

I said goodbye to my final appointment shortly before six. I'd seen the usual procession of the worried well, a few older people who needed someone to talk to, a couple of people looking to be signed off work, mothers with children for routine check-ups, and a small number of people that I could actually help in a proper medical sense.

The closing door marked the end of another ten hour day. As I left, there was only the practice manager left in the office. I exchanged a few words with him before leaving the building and walking quickly across the car park in the gathering gloom of an early winter evening to my VW Passat. My thoughts were on one of my patients and so it was only when I got close to the car that I noticed that someone was leaning against it. My heart skipped a beat and my stride faltered as I looked around to see if there was anyone close by in case I needed to shout for help. Then the person stood up straight and I recognised him, something which drained the adrenalin from my body at the same time as causing me to mutter an expletive softly under my breath.

He was aged probably in his early or mid-fifties; tall and lean, with a thin face, narrow lips, a hook nose and a prominent chin. His hair, cut short since the last time I'd seen him, was dark, with the exception of grey wings on his temples and his brown eyes were fixed on me. I walked to within a few feet of him before speaking.

'I'd hoped that I'd seen the last of you.'

'Good day to you too, Morag. How are you keeping?'

I laughed, a dry sound lacking any humour. 'Thank you for asking, but I doubt that you're interested. What is it that I can do for you?'

'You can have a coffee with me. I need to talk with you and the café across the road is still open.'

'I don't want to talk with you.'

He smiled thinly. 'In this instance, I don't think that what you want really matters.'

He turned and started walking. I hesitated for a moment and then opened the car, put my briefcase in the boot and followed him.

By the time I entered the café, he was already seated at a table. I joined him and we looked briefly at the menu. When the waitress arrived, we both ordered cappuccinos. I also asked for a fruit scone, a minor vice of mine, which arrived almost immediately. I began to butter it and we sat in silence until our drinks arrived. Then I opened the conversation.

'I might have grounds for a complaint of harassment against you, Superintendent Peel.'

He inclined his head in acknowledgement. 'I suppose that you might, but you and I know that that isn't going to happen. An investigation might raise some awkward questions which could embarrass you.'

'Perhaps. But it would damage you as well.'

'I could take that,' he replied. 'I'm only a few years off my pension, I'm not looking for any further promotion, and it's very unlikely, even if I was found guilty, that I would be sacked. I'd

probably just get a reprimand. On the other hand, some very unpleasant skeletons might emerge from your closet. Putting that together, I calculate that you have more to lose than I do.'

We both sipped from our cups as I contemplated this answer. I knew that he was right. There would be no complaint.

'What is it you want to talk about?' I asked.

'You know what it is.'

'Tell me anyway.'

'I think that he's done it again.'

'And do you have any evidence to back this up?'

'Concrete evidence, no. Circumstantial evidence, yes. I know it's him. His fingerprints are all over it, metaphorically speaking. If I'm right, this will be number five.'

'And you are sure that you are right?'

'I know it as sure as I know that you are sitting here in front of me.'

'And what if you are wrong?'

'I'm not wrong.'

'But what if you are?'

His response was slow and measured. 'If I was, Dr Madison, we wouldn't be sitting here, and you'd have made your complaint by now.'

The truth of this statement created a moment of silence between us. Eventually I asked, 'Are you recording this conversation?'

He shook his head emphatically. 'No. And you can trust me on that.'

'What do you want from me then?'

'I want you to stop covering for him.'

'You know I'm not going to do that.'

He changed tack. 'You know, I have great respect for GPs. You have a lot in common with police officers. You come face to face with every pain and hurt and depravity known to man. And you see the consequences, especially in the way that trauma continues to destroy lives long after the event that caused it. I'm surprised that more of you don't crack and just throw in the towel.'

I felt my face harden and I hissed quietly. 'I know where you're going, and this is not a good idea.'

He carried on as though I hadn't spoken. 'You have an intimate knowledge of the consequences of what people like him do. You see it on a regular basis. But because you are protecting him, you are perpetuating that suffering for someone else's daughter or sister or mother. Is that what you want?'

'This is emotional blackmail.'

'It's not, and I resent your use of that word.' He leaned closer. 'I am leaving my pride on the floor here and I am begging you to do what is right. Otherwise, you are prolonging this abomination and the consequences will be on your head.'

'I cannot do what you want. It's impossible.'

'It is not impossible. It's what you must do. He is becoming more savage. The woman he attacked last month was in hospital for two weeks. She has a fractured jaw and two cracked ribs, as well as having several teeth knocked out. You can see the direction of travel in this as well as I can. It's only a matter of time before he kills someone.'

A wave of shame and self-loathing threatened to overwhelm me and I looked for something to grab my attention in the bottom of my cup. He let the silence expand for a few seconds before bursting the bubble.

'Why are you doing this, Morag? You know the facts of life as well as I do. He's almost young enough to be your son and I'd guess that he's probably screwing around like a tom cat behind your back,'

'You mean,' I said, unable to keep the bitterness out of my voice, 'what is a man like him doing with an overweight, grey-haired, plain-Jane like me?'

