

Gazpacho

Freddy Ryan had never liked Accident & Emergency wards. The smell of blood, the blue clad doctors and nurses in their green, plastic aprons, the atmosphere of controlled urgency all combined to raise his blood pressure and he could already feel his heartbeat increasing. He almost walked into an elderly woman in a wheelchair, a gash on her head bleeding profusely and her eyes fixed in the blank, unfocused response of someone who has become emotionally detached from their surroundings. He muttered an apology as he skipped around her and then slowed, despite himself, to watch a large group surrounding a bed, moving a body gently from a stretcher to a bed as a nurse recited a litany.

‘...left tibia fracture, two fractured ribs on the right side and a cracked sternum...’

He was interrupted by a strident whisper from the nurse who was escorting him.

‘Sergeant, stop dawdling. Follow me please.’

He gave her the benefit of his full attention and smiled. ‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Sorry.’

Summer replaced winter on the young woman’s face and she smiled back. ‘No problem,’ she replied, and walked off. He followed her to the far end of the room where a space was cordoned off by a curtain, which she pulled back to allow him to enter.

The man on the bed was asleep, his breathing regular and steady. Freddy estimated him to be somewhere between his late twenties and early thirties. The blanket was pulled up under his armpits and the width of his shoulder visible through his hospital gown gave a promise of considerable physical strength. He was clearly tall, probably a few inches above six feet. His hair was dark and cut short over his ears. His face was thin, and the sharp nose and thin lips combined to give it something of a feral look. He had a large bruise and a cut on his right cheek.

There were two other people in the cubicle. The first was a short, stocky, olive skinned man dressed in the green uniform of his profession. He looked at Freddy and said in the characteristic accent of the sub-continent, ‘I assume that you are from the police?’

Freddy nodded. ‘I’m Sergeant Ryan and I’ve been assigned to investigate the events which led to this man being attacked.’

The fourth person made her presence known. ‘This man, as you call him Sergeant, is my son. His name is Patrick Malloy.’

Freddy looked at the source of the interruption. She was sitting on a chair on the opposite side of the bed and did not look happy. He estimated her age at around sixty but the bleached blond hair that was pulled back from her face in a tight ponytail had smoothed out the lines of age and made it difficult to be confident in that assessment. She had a large forehead and a mouth that appeared to have shrunk into a hole between her cheeks, but apart from that, she shared much of her son’s physiognomy.

‘May I ask your name please?’ he asked.

‘Patricia Malloy,’ she said.

‘I’m sorry we had to meet in these circumstances, Mrs Malloy. As I said, I’m the investigating officer in this case. I’ll speak to you in a moment but I need to speak to Dr....’

He raised his eyebrows in enquiry.

'Dr Das. Purnandu Das.'

'I need to speak to Dr Das first.'

'Shoot away Sergeant.'

'Thank you, Doctor. Can you tell me what happened to Mr Malloy, and give me some indication of the extent of his injuries?'

'He was brought in last night. I was told that he'd been found not that far from a pub called The Tar. He was unconscious on arrival and had received a severe beating not that long before he was found.'

Das paused for a second before addressing the woman.

'You may wish to leave for a few minutes, Mrs Malloy while we discuss this. You might find it upsetting.'

Patricia Malloy remained seated. 'I've had a tough life Doctor, including watching my father beat the hell out of my mother every time he got drunk. There's very little that you can say which will bother me.'

Das shrugged and turned his attention back to Freddy. 'Mr Malloy was attacked by someone or some people. I have examined him thoroughly and he appears to have marks on his right buttock consistent with being tasered.'

'That would have incapacitated him I guess?'

'Absolutely. The shock would have been intense and he would certainly have screamed. His motor functions would have shut down and he would rapidly have lost muscle control. At that point, his body will have frozen and he will have fallen face first to the ground. That was probably when he got the cut and bruise to his face.'

'Is that it?'

'No. It appears that that was just for starters. Whoever did this to him then systematically beat him with a heavy, blunt object; a golf club is one possibility, but there are other options as well. He was hit multiple times on both sides of the body. If I was a forensic doctor, which I'm not, I'd say that someone started at the ankles and hit him again and again all the way up to the chest, on both sides and with considerable force. I counted twenty impact sites where he has blunt force trauma and he also has several cracked ribs.'

'What effect will this have on him?'

'Well, he's sedated now but when he wakes up, he is going to be extremely sore for quite a long time. At a guess, he's probably looking at a period of up to a month before he'll be able to walk properly. If you want to try to envisage what has happened to him, I suggest looking up those pictures that are available on the web of the English batsmen the first time they met the West Indian fast bowlers.'

Freddy had seen the photos and he knew that the batsmen had never played for their country again. He began to feel sympathy for Patrick Malloy.

‘There will be more,’ continued Dr Das. ‘The psychological damage from such an assault will be considerable. He may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and the effects of that may last longer than the physical injuries.’

Das paused for a moment before continuing. ‘Whoever did this Sergeant must have really hated him. I am no policeman, but in my opinion, this was not a casual attack. Now, I assume that you’ll want to speak to Mrs Malloy. So, I’ll be away. Mr Malloy will be transferred to a ward later this evening. Goodbye Sergeant.’

Freddy waited until the curtain had closed behind the Doctor before turning to Patricia Malloy.

‘Do you know anyone who might want to do this to your son?’ he asked. ‘Does he have any enemies or has he been in any sort of trouble recently?’

The woman shrugged. ‘I’m sure that you’ll look him up on your computer when you get back to the station Sergeant. A lot of people don’t like Patrick. But I won’t do your job for you. I’ll let you find out for yourself.’

‘Do you know what he was doing in Byker when he was attacked?’

‘Probably drinking, Sergeant. He has a bit of a problem with the bottle. It runs in the family. He’s young enough to be able to shrug the worst effects of it off at the moment but it will get him in the end like it gets all the men in my family.’

The words were spoken in a flat monotone, without emotion but Freddy could guess at the pain and the suffering which lay behind them. He wondered if this woman was herself a victim of PTSD, but this was not the time or place to investigate. He was done here and, after he got Malloy’s address from her, he left.

Back at the station, he looked up Patrick Malloy on the Police National Computer. As it turned out, he had come to the attention of the Northumbria Police on numerous occasions. The first was when he was sixteen, an arrest for shoplifting. He was let off with a warning, which didn’t seem to deter him. At seventeen, he was caught in a stolen vehicle, albeit not driving it. He got the benefit of the doubt when he claimed that he didn’t know that the car was nicked. There were several arrests for affray when under the influence and stealing from a building site, which got him a suspended sentence. He’d gotten two years in Durham prison in his mid-twenties for breaking somebody’s jaw in a fight, although he was out in twelve months for good behaviour. He’d also twice been caught in possession of cocaine, which led to Freddy calling up a friend in the drugs squad.

