



Murder in Shades of Fire and Ash (DS Charlie Rees #4)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: A searing summer heatwave. A terrifying fire and a dead police officer.

Not your typical north Wales summer for DS Charlie Rees. Social media is awash with lies about local holiday parks being requisitioned to house refugees. Sleepy Llanfair finds itself on the radar of the far right.

Charlie is called out to a fire at an Asian-run business, and in the shattering aftermath, a body is discovered. To his horror, Charlie's straight-talking colleague Patsy Hargreaves is the number one suspect for the murder.

In the centre of a media storm, Llanfair suffers another devastating fire and another body is discovered. Will Charlie find the evidence he needs before the whole town goes up in flames?

Total Pages (Source): 47

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Saturday morning

The only good thing to be said about the heat was that it was worse further south. North Wales wasn't used to these kinds of temperatures, and certainly not day after day. At first, people in Llanfair were all It's like being abroad, and isn't it lovely to be able to eat outside? along with I shouldn't complain, but ... followed by a long and detailed complaint about not liking it to be too hot. Often the moaners would be the same people who grouched about the cold, the damp, the rain, and the grey skies that were the norm in this part of the world. But then, British people love to talk about the weather, and especially love wishing for it to be different.

Patsy Hargreaves, who had newly finished her probation, and was now Police Constable Hargreaves, was opening and closing windows. Closing them on the south side of the little Llanfair police station; opening them to the north. Detective Constable Eddy Edwards was following her round with a long face, demanding that all the windows be opened, to allow what he called 'a through draught.'

"No such thing in this weather," Patsy told him. "If we open the back windows, all we do is let the hot air in. The only windows we should open are the ones in the shade."

"We need air conditioning," Eddy grumped.

"Eds, this is north Wales. How many days sunshine do we have? Come on, get a grip."

Charlie heard the two of them bickering as he made his way up the stairs to the open plan office with his own little office in the corner. Without PC Mags Protheroe to call them to order, they would carry on all day. But Mags was on holiday in France, which was apparently cooler than here, so keeping the peace was going to be his responsibility. Or he could leave them to it, on the basis that he had spent enough of this morning trying to keep the peace at home and largely failing. The truth was, he'd only come in to work to get away from the arguments at home. Slammed doors and raised voices had not previously been a feature of his relationship with his beloved husband, Tom, but recently ... He sat down heavily in his chair and turned on the fan behind the desk. It did little to reduce the temperature, but at least it helped dry the sweat on his face caused by walking the half mile (in the shade) to work. It wasn't even ten o'clock and the weather forecast predicted that the high temperatures would continue for another week. He tuned his colleagues out and turned the computer on. At the top of a long list of emails was:

To: DS Rees

From: DI Ravensbourne

URGENT

Charlie

National Anti-terrorism Taskforce reports social media traffic saying Llanfair Holiday Park is about to be turned over to illegal migrants (not my words) in the coming weeks. This is apparently going to lead to the eviction of longstanding holiday home owners from their static caravans and holiday lodges. The Taskforce has fact-checked and there is no substance to the rumours, but the amount of traffic is increasing and being shared all around the UK. It's not the only place to be targeted like this — several Welsh coastal holiday parks are also suggested as being earmarked for the housing of refugees and asylum seekers, as well as lots of places in

England. No idea whether common sense will prevail, but given the weather, perhaps not. So just a heads-up.

See: “Illegal migrants to be given luxury accommodation in Welsh beauty spots” (weblink).

I’ve asked for a check on any extreme right wing/anti-immigrant types in the Clwyd Police area. I’ll circulate the results.

You might want to consider whether any businesses or other institutions need to be apprised of the potential threat. Obviously take into account that you don’t want to create unnecessary alarm.

FR

That was typical Freya Ravensbourne, Charlie thought. On the one hand, telling him to do something, and at the same time telling him not to do it.

To: DI Ravensbourne

From: DS Rees

Re: URGENT

Do I need to talk to the people at Llanfair Holiday Park?

Charlie

The answer came back quickly.

To: DS Rees

From: DI Ravensbourne

Re: re: URGENT

I think so, don't you?

Also typical. Of course, the owners might have already been alerted by social media, in which case they were probably going to need reassurance. In the background, Charlie could hear Patsy and Eddy still arguing about which windows to open. He looked up the holiday park and decided to go himself.

There was always the hope that no one would be stupid enough to think that a static caravan park in rural Wales would be requisitioned by the Government at the beginning of the summer holidays to house refugees. But hot weather and too much booze went hand in hand and together produced stupidity. Otherwise rational people would believe all kinds of nonsense if they read it on their favourite website. Add a few drinks and the mob would begin to take shape. Better to take the potential threat seriously, and hope it came to nothing.

Charlie propped his door open, leaving the fan running. In the outer office, Patsy was thrusting her phone at Eddy, saying, "See, even the Government says I'm right ...". Her blonde hair was tied into a bun, and she was wearing the lightest possible version of the police uniform, which was still too much clothing for the weather.

"Guys," Charlie said, "It's going to be too hot whatever you do. So, do me a favour and stop arguing. We may have a problem."

Patsy blushed and shoved her phone in the pocket of her trousers. Eddy just blushed. Or he might have been too hot. Charlie told them what Freya Ravensbourne had said and showed them the link.

“I’m going to the holiday park to talk to the owners. While I’m there, have a think about how this might potentially affect us.”

Patsy’s face showed disbelief. “In Llanfair? Like the Home Office even knows we exist.”

“That’s not the point. What matters is that there are idiots out there who will believe it or at least use it as an excuse to throw a few traffic cones through shop windows.”

“Sad, but true,” Eddy said, and then Patsy nodded slowly.

“On it,” she said. “Lists of who might throw the cones and which shop windows might get broken. Though really, bricks might be more likely to break shop windows. Cones would just bounce off.”

Saturday morning/afternoon

Charlie was glad of the air conditioning in the car, though it was only just starting to get properly cool by the time he arrived at Llanfair Holiday Park. He left it running for a last minute before switching the engine off, even though the visitors' parking area was still shaded by tall trees. A sparkle of blue water, and high-pitched children's voices, indicated the park's swimming pool was busy, and in the reception office Charlie could see an ice cream freezer and a fridge with cold drinks. He forced himself out of the car and across the few yards of too-bright sunshine to the door. Inside, a fan was blowing, and a middle-aged woman wearing a lightweight pink and purple floral frock looked up from behind a high desk.

"Detective Sergeant Charlie Rees," he said, showing his identification. "I'm here to talk to the owners of the park."

"I'm glad you're here," she said, "because Alun Evans is on his way, and one of you had better have a bloody good explanation."

She picked a tablet off the desk and showed it to him. The headline read: "Welsh MP Alun Evans says Immigrant Plan For Llanfair Not Acceptable"

Charlie's heart sank.

The heat continued to build, with hard blue skies and bright sun dividing the area outside the office into light and dark where there was any shade. Charlie spent the

rest of the morning at the holiday park, trying to reassure park owner Jennifer Gladden (she of the pink and purple dress), and Alun Evans MP. After the first ten minutes, he concluded that the MP had the patience of a saint, and that you didn't have to be very smart to run a holiday park.

"In the unlikely event of anyone threatening the park or any of its residents, Clwyd Police will take the necessary action," Charlie said repeatedly, with no idea what the necessary action might be or how three of them could provide it. They were interrupted four or five times, by holidaymakers carrying phones and tablets with variations on the Migrants to get Luxury Accommodation story. Each time the combination of MP, park owner and policeman sent them away, even if they weren't happy. Charlie heard comments about refugees that he could have managed without.

He tried to tell himself that the holiday park residents were being targeted and deliberately frightened, but by the time he left, he felt dirty from the invective and casual bigotry. His head ached, and the tree he had parked beneath no longer provided any shade for his car. The steering wheel was almost too hot to touch. A look at the weather app on his phone showed that it was only going to get hotter.

The MP had agreed to release a statement denying the rumours of holiday park housing for refugees anywhere in the area. Charlie had promised to ask for a similar statement from the police press office. Jennifer Gladden had already replied to dozens of social media posts saying the holiday park would be remaining as a holiday park and that no one would be evicted. The truth was no defence against deliberate misinformation, but what else could they do?

Pub gardens on the road back to Llanfair were jumbles of tables shaded by bright umbrellas, their customers in shorts and sundresses with long drinks. No doubt every beer garden in the town was doing a similar trade. Charlie sighed. Saturday night. People drinking all day. Hot weather. There would be trouble of the shouting, arguing, fighting, refusing-to-go-home variety. It was likely that a few windows

would be broken, and some bottles smashed in the road. Most Saturday nights, a couple of special constables were enough to keep the peace, but in the circumstances, he, Eddy and Patsy, would have to join them. It would be a late night filled with tedious and predictable exchanges with drunks. He would not be sitting in his own garden watching the barbecue. Tom and the girls would have to manage without him, which they would probably be happy about. Charlie sighed again.

The afternoon got hotter. The police station, designed to retain heat in a cold climate, was like a sauna. Patsy and Eddy had produced a contingency plan for potential public disorder caused by the online haters, but they were all too hot and enervated to discuss it for more than five minutes. Charlie sent them both home, so they could rest before the night's work. He considered going for a siesta himself but decided not to until he'd spoken to DI Ravensbourne. He called, and she answered on the first ring.

"Charlie. How's the holiday park situation?"

He told her about meeting the MP, and the interruptions from residents. "Lots of anti-immigrant sentiment, boss, but these are people on holiday with their kids, not far-right extremists. To be honest, I'm more worried about trouble from Saturday night drunks. The pubs have been packed all day. I'll join the patrols tonight and I've asked Eddy to help."

There was a small silence.

"Ah. About that ... the cyber traffic has shifted to the coast, and the powers-that-be want all hands on deck."

"You're pinching my specials." The special constables were volunteer officers, well trained, and called on regularly.

"I'm pinching your specials. Sorry." Ravensbourne didn't sound particularly sorry.

“I’d pinch Eddy and Patsy as well, except for the online rubbish about Llanfair. So, I insisted you kept them.”

Charlie thanked her, though he didn’t feel particularly thankful. Fair play, Ravensbourne probably had gone to bat for Llanfair to keep Patsy and Eddy, even though the little town was far less likely to attract trouble than the coastal resorts.

When the call ended, Charlie dialled again.

“Unwin,” he said. “Talk to me about this holiday park stuff.”

DC Josh Unwin, known as by his surname since school, thanks to there having been four Joshes in his class, was both Patsy’s boyfriend and one of Clwyd police’s computer nerds. He was based at HQ in Wrexham with Will Wayward, who had briefly worked from Llanfair whilst Charlie had been away.

“You only just caught me. I’m taking the afternoon off, starting five minutes ago. Anyway, you should be talking to Will,” Unwin said, “only you can’t right now. He’s done all the modelling, and he’s just explaining it all to the executive. According to him there’s no more than half a dozen home grown nutters, and they will most likely go to Liverpool or Manchester if they feel like a riot. But all the local politicians are behaving as if the barbarians are hammering on the gate with sharpened swords.”

Charlie laughed, probably for the first time that day. “It’s not funny really,” he said. “HQ has pinched my specials, and I’ve got a town full of people who’ve been drinking all day. Closing time is going to be a big pile of no fun. So much no fun that Eddy and I are going to be holding the thin blue line, along with your beloved.”

“Detectives doing public order work? Whatever is the world coming to?”

Unwin laughed, as Charlie growled and ended the call. He still didn’t go home,

choosing instead to nap in the break room. It was neither comfortable nor cool. The row with Tom swirled around the inside of his head, keeping him awake. He thought about how much he had enjoyed Tom's twin daughters coming to visit in the past, and how much he wasn't enjoying them now. They were staying for the whole summer, and it seemed as though the summer would never end. And how even thinking about it made him cross, because what sort of a person doesn't like his partner's kids?

Tom's twin daughters, Amelie and Ziggy, had been to stay before, but never for more than a day or two. They'd generally had fun together, the girls demanding Charlie tell them stories of police work.

"So much better than hearing about some dull meeting at the art college," Amelie (or was it Ziggy?) said.

"Or about Mum's telephone call with her publisher, because, hello, not exciting," said Ziggy (or possibly Amelie).

Charlie never shared any of the potentially upsetting aspects of his job, so Amelie and Ziggy treated him as some kind of real-life Sherlock Holmes, or Poirot, solving mysterious cases with the power of his intellect. The reality of petty crime, repeat offenders battling addiction and abuse, pointless violence, and endless paperwork, did not have the excitement and romance they craved. This visit was different.

Firstly, it was for six weeks, because Orianna, one of the twins' mothers, was teaching a prestigious summer school in London. Secondly, Tom hadn't consulted him about them staying, and thirdly...well, thirdly, Charlie felt like he wasn't needed in the exclusive dad-and-twins bubble. He'd bitten his tongue as Tom had excitedly arranged adventures, and again as he had cooked their favourite meals, refurbished the spare bedroom to their satisfaction, and generally focussed on his children to the exclusion of all else. Nor had Charlie said anything when he found that Tom had

booked his entire years' worth of vacation days to care for the girls in the school holidays, again without consultation. The detritus of two teenagers was engulfing their home in a tide of clothes, hair care products, make-up and charging cables. His own charging cables routinely disappeared, bathroom and washing machine were permanently unavailable and there was never any bread, milk or coffee. Sex had almost dried up. Kisses and cuddles with Tom were interrupted by gagging noises and calls to 'get a room'. If only. Still, he had said nothing. Finding Billy the cat being fed smoked salmon and cream cheese by a giggling Ziggy changed that.

It was the smoked salmon and cream cheese for the sandwich he was planning to take to work. Admittedly, Ziggy had only given a small amount to the cat, but she had left the open packets on the untidy kitchen counter in the hot sun. Judging from the way the smoked salmon was curling at the edges, they had been there for some time.

"Ziggy," Charlie said in exasperation.

She had turned to him, lost the giggles and said, "What?"

"The cat shouldn't have dairy products, and you're feeding him my lunch."

"Oh, sorr-ee ," Ziggy snapped and left the room. Charlie tried not to listen to what she was mumbling under her breath, but it sounded suspiciously like "Dad wouldn't make such a fuss."

"Yes, he would," Charlie called after her, but she slammed the kitchen door without replying.

He contemplated making her come back and tidy up, but decided life was too short, sighed and cleaned the counter so he could make his lunch. He put the crumbs in the bin, only to find it full of burned toast, and once again, there was no bread for sandwiches. Which is when Tom came into the kitchen and asked what Charlie had

done to upset Ziggy.

The resulting row was not pretty. It was the first time they had argued over anything important or lost their tempers with each other. Even though they managed not to say anything unforgivable, Charlie felt as though his world was ending.

“We’re married ,” Charlie said. “We are supposed to be a team. You didn’t ask me before the girls came, and you took all your holidays without talking to me first. No trip away for us. You’ve decided the whole summer and to hell with anything I might want to do.”

“You can come with us when we go out,” Tom said.

“I’m working, and when I get home you’ve already cooked and eaten. You spend all your time being a dad and there’s nothing left for being a husband. Which would be fine if you’d actually asked me about it.”

There was more of the same, until Charlie heard Taylor Swift at ear-splitting volume coming through the ceiling. The argument had festered ever since, with Charlie staying out of the way as much as he could.

