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Opening extract from

Murder on Page One

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1

The body lay on the floor, as warm as the blood that seeped through the plush Wilton carpet or trickled down the white walls.

A clean, deep cut had caused that blood to spurt in spectacular quantities from the left side of the neck until the heart was still.

Glassy-eyed, brain-dead, finished, Lorraine McNeill's high-achieving life was over.

Her black skirt had bunched up round her hips, revealing long, shapely legs – legs to die for. Like a butcher arranging the shop window, the killer lifted a slender ankle and put underneath it a sheet of plain A4 paper. One character had been typed at the foot: the numeral 1.

'Well, you wanted a murder on page one,' the killer whispered, then left to be absorbed into the anonymous crowd.

2

His shabby chair gave a painful creak as Detective Inspector Noel Osborne threw his eighteen stones into it. Before he could open the baker's bag he was clutching, his phone rang.

'Oh, good morning, ma'am … yes … just following a lead … nothing exciting … oh … another one? … yes … I will …' He pulled a face at the receiver before slamming it down. He turned to the other two officers in the Wimbledon CID room. 'So, another literary agent. Lorraine McNeill.' He swilled the name round his mouth. 'She's not Scottish by any chance?' he asked hopefully.

His back turned as he made coffee, Detective Constable Bagawath Chandavarkar, 'Baggo' from his first day in the police, grinned. Inspector No was incorrigible. Since giving up their national drink, he had not had a good word to say about the 'sweaty-sock jocks'. The previous June, Baggo had wound him up repeatedly by calling Henman Hill 'Murray's Mound'.

Detective Sergeant Flick Fortune scowled. 'She lived in London all her life,' she said sharply.

Osborne reached into the bag and drew out a cream doughnut.

‘The SOCOs and the photographer finished an hour ago, so I told them they could take the body away. Sir.’ Flick made sure Osborne saw her looking at the wall clock in the CID room. It showed half past eleven.

Fifteen – love, Baggo thought to himself as the kettle came to the boil.

Osborne swung a brown shoe, darkened by muddy slush, onto the papers littering his desk and bit into the doughnut. Cream squelched out, some dropping on his shirt. ‘What do we know?’ He wiped the cream from the crumpled fabric and licked his finger.

Flick said, ‘Yesterday, Ms McNeill worked late. She was the only person in the office. *Rigor mortis* was complete when she was found this morning at about nine. Her throat had been cut and she’d bled to death.’

‘So time of death would have been some time yesterday evening. Any sign of forced entry?’

‘None. She may have known her attacker.’

‘Or they barged in as she left for the night. Had she arranged to meet anyone?’

‘Don’t know. Chandavarkar has her i-Phone.’

‘Anything interesting there, Baggo?’ Osborne asked.

‘Nothing yet, gov.’ He put the mugs down and resumed his seat. ‘This lady did not have a big social life, if her contacts are anything to go by. A publisher was her last caller, at half past five yesterday evening. I’ve ordered up the phone records for her and her office. I will tell you more tomorrow.’ The classical sing-song of Mumbai was over-laid by the flat whine of the English capital.

Osborne turned to Flick. 'What's happening at the scene?'

'I left Peters there with the receptionist. She's been told not to touch anything and not to use her computer. Do you want to see for yourself?'

'Never saw the point of rushing to a crime scene, Felicity. I need to think …'

Fifteen all.

'Flick, please. Sir.'

Thirty – fifteen.

'Felicity's your name, and you can't belly-ache when I call you that.'

Thirty all. The game is warming up, Baggo thought. Two days previously, Flick had complained to Superintendent Palfrey that Osborne called her 'doll', 'pet' and 'my love'. He had been summoned to the station head's office and spent quarter of an hour with her before storming out, his face red; angry, not ashamed.

Flick glared. She despised everything about Osborne: his slobbishness, his idleness, the extent to which he was off-message. He had an addictive personality, smoking like a chimney, even in the office. Years ago, his irregular methods concealed by perjury, he had jailed a lot of East End villains; in the muster room he was still a legend in his own lunchtime. But modern, transparent policing was not his style and he had developed a fondness for whisky that had nearly cost him his job; High Court Judges are not all deaf, and none of them likes being called 'old wanker' in the street outside the Bailey. Now, his mojo long gone, instead of drinking, Osborne ate,

mostly curries and doughnuts. His sinewy thirteen stones had ballooned beyond recognition and, motivated only by his pension, he coasted towards retirement. It couldn't come soon enough for Flick, either.

'I need to think,' he repeated, slurping coffee. His mug was so chipped and stained that few tramps would touch it. 'That other literary agent was strangled, with paper stuffed in her mouth.'

'Not just paper, something she had written.'

Forty – thirty.

'Quite right, my lo… Felicity. Made her eat her words.' He looked meaningfully at her.

Deuce.

'Anything odd about the new one?' he asked.

'There was a bit of paper under her. It had '1' written on it.'

'One?'

'The numeral.'

'Interesting.' He scratched his crotch then said, 'Someone must hate literary agents. Don't much fancy them myself, but who's going to murder them?'