If he was embarrassed by my outburst, he didn't show it. 'You know as well as I do that he'll eventually drag you down with him. And when we get him, there's a good chance that you'll be caught up in it and be liable for aiding and abetting. What will your family and your friends and your colleagues say then? For God's sake, do what's right for you, if not for those poor young women. You still have a chance to save yourself and your reputation. Take it. Plead coercive control if you have to.'

It was like being hit with a verbal baseball bat and I'd had enough. I stood up and stormed out of the café, leaving him facing the disapproving stares of the other customers.

'Did you get anywhere?' asked Ryan.

Peel's mood was savage. 'It was like trying to poke butter up a hedgehog's arse with a red hot needle. I threw the kitchen sink at her and got nowhere. That woman's not budging an inch. And I'll tell you what the worst of this is, sooner or later, he'll start on her, and then God alone knows what will happen.'

'I've been looking at the case files again, just in case we're wrong and there's something that we've overlooked,' said Ryan.

Peel looked at him balefully. 'There's nothing that we've....'

Ryan held his hands up to placate him. 'I know, Sir. And the review that I've carried out has confirmed that. He's our man all right. He's the common denominator. All five of the women remember meeting him. All five allowed him to either walk or drive them to their homes. And all five have told us that their attacker was about six feet tall with a slim build and brown eyes. If it's not him then he's got an identical twin brother running around the city. And just to cover all the bases, he doesn't. I've checked and he's an only child.'

Peel sank deeper into his chair, a look of resignation on his face. 'We have got to get to this bastard, Freddy. There must be a way. We need to come up with a different strategy.'

Ryan had rarely seen his boss looking so disconsolate and he knew the man well enough to know that he needed to be alone. He muttered some words of encouragement and went back to his desk. Sergeant Wireman raised an eyebrow and he shook his head.

'He got nowhere,' he said. 'She just stonewalled him.'

'How many times does that make it that he's spoken to her?'

'By my reckoning, three. That's just the ones that he's told us about of course.'

'She could go after him for harassment.'

'Possible, but unlikely. She potentially has more to lose than he has if she went down that route. The truth is that we're stuck, and we'll continue to be stuck until either she cracks or her boyfriend makes a mistake.'

'Which he's unlikely to do. He's a clever bastard. He has a doctorate in applied physics and, if his Facebook site is to be believed, he's a member of Mensa.'

'You're right, Barbara. Of course, those sorts of things measure only a certain type of intelligence and I've known people with academic qualifications coming out of their ears who couldn't find their backsides with two hands and a guide dog. But our man is different. He's the real deal.'

Wireman bit her lip and looked thoughtful 'There is one thing that we haven't considered,' she said. 'A honey trap.'

Ryan shook his head emphatically. 'Not a chance. That would be putting an officer in danger and our boss wouldn't take the risk. And before you say anything else, nobody is going to let you volunteer. For one thing, you live with someone and you might put her in danger, and you're gay. It doesn't matter how good an actress you are, a bloke like this would see through you in minutes. And don't forget that he's onto us. He knows that we know. He'll be on the lookout for just that sort of thing.'

She opened her mouth to protest and he put up his hand to forestall her. 'I'm sorry, Barbara. It just isn't going to happen. We need to think of something else.'

I pulled up on the drive of a pleasant, detached, brick-built house in one of Gosforth's most exclusive estates. My ex-husband and I had bought it together over twenty years previously, not long after we'd finished university. Our marriage had finished without acrimony or children ten years later, and I had kept the house as part of the process of splitting the assets. It was much too large for one person of course, but that was no longer something that bothered me.

I opened the front door and stood silently in the hall, listening. I thought I heard running water in one of the bathrooms and I followed the sound upstairs. I opened the door just as the shower was switched off and waited for him to appear.

He emerged from the cubicle reaching blindly for his towel and, because of this, it took him several seconds to notice that I was there. He stopped and smiled at me and I felt that my heart was

almost ready to stop with the intensity of my emotions. I had now known him for almost five years, and lived with him for over four of these, and I had yet to get used to how amazingly, achingly beautiful he was.

Some people might have claimed that he wasn't anything more than conventionally handsome and that his body, although lean and well-muscled from frequent visits to the gym, was nothing exceptional. But his effect was in the quality of his physical presence. Somehow, in a way that was undefinable, he radiated a kind of power and confidence. I suppose it was what is often called charisma. I had understood this when I met him and, at an atavistic level, immediately known the risks, even as he was drawing me into his orbit. But I had been like an animal, gazing with fascination into the flickering flame lighting up my darkness; knowing instinctively that it was dangerous, but at the same time being seduced by the heat and wonder. I had surrendered willingly, accepting the hazards and the pain that I knew would come in return for the joys and the pleasure.

Large brown eyes that took in the world with an air of benign tolerance looked me over, and the corners of his mouth, which seemed to be permanently on the point of turning upwards as though inviting everyone around him into a private joke, spread wide in a smile of welcome. He wrapped the towel around his waist and walked toward me. He took my face gently between his hands and kissed me softly.

'You look worried,' he said.

