and studied the IT expert’s face for signs of sympathy, excitement or fear that would give her an inkling as to what the new lead meant for her mother. All she could see was a rash of embarrassment curling its way up Marie’s neck with red tendrils.

Marie clicked her mouse several times. Brought up a photo of a corpse on screen.

George grimaced at the partially decomposed man. ‘Jesus. He’s no looker,’ she said in English. ‘What’s his story?’ Back to Dutch.

Marie pointed with her biro to the empty eye socket on the left-hand side of the man’s face. ‘They actually found him about nine months ago, buried in some heavy clay when they were doing landscaping for the new A2 Maastricht double-decker tunnel.’

‘The motorway bypass?’ George asked.

‘Yes. Exactly. The clay had preserved his soft tissues pretty well but we don’t share a database with Maastricht, so I didn’t come across this record until the other day. Completely by accident and only because I was digging in the right place.’ Marie blushed and hooked her lank red hair behind her ears. ‘Excuse the pun.’

‘And?’ Wearing a scowl, George scrutinised the photo of the corpse. ‘How does that relate to Letitia? I don’t get it.’

‘He’s a DNA match.’

‘Shit. Get out of town,’ George said in English, standing abruptly. ‘It was *his* eye? All those months ago?’

Marie nodded. She clicked up a photograph of a man who appeared altogether healthier. Alive, for a start. Dark-skinned with brown eyes and his black hair cropped brutishly. A tattoo of an indiscernible pattern on the side of his head, visible beneath the stubble on his scalp. Another tattoo of black roses scrolling around his neck.

‘He wasn’t bad looking,’ George said, raising an eyebrow. ‘What a waste.’

‘Well,’ Marie said, ‘The eye in the gift box in Vinkeles belonged to a man, not your mother. Forensics sussed that straight away. We’ve known it all along. Right? So, turns out, it belonged to this poor chump.’ Marie rubbed her nose, examined the inside of her empty crisp packet and tutted. ‘Nasser Malik. Only twenty. Low-level Maastricht dealer, who knocked about with some really nasty types. A recent addition to the M-Boyz gang, a few of whom got busted in 2009, after a couple of kids died from a bad batch of coke that they’d cut with too much levamisole and bloody scouring powder, would you believe it? Malik had previous for dealing, burglary, GBH and car theft but had always

managed to avoid prison, getting off with fines and community service. He went missing about a year ago – reported by his mother, who’s a widowed dentist. Apparently, he’d had ADHD and never did particularly well at school because of it. His brother, Ahmed Malik, is a doctor in Breda but Nasser, the younger son, went off the rails after his dad died.’

George considered the handsome young fool that peered out at her from one photograph and the enucleated, ruined corpse that ogled her with one solitary half-rotted orb in the other. ‘For God’s sake. How tragic is that? What did the coroner say in the report? I presume you’ve pulled it?’

Clicking onto another tab, Marie scanned the text. ‘He’d been strangled. Garrotted with soldering wire, in fact, in exactly the same manner as a couple of gang members had been killed that year, suggesting this was an organised hit.’

Pointing at the screen, George rocked back and forth in her typing chair, mulling over the information. ‘A lot of planning went into that hoax lunch at Vinkeles. Somebody somewhere knew I really wanted to hear from my dad and wouldn’t turn down an invitation if it came from him. Then, the whole Letitia missing bullshit. *Then*, that gift box containing my worst nightmares, waiting for me at precisely the time and place I’m supposed to be meeting my long-lost Daddy Dearest ... who has also either vanished off the face of the earth or is living off-grid, without so much as an electoral registry listing online.’ She inhaled deeply and rubbed her face with her hands, remembering the abject terror she had felt when she had caught sight of the brown eye, staring back at her dully from its box. She had been convinced it was Letitia’s. Only Marianne de Koninck had persuaded her that the DNA had been that of a man of Asian extraction. A mystery. Now solved. George could finally let go of any nagging doubt.

Silence permeated the IT suite, leaving only the buzz of the computer terminals and the bodily funk of Marie.

‘This Nasser guy was bumped to order,’ George said, knocking against her full lips with a balled fist. ‘Whoever is behind this wanted his eye to put the frighteners on me. A grand gesture to make me think they’d got to Letitia. Probably a shit metaphor to say I’m being watched at all times.’

‘Well, some sick bastard has definitely got a hard-on for you,’ Marie said, nodding. ‘And it’s not going to be your dad, is it? No parent would torture their child like that.’ She sighed, stroking a framed photo on her desk of a pink-cheeked baby boy.

George tried to visualise her mother. The memory of that sour, over-made-up face. False-lashed eyes that were always on the lookout for slights and perceived inequities; never seeing joy in the small things or kindnesses or good intentions of the people around her. Letitia in the fur coat that made her look like a mountain lion, throwing cheap Chardonnay down her fat neck in Wetherspoons. Running her talon-tipped fingers, painted the colours of the Jamaican flag, through those caramel blonde hair extensions that she’d bought with her bingo winnings. That memory was beginning to fade, now. Gloria Gaynor at Christmas TK Maxx. That was the Letitia George remembered. That was the Letitia she wanted to remember. Not the bewildered, punctured woman who had been given the diagnosis that she had only a few years left, thanks to her sickle cell anaemia and pulmonary hypertension.

‘She’s out there, somewhere,’ she told Marie, acknowledging a heaviness in her heart that wasn’t just indigestion from eating Aunty Sharon’s patties too quickly on the flight. ‘Either buried in a shallow grave or chained to a radiator in some basement, annoying the shit out of her kidnapper.’ She gave a chuckle, devoid of any real humour. For years, she had opted to eschew the company of Letitia the Dragon, but now, with the element of choice having been stolen from her, she felt short-changed by a family that only really consisted of her aunty and her beloved, cantankerous arsehole of a partner, Van den Bergen.

Turning her attention back to Nasser’s blackened, hollow eye socket on the screen, she nodded. ‘Some evil wanker has orchestrated all of this with great skill and forethought.’ Sucked her teeth. ‘It *must* have been The Duke. That Gordon Bloom bastard denies it every time I go to see him in Belmarsh, but, of all the people I’ve pissed off, who else would have had access to guys with previous,

that could be just whacked to order for their eye colour?’ She groaned with frustration and shouted, ‘Christ on a bike!’ in her native tongue.

‘What about him?’ A man’s voice coming from the threshold to the IT suite heralded the arrival of an interloper. A familiar, deep rumble. ‘Last time I heard, he’d been arrested for cycling under the influence. Gave us some bullshit about turning water into wine.’

George turned around as Marie furtively, hastily clicked her tabs shut. Van den Bergen’s long frame filled the doorway, leaning against the architrave with those long legs crossed in the way that caused a knowing, wry smile to curl the edge of George’s mouth upwards. ‘Are you trying to make a terrible joke in my general direction, Paul van den Bergen? Because you should pack that in, right now!’ She drank in the sight of him, noting the changes from the past few weeks since he had visited her in Cambridge. Looking thinner, healthy, well. Better colour from being outdoors, now the gardening season had started.