Saturday evening

Policing weekend night pub closing time in Llanfair usually involved parking a police car prominently at the junction of the two main roads and ensuring that the uniformed special constables were as visible as possible. The difference tonight was that in the absence of the specials, Charlie and Eddy donned yellow vests with police insignia, and along with Patsy, leaned on the car, parked in its usual place.

At ten o'clock, the sun had gone, but the heat remained, thickening the air. The streets were busy with people strolling from pub to pub, or from the few restaurants back to their homes. Women wore lightweight dresses; men, shorts and T-shirts. A few men were bare-chested, and sweating under his clothes, Charlie understood why. But there was no trouble. Loud voices and raucous laughter, yes. Music spilling out from the pubs. The acrid smell of cigarette smoke and the occasional scent of weed drifting towards the three of them. But no trouble.

Eleven o'clock came and went. The restaurants had all begun to shut up shop, leaving a couple of pubs and takeaways still open. Numbers on the streets had reduced, though the level of noisy inebriation had risen. Charlie and Eddy kept a visible presence along the street, taking regular strolls, greeting passers-by in Welsh and English. Still, there was no trouble.

Until suddenly and without warning, there was.

Charlie and Eddy were strolling along the street opposite the university campus, next

to their favourite bakery, now sadly closed for the day, when they heard the police car siren blare. Panic flared in Charlie's stomach. Patsy was on her own. He ran, and Eddy ran, too, faster, with the same look of panic on his face. As Charlie skidded round the corner, a wave of putrid smoke rolled towards him, he smelled petrol and saw flames spewing out onto the street.

"Patsy!" he shouted, and thankfully, there she was, unharmed but far too close to the flames.

"Get away from there," Eddy said, and caught Patsy's arm to pull her away. She shook him off.

"I'm fine, firefighters are on their way," she said.

"What happened?" Charlie asked, as something inside the burning building crashed, and a new gout of flame spilled through a broken window.

Instead of answering, Patsy waved towards the street. "We need to move these people," she said. Everyone leaving the pubs and restaurants was crowding forwards, phones recording, despite the flames and broken glass. Charlie heard the siren of the fire engine.

"Dammit," he muttered, and, with Eddy beside him, started trying to herd people away from danger, and out of the way of the firefighters.

"Gerroff," said a man leaning round Charlie with his phone camera pointing towards the fire. The fire engine, blue lights flashing and siren wailing, came round the corner.

"For God's sake," Eddy said and hauled the protesting man physically out of the way.

The fire engine stopped, and was immediately surrounded by the very same people Charlie and Eddy had just moved. Charlie saw Patsy with a roll of police tape in one hand, trying to reason with a bunch of amateur filmmakers.

“Tape off the whole fucking street,” Charlie said. “Both ends. If they won’t shift, arrest the buggers.” Because this was madness. The firefighters were having to move people out of the way to get their job done. He felt the beginnings of a headache; whether from despair at the stupidity of humans, or inhaling toxic fumes, he didn’t know.

It took a few minutes, but the combination of evil-smelling smoke and the police, but the area was cleared for the firefighters to start pouring water onto the burning building. Charlie, Eddy and Patsy stood and watched.

“What happened?” Charlie asked, “and wasn’t that Llanfair Fast Food?” He gestured towards the fire.

“It was,” Patsy said, “but I can’t tell you what happened. Just an enormous crash and then the flames. I called the fire brigade and then you two came.”

“In that case, sorry guys, but you’d better go and start asking questions. Someone must have seen something.”

“They’re all drunk,” Eddy said gloomily.

Charlie thought that was probably true, but the questions had to be asked. The throbbing in his head increased.

The fire brigade poured water and foam on the burning building for over an hour, before the Chief Fire Officer told Charlie that the fire was under control. Judging from the absence of flames and smoke, this meant the fire was what Charlie would

have called out.

“We’ll stay and keep an eye on things. Sometimes, they flare up again,” he said. “Then we can have a look around in the morning and see what’s what. How did it start?”

“No idea,” Charlie said, “but I dare say I’ll be spending the next few days finding out.” He rubbed his face, now coated with smoke particles as well as sweat. His hands felt gritty against his skin. Had this been ‘high spirits’ aka drunken idiocy, or something more sinister? Too early to tell. Lack of sleep was beginning to have an effect. Charlie felt weariness in his legs and the headache got worse. He told himself that he’d be fine, and went to join Patsy, Eddy and the crowds around the crime scene tape. It seemed as if half the town had gathered, some of them with bed hair and dressing gowns.

Neighbouring shop owners had been alerted by the town grapevine. The buildings on each side appeared undamaged by fire but would have probably taken in enough smoke and water to necessitate a lot of cleaning and probably a series of irritating and expensive conversations with their insurance companies. One was a small boutique, the other an estate agent. The owner of the estate agency, Huw Jones, made a beeline for Charlie, accompanied by a smartly dressed woman he introduced as Corrine Bailey, his Llanfair branch manager. The downside of small-towns, Charlie thought, everyone knows who you are, even in the middle of the night. Corrine Bailey he didn’t know, and he wondered at her outfit, which was more appropriate for work than a night out.

The burned building had been offered for sale by Jones and Company; their red and white sale board had joined the glass and other debris on the pavement. The empty shop had been a pizzeria and kebab shop, catering mainly to students. The business had moved to new and bigger premises a few weeks before, with special offers and a big fanfare. Charlie’s stomach rumbled with the remembrance of some excellent

pizza. He could do with it now ... he pushed the thought aside ...

“What’s upstairs?” Charlie asked Jones. The building was three storeys high, and there were a lot of flats over shops in the town.

“Storerooms and offices,” Jones told him. “Could have been turned into flats, but who wants to live above a kebab shop? Basically, empty space.”

“Who owns it?” Charlie asked.

“I do,” Jones said. “Or rather, the business owns it. We leased it to the Hassans, and when the lease ended, they moved to the bigger shop round the corner. We own that, too.”

Small towns, Charlie thought, again. But was there any significance to the burned building having been associated with a Muslim family? A Muslim family who now operated from somewhere else? He shook his head in an attempt to clear it. The attempted siesta he’d had earlier was a distant memory, and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten. And he hadn’t spoken to Tom since he’d left for work the day before, but he wasn’t going to think about that. He would sleep in the break room at the police station in case anything else happened in the night. Tom would understand. Charlie sent him a text. He didn’t wait for the answer before heading back to the police station and his bed of nails. He was being unfair to Tom, he knew that, but he didn’t want to risk saying something critical about Tom’s daughters and widening the rift with his husband. Better to keep away.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:53 am

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Sunday morning, early

The shower at the police station didn't do much more than drip, but it got the smell of smoke out of Charlie's hair. Like most coppers, Charlie had a stash of clean clothes at work, and he found some boxers to sleep in. But it was still miserable.

Too hot, too uncomfortable, too sweaty, too much night and not enough rest. When he awoke, to the sound of Patsy shouting into his ear about coffee and breakfast, Charlie thought he must have had some sleep, though he couldn't be certain that it had lasted for longer than five minutes.

"We need to go and look at the remains of the shop," he said after a mouthful of bacon sandwich, and a slurp of coffee.

Patsy nodded. "I came past it on my way here," she said. "I think the fire investigator is there already. Keen or what? Sup up, and let's go and see what he's found."

Now who's keen? Someone who spent the night in a proper bed, that's who.

Broken glass crunched under his feet, as he and Patsy followed the forensic fire investigator into the burned-out shop. It wasn't yet nine o'clock, and the temperature was climbing. It promised to be another scorching day.

"Stairs are at the back, which is a good job, because the fire was at the front. So, we can get upstairs without the ladder. Something isn't right, up there." The fire

investigator was English, Jeff Britton, new to the area. He'd already complained about the length of time it had taken to get from Wrexham to Llanfair because of the hilly and winding roads. Charlie had to poke Patsy in the back to stop her explaining that it was in fact an easy and straightforward route. After a year of Patsy, he was starting to understand what she was likely to say next, and there was no way she was going to let that one pass. At least Britton wasn't complaining about the heat.

Inside, the shop smelled of smoke and damp. Considering the size and intensity of the flames Charlie had seen the night before, there didn't seem to be much actual fire damage. He'd expected to find a jumble of wood turned to charcoal and ash. There was some of that, as well as burnt remains of the vinyl flooring, along with whatever had formed the ceiling of the main shop. Water dripped relentlessly from somewhere out of sight, and the building creaked, making Charlie look around apprehensively.

"It's just cooling down and starting to dry. Nothing's going to fall on our heads," Britton said.

Charlie wasn't a hundred percent convinced, but he had to assume the guy knew what he was talking about. He had led them through the shop proper, into a back room that had been tiled, presumably to make a clean space for food preparation. The white tiles were streaked with soot, and the very walls seemed to be sweating with condensation. The smell of damp was in competition for dominance with the odours left by the fire. A warped and soot-streaked door opened onto the stairs, which were damp, but not obviously fire-damaged.

"Fire door," Britton said. "They work. Smoke yes, a bit, combustion, no."

The stairs were covered in a nasty brown carpet that might once have had some substance, but which was now flattened and greasy, as well as wet. They climbed up to the first floor, where another fire door blocked the stairs from the rooms beyond.

Jeff Britton kept climbing. The fire door on the second floor was closed, too. The smell of smoke and damp was still there, but perhaps not as strong. Or perhaps other smells were stronger. When Britton opened the door, the smell got stronger still, and Britton retched.

“It wasn’t so bad before,” he said.

The room beyond the fire door stretched across the back of the building, with a door opposite the stairs presumably leading into another room at the front. The room in front of them was carpeted in blue, the same blue as they had in the police station. A roll of leftover carpet sat in the middle of the floor, along with a single grey filing cabinet and a waste paper basket. Against the far wall, there was an elderly desk, but no chair. Charlie took it all in, as he put his arm out to stop Britton or Patsy moving into the room and contaminating the crime scene. Because it had to be a crime scene.

The prone figure on the floor next to the filing cabinet was already attracting flies. The figure lay face down, arms crumpled underneath, hair matted with something dark, which had spread in a pool beneath his head. Charlie knew it was a him, by the shorts showing hairy legs, and the dark beard, visible through the blood. Though he couldn’t see the face, Charlie had the impression of someone young. Maybe it was the heavily tattooed arm, maybe the Adidas trainers ... there was something familiar about the figure.

“Wait downstairs,” Charlie said to Britton, “but don’t go away from the building. Like stay by the back door. Don’t talk to anyone. I mean it. I’m going to have a lot of questions, starting with why you didn’t report this the minute you found it.” He pulled his phone from his pocket to begin making the necessary calls: to the pathologist, to Freya Ravensbourne, to Eddy ... but he was pushed aside by Patsy, so hard that he stumbled against the doorframe and dropped the phone.

“Pa ...” Charlie started to say, when the scene in front of him came into a sharper

focus, as Patsy fell onto the floor next to the dead man with a cry of despair.

It was Unwin.

Sunday morning

Patsy was hysterical. Charlie had to drag her physically away from Unwin's body and hold on to her at the top of the stairs as he called Eddy to come right now, this minute. Then, still holding Patsy, who was sobbing into his shoulder, Charlie rang DI Ravensbourne, insisting she sit down before telling her what they had found.

"He's definitely dead?" Ravensbourne asked. Then, "Of course he is. My apologies Charlie, I'm being a fool. It's just the shock. I'm on my way."

It was the same question anyone would ask, even someone as experienced as Ravensbourne. Because who could believe in the violent death of someone they knew and liked? Charlie's head swam, and he wanted to sit down until it cleared. He recognised the signs of shock, and the beginnings of sorrow – for Patsy's loss as much as for Unwin.

Charlie's next call was to Scenes of Crime, and then the pathologist's office, hoping the person on duty would be Hector Powell. It was.

"It's going to get very hot, Dr Powell, and my guess is that he — the deceased — has been here all night," Charlie said. "It's a colleague, Josh Unwin. One of the tech guys from HQ." In other words, Please hurry up .

There was no sign of Eddy, so Charlie put his arm round Patsy, ignoring his own light-headedness, and told her that they needed to go downstairs.

“I want to stay with him,” Patsy said, trying to pull away.

“No. And that’s an order.” The odour of death was going to start as the temperature rose. They were on the top floor of the building, right under the roof. He didn’t want this to be Patsy’s memory of Unwin. He needed information from her, and he needed to get organised. Where the hell was Eddy? “Patsy. Downstairs. This is a crime scene, and we need to get it secured.” She gave in, with obvious reluctance. To be fair, he didn’t want to leave Unwin’s body alone, but he wanted Patsy out of the way more. He set off down the stairs, supporting her, but not giving her any choice about descending.

A pounding on the stairs indicated Eddy’s arrival. He was red-faced and already had sweat marks under his arms.

“Sorry, boss, what’s up? Hey, Pats, what’s the matter?” Eddy’s change of expression indicated that he had caught the faint smell of decomposition. “Oh, shit.”

“It’s Unwin. He’s dead.” Charlie jerked his head upstairs.

“Our Unwin? Patsy’s Unwin?”

Charlie didn’t need to answer. Patsy’s face was enough.

“Oh, shit,” he said again, and held his arms out for Patsy. “Come here, love.”

“Next of kin,” Charlie said. “And get her somewhere private.”

Eddy nodded. “Will do. But, boss, not that it’s important compared to ... Unwin ... you need to know that there’s racist graffiti, down the alley by the Town Hall. That’s where I was. It’s been seen. People have taken pictures. I was putting tape up when you called.”

Great. Just fucking great.

Charlie's phone rang. "Rees," he said automatically assuming the call related to the fire, the dead body or even the graffiti.

"Charlie," Tom said, "what's going on? The girls say there has been a fire in the middle of town. Is everyone OK?"

"I'll ring you back," Charlie said, and ended the call. He felt like a jerk, but he didn't want to talk in front of the others.

The phone rang again, and again, it was Tom.

"Tom, things are seriously hectic. I really can't talk."

"Don't hang up," Tom said. Charlie didn't, though it was a close-run thing. "Just ring me, and make it soon, OK?"

"I will, promise. But soon may not be very soon, sorry." He looked at Patsy and felt the weight of her shock and grief. "I'm fine, love," he said, "just up to my eyes. I'll ring you."

Eddy and Patsy were down to the first-floor landing. Charlie let out a breath and leaned against the wall for a moment. Unwin. What the hell had Unwin been doing in an empty shop? Why was he even in Llanfair when he'd spoken to him at HQ earlier in the day? How could Unwin be dead? There was work to do, and the number of people to do it was shrinking by the minute. Thankfully, when his phone rang yet again, he looked to see who it was rather than snapping "What now?"

It was Alun Evans MP, and he wanted to know about racist graffiti. Apparently, pictures were already on social media, and what were the police going to do about it?

Add it to the fucking list, along with a suspicious death and suspected arson. And yes. I do know it's important, but so is everything else. Deep breath and get on with the job.

“Sir. I need to tell you, in confidence for the moment, that there has been a fire — probably arson — in an empty shop. The shop was previously occupied by a minority-owned business. In addition, we have discovered a deceased person in the shop. We are treating the death as suspicious.”

Charlie heard a sharply indrawn breath from the other end.

“What?” Alun Evans said abruptly.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I can’t tell you any more, and I absolutely must insist you do not share this information. I will ensure we keep you updated.”

“Are these things related?”

