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Die With Me
Evil in Return

OUR LADY OF PAIN

ELENA
FORBES

a **MARK TARTAGLIA** Mystery



SPIDERLINE

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For George

PROLOGUE

It was seven in the morning but so dark it might have been midnight. Snowflakes whirled like moths in the orange glow of the street lamps, blurring the skeletal outline of the trees, settling on the thick crust that already covered the ground. The gates to Holland Park had been unlocked only a few minutes before and she stopped just inside, jogging up and down on the spot and stretching her legs as she gazed around, her breath a pale cloud blown away on the air. There was nobody in sight, the only sign of life the keeper's fresh tracks which disappeared from the gate in the direction of his office, its lights a dim blur in the distance. Squinting, she thought she saw his retreating shape but she couldn't be sure.

The park lay before her, open and inviting. On one side, playing fields led away down the hill towards Kensington High Street. On the other, the black tips of the trees that marked the edge of the woods were just visible behind the walls of Holland House. The landscape was almost unrecognisable, outlines softened, features obliterated under a uniform sea of bluish white, strangely luminous under the dark sky. Marveling at the transformation, she started to run slowly down the long, broad avenue, feeling the scrunch of

the deep, powdery snow underfoot. The music from her earphones filled her head, a bass riff pumping, the song spinning round and round. Needles of ice stung her face and the cold penetrated through her trainers and clothing. But she didn't care. Elated, still adrift on the tide of alcohol from the night before, she felt as though she could fly. She was out of control but it had been worth it.

She passed the ornamental gates of Holland House, the jagged ruins just behind, and turned up through the formal gardens, picking her way around the frosted patterns of low hedging which framed the empty flowerbeds. She climbed the steps to the North Lawn and ran towards the woods. The smell of bacon wafted momentarily on the air from the youth hostel just behind and she felt a stab of hunger. Only another ten minutes or so and she would be done; she would reward herself with a full English breakfast in one of the cafés along Holland Park Avenue.

Once in the woods, the track narrowed and the trees arched high above her, forming a tunnel. The few lamps were widely spaced, casting pools of weak light on the path below, which illuminated the trunks of the trees and the bushes immediately around. Beyond, in the thick undergrowth, everything was black. She lengthened her pace and drove herself faster now, down the hill. The freezing air made her lungs ache and her breath came in short, almost painful bursts. She felt tired already, each stride an effort. Almost at the bottom, she tripped and fell hard on the ground. Winded, gasping, laughing at her clumsiness, she

rolled over onto her back and lay there, gazing up at the murky sky, letting the flurry of fat, feather-like flakes melt on her skin. Her earphones had fallen off and she noticed how still everything was, how the snow seemed to deaden any sound. Apart from her own breathing, all she could hear was the distant call of a bird high up in the trees and the muffled drone of cars on the periphery of the park.

After a moment, she pushed herself up into a sitting position and stretched out her calves, flexing her feet backwards and forwards to get rid of any stiffness. She brushed away the thick dusting of snow from her hair and clothes and gathered up her earphones. About to stand up, she noticed that one of her laces had come undone. As she bent forwards to retie it, she heard the sharp crack of a branch close behind. Then someone softly spoke her name.

‘You work for a murder squad?’ Sarah asked, arching her dark eyebrows, as if the idea was extraordinary. ‘What’s it like? I mean...what you have to deal with, what you see...God, it must be awful.’ She gestured vaguely in the air with her hands as the words tumbled breathlessly from her lips.

Mark Tartaglia leaned back heavily in his chair, choosing his words carefully. ‘What can I say? It is awful, but someone has to do it.’

They were sitting together at one end of the refectory table in his sister Nicoletta’s kitchen in Islington. He took a gulp of wine, his eyes focusing fleetingly on the dark wood dresser that ran along one wall. As tall as the ceiling, it dwarfed everything else in the room. It had once belonged to his grandmother, salvaged many years before from his family’s first grocery shop in Edinburgh. Symptomatic of the rest of the house, the shelves were drowning under a sea of china, oddments, children’s pottery and artwork. Family photographs were dotted everywhere, including one of himself taken at Christmas, bleary-eyed, wine glass in one hand, cracker in the other, and wearing a stupid pink paper hat.