‘Richard,’ he said, ‘I’ve just been down to the hospital checking out a bloke who’s been attacked near The Tar. I’ve been looking him up on the PNC and it looks like he has a record. I’m hoping that you can tell me something about him.’

‘What’s his name, Freddy.’

‘Patrick Malloy. I have an address for him in Wallsend.’

‘Yes, I know him. He’s a nasty piece of work. A part-time thief and part-time drug dealer. He hangs out around the Byker Wall mainly. We’ve nabbed him a few times but it never keeps him down for long. Apparently, he does a bit of enforcing for the Wilkie brothers on occasion as well. He’s not above delivering a bit of a hiding and, if the reports are true, seems to enjoy it. I’d say definitely not the type of lad you’d want to meet down a dark alley on a Saturday night. What happened to him?’

Freddy outlined the facts that he'd been given in the hospital and Richard grunted. 'I can't say that I'm sorry. It'll keep him out of circulation for a while, which is good news. The bigger problem might be that, if the Wilkies see him as one of theirs, they'll be looking for whoever did it themselves, and that might mean that you have a bigger problem. Was there anything else?'

'No. Thanks for the information. I owe you a pint.'

'Well, if you're not doing anything after work, you can buy it for me tonight.'

Freddy put down the phone after making arrangement for where to meet and continued reading the litany of offences of the typical small-time career criminal. Until he reached the last page, when things changed. Because it appeared that, one year previously, Patrick Malloy had stepped up a gear. Specifically, he'd been accused of rape. The case was in the minority in that it had gone to court but it had been dismissed because of the non-attendance of a key witness. Freddy noted the name and telephone number of the investigating officer and called her. The phone was picked up after two rings.

'Inspector Wolfenden.' The voice was clipped and business-like and carried the traces of an estuary English accent.

Freddy introduced himself and explained the reason for the call. 'I'm looking into a serious assault on a man called Patrick Malloy. I've looked him up and he has a serious record.....'

He was interrupted by Wolfenden. 'Is he badly hurt, Sergeant?'

'Yes. Whoever attacked him was deadly serious. He's looking at a long time in hospital and an even longer recovery time.'

'Good. Although I'm sorry to hear that he's survived.'

The words were spat out with a venom that surprised Freddy. There was none of the professional detachment which police have to adopt to prevent themselves from getting dragged into the cesspit in which they spent much of their professional lives. He took a second to steady himself and then spoke in a level, flat voice.

'Can you tell me why you feel like that Inspector?'

'Because that bastard raped a young girl and destroyed her life and got away with it. He walked away without a stain on him and the girl he hurt will carry what happened with her for the rest of her life.'

'What happened?'

'What happened was that we had him by the balls. The girl lived in a flat in Heaton. He broke in one night and she woke up to find him on top of her. He gave her a few belts to keep her quiet and when he left, he threatened to come back and kill her if she told anyone. But she dialled 999 as soon as he'd left and we got there before she'd showered or washed her clothes or brushed her teeth. So, we managed to lift trace evidence linking him to the scene and DNA from some hair that he left behind him. We matched those from samples that we had on the database and that gave us an immediate hit. We got the CPS to agree to accelerate the case through the court and the girl was prepared to go through with it. We had everything we needed to put him behind bars for a very long time.'

'What went wrong?'

‘What happened was that he and his friends did it the old-fashioned way. The family started receiving threats. The girl’s younger sister was pulled into an alleyway in town and told what would happen to her if the case went to court. The mother was accosted on the bus. You know the score. Malloy has some very unpleasant friends.’

‘The Wilkies?’

‘The very lads. We couldn’t be with the family all the time to protect them and eventually they threw in the towel and the case had to be withdrawn. The girl who was raped backed down on the day of the trial and wouldn’t testify.’

It was a story as old as time and Freddy could understand Wolfenden’s anger. ‘Do you think,’ he asked, ‘that this assault might be the work of the girl’s family?’

The line went silent for a few seconds before Wolfenden answered. ‘Possible, but unlikely. There’s no father around; he buggered off ten years ago and hasn’t been seen since. There’s just the mother and two daughters. The girl who was raped had moved out of the family house and into her own flat. But I think you’ll find that Patrick Malloy has plenty of enemies around the place. They’ll be no shortage of candidates for this assault.’

‘There will be if he’s under the protection of the Wilkies.’

‘That’s true. In which case, even if you find out who did this, you might discover that he’s disappeared before you can get to him. However, if I can offer one word of advice Sergeant, don’t bust a gut on this. Nobody will thank you. Now, I’ve got to go. Call me again if you need any more information.’

Freddy put down the phone. He found it difficult to disagree with the Inspector, but neither did he want to be investigating a murder sometime in the future which had occurred because he’d been reluctant to do his job.

The next task was to look at the crime report filled in by the attending officers. It turned out that Malloy had been found behind The Tar at just after nine the previous night. He was unconscious at the time. The call had come in to 999 but the caller had withheld his number and gave only minimal details. An ambulance had been dispatched and the local squad car had also been sent to investigate. By the time they got there, a crowd had gathered. The officers in the car had canvassed them and the people in the bar for witnesses but nobody had come forward with any information. In fact, nobody admitted to knowing who the victim was, which was a bit unusual. The person who’d called 999 was nowhere to be found, which was not remotely unusual. The officers had followed the ambulance to the hospital but had left after an hour when it became clear that Malloy wasn’t going to be in a position to answer questions any time soon.

Freddy decided that it was time to visit the scene of the crime.

The Tar was a Newcastle institution. It stood on the boundary between the old city and the newly gentrified Quayside, occupying a site about half way down the steep valley that led to the river and overlooking the bridges to the west. It had about it an air of shabby chic, carefully cultivated to appeal to both the newly arrived wealthy professionals and the inhabitants of what remained of old Byker.

Freddy parked the car in front of the building and took a few moments to take it in. In his days as a student, it had been a regular haunt and he and his friends had been welcomed by the manager

for the money they brought in, while at the same time being resented by the old regulars who sat in the corners in their cloth caps, carefully nursing their bottles of Newcastle Brown. They were gone now, replaced by a different type of local. Young men with shaven heads, tattoos down their arms and a hard, wary look about them.