Charlie wished he knew. “At this stage, I don’t know. We literally found the body within the last few minutes.”

“Is there anything I can do to help? Obviously, I’ll condemn the graffiti and express my support for the police. For now, I’ll let you get on with your job. If you need anything I can provide, just ring.” He ended the call.

Charlie vowed then and there to vote for Evans at the next election. In the meantime, ... he ran down the stairs. Eddy was waiting with Jeff Britton, and a white-faced Patsy, who was sitting on a pile of old pallets staring at the ground. The priority had to be informing Unwin’s next of kin, but he also needed to know what Britton had discovered about the fire.

“Mr Britton. I’d like you to go with my colleague, and tell him everything you know about how this fire started, and everything you did since you arrived here this morning. OK?”

Britton nodded, and Charlie looked pointedly at Eddy. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of her,” he said.

Eddy put a hand on Britton’s elbow and steered him into the yard at the back of the shop. “The police station is only a couple of minutes’ walk,” he said, “And I’ll brew up.”

“I know where it is,” Britton said. “I’ll see you there in five. Gotta make a couple of calls.”

Charlie sat next to Patsy on the pallets, putting his arm round her shoulders. They were still in the shade of the building, though it was hot enough that the physical contact with another person was unpleasant.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “This is awful.”

Patsy drew in a shuddering breath. “I love him. We were going to move in together, to get onto the property ladder. Become grown-ups. What am I going to do without him? Charlie, what am I going to do?”

“Help me find out what happened. It won’t bring him back, but ...” He paused. “We need to tell his next of kin before someone finds out and posts it all over the socials. Do you know who that is?”

Patsy nodded, and pulled her mobile from her uniform shirt pocket. “His parents live in Pentrebach. It’s the first house you come to in the village if you drive from here. A big bungalow. White. Solar panels on the roof.” She scrolled through her contacts list

and forwarded a number to him. His phone pinged and he read Gerald and Tansy U , with a number.

“Thanks,” Charlie said.

But Patsy hadn’t finished. “There’s someone else who needs to know.” She paused. “Dylan. Unwin’s boyfriend.”

“Unwin’s boyfriend,” Charlie said stupidly, before he pulled himself together. If he was honest, he wasn’t completely surprised. More to the point, Patsy didn’t need to have to deal with Charlie’s reactions when she’d lost her partner.

Charlie looked at the time on his phone. Less than twenty minutes since he called Ravensbourne, and the drive from HQ would take at least another ten minutes. The total available police resource in Llanfair consisted of him and Eddy, and the town was beginning to wake up. No way was Patsy in any fit state to work, even if she wasn’t precluded from being involved in the investigation of her boyfriend’s death. They needed Jeff Britton’s statement, but above all, he needed to tell Unwin’s parents what had happened, and that meant finding some warm bodies to stop any of the looky-loos deciding to have a nosy around the burned shop. Not for the first time, Charlie wished it was possible to clone himself. They were going to have to wait for reinforcements, and just hope the Unwins kept off social media for the next hour.

“Tell me about this Dylan,” he said.

Patsy wiped her eyes with her fingers. “Me and Unwin are ENM — ethically non-monogamous. Both free to see other people as long as we’re open and honest. Unwin is bi, and he’s been seeing Dylan for a few months. He’s a nice guy, Dylan I mean.”

Charlie saw the moment Patsy remembered that Unwin was dead and watched her face crumple and the tears begin to flow again. He tightened his arms around her and

let her cry. Because right now, some things were more important than the demands of his job.

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6

Sunday morning

DI Freya Ravensbourne never drove herself. Today's driver must be moonlighting from his day job in Formula One, because she arrived in Llanfair in record time. Charlie had never been so pleased to see his scruffy, cigarette-scented boss, especially as she was accompanied by three uniformed constables.

"We need to secure this building," he said. "And there's some racist graffiti on an alley wall by the Town Hall. It's taped, but people have already taken pictures."

Ravensbourne nodded and gestured at the three constables. They left immediately, and Charlie sighed with relief. Patsy disengaged herself from Charlie and sat up.

"Sorry, ma'am," she said.

Ravensbourne patted Patsy's shoulder, and it was a gentle pat, not the usual bruising blow. "No, I'm sorry," she said. "Unwin is going to be missed by a lot of people. Now let me talk to Charlie for a minute, and we'll get you home." She grabbed Charlie's arm and pulled him away from Patsy, further into the yard.

"Tell me what's what," she said in a low voice, keeping her eyes on Patsy.

"The fire broke out late last night. Patsy, Eddy and I were keeping a visible presence in case of trouble, but we didn't see the fire until it was well alight. No one we've talked to saw anything either. Then this morning, Patsy and I turned up and found the

fire investigator was already there. He walked us through the building and up to the top floor which is we found Unwin's body. I don't know if the fire guy knew it was there, because he didn't say anything about it until we got there. No need to tell me how weird that is, because I already know. I mean, if he'd been up the stairs before, he would have seen the body, so surely he would have said something." Charlie shrugged, because he simply didn't know what to make of Britton's behaviour. "The only reason I didn't call him out on it was that Patsy saw who the body was. Anyway, Eddy's talking to him now."

Ravensbourne nodded. "You did what you could."

"It looks to me as if someone bashed Unwin on the head," Charlie went on, "but that's not my call. There's lots of blood and it looks dry. I've got Unwin's next of kin details and I want to get to them before the word gets out."

"Good," Ravensbourne said. "Anything else?"

"The shop used to be a takeaway, run by a Muslim family. They moved to a bigger place. There's racist graffiti on a wall by the Town Hall. Eddy's seen it. I haven't. I don't know if any of it's connected." Charlie took a breath. "Oh, and the local MP is offering any help we need."

"That's something I suppose," Ravensbourne said. "But you're right about Unwin's family. Get going and I'll wait for Hector Powell. Not to be crass, but we need the body moving asap in this heat." She paused and her face fell into lines of unhappiness. "Unwin, though. Who would kill Unwin? Go. I'll keep hold of Patsy."

"Just before I do, Patsy said Unwin had another partner, Dylan. Maybe I should talk to him, too?"

Ravensbourne nodded. "You absolutely should. I'll get the address and text you."

“And Eddy is talking to the fire investigator,” Charlie said.

“What is my job, Charlie? How many reminders do you think I need?” Ravensbourne asked.

Charlie took the hint and left, walking back to the police station where he’d left his car. The air was warm and humid, and becoming decidedly soupy; soup flavoured with a hint of burnt ashes. The sky was already a hard blue, and the bright streets were striped with dark shadows. Charlie stuck to the shady side of the street, wishing he could go home for a shower. But he had a spare shirt in his car, and that, with some wet wipes and deodorant, would have to do. It was his very last shirt. Home was calling increasingly loudly.

The Unwin house was exactly as Patsy had described it: a pristine white bungalow, with an array of solar panels on the roof. There was a large brick driveway, but Charlie left his car on the road, where a high hedge provided some shade. Nothing was going to make this easy, so he squared his shoulders, walked up to the front door and rang the bell.

There was some shouting from inside, along the lines of “If that’s the Jehovah’s Witnesses ...” and “I’m going,” before the door opened to a man who could only be Unwin’s father. He had the same features, and when he said “Yes?” it was with the same inflexion in his voice.

Charlie produced his ID. “Mr Gerald Unwin?”

The man nodded “Why?”

“Detective Sergeant Charlie Rees. May I come in?”

Gerald Unwin held the door open, and stepped backwards, though not far enough to

allow Charlie to enter. “Why are you here?”

“Is your wife here, sir?” Charlie asked. “Perhaps you could call her.”

“Oh, hell,” Unwin senior said. “Are the kids alright?” Then he shouted, “Tansy, it’s the police.” This time he did hold the door open and led Charlie to the back of the house, into a large room with a kitchen at one end, dining table in the middle and a curved sofa in well-used blue corduroy at the other end. A tiny, doll-like woman with bright white hair, wearing a thin cotton dressing gown stood by the kitchen island, one hand on a coffee machine. She looked up and opened her mouth as if to speak, but something in her husband’s expression warned her that this wasn’t a social call.

“What?” she said.

“I think you should both sit down,” Charlie said, and he saw that they knew what he was going to say. Neither parent moved.

This was it. “I’m sorry to have to tell you that this morning police in Llanfair discovered the body of your son, Josh. At this point, we don’t know how he died, but we are treating it as suspicious. I’m so sorry for your loss. Un — Josh was a good man and a valued colleague.”

Unwin’s mother, Tansy was shaking her head violently. “No, that can’t be right. Josh is in Wrexham. It must be someone else.”

“I’m afraid there is no doubt, Mrs Unwin. I knew Josh personally, and Patsy Hargreaves was also present.”

At this, all the blood drained from Tansy’s face, and her eyes began to roll back in her head. Gerald started towards her, but Charlie was closer, and caught her before she fell. Gerald stepped close and took his wife, her eyelids fluttering. He carried her

bodily to the sofa and put her down gently, sitting beside her and stroking her hair.

“Let me get you a glass of water,” Charlie said. He could see tumblers in a glass-fronted cabinet.

“Thanks,” Gerald said as Charlie put two glasses of water on the small table by the sofa.

Tansy had recovered, if that was the right word, and was holding tightly to her husband, as the tears streamed. Gerald offered her a glass, and she drank thirstily.

She lifted her face and asked, “Patsy found him?”

Charlie nodded.

“Poor Patsy. They were going to get married, you know,” Tansy said, and the tears came harder than ever.

By contrast, Gerald sat like a statue. Charlie recognised the feeling. Hold the body to contain the emotion, because if the emotions leaked, every bit of control would go, and that was too terrifying to contemplate.

“What’s going on?” said a girl’s voice. “What’s wrong with Mum?”

Charlie hadn’t heard the girl come in. She was a teenager with her mother’s petite figure and pale hair.

“Come and sit down, Lola,” Gerald said, patting the sofa beside him. When she did, he took her hand. “I have some very bad news, love. Josh is dead. The police found his body this morning. They say his death is suspicious. This is ...” He looked helplessly at Charlie.

“Detective Sergeant Charlie Rees,” Charlie supplied.

The girl looked him in the eyes. “You work with Patsy, don’t you? Did she find out about his other women and kill him?”

Sunday morning

Charlie stared at the girl, momentarily disorientated. Then Gerald spoke.

“We don’t know anything yet. We are going to have to be patient. I don’t think accusing Patsy will achieve anything.” His voice was soft, but Lola pulled away.

“Patsy, Patsy, Patsy, always bloody Patsy .” She was crying now, wiping her eyes roughly with her hands. Charlie remembered there was a box of tissues on the kitchen counter, so he got up and brought them over to the table.

“I know this isn’t the right time,” he said, “but it would be really helpful if I could ask a few questions now.”

Gerald nodded. “Anything, as long as it’s quick. I have to speak to my other son, and I don’t want to leave it too long.”

“Can I ask when you last saw Josh? Or heard from him?”

“I know we spoke on the phone a couple of days ago,” Gerald said, “but we haven’t seen him for a couple of weeks. He lives in Wrexham, and I know it isn’t far ...” He stopped, as if realising his son didn’t live anywhere any more.

“I went out with him last Saturday,” Lola said. Her eyes were wet and shiny with tears, and her cheeks were red in her pale face. “I went into Wrexham for some

shopping, and we met for lunch. In a pub. Just us.” She looked directly at Charlie. “Mum thinks he was going to marry Patsy, she’s been planning the wedding for months, but he wasn’t.” Then she stood up and ran from the room.

Gerald rubbed his hand over his head, ruffling his hair, in a gesture Charlie was familiar with from Unwin. “Please forgive Lola,” he said. “She and Patsy didn’t get on. Patsy can be a little direct, as I’m sure you must know, and it rubbed Lola up the wrong way. She idolises Josh ...”

Charlie saw the realisation dawn again, and the iron control begin to slip.

“They were going to get married,” Tansy said. “My first baby was getting married and now he’s not ... what am I going to do? I can’t bear it. Gerald, I can’t bear it. I want to see him. I can see my baby, can’t I?” This last was directed at Charlie.

“There will be a post mortem examination,” he said as gently as he could. “And then, we can arrange it if you want to see him. In a few days.”

“Don’t you need someone to identify ...” Gerald asked.

Charlie shook his head. “Not in this case. Do you have any idea why Josh might have been in Llanfair?”

“No, sorry. Will you tell us what you find out?” Gerald said. “Because ... this is just unbelievable. Josh wasn’t on the streets fighting drug dealers, he was in IT.”

Which was exactly how Charlie felt about it. Unwin had done an undercover job once, and done it well, but he’d spent most of his time in the office, crunching data. He hadn’t been the sort to go off on his own, having secret meetings in empty shops — or not as a police officer anyway. What he’d done in his private life, Charlie didn’t know, but he supposed he was going to find out.

There was a last question he needed to ask, but first: “Mr Unwin, please don’t think we are going to keep you in the dark. I’m leaving my number. If you think of anything, call me. I’ll call you as soon as I know anything.” Deep breath. “Before I go, could you tell me what you were doing yesterday and last night?”

Gerald’s face twisted into an attempted smile. “Just routine?”

“As routine as it gets,” Charlie said. There was no way to pretend that everyone close to Unwin wasn’t going to fall under the spotlight. “And Lola, too, if you know where she was.”

“We were all here, all together. I work from home, Tansy is a school welfare officer, so she’s not been at work because of the summer holidays, and Lola is on holiday — her exams are finished for this year. I didn’t get much done. We sat in the garden all day, in the shade, and wished we had a swimming pool.” His face clouded. “It doesn’t seem important any more. I need to tell Alex.”

It was time for Charlie to go. He asked for, and got the contact details for Unwin’s brother Alex, and promised to ring Gerald later. Then he let himself back out of the house, through air that seemed saturated with the pain of Unwin’s loss.

Now, assuming Ravensbourne had sent him the address, he had to go and spoil someone else’s day. She had. Dylan Gayle lived on the outskirts of Wrexham.

News of the body is out, but no ID

Ravensbourne had texted, along with the address. Then,

How were the parents?

Charlie composed an answer:

Devastated. Sister (Lola) is blaming Patsy. Parents are not. He thought about the last sentence and deleted it. Just because Tansy was — allegedly — planning a wedding, didn't mean Patsy was off the hook. Charlie didn't know much about non-monogamous relationships, but it was curious that whilst Patsy had mentioned Dylan, Lola had talked about other women. Still, he had never known Patsy to be dishonest. And Lola was as devastated as her parents. It would wait. That was, if Ravensbourne wasn't already interrogating Patsy.

Charlie thanked all the gods that his car was still in the shade. He turned the engine and the air-conditioning on as he got the route set up on his phone. Twenty-eight minutes said the sat nav, which had clearly no idea about the local roads, or the difficulty of driving in the blinding sunshine. Most of the fields were yellow where the hay had been cut, contrasting with the deep, deep, green of the trees overhanging the narrow roads. Every few miles, there would be the gift of a panorama: rolling hills and woods, as far as the eye could see, all bathed in the unexpected heat. But he got there in the end, pulling up — no shade this time — in front of a small brick house at the end of a terrace. It was clean and tidy, with a trellised archway over the path, smothered in white flowers. Pots of white pelargoniums stood in front of the door. Charlie rang the bell. The door was opened by possibly the most beautiful man Charlie had ever seen. He was around six feet tall, with broad shoulders and the perfect swimmer's body. He wore nothing but a pair of blue shorts, the same blue as his painted toenails and, when Charlie got a grip on his manners and looked at the man's face, the same blue as his eyes. Big eyes, with long eyelashes, sitting in a gentle face that belonged in a storybook about fairies or elves. He had long pale brown curly hair, and the softest-looking body hair. Charlie wanted to stroke him.