'Unpublished authors, I suppose,' Flick said.

'Are there many who can't get published? Bookshops are full of rubbish. With your education, you should see that.'

Advantage Osborne.

Flick had ceased to rise to jibes about her two/one degree in English Literature from Bristol. She sipped her coffee then explained, as if to a child: 'There are good

writers who don't get published and bad ones who do. It depends on whether a publisher thinks the book will sell. Thanks to computers, anyone who wants can write a book these days.'

Deuce.

'What do you mean?'

'A book has to be typed. Before computers you had to type out every page yourself, or get someone else to do it. If you made a bad mistake, or wanted to change something, you had to re-type the whole page. Sometimes pages. Now you can alter your work easily. Bit like you and your statements,' she added pointedly.

Advantage Fortune.

Osborne ignored the dig. 'So you put all your imaginings on the computer, then print out your book when you're finished?'

'You don't even have to do that. You can e-mail your work round the world.'

'I see. But why blame literary agents if no one likes it?'

'It's probably the literary agent who doesn't like it. Most publishers look only at work sent to them by agents, so, if you want to get published you need an agent. Good agents reject hundreds of books every week. Yes, hundreds.'

'And if they do take a book on …?'

'It still may not get published.'

'And there's another reason to blame an agent,' Osborne said, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. 'But a writer wouldn't have the one eating her own words …'

He nodded towards the whiteboard, where an asymmetrical, botoxed face, clarted with make-up, had the word 'victim' beside it in green ink.

'Jessica Stanhope.'

'I know. And this new, sweaty-sounding one …'

'Lorraine McNeill.'

'Representing them, would they?'

'I doubt it.'

'So if there's a wannabe that both agents have turned down, we have a suspect for both murders.' Osborne looked triumphant.

'I'd worked that out. Sir.'

Game Fortune.

'Well, Felicity, what are you waiting for? We need two lists, soon as you can manage. But we'll do the usual personal checks as well. Don't want to overlook the bleeding obvious. I wonder if this one got up to as much hanky-panky as Jessica.'

'Are you going to visit the crime scene at all? Sir.'

Osborne screwed up the empty bag and missed the bin with his throw. 'Suppose it'll fill in the time till lunch. You drive.'

'It's just round the corner. Off Worple Road. I thought I'd walk.'

'We'll take the car in case it snows. You drive.'

Baggo waited till they had left. 'The match will resume later,' he announced to the empty room. 'New balls, please.'

* * *

‘She was such a lovely person,’ Aline-Wendy Nuttall sniffed as she struggled to re-attach her false eyelashes. Tear tracks spoiled her heavy make-up, her silver-grey hair was askew and her nose was red. It was only a few hours since she had reported her employer’s murder. ‘I can’t face anything till I have my eyes on,’ she confided to Flick as Osborne rummaged in a filing cabinet and a bored Detective Constable Danny Peters looked on.

Flick raised her eyebrows. ‘What exactly do you do here?’ she asked.

‘Anything I can to help. Ms McNeill is … was so busy. I answered the phone, opened the post, kept her diary. Sometimes I saw people she was too busy to see. “You’re my shield,” she would tell me. Some people can get quite nasty, you know. Excuse me.’ Seizing tissues, she swivelled her chair and buried her face in her hands.

‘We’ll just look round,’ Flick said. The McNeill Agency’s premises were compact. Osborne had already moved from the poorly-heated hallway, where Aline-Wendy’s simple pine desk was situated, to what had been Lorraine McNeill’s office. No one else worked for the agency.

Trying to think of the blood as paint, splashed extravagantly about the room by a crazy artist with a bucket and spray-can, Flick stepped over the soggy, coagulating stain on the carpet to the right of the door and inspected the walls. Alongside the likes of Tony Blair, David Cameron and Stephen Fry, the dead woman’s superior smile shone out of numerous photographs. Anyone with her who was not a

recognisable celebrity clutched an award, a plaque or a dagger. Flick presumed they were writers she had successfully represented. The huge, laminated black desk held only a crystal vase containing a dozen red roses, a telephone and a small laptop. Osborne sank into the leather swivel chair behind it and started going through the drawers.

'Go and get the receptionist to open up this computer, will you?' Osborne said. 'We'll have to take it away, but I'd like a sniff round it first. And try to find out who sent the roses. You're a woman,' he added.

Shaking her head, Flick willed herself to be patient.

'I organised the flowers,' Aline-Wendy admitted after some probing. 'Ms McNeill thought it important, professionally, you know, that people should see how much she was loved. I know very little about her private life, she kept that to herself. When someone did send her flowers, she was so pleased, so happy. Anyway, at the end of a bad week I organised a delivery. I put on the card: "From you-know-who", and she just winked at me. But I could tell she liked them. From then on, every Monday, I phoned in an order. These were fresh yesterday. She commented on their deep red colour.' Her voice dropping to a whisper, she added, 'I even started taking the money out of the company account.'

'Sergeant! I haven't all day,' Osborne's voice was raised.

'Sorry,' Flick whispered, then added, 'We really need to see what she had on her computer. Could you get us in?'