He pushed in the door and was met with blank stares from a pair of lads pushing money into a slot machine. He held their gaze and heard one of them mutter, 'Fucking copper.' They turned their attention back to the flashing lights and he looked behind the counter, a space occupied by a middle-aged woman engrossed in reading that day's edition of *The Journal*. She folded the paper and put it on the shelf behind her. Lacking her customers' intuition, or more likely their records, she smiled and asked what she could get him?

Freddy returned the smile and pulled out his warrant card. 'I'm Sergeant Ryan. I'm here to check out the assault that happened here last night. Can I ask, were you on duty?'

The smile left the woman's face and she looked worried. 'No. I was off. I only do days. But the manager, Mr Kirkwood, was here. It's him you need to speak to. He's in the cellar. If you wait here, I'll go and get him.'

She disappeared through a door and within a minute reappeared followed by a large, burly man with a round, ruddy face, a thatch of grey hair and blue veins on his nose which indicated that he might be his own best customer. He stood behind the counter and looked at Freddy without offering his hand.

'What can I do for you, Sergeant?' His voice was studied, offering neither welcome nor hostility.

'I'm here to investigate the assault which took place on this premises last night.'

'There was no assault on these premises last night.'

'Please don't mess with me. A man was seriously assaulted outside this pub yesterday. He was found in the yard behind the premises. I understand that the yard forms part of this business. I have reason to believe that he was drinking here before he was attacked. His name is Patrick Malloy. Do you know him?'

Kirkwood hesitated and out of the corner of his eye, Freddy saw one of the two men playing the machine stiffen. Freddy repeated the question, 'Do you know Patrick Malloy.'

Reluctantly, Kirkwood nodded. 'Yes, I do. He's a regular.'

Freddy knew that the man would be unwilling to answer any further questions in the hearing of an audience so he said, 'Why don't you show me where Mr Malloy was discovered.'

A look of relief quickly passed over Kirkwood's face and he said, 'Follow me then.'

He walked out from behind the counter and went to the door which he opened and beckoned Freddy through. Freddy did as requested and Kirkwood came after him. He led him around the back of the building to an open area which had been set aside for storing empty barrels and crates of bottles. He gestured at the concrete floor. 'He was found there.'

Freddy changed tack. 'Those men in the pub,' he asked, 'Are they friends of Malloy? You seemed reluctant to talk in front of them.'

'I wouldn't say that they were friends of Malloy, but they know him, and they know they know the people that he's connected to. If they knew what I'm saying to you, it would get back to people who don't like the police. That could damage me, and my business. It's best if they don't hear anything.'

Freddy knew the score and that he'd have done the same thing in Kirkwood's situation. 'Tell me what happened last night,' he said.

Kirkwood shrugged. 'It was a quiet night, probably no more than fifteen or twenty people in at most. The weather was crap. Cold with the kind of wet, drenching rain that soaks you to the skin in no time. I give local bands who're just starting off a bit of a start here if I can, and I had one of them on. They started at about half eight. Most of the people in were their friends or family. They were loud and enthusiastic, just not very good.'

'And you saw Malloy?'

'Yes. He came in just before the band started and stood at the end of the bar on his own. Before you ask, I didn't see him talking to anyone. That's not surprising. He has a bad reputation around the place, although he's never been any bother to me. Nobody's likely to engage him in conversation unless he comes in with his mates.'

'Do you know what brought him out here?'

'He's a heavy smoker. I'm guessing that he came out here for a light up.'

'We understand that he got tasered to incapacitate him before he was assaulted. I've seen people at the wrong end of that and they scream like hell. I doubt that Mr Malloy was any different. Did you hear anything?'

Kirkwood laughed without humour. 'With the noise that the young lads were making last night Sergeant, the apocalypse could have been going on out here and I wouldn't have heard.'

'Did nobody miss Malloy when he didn't come back in?'

'He's not the sort of person you miss. Anyway, I was handling things on my own. I was too busy to be concerned about what had happened to someone I didn't like.'

'Did you see anyone leave the pub after Malloy?'

'No, not that I can remember.'

'What was the first you knew that something was wrong?'

'When I heard the sirens coming up the road. Your lot and the ambulance arrived at more or less the same time so I went out to investigate. So did half the pub.'

'Did you see anyone acting suspiciously?' Freddy asked the question for form's sake. He knew what the answer was going to be.

'No. There were a lot of people milling about and I couldn't leave the bar for too long.'

'Do you have any CCTV inside or outside?'

Kirkwood grinned, humour in his eyes this time. 'Does this look like the sort of place where we have cameras? We'd lose half our custom.'

Freddy knew the truth of the comment and also when to leave well enough alone. 'OK Mr Kirkwood. That will do for now. I'll let you get back to your work. I will send someone around later to take a statement. I'd appreciate it if you would cooperate.'

Kirkwood turned his back on Freddy without responding and went back inside the pub.

Freddy took a look around the geography of the area. The road that ran alongside The Tar rose steeply from the quayside to the east over a distance of a couple of hundred yards. It bent at a right angle in front of the pub and levelled off until it reached the main road that linked the City to Byker. The space between the pub and that road was filled by a minor access lane and a modern block of flats. A steep concrete path sloped down to the west to take pedestrians in the direction of the Millennium Bridge.

Freddy strolled over to the flats, looking for cameras but found none. However, further down the access road was what appeared to be a storage shed and he spotted one above the door. There didn't seem to be anyone at home so he made a note of the street name and the company title painted on a board above the front gate. He retraced his steps and walked down the concrete path. There was an arts centre at the bottom but no cameras. He wandered in and enquired as to whether it had been open the previous night, or if anyone had been likely to have been in at about nine? To both questions, he got a negative answer. He decided to let it lie for the moment.

He climbed back up the path to The Tar and walked down the steep road. It was bordered on one side by a high stone embankment wall and on the other side by a steel railing. At the bottom, he came to a T junction, the road running right and left, paralleling the river. Between the road and river was a community centre and a large car park. He crossed over and went in the front door.

The girl at the reception desk smiled brightly and asked if she could help him.

He pulled out his warrant card. 'I hope so,' he replied. 'Is the manager around?'

'Of course. I'll go and fetch her.'

The manager, when she appeared, was a roly-poly lady with long dark hair, bright red lipstick, a welcoming smile and a twinkle in her eye.

'Sergeant,' she said, a deep bass voice rumbling up from somewhere in the vicinity of her toes, 'My name is Margaret Heffernan. How can we help you?'

Freddy felt the change in air pressure and almost stepped back. He steadied himself and explained the events of the previous night. 'Do you,' he asked, 'have CCTV around the building?'

'Of course,' she boomed. 'I'm sure you've noticed already but just to let you know, we have five. One for each side of the building and one for the car park. Why do you ask?'