I had decided in the car to tell him. 'Peel came to see me today.'

He looked straight into my eyes and asked, 'And what did you tell him?'

'I told him to go to hell.'

He kissed me again, harder, more urgently this time, then he whispered in my ear, 'Well done, my lovely lady. I think that you deserve a reward.'

The towel fell from his waist and he took me by the hand.

Peel was filling in Superintendent Lyons on progress, or lack thereof, in the case.

'There have been five attacks in Newcastle spread over four years,' he said. "All of them have the same MO. An attractive young woman, living on her own, meets a man in a pub or a club. He's good-looking and charming. At the end of the evening, he walks her home or takes her there in a taxi. It goes no further than that, but the key thing is that he finds out where she lives. Five or six weeks later, she is attacked in her home and brutally beaten. She is not sexually assaulted, which is unusual in these cases, but is instead made to repeatedly beg for her life, which is what her assailant seems to get off on. All five victims give the same general description and think that their assailant may be the man that they met several weeks previously. However, he wore a ski mask while he was in their houses and they can't be definite.'

He paused and Lyons nodded slowly. 'Keep going.'

'Because all the attacks took place at least a month after the women met their assailant, the vast majority of CCTV footage that might have allowed us to identify him was deleted. However, the third woman to be assaulted spotted the man that she'd met, in the city centre, two months after she was attacked and had the presence of mind to follow him to what turned out to be his place of work near the Quayside. She contacted us and we were then able to identify him as Damien Gatehouse.'

We showed his photograph, along with those of half a dozen random men, to the other women and they all agreed that he was the man that they'd met weeks before they were assaulted.

'We took a hard look at Mr Gatehouse's background and discovered that he is originally from Leeds. His parents split up when he was five, amid allegations of domestic violence and he was raised by his father. His mother hasn't seen him since he was fifteen and described him as, and I quote, "a right nasty little shit; just like his father". He is a graduate in physics from Oxford University and also has a doctorate from Imperial College. He was expelled from the local state school when he was fifteen after which his father sent him to a private school, where he seems to have stayed out of trouble. The reason for the expulsion was that he got into a scrap and beat up some boy quite badly, well beyond what might be normally expected in a playground fight, and showed no remorse.

'His tutor at Oxford disliked him and had no hesitation in saying so. He said that Gatehouse always seemed to him to be someone who was verging on disturbed, although he could be very charming when he wanted. He was extremely bright however, and got a congratulatory first. His supervisor at Imperial said something similar to his counterpart at Oxford, and also that she was never comfortable with him. She was quite pleased when Gatehouse left and added, without any prompting, that she was aware that there had been a complaint to the police by a woman during his time there, although it was subsequently withdrawn. When we looked into this, we found that it involved erotic asphyxiation. It occurred in her flat and was allegedly initiated by Gatehouse, but she began to black out and became terrified that he was going to kill her. She managed to shake him off and hid in the bathroom until he left. We spoke to her and she told us that the reason she dropped the charges was because she comes from a religiously conservative family who would have been shocked and ashamed by what would have been revealed if the case had gone to court. She regrets it now because there were some unpleasant rumours around the university about Gatehouse and she thinks that, if she had pressed the charge, other women might have come forward.

'He finished at Imperial and took a year off to travel the world. He then got a job at Lucas Offshore Research, where he has now spent over five years and appears to be very highly regarded. The first attack took place a year after he arrived in Newcastle, around the time that he moved in with Dr Morag Madison, a forty-four year old divorced GP, who has vouched for his presence in her house on the night of every one of the five attacks. He wears a Tyvek suit during the assaults, although where he gets them, God alone only knows. There's no record of the purchases showing up on his bank account or anywhere online. He doesn't leave a trace behind him and we have no fingerprints or DNA evidence.'

'So, we can't prove anything,' said Lyons.

'No, Sir. But I know it's him. But to get to him, we need to break Dr Madison, and there's no sign of that happening.

He was wearing his best leather coat and was dressed for going out. I could smell his aftershave and my heart sank. I hated it when he did this and ached to be invited to accompany him, but I knew that he would interpret a request to do so as an attempt to smother him and, as usual, my courage failed me.

'Going anywhere interesting?' I asked and cursed silently. I had wanted the question to be light and offhand, but a hint of desperation had leaked into my voice. Annoyance flashed briefly across his face.

‘Just meeting some friends in Jesmond,’ he said, his voice flat. ‘I might be late getting home so don’t wait up.’

It was a signal to say nothing more but I’d started and now I couldn’t help myself. ‘Why don’t you stay in tonight? Perhaps we could open a bottle of wine and watch a film.’

Before the final word had passed my lips, he had crossed the room and his hand was on my neck. It lay there lightly but I could feel its strength and power. I felt my body start to tremble and I looked into his eyes as he spoke.

‘Please do not try to control me, Morag. We’ve had this conversation before, haven’t we?’

Fear tightened my vocal cords and all I could do was nod my head.

‘And you remember what happened the last time, don’t you?’

This time I was able to speak. ‘Yes,’ I whispered.