Rising to embrace her lover, she could smell on him a whiff of formalin from the mortuary and the remnants of VapoRub beneath his nose as she kissed him fleetingly on his dry, neglected lips. The difficult old bastard turned his head briskly to offer her his sharp-sand hard stubbled cheek, but in his grey hooded eyes, she spied a glint of mischief. ‘What was so urgent that I had to abandon my book launch to come over?’ she asked.

‘This,’ he said, pulling a large envelope out of his bag. Glancing over to Marie’s monitor, he started to lay out photo after photo of a man who appeared to be in his early thirties. Blond, almost handsome, slender in build and very much alive in the first three. Posing on a tropical beach with another man, his arm draped casually around his shoulder and a closeness evident between them that marked them out as lovers, George was certain. In the fourth photo, he was very dead and utterly unrecognisable. A photo of some bruising around the man’s armpits. Followed by further photos of three bodies in varying states of decomposition. Ragged, overblown effigies of the humans they had once been.

‘Floaters?’ George asked, fingering the prints and scowling at the grim portrait of a cadaver with opaque eyes and lips that had been nibbled away to reveal a deadly grin.

‘Precisely,’ Van den Bergen said, hanging his raincoat over the back of a chair and folding his long frame into another. ‘I thought there was a link between them, but I can’t work out what. We’ve got a twenty-year-old male – Alex Jansen.’ He took out his notebook. Wedged his glasses on the end of his triangle of a nose and peered through the lenses like an overtaxed teacher. ‘I’ve written something here and I can’t bloody read it.’

He passed the book to George, who stifled a grin.

‘A student vet on holiday from Utrecht University,’ she read. ‘Found in the Keizersgracht near Vijzelstraat. Seems to have fallen in after a party at his friend’s house nearby, where he was last seen alive.’

Van den Bergen’s grey eyes met hers for an instant and George felt warmed by the connection; the erotic promise that the evening might hold if he didn’t get called away on police business or they didn’t start arguing over something inane.

‘Then, there’s André van der Pol,’ he continued, taking the book from her. ‘Seventeen. Went to a nightclub – Church.’

‘A gay club,’ Marie offered, blushing. ‘Pretty full on, from what I’ve heard.’ She scratched at the angry threat of a spot on her chin. Eyes darting from her desk to the empty crisp packet. ‘My neighbour goes.’

‘Right,’ Van den Bergen said, sighing. ‘He wound up in the Singel. And finally Ed Bakker. Nineteen, from a wealthy family who were from Utrecht but who now live in Willemspark. He was out drinking with friends and seems to have gone into the Leidsegracht without leaving so much as a ripple. No witnesses for any of them. None that would come forward, anyway.’

Gazing at the photograph of what was left of the unrecognisable nineteen-year-old boy, George imagined Danny Spencer – bones she had once jumped, by now in a cemetery in Southeast London, thanks to the ruthless change in fortunes the dealer had been dealt. Letitia, possibly floating somewhere in some tributary of the North Sea, becoming food for aquatic life and passing seagulls. This was a depressing, shitty line of work to be in.

‘They were all very young, apart from Floris Engels,’ Van den Bergen said. ‘But the three kids all had drugs and alcohol in their systems. Beer. Hash. Meth. MDMA.’

‘Partying hard,’ George said, closing her eyes. Remembering what it felt like to roll out of a nightclub in the small hours, full of intoxicating substances and drunk on expectation of what might yet come to pass before sun-up.

‘Other than that,’ Van den Bergen said, ‘I can’t find a connection between them. The parents all claim their dead children are angels. Their friends have got nothing but good things to say about them. No obvious commonalities, though, apart from them dying in the canals, stoned off their tits. In fact ...’ He stretched in his chair until his hip clicked. Grimacing, he pressed two ibuprofen out of a blister pack and swallowed them down dry. ‘Maybe there isn’t a bloody connection and it is just coincidence, after all. But I inherited this case off Louis Beekmans, after Minks did a reshuffle.’ He rubbed at his prematurely white sideburns with a long finger.

‘Who the fuck is Beekmans?’ George asked.

‘Sudden heart attack. He’s just had a triple bypass,’ Van den Bergen offered by way of explanation. Put a hand over his sternum and belched noiselessly. Clearly feeling for ventricular abnormalities. His fingers wandered southwards along his torso to his scar tissue. His hooded eyes seemed to darken. ‘Anyway, his record-keeping wasn’t up to much and I have a hunch there’s some chicanery going on – especially now I’ve seen the bruises on our mysterious teacher, Mr Engels. When I get toxicology and bloods back, I’ll know more. My young and shiny-faced new boss, Minks, is pushing for a serial killer, because that’s what makes him feel tingly in his big-boy pants.’

‘And what do you think?’ George asked, surreptitiously grabbing his large hand and kissing it, as Marie reached into her desk drawer and withdrew another packet of crisps.

‘I think I want a fresh pair of eyes on it,’ he said, winking. ‘Me, Marie, here and Elvis have run out of steam for now. Feeling up to applying your criminologist’s mind to this mess, Detective Cagney?’

George thought about the tantalising opportunity to do a bit of digging on the side around the circumstances surrounding Nasser Malik’s death. Spending time with her argumentative ageing lover, instead of being wheeled out on the book-signing and lecture trail by Sally Wright and marking sub-standard essays written by lazy first-year undergraduates. Then, she thought about the pot she was saving for a deposit on a flat. ‘Will I get paid?’ she asked.

‘Maarten Minks has a fancy post-grad qualification from the London School of Economics,’ he said. ‘He’s the polar opposite of Kamphuis. Nothing he likes more than forking out for an expert opinion to check his expert’s opinion was expert enough. He can’t wait to receive your invoice, Georgina.’

CHAPTER 9

Amsterdam, Van den Bergen's apartment, then, Melkweg nightclub, later

'Oh, you're not going to start going on about your bloody mother again, are you?' Van den Bergen asked over dinner. 'I thought we'd decided she'd done her usual disappearing act because the prospect of playing the second-fiddle mother figure in the drama of someone else's life didn't appeal. Isn't that Letitia all over?'

George eyed her burnt mushroom risotto. It put her in mind of cerebral matter served up in a vintage dish. She put her spoon and fork together and pushed the plate aside. 'Nice,' she said. 'I don't see you for weeks and you're on my case the minute I set foot through the door. You asked *me* over, remember?' Scraping her chair aggressively along the wooden floor, she walked into his kitchen and flung the dish on the side. 'Not the other way round. And don't give me that bullshit about you, Marie and Elvis running out of steam, because you'd only just inherited this bloody case. Face it. You've just been looking for an excuse to get me over here!'