'I'm investigating an assault that took place outside The Tar last night. I want to check up on who was passing this building or parking in the car park at the time.'

The smile dropped off Heffernan's face. 'Do you have a time?' she asked.

'Yes. Shall we say between eight and ten last night.'

'Not a problem. Come with me. We'll have it on a CD for you in no time.'

Freddy followed her into her office. She sat down at her desk and began to fiddle with a console in front of a bank of TV monitors.

‘Do you want to look through it now,’ she asked, ‘or do you want me to put it on a CD and take that away with you?’

‘The CD option please,’ said Freddy. ‘It will take a while and I don’t want to stop you from your work. Also, I’ll need a permanent record in case this ever goes to trial.’

Heffernan nodded. ‘No problem,’ she said.

She opened a drawer and pulled out a CD which she put into a slot in the hard drive below the desk. As she got to work, she asked, ‘Am I allowed to ask who was assaulted?’

Freddy hesitated before answering but figured that it would be in the local newspapers before the day was out.

‘A man in his late twenties,’ he said. ‘He got quite a hammering. He’s in the RVI at the moment. He’ll live but it’ll take a good while to get over.’

‘Oh dear. That’s a shame. We don’t get things like that happening around here. Do you have any idea who did it?’

‘Not at the moment. But it looks like it wasn’t a casual attack. The evidence indicates that he was targeted. Before I forget to ask, was this place open between eight and ten last night? Would anyone have been here?’

Heffernan shook her head. ‘No. We close at six and the place is cleared pretty soon afterwards. We open again in the morning at nine.’

She reached under the desk again and removed the CD which she handed over. ‘I hope you get whoever did this Sergeant. A lot of effort has gone into rebuilding the community around here. We don’t want this sort of thing dragging it down again.’

An hour later, he was called into Chief Inspector Peel’s office. His boss drummed his fingers on his desk as his protegee sat down and then said. ‘Tell me what the story is then.’

Freddy outlined the results of his morning’s work. ‘To tell the truth, Sir,’ he said, ‘without the possible involvement of the Wilkies, I’m not too sure how hard I’d want to investigate this. Malloy is a nasty piece of work and he was probably long overdue what happened to him. But if we don’t find out who did this, it’s possible that the Wilkies will take it into their own hands. And that could mean big trouble.’

Peel nodded. ‘I agree, Freddy. However, for the time being, don’t worry about the Wilkies. Just investigate as you would any other serious assault. Keep me up to date with developments. I’ll assign a couple of officers to you for the house to house enquiry.’

Freddy looked at Peel curiously. ‘Does this mean that you’re going to...’

‘Never mind what it means, Freddy. Just do your job. Find out who did this and leave the rest to me.’

Freddy knew when not to ask questions. He stood up and left the room.

Before another hour had passed, he and the two officers assigned by Peel were traipsing up and down the streets surrounding The Tap. They got little joy until Freddy knocked on the door of one of the upper floor flats near the pub. The man who responded was probably in his fifties and the word that immediately entered Freddy's head was dapper. He was slim, of medium height and possessed a full head of impeccably cut greying hair. His feet were encased in casual loafers and his dark trousers were tailored flannel. The ensemble was completed by a black turtleneck jumper.

He raised an elegant eyebrow in Freddy's direction as he looked at the warrant card and asked, 'What can I do for you, Sergeant?'

'We're investigating an incident that took place behind The Tar. A man was assaulted and badly hurt. Were you in last night Sir between eight and ten?'

'I was indeed. It was a foul night and I decided that an evening in the company of a Spanish Merlot and a good book was called for.'

Can I ask you if you saw anything?'

The man thought for a moment and then said, 'Come on in.'

Freddy walked through the door, which the man then shut behind him. 'Straight on Sergeant,' he said, 'and through the living room.'

Freddy did as indicated and found himself in a large, elegantly furnished space. The man walked towards a patio window and opened it to give access to a small balcony.

'Take a look out here,' he said.

Freddy stepped out. He was, he knew, facing south across the river, which was only about three or four hundred yards away. The bridges spanning the river were to his right and he found that he was looking out over The Tar, although the yard where Patrick Malloy had been attacked was not visible. Directly beneath him was the access lane and when he looked to his left, he could see the edge of the yard surrounding the storage shed that he'd noticed earlier.

The man joined him and said, 'I spent most of last night with the lights on and the curtains drawn but I stepped out here sometime around nine for a cigarette. I was here for no more than five minutes and in that time, I saw a few people, probably not more than one or two walking down from the main road and into the pub. The only person I saw walking in the opposite direction was a tall, slim, quite upright looking person dressed in trousers and a dark cagoule. It was probably black or navy but I can't be sure. She had the hood pulled over her head.'

Freddy felt a stirring of interest. He looked at the man. 'You're sure it was a woman?' he asked.

'Pretty certain, Sergeant. It was the way that she walked. It was almost a military bearing but very characteristically female. She was carrying a rucksack, which was a bit unusual in itself, but what caught my attention was that she walked up this access lane rather than make her way to the main road.'

'Yes,' said Freddy musingly, 'that was unusual. Where does this lane lead?'

'It will take you up to a few small businesses. Garages and workshops and the like. It's a dead-end for cars but there is pedestrian access to the main road after a few hundred yards.'

‘Would you be able to identify this person if you saw her again?’

The man shook his head. ‘No chance. She was covered up. I didn’t get to see her face.’

‘Would you be happy to make a statement to confirm what you’ve just told me?’

‘Of course. Do you want to do it now?’

‘Not here. I need to be able to make copies. Can you come into the station tomorrow morning at nine?’

‘Certainly. I’ll see you there.’

Freddy took his name, gave him his card and left.

One of the officers had managed to find somebody at the storage shed and obtained a copy of the CCTV footage from the previous night. Back at the station, Freddy first looked through the results of the house to house. As he had expected, apart from the nugget that he had dug up, they’d drawn a blank. He settled down to watch the recordings.

The quality from both sources was decent, for which he was grateful. A lot of CCTV systems were mainly for show and the definition of the images, if they existed at all, was often so poor as to be useless. But these were clear. And both yielded gold dust.

He looked first at the footage from the community centre. He drew a blank with the cameras around the building but the one focused on the car park gave him something. It took in the whole of the car parking area but, on the left-hand side, it also showed the pavement and part of the road. Just before a quarter to nine, a figure came into view and stood stock still, looking upwards in the direction of The Tar. It was tall and slender, and dressed in a dark coat with the hood pulled up. Whoever it was carried a rucksack on its back. He or she remained in the same position for about ten minutes and then moved away purposefully.