At the other end of the room, amid a cloud of steam and a theatrical clattering of pots, pans and crockery,

Nicoletta was busy putting the final touches to the main course. She was wearing a simple navy blue and white wrap-around dress that clung to her body and emphasised her wiry thinness, a little too much, he thought. Her long, straight black hair was coiled up and loosely clipped on top of her head and, as she talked and moved around, nodding and waving her hands in the air, she looked as though she were conducting an orchestra. Her husband John stood at her side taking orders, pale head shiny with perspiration, sleeves rolled up, and an incongruous pink flowery apron protecting his front.

As with most Sundays, they had all been to Mass together that morning, along with their cousins Gianni and Elisa, who were now seated at the other end of the table, attempting to teach Nicoletta and John's children, Carlo and Anna, how to play 'I Spy'. Carlo, aged four, sat on Gianni's lap, Gianni helping him with the words, while Anna, nearly six, sat beside Elisa. Their laughter and high-pitched voices reverberated off the low ceiling, piercing sharply through the thickness in Tartaglia's head. Usually he was delighted to be around them, but he hadn't been sleeping well and had drunk too much the night before in an effort to anaesthetise himself into a state of unconsciousness.

'Do you only investigate murders?' Sarah asked, after a moment.

Struggling to focus, Tartaglia looked back at her. 'Can't hear myself think over that racket. What were you saying?' Sarah coloured. 'I'm sorry. I asked if you only dealt with murders. I really didn't mean to sound

so surprised. It's just that I spend my days with text books and students while you...you...'

'It's OK,' he interrupted, before she went any further. 'I'm used to it. I usually try and keep quiet about what I do for a living, at least when I meet someone for the first time, but you caught me off guard.'

'Sorry again.' She smiled tentatively. 'Is it like on TV? Like *The Bill* or *Frost*?'

'No. It's actually quite different. We're not attached to a police station. We don't even have cells or interview rooms or anyone in uniform. We just work in a normal office and, as you say, murder's all we investigate.'

'I see. So you're like a crack team?'

'We're specialists, if that's what you mean.'

'It sounds incredibly interesting, really it does.'

She still seemed embarrassed, as if she had said something rude. Not wanting to make her feel awkward, he was about to mutter some sort of vague palliative when Nicoletta rushed over to the table, carrying a dish of buttered spinach.

'Mark's a detective inspector,' she said, dropping it down on a mat in front of them. She shook her hands vigorously and blew hard on her fingertips for a second. 'He's been involved in some very interesting cases. You should ask him to tell you about it.'

Sarah gave a wan smile.

'Are you sure I can't help?' Tartaglia asked, half getting up from his chair.

'Thanks, but everything's under control,' Nicoletta said briskly, before wheeling around and returning to the stove.

Usually when he went to lunch with Nicoletta and John, everybody mucked in. That's what family lunches were all about, she always said, and he usually did more than his fair share of the washing up. But this time was different. She had him practically chained to his chair, his cousins deliberately placed out of range, forcing him to give Sarah his full attention. With his fortieth birthday looming in a few years, Nicoletta wasn't content to leave anything to chance, especially not what she viewed as his generally lackadaisical approach to romance.

However, he could hardly blame Sarah, who was hopefully unaware of the setup. Compared to the motley array of Nicoletta's female friends who had been trotted out for him over the years, she was actually quite attractive, with nice, hazel eyes and a shapely figure. If she hadn't been a friend of his sister's, if he had met her somewhere else, he might have made more of an effort. But he didn't feel in the mood and he had no intention of letting Nicoletta pull his strings.

Noticing that Sarah had finished her wine, he reached across and poured the last inch in the bottle into her glass, carefully avoiding the thick, inky dregs at the bottom.

She smiled. 'Thanks. The wine's lovely. Is it Italian?'

Checking the label, he nodded. 'From Sicily. Merlot apparently. I'd better get us some more.'

Grateful for an excuse to stretch his legs, he got up from the table with the empty bottle. He glanced briefly through the misted windows at the snow-covered back garden beyond. It was extraordinary to

have so much snow in February, but then nothing about the weather was a surprise any longer. Even in the warm fug of the kitchen, just looking at it made him shiver. He hated winter, February particularly, the bitterest, blackest month of all, when it seemed that spring would never come again.

He went over to the kitchen area where John was busy straining some vegetables at the sink while Nicoletta transferred a roast from an oven dish to a carving board. Tartaglia leaned over her shoulder and inhaled the pungent aroma of truffle, porcini mushrooms and garlic. The smell was familiar, the recipe as usual one of their mother's.