She was aware of him moving from the dining area towards her. Kept staring at the splashback tiles, waiting to see if he was coming in to offer some placatory gesture or merely gunning for an argument at closer range. When his arms slid around her waist, she smiled. Turned around and craned her neck to look up into that familiar, handsome face. Appraising his large, hooded grey eyes, topped with those dark eyebrows. The sunken furrows either side of his mouth were back now that he had started to return to fitness. His skin, so sallow over the winter months, was now lightly tanned and reflected time spent outdoors.

'You look well. Being a grandfather agrees with you. Give us a snog, old man,' she said, smiling as she ran a finger over his stubble. 'And you'd better grow a goatee or something while I'm here, because I can't do with scouring my lips off on your five o'clock shadow.'

'Don't you like my risotto?' he asked, kissing her neck gently.

'You're a shit cook.' Stroking the soft navel hair beneath his top, she ran her fingers delicately over the long lump of his scar. 'But I missed your hot stodge so badly.' Giggling, George unzipped the fly to Van den Bergen's work trousers and dropped to her knees. Yanked down his disappointing grey jersey underpants to deal with the contents, which were wholly non-disappointing. Van den Bergen groaned as she took him into her mouth. Brought him almost to the point of no return with a tongue normally sharpened on the egos of Wormwood Scrubs wide boys, overinflated Cambridge Fellows or Peckham's finest players in their low-rise G Star Raw.

Van den Bergen buried his hands in her mass of curls, encouraging her steady rhythm. But George broke off, as he began to thrust too lustily, kissing her way up his abdomen. Teasing him with her abstemiousness so that he might afford her the same pleasure with that wry, acerbic mouth of his.

They never made it to the bedroom but they did engage in a clumsy, desire-driven tango to the sofa, where George flung her clothes on the floor, climbed astride his long, lean frame and hungrily lowered herself onto him. First, she relished his tongue on her. Then, she slid her body sinuously down towards his groin, manoeuvring him inside her. With his hands caressing her breasts, the lovers locked onto a familiar fast track that shunted and rocked them all the way to the end of their urgent thrill ride.

'Jesus. I needed that,' George said, pulling her pants and jeans back on. She clambered back onto the prone Van den Bergen and kissed him passionately.

'You're balm for the soul,' he said, wrapping his arms around her and cradling her head on his chest.

His heartbeat loped steadily along. A comforting sound. She drank in his scent of warm skin, testosterone and sport deodorant. Committed it to memory.

‘I need a smoke and your hip bones are digging in me,’ she said, rising. ‘You’re a shit mattress.’

Taking the box of tissues from the sideboard and throwing them into his lap, she stumbled to the balcony to spark her e-cigarette into life. Exhaled her smoke and what was left of her tension onto the Amsterdam night air. Listening to the animated chatter of the neighbours in adjacent apartments to the side and below. A slice of Dutch life. Those clean-living citizens knew nothing of the depravity and violence that George and Van den Bergen saw week in, week out. Good. There needed to be some innocence in the world still. And there had to be more to life than death.

‘Do you know what? I fancy going dancing,’ George told the full moon.

When she returned to the living room, the steady buzz of snoring coming from the sofa told her she was either going to bed or going clubbing alone.

Melkweg draped itself along the edge of the Lijnbaansgracht, like an elegant old burgher with bragging rights to its slumberous, low-rise canal-side position. Dwarfed by the outsized glazed boxes of the modern theatre that it sat next to, the five-storey townhouses behind it and the ugly apartment block in front. In the daytime, George had walked past this place and barely glanced up at it. At night, with the neon lights that shouted this was where the hip-hop, R&B and deep house happened reflected in the almost still canal water, the whole scene was transformed into something Van Gogh might have painted on acid, had he lived in modern times.

Needing to feel the bass throbbing through the soles of her feet and reminding herself that there was no shame in going clubbing alone, George pushed to the front of the queue and marched up to the door.

‘Not so fast, girly!’ a bouncer said, putting his beefy arm out in front of her as a barrier to entry.

George was aware of the complaints of the scantily clad teens standing behind her that she had jumped the queue. Speaking English and clearly on some sort of parent-funded mini-break, judging by the cut-crystal public school accents. Ridiculing her attire of ripped jeans, studded high-tops and the size and shape of her arse.

Turning around, George quipped, ‘Have you fucking finished, children?’ She sucked her teeth at them, taking in every detail of the taut white skin on their waxy faces and the glazed look in their stoned eyes. ‘Or do you want me to tip off the bouncer here that yous are all underage and off your tits already?’

The group of dissenters fell silent, glancing nervously at one another. George flashed her membership card at the bouncer. Perhaps he saw some of the thunder in her expression.

‘Sorry, miss. Go ahead.’ Respectfully ushering her inside.

‘That’s more fucking like it,’ George said under her breath. ‘Dick.’

Inside the giant laser-lit space, the crowd heaved as one writhing organism. The smell of dry ice and alcohol was thick on the stifling, sweaty air. Music throbbing rhythmically like a beating heart. George imagined she could see sound travelling in waves from one side of the venue to the other. Losing herself in the middle of the dancefloor, she closed her eyes. Started to dance. Tried desperately to shake the feeling that she was being watched. In here, of all places, she could hide in plain sight. Wearing an invisibility cloak of young clubbers, she could free herself from surveillance. Because surely, whoever had sent that email from her father and stolen her mother had set out with the nefarious intention of getting to her. Whether her parents were lying dead somewhere or not, she was the target. She had received the eye. The metaphor that said her every move was being scrutinised. And what she hadn’t told Van den Bergen, for fear of pissing in his new-grandfather’s chips, was that she had had another email, purporting to be from Michael Carlos Izquierdo Moreno. Daddy Dearest. The image of the email started to take shape in her mind’s eye. Along with it, a memory of her stalker. She’d omitted to tell Van den Bergen about him, too.

Stop fucking obsessing, George told herself. You came here to drown all that shit out and hide from the eye for a couple of hours. Listen to the music. Let the bass heal you. Nobody's watching in here.

Trying to dispel the mounting tension, she forced herself to dance to the compulsive, lazy beat of a hip-hop track. Shaking her thang. Arms in the air. Except she couldn't relax. Her movements were out of sync with the rhythm, embarrassing the ghosts of her ancestry who almost certainly, as stereotype demanded, had had all the moves. Adrift in a sea of gyrating kids, all at least seven years younger than she was, she realised she had become stiff-arsed, like some middle-aged housewife from Staines. The music started to irritate her. Then, she got annoyed at the misogynistic lyrics.

And skanky Nasser Malik is in a fridge in a Maastricht morgue. Am I going to end up in a fridge in a morgue, with Van den Bergen grimacing at my cadaver?

Forcing her way to the bar, she decided she would get a cheap beer and just people-watch for a while. Wait for her mojo to return. But the queue for drinks was five deep and George lacked the height of the Dutch. Perching at the end of the bar, she realised a peacock of a boy in a tight T-shirt, who clearly had cash to splash, had ordered a large round of bottled Belgian beer. Waving his €50 note, he was too preoccupied with barking orders at the harried barman to notice George swipe a single bottle of Hoegaarden.