Shortly after nine, the camera at the storage facility had recorded the bottom half of same figure walking past, away from The Tar, on the periphery of the image. Neither camera had caught the person’s face.

Freddy leaned back and thought about this for a while before picking up the phone again. Afterwards, he decided to go and see Peel.

The thing is, Sir,’ he said, ‘it now looks like the person who attacked Malloy was a woman. Our witness in the flats thought that the person he saw moved like one and the images on the CCTV certainly support that, at least from what I’ve seen. It looks like she stood on the pavement outside the community centre looking up at The Tar until Malloy came out and then went after him. She then made her escape by walking in front of the pub and down the access lane to the main road.

Peel whistled softly. ‘If you’re right Freddy, that took nerve.’

‘There’s more to it than that Sir. It took premeditation. Whoever did it knew where to find Malloy last night. She also knew his habits, in particular where he drank and that he smoked. On top of that, she knew where the smoking area was behind The Tar and that there was going to be a lot of

loud music in the pub to cover up the sounds of what she was intending to do. This was carefully worked out.'

Peel nodded thoughtfully. 'Which means,' he said, 'that she was probably watching him for some time. She was waiting for the right moment and last night, the stars aligned.'

'I agree,' said Freddy. 'I'm guessing that, if things hadn't worked out last night, she'd have bided her time and waited for another opportunity. I think that this is a very dangerous person. And I'll tell you something else. I'm pretty certain that she was aware of where the cameras were and didn't care. She knew how to make sure that she didn't give herself away.'

'Which means,' said Peel, 'that we're not looking at Joe Public. We're looking at someone who knows how these things work.'

'That's the way it seems, Sir. Of course, we can't be certain but it gives me a definite line of enquiry. The other thing to consider is that this almost certainly looks like a revenge attack. Malloy was carefully targeted. The solution to this then looks like it's going to be in his past. We know that he was involved in the rape of the young woman in Heaton, but he's also a drug dealer and an enforcer. I've spoken to the drugs and organised crime people to check out if he's been implicated in any killings or deaths from overdoses in the recent past. Anything really which might provoke a revenge attack, but I drew a blank. Which leaves Heaton. I want to go and see Inspector Wolfenden in person. She may know something.'

'Go for it, Freddy and, as always, keep me in touch.'

Freddy studied Wolfenden for a few seconds through the glass walls of her office. She was a woman somewhere in her early to mid-forties of medium build with long, strawberry blond hair tied in a ponytail, a few stray strands falling over the side of a strong, square face devoid of make-up. She bent over her desk concentrating on some papers, and projected strength and purpose, a person in command of herself and her surroundings.

He knocked on the open door and she looked up. After a moment's hesitation she beckoned him in. He started to introduce himself. 'Hello Inspector. I'm Freddy Ryan. We spoke....'

She cut him off. 'I know who you are, Sergeant. Why don't you take a seat?'

He was nonplussed and it showed. She smiled, 'Don't be surprised. Everyone knows the famous Sergeant Ryan.'

He sat down on a chair in front of the desk. 'Is it that I am famous,' he asked, 'or notorious?'

'Famous,' she said, 'definitely famous. Anyway, what can I do for you that I wasn't able to do when we spoke this morning?'

'Patrick Malloy,' said Freddy. 'I've been looking into the attack on him. We have the description of a suspect but it's all very vague. It appears to be a tall, thin woman, but that's all we have. However, the evidence that we have indicates that this was a carefully planned, premeditated attack, designed to cause a lot of harm but not to kill. That indicates revenge. Now, I took in what you told me when we spoke about Malloy having lots of enemies, but I can't find anything that he's been involved with that would provoke such a brutal response. There's no dead kid from an overdose of dodgy heroin and he hasn't been involved in a beating that went wrong. The only thing that I haven't looked at in any detail is the rape in Heaton.'

Wolfenden leaned forward, put her elbows on the desk, forearms vertical and rested her chin on top of her clenched fists.

‘Why are you worried about this bastard?’ she asked. ‘It seems to me that he got what he deserved. Why don’t you just leave it? You must have a load of other things on your plate.’

‘I could take that approach,’ said Freddy, ‘but that starts to skirt around the edges of vigilantism. Deciding what’s wrong and right is not up to us.’

Wolfenden leaned back on her chair. She put her elbows on the arms and steeped her fingers under her jaw. ‘Very noble, Sergeant,’ she said. ‘But you’ve been around long enough now to know that that’s not always how it works. We prioritise our cases all the time.’

‘I can’t disagree Inspector. But we have a complicating factor this time. Malloy is a part-time hard lad for the Wilkies. If they decide that he’s their man and they need to get involved, then the person who carried out this attack will be in mortal danger. I need to identify her for her own safety.’

‘What is it that you want me to do?’

‘I want you to contact the family of the girl that was attacked in Heaton and get me in to speak to them.’

‘That could be a tough ask. They’re not exactly fans of the police at the moment.’

‘Are you willing to try?’

Wolfenden considered her options for a few seconds before responding. ‘I’ll call them,’ she said. ‘But I’m not promising anything. I’ll let you know what they say.’

Freddy knew that this was as good as he was going to get. He thanked her, stood up and left. Later as he sat in his car and ran the conversation over in his mind, he considered the most revealing aspect of it; not anything the Inspector had said, but what she hadn’t said.

That evening, just before he packed up for the day, he got a call from Wolfenden. The girl’s mother would meet him the following morning at nine.

The house was one of a long series of three up, two down semis in an anonymous street in Wideopen. The small patch of garden in front was well tended and the windows and doors freshly painted, indicating that whoever lived there had pride in the place. Wolfenden was leaning against her car waiting for him as he pulled up. They conferred before approaching the door.

‘Right,’ she said. ‘The girl’s mother is inside but not the sister. She’s at work but didn’t want to speak to you anyway. The mother’s name is Yvonne Gibson. I have told her what this is about, although I have been straight with her and told her that you are not here to see if the case against Malloy can be reopened. The ground rules are that if she asks you to leave, you leave. And if I think that you’re asking questions you shouldn’t be asking, I’ll tell you to stop. Is that understood?’

Freddy didn’t think that he was in any position to argue but he said yes anyway.

‘OK then. Let’s get this done.’

She walked to the door in front of him and pressed the bell. There was a wait of about five seconds before the door opened to reveal a neatly dressed, trim woman of medium height, her brown hair pinned in a bun behind her head. She had about her an air of anxiety, as though a great many problems were pressing down on her shoulders and Freddy was aware that her fingers twitched slightly, almost grasping at the sides of her skirt.