Instead, he said he was looking for Dylan Gayle.

“You've found him, sweetie,” the man said. “And who might you be, coming to my door on this lovely morning? You look a little overdressed, dear. Care to come in and get into something more comfortable?”

Charlie wanted to laugh at the outrageous flirting (and if he was honest, to take up the invitation). He also wanted to cry, because he had come to ruin this man's lovely morning. He sighed and produced his identification.

"Could we go inside, sir?"

"I'm not liking the sound of this," the man said, but he stood aside to let Charlie into the house. It was a single open space, with a spiral staircase against the wall. French doors opened at the back onto a tiny patio with sun loungers and a miniature fountain. A small dining table and chairs stood by the front window. Charlie indicated them.

"Could we sit down?"

Dylan folded himself gracefully into a chair, and Charlie sat opposite him, feeling like a lumbering fool in comparison.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news," he said for the second time that day.

8

Sunday morning

Unlike the senior Unwins, Dylan didn't express disbelief at the news of Josh Unwin's death, just shock and sorrow.

"I was falling in love with him," Dylan told Charlie. "It was only supposed to be friends with benefits, but he was special, you know ... most men don't talk about feelings, but he did. Communication is essential in a polyamorous relationship ... "

Charlie watched Dylan's face as he talked. Explaining about their relationship was a distraction from the awfulness, Charlie thought. But it couldn't last.

"Oh, God, how's Patsy?"

"As you'd expect," Charlie said. "They'd been together a long time."

"I must go and see her," Dylan said, and then he pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of his shorts and let himself cry. Charlie went over to the kitchen end of the room and poured a glass of water which he put on the table in front of Dylan.

When Dylan's crying eased, he looked at the glass.

"I think gin would be better, don't you think?" he asked, but he drank the water anyway.

“I’d like to ask a few questions,” Charlie said.

Dylan nodded. “Go ahead. It’s not like I have anything else to do. I almost want to get called in to work.”

“What do you do?” Charlie asked.

“I’m training to be a paramedic. But when I met Unwin, I was a trolley dolly on a budget airline. He picked me up when I was working, the shameless hussy.”

“That’s quite a career change,” Charlie said.

“It takes some people longer to find their vocation. I was a model for a while, too.”

Charlie had no problem believing it. “You knew about ... that Unwin had another partner?”

“Of course. I told you; it was only supposed to be a fling. Now I’ve found what I want to do as a career, I’m making it my priority. There’s a lot of studying. I don’t have time for a relationship, but the connection was real, you know? Not just a quick fuck. We did other stuff too. Clubs, hikes, theatre trips. All sorts of things. Sometimes with Patsy, sometimes just us.”

“You weren’t jealous?” Because Charlie couldn’t imagine not being jealous. Hell, he was jealous of Tom’s relationship with ... Not going there.

Dylan shook his head. “I don’t like being tied to one person. Nor did Unwin.”

“It has been suggested that Unwin had relationships with women other than Patsy,” Charlie said. He planned to ask Patsy the same thing, though in truth he wondered how Unwin could have found the time.

Dylan shook his head again. “Don’t think so. Maybe a one-night stand, but he loves Patsy and he says he loves me. I mean, he loved us. I think that was enough, don’t you? I think I want to be on my own now, please.”

Charlie saw the tears threatening again.

“One last question. Can you tell me where you were yesterday and last night?”

The storm broke. “I was here. With Unwin. He took the afternoon off to spend it with me.” Dylan sobbed. “I made him leave after dinner, because I wanted to work on my assignments. I should have made him stay. Sorry, but please, just go.”

Charlie stood up. He left his card on the table. He wanted to ask what time Unwin had left the little house, but there would be no point. Dylan had his arms on the table and his face buried in them, sobbing. He hated to leave Dylan, and vowed to check back later, and not just to find out about Unwin’s movements. But it was time he got back to Llanfair.

“Can I call someone to sit with you?” Charlie asked.

Dylan shook his head. “I’m fine,” he said, though it obviously wasn’t true.

Charlie was torn between the need to get back to Llanfair, and the need to take care of someone in distress. Neighbour, he decided. He let himself out of the house and walked round next door, warrant card in hand, but before he could knock, the door opened to reveal a middle-aged woman in shorts, clogs and the kind of smock seen on gardening programmes. For sure, people could look trustworthy and still be villains, but this was someone who would help, he thought, and he was right. She promised to call in on Dylan as soon as she’d done a bit of ‘tidying up’ and took his card ‘just in case’. Charlie breathed a sigh of relief.

The roads on his way back were busy with Sunday drivers but the air-conditioning worked. The journey gave Charlie time to think. How had Unwin sustained relationships with two people, maybe more, when he, Charlie, was struggling with one.

“It’s arson and murder,” Ravensbourne said. She was sitting in one of the few shady spots in Llanfair — on a bench under an oak tree in the art college grounds. All the other shady spots were occupied by people sprawled out on the grass. Charlie was careful not to look for Tom. Ravensbourne smelled of recent cigarette smoking, for which he couldn’t blame her. She probably needed to replace the odour of damp and decomposition with something less upsetting. The mortuary van had left leaving the pathologist, Hector Powell, standing beside the burned building looking thoughtful. Charlie wanted to talk to Hector, but Ravensbourne would have the essentials.

“What did Dr Powell say?” Charlie asked.

“Blunt force trauma to the cranial something or other,” Ravensbourne said. “In other words, someone hit Unwin over the head with a hammer. We know it was a hammer because it was next to his body, covered in blood, poor bastard. Charlie, we have to get the fucker who did this. I know Unwin had some odd habits, but this?”

“Odd habits, boss?”

“This business of multiple girlfriends and boyfriends. I’m sure it’s all with consent ... I dunno, I struggle with it to be honest ... or maybe I’m just curious.”

“His mother said that he and Patsy were planning to get married, and Patsy said they were planning to move in together,” Charlie said. “And Unwin’s boyfriend had nothing but good things to say about him. His sister, though, seemed to have a problem with jealousy. She certainly didn’t like Patsy; all but accused her of the killing. If it was Patsy’s body we’d found, I’d have a closer look at her – except she’s

seventeen and weighs about eight stone wringing wet. And according to Unwin's dad, she worshipped her brother, and her parents give her an alibi for last night."

Ravensbourne leaned back on the bench. It wasn't a comfortable bench, but Charlie couldn't imagine holding the conversation sitting on the grass. He shuffled about, wishing he had a cushion.

"Tell me about the boyfriend," Ravensbourne said.

Charlie described Dylan. "He says that Unwin was with him all afternoon, but I don't know when he left. I couldn't push it. He was telling me to go. Really distressed. I found a neighbour to keep an eye on him. I'll go back later and find out."

"So, what was Unwin doing here? In an empty shop?"

Charlie shrugged. He'd been asking himself the same question. "You asked Patsy?"

Ravensbourne looked at him. Of course she had asked Patsy. She would have found out what time Unwin left Dylan, too. Ravensbourne would have insisted, regardless of Dylan's tears.

"Who's with Patsy now?"

"One of her friends. A funny-looking girl with a T-shirt proclaiming that she's a witch. But she came when Patsy rang, and I left her making herbal tea and providing tissues. In answer to your question, Patsy has no idea what Unwin was doing in Llanfair. She thought he was staying the night with Dylan."

Charlie thought about that for a moment. Finding out why Unwin was in the empty shop must be one of the keys to his murder. "And you said arson?" he asked. "I did think there was a smell of petrol, but I forgot about it, in the light of what else we

found.”

“Petrol and lots of it. One of those plastic containers you can fill up at a petrol station. The fire investigator thinks it was thrown through the window with the lid off, and then something like a burning rag, or a lit cigarette, thrown after it. And apparently, no one saw a thing.” Ravensbourne’s tone was dismissive of the idea that the arson had gone unseen. She fumbled about in her pockets, producing cigarettes and lighter. “Filthy habit. I should quit. I will. As soon as we find out who killed Unwin. OK, working hypothesis. Whoever killed Unwin set the shop on fire with the hope of concealing the body.”

“Or maybe,” Charlie said, “with the opposite aim. Because without the fire, we wouldn’t have found the body. Or we would have, but not so quickly.”

Ravensbourne gave him one of her patented pats on the arm, the kind that left bruises.

“It’s one or the other, or possibly something else altogether. None of which helps us understand what the hell happened last night.”

“What I want to know,” Charlie said, “is when the fire investigator found Unwin’s body. Because he was odd about the whole thing. And the other thing I want to know about is that graffiti. Because that’s odd, too. I spoke to Unwin yesterday. He said the nutters would head to Liverpool or Manchester to cause trouble. So, why were they here?”

Sunday lunchtime

Ravensbourne wanted to see what the crime scene investigators came up with as they trawled through the building looking for possible evidence. Charlie was sent to find Eddy, to see if anything useful had come from his interview with Jeff Britton.

At the police station, Eddy was sitting in the break room, with the door propped open to the gloomy — and hopefully cooler — corridor. He had a bag of doughnuts from the supermarket, and for a miracle, hadn't yet eaten them all. Charlie grabbed the bag and helped himself, even though the heat was making the icing too soft and sticky, coating his fingers and lips as he ate. Which didn't stop him eating another.

“What did he say?” Charlie asked when he'd sucked all the sugar from his fingers and run a glass of tap water to drink. He wanted coffee, but he couldn't bear the thought of adding to the heat in the room.

“Britton? The fire investigator?” Eddy sighed. “He never showed up. I walked back into town in case he'd got lost, despite saying he knew where the station is, but there was no sign of the guy. And we never took a number for him, because he was supposed to be following me here.”

“So did he know there was a body?” Charlie asked, though rhetorically. “He didn't tell me that there was a dead man on the top floor, but if he'd been all the way through the building, he must have seen it.”

Eddy nodded. “Exactly. He must have. Maybe that’s what he didn’t want to tell us. But he’s a fire investigator. It can’t have been the first time he’s seen a body.”

“Well, we’d better find him so we can ask,” Charlie said.

Eddy shrugged. And then the big man started to cry. Just snuffles and fat tears hidden behind his hands, but Eddy was crying. Charlie went to the counter for the roll of kitchen paper. “Thanks,” Eddy mumbled, blowing his nose hard and wiping up the tears. “It’s Patsy. I can’t help thinking about Patsy. She loved that fucker. He didn’t deserve it, but she still loved him, and it’s not bloody right.”

“I think we’re all in shock,” Charlie said. “We all worked with Unwin, and then there’s Patsy, like you say.”

“I wanted him gone,” Eddy said. “Unwin. He wasn’t good enough for her, but not like this. I just wanted him to leave her alone.”

There was real venom in Eddy’s words. Eddy and Patsy bickered constantly, but the affection between them was genuine. If it had been someone Eddy cared about being transported to the morgue, Patsy would have been equally distressed.

“I thought Unwin was OK,” Charlie said.

“That’s because you’re probably the only cop in Clwyd he never tried to get into bed. He probably tried it on with the brass, too. Men and women.”

This was a bit rich coming from Eddy, who had tried it on with Charlie, and more than once.

“I think it’s fair to say that Unwin was sex-positive,” Charlie suggested.

“Fucking sex predator more like. Only it didn’t do him any good in the end, did it? Tried it on with the wrong person.”

“You think Unwin went to the empty shop for a hook-up?”

“That would be a yes,” Eddy said, as if nothing could be more obvious.

It might even have been true. Unwin had been expecting to stay the night with Dylan, only Dylan had had other plans. Except ... when had Unwin made the arrangement and how did he and the supposed hook-up get into the empty building?

Eddy’s eyes were brimming again. He swiped his hand across them and sniffed loudly. Apparently unable to speak, he nodded.

“It’s a theory,” Charlie said. “Though whoever it was went to the meeting armed with a hammer and the intention of killing Unwin. Not a spur-of-the-moment thing because Unwin came on too strong. And why meet there? Unwin has a home. He doesn’t live with Patsy.”

“I don’t fucking know. Maybe the hammer was in the shop. As for premeditation, it could be someone Unwin had harassed in the past.”

“We need to talk to Patsy, and we need Unwin’s phone, and we’d better hope there is some evidence on the hammer or in the building ...” because if Eddy was right, they would be looking for someone who knew Unwin. Only, Charlie was going to need a lot more persuasion that Eddy was right. Both Patsy and Dylan had obviously loved Unwin, and though Charlie had only met Dylan once, he seemed like a sensible guy. He did know Patsy, and she was nobody’s fool. If it counted, and Charlie thought it did, his own impression of Unwin was of someone loyal, and basically trustworthy. Was Unwin a sexual predator? Charlie supposed he would find out.

Charlie's phone chirped. He clicked it off, expecting the message to be from Tom. But then Eddy's phone chirped too and Eddy looked.

"Shit," he said.

Charlie picked up his own phone. The message was from the press officer at police HQ.

British nationalists claim responsibility for fire in Llanfair.

There was a link. It led to a website festooned with Union flags and nazi symbols, and a headline:

Wales Says No to Migrants!

The false story about the holiday park was recycled together with the assertion that loyal British people had taken matters into their own hands, and the claim that Wales knows how to repel unwanted outsiders which made Charlie snort with laughter.

"These guys have a real grasp of Welsh history," he said.

Eddy looked at him with a bemused expression. "There was all that graffiti."

"Let's see how keen they are to claim responsibility when the word gets out about Unwin's murder. Especially when they find out he was a cop," Charlie said.

The back door crashed open, and a moment later the smell of cigarette smoke indicated that Ravensbourne had arrived.

"What the actual fuck is going on in this town, boys? A people carrier full of sweaty nazis has been stopped on the A55 on their way here to protest about refugees

moving in to, I quote, a luxury holiday park. The MP wants to know what's occurring. The Chief Super is spitting nails. The Police and Crime Commissioner has a press conference planned and would like to know what to say."

Charlie wished he knew. But Ravensbourne hadn't finished.

"And the Forensic Fire Investigator has just arrived at the scene. The real Forensic Fire Investigator."

Sunday lunchtime

Charlie saw Eddy's mouth open in shock and had to make an effort to stop his own doing the same.

"Quite," Ravensbourne said. "Stick the kettle on, Eddy. Tea, two sugars, and pass me the doughnuts." She sounded almost human. Possibly because she'd just had a smoke.

Eddy stood up, as if in a daze, and walked over to the kitchen, fumbling to get the kettle under the tap, and then to open the fridge for milk. Ravensbourne tore the bag to extract the final doughnut, which she ate in about three bites. Charlie passed her the roll of kitchen paper before she could wipe her sugary fingers on her trousers. The usual worn-out black polyester trousers, he noted, which must be boiling in this weather. But he couldn't imagine Ravensbourne wearing anything else. She gave him a wry smile, and he wondered if she knew what he was thinking. Probably. His boss might look like a bag lady, but she was as sharp as a scalpel blade.

"Who showed us round the empty shop this morning?" Charlie asked. "He had ID, I saw it, and he seemed to know what he was talking about when it came to how the fire started."