'Thanks, asshole,' she said under her breath, grinning.

Perching upstairs on the balcony, George watched the revellers below, debating whether she should just go back to Van den Bergen's flat and admit that she was getting too old for this. Maybe Van den Bergen was making her feel prematurely too old. Fifty wasn't far away for him, after all, and then there was his granddaughter, little Eva, on the scene now.

Eyeing the younger men that buzzed nearby, all sweaty from the dancefloor with their going-out-best clobber clinging to their firm bodies, George's attention was pulled in the direction of a dealer, stealthily palming a baggie of white powder onto a boy of about eighteen. The dealer could have been a clubber. Nothing out of the ordinary, apart from the tattoo just visible in the stubble of his hair. Like Nasser Malik's tattoo. Suddenly George had become distanced enough from her own woes to really notice what was going down.

'It's snowing in Amsterdam,' she muttered.

Pushing the clubbers aside, she walked up to the dealer. He smiled down at her. A greedy, rotten-toothed smile of a seasoned junkie, earning to fund his own addiction, no doubt. Either that, or he had really shocking dental hygiene, George mused. She suppressed a full-blown grimace. Ensured there was space between them in this packed temple to hedonism.

'What you got?' she shouted above the music, careful not to come too close to his ears. They were greasy-looking with hardly any lobes, punctured by an oversized stud. She shuddered. 'You got any good coke or E?'

'Coke? No, love.' His eyes darted everywhere. Checking for the long arm of the law, no doubt. 'Crystal meth, miaow miaow, G. Might be able to get you some E by the end of the night.'

'I'll leave it thanks,' George said, backing away. Annoyed with herself, she realised she had started to lose touch. The inevitability of being closer to thirty than twenty. Too much clean living.

As George hastened out of Melkweg to wake the sleeping Van den Bergen and tell him her theory about the canal deaths, she failed to notice that she was followed home.

CHAPTER 10

Amsterdam, Melkweg nightclub, then, Leidsegracht, 30 April

It had been a long walk from the gay sauna in Nieuwezijds Armsteed to Melkweg, but Greg Patterson had agreed to hook back up with his friends for a drink and a dance before the night was out. A shame not to, since this was supposed to be Sophie's twenty-first celebration.

'I'll not be long,' he'd promised her, squeezing her hands as they all stood in the busy, cobbled square – a crossroads between the respectable Amsterdam and the red-light district. His mind had been elsewhere, contemplating the sauna and the sensual overload that awaited him in the steam of the cubicles. 'I said I'd nip to this place to get something for my mum.'

James and Poppy had exchanged a fleeting but meaningful glance with one another. Making morality judgements about him, no doubt.

'What? At nine o'clock at night?' James had asked. Nudging Poppy. Jesus. The wanker was so obvious and rude.

'You guys go!' Greg had said, ignoring the rank prejudice that had flown just beneath Sophie's radar. Typical hetties. 'I'll meet you later.' He waved dismissively. Smiling benignly. He had pulled the sleeves of his best jacket down against the chill in the evening air. D&G. It had cost him all of his Christmas money off his mum and dad. 'Melkweg, right? I'll be there by midnight. I'll text so we can find each other. Okay? I promise!' He had kissed Sophie's hands, the feathers from her bright red boa tickling his nose. Perhaps he could persuade her to lend him that for Club Church, once the others had all toddled off back to the hotel. Greg had an itinerary and he had intended to stick to it. He had pecked his friend chastely on each cheek. 'Have fun, birthday girl!'

Her chubby face had been flushed pink with effervescence. Centre of attention, for once, instead of being just the dumpy girl on their languages course, whom the straight guys all ignored in favour of Giselle. Giselle was the worst person Sophie could have chosen to be BFFs with. Giselle, who was dainty like a gazelle but had all the personality of a medium-sized snail. Giselle had been hanging back, texting some beau or other, obviously. Chewing gum and smoking at the same time. Looking too cool for school, as though it had been killing her to be in Amsterdam for something as ordinary and unglamorous as fat Sophie's birthday.

'Aw, it will be rubbish without you, Greg. Come on.' Sophie had clasped at his sleeve, looking at him with undisguised adoration. 'Don't just bugger off on me.'

It wasn't the first time that this had happened. A nice girl like Sophie, falling for him. Believing that he was available and fair game because he was friendly and listened and understood. Not like the straight lads, who couldn't give a stuff. She did know he was gay. But perhaps she believed she could turn him. He had often seen the optimism shining in her eyes. He should have drawn his boundaries more clearly, but didn't want to disappoint her. And he was hardly going to ram his sexual proclivities down her throat like the cock of some guy from Grindr on a wet Saturday night in Leeds.

'See you later, Soph. Enjoy!'

And that had been that. Feeling anticipatory, he had taken himself off to a gay bar and partaken of some traditional Dutch courage – four glasses of strong Belgian beer, though the clientele had been a little too old for him. Finally, he had meandered down to the sauna, hoping that his slightly disappointing pecs and one-pack would pass muster with the guys there who spent more hours on their bodies per week than he spent in an entire term. The drugs had helped. He had allowed one of the men to booty bump him with some crystal meth. The high had been intense. He had never felt so horny.

As the high had begun to wane, he had snorted the couple of lines of mephedrone that had been offered to him by some guy called Hank or Henk or some bloody thing beginning with an H. This

was the kind of trip he had hoped for. And those were the elements of his Amsterdam adventure that he wouldn't be relaying to Sophie once they were back in halls.

Utterly fucked dry, he had traversed town, ready to drink some more and dance with the sad hetties. Just after midnight, as he entered Melkweg, his confidence was beginning to slide into the shadow of a comedown again. He needed more gear. Needed to get higher. Observing the crowd of writhing men and women, he felt out of his depth and estranged. These were not his people. But then ...

'Greg!' Sophie shouted, waving avidly. Flapping her feather boa. Her polyester shift dress looking crumpled with dark rings around the armpits.

He couldn't hear her, but he could see her mouth moving. The others were with her, swaying their bodies uselessly to some R&B track. Giselle was being frotted by some local, built like a brick shithouse, by the looks. Pushing him away but enjoying every minute of the attention, no doubt.

Reluctantly, Greg started to make for their group. But then, he spotted a wraith of a man moving in amongst the clubbers. Older, dressed far better than the kids in designer casual clothes, he had the tell-tale shifty eyes and swift hands that Greg sought. People were approaching this cuckoo in the nest, but looking the other way. Stopping. Standing. Engaging in some awkward exchange. Leaving with their hand in their pocket. A dealer.

Bypassing Sophie, he made for the wraith. He could feel the dealer weighing and getting the measure of him as though he were nothing more than a lump of raw product waiting to be graded and cut for more profitability. 'What have you got?' he asked. 'Tina? Gina? Miaow miaow?'