'Veal?'

'Veal. Go and sit down.' Not even looking at him, she shooed him away impatiently with her hands, a gesture also reminiscent of their mother.

'Here, you'd better take this with you,' John said with a sympathetic smile, exchanging the empty bottle for a new one that was already uncorked. 'What do you think of it?'

'Very nice.'

'It's from a small producer just outside Palermo. Your dad's just started to import it into the UK and he sent us a case for Christmas.'

'Wish he was as generous with me. Thinks I can't tell the difference between plonk and decent stuff.'

'You can't. Now go and sit down,' Nicoletta hissed, elbowing her way past her brother with a stack of clean plates.

Tartaglia retreated back to the far end of the table,

skirting around his nephew and niece, who had started to squabble for some reason.

‘What were we saying?’ he asked, sitting down again next to Sarah, trying to block out the noise.

She watched as he refilled their glasses. ‘Why do you think people are so obsessed with serial killers? It’s all so incredibly gruesome and horrifying, yet the TV and bookshops are full of it.’

Tartaglia nodded thoughtfully. It was a question he had often asked himself. ‘I suppose people like to scare themselves. The serial killer is just the modern-day bogeyman, the real-life stuff of nightmares. The fact that some of them are never caught just adds to the myth. Thank God they’re rare, at least in this country. Most of the murders we investigate are a lot more mundane.’

‘Still, it must be extraordinary. I mean, murder’s hopefully something none of us will ever come across in our lifetime. Don’t you find it odd?’

He shrugged. ‘Odd’ wasn’t the word he would have chosen.

‘I find the stuff in the papers bad enough, particularly when it’s about children. But you’re face to face with it every day. I’m surprised you can sleep at night.’

‘Sometimes I don’t.’

Sarah looked at him inquiringly over the top of her glass and he could see that she was hoping for more of an answer. But what was he supposed to say? Did she really want to hear how some cases preyed on his mind so that he couldn’t sleep, how some images were impossible to eradicate? If he were honest, he had never

become hardened to murder, never managed to make himself entirely immune to the dirtiness and darkness of what he saw, or the personal tragedies and fall-out from every killing. But he had no desire to start analysing it over the lunch table with someone he barely knew.

‘It’s difficult to put into words,’ he said, hoping to change the subject, although he wasn’t sure what else they had to talk about. They had already exhausted the topic of her job as a lecturer, like Nicoletta, in the Modern Languages department at University College London, and nothing else had come up naturally in conversation.

She looked at him quizzically. ‘Well, considering everything, you look pretty normal to me.’

He took a sip of wine. ‘Thanks – if that’s meant as a compliment.’

‘It is. You know, if we were playing “What’s My Line”, I would never have guessed what you do for a living.’

‘I don’t look like a policeman? Now I’m disappointed. It’s the only job I’ve ever had, apart from working in my parents’ shop in the school holidays.’

She shook her head smiling. ‘You definitely aren’t how I imagine a policeman, not a real one anyway. You’re too, well...’ She hesitated, looking a little embarrassed. ‘On TV they’re too good to be true, aren’t they? And they always solve the crime.’

He nodded. ‘Unfortunately, real life’s not like that.’

There was a sharp scream from the other end of the table, followed by the sound of breaking glass. He looked over and saw Carlo and Anna being forcibly held

apart by Gianni, while Elisa rushed to the sink to get a cloth to clear up the mess.

'Anna, Carlo, if you don't behave, you'll go to your rooms,' Nicoletta said, with a cursory glance in their direction as she swept over to the table, bearing large white platters of steaming polenta and sliced veal, topped with a layer of mushrooms. She placed them down carefully so as not to spill the juices and wiped her palms hurriedly on the front of her apron.

'Do tell Sarah about some of your cases,' she added to Mark, tucking a few stray wisps of hair behind her ears before striding away again to the stove. 'Tell her about that bridegroom one,' she shouted from across the room.

He stared at her, amazed that she should mention the case by name, but she looked away, occupied with something else. The case was too recent, too raw a subject, and one which was contributing to his current sleeplessness, although she wasn't to know that. He and his colleague Sam Donovan had nearly lost their lives trying to catch the serial killer known as 'The Bridegroom'. It was the closest he had ever come to dying. The sense of horror at what might have been still affected him, the sequence of events replaying in his mind over and over again in the small hours of the night.