Ravensbourne shrugged. "At this stage, your guess is as good as mine, Could be the arsonist, could be Unwin's killer, could be our graffiti artist. All I know is his name isn't Jeff Britton, it's Ivan Smith. Thanks." She took the cup of tea from Eddy and

blew on it to cool it down. Eddy put a coffee in front of Charlie and another on the floor by his chair.

Just then the outside door banged again, and a familiar figure entered the room.

“I understand you need my help,” PC Mags Jellicoe said. She looked relaxed and tanned in a summer dress. Her hair had lightened in the sun.

“You’re on holiday,” Charlie said.

“We got back from France yesterday. I was only going to be unpacking, doing laundry and mowing the lawn.” She smiled. “I have a perfectly capable husband who can do all that stuff, probably better than me, so here I am. Tell me what’s been going on. Isn’t Patsy here?”

Eddy looked at Charlie. Charlie wished this was a job he could pass upwards, but it wasn’t. He cleared his throat.

“What?” Mags said.

“So, last night there was a fire in the old pizza and kebab place, and this morning when we went to look at the damage, we found a dead body. It was Unwin, Patsy’s boyfriend. It looks like someone attacked him with a hammer.”

The colour drained from Mags’s face. “Our Unwin? Unwin who works at HQ with Will Wayward? Computer nerd Unwin?”

Charlie nodded. “Sorry, but yes. There’s more. The guy who showed us round the building this morning when we found Unwin? He said he was the fire investigator, only he wasn’t, and we don’t know who he was or what he was doing there.”

“Someone sprayed racist stuff all over the alley by the Town Hall,” Eddy added. “We were all there in the town centre, and none of us saw anything.”

“You missed someone setting fire to a shop? ”

“Patsy was right outside, and she didn’t see it,” Eddy said defensively.

Charlie remembered the crash and the shouts as the flames had lit up the main street. But nowhere did he have an image of anyone running away, or carrying a petrol can, or being other than happily drunk on an unexpectedly warm evening.

“You need me even more than I thought,” Mags said.

Charlie was torn between relief that the team was now more than him, Eddy, and the temporary constables, and concern for Mags, who was entitled to time off.

Ravensbourne had no such inhibitions.

“Good. We’d probably have called you in anyway. Now, let’s try and get this into some kind of order. This place is hopeless as an incident room, but it’s what we’ve got. There’s no point in running the enquiry from HQ. Charlie, get your whiteboard.”

Charlie set the battered whiteboard up on its ‘stand’ of two decrepit chairs, and found the marker pens in one of the kitchen drawers. Then he stood and waited, but this was Freya Ravensbourne. She waved her hand in a get on with it gesture.

“Three probable crimes,” Charlie said. “Arson, criminal damage, probably also a hate crime, and a suspicious death. I’d say murder, but we should wait on the post-mortem to be sure. First question. Are they connected?”

“They must be,” Eddy said. “This is a small town. If you don’t actually live here,

you've probably never heard of it. Three separate sets of criminals doesn't make any sense ...” He trailed off, presumably remembering that he had been the one insisting that Unwin's murder was about sex rather than immigration. “Well,” he rowed back, “Unwin and the fire. They must be connected.”

“The fire was in a shop run by Muslims,” Mags said, “and the graffiti was racist, and so is all this talk about saving Wales from immigrants. Maybe Unwin was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and it got him killed.”

“Except the fire was downstairs at the front of the shop, and Unwin's body was found upstairs, at the back,” Charlie said. “And we know the shop was run by Muslims, but no one from out of town would know. There's no signage left. I think the fire was set so we would find Unwin's body.”

“It's four crimes,” Ravensbourne said. “Or possibly. Patsy would know and would quote the statutes. This man who pretended to be a fire officer. It's certainly obstruction.”

Charlie divided the board into four columns, headed Arson, Graffiti, Murder? and Fire Officer. There was precious little to go under any of the headings, and only wild speculation to connect the four. He sat down, feeling damp sweat bloom everywhere his skin touched another surface.

“Unwin could have been meeting Jeff Britton, or whatever his name really is, for sex, and he could be the killer ...” was Eddie's offer, though it failed to account for the graffiti ... or, as Charlie pointed out, to account for meeting in an abandoned, and presumably locked, building.

“Only an idiot would come back the next morning to show the cops where the body was,” Mags said. “Unless he was worried that he'd left fingerprints and wanted an excuse for them to be there.”

“But he seemed genuine,” Charlie said. “He knew his stuff about the fire, and he didn’t disappear after we found Unwin.”

“Arsonists do that,” Eddy said. “They like everything to do with fires ... know all about them ...”

Round and round they went, their theories getting more outrageous with each turn, until Ravensbourne waved her hand.

“Enough.” She looked at Charlie, who stood up again beside the whiteboard. “Populate it with actual evidence,” she said.

Charlie added the few things they actually knew: the ownership of the building, the time of the fire, the time Unwin’s body was discovered by the police, all the identifying details they had for Jeff Britton, pictures of the shop, pictures of Unwin’s body, pictures of the graffiti, references to the various social media comments about immigrants coming to Llanfair.

“Suspects? Put their names up. All of them.” Ravensbourne asked, and with a sickening lurch in his belly, Charlie knew exactly the name she wanted him to write on the board. He shook his head as he spoke.

“No, boss. I don’t believe it. No. You’re wrong.”

“She was the nearest thing he had to a spouse; he would have gone to meet her without question; and she was close to the source of the fire when it started. You, yourself, said that Unwin’s sister accused her of killing him because of her jealousy over ‘his other women’. I know she’s a police officer, and a friend, but Patsy Hargreaves has to be considered as a suspect in her boyfriend’s murder.”

Sunday lunchtime

For the second time in an hour, the break room was silent with shock. Eddy spoke first.

“With the best will in the world, ma’am, we know Patsy. She’s not a killer.”

“I didn’t say she was, Eddy, and please don’t ma’am me. I said she had to be considered as a suspect for the reasons I outlined. I will make arrangements for a formal interview with someone who doesn’t work with her.”

“But,” Eddy said, “we were with her.”

“For every single moment?” Ravensbourne asked, almost certainly knowing that the answer had to be no .

“For most of the evening,” Charlie said. “And Dylan said Unwin left after dinner. If we nail those times down, I’m sure Patsy will be in the clear.”

Ravensbourne gave him one of her signature pats on the arm. Charlie felt the reverberations throughout his body. “I’m sure you’re right,” she said. “It would be useful to know what time Unwin died, to make a proper timeline. Hector is doing the autopsy later this afternoon and I suggest you go and observe. Eddy and Mags can start trying to find the elusive Jeff Britton.”

Charlie treated the ‘suggestion’ that he might observe the post mortem of the man who had been his colleague as the instruction it certainly was.

Ravensbourne stood up, feeling in her pockets for cigarettes and lighter.

“Walk me out, Charlie,” she said.

Once in the tiny car park, happily shaded by an out-of-control sycamore tree, Ravensbourne lit up and inhaled deeply, blowing the smoke out with a great sigh.

“You look like shit,” she said. “I need you at the top of your game. You’re not stupid. Patsy could have killed him. Anyone can kill anyone in the heat of the moment, and fuck only knows there are a lot of heated moments this week.” She gave a twisted half smile at her pun. “Have you ever been jealous, Charlie? It’s the worst feeling in the world, and people kill over it. You’ve been a copper long enough to know that.”

Charlie began to protest, but she gripped his arm, thankfully with the cigarette-less hand. “I’m not saying she did it, I’m saying she could have done, and if you start by ruling her out completely, you won’t do a proper job. Evidence not instinct on this one. Either clear her or convict her; anything else and her life will be hell anyway. Rumours, and talk of no smoke without fire. ”

Was that fair? He didn’t know. Ravensbourne had backed his instincts in the past. She knew Patsy, if not as well as he did. Jealousy was corrosive, and love could kill, and having killed, drown in despair and grief at what it had done.

“Boss,” he started.

She turned towards him, but he shook his head. “It’s nothing.” Because that was a thought he wasn’t going to share. Or not until he’d had time to turn it over and look at it from every angle.

“Right, go home, have a shower and a nap, and get over to the post mortem. Hector said he’d do it at five, so make sure you get there in plenty of time.”

“Patsy is grieving, boss. She’s not putting on an act, I’m certain of it. I’ll do what you say and keep an open mind, but I don’t want her ...” what he wanted to say was bullied or harassed because he knew there were plenty of detectives who would love to take a shot at a young, attractive, newly-minted constable with a non-standard love life. His meaning must have shown on his face.

“Calm down, Sir Galahad. The Chief Super owes me a favour. He can talk to her, and he can meet at her house in Llanfair. Will that do?”

Charlie slumped against the police station wall, feeling the heat stored in the bricks. Chief Superintendent Mal Kent would treat Patsy with courtesy and respect, even as he turned her inside out searching for inconsistencies in her story. Patsy might not be the easiest of colleagues, but she was part of his team, and she was vulnerable and hurting. Charlie wanted to keep her safe.

“Thank you,” he said.

Ravensbourne lit another cigarette from the stub of the first one. “I really am packing the ciggies in when this case is done,” she said. “Now, go home, and let me get on.” What she was going to get on with, she didn’t say.

Charlie made his way out of the shady car park into the street. Heat radiated from the pavement and the buildings alongside, sapping what was left of his energy. His legs felt as if they had been encased in stone, barely able to bend and move. The walk home was short and flat, and for the most part, shaded, but the heat had become palpable, a pressure pushing Charlie towards the ground, making his feet drag and his hands swell. Only the thought of a cold drink, straight from the fridge, a shower and even a ten-minute nap, kept him going.

Please let them all have gone to the beach. I can't deal with any more aggravation.

He was out of luck. As Charlie stumbled up the path, Tom opened the front door. But there was no sound of teenager music rattling the window frames, nor any girlish chatter floating down the stairs. A small mercy, but a mercy nonetheless.

Tom held out his arms and Charlie all but fell into them, then pulled away.

"I stink and I'm filthy," he said.

"So?" Tom asked, and pulled him into the house, kicking the door shut behind them. "Drink, dinner, shower? You can stay the night if you like." But he was smiling, so there was that.

"I've got to go out again," Charlie said.

"Not without some proper food," Tom replied.

"Yes, without food. I'm going to an autopsy. But I'd kill for a cold drink and a shower." He felt himself sagging internally. Tom would look after him. Tom always looked after him. Except when he was too busy looking after his daughters. Yes, Charlie knew all about jealousy, and about the guilt that came with it. How had his relationship with Tom, celebrated only a few months ago in front of all their friends and family, changed into this? He was angry. Angry at the heat, at a stupid murder, at Tom, at himself for not being able to act like an adult. Then his phone rang, and he got angrier.

"HQ say that another bunch of anti-immigrant protestors are on their way to Llanfair," Ravensbourne said.

"Then HQ had better send some bodies to deal with them," Charlie snapped. "Ring

Alun Evans MP. He might actually be able to do something about it. Because I sure as hell can't."

There was an ominous silence, followed by the sound of Ravensbourne clearing her throat. "Sorry, Charlie, what was that?"

"I meant to say that I'll watch out for the protestors, boss," Charlie said.

"That's what I thought," Ravensbourne said and ended the call.

Great. Now I've lost Ravensbourne's support. Anything else I can mess up today?

Sunday afternoon

Charlie was still angry when he arrived in Hector Powell's autopsy suite after another Sunday driver-ridden journey. He always thought of it as belonging to Hector, though there were other pathologists, including, bizarrely, Powell's wife Sasha, doing a placement from her university course. "We bonded over corpses," she had told him airily. Today, he was even angry — jealous — of the easy way Sasha and Hector managed Unwin's body between them, laying it out on the stainless steel table, ready for examination. He didn't want to see Unwin naked and helpless, unmoving, his flesh mottled and cold, unable to stop the coming dissection. He had been talking to Unwin the day before, and here he was, a case. Somehow, it was worse that this invasion of Unwin's body was to be carried out by two people whose love was still strong and obvious. That was how he and Tom had been, and it was how Unwin and Patsy had been. There was no way back from this for Patsy and it made Charlie want to scream.

"I don't want to see this." The words burst out from Charlie without conscious decision on his part, looking down at the tiled floor, concentrating on the marks left when it had been last mopped. From the corner of his eye, Charlie saw the sweep of something white, and then Hector was beside him, a gentle hand on his arm.

"You don't have to," Hector said. "There are things you will need to know, but you don't have to watch if it's too much. There's a chair over by the wall, or you can wait in my office."

Charlie looked up to see that Unwin's body was now covered by a sheet. He breathed out. Unwin was still dead, but not being able to see bare skin, hair, feet, and fingers made it more bearable.

"Could you stay while I look at the head injuries?" Hector asked, and Charlie nodded.

Hector moved back to the body and uncovered only Unwin's head and neck. Thick hair covered his head, making the damage hard to see, but Charlie remembered the pool of dried blood on the carpet of the upstairs room.

"Here ... and here," Hector was saying, parting the hair with probing fingers as Sasha took notes. Then, "Let's turn him over."

Charlie looked away as Hector and Sasha removed the sheet, turned the body and replaced the sheet. Hector returned to his probing and measuring, murmuring to Sasha, and occasionally asking her to help. After some minutes, Hector stood back, and Sasha replaced the sheet.

"I want to see inside the skull, to be one hundred percent certain," Hector said, "but for now, I can confidently say that your colleague died from these wounds, probably from the very first blow. I'm also convinced that the hammer found with the body was the implement that delivered those wounds."

There was some comfort in the thought that Unwin had died from the first blow. Not much, but some.

"The other thing I can be confident about is that the first blow was delivered by someone standing behind and to the right-hand side of the victim, and from the angle, I would say that the attacker was smaller than him. The other blows indicate that the victim was on the ground when they were struck."

Charlie felt sick. An image of someone striking the fallen Unwin repeatedly came into his head and refused to leave.

“How much smaller?” he croaked.

“Hard to say,” Hector replied. “I’ll measure the angle more accurately later, but the blow was not from above, but rather from below and to the side.” He mimed blows to Sasha’s head by way of illustration.

“It could be someone not used to using a hammer as a weapon,” Sasha chimed in, and then said, “Sorry. I’ll shut up.”

“It’s a reasonable observation,” Hector said. “Though we usually leave that kind of speculation to the police.”

“OK, here’s another one,” Sasha said, apparently forgetting that she had promised to be quiet. “When I was at school, we had self-defence classes from this policewoman. She showed us how to do that thing where you poke your keys between your fingers, told us to go for the eyes and the balls and not to carry a knife. She said most people have no idea how to use a knife, but that almost everyone knows how to use a hammer.”

The words hung in the empty air around Charlie. He could hear the background hum of the refrigerated cabinets, the sound of birds outside the high windows, people shouting in the street and the squeak of Sasha’s trainers on the tiled floor. The stink of formaldehyde, or whatever other chemicals were in use, filled his nose and mouth. His throat seemed constricted again, so he cleared it.

“Can you get us any closer to the time of death?” he asked. At the scene, Hector hadn’t wanted to be drawn about when Unwin died, though he had taken the usual measurements of body and ambient temperature. “Sometime last night, or possibly

earlier,” had been as far as he was prepared to go.

“That depends,” Hector said. “Do you know when he last ate? And what he ate?”