The wraith answered him in English, spoken with a rolling Amsterdam accent. Clearly used to dealing with tourists from across the North Sea.

Ten minutes later, Greg had downed the glass of water containing his drug of choice. Expecting to feel ready to party, as he moved back into the stifling heat of the crowded dancefloor, he started to feel like he was being watched. A wave of nausea almost knocked him to the ground.

'Are you okay?' Sophie bellowed, putting her arm around him.

He shrank from her touch. Didn't want to be that close. Nodded. His mouth prickled. Was he about to faint?

'I'm going outside,' he said.

No idea whether she had heard him or not, Greg felt panic draw him towards the exit, as though, like a bad marionette, some puppet-master controlled his movements and impulses with a yank of a string. Too many people. All watching him. Had to get away. Go where it was quiet.

Greg Patterson resolved to walk slowly down towards Club Church, hoping by the time he had got some fresh air, he would be good to go again. Six minutes, Google had told him. At this time of night, the towpath by the Leidsegracht had been clear of other pedestrians. Only the silent hulking shapes of parked cars stood between him and the gently lapping canal.

'I'm going to be sick,' he said to the streetlight, leaning against it for support. Wishing, now, that he had asked Sophie to come outside with him. Dry-heaving, he said a silent prayer that this gruesome feeling would pass; that he'd return home to see Mum and Dad and his room in halls and his gaming console and his books and Nana and the dog. *Shit. What have I done?* Memories of the sauna inserted themselves into his view of the cobbles and the notion that he might vomit on his new shoes. The laughter among strangers. The booty bump. The absurdly hot sex. So much fun that he now regretted having. *Idiot.*

There was a sound of footsteps. Good. Thank God for that. Greg was hopeful that the night-time stroller might come to his aid, should he need it.

When the still, black water rushed up to meet him, Greg was taken by surprise, not just by the freezing chill but that he had fallen in at all. Flailing his arms, trying to kick his way back up to the surface, he cried out. A muffled plea that only he heard, as the bubbles containing the last of his breath rose uselessly to the surface. His foot was snagged. His lungs were full. And then all was dark.

CHAPTER 11

Amsterdam, Sloterdijkmeer allotments, later

Sitting in a deck chair on the small decking area by his shed, Van den Bergen relished the warmth of the mid-morning sun on his face. It felt like somebody had inserted a key into the bullet hole in his hip and had tried to wind him up. But aside from the incessant, nagging ache that he had tried and failed to calm with strong ibuprofen gel, he reasoned that he was faring a damn sight better than young Greg Patterson.

Radiohead's Thom Yorke emoted out of the battery-operated CD player that George had bought him for Christmas. Wailing that the witch should be burned. The melancholy in his voice seemed fitting.

'How many's that now?' he muttered, opening a foil-wrapped pile of ham sandwiches and biting into the top one hungrily. Not bothering to sweep the crumbs off his gardening dungarees. It felt like an act of rebellion. If George saw he was eating without having washed his hands first, he would never hear the end of it. Compost beneath his fingernails from repotting his petunias into larger containers. But not all of his fingers smelled of compost and leafy growth. He sniffed his middle finger and remembered their reunion on the sofa the previous evening. Smiled. Frowned. Remembered he was supposed to be thinking about more serious matters.

'Five,' he said to the allium globemasters that had just blossomed into giant purple balls on the end on their thick, green stems. 'Five damned floaters.'

He belched. Ham played havoc with his stomach acid. Why did he never learn? His throat had been sore of late. Maybe he had oesophageal cancer. Swallowing, he realised it was more uncomfortable than yesterday. Or perhaps he just needed a cup of coffee from his flask to wash down the sandwich.

Checking his phone for an email from Marianne de Koninck, he thought about Greg Patterson's body on the canal side at 5 a.m. that morning. Leaving George, warm in his bed, to stand in the drizzle beneath the umbrella, yet again. Next to Elvis, who had refused to share the umbrella, yet again. Marianne's number two, Daan Strietman, had found a lump of frothed mucus and vomit in the boy's throat. Later, during the preliminary examination at the morgue, he had confirmed recent rough intercourse and blistering inside the boy's rectum – apparently a common side effect of taking liquid crystal meth anally via a syringe.

Grimacing at the florid pink flesh that hung out of his sandwich, Van den Bergen folded his lunch back up, levered himself out of the chair with a grunt and flung the packet onto the deck chair.

His phone rang. Looking around the allotment, he couldn't make out where the noise was coming from. Peering inside the shed, it wasn't on the potting table. Debbie Harry hung limply on the wall, looking clueless. She was no bloody use. It wasn't in the trug of compost, with his trowel. Ringing. Ringing.

Agitated, he finally realised the phone had fallen into his oversized wellington boot.

'Yes,' he barked down the phone, wondering if his blood pressure was dangerously high. Made a mental note to switch vibrate on.

'It's Marianne,' the chief pathologist said. 'I've got the toxicology report back from Floris Engels. He'd taken a cocktail of drugs prior to death.'

'Oh.' Van den Bergen sat back down heavily onto his deck chair, inadvertently flattening his ham sandwiches. 'An OD?'

'Well,' she said. 'He had a lot of the drug G in his system – Gamma Hydroxybutyrate. But that wasn't what bothers me. He's also been poisoned by bad methamphetamine, commonly known as

crystal meth or Tina. Acute lead poisoning, to be precise, apparently common where lead acetate has been used as a substrate in production in a bad batch.'

Van den Bergen rubbed the lengthening stubble on his chin and gazed up at the treetops contemplatively. 'What about the others? The kids?'

There was a shuffling of paper at the other end of the phone. 'I dug out the original toxicology reports from our younger floaters. There was nothing had been flagged apart from drug misuse. But then, they'd been in the water so long and were so badly decomposed, I guess it was hardly surprising the results were inconclusive. Especially given the weight of evidence that it was death by drowning, hence the open verdict. But then, when Floris Engels showed signs of having taken contaminated meth, I had the toxicology on the kids redone. And this time round, we found that they had suffered the same fate. Renal damage *was* present, consistent with severe lead poisoning. I'm sorry. I don't know how Strietman missed it. Sometimes, you just have to be looking in the right place.'

'Any other similarities starting to emerge?' he asked. Perching his glasses on the end of the nose. Unable to read the instructions on a packet of seeds, thanks to a muddy smudge on his left lens.

'Floris Engels and Greg Patterson had both had rough anal intercourse prior to death, given the abrasion. But there's nothing to say it was forced. If they'd been taking drugs ...'

'It's likely they'd been partying. Right.' Fleetingly, Van den Bergen tried to imagine what young gay guys might get up to in a liberal city that was full of possibilities. He grimaced as his haemorrhoids twitched involuntarily. Wondered if he was due a prostate check. 'And Ed Bakker?'