'I expect the last thing Mark wants to do is to talk shop on a Sunday,' John said, arriving at the table with a huge jug of water and a fistful of serving spoons. 'The rugby's on later. Can you stay?'

Tartaglia was about to reply when he felt the vibration of his phone in his pocket. Taking it out, he

saw Detective Chief Inspector Carolyn Steele's name flash on the caller ID and got up hurriedly from the table, almost glad of the interruption.

'Work, I'm afraid,' he said to Sarah with an apologetic shrug, and rushed past Nicoletta, who was on her way back to the table with more food.

'Hey, Marco,' she shouted after him. 'You're not going, are you?'

He ignored her and went outside into the hall, closing the door firmly with his foot before he flipped open the phone.

'Where are you?' Steele asked, her voice quiet and crisp against the background of voices coming from the kitchen behind him.

'At my sister's. In Islington. About to have lunch.'

'Good,' Steele said, as if she hadn't heard the final sentence. 'That's not too far away. I want you over at Holland Park immediately. We have a suspicious death. Sam's there now with the crime scene manager. The rendezvous point's in the main car park, on Abbotsbury Road, in between Kensington High Street and Holland Park Avenue.'

The Ducati slithered to a halt on the icy ground, front wheel nosing deep into a bank of shovelled snow. Tartaglia killed the engine and lights and dismounted, noting, as he removed his helmet, how dark it was even though it was still early afternoon. The whole of Holland Park had been sealed off and the car park had been cleared; the only remaining vehicles belonged to members of the police or forensic services.

He spotted DS Sam Donovan in a far corner. She was talking into her phone, standing beside a small semi-circle of uniformed police from the local station who were gathered around the open back of a van. One of them was distributing plastic cups and a thermos of something hot was making its way down the line. Judging from the colour of what was being poured, it looked like tomato soup.

As he walked towards her, Donovan gave him a small wave and, after a few more words, snapped her phone shut.

'You got here quickly,' she said, picking her way gingerly through the snow towards him.

Her short brown hair stood in spiky tufts in the cold air and her eyes were watering, a smear of mascara under one of them. She was wrapped up in a short, black and white checked coat that looked quite unsuitable for the weather, with a bright orange and red patterned scarf wound around her neck.

'There wasn't much traffic. Everyone's having lunch, I suppose.'

He followed her up a steep, slippery flight of steps into the park, noting that she was wearing a skirt for a change, and quite a short skirt at that, barely longer than her coat, although he couldn't see much of her slim legs as they were encased in a pair of enormous Wellingtons.

'So, what have we got?' he asked at the top, wondering why she was dressed up on a Sunday.

'Victim's female, late twenties or early thirties. She's been stripped naked. No ID as yet and cause of death

unclear. They're searching the area for any clothing or personal belongings but nothing's turned up so far. CID are checking with MISSPER right now.'

'Who's the CSM today?'

'It's Nina Turner. I've just been speaking to her.'

'Good,' he replied. Nina was married to one of the other DIs in the Barnes office where he worked and was generally very thorough. 'Where is she?' He hadn't noticed her in the car park.

'She's gone off to sort out the dog teams but she'll meet you at the crime scene in ten minutes. We'd better get a move on as it's a bit of a hike.'

They passed the Belvedere Restaurant and cut across the back lawn towards the woods. The last time he had been to Holland Park had been in the summer a couple of years back, when he had gone with Nicoletta, John, and a group of friends to the open-air opera. It had been Verdi or Donizetti, something lyrical and Italian. He remembered the strident sound of the park's peacocks shrieking from time to time over the music and how hot it had been, sweating in his jacket and tie under the airless, tented canopy. Looking around now, the place was unrecognisable and he wished he had more time to stop and enjoy the spectacle.

It had been blowing a blizzard for days and the ground and every horizontal surface was covered in a thick white crust, several feet deep in places. Much of it was undisturbed, although a number of human tracks carved through the snow on much the same path as they were taking, with what looked like the tracks of dogs curving off every so often into the distance.

Although it had snowed heavily overnight, the park had been open for business that morning and he wondered how much ground had been disturbed and contaminated before the whole thing was closed off.

‘Christ, it’s cold,’ Donovan said, tucking her chin further down into the folds of her scarf. ‘I hate winter.’

‘Me too. Who found the body?’