“I can find out, if I can get hold of the guy he was with in the afternoon,” Charlie said. He knew about the role of stomach contents in determining the time of death, but that was something else he didn’t want to think about.

“Why don’t you go and sit in my office and make your calls? The coffee machine is easy to use. Biscuits in the bottom drawer of the desk. I’ll come and get you if I find anything you need to see. Otherwise, we’ll be about an hour.”

Charlie’s legs had seized up, so that he struggled to bend his knees enough to walk, but he made it to Hector’s office, and onto Hector’s desk chair. He closed his eyes, feeling his skin tingle with the anticipation of a few moments’ sleep. Instead of succumbing, he stood up and pulled out his phone to ring Dylan.

“I said dinner,” Dylan replied, after Charlie had explained what information he needed. “But it was quite early, maybe sixish? And it was just a big salad with lots of cheese and some prawns. No booze. I wanted to work, and Unwin had his car.”

“So, Unwin left you, what, about seven?”

“Earlier. I heard the seven o’clock news on the radio, and he’d gone by then.”

That meant Unwin could have been in Llanfair long before Charlie, Eddy and Patsy took up their stations in the town centre.

“Have you found out what happened to him yet?”

Charlie said they hadn’t, and once again, promised to stay in touch. Then he ended

the call and let the phone drop onto the desk in front of him. None of it proved anything. Plenty of people were shorter than Unwin. Hell, he was shorter than Unwin. Just because Unwin could have been in Llanfair while Patsy was out of the police station, didn't mean he was. Just because Patsy's time was unaccounted for now, didn't mean it wouldn't be accounted for later. But if anyone knew how to use a hammer, Patsy would. It would be yet another of her skills. It wasn't her. Surely, it wasn't her.

Charlie fell asleep.

13

Sunday late afternoon

The smell of coffee brought Charlie out of his slumber. For a moment he thought he was at home, waking up next to Tom, and it was morning. The reality was an aching neck, and Sasha staring at him with a concerned expression. Hector stood behind her, with a mug of coffee. Two other steaming mugs stood on the desk.

“You had us worried there for a minute,” Hector said. “Do you want milk in this?” He held the coffee mug towards Charlie, who shook his head.

“Sorry,” he said, “I haven’t had much sleep over the last few days.”

“Then drink up, while I’ll tell you what we found. Then you can go home and hit the sack,” Hector said, putting the mug down in front of Charlie.

Charlie ran his fingers through his hair, wiped the sleep from his eyes and tried to concentrate.

“I’ve got nothing to add to my findings about the cause of death,” Hector began, “but I can tell you that Unwin died within a couple of hours of ingesting a meal. Did you find out what he ate and when?”

“Salad, about six o’clock,” Charlie said.

Hector nodded sharply. “That fits.”

“So, some time around eight?” Charlie asked.

“It’s not an exact science, but that’s a good place to start. Any time from when he was last seen alive, until maybe nine or even ten o’clock at a stretch. Does that help?”

Charlie shook his head. “Not really. There’s no chance he died after, say, eleven or midnight?”

When I had Patsy right next to me for several hours.

“Anything is possible. I’m sure we could come up with a plausible scenario for later, but if you want my professional opinion, ten would be the absolute outside.”

With that, Charlie had to be content. Hector Powell’s professional opinion would sway a jury, and Clwyd police treated his findings like the word of God. If Hector said Unwin was dead by ten, he was going to have to look harder for evidence to exonerate Patsy. Or, and he heard Ravensbourne’s voice in his head: to convict her. Not a thought he planned to share with anyone else.

On the drive home, Charlie updated Ravensbourne on the post mortem, and in her turn she told him of their inability to discover anything about the elusive Jeff Britton, even though she had requisitioned Will Wayward’s help. Then there was a pause.

“Boss?” Charlie said. And it came back to him. “The right-wing nutters. I owe you an apology, Boss.” He heard the unmistakeable sound of Ravensbourne lighting a cigarette.

“You certainly do, DS Rees, but given the circumstances, I’m prepared to let it go, just this once.”

But there was no anger in her voice.

“Did they turn up? The nutters, I mean,” he asked.

Ravensbourne exhaled loudly. “They did. About fifteen of them. With placards. They told the uniformed PC that they intended to march to Llanfair Holiday Park to make their point. He wished them well, and advised them to take plenty of water, as it was quite a long walk.”

Charlie couldn’t help his snort of mirth. “How far did they get?”

“Who knows? Who cares? Seriously, I think they made it to the supermarket car park by the river, and then packed it in. No one in the town took any notice of them. We sent a patrol car with a couple of specials to drive along the route, and they didn’t see anyone except holidaymakers. No doubt they are claiming a great victory on social media. Now go home, have something to eat, a decent night’s sleep and I’ll be over first thing.”

“I was going back to the station,” he said.

“No, you’re going home, and that’s an order. No more work tonight, it’s too bloody hot.”

The car’s air-conditioning had been keeping the heat at bay, but as soon as Charlie parked and stepped outside, it hit him anew, despite the darkening sky. The air felt thick, as if the pressure was building, pressing down on the town and its surrounding hills. The knowledge that sooner or later it would break and there would be a storm didn’t help. Everyone wanted to keep the sunshine; they got little enough of it, but this enveloping heat was becoming too much. From the back of the house, Charlie heard voices and the play of water from a hosepipe as Tom watered the garden. One of the voices was Patsy’s. He let himself into the house, dropped his keys and phone into the dish on the hall table and walked through the kitchen to the back garden.

No way should she be here.

But here she was, sitting on their garden bench, looking down at her knees, next to Tom. The hosepipe poured water onto a bed of courgettes and tomatoes. Tom saw him first.

“Charlie,” he called, and to Charlie’s mind, there was an element of desperation in his voice. Patsy looked up and Charlie knew he wouldn’t be sending her away, even though that was the right thing to do. Her face was swollen and red from weeping, and her posture, always so perfect, had turned to that of an ancient rag doll. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a tired pony tail, and her clothes were limp, hanging on her as if she had lost half her body weight overnight.

Tom stood up. “I’ll make a drink and some food.” With that he disappeared into the house.

Patsy turned to Charlie. “I know I shouldn’t be here, but I couldn’t not come. I can’t talk to Eddy, and Mags has the baby ... I have to know what’s happening. Please.” She couldn’t seem to stop the tears beginning again, though from the state of her face, she must have been crying continuously since he saw her last.

Charlie took her hand and held it between his own. “I’ll tell you what I can, but I can’t compromise the investigation, and none of it will bring him back.”

Patsy nodded. He saw there was a box of tissues from the house on the bench beside her. “I just need to know.” She took a tissue and mopped her face. “I can’t stop seeing him lying there.”

Nor could Charlie. “All I can tell you is that he wouldn’t have known what happened, and that he was almost certainly murdered, not long after he left Dylan’s house yesterday evening. I don’t know what he was doing in the shop, or who else was

there. I don't know who set the fire, and I don't know who the fire officer was who showed us up there."

"Everyone thinks it was me who killed him," Patsy said. "DI Ravensbourne, the Chief Super, Unwin's vile sister and probably the rest of his family. But I didn't. I didn't know he was in Llanfair. I thought he was with Dylan. I was working . Unwin knew I was working, and anyway, he was supposed to be with Dylan."

"So, you didn't hear from Unwin at all yesterday?"

"I didn't need to. I knew where he was, who he was with. He knew where I was and what I was doing. That's how it was, Charlie. We weren't in each other's pockets, texting all the time. I knew he loved me, and he knew I loved him. Our relationship might be a bit unusual, but that doesn't make me a murderer. We had what we both wanted. We were happy. I had no reason to hurt him."

This was vintage Patsy, stating the facts, and expecting to be believed. And despite Ravensbourne's words of warning, he did believe her. Which meant he had to prove it, by finding out who had killed Unwin and making a case so strong that even Houdini couldn't escape it.

While they'd been talking, the water from the hose pipe had stopped. Tom appeared from the back door, carrying two tall glasses filled with ice and something pink. He put them down in front of the bench and got Charlie's phone from the pocket of his shorts.

"I don't know whether you want to have a drink before or after you answer this," he said, holding out the phone. "It's not stopped." As if to prove Tom right, the phone began to ring.

14

Sunday evening

It was the Clwyd Police Press Officer. “The Chief Constable wants to make a statement,” she said. “He needs to know the latest information about the murder of DC Unwin.”

“I’m not the SIO,” Charlie said. “Contact Chief Superintendent Kent, or DI Ravensbourne.” He knew as he spoke, that the Press Office would have already done just that. They had. Charlie moved away from the bench to stand next to the house.

“DI Ravensbourne is not available, Chief Superintendent Kent suggested I talk to you.”

Thank you very much Chief Superintendent sodding Kent.

She continued: “I understand that Alun Evans, MP, will also be making a statement, and that you have already spoken with him, and the family of Josh Unwin. You really are the best person to brief me.”

“What do you want to know?” Charlie asked tiredly. He could ring Kent and ask for guidance, or try to contact Ravensbourne, or he could get it over with and follow his inclination — which was to say as little as possible.

“Can you confirm that DC Unwin was murdered?”

“We are treating it as a murder enquiry, yes.” But anyone could have told you that.

“Is there a relationship between the arson attack on the shop where the body was found and the murder?”

You tell me.

The questions continued, pointlessly asking Charlie things he didn’t know, until he lost his temper.

“Look, Unwin was a colleague. We found him this morning and we’ve hardly had time to draw breath since. We don’t know anything yet. Not about Unwin, not about the fire, not about nutters on social media.” He calmed down enough to apologise, and say he had to go back to work, but she was relentless.

“It would be super-helpful if you could be part of the press conference,” she said.

“It would be even more helpful if you would let me get on with my job,” Charlie said and ended the call. Whatever Ravensbourne said, he would eat and then go back to the station, if only to make a list of all the things they still had to do. But first, he needed to ask Patsy a question and then ensure she was being looked after. He went back to the bench and picked up his drink. A sip told him it contained a lot of alcohol, so he put it down again. His head was fuzzy enough already.

“Can I ask you about something,” Charlie said.

Patsy nodded. “Anything, if it helps.” He noticed that her glass was almost empty. Good, it might help her get some sleep.

“Unwin’s sister said that you had, I quote, found out about his other women ...” He didn’t get the chance to finish his sentence.

“I had all this with the Chief Super. There weren’t any other women, and if there were, I wouldn’t find out , Unwin would have told me. We’d have talked about it. Non-monogamy doesn’t mean sex with everyone you meet.”

On paper, perhaps. Charlie didn’t want to quiz Patsy about Unwin’s alleged habit of propositioning members of the HQ staff, but he channelled his inner Ravensbourne.

“You do know Unwin had a bit of a reputation ...?” he asked.

Patsy blushed red with anger. “According to whom? Don’t answer that. I know. Eddy and Will. Because Unwin liked them both, and he flirted with people he liked. Big fucking deal. He thought I liked Eddy, which I do, as a friend . We talked about it and Unwin backed off. Only Eddy got all bent out of shape, and he won’t let it go.”

Tom coughed, loudly and artificially. Charlie looked up as Eddy’s tall figure stepped out of the back door and came over to the bench.

“I’ve been looking all over for you. Mam insists you come back to ours,” he said to Patsy. His tone left no room for argument. Eddy reached out his hand to help Patsy up and put his arm around her shoulders. He looked at Charlie. “I’ll be in first thing,” he said.

Charlie watched them leave. He felt Tom’s presence and turned. “I have to go back to work,” he said. “I’ll get some sleep there later.”

“You need to eat,” Tom said. “Proper food, not doughnuts.”

Charlie heard his stomach grumble its agreement. “Lead me to it,” he said. Inside, Tom had set the kitchen table with a quiche, cold meat, cheese and salad. “Thanks,” Charlie said, sat down and started eating. After the first few minutes, he noticed Tom hadn’t eaten anything. “You’re not eating?”

“I ate earlier with the girls,” he said. “They’re at a friend’s house. I’ll go and pick them up in a bit.”

Silence fell.

“Can I take some of this with me?” Charlie asked. “Because I need to get going.”

Tom reached over the table and took Charlie’s hand in his own. “This is your home, Charlie, your food. Your Tupperware boxes to put it in. You don’t have to ask. Take whatever you want. But come back tonight. Don’t sleep in the office again. I miss you.”

“I can’t talk about this now,” Charlie said, reclaiming his hand. “I’m going to get a change of clothes to take with me.”

When he got back downstairs, Tom had packed several boxes of food into a cool bag.

“Drink some water, not just endless coffee,” he said as he handed the bag to Charlie. “I’m sorry,” Tom said, though it wasn’t clear what he was sorry about. Charlie kissed his husband briefly on the cheek and took his packages to the car and thence to the police station.

Charlie shouldn’t have been surprised to find Mags in the open office, head thrust forward, reading something on her screen.

“Mags, it’s after your bedtime. And certainly after the baby’s bedtime.”

She turned to him grim-faced.

“I told you. My husband is perfectly capable of taking care of his offspring. I’m needed here. I hope we’ll get more help tomorrow, but for now I thought I’d make a

start on these statements.”

“OK,” Charlie said. “Have we heard anything from Ivan Smith, aka the genuine fire investigator?”

“Report on the system.”

He went into his little office and booted up the computer. The electronic files appeared to be breeding rapidly, but he soon found the fire investigator’s report. Its conclusions were exactly the same as the conclusions reached by Jeff Britton — that the fire had been caused by a lid-less petrol can thrown through the shop window, and something to set it alight. The only difference was that the petrol can, or rather its remains, had been identified. There was a picture of something purporting to be the container in question, but which could have been any bit of melted metal and plastic. The next picture was of the un-melted version; the same petrol can he had in the back of his car and the back of every police car he’d ever been in.

“Sarge,” Mags called, and Charlie went out to the main office.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Some of these statements contradict what you and Eddy saw. At first I thought the witnesses were probably drunk, and anyway, you and Eddy are trained observers, but there’s enough agreement for you to have a look.”

Charlie took the chair next to hers, as she scrolled through the statements, mostly taken by Ravensbourne’s three uniformed officers earlier in the day.

There was a police car parked on the corner, and a lady policeman next to it. While I was having a smoke outside the pub, she walked up the road to where that old kebab shop was burnt down.

I didn't see the fire start but your officer must have done. She was right next to it.

The policewoman either started the fire or tried to stop it. Is she OK? She was very close.

The girl in the police uniform was right by the shop when it went up.

There were others, all saying the same thing in different words.

“Stay here,” Charlie told Mags, and he ran down the stairs to the car park where the patrol car was kept. He popped the boot open. It held the usual paraphernalia: traffic cones, police tape, waterproof and hi-vis jackets. The one thing missing was a standard police issue petrol can.

15

Sunday evening

Charlie went back upstairs with a lot less enthusiasm than he went down. Patsy had no alibi for the time of the murder. Witnesses, albeit drunk witnesses, put her at the scene of the arson attack. The petrol can was missing from the patrol car — which Patsy was responsible for maintaining and re-stocking with supplies.

All of it was circumstantial, however.

He would put money on Patsy's grief being genuine. Sure, a murderer could grieve for their victim, but Charlie didn't think that was what he saw in Patsy. All he had to do was prove it, ideally by finding the real murderer.

"Anything else of interest in the statements?" he asked Mags when he got back to the office.