'I couldn't tell you about Ed Bakker, because of the tissue damage from being in the water so long, but witnesses say he'd been to a gay club, hadn't he?' There was a pause on the line. She was chewing something over. Something unpalatable, clearly. 'Maybe Maarten Minks is not a million miles away with his serial killer theory, Paul. What if someone is spiking gay men on purpose and then shoving them into the canals?'

'Bullshit!' Van den Bergen shouted, well aware that her theory was anything but bullshit.

'Suit yourself.' The ice in her tone of voice almost froze the line. 'You're the detective.' She hung up.

Mind whirring at how best he could step up the investigation without sparking media hysteria, he dialled George's number. She picked up on the fourth ring, sounding sleepy.

'Morning, hot stuff. What's wrong?' she asked.

'I need you to get a job.'

'A job?! What do you mean, get a job? I've got a job. I'm a criminologist, remember?' Agitation had supplanted the sleepy affection in her voice.

'You need to get a job in a nightclub. A barmaid or something. I need to find out about meth supply in the city. Urgently.' He pinched the piece of skin at the bridge of his nose, imagining her outraged expression.

'I told you this was about drugs! Didn't I say last night?' She sounded momentarily triumphant. Good. 'Hang on.' The triumph was abruptly replaced by suspicion. 'You want me to do *what*?! I don't want to work as a fucking barmaid in a club.' He could hear her sparking her e-cigarette into life.

'Don't smoke in the flat! George!'

'Yeah. Whatever.'

He imagined the fumes from the e-cigarette, lingering in his curtains. Finding their way into his lungs, causing changes in his healthy cells. An image of his father, wired up to the chemo for long afternoon sessions, hope ebbing away with every drip of poison that entered his bloodstream. Struggling to gasp his last on oxygen at the end.

Van den Bergen's own breathing quickened. 'I thought you liked clubbing! It's your chance to be like a young person.'

There was a disapproving sucking sound that almost deafened him. How could he talk her round? Marie would never be able to pull a surveillance gig like that off. ‘Look, if it’s any consolation, I’m going to make Elvis go undercover too.’

‘As what? A shit Elvis impersonator?’

‘A gay clubber.’

She started to laugh but it wasn’t the sound of amusement. It was sarcastic and loaded with disappointment. ‘Do you really think Elvis – the straightest man in the world – is going to abandon his terminally ill mother to twerk in chaps until some murderous homophobe tries to bump him off with an overdose and a watery end? You’ve lost the fucking plot, old man.’

For the second time that morning, a woman hung up on Van den Bergen, leaving him alone with a half-chewed ham sandwich and a sense that something was deeply amiss in his beloved city of Amsterdam.

CHAPTER 12

Amsterdam, Reguliersdwaarsstraat, 1 May

‘Come on, Dirk. You can totally do this,’ George told Elvis. She grabbed him by the arm and marched him towards the entrance to the Amsterdam Rainbow Cellars. Music thumped its way up and out onto the bustling Reguliersdwaarsstraat, which thronged with clusters of men, making their way from bar to bar. A rainbow flag was suspended from the façade of the tall townhouse in which the cellars were situated, just in case the tourists hadn’t worked out what sort of place this was.

Elvis swallowed hard, tugging at the uncomfortably tight white T-shirt that George had persuaded him to wear. Contemplating his burgeoning paunch, he then cast a judgemental eye over the ripped gay guys who were sitting outside a café, draped nonchalantly over their chairs like men who knew they could carry off tight clothing.

‘This is ridiculous,’ he said. ‘This is the worst idea the boss has ever had.’

‘Tell me about it,’ George said. ‘I’ve got to go and do a shift as a barmaid, now. I’ve only ever cleaned or danced in clubs before. What the fuck do I know about pulling pints?’

‘More than I know about what to do in a gay club,’ Elvis said. He followed the progress of a beautiful, leggy blonde girl, who strutted down the street in sequinned hot pants. Twenty seconds in, he realised she was holding the hand of another girl. ‘I can’t even dance. And I’ve got psoriasis.’

They stood together outside the club, staring at the two bald bouncers on the door, who were chatting animatedly to a group of bearded men wearing make-up. The taller of the two bouncers refocused his attention on Elvis. The beady-eyed stare of a man who made snap judgements about other men for a living.

Feeling stripped naked, Elvis blushed. Dropped his gaze back to his paunch and took out his phone. There was a text from the carer, marked urgent, asking where Mum’s incontinence pads were hidden.

‘I shouldn’t be here,’ he told George, texting,
bathroom cupboard above hot water tank

with a practised thumb. ‘I should be at home with Mum. She’s really not got long left.’ He sighed heavily at the thought of having to say goodbye to the only parent he had left. A once-robust woman who had been reduced to a frail husk. Inside three months, the doctor had estimated. He would have to deal with all the admin, alone. And clear her place, alone. Oh, and bury her too. He had been able to think of nothing else for a year. Knew he should be over the moon to get away at all and spend some time as an unencumbered thirty-something man with no responsibilities. But he wasn’t. ‘Nightclubs aren’t really my thing, either.’ Touching his hair, where George had gelled it into spikes, rather than a quiff, he felt a stranger to his own skin. She had made him trim his sideburns to conform with ordinary proportions. ‘Or men. Obviously.’

‘Sorry, man.’ Patting him on the shoulder, George offered him a cigarette, which he took gratefully. Lit her own and exhaled thoughtfully. ‘You’ve got so much on your plate. And a needle to find in a haystack. We both have.’

‘What do I even say? Or do? I don’t want to ...’ He looked up at the rainbow flag; followed the line down to the muscular, perfectly groomed men who chatted animatedly to the bouncers beneath it. Winced.

‘Look, Elv— Dirk. You’re in the workplace,’ George said. ‘Just try to make conversation with the men in there. That’s all that’s expected of you, right? Ask about drugs. Dealers. Anything unusual. The sort of detective work you do every day of the week. How is this any different?’

George had the keen focus of a woman who knew better than most what to look out for on a busy street scene. Not a cop’s eye, Elvis assessed. But the intuitive gaze of someone who had lived

on the other side and could easily sniff out the shifty, the disingenuous and the downright illegal. 'I wish you could do this and I could be the barman in a nice, easy straight club.'

George guffawed with laughter. Pointed to her simple black jeans and T-shirt. 'I'm hardly dressed for a night on the town.' Patted her bosom. 'And I'm lacking the correct kit, let's not forget.' Checked her watch. 'Listen. I've got to go. My shift starts in five and I don't want to be late on my first night.' She squinted into the near distance. 'So, there's squad cars parked up if there's trouble?'

He nodded. 'You know the number to call.'

He didn't like the way it smelled inside. Air freshener and beer and testosterone. The stairs leading down into the club were sticky underfoot, lit with blue neon treads. Every time he passed a man, he felt certain he was being checked out. He held his stomach in, conscious of having the figure of a man who ate too many *frites* with mayonnaise, sitting for too long in the pool car on stakeouts or tending his mother and compensating for the stress with the cake he had bought to fatten her up.