‘Hello, Miriam,’ she said.

‘Hello, Yvonne,’ said Wolfenden. ‘This is Sergeant Ryan. He’s the officer who’d like to speak to you. I’ve told him that he needs to respect the bounds of this conversation and that you are at liberty to refuse to answer or to ask him to leave at any time.’

The woman’s eyes flickered briefly to Freddy and then back again. ‘That’s fine,’ she said. ‘Please come in.’

She held the door open as the two police officers entered and then said. ‘Please take the first door on the right. It’s the sitting room. Just sit where you want.’

They did as instructed and both sat on a large couch. She followed and perched on the edge of a chair facing them. There was no offer of tea or coffee, which reinforced for Freddy that he was here on sufferance.

‘Miriam tells me that you have some questions for me Sergeant,’ she said.

‘That’s correct, Mrs Gibson,’ said Freddy.

‘Ms’

‘Sorry?’

‘It’s Ms Gibson. I reverted to my maiden name when my husband abandoned us and I divorced him.’

‘My apologies. Let me explain why I’m here. I’m investigating a serious assault that took place near the Quayside the night before last. A man called Patrick Malloy was attacked and severely beaten. My investigations have led me to think that the attack may have taken place as a form of revenge. I am therefore looking at his previous arrests and convictions.’

‘Why?’

‘Can I ask what you mean by that question?’

‘Why are you investigating this attack? Malloy deserved everything he got. I hope that he has been badly hurt in a way that he’ll remember for the rest of his life. My only regret is that, from the way in which you spoke, he is not dead.’

There was a silence in the room after this statement. Freddy let it pass and then continued.

‘I have already spoken to the Inspector about this Ms Gibson. It is not my place to assign guilt or innocence. Every crime must be investigated. However, having said that, I will level with you. Malloy is associated with some very unpleasant people and it is possible that they are also looking for whoever carried out the attack. I am hoping that I can get to that person before they do. Otherwise, the consequences could be very ugly.’

‘That can have nothing to do with me, Sergeant. I don’t know who attacked Malloy. But if I do find out, I’ll give them a medal.’

‘So, you can tell me nothing.’

‘I can tell you lots, Sergeant. I can tell you about the effect that Molloy’s attack has had on our family. I can tell you about how my bright, beautiful daughter with her whole life ahead of her is now too afraid to leave her house and is dependent on anti-depressants. I can give you great detail on that, but I can’t tell you anything about the attack on Malloy. Now, I agreed to speak to you as a favour to Miriam but I think that we’re done here and it’s time for you to leave.’

Freddy took his card out of a pocket in his jacket and put it on the table.

‘If you’d like to speak to me again.....’

She interjected, her voice forceful and unfriendly. ‘I doubt if that will be necessary, Sergeant.’

She remained seated as Freddy and Wolfenden stood up and left. As he walked along the footpath to his car, he looked in through the window. Yvonne Gibson was still sitting exactly where they’d left her, her gaze focused in the distance.’

‘So,’ said Peel, leaning back in his chair, his fingers laced behind his head, ‘we have a local hard man gets beaten up. It appears to be a premeditated revenge attack. His bosses haven’t shown their hand yet but they’re likely to want to get involved in finding out who did it. And if they do, it’s probably the last we’ll see of them. The most likely driver for revenge is the rape of the young woman in Heaton, although her mother denies all knowledge. And it looks like the attack was carried out by a lone woman who was stalking Malloy and knew his movements.

‘That’s a pretty good summary, Sir,’ said Freddy.

‘And we have nothing else to go on?’

‘Not a thing, Sir. I’ll get the officers that you assigned to me to extend the search of the areas around The Tar in the direction in which our suspect was travelling to see if they can pick her up on cameras. But it’s a long shot. She was heading into residential areas that are not exactly bristling with them. It’s likely that she parked somewhere local and left the area. If I am correct, and she knew exactly what she was doing, she won’t have taken a bus. They have CCTV in them, but we’ll check anyway.’

‘So, it looks like we’re about to hit a brick wall.’

‘It looks that way, Sir. Unless someone contacts us with information, which I think is unlikely, or we catch a break with CCTV, we’ve nowhere to go on this. Unless, that is, Malloy himself has something to say.’

‘When are you going to see him?’

‘As soon as I leave here. I got word this morning that he’s awake and able to speak.’

‘OK. Let me know what he says.’

The answer to that was, not very much.

Malloy's mother was sitting on a chair beside the bed, idly flicking through a copy of *Hello* which she put down when she saw him. She stared at him silently as he introduced himself to her son.

'Is it OK if I ask you some questions?' he asked.

There was no response, which Freddy interpreted a yes, so he grabbed a chair and took a seat on the opposite side of the bed to his mother. He took a few seconds to look at Malloy. The man lay still under the blanket, staring at the ceiling, his face pale and exhausted.

'Have you any idea who attacked you?' asked Freddy

There was no response.

'I'd like to know something of your movements over the past few weeks, Mr Malloy. We think that the attack on you was motivated by revenge, and that someone may have been following you for some time. If we know where you've been, we can possibly track down CCTV images and see if we can spot that person.'

This was met by silence. Freddy tried again.

'Do you have any idea why you were attacked?'

Malloy turned his head towards the policeman and spoke with venom. 'I don't talk to coppers. Now, why don't you just get off that chair, turn around and fuck off out of here.'

'That's not very nice,' said Freddy, his voice neutral.

'People like you and me aren't nice to each other. Now why don't you just do as I tell you and leave.'

'So, you're not going to answer any question? Don't you want us to find the person who did this to you?'

Malloy turned his head back to face the ceiling and muttered one word. 'No.'

Freddy shrugged. He'd done what needed to be done to show that he was taking the assault seriously and his back was now covered. He stood up and left the ward. He was half-way down the corridor when he heard someone call his name. He turned to find Patricia Malloy standing in front of him, her face anguished.

'Sergeant,' she said, 'I know that my son's not a nice person. But try not to be too hard on him. He's all I have.'

It was not the first time that Freddy had heard such a plea, but he had seen the sort of damage that people like Malloy left in their wake. He had no sympathy left for this woman. Perhaps if she'd been a better mother, her son would not now be lying in a hospital bed.

'There will be a lot of people, Mrs Malloy,' he said, 'who will be very glad to hear that your son is in this place, and even more who'll be sorry that whoever attacked him didn't finish off the job. I'll do what I have to do but you'll get no sympathy from me.'

He turned away and left her staring at his retreating back.