‘And you don’t want that to happen again, do you?’

The truth was, I wanted it more than I’d ever wanted anything in my life, because then I would have his attention, and that was all that mattered to me. But I also knew that I dared not say this and so I shook my head.

He smiled in that way that made me believe that I was the centre of his universe and he moved his hand up onto my cheek. He caressed my skin and then kissed me softly.

‘As I said, don’t wait up.’

And then he was gone. I waited until I heard the front door close behind him and then went into the kitchen, where I liberated a bottle of Sancerre from the fridge.

I was quite drunk when I fell into bed two hours later and didn’t hear him come in. He slept in one of the spare rooms.

Ryan and Wireman had been summoned to Peel’s office to hear his latest thoughts.

‘The facts of the matter are,’ he said, ‘that Gatehouse hasn’t put a foot wrong, and we can’t touch him. Nevertheless, we have to believe that sooner or later he’ll make a mistake and we need to be ready for that. Do you have any suggestions?’

‘I have one,’ said Wireman.

Peel smiled. ‘Somehow, Barbara, I thought that might be the case. Go on.’

‘The fact that we don’t have forensic evidence from any of the assaults doesn’t mean that we won’t get some at some future crime scene. We need to be prepared for that eventuality. And that means getting hold of Gatehouse’s DNA and fingerprints. To do that, we need to catch him in the act of a recordable offence. The last time I looked, there were well over five hundred of these. Most of them will never apply but there are a number that might. I’m thinking of things like resisting a stop and search, criminal damage, getting drunk in a public place, and so on. If we can catch him, we can bring him to the station and get the necessary. Then, when he does make a mistake, we’ll have him.’

'That's all well and good, Barbara,' said Ryan, 'but the chances of an officer being present when he does something he shouldn't are close to zero.'

'Not if we're looking at him when he does it, Sir.'

'That would mean having a dozen people trailing him, possibly for weeks' said Peel. 'We don't have anything like those sorts of resources. It's a non-starter.'

Wireman drew a breath to steady herself before speaking. When she did so, she looked straight at the Superintendent. 'That's not correct, Sir. I've been speaking to a number of the female officers around the station. There's quite a few of them who're prepared to give up some of their spare time to keep an eye on Gatehouse and watch what he's up to. A couple of the male officers are prepared to chip in as well. We know his movements and habits so it shouldn't be too difficult to keep tabs on him. If he does anything over the next few weeks, we'll know about it.'

There was silence in the room as Peel stared at her. Then he said slowly, 'It appears DS Wireman, that you have been using your initiative and have been organising an independent operation behind my back.'

Wireman didn't flinch. 'That's not how I would put it, Sir. I prefer to think of it as making sure that the building blocks of a plan are in place before putting it before you. I can assure you that I had no intention of implementing this without your approval.'

Peel considered this for a few seconds and then made up his mind. 'OK then, Barbara, carry on. But make sure that everyone involved keeps their distance. If anyone thinks that Gatehouse is on to them, then they must withdraw from the operation. Is that understood?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'OK then. Report back to me if you get anything and, if necessary, we'll review the situation in two weeks.'

Wireman stood up and left. As the door of the office shut behind her, Peel raised an eyebrow to Ryan, who said, 'That woman is either going to get herself drummed off the force, or she's going to end up as Chief Constable.'

It took Wireman ten days to come up trumps. Ryan came into the station to find her sitting at her desk with a grin that would have made the Cheshire Cat green with envy.

'You've either won the lottery,' he said, 'or someone you don't like has just gone face down into a pile of dog shit.'

'Better than that, Freddie. We had someone trailing Gatehouse last night and we nailed him. He was off his head in the Bigg Market with a load of his mates and we arrested him for being drunk in a public place. To make it even better, he initially resisted and a bit of force was needed. The lads in the car brought him and we got the DNA samples and the fingerprints.'

Ryan whistled softly. 'Well done, Barbara. Let's go and have a chat with the boss.'

Peel was also pleased but cautious.

'There is, as I'm sure you'll have worked out, a down side to this. Gatehouse now knows that we have his biometric data and he'll lie low. This means that our chances of catching him any time soon are minimal. In fact, we may never catch him now.'

'He'll be back, Sir,' said Wireman, more confidently than she felt. 'What he does is a compulsion. He will be able to fight it for a while but sooner or later he will try again. And this time, we'll be ready for him.'

Peel drummed his fingers on the desk before answering. 'Looking at the overall picture, I think you're right, Barbara. I'm not sure whether to be comforted or horrified by that. On the one hand, it means that we have a chance of putting the evil bastard behind bars, but it means that, to do so, an innocent woman is going to have to be put in harm's way.'

That stopped the conversation for a while as the three officers contemplated this reality. Eventually it was Peel who roused himself. He slapped his hands on his desk and said, 'Enough of this. Let's not forget that there are a lot more bad guys out there to catch.'

I had a late shift the day that the letter from the Northumbria police arrived. I picked it off the mat and turned it around slowly, checking that it was indeed addressed to Damien. Then I put it on the mantelpiece, behind the clock which had been the only thing that my grandmother had been able to leave me when she died. This was not something that I was going to pretend I hadn't seen.

