



Chapter 3



PRESENT DAY

CHRISTMAS DAY – EARLY MORNING

DI KATE STEWART

DI Kate Stewart, ‘Kat’ to her friends, ‘Boss’ to her subordinates, enters the house. It’s the smell that hits her first, despite the protective mask covering her nose and mouth. Using one hand to keep the mask in place, she uses the other to cradle her stomach, now constricting like a tightly wound coil, and holds her breath, closes her eyes. It’s all she can do to stop herself gagging. The smell permeating the house of the deceased is almost as wretched as the man himself. Rancid. Quite unlike anything else she has ever come across – and after thirty-odd years on the force that’s saying something. Puke, blood, faeces, rotting corpses, burnt flesh; she has seen and smelled the lot. She saw her first corpse just months after starting the job. A drowning. A man, swollen and blued by the water, had fallen in the Thames and was washed up a week later, some of the flesh on his face having fallen away in strips. It had quite turned her stomach at the time. She soon hardened up though; it was a case of having too.

This however, whatever the fuck *this* rotten, putrid stench is, is something else entirely. She breathes out again and braces herself as the loathsome scent clings to her flaring nostrils. A wave of nausea washes over her. She puts her hand out, steadies herself; the two cups of black coffee she’d necked on the way over now sloshing around in her otherwise empty stomach. Lowering her head, Kat concentrates on keeping her breathing



slow but shallow, desperate to temper the black sea whipping up a storm inside her.

Fat chance she'll feel like eating Christmas dinner after this. Then again, who the hell is she trying to kid? She knows, despite the early hour, she'll never make it back on time. Not with this individual: his money, his celebrity status, his connections. She's already had the Home Office on the phone. They wouldn't have dragged her from her bed at this godforsaken hour on Christmas Day if it had been some junkie in a council flat. Sickening. Even in death money talks. *Fuck! Why today, though? Why Christmas Day?* She lifts her head, imagines Hannah's sulky, surly face floating in front of her like a balloon, only, like a lead balloon, Kat Stewart's heart sinks. Is Hannah even awake yet? Does she know her mother has abandoned her... again?

She sighs. How is it possible, despite having fought, apprehended and arrested some of society's worst individuals, that one word, one cursory glance, one angst-ridden flick of her daughter's shiny, long hair (straightened to within an inch of its life) can bring her out in a cold sweat? Running for the hills. Kat grins, shakes her head. *Teenagers!* On her head be it if she doesn't make it back for dinner today. And rightly so. It is Christmas Day after all. And for once, her absence would justify Hannah's creased brow and permanently painted pout. 'I don't know why you bothered having me.' she hears Hannah say, her verbose, high-pitched whining reverberating inside Kat's head like a finely-tuned pitching fork. 'You care waaaaay more for your job than you do me.'

It's not true, of course. And besides, it's still early – 5am to be precise – and while excited children all over the country are undoubtedly waking up their exhausted parents, it would be at least another couple of hours before sunrise. Everyone knows teenagers never rise before the sun. If Kat gets her shit together, she might, by the skin of her teeth, be able to slip back home,

dive in the shower – god knows she’ll need to wash away the foul smell that seems to cling to every fibre of her being, never mind her clothes – and all before her moody daughter realises she has gone.

‘Like fuck!’ she says out loud.

The brief seconds spent thinking about her daughter have given Kat enough time for her stomach to settle a little. Protective mask in place, she steps further into the sprawling hallway. Whatever the hell is causing the terrible smell, it seems to have filled the entire house.

‘Fuck me,’ she mumbles, more bemused than reviled when her stomach, like an agitated washing machine, whirrs and churns. What the hell is wrong with her? Is she really going to heave? She can’t remember the last time she’d puked on the job – years ago, when she first started out? It’s surprising how, over time, Kat has adjusted to the rotten smells that are part and parcel of the job. Never pleasant, some smells, she quickly discovered, linger in the memory as much as the visuals do, apt to blindside you on a rainy Tuesday afternoon when a vague whiff of something familiar stirs something deep within you. Reminders of some of the worst cases you’d worked on, or the ones never solved – the young woman raped and murdered, the missing child never found. Nonetheless, for the most part, when it came to odious odours, nothing much affected her these days.

But this is bad. Really fucking bad.