‘Some kids, playing hide and seek this morning.’ She spoke breathily, as she struggled to match his pace. ‘I expect they got the fright of their lives, poor things. Dr Browne’s examining the body now.’

‘Arabella? What sort of mood is she in?’

She smiled. ‘It’s Sunday and she’s missed lunch.’

‘She’s not the only one,’ he said with feeling.

She looked over at him inquiringly.

‘I was at Nicoletta’s,’ he added, finding it necessary to explain for some reason. ‘We had barely started.’

She gave him a look of sympathy. ‘Poor you. She’s a fantastic cook, I remember. Was she matchmaking again?’

‘Of course.’

‘And?’

‘Nothing,’ he said emphatically, which brought another smile to her lips. ‘It was one of her friends from work. A woman called Sarah. Perfectly nice...’

‘But not your type?’

‘No. I was actually pleased to get Steele’s call.’

They tramped through the deep snow in silence and entered the woods. He wondered if she was thinking of the time when he had taken her to Nicoletta’s for lunch a few months before to cheer her up after the

Bridegroom case. Perhaps the association was enough to awaken unpleasant memories and he looked over at her, but nothing registered in her expression.

The woodland on either side of the track was dense, with a mixture of rhododendrons, tall hollies, and bare deciduous trees that created a canopy of branches over their heads. Tartaglia thought how incredibly rural and quiet it all was, with not a road or house in sight. Apart from the wooden fencing on either side of the path, they might easily have been somewhere in the country, instead of central London. Numerous fallen trees dotted the area, brought down in the recent storms. Some still lay where they had fallen, others had already been partially cut up into logs. One, which looked as if it must have been well over a hundred feet tall, with a huge, ivy-clad circumference, had smashed through the wooden fencing that ran along one side of the path, its massive, frosted roots exposed to the air, like a giant hand.

The ground was uneven and they hadn't gone more than a few yards when Donovan stumbled and slipped, her foot coming out of one of the boots. He reached out just in time to stop her falling.

'Thanks,' she said, shaking the snow off her red-stockinged foot before putting it back into the Wellington and walking on. 'My feet have turned to ice. I can hardly feel them, let alone get a grip in these boots.'

'They're about the only practical thing about your get-up,' he said, wondering again where she had been.

She laughed. 'I borrowed them from one of the

uniforms. I didn't have time to go home and it was either that or ruin a brand new pair of shoes.'

A gust of wind blew a shower of ice particles into Tartaglia's face from one of the overhead branches and he suddenly felt very cold, in spite of his heavy-duty leathers and boots. He heard the distant whirr of a helicopter somewhere above and he and Donovan glanced up at the sky. Although it had stopped snowing, it looked ominously dark and he remembered that the weather report had promised fresh snow.

'It's amazing how quickly the vultures appear,' she said, as the helicopter noise grew louder.

'Somebody's been hot on their mobile to the news desk, as usual. I hope there's nothing for them to see.'

'All well under cover, according to Nina. Don't worry.'

A minute later he saw the flicker of electric light through the thick branches ahead and heard the murmur of voices. They followed the track around into a wide clearing where several other paths came together, like the spokes of a wheel. A few wooden benches were dotted around as if this were a favourite place to sit, although he couldn't imagine why as it was all so gloomy, with no view except of the trees. Here again the tracks were well trampled in the middle, although the banks of snow at the edges were high and untouched. A couple of uniforms from the local station stood huddled together just in front of the inner cordon, stamping their feet for warmth. Beyond, several blue-suited SOCOs were moving along slowly on their hands and knees in the snow, combing the ground.

'The body's in there,' Donovan said, stopping just in front of the cordon tape which stretched across the path and pointing towards a large, fenced-off area of woodland about twenty feet away. He could just make out the top of the forensic tent behind some thick undergrowth.

'How the hell do I get in?'

'There's a gap just along there to the right. Nina should be here any minute now. If you don't need me, I'll go back to the car park and see how we're progressing with the ID. I'll call you if there's any news.'