He was home before me, getting ready to put the dinner on the table almost as soon as I came through the door. He was an excellent cook and he was able to utilise my expensively equipped kitchen to its maximum potential. He cracked open an excellent Merlot and we sat down to eat and discuss the events of our day. It was only when the table had been cleared and the dishwasher filled that I got the letter and placed it carefully on the table in front of him.

'What the hell,' I said, 'is this about?'

He stared at the letter for a few seconds and I saw his face drain of colour. When he eventually looked at me, he was less the dominant Adonis that had shared my bed for the past five years and more a frightened and uncertain little boy. Doubt and indecision flashed across his face and I could see him calculating how much to tell me. When he spoke, his voice was quiet and subdued.

'Two weeks ago, I was out with some friends and got very drunk. I was arrested and taken to the police station. I was charged and they took my fingerprints and a DNA sample. This letter is probably an official notification to attend a magistrate's court.'

I slumped down on the chair and put my elbows on the table, my head sinking into my hands. This was bad news and I struggled to process the implications. He looked at me intently as I reached a conclusion. Eventually I spoke through gritted teeth.

'You really are a very, very stupid man. You must have known that they'd be looking for you and waiting to pounce as soon as you made any sort of mistake.'

'I'm sorry.'

I looked at him and understood why people said that there was a thin line between love and hate. At that moment I could have happily brained him.

I took my elbows off the table and leaned back in the chair. 'It's a bit bloody late to be sorry now. The one thing it proves however, is that they have no evidence from the attacks. If they had, you'd be sitting in a police cell by now. What they're doing is setting you up. If you carry out another attack and leave any traces behind you, they'll have you and you'll probably spend the rest of your life in prison. And you'll probably drag me there with you. Do you understand what that means?'

He nodded and I said, 'Don't just nod your head like an idiot. Tell me what you understand.'

His voice was subdued. 'I need to stay out of trouble and keep my nose clean. There must be no more attacks.'

I stood up and took his face in my hands. 'You have been very stupid, Damien. But it's not fatal. We can get through this. We just need to remain calm and not panic.'

A few weeks later he attended the Magistrate's Court where he received a fine and a warning. Afterwards, the mood in our house, which had become febrile, began gradually to settle and something approaching normality returned. Initially, I was terrified that he would conclude that I was no longer useful to him and leave, but gradually I worked it out that he couldn't afford to do that. He still needed me to provide his alibis and if he left, there was no guarantee that I'd continue to do so, was there? I might go to the police and tell them that he had threatened and coerced me. Gradually, slowly, and without either of us saying anything, we both began to realise that he'd painted himself into a corner. The balance of power in our relationship began to tip my way. I now had the opportunity, should I wish to do so, to destroy him, and we both realised it.

I no longer asked him to stay in when he wanted to meet with his friends, I told him to do so. If I decided that we were going to the opera at the Theatre Royal, we went, and if he was bored out of his skull, then that was just tough. And at night, when we went to bed, I no longer lay there, my body aching with desire, wondering when he'd see fit to reward me. Instead, I took what I needed when I wanted it.

And I enjoyed it. God above, but I enjoyed it. He was mine now, this gorgeous, wonderful creature and I had everything that I ever desired. I was finding out something else about myself. I was a natural bully. I was good at it, and I loved it.

It couldn't last of course. Time passed and the pendulum of our relationship swung again, if not back to its old position, then to somewhere in the middle. He got over the shock of his arrest and recovered some of his old poise and confidence. Gradually he began to stand up for himself and we eventually arrived at an equilibrium where he made sure that he didn't do anything that pissed me off, but I had to loosen the straightjacket and allow him more freedom. We maintained the fiction of civility and respect, as we circled each other warily, but we both knew the truth. He now detested and feared me, and I both loved and despised him.

I had no illusions about the nature of the person I was dealing with. And in case I had, Peel had spelt it out in one of our little meetings. 'Damien Gatehouse is a nasty piece of work, Morag. He is a psychological mess from a broken and violent home. He was abandoned by his mother and has

form with respect to misogynistic violence, even before these attacks. He clearly hates women and loves humiliating them. And you know as well as I do, that sooner or later, he'll start on you.'

I'd run away from that particular confrontation with his words ringing in my ears. I'd known that he was right but, in my way, I was as helpless to control my compulsions as Damien was to control his. I was between a rock and a hard place, overpowered by emotions I feared as much as embraced, and sooner or later, I was going to have to face the consequences.

He started to stay out late again. I remonstrated with him of course, but he just smiled and stared vacantly over my shoulders. I knew what this meant. He was losing his fear of me, or something inside of him was stronger than his fear. I shouted at him, screamed at him and threatened him, but it did no good. And then one night, he did exactly what Richard Peel had predicted. He ended our argument by punching me once, briefly and savagely in the stomach.