That evening, Peel got to work. He parked his car outside a betting shop in a street off Shields Road. He went in and looked around, seeing the same sad sacks that inhabited every one of these establishments from Dover to John O'Groats. The girl behind the counter raised her eyes from whatever magazine she was reading and looked at him disinterestedly. He walked over to her and said in a low voice 'Tell Julian Wilkie that Richard Peel is here.'

She perked up and looked at him with something approaching interest. 'There's nobody here by that name,' she said.

He held her gaze and replied, 'Yes there is, little girl, and as we're speaking, he's probably watching us through that camera behind your shoulder. Now, get off your skinny little arse and tell him I'm here and that I'll be waiting for him outside.'

He turned to leave. At the door he turned to look at her. She was still sitting on her chair, her face a mask of irresolution. He waved his fingers towards the door behind her and went outside.

Wilkie kept him waiting, just to make sure that Peel knew who was in charge. He eventually walked out ten minutes later. He hadn't changed a lot since the last time that Peel had seen him. He was tall and well built, with a bodybuilder's physique. He was the oldest of the brothers and Peel supposed that he must be in his early fifties by now, but he could easily have passed for a man ten years younger had it not been for a perfectly bald head. Like his siblings, he had a short, rounded chin and forehead which, combined with broad cheeks, gave his face a square appearance. His eyes were dark and cold and there was little trace of welcome around his mouth. He stood in front of Peel with his arms crossed in front of his chest and his voice, when he spoke, was less than friendly.

'What do you want, Richard?' he asked.

Peel saw little point in beating around the bush. 'One of your lads, Patrick Malloy, got attacked and badly beaten two nights ago behind The Tar.'

'Tell me something I don't know.'

'We don't think that it was unprovoked. We think that it happened for a reason and we're trying to find out what that is.'

'Good for you.'

Peel ignored the sarcasm and continued. 'The thing is, we don't want you and your brothers getting involved. It could make things very unpleasant.'

Wilkie grinned without humour. 'Unpleasant is what we do, Richard. It's what keeps our businesses safe.'

'Not this time, Julian. Keep your dogs off the street. If I find you anywhere near this, I'll come after you. You know the score. Your nightclubs will be raided by the drugs squad. Your pubs will get visits on the dot of closing time. The flats you use as brothels will be shut.'

Wilkie shrugged. 'We can survive that. We've done it before. And you don't have the people to keep it up. There's too much going on in this town. At worst, it'll be an inconvenience.'

He hesitated for a moment and then said, 'I'll give you something though. Malloy is not one of our people any more. We cut him loose after the incident with the girl in Heaton. We helped him

get rid of the problem but he'd gone too far. I have a daughter myself not that different in age from the one he attacked. We won't get involved.'

Peel nodded. 'That will do,' he said and turned to get into his car. He was stopped by Wilkie's voice.

'And Richard, there's one other thing. I don't take kindly to getting threatened. You'd better think very carefully before you do it again.'

Peel didn't reply. He got in the car and drove away.

The following morning, he and Freddy touched base again. He relayed the details of the conversation with Julian Wilkie.

'So,' he said, 'if I was getting the truth, the Wilkies are out of the frame and we don't need to worry about a body turning up somewhere.'

'True,' said Freddy. 'But it leaves us with a situation where we don't have a clue who attacked Malloy, or why she did it. It's a brick wall. Which leaves us with no choice really but to drop it.'

Peel nodded. 'You're correct. Write it up and move on I think.'

Freddy was kept busy over the following weeks but the issue of who had attacked Malloy nagged at him. Eventually, one evening after most of his colleagues had left for home, he found himself looking again at the grainy videos of the person who was presumed to be the assailant.

There was something eating away at the back of his mind and it was only after running and re-running the images several times that he eventually realised what he'd missed. It was in the way that she walked.

He picked up the phone and called a mobile number. It was picked up on the second ring.

'Miriam Wolfenden.'

'Inspector, this is Freddy Ryan. Have you got the time to answer a quick question?'

'I suppose so, although I'm at home and my husband is going to put the dinner on the table in five minutes.'

'I'll try to get out of your hair before then. As you will know, we dropped the investigation into the attack on Patrick Malloy some time ago, but something has been eating away at me and I've finally realised what it is. When you were investigating the rape of Yvonne Gibson's daughter, did you meet many of the wider family?'

'Yes. Quite a few in fact. They pulled together very well and gave her wonderful support. Why do you want to know?'

Freddy told her.

The following day, Inspector Wolfenden drove south on the A1 past Scotch Corner and into Catterick. She parked her car near the centre of the town and made a call to Catterick Garrison, the largest

military base in the country, and asked to speak to Inspector Jeffers of the Ministry of Defence Police. She was put through to a phone which rang three times before it was answered by a youngish sounding man.

‘MDP,’ he said. ‘How can I help you?’

‘I’d like to speak to Inspector Janet Jeffers please.’

‘May I ask what it is about?’

Wolfenden considered for a second and then said. ‘It would be quite a long message. I’ll tell you what. Please tell her that Miriam Wolfenden has figured it out and wants to speak to her. She’ll know what it’s about. Tell her that I will meet her in the Village Café in Catterick in one hour from now. Have you got that?’

‘Yes, Madam.’

She thanked him and hung up. She got out of her car and spent the next fifty minutes strolling around the village before taking his place in the café, ordering a tea and scone and settling down to wait.

Fifteen minutes later an anonymous looking black Astra pulled up outside. The woman who got out was about fifty years old and dressed in civilian clothes. She was tall and slim, with a too-thin face, a ring of tight curls around her head and a pair of sharp, piercing eyes that took in everything in her surroundings. She walked to the door of the café with a straight, military bearing and stepped inside. She saw Wolfenden and strode over to the table.

‘What do you want, Miriam?’ she asked.

‘Why don’t you sit down, Janet. We need to have a chat.’

She pushed out the chair opposite her with her foot. After a moment’s hesitation, Jeffers accepted the offer.

‘What would you like?’ Wolfenden asked

‘A sparkling mineral water will do fine, thank you.’

She went to the counter and returned with the drink. When she sat down again she said, ‘I’m not here to cause you any trouble. I just want to know what happened.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

Wolfenden sighed and looked over Jeffers’ shoulder at the street outside for a moment. When she looked back at the other woman she said, ‘We both know why we’re here. And the reason I know that you know is because if you had nothing to hide, you would not have left the base just on the basis of a phone call from a police officer operating outside her jurisdiction.’

Jeffers smiled frostily. ‘Tell me what it is that you know then, Miriam.’