Tartaglia signed in with the uniformed gatekeeper and put on protective clothing, gloves and overshoes before ducking under the tape. He walked around the perimeter of fencing, following the boarded walkway put down over the snow by the SOCOs to protect the track, until he came to the gap in the fence. He paused for a moment, gazing into the dense wooded area beyond. Even at this time of day it was dark in there, and nothing much was visible from the public path. Short of jumping over the high fence, the gap seemed to be the only way into the enclosure beyond. The hole had been inexpertly patched with chicken wire, with several broken wooden staves poking up through the mesh like bones. Judging from the tufts of hair caught on some of the points, it was a passage much used by dogs and other animals. He stepped carefully over the low barrier and started to pick his way through the deep snow, struggling to find a sure footing amongst the hidden layers of bracken and fallen branches.

The small forensic tent was tucked away in the mid-

dle of the enclosure behind a thicket of holly. Someone was moving about inside, silhouetted against the bright light of the lamps. As he lifted the flap, he was confronted by the broad rear view of Dr Browne, kneeling over something on the ground, a man with a camera standing beside her.

'I want some final close-ups from this angle,' Browne barked at the photographer, pointing with a gloved hand. 'And the other side too before we turn her over. Then I want some more shots of her hands and feet before I bag them up.'

The photographer moved in closer and started snapping away. As each flash lit up the area, it penetrated Tartaglia's head like a blade, leaving an echo of brilliance dancing in front of his eyes.

'Afternoon, Dr Browne,' he said, blinking several times, trying to focus, although with Browne and the photographer blocking his view there was nothing much to see.

Browne jerked round and peered up at Tartaglia through half-moon spectacles, just visible between the hood of her suit and mask.

'Glad you could finally make it,' she said gruffly.

'Was I that long?'

'When you're stuck out here in the bloody cold, a minute seems an hour.' The photographer was still snapping away and she turned to him. 'Give us a minute will you, John? Inspector Tartaglia wants to feast his eyes on our wood nymph and there's not enough room in here to swing a cat.'

'OK,' John said cheerily, putting his camera down.

‘Give me a shout when you’re ready.’ He stepped out of the tent.

‘You’ve certainly got an interesting one here,’ Browne said, wheezing as she struggled to her feet. ‘Which is some small consolation for spoiling my Sunday lunch. Take a look.’

She shifted aside. Under the dazzling glare of the electric lamp, Tartaglia saw the naked body of a young woman. She was kneeling down in the snow, head bent right over touching the ground, her face almost entirely hidden beneath a tangle of pale blonde hair which spread out stiffly in front of her like waterweed. He followed the delicate outline of her shoulders, the smooth curves of her back, her hips and buttocks, which were glistening and luminous under the light. Her legs and arms were folded beneath her and disappeared into the snow. For a moment he pictured a partially carved statue emerging from a block of marble, so pale that it was difficult to see where the snow ended and flesh began. He felt cold just to look at her.

As he adjusted his eyes to the light, he could just make out faint patches of pinky-red *livor mortis* along her neck, shoulders and back, just visible beneath the sparkling carapace of ice.

‘So she’s been moved,’ he muttered, looking over at Browne. ‘Was this how you found her?’

‘More or less. From what I’ve been able to see, there are some areas of lividity along the back of her legs and arms too, so she was lying flat on her back for several hours after death, although she was moved into the

current position before the lividity became completely fixed.'

'Any idea when she was moved?'

'In these temperatures it's difficult to tell. Judging from the colour of the hypostasis, she's been kept at a low ambient temperature either here or somewhere else. As you know, it's impossible to be precise, but I'd hazard a guess that she was shifted anything between twelve to thirty-six hours after death. And it gets even more curious, as you'll see if you take a closer look.' She raised her thick brows for emphasis.

Intrigued, he moved forwards and knelt down beside the unknown woman, carefully brushing aside some of her hair and examining what he could of her face. Her forehead rested on her hands and her eyes were open and stared vacantly at the ground, eyelashes and brows frosted white. She looked maybe in her late twenties or thirties, although it was always difficult to tell.

'Oh Christ,' he murmured, as he moved aside some more of her hair. Her hands were tightly bound at the wrists with duct tape and clasped as if in prayer.

'Her knees and ankles are also taped together,' Browne said. 'Although you won't be able to see properly until we get her out of here.'

He nodded automatically, still focusing on the woman's hands. Her nails were manicured but unpainted and she wore no rings, or any form of jewellery, although that meant nothing.

'Any idea about cause of death?' he asked, getting to his feet, still looking at the woman. Something about the pose immediately struck him as symbolic,

although he couldn't think what it reminded him of. The image locked in his mind as he wondered who she was, whether she had a husband or family or friends who were missing her.