"Didn't see anything, only saw the fire once it got started, dunno why I was watching, really, that kind of thing. Mostly, I think the fire was an excuse for people to stay out a bit longer and ogle the firefighters."

"Yeah," Charlie said. "They only started going home when we asked for names and addresses. What we should have asked for was their pictures and videos, because I bet everyone had their phone cameras out. Can we put some boards up in town appealing for photos, and a notice in the press?"

Mags made a note and reached for her keyboard.

“The thing is,” Charlie said before she started typing, “this Jeff Britton came across as absolutely the business. I never doubted for a second that he was exactly who he said he was. Eddy says the same. Both of us thought he was a bit weird about Unwin’s body — didn’t want to say whether he’d known it was there — but apart from that he was perfect. I’ve just read the statement from the actual fire investigator, and it’s almost word for word what this Britton told us. I think Britton’s a firefighter, and if we can put him at the scene, I think he might be our arsonist, too.”

“That’s why you want people’s photographs?”

“That’s why. All of us had our body cams, so Eddy and I need to look through those. I’ll start tonight. Can you start looking for firefighters called Jeff Britton? And probably suspected arsonists with the same name?”

Again, Mags made a note. “I’ll do the pictures appeal and then get started. Tell me what he looks like.”

Charlie described a man about six feet tall, in good shape, late thirties or early forties, brown hair and brown eyes. “He didn’t really stand out, to be honest. I’d recognise him if I saw him again, but there was nothing useful like a tattoo on his cheek.”

“Clothes?”

“Navy trousers, navy T-shirt, work boots.”

“Exactly what you’d expect,” Mags said.

Back in his office, Charlie began to download the footage from their body-worn cameras. He and Eddy had borrowed the ones usually used by the two special

constables, but as a uniformed PC, Patsy had her own. It was the obvious place to start. If nothing else, it would show where she was standing when the fire started, except it didn't. There were a few encounters with drunken passers-by, and then the screen went black.

"Mags," Charlie called, "will you have a look at this?"

Mags came and looked over his shoulder at a few minutes of rewound footage before the screen went black again. "Keep going, speed it up." They continued to watch the black screen with the time showing as a white blur, until suddenly the camera began to show images of the street again. This time with a clearly burning shop to Patsy's left.

"That used to happen to me all the time," Mags said. "It's the clip on the camera. If you catch it the wrong way it starts recording you, instead of what you're looking at. I used to come back with a lot of images of my jacket. I did show Patsy how to stop it happening. I guess with everything going on, she forgot."

Charlie could hear the seeds of doubt in Mags' voice. "She's not part of this, Mags. Patsy is no more a murderer and an arsonist than you are. I trust her."

"But do you trust Unwin?" Mags asked. "He was a strange one. I know Patsy was his official girlfriend, but I don't think she was the only one. He did have a bit of a reputation, you know."

If Charlie hadn't known before, he surely knew now. "I do know Unwin had a boyfriend, Dylan. He and Patsy knew about each other. They liked each other. Everything was open and above board. Ethical non-monogamy Patsy called it."

Mags shook her head. "That's easy to say. But feelings get involved and people get jealous, and jealousy leads to insecurity, and it twists you up inside, makes you do

things you wouldn't normally do ...”

Like sleep in the office, even though your own bed was ten minutes' walk away.

“I know. It wouldn't work for me. But what you see with Patsy is what you get. If she'd killed Unwin, she would have told us. No, I think we need to find this Jeff Britton.”

Mags stood up straight and stretched. “Nothing so far. Did I see you with a cool bag earlier?”

Charlie grinned. “Follow me,” he said, and they went down to the break room and ate cheese and crusty bread until they were ready to go back to work. Charlie watched the rest of the footage from all three cameras for a sighting of Britton but found nothing. There were any number of tall men in dark clothes, any one of whom could have been Britton. But only a few faces were visible; none of them were the fake fire officer. Maybe they would have better luck with photographs from the public. He took his aching bones into the big room. Mags had her head propped up on her hands and was yawning widely.

“Sorry,” she said, and yawned again.

“Time to pack it in,” Charlie said.

“I did find a firefighter from the West Midlands called Jeff Burton , but there's no picture. I can ring them in the morning.” She yawned again.

“Home,” Charlie said. “And thanks for coming in.”

He escorted her to the door and watched until she was out of sight. In a town the size of Llanfair, nowhere was far from the police station, and the Jellicoe household was

closer than most. But he would stay outside until he got her text to say she was safely indoors. When it arrived, he locked the door behind him and went back to the break room, where a few chairs pulled together made an adequate bed, with a pillow and sheet he had brought from home. The room was airless, and smelled of old coffee, and milk left too long in the fridge, but it was better than being at home. Mags' words came back to him: jealousy leads to insecurity, and it twists you up inside, makes you do things you wouldn't normally do ... He would talk to Tom. But first he would sort out his own feelings, and before that he would find whoever killed Unwin and clear Patsy's name. They had leads to follow: this Jeff Burton, discovering who had access to the shop, Unwin's phone records, whatever the crime scene team had uncovered, a timeline of Unwin's movements ... it was all written down and it would all wait until the morning.

Unexpectedly, Charlie slept.

16

Monday morning

Charlie woke up at six a.m. with a stiff neck, a headache and the strong feeling that he needed to add “Access to the back door of the shop,” to his list. Because whilst the fire had been started from outside the empty shop, the murderer must have had access to the back door and the staircase. That meant keys, and keys probably meant either the Hassans or the Estate Agents. Someone else could have acquired keys, but those two seemed like the obvious starting point. He found his list on the floor by his makeshift bed, and there it was: find out who had access to the shop. He stretched and wished he hadn’t as every muscle twinged. Despite the early hour, the temperature in the break room was unpleasantly hot and sweaty — Charlie assumed that the night had been no cooler than the day. He looked at the weather app on his phone. It was going to be another scorcher.

The headache he could deal with. Neck stretches and a large glass of water. That done, it would be time for coffee and whatever was left in the fridge from the parcel of food Tom had given him.

Tom. Charlie wanted to see his husband, kiss and cuddle him, talk to him, get back to how they should be. They could sort this out, and they would. Soon. For now, he sent a message: Morning! With a heart emoji. Then he put his phone in his pocket, because their problem wasn’t going to be sorted out by text message. When the phone chirped, Charlie assumed the message was from Tom, so he left it, until it chirped again, and again.

DI Ravensbourne: Local press have got news of Unwin's murder. Insinuations about his sex life. Someone's been talking, possibly for money. Be careful. The nationals will pick it up soon.

He sent a thumbs up emoji back and cursed loudly. So loudly that he didn't hear the door open or Eddy's footsteps along the corridor.

"Good morning to you, as well," Eddy said, his eyes running over Charlie's bare chest and legs.

"Make some coffee," Charlie growled and gathered his clean clothes. There was time to wash and dress before he shared the bad media news with Eddy.

It turned out Eddy already knew.

"It was on the local radio news this morning," he said. "Mam heard it and told me. We made sure Patsy didn't hear, but she's bound to find out. They didn't say anything about Unwin's personal life, but they did name him. Of course, they mentioned that this wasn't the first murder case we've had in the town."

It was going to make everything much harder.

Eddy had made coffee, and he'd brought some of his mother's home-made Welsh cakes to add to the breakfast supplies.

"Mags is trying to find if Jeff Britton is a real fire fighter, or conversely, a known arsonist," Charlie said. "We'll get a couple of helpers from HQ today, and I'd like them to construct a timeline of Unwin's movements from the last time he was seen at work. Can you put a request in for his phone records? And start harassing the crime scene people? I'm going to get those estate agents out of bed. We need to know who could get access to the shop."

“When we got there, the back door was open,” Eddy said. “The question is, was it open all night?”

Charlie nodded. “Quite. There was no sign of breaking and entering that I could see. Jeff Britton, or whatever his name is, just opened the door. I’m going to find out who had a key.”

It was shortly before eight when Charlie got to the estate agents, and there was a Closed sign on the door. He could see someone moving around at the back of the office, so he hammered on the glass until Huw Jones came into view, looking irritated.

His expression changed when he recognised who was knocking. He unlocked and opened the door to let Charlie in, and then carefully re-locked it, before ushering Charlie to the back, where there was an office not unlike his own, carved out of the bigger space.

“What can I help you with?” Huw said, sliding behind his desk and waving Charlie to a visitors’ chair, as if they were meeting about a house purchase.

Um, no. this isn’t business as usual.

Charlie didn’t sit down. “The shop next door. Specifically, who has a key to the back door?”

Huw looked puzzled. “Surely it was a break-in?”

Charlie shook his head. “It looks like someone used a key. So, who has keys?”

“We do. In a locked key cabinet. Well, I say locked, it’s usually open during the day, and all the staff have keys to it anyway. But the actual keys aren’t labelled with the

address of the property. There's a numbering system. On everyone's computers. Not foolproof, but good enough to stop a casual burglar."

It was what Charlie had expected. Huw Jones was right. It would stop a casual burglar. He wondered if Huw had considered the implications.

"What about the previous tenants? Would they have a key?"

The estate agent shook his head. "Don't think so. I mean, they might have made a copy, but I'm pretty sure we got all the keys back. If they kept a key, it would be by mistake. I've known them for years."

"We need to check," Charlie said and

watched realisation dawn on the other man's face.

"If you have the only keys in your key cabinet, and your staff are the only people who know which keys match which property, then we are going to have to talk to your staff."

"No one here would give a key out," Huw said.

Charlie revised his opinion about how much Huw had realised. It was time to acquaint him with the reality of a murder investigation.

"I'll need a list of all your staff, with their names and addresses — ideally their personnel files. And I'd like your undertaking not to contact them before we interview them."

Huw looked shell-shocked. "I suppose so," he said.

“In the meantime, I have a few questions for you, starting with your movements from lunchtime on the day of the fire.” Charlie leaned back in his chair, waiting for the reaction.

It came in the form of a fiery blush, the redness spreading from Huw’s neck and up over his face until the sweat stood out on his forehead.

“I was here,” he began. He looked at Charlie, who looked back as blankly as he could. “And I stayed quite late. Maybe until half-six or seven.” Huw visibly swallowed. Charlie leaned his head forward in encouragement but remained silent. “Then I went out. To a pub. I don’t want my wife to know.”

“I can’t promise anything,” Charlie said. “This is a murder enquiry. If you’ve done something you don’t want your wife to find out about, I suggest you tell her yourself.”

“I didn’t do anything. I talked to some people, that’s all. I just needed a break, you know. The business, the kids, my wife going on about a new kitchen, the heat, the whole boiling. Sometimes it gets on top of me, and I tell my wife I’m working late and take a couple of hours off, that’s it . But she wouldn’t understand.” Huw rubbed his hands over his face and through his hair, leaving it damp and disordered. “I was home by ten. My wife will tell you.”

Charlie nodded. “I will be asking her. I’d also like to know which pub, and the names of the people you talked to.”

“The Pelican. I talked to a Helen, and a Sion, and I think one of the women was called Rhian. They are just people I see now and again. But this is silly. I didn’t even know the bloke who was killed.”

A key rattled in the main office door. Huw got up, said “Excuse me,” and returned a

moment later with Corrine Bailey, the branch manager. Perfect.

“I wonder if I might have a word with Ms Bailey,” Charlie asked. “While you get those names and addresses for me, Mr Jones.”

Huw Jones nodded.

Corrine Bailey’s face lost all its colour.

Monday morning

“Is there somewhere private we can talk?” Charlie asked.

Corrine Bailey said, “Sure,” and led him past Huw Jones’ office to a small kitchen, with a door to the back yard. There was just enough room for a table and chairs, pushed up into one corner, opposite a counter with sink, microwave, kettle and an under-counter fridge. A collection of mugs hung on a mug tree, next to a box of tea bags, a bag of sugar and a jar of instant coffee. Not that she offered Charlie a drink. Corrine pulled out a chair and sat. She looked about his own age, Charlie thought, maybe a little older. Her hair was a glossy dark brown, and very well cut into a sharp asymmetrical bob. She wore a cream linen dress, which from the rustle when Corrine sat down, Charlie assumed was fully lined. Matching low-heeled sandals completed the look: professional, smart and attractive. She wasn’t Welsh, or at least she didn’t have a Welsh accent; rather a generic newsreader’s English.

“What’s this about?” she asked. “Because, sorry and all that, but I do have to get started before Megan and Jackie come in.”

Charlie pulled out another chair and sat at right angles to her. “I’m investigating the murder of one of my colleagues, Ms Bailey. A murder which happened in the shop next door. I understand that the keys to the back door of the shop are kept in your key cabinet here, and that everyone who works here has access to those keys.”

Corrine nodded, a look of wariness on her face. “Do you want me to check if they’re

still there?”

“In a minute,” Charlie said. “First, could you tell me your movements from lunchtime on Saturday, until yesterday morning?”

“My movements?”

“Where you were, who you were with, what you were doing.” Did this woman not watch TV?

“Why would you want to know that?”

“I’m asking the same questions of everyone even remotely connected to this case. That includes everyone who has access to the keys to the shop next door.”

Corrine nodded, slowly, turning the rings round on her fingers. “OK,” she said. “Let me think. I would have been here on Saturday afternoon. I didn’t have any viewings, but I did take some details for a new client and arranged some things for next week. Saturday afternoons are usually quiet, especially on nice days.”

“What time did you leave?” Charlie asked.

More ring turning. “We close at five.”

This was like pulling teeth. Charlie said nothing, leaving silence for the manager to fill.

After a few moments, she did. “I don’t know what time I left. I had my car here, so I went to the supermarket for a few bits and then went home. I live in those new flats near the river, and I sat outside on my balcony until I heard the sirens, and a friend called to say she thought this place was on fire. I walked back into the town, which is

when I met Huw, and you, of course.”

“After that?”

“Huw and I came in here, to make sure everything was OK. He was worried about smoke damage, but there wasn’t much. So, I went home and went to bed.”

“Do you live alone?” Charlie asked, although he was sure that Corrine would have mentioned a husband, partner, or housemate if there was one. She must surely realise that she was being asked for an alibi.

“I do,” she said, and smiled. “I’m very happily single.”

No alibi, then. For a professional woman, Charlie thought she seemed very vague about time. Though to be fair, the current weather was enervating. No wonder hot countries were famous for having ‘a slower pace of life.’ Charlie could imagine that nobody had enough energy to do more than the minimum needed to keep body and soul together.

Charlie asked to see the key cabinet. It was fixed to the wall in a dark corner of the main office, behind a stand holding advertising brochures for the company. Corrine went to one of the desks, opened the top drawer and produced a key with which she opened the cabinet. Rings of keys, each with a little tag, hung on hooks inside the cabinet.

“I’ll have to put the computer on,” Corrine said. “To get the right number.” Charlie had to wait until she muttered “Twenty-one.” She pointed at a set of keys: “That one.”

Charlie took an evidence bag from his pocket and gathered the keys into it. Probably a pointless exercise, but it would be remiss not to check for fingerprints. “I’ll give

you a receipt,” he said.

There was a knock at the front door. Two young women, both dressed in business clothes, summer edition, stood outside on the street. Corrine let them in. They stared at Charlie with wide eyes.

“This is Detective Sergeant Rees,” Corrine said. “He wants to talk to each of you.” Then to Charlie, “You can use the kitchen.”