‘Last year, in Newcastle a young woman called Sheena Mullins was raped by a man called Patrick Malloy. She went to the police but she was scared off going to court by criminal associates of Malloy. As a result, he got away scot-free. Sheena Mullins is your niece, the daughter of your sister, Yvonne. Several weeks ago, Malloy was assaulted by someone behind a pub in the town. The identity

of the assailant is unknown at this time but my colleague who investigated the assault has managed to gather footage of the likely perpetrator from CCTV cameras. These do not allow him to identify the person, but it gives him confidence to conclude that it was a woman. Are you with me so far?’

‘Loud and clear.’

‘The footage the investigating officer has of the likely assailant tells him that she was possibly ex-forces or police.’

‘He can tell that from a CCTV picture? I’m amazed.’

‘He can infer it with reasonable confidence apparently, although I haven’t seen the footage myself. Last night I received a call from the officer. He’s a very bright young man with good instincts and is, according to the gossip at the station, destined for great things. He says that the bearing and stride pattern of the assailant was typical of what would be seen in someone who had learned parade ground drill. Specifically, it indicated that she was, or had been, either army or police. And the confident way in which she held herself indicated that she was someone used to being in command. This was a lot to deduce from so little evidence and he admitted that it might be bullshit, but his instincts told him that he was on to something.’

‘Good luck with proving that in court.’

Wolfenden ignored the comment. ‘The thing is,’ she said, ‘that when we spoke last night, he asked me two very specific questions. The first was, when I was investigating the rape of Yvonne Gibson’s daughter, did I meet many of the wider family? I answered yes to that. The second question he asked was, did any of that family have a police or military background?’

The question hung in the air between them. Jeffers’ face remained impassive but Wolfenden saw her swallow and that gave her the answer she needed.

It was Jeffers who broke the silence, her voice level and steady. ‘What did you tell him?’ she asked.

‘I lied. I told him that I knew of nobody connected with the family who fitted that description.’

‘In other words, you put your career on the line to protect me?’

Wolfenden leaned back in the chair and laced her fingers behind her head. ‘Put like that,’ she said, ‘it sounds very noble and self-sacrificing, but I guess that, when you put it all together, you are correct. But, ignoring that, the problem we now have is this; if Sergeant Ryan decides to continue the investigation, he probably will make the connection eventually and you and I are going to be up shit creek with no paddle in sight.’

‘And do you know if he is likely to keep looking into it?’

‘I have no idea. Assuming he does, and he makes the connection to you, it won’t be too difficult for him to figure things out. You’ll almost certainly have left a trail behind you that he’ll be able to follow. If you travelled to Newcastle by car, somewhere or another you’ll have been caught on some sort of camera or ANPR system. Also, did you remember to turn off your phone? Because if you didn’t, and you had location switched on, he’ll be able to track your movements.’

You know what,’ said Jeffers, ‘I’m going to get a coffee while I think about what you’ve said. Do you want anything?’

Wolfenden shook her head and Jeffers stood up. When she came back, she was carrying a cup which she put on the table, and then ignored.

‘What do you want from me, Miriam?’ she asked.

‘I want to know what happened,’ said Wolfenden.

‘Are you sure? Because, despite what I said earlier, you might still be able to get out of this if the shit hits the fan. But once I start talking, you are compromised.’

‘I’m sure.’

‘OK then, I’ll tell you what happened,’ Jeffers replied, ‘and you can decide yourself what you want to do with the information.’ She drew a breath and started.

‘You are absolutely correct. I followed Malloy over a period of a few weeks, waiting for the right moment. That arrived outside The Tar. The night was wet and cold and when he came out for a cigarette, he went into a small yard area behind the pub. He turned his back to the street to light up and I tasered him. As an officer in the Ministry of Defence Police, I have access to a large store of these and I borrowed one for the night. He went down like a sack of potatoes and then I systematically beat him for over a minute with an extendable baton. He made a lot of noise but there was a racket from inside the pub and nobody came to investigate.’

‘Why did you do it?’

Jeffers laughed without humour, a short barking sound. ‘I would have thought that was obvious. That bastard destroyed the life of my beautiful, lovely niece. I had to make sure that he didn’t get away with it.’

‘So, it was revenge?’

‘Yes, it was. And it was like gazpacho.’

Wolfenden raised an eyebrow.

‘Best enjoyed cold Miriam. I waited and waited for the right moment and I relished what I did. The sixty seconds I spent beating the crap out of Malloy were the best of my life. I did it for my niece and also for all the other women whose lives have been broken by violent, despicable men like him.’

Wolfenden felt something move inside her that felt suspiciously like fear. But her face remained expressionless and her voice level.

‘Do you hate men?’

Jeffers shook her head emphatically. ‘No Inspector, and I’m not one of those people who thinks women good, men bad. I’ve met too many nasty and unpleasant people of my own gender to think that. But I do hate the Malloys of this world, with their arrogance and their stupidity. And just for once, I had a chance to strike back. I took it and I have no regrets.’

‘I should take you back to Newcastle with me and charge you with assault.’

‘Are you going to?’

‘No. I’m not, because I support you in what you did and I admire your courage. I would like to think that I’d have done the same in your position, but I doubt I’d have had the bottle.’

‘So, where do we go from here?’ asked Jeffers.

Wolfenden’s voice was slow and measured. ‘We stand up, walk out of here and pretend that this conversation never took place.

The following morning Miriam Wolfenden was waiting at the station as Freddy Ryan parked his car. She walked across the car park to meet him and they stood facing each other.

‘Hello, Sergeant Ryan.’

‘Hello, Inspector. What can I do for you?’

‘Patrick Malloy.’

‘What about him?’

‘Are you going to continue the investigation into the assault?’

‘I haven’t decided yet. The boss told me to close it, so I was operating off my own bat when I called you.’

‘I want you to drop it.’

Freddy raised an eyebrow. ‘Can I ask why?’

‘I’d prefer you didn’t.’

He considered this for a moment, then said, ‘This is highly irregular. You are asking me to close down an investigation without giving me a reason.’

Wolfenden breathed deeply and when she spoke, her voice was steady. ‘Freddy, you are an excellent police officer but I am now telling you that, if you continue investigating the assault on Patrick Malloy, you will open a huge can of worms and destroy a lot of good people. No good will come of it. I am asking you as a fellow officer to let sleeping dogs lie.’

This was it. Wolfenden had put her career in his hands and both of them knew it. Her heart was beating so fast that she imagined that he must see it trying to break out of her chest, but her face remained impassive. They stood silent and still for what seemed to her like a lifetime but was probably no more than five seconds. Then Freddy spoke.

‘I will do as you ask, but you owe me.’

Then he brushed past her and walked into the station.