A look of panic passed over Aline-Wendy's face. 'But

Ms McNeill is … was very strict about security, erm, confidentiality, that sort of thing.'

'This is a murder,' Flick said softly. 'Did Ms McNeill have any enemies you can think of?'

'Some agents didn't like her much, I believe, but she always said that was envy. Almost everyone loved her …' She reached again for the tissues.

'Felicity!'

'Coming,' Flick snapped. Putting on a severe face, she said, 'We need to catch who did this. Please, now.'

Aline-Wendy responded to a firm tone, as Flick sensed she would. She glanced at her face in her hand-mirror and sniffed. Then she marched into her employer's office, doing her best to ignore Osborne, who lolled in the chair and watched as she bent over the desk.

'There, that's her e-mails. You'll be able to see most of her documents, too. I don't know the passwords for a few files. That's all I can do. And we don't have ashtrays in the office.' Aline-Wendy straightened herself, sniffed again and left the room.

Osborne pinched the butt of his cigarette and put it in his pocket then spent the next ten minutes reading e-mails. A pile of hard-backs sat on a coffee table. Flick selected one and began to read. It was a 'whodunit'. On the first page, a pensioner was garrotted. She picked up another. It opened with a traffic warden being hung, drawn and quartered. She saw the significance of the page under the body but didn't rush to share her insight.

'Nothing here,' Osborne sighed. 'Still, you'd better have a gander.' He looked out of the window. 'Give me

the car keys. I'll pick you up here in a couple of hours.'

Trying not to imagine the aromas she feared he would return with, Flick brushed fingerprint powder and cigarette ash from the desk then sat at the dead woman's computer, eating the muesli bars she had packed in her briefcase.

An hour later, she reluctantly agreed with the Inspector. It was the computer of a busy and successful businesswoman, with no frivolity anywhere and surprisingly few unpublished books in the documents.

'Did Ms McNeill get a lot of approaches from people who wanted her to represent them? New writers, I mean?' Flick asked when Aline-Wendy brought her a coffee.

'Hundreds. Every week.'

'I see no sign. There's nothing on the computer and there are no piles of manuscripts in this room.'

'We don't keep them here. I'll show you if you like.' She led the way to a cupboard in the corner of the hallway. With an apologetic shrug, she opened it.

The space from floor to ceiling was crammed with thick bundles of paper, all white A4. Flick pulled out one at random and disturbed some dust. The thick rubber band which held it together had perished and fell uselessly to the floor. On the front, in large bold type was the title, *A Bath Full of Blood*, and the author's name and details. At the back was a large, brown, stamped addressed envelope. Spilling it and some of the typescript, Flick checked the first page. As she expected, a body was found in a bloody bath. She put the bundle

down and selected another: a gamekeeper was shot on page one.

'Ms McNeill liked a shock opening,' Flick commented.

'She insisted on it. For crime.'

'Was it mostly crime she dealt with?'

'Yes. There's a huge international market. If you get a hit, it can be very lucrative. We've had quite a few best-sellers.'

'I see from your website that wannabes are asked to e-mail their submissions. What happens when they do?'

'They come to me. I look at them. If the first chapter seems well-written and there's a murder on the first page, I e-mail the author, inviting them to send the full manuscript in hard copy, with a stamped addressed envelope. The manuscripts go in the cupboard.'

'And did Ms McNeill …?'

'She was so busy. She concentrated on her existing clients. "They're our bread, butter and jam," she would say.'

'What about the wannabes?'

Aline-Wendy pulled a face. '"Nevergonnabes", she called them. I felt sorry for them. Some had tried very hard. I usually took a couple from the cupboard home at weekends and, if I really liked them, I put them on her desk, but it's nearly two years since we've taken on a new author. Mind you, today he's a best-seller.'

'Can you give me a list of all the wannabes who have approached you in the last year?' Flick was thinking needles and haystacks.

Aline-Wendy shook her head. 'The e-mail rejections

get a standard response then I delete the submission and our reply. Once we've had a look at the manuscripts we send them back. We don't keep records. You could look through the cupboard, of course.'

Flick, who had pictured herself writing detective stories in her retirement, was downcast. 'If they send in their manuscript and don't hear back, do they not get impatient?'

'Sometimes, but I just tell them we're very busy and we'll let them know when we can. About once a year, I go through the cupboard and send back a whole lot even if we haven't looked at them.'

'Can you think of anyone who has responded angrily after being rejected?'

'They just seem to accept it. Sorry, I can't think of anyone right now.' Aline-Wendy shook her head then brightened. 'But I have an idea. You should contact the Crime Writers' Association. They run a competition for aspiring writers. It's called the Debut Dagger. If Ms McNeill's killer wants to become a crime writer, they're sure to enter. I think the closing date is early February.'

'Just a week or two away. A lot of the entries will already be in. How do I find them?'

'I don't know. They're in England, somewhere. You'd probably be best Googling them.'

As Flick thanked Aline-Wendy, the door flew open. Osborne rolled in, pungent wafts of spices and nicotine in his wake. Flick took the air freshener from the desk and gave a five-second burst.