Browne grunted and folded her arms across her bulk. 'Not obvious yet, other than that she clearly didn't do this to herself.'

'You surprise me. So no visible signs of injury?'

'There's some minor bruising to her face and a few deep scratches around her mouth. From what I can see, it's possible she was sexually assaulted. Once we turn her over, I'll take swabs. But a full exam will have to wait until I get her back to the mortuary. It also makes more sense to fingerprint the tape on her arms and legs back there and I can't examine her properly until I remove it. We'll catch our deaths if we stay here much longer.'

'You'll check the tape for traces of saliva?'

'Of course,' Browne said, emphatically. 'I can't see anyone bothering with a pair of scissors out here. We'll look for tooth marks on the tape as well, just in case.'

'Assuming she's been out in the open all this time, I suppose there's no way of telling if she died here or if she was dumped?'

Brown shook her head. 'The snow under her is about a foot deep, and when we got here, she had another six inches or so on top of her which was fresh and untouched. I'd say most of the more recent stuff's probably accounted for by what fell in the night.'

'So, she's been here at least twenty-four hours?'

'At least. She's also got traces of leaf mould in her

hair. The only place where the ground is exposed is under some of those thick holly bushes outside. Maybe that's where she was lying before. I've sent someone out to take samples.'

'It's not easy getting into the enclosure, even in daylight. And there's nothing in here for anybody to see. Are there any signs that she was dragged or pulled along at all?'

'Apart from what I've already mentioned, the body's unmarked. She either got here under her own steam which, I agree with you, seems unlikely, or she was carried in, dead or alive.'

Tartaglia nodded. 'Which means we're looking for somebody capable of lifting a grown woman of...' He looked down at the body in the snow, trying to gauge her size fully stretched out. 'Medium height, slim build. Probably about eight to eight and a half stone, I'd say.' Browne nodded in agreement. 'Not a simple thing,' Tartaglia continued, 'given the fence and the uneven ground. Any thoughts on time of death?'

Browne frowned. 'You know what I usually say—'

'Yes. I know. When was she last seen? When was the body found?' Like most pathologists he had come across, Browne was notoriously reluctant to estimate times of death. 'Can't we do a bit better than that today, Doctor?'

Browne took a deep, wheezy breath and placed her hands on her ample hips. 'Well, as I'm in a charitable mood...It started snowing on Thursday, so we're definitely looking at some time within the last three days.'

'That's a great help.'

'Don't interrupt. I was going to say that in my view

we're looking at less than that. She's at ambient temperature and rigor's only coming on now, although it's pretty weak because of the cold. Unless she's been kept in a freezer, which the lab will tell us, my guess is that she's been dead for no more than a couple of days. I know you boys like chapter and verse, but that's the best you'll get out of me until the post mortem this evening, and that may well not tell us anything.'

'Thank you,' he said, with an appreciative smile, which Browne returned with a curt nod of her head. 'Call me when you want me for the post mortem. Anything else?'

'Yes. Speaking of verse, you'll be interested in this.' With another wheeze, she bent down and picked up an evidence bag, which was lying on the ground beside her case with a number of other bags and medical implements.

She thrust it at Tartaglia. 'Someone's got a vivid imagination.'

Through the clear plastic he saw a creased sheet of white paper with some printed words centred in the middle of the page:

Cold eyelids that hide like a jewel
Hard eyes that grow soft for an hour;
The heavy white limbs, and the cruel
Red mouth like a venomous flower;
When these are gone by with their glories,
What shall rest of thee then, what remain,
O mystic and sombre Dolores,
Our Lady of Pain?

'It fell out of her mouth when I was examining her,' Browne said. 'Seems an odd place to find a piece of bad poetry, don't you think?'

'Yes. It's certainly very theatrical.'

'CSI has a lot to answer for, if you want my opinion.'

Tartaglia nodded, still looking at the sheet, trying to make sense of the strange images. Was it some sort of a joke or did it actually mean something in terms of the dead woman before him? The ringing of his phone interrupted his train of thought. He found Donovan at the other end.

'We've got a result back from MISSPER,' she said. 'It looks like we have an ID on the victim. Her name's Rachel Tenison. She was an art dealer and she was last seen at work in the West End on Thursday, late afternoon. Her business partner reported her missing on Friday when she failed to turn up for an important meeting at lunchtime. The age and physical description fit perfectly and she lives only a few minutes from the park.'