At the bar, he was careful to order just a Diet Coke, though something stronger might have helped him through this hell. Should he ask the barman about drugs? Too obvious. Was the barman giving him a funny look? Had he already sniffed him out as a straight cop? Elvis opened his mouth to ask a question but realised there were men standing behind him, clamouring to be served. He would never be heard over the din of dance music, anyway.

After twenty minutes of scanning the dancefloor to get a feel for the place, wondering why the hell middle-aged bearded men might want to drag up and wear full make-up, like bad pantomime dames, Elvis decided to be brave and head to the toilets. Remembering that his prejudices were founded only on his late father's bigotry and that nobody was likely to try to bone him unless he asked. Nobody would probably want to bone him, anyway. He found himself unexpectedly saddened at that thought.

'Oh, Olaf's such a silly bitch! Guess what? He went to the hairdresser's and asked for—'

'Fuck off, Jef. I don't need you telling everyone about my grooming disasters.'

'I don't need to tell them. They can see for themselves, you daft cow!'

Overblown gales of laughter ensued.

Standing at the urinal, Elvis listened to the inane banter of three of the most catwalk-ready handsome young men he had ever seen, gathered around the sinks where they were primping their hair. What would they be talking about had they been straight? Football. Obviously. And they wouldn't have congregated in the stinking toilets. There was a rhythmic knocking sound coming from one of the cubicles. Hastily, Elvis zipped his trousers and left without washing his hands.

Perching on a balcony above the dancefloor, he scanned the club for signs of drug use or dealing.

'Hi!' He was startled by a man's voice bellowing in his ear. 'I'm Frank. What's your name?'

Blushing in the dark, Elvis swallowed hard. Was he being hit on? Thought of a name that was neither Dirk nor that hateful damned nickname that Van den Bergen had bestowed on him, now inextricably linked with his professional persona – Elvis. 'Antoon.' He reached out to shake Frank's hand. Frank, a balding boulder of a man who clearly ate iron for breakfast, laughed nervously, raised an eyebrow and shook his hand. Firm but sweaty.

'Very formal, Antoon,' he said. 'So, what brings you here? You're new.'

Elvis opened and closed his mouth. Half-relieved that he was being hit upon. Appalled with himself that he wasn't sure where to go with this conversation. 'I'm from out of town,' he said. 'I just fancied coming out. Kicking back. You know?'

Frank started to laugh. Stroked his cheek. Elvis shrank away from his touch and folded his arms across his chest.

'I spy a man in the closet!' Frank said, smiling. 'Are you married? Fancied a walk on the wild side?'

'No, it's not like that,' Elvis said, feeling the sweat pool around his armpits and pour into the waistband of his jeans.

‘Ah, shy?’ Frank reached into his pocket and pulled out a baggie of white powder. ‘Fancy a bit of chemical courage?’

This was more like it. ‘Maybe,’ Elvis said. ‘Is that coke?’

‘Yep. I’ve got some meth too, if you’d prefer.’

‘Cool. Where did you get it?’

‘Why?’ Frank’s brow furrowed.

Stop acting like a cop, Elvis chastised himself. *You’re undercover! This is not an interview down the station of a door-to-door. Screw this up and Van den Bergen will never respect or trust you again.* ‘I hear there’s a bad batch going round. You can’t be too careful.’

‘Oh, I think *this* is good gear,’ Frank said. ‘My dealer is the go-to man in chem-sex circles.’

‘Chem-sex?’ Elvis gulped.

Frank ran his forefinger down Elvis’ sweaty chest, over his moobs and gut, which he could no longer hold in. What the fuck should he say next?

‘There’s been a couple of guys from the scene died lately,’ he said, reasoning that if the newspaper had printed stories about the canal deaths, then it was fair game. ‘Aren’t you worried?’

Raising an eyebrow, Frank smiled and leaned seductively against the balcony. ‘Should I be? Are you going to fuck me to death, Antoon?’

Feeling the phone vibrate in his pocket, Elvis’ head started to throb with the worry that some ill-fate had befallen his mother – that was almost certainly the carer texting – and anxiety that he hadn’t yet got any information of use and was now almost certainly being propositioned for sex.

‘I need to know about the provenance of the gear before I ... er ... indulge,’ he said. Thought of George and her OCD. Was she faring any better? ‘I’m very uptight about these things.’ He put his hand on top of Frank’s. Smiled. Prayed the guy couldn’t feel how dangerously fast his heart was pounding. ‘My body’s a temple. I’m sure you understand.’

Frank slapped him on the shoulder and threw his head back. Mirth in his opiate-glassy eyes. ‘You’re funny.’ Grabbed at Elvis’ belly. ‘Temple, indeed! I like you.’

And then he said the name that would crop up in conversation time after time in every bar and club Van den Bergen sent Elvis to.

CHAPTER 13

Amsterdam, Keizer's Basement nightclub, 14 May

'Nikolay?' George asked. 'Who the hell is Nikolay?' She flipped the tap on and started to pour the first glass of beer from a new barrel. Channelling Aunty Sharon, who had spent the last two decades pulling pints in Soho. Maybe barmaiding was in the blood. The foam started to spurt, shooting up to the rim of the glass, covering George's hand and T-shirt in sticky alcoholic ejaculate. Maybe barmaiding wasn't in the blood. 'Ugh. Grim, man. I'm gonna kill Van den Bergen,' she muttered in English, wiping her hand on a bar towel.

'He's the Czech gangster I was telling you about.' At her feet, her cocktail-shaking compatriot Tom was methodically stacking a beer fridge. Whispering, lest he be overheard by the manager. 'I've heard the bouncers talking about him.'

Nikolay. Nikolay. George committed the name to memory. The first decent lead she had managed to generate in ten nights of working as a cack-handed barmaid in five different clubs across the city.

'Move aside for the expert.' Tom stood. Playfully, he pushed her out of the way and started to tinker expertly with the beer tap until it produced a steady amber stream. 'There you go,' he said. 'I've got the magic touch.' He winked at her.

George was relieved he couldn't see her blush. Eyeing his wiry, hairy forearms, she reasoned that they were the right kind of forearms. But she hated his bitten nails. Had a sudden urge to ask him why he took such good care of his hair and body and yet neglected his hands. Bitten nails made George wince inwardly. *Focus, tit! You're not here to check out some strange guy's forearms or his hand hygiene.* 'Nikolay,' she said. 'So the dealers who work in here flog his gear?'

'Oh yeah,' Tom said, grinning, as though he were pleased at having insider information with which to impress this inquisitive new barmaid. 'They used to just deliver to order outside. Turning up on mopeds like pizza guys. But they've got braver in the past year and you can spot them on the dancefloor if you know what to look for. I reckon the bouncers must be taking a cut. Nobody ever sees the man himself, though. You wouldn't catch Nikolay on house night in crappy Keizer's Basement, that's for sure. Apparently, he's the stuff of legend. Like some Scarface type, except he deals meth and other chems.'

'What? Like whizz?'