I had never been hit before, not even by my strict and Calvinistic mother, or any of the teachers at the cold and inhospitable boarding school to which my parents had consigned me for most of my teenage years. I doubled up and then fell to my knees, screaming soundlessly from the pain and the shock, wheezing and gasping for breath. He stood over me for what seemed to be an age but was probably no more than ten seconds and then he caught my hair, pulling my face up so that I was looking directly at him. We stared at each other and what I saw in his eyes was only cold contempt. I felt a physical sensation rip through my body, overcoming the pain, and my soul shrivelled, leaving a hole where previously had been the pride and dignity that had sustained me throughout my life. I wanted to cry but the tears wouldn't come, instead I could only whimper. He released my hair and pushed my head to one side. I collapsed in a heap on the carpet and by the time I staggered to my feet, he was gone.

I stayed up until two hours past midnight, fighting sleep, my body coiled on the armchair. When I finally heard the key in the lock, I stood up, stretching to relieve the stiffness in my muscles. The front door opened and closed and I sensed his hesitation in the hallway as he saw the light under the bottom of the living room door.

He pushed the door open and I got my first look at him. His face was haggard and drawn and he appeared to be almost on the verge of tears. But it was his cheek below his left eye that drew my attention. I saw two parallel scratches, about three inches long, curving down from his ear. I knew the implications immediately and I was almost sick. My hands went to my mouth and when I eventually spoke, my voice was faltering.

'W-w-what happened?'

'The little bitch was braver than the others,' he said, his voice a low monotone. 'She fought back. She tore at the hood and managed to scratch me.'

I spoke slowly. 'That will mean your DNA will be under her fingernails.'

I expected a sarcastic response but his spirit was broken and all he could do was nod.

'She knew that herself. She started to scream blue murder and crawled under the bed.'

'What did you do?'

‘What was I supposed to do? I got the hell out of there before any of the neighbours phoned the police.’

‘You fool,’ I hissed. ‘You should have finished the job properly and then cut her fingers off.’

Shock and confusion competed for space across his face and I could see that, even in his overwrought state, a penny had just dropped. The woman standing in front of him, the one that he had taken brutally when he’d returned home after the previous attacks, and into whose ears he’d poured the revolting details of everything that he’d done, wasn’t another of his victims. She was a kindred spirit. I hadn’t provided him with alibis because I was some pathetic older woman infatuated by a younger man. Behind the façade of civility, manners and education, I was like him. Oh yes, I was besotted by him but I had enjoyed being part of what he had done. I was as much a monster as he was.

I was thinking fast. Damien was done for, no matter what happened next. I had a couple of choices but I already knew what I was going to do. I had little doubt that, if push came to shove, when the police came knocking at the door and then started questioning him about the other attacks, he’d sell me down the river if he thought that there was any advantage in it for him.

I walked over to him and took his hands gently in mine. I looked into his eyes and said, ‘There’s a way out of this, Damien. But you need to trust me. Do you trust me?’

He looked at me hopelessly and nodded, the bravado gone and now just a helpless little boy looking for an adult to help him.

‘OK,’ I said, ‘first things first. Take your clothes off and I’ll put them in the washing machine. Is the Tyvek suit in the car?’

‘Yes. It’s in the boot.’

‘That’s fine. I’ll get rid of it later. Now, strip off and I’ll get your dressing gown from the bedroom. I’ll also start to run a hot bath so that you can calm down and we can think of a way out of this.’

I went up the stairs as he began to take his jumper off, my brain racing. I got his dressing gown from the bedroom and went into the bathroom. I put the plug in the bath and started the hot water running, then went to the small cupboard above the mirror. I pulled out several bottles and found what I was looking for. I put the packet in my pocket and went downstairs. I gave Damien the dressing gown and put his discarded clothes in the washing machine. Then I took his hand and led him gently up the stairs to the bathroom. I removed the dressing gown and persuaded him into the water and knelt down, soaping his back and talking softly as the shock wore off and his body stopped shaking. I stood up and told him that I’d be back in a moment. I went downstairs to the kitchen and took a bottle of white Rioja out of the fridge.

I poured a liberal amount into a glass and then took the box from my pocket. I removed a dozen pills, cut them open, and poured them carefully into the bottle. I put the cork back on and shook the bottle vigorously, then poured a second glass.

I took both glasses and the bottle upstairs and sat on a chair beside the bath. He looked at me anxiously and I smiled at him as I handed him the wine.

‘Drink that. It’ll make you feel better and then we can discuss our next move.’

By this stage, he was so helpless and terrified that he's probably have jumped off the Tyne Bridge if I'd told him to do so. He took a liberal slug of the wine and I matched it from my glass. Then he drained his glass completely and I refilled it from the bottle. I watched carefully for a reaction as he started talking.

'What are we going to do, Morag? They'll know that it was me before the day is out.'

'I have a plan,' I replied. 'First of all, we need to get you out of here. I've got a load of cash in the house that I can give you. We'll pack a bag for you tonight and in the morning, you can take my car to Cairnryan. Leave it there and pay cash to get the ferry across to Larne. Then get a bus to Dublin and a train to Rosslare. Get the ferry from there to France and lie low. Contact me and I'll meet you. We'll be able to work something out from there.'