Clearing her throat, Kat straightens up and glances over her shoulder to see how DS York is doing. Hunched forward, his hand protecting his mouth, she sees his retreating back, and the front door slam behind him. Clearly DS York’s gag reflex is working as well as hers. She feels relieved, had thought, for a moment, she was going soft. Turning back again, she walks towards the body splayed across the polished floor at the foot of the stairs.

Nice floor. Oak, I reckon. Must have cost a bloody fortune.

Forensic pathologist, George Martin, who is standing next to the body, greets DI Stewart with a cursory nod.

‘How long has he been dead?’ She leans forward to peer at the halo of blood surrounding the deceased’s head.

‘Hard to tell at the moment. At least two days.’

‘Cause of death?’

‘We’ll know more when we get him back to the lab but his neck is broken and there’s a deep wound to the back of his head. Most likely caused when he hit it on that—’ He points to the second blood covered step at the foot of the stairs ‘—after a fall.’

‘From the top of the stairs?’

The pathologist nods. ‘Judging by the trauma caused by the injury, yes.’

‘A fall? Or would you say he was pushed?’

‘Again, it’s hard to say. He could have been pushed, or he could have lost his footing and tripped.’

‘But you suspect foul play?’

‘Like I said, I’ll know more later, but we can’t rule it out.’

Somewhat deflated, DI Stewart rolls her eyes. Why couldn’t it be cut and dry? An obvious accident? Suicide, even? Would make life a damn sight fucking easier. Now though, the shit really will hit the fan. Hannah and her lead balloon once again drift into her thoughts as any hope of spending Christmas Day with her only daughter floats further away.

‘And that smell?’ Kat points to the body. ‘Is that coming from *him*?’

‘Ah... yes. Interesting, isn’t it?’

‘That’s one way of putting it.’

‘Sort of like a rotten corpse that’s been stewing in a stagnant sewer for a few weeks. Pugnacious and nauseating.’

Hmm... not unlike the man himself. DI Stewart’s hand flies

to her mouth. Did she really say that out loud? She coughs, clears her throat. 'Allegedly, of course,' she adds.

Pathologist George Martin stares at her. Like her, he is covered head to foot in protective clothing. Only his eyes, bright green, fringed by enviably long, dark lashes, are visible. It's hard to tell whether her sudden outburst has irritated him or if he is just indifferent. Regardless, he merely nods.

Kat has read and heard a lot about Hunter Black over the last year. Most of it vile and most of it concerning his alleged misconduct against at least ten young women, mainly while in his employment. A powerful man by all accounts; rich too, with friends in high places and low morals. American, apparently, he was one of two sons born into wealth and privilege who finished his private education by reading History at Oxford University before going on to earn a separate fortune of his own in the music industry as some bigshot record producer. It also looked, up until this point anyway, as though he was going get away with his alleged crimes. Which didn't surprise DI Stewart. Rape cases are notoriously difficult to prove, especially against rich, self-aggrandising sociopaths like Black. And if the rumours were true, Black had been using every trick in the book, including bribery, threat and intimidation, to make sure he would not be held accountable for his actions.

'Alleged actions,' George Martin says.

Surprised, DI Kat Stewart looks up. *Shit, I really must stop talking to myself out loud.*

'First sign of madness,' the pathologist with the nice eyes, continues.

George Martin doesn't see it but Kat clamps her top lip over her bottom one. On a personal level, this is hard for her. The world, she believes is a better place without men like Black. However, on a professional level she has a job to do. If this was foul play it's up to her to understand why. God knows they

won't be short of suspects though. Ten at least – for starters. She throws her head back, stares at the ceiling, and sighs. This was going to take a while.

'I'm getting too old for this shit,' she says, looking down again.

George Martin stares at her for a few seconds. She's pretty convinced he is grinning under that mask. He kneels down next to the lifeless body and Kat hears the front door open behind her. She glances over her shoulder, spots DS York who, red-eyed, his hand pressed so hard against the mask covering his mouth his knuckles have turned white, is now walking towards her.

'Boss.' He clears his throat and refuses to make eye contact with her. 'Sorry about that.'

DI Kat Stewart nods then introduces the pathologist. 'So, as I was saying, that smell – is it coming from his body? Black's body?'

George Martin shakes his head. 'No, I don't believe it is.' He points towards a large oak-panelled door, which blends perfectly with the expensive-looking polished floor. It is half open and a shaft of white light shines through from the room behind it.

'Take a look in there,' he says.