He laughed. 'Nobody takes whizz anymore.' Derision in his voice, as though George had said something preposterous, like an ageing parent trying to be cool. 'Ecstasy's popular again, but mainly it's all crystal meth and mephedrone now. Where have you been for the last couple of years?'

'Writing my book. I told you!' she said, treating him to a winning smile; having to suppress the desperate urge to flip him the bird. *Calm down, dick. Shove your ego back in your box. It's not his fault. He doesn't know the first thing about you. He's fresh out of college and a wet-behind-the-ears middle-class kid on his gap yah.* 'I'm doing this shitty barmaiding job for research. Where else am I going to get inspiration for a novel about drug-dealing and gangs and the underworld?' She widened her eyes dramatically.

'That's *so* cool that you're a writer.' Tom leaned on the bar, as though the club was not opening in only fifteen minutes. 'I wish I could do something arty like that.' Smiling away. Blowing smoke up her arse in a way Van den Bergen never did.

'Well, I'm pretty sure you've got some brilliant anecdotes up your sleeve. I can tell you've lived.'

He nodded enthusiastically. 'I suppose so. I've been working bars all over France, Germany and Belgium since graduation. I mean, why the hell would I wanna rush back to a job in some mind-

numbing call centre in Leeds, *if* I'm lucky? I'm not ready to wear a suit and do the nine to five bollocks!

'Hmm,' George said absently, studying Tom's white teeth for signs of food. 'Come on, then. Tell me your cool stories about this Nikolay guy.'

He leaned in conspiratorially. A little too close. The intimacy sucked the oxygen out of the air. 'I've heard his name dropped in several of the places I've worked. I like that sort of thing. You know? True life crime and dat.' He stood tall. Crossed his arms, hip-hop style.

'You didn't just say "and dat" did you?' Pushing the bar towel into his hands, George shook her head disapprovingly and started to stack clean glasses on a shelf.

An awkward silence between them descended, smothering any further conversation, until the manager strode over, giving them both instructions for the evening.

'I want you to mop the toilets through before we open,' he told George, wiping his sweaty forehead on the sleeve of his black shirt.

The pasty-faced lump was probably younger than she was, she assessed. He spoke with a strong Limburg accent. Almost certainly some southern farmer's son, who had moved to Amsterdam for a taste of life in the fast lane.

'I'm not mopping the toilets,' she said. 'I'm here as temporary bar staff.'

The manager stared at her, slack-jawed. More surprise in his expression than annoyance. 'You're a temp. And I'm your boss. You do as I say if you want to get paid.'

George was just about to tell him to go fuck himself. Remembered that Van den Bergen and the families of the floaters were relying on her. She grabbed the bucket and mop. Waited until the manager's back was turned and mouthed 'fat wanker' at the back of his head. Shook her closed fist sideways.

'You crack me up,' Tom said, a wry smile on his face.

'You'd be fit if you grew your nails and didn't have a load of tats,' George said, pointing at the inked roses and foliage that scrolled just beneath the sleeve of his T-shirt. 'And got rid of that unhygienic bloody thing in your nose.' Gesticulating with her chin towards his piercing.

'Thanks,' Tom said. 'You are fit. But you'd be fitter still, if you didn't blurt out the fucked-up contents of your head.'

George filled the bucket with soapy hot water. 'You have no idea what's going on in my head.' She eyed his crotch and grinned.

'Are you flirting with me?' he asked.

Feeling like she'd overstepped an invisible line, George looked down at the bucket. Thought about Van den Bergen, spending long days trying to chase down bad guys in some seventh level of hell that only policemen, prison workers, criminologists and forensic pathologists occupied; spending long nights next to her in the bed that they shared, trying to scorch away the stench of death and corruption in the fires of their passion ... when they weren't at each other's throats. Which she perversely relished. 'No. I'm not flirting. Sorry,' she said. Looked back up and tried her damndest to wear an expression that was encouraging and friendly only. 'But I do want to hear more about this Czech dude. He sounds nuts. What do you know about him?'

Tom shrugged. 'Like I told you. He's Nikolay. He's a Czech drug lord. He's a nutter who keeps Europe's clubland stocked with cheap meth. That's it.'

CHAPTER 14

Amsterdam, police headquarters, 15 May

As Marie trawled through the drug-user forums, searching for mention of a Czech drug lord called Nikolay, George's head started to throb. She read over her shoulder, wrinkling her nose only slightly at the smell of hair that had clearly not been washed for at least a week.

I had outta this world hard-core porn sex with my GF on this stuff. She let me do things to her she never let me before. It was the best high ever. You gotta dissolve the meth with water and shove it up your ass for a really great high. Better than smoking.

'I can't take any more of this,' Marie said, minimising the screen.

George sat back in the chair. 'Neither can I,' she said. Yawned and stretched her arms, feeling the fatigue from night after night, working until the small hours, followed by day after day of dragging herself into the Dutch police HQ for debriefing, leaching the wellbeing and strength from her muscles. She sniffed her denim jacket and grimaced. 'I'm sick of the smell of stale beer on everything. It gets everywhere. I've had it. Van den Bergen can bugger off if he thinks I'm doing another night.'

Tearing the wrapper off a bar of Verkade milk and hazelnut chocolate, Marie snapped off a row, offering it to George. 'Poor Elvis has got it worse. No wonder he's called in sick. I wouldn't have lasted two minutes, having to cavort and make nice with a bunch of ...' She gave the impression of choosing a derogatory term from some sort of bigot's lexicon that the religious memorised from childhood. '... sodomites.' There it was.

'Seriously, Marie? That's very Dark Ages of you,' George said. 'And probably a sackable offence. Don't let Van den Bergen hear you say ignorant crap like that. And I don't want to hear it, either.'

Marie made a harrumphing noise. 'Do you want some chocolate or not?'

George eyed Marie's dirty fingernails. Shook her head emphatically.

Tutting, Marie rammed the chocolate into her own mouth. 'Suit yourself,' she said, chewing noisily.

'Any news on Floris Engels' apartment? The mystery lodger.'

'Funny you should say that.' Bringing up Facebook and logging into an account that had the anonymous blue and white silhouette of a generic man's head, Marie clicked through to the 'about' page for Floris Engels' account. 'His privacy settings were on max and he'd left no legacy information, in the event of death. That's why it's been such a pain in the backside. You ever tried to contact Facebook's admins?'

George shook her head.

'It's a nightmare,' Marie continued. 'We finally got permission to access his profile at the end of play, yesterday. And look!' She pointed to the section that revealed Floris Engels was, 'in a relationship with Robert Menck'. With one click, Menck's name led to a photo of a dark-haired man with jutting teeth that emerged from a generous smile. Smartly dressed in bright colours, he stood in his profile photo with his arm draped around a man – judging by the height of the shoulder – whose head was just out of shot. 'Van den Bergen's gone with Elvis to Menck's place of work. He lectures in architecture at Amsterdam University of the Arts.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.