It was rubbish of course but the wine and the drug were already at work on his central nervous system and his head was beginning to droop. He was swiftly reaching the point where he would be incapable of thinking clearly but there must have been something in my voice, perhaps in its tone or maybe I was forcing it a bit too much that set off a warning bell in his brain. Some impulse suddenly made him aware of the danger that he was in and his eyes shot up in horror and he looked at me, a sudden fear stretching the muscles on his face.

'You're talking bullshit,' he shouted, although his voice was slurred and broken. 'I'm never going to leave here, you bitch. You're going to do me in.'

He struggled to sit and I stood up. I put my hands on his shoulders and forced him back into the water. I am not a strong woman but I didn't need to be. He was unable to fight against me, although he thrashed around and some water splashed over the rim of the bath. Gradually however he stopped struggling. The drug was taking full effect by now and he was incapable of any resistance. I released him and went downstairs to the kitchen. I removed an ultra-sharp chef's knife that he had recently bought from its drawer and returned to the bathroom. He was almost, but not quite unconscious and I resumed my position, kneeling by the bath.

The two policemen studied the woman through the one-way glass. She sat perfectly still, her hands on her lap, staring at the opposite wall.

'She's very calm,' said Ryan.

'Unnaturally so,' replied Peel. "Most people who have no experience of the police would probably be pacing around the room like a cat on a hot tin roof.'

'It's interesting that she came alone, without a solicitor.'

'Yessss,' Peel drew out the word. 'She's either very trusting, or very confident. Anyway, I guess that we've let her stew for long enough. Let's hear what she has to say.'

It was Peel who opened the conversation.

'This is not a formal police interview, Dr Madison. It is entirely voluntary and you are at liberty to leave at any time. Do you understand?'

She nodded quickly, betraying a nervousness beneath the surface. 'Yes, I do.'

'And you are happy to proceed on that basis? You do not want a solicitor?'

'Yes and no, I don't.'

Ryan took it up. 'We are examining the circumstances that led to the death of Gabriel Gatehouse at your house in Gosforth on the evening of 8th of October. As you will be aware, Mr Gatehouse was a suspect in a series of attacks on women across the city over the past five years.'

He paused and she nodded her head again. 'Yes, I was aware of that, and I was also aware that you had no evidence to substantiate your suspicions.'

'And you will be aware that, on the evening of the 8th of October, another woman was attacked in a manner almost identical to those which had previously taken place.'

He paused and she said, 'Yes.'

'You have been informed, I understand, that the victim on that occasion managed to scratch her assailant and that skin samples later taken from under her fingernails gave a DNA match to Mr Gatehouse. Is that correct?'

'I was told that, yes.'

'Mr Gatehouse lived with you at the time of the assault. You have stated that you were unaware that he planned an assault and the first thing that you knew of what might have happened was when he returned to your house in the early hours of the morning looking scared and frightened with two scratches under one eye. Is that correct?'

'Yes, it is. I have already told you this on several occasions.'

'And you also told us that you woke up when he arrived in the house.'

'Again, that is correct.'

Ryan paused for a moment and then said, 'The problem we have with that statement Dr Madison is that, when we searched the house later that night, your bed had not been slept in.'

There was a pause while she considered this statement and Peel thought that he saw a slight tick under one eye. But she kept her composure and answered, 'I must have been mistaken then. In fact, you are correct. I'd been watching a late night film on the television, and I'd fallen asleep on the couch. Given what happened that night, I'm sure that you'll forgive me that oversight.'

'What film were you watching?'

'Winchester 73. The Jimmy Stewart classic. I have a soft spot for the old westerns.'

Ryan would check but he knew that he'd find that it had been on that night. He continued.

'What happened between you when Mr Gatehouse arrived in the house?'

'I have already told you this previously.'

'Well, please tell us again.'

She looked at him malevolently but decided to comply. 'I was shocked by his appearance. I shouted at him and he got angry.'

'What happened then?'

'He punched me in the stomach. I fell to the floor; I think that the phrase is, like a sack of potatoes. Then he kicked me and told me to stay there if I knew what was good for me. He went into the kitchen and I heard him rummaging around. I was in a great deal of pain and shock and my mind was beginning to shut down so I couldn't tell you exactly what he was doing. I was just curled up in a ball on the floor.'

'How long did you stay like that?'

'I think that it was about an hour, maybe a bit more. I'd never been hit before in my life and the shock was overwhelming.'

'What did you do then?'

'I was aware that I'd heard the bath running. I more or less crawled up the stairs and into the bathroom. That was where I found Gabriel. He was dead. There was an empty bottle of wine on the side of the bath, and he had slit his wrist. The water in the bath was stained red.'

'You say that he was dead. Did you check?'

'Yes, I did, although it was useless. I've seen plenty of dead bodies and I knew that he was beyond rescue.'

'And then you called the police.'

'Yes. I dialled 999 and asked for an ambulance first and then the police.'

Ryan had heard a recording of the call and she had sounded hysterical. It had been almost convincing.

Peel took up the questioning. 'I have a few questions to ask about Mr Gatehouse's suicide, Dr Madison. You see, our pathologist has raised a few questions.

She raised an eyebrow. 'Such as?'

'To start with, it is commonly assumed that someone contemplating taking their own life by slitting their wrists, does so using horizontal cuts. However, if someone slits their wrists in that way, death takes some time, if it happens at all. A lengthwise slit has a better chance of opening up the blood vessel. This causes exsanguination at a much quicker rate and is much more likely to result in death. Mr Gatehouse's wrist had been slit lengthwise. My question is, how did he know to do that? It is fairly specialised medical knowledge.'

She smiled. 'That's easy, Richard. We watched a film a few weeks ago called Calvary. It's pretty deep and dark, and I wouldn't recommend it if your spirits are low. But there is a scene in which a suicide is described, and the virtues of the horizontal versus the vertical cut are discussed in some detail. And you must remember that Gabriel was a very clever man. He knew how to work things out.'

That stopped Peel in his tracks and it was Ryan who broke the silence which followed.

'There were a few other things that made us question certain aspects of the scene, Dr Madison.'

She looked at him and smiled quietly. 'Please continue.'

'Your fingerprints were on the wine bottle and the knife. Can you explain that?'

'Of course. I had opened the wine earlier that evening and drank a glass. And both Gabriel and I loved to cook. So, my fingerprints would have been all over both objects. It would have been surprising if they had not been.'

Ryan inclined his head to acknowledge the truth of the statement and continued. 'The post-mortem found large amounts of a psychoactive drug called benzodiazepine in Mr Gatehouse's bloodstream. It was also found on the glass from which he had been drinking and in the dregs in the bottle of wine. Our pathologist reckons that there was enough in his system to knock out a horse.'

The statement hung in the air and the two men looked at the woman. Eventually she said, 'Are you asking me a question?'

'I was hoping that you'd be able to explain the presence of the drug in his body and in the wine.'

'That's easy. I suffer from anxiety and depression. I take temazepam, which contains benzodiazepine. I don't try to hide it and Gabriel knew where to find it. They were in the bathroom so he didn't have to try hard.'

'That's what puzzles us a little, Dr Madison,' said Peel. 'You see, if someone had poured the contents of those pills into the bottle themselves, one would expect it to be done where the pills were kept, and that there would be some spillage, especially if the person doing it was in an agitated state. But we found no trace of any spillage in the bathroom. In fact, the only place that we found it was on the table in the kitchen.'

She shrugged. 'I can't comment on that. Who knows what goes through the mind of someone who is contemplating suicide. Gabriel was frantic when he came through the door that night. I now know what he did and what he would have known was ahead of him. He was looking at many, many years in prison. He was a free spirit and it would have killed him. He decided to take what we medical people often call the short cut, and who can really blame him.'

The room fell silent again. It was eventually Ryan who spoke.

'There is one other thing that we'd like to clear up,' he said. 'There was a lot of water on the floor of the bathroom and on a dress which we found in your washing basket. In neither case did the water contain any traces of blood so whatever caused this occurred before Mr Gatehouse's wrist was cut. We can't figure how that happened. Can you offer an explanation?'

She shrugged again. 'I can offer no explanation for the water on the floor of the bathroom. You must remember that Gabriel was in a very agitated state. He could have gotten in and out of the bath before finding the courage to do what he did. I simply have no idea. As far as my dress is concerned, that is simple. After finding him, but before the ambulance and your people arrived, I went to the kitchen to get a glass of water. I was in a state of shock. I fumbled with it and spilled most of it across my dress.'

The room fell silent again and the two policemen stared at her. Then Peel stood up, quickly followed by Ryan.

'That will be all for now, Dr Madison,' he said. 'I will ask an officer to escort you to your car. But I reserve the right to ask you to attend again in the future for further questioning.'

Peel, Ryan and Wireman watched her get in her car outside the police station and drive away.

'You're still pretty certain she did it, Sir,' said Wireman.

'Definitely,' said Peel. 'Somehow, she persuaded him into that bath, drugged him and then slit his wrist. I think that their relationship was volatile but that was not why she killed him. She was afraid that, if he coughed up to the other assaults and implicated her, she'd go down as well. And she wasn't having that.'

'If you are correct, Sir' said Ryan, 'then that makes her as cold blooded and nasty as he was.'

'It does, doesn't it? I think that maybe I've been mistaken about her all along. I've been seeing her as some combination of an infatuated fool and a coerced victim. I'm beginning to think that I was wrong.'

'We're never going to get her for Gatehouse's killing, are we?' asked Ryan.

'No. That horse has bolted. But I'm thinking about something else now.'

He turned to Wireman. 'Barbara, I want you to take a deep dive into her records. In particular, I want you to check the mortality rate of her patients against expected outcomes at every practice that she's worked at. That woman is dangerous, and I'm going to find out just what other skeletons might be rattling around in her closet.'

He turned to Ryan. 'In the meantime, Freddy, I want you to find her ex-husband and have a chat with him. Find out the details of her marriage and why they split up. We're not finished with Morag Madison yet. Not by a long chalk.'