The taller of the two spoke. “Is it true that Patsy Hargreaves’ boyfriend has been murdered?”

“How do you know Patsy?” Charlie asked.

“College,” the young woman replied. “Everyone knows Patsy, and Unwin was lush. Best of the Joshes by a long way.”

“Joshes?” asked the other woman.

“You remember, four guys called Josh in one class?”

The second woman shook her head. Corrine interrupted. “Fascinating though this is, DS Rees needs to get on, and so do we. Megan, take DC Rees into the kitchen, and Jackie, you wait here, please.”

As Charlie followed Megan into the kitchen, he heard Jackie asking what was going on and getting no answer from Corrine.

“She can’t tell you anything, anyway,” Megan said. “She’s been away in Turkey for the last two weeks. Only got back last night. I told her, if you wanted a tan, you should have saved your money and stayed here. Is it true about Patsy’s bloke?”

Megan's eyes were huge, and she was almost straining forwards in her chair with the desire to know.

Charlie stifled his impulse to laugh, because none of it was funny. "I'm sorry to tell you that Unwin is dead, yes."

Immediately, Megan's face crumpled. She would be a terrible poker player. "Is Patsy OK? I mean, we weren't besties or anything, but ... you don't expect anyone you know to be, well, murdered."

Charlie did know. Any kind of connection to murder was shocking.

"What did you mean that Unwin was the best of the Joshes?" he asked.

Megan was wearing a linen dress, shorter than Corrine's, and from the creases beginning to form, unlined. She pulled the skirt down towards her knees. "Unwin was the best-looking. To be fair, I mostly saw them with a big load of other people, like on nights out and stuff. Everyone knew he was a policeman, and that Patsy wanted to be one, too, and people talked about the four Joshes. One of them was a total creep. Like, a put-his-hand-up-your-dress kind of creep." Megan shuddered. "The others were OK, though. Like I say, it was mostly in big groups. Most of them stayed in Wrexham anyway."

From this garbled account, Charlie concluded that Patsy and Unwin had been together since Patsy was at college, and that Megan relied on other people's opinions rather than her own observations. He asked for her full name and address, as well as her movements since the day of the fire and wasn't surprised to learn that she had been part of the crowd in Llanfair town centre watching the fire, or that she had had "a few drinks after work," so couldn't remember much.

If what Megan had told him was true, all Charlie needed from Jackie was

confirmation, that she had not arrived back in the UK until Sunday, and had spent most of the day on the train and bus from Manchester airport. He would check, because that was the job, but her tired eyes and sunburned skin suggested she was telling the truth. Time to go back to the station.

He wasn't expecting to see Tom sitting on the seat by the war memorial.

I'm so not ready for this conversation. Not in the middle of a case, with the girls waiting at home.

But Tom stood up. It looked like the conversation was going to happen whatever Charlie wanted.

18

Monday morning

Charlie was going to have to talk to Tom. He gave avoiding it one last try. “I’m really, really busy,” he said.

“This won’t take long,” Tom replied. “I owe you an apology and an explanation. We can get ice creams.”

As the ice cream in the house freezer disappeared as soon as it arrived, and Charlie was entitled to ten minutes off, he agreed. The nearest source of ice cream was just across the road, and for once there was no queue. Cones in hand, they sat on the nearest bench. Charlie looked at his double chocolate, with extra chocolate chips, which Tom had bought him without needing to ask, and his heart felt full.

“It’s not you,” Tom said.

“So, who is it then?”

“I should have talked to you about the girls coming to stay. I should have asked you about the holidays. I’m sorry. I’m their dad, and I’m used to putting them first. But you’re my husband, and we’re supposed to be a team. I need to remember that.”

“Fine,” Charlie said, and turned his attention back to his ice cream.

“Look, they’re pissed off with each other at the moment, and they’re pissed off with

Ann and Ori for leaving them here instead of taking them both to London. They're just pissed off, and they're teenagers."

"Which is hardly my fault," Charlie said. "But it's me who can never find anything, or get in the bathroom, or make my lunch."

"True. So, I rang Ann, and I'm putting them on the train to London this afternoon. I negotiated us three days. Couldn't persuade them to keep them for any longer. Apparently, they've got dinner invitations, and concerts and private views." Tom sighed. "But three days peace is better than nothing."

Charlie wanted to throw his arms round Tom, except that they were in public, he was holding an ice cream, and he really did have to get back to work.

"Thank you," he said. Then his phone rang.

Ch Sup Kent.

"Sir," Charlie said.

"I need you to come in to HQ to see me," Kent said.

"No problem," he said, thinking about how he had driven to Wrexham twice the day before. But he could check up on Dylan if he was going yet again, and that felt like the right thing to do. "What kind of time?"

They agreed Charlie would go to see Dylan first.

It seemed to Charlie that the weather was fractionally cooler than it had been the day before. The sky was the same hard blue, but there were a few wispy bits of cloud amongst the contrails. There was plenty of time to contemplate the sky, thanks to it

being the school holidays and thus prime time for the commissioning of roadworks. Charlie sat in long lines of holiday traffic, waiting for the temporary lights to let them through — to the next set a mile down the road. Men in work boots, shorts and hi-vis vests over bare chests did whatever they were doing, though labouring outside in this heat must be hell. Things speeded up a bit on the A5, but even that wasn't immune to the rash of roadworks. He passed the signs to Vale Crucis Abbey and wished he were going there, to wander through the shade of the ruins, imagining the monks from centuries before. Orianna had written about the Abbey:

... Bare slabs where monks laid their heads.

We observe. Collective memories

Compressed beneath the grandeur of soaring vaults ...

Tom and he had spent a day there earlier in the year, so that Tom could draw. In true Tom style, the ruins were meticulously portrayed, but each image had the ghost of a long-ago monk, slipping just out of view. Which, Charlie thought, was how this case felt. As if there was something on the edge of his vision that he needed to bring into focus. He shook his head and told himself to concentrate on driving, and the parts of the case in plain sight.

He parked again outside Dylan's neat brick house. Charlie heard steps behind the door, but it didn't open. There was a spy hole, he saw, and he wondered if the press had found out about Dylan, or he was simply being careful in case they did. Wise man.

Dylan answered the door in what appeared to be the same shorts and T-shirt that he had been wearing the day before. His face was blotchy, and his eyes were dark pits in his face. The previously perfect hair hung limply, damp with sweat. He looked as if he hadn't slept, eaten, or been outside since then. But once they were inside, Charlie

saw that the house was tidy, with a pile of books and papers next to an open laptop on the coffee table. The back garden doors were open.

“I’ve been working,” Dylan said. “Unwin was killed because I sent him away so I could study. So, I’m studying.” Dylan’s face crumpled as he spoke.

Charlie reached out and touched Dylan’s arm. “Unwin was killed because someone out there is a murderer. Not because of anything you did. This isn’t down to you .” But he could tell Dylan didn’t believe him, or didn’t want to. “Telling yourself if only won’t help. Honestly, it won’t.”

Dylan shook his head miserably. “That’s not how it feels,” he said. He took a deep breath. “I’m glad you came, because I remembered something. Unwin had a phone call just before he left. I was in the kitchen tidying up a bit. I heard Unwin say something like, I’ll see you later then, and I assumed it was Patsy. I couldn’t hear the other person, but I thought it was a woman’s voice. Higher pitched, I guess.”

“Patsy was going to be at work that evening,” Charlie said. “She says Unwin knew that.”

Dylan shrugged. “I’m not saying it was her. I’ve never spoken to Patsy on the phone, just met her in person. I don’t suppose she’s the only woman Unwin knew. How is she?”

“About how you’d expect,” Charlie said.

“I’ll call her in a day or two. Once I can be sure of not breaking down. Give her my love.”

Charlie said he would. “This woman definitely rang Unwin, not the other way round?” he asked.

Dylan might not have been sure about anything else, but he remembered the phone ringing. “No, I can remember Unwin’s silly ring tone. He was always changing it, and the latest was bird noises.”

Either way, it meant that Unwin was going to meet whoever made that call. Or at least he intended to meet them, and later probably meant later that day. Access to Unwin’s phone records had just become more urgent.

“Excuse me a second,” Charlie said, and reached for his own phone to send

Eddy a text:

We need Unwin’s phone records ASAP. Harass them!

A thumbs-up came back.

“We’ll find out who called,” Charlie said, “and I’ll be in touch. Take care of yourself, and ring me anytime if you remember anything else.”

Dylan nodded. Charlie wanted to stay, if for no other reason than to make sure Dylan ate something, but it wasn’t an option. He made a mental note to call, and to ask Patsy to do the same.

Detective Superintendent Mal Kent and Charlie had attended each other’s weddings, but at work, Mal was sir , the big boss, and clearly headed for further promotion. Even as a friend, Mal could be intimidating. He had the natural authority Charlie saw in Tom in his college principal mode, and today, that authority filled his office. Charlie sensed that he was in for a telling-off, and he was almost right.

“Freya has been keeping me up to date on the investigation into Unwin’s death,” Mal began. “I’m concerned that PC Hargreaves appears to have no alibi for the time of the

murder, and that you seem convinced she had nothing to do with it. I admit that I find her to be a strange young woman.”

Most people did, Charlie reflected. Patsy’s direct way of talking, combined with her excellent memory for detail, could make her an uncomfortable colleague. She rarely bothered with social niceties and had no hesitation in correcting anyone who made a mistake about, say, an obscure point of law, or indeed, which side of a building to open the windows on in a heatwave. But she was a superb police officer and would be a brilliant detective, unless he, Charlie, failed to find who killed Unwin. If he didn’t, Unwin’s death would follow her around like a shadow.

“What you see is what you get with Patsy,” he said. “She doesn’t have an alibi, but then nor do a lot of other people.”

Mal didn’t speak. He didn’t have to.

“OK, I agree that most people weren’t about to move in with Unwin, and most people weren’t in a polyamorous relationship with him, but all the evidence against her is circumstantial. There are other people we should eliminate before we accuse Patsy. The mysterious Jeff Britton for one, and I’m waiting on Unwin’s phone records.” Charlie told Mal about the call Unwin had received while at Dylan’s.

“A call that Dylan thought was from Hargreaves,” Mal said.

All Charlie could do was agree. “I’ve asked Eddy to prioritise the phone records. Once we get them, we’ll know one way or the other who the call was from.”

“I’ve had a call from Unwin’s older brother, Alex,” Mal said. “He knows someone, who knows someone, and he got through to me rather than you or Freya.” There was a pause. “The main thing — the only thing — he wanted to tell me was that he thought Hargreaves murdered his brother. He said she was jealous of Unwin’s other

partners and that anything else was an act.”

19

Monday afternoon

“Charlie.”

The voice of his immediate boss came from behind him, as he walked away from Kent’s office.

“It’s time we went to find out about this fake fire officer. You can drive.”

It was unusual for Charlie to spend more than half an hour or so with DI Ravensbourne. Her usual habit was to appear, ask pertinent questions, issue carefully constructed instructions — with an inevitable sting in the tail — and depart in a cloud of cigarette smoke. Today, for reasons known only to Freya Ravensbourne herself, Charlie was driving her to a fire station just over the border into England, in search of the elusive Jeff Britton.

Charlie was instructed to take the ‘scenic route’ avoiding the main roads with their road works and holiday traffic. It meant a lot of tight bends and steep hills, and shadows stark against the bright sunshine. But many of the fields were still green, dotted with newly shorn sheep, and noisy with the sound of farmers getting their hay in before the weather inevitably changed. There were stretches of road completely shaded by trees arching overhead, and others where the land stretched out in front of them until Charlie was certain the whole country was visible.

Ravensbourne sighed. “Who needs to go abroad when the weather is like this?” she

asked, apparently not expecting an answer as she gazed out of the window. “Not that it is often like this,” she said after a moment, “and when it is, there is always trouble.”

Which was a much more Freya Ravensbourne thing to say.

“Trouble?” Charlie asked.

“Idiots drinking all day and getting into fights. Windows left open so the thieves have easy pickings. Teenagers jumping into freezing water and drowning. Riots. Looting. You must have noticed that nobody ever riots in the rain?”

Charlie grinned. “Too right, boss.” Riots were a summer phenomenon.

“What’s that got to do with our attempt to find Jeff Britton?” he asked.

“Jeff Britton, ” Ravensbourne said. “Our impostor fireman chose a significant pseudonym, don’t you think?”

It hadn’t occurred to Charlie, and it should have done.

“So, he was behind the graffiti?”

“That’s what we are going to find out,” Ravensbourne said. “But while we’re here, I think we ought to talk about Patsy.”

Charlie braked for a steep downhill bend and then braked again as the twenty-mile-an-hour sign came into view half hidden in the hedge. There were a few houses clustered in the valley bottom, with a single-lane hump-backed bridge. Even at this time of year, the valley was shaded. It must be in permanent gloom for the rest of the year. Charlie gave an involuntary shiver. He felt, rather than saw Ravensbourne look over to him.

“I was just thinking that living in the bottom of a valley like this must always be chilly and damp,” he said.

“It was,” Ravensbourne said. “I was brought up in a place like this. And it flooded most years, too.”

Charlie, brought up under huge open skies next to the sea, shuddered again. “Much too closed in for me,” he said.

“Me, too. Now then, Patsy. Could she have killed her boyfriend?”

Obviously, there would be no more personal revelations.

“She could have. She’s strong enough, and clever enough. But I think she would have told us what she’d done.”

“For what it’s worth, I agree,” Ravensbourne said. “Though without a very good alternative suspect, she’s in the frame, front and centre. I have to tell you that the word at HQ is that Unwin had it coming and Patsy did it.”

“Then it must be true,” Charlie said bitterly.

“Must be,” Ravensbourne said. “Which being so, we need to look for alternatives. Not to put too fine a point on it, you are considered partisan and pro-Patsy. People being human, they may discount any suspects you come up with. I, by contrast, will be listened to.”

Which is why you are here. Thank you.

“Understood, boss,” Charlie said.

They drove most of the rest of the way in silence, Charlie concentrating on driving, and Ravensbourne gazing out of the window at the passing scenery. As they came into the outskirts of the town, Ravensbourne provided directions to the fire station. Charlie parked in a visitor's spot, and the two of them got out of the car, Ravensbourne rather more creakily than Charlie expected. She stretched, lit a cigarette and drew the smoke in like it was restoring her health. Before she had taken more than a couple of puffs, a door opened, and a man came out. Ravensbourne quickly stubbed the cigarette out.

"Filthy habit," she said, walking towards the man. She extended her warrant card. "DI Ravensbourne and DS Rees, Clwyd Police."

The man's expression lightened. "Come on in, it's cooler."

The officer introduced himself as Kieran Pretty, the watch commander. He didn't match his name, looking instead like an unsuccessful boxer. "You're here about Burton, yes? I can't tell you much except that he's disappeared, and we haven't heard from him for over a week. He's retained, not full time, but he ought to stay in touch. Drink?"

They both accepted tea.

"First up," Ravensbourne said, "have you got a photo of the elusive Burton?"

Pretty bashed his computer keyboard a few times and then turned the monitor towards them. A photograph of a younger Jeff Britton faced them.

"That's him," Charlie said. "I can't tell you where he is now, but I can tell you where he was on Sunday morning. Impersonating a fire investigator in Llanfair, and for what it's worth, doing it convincingly."

Pretty nodded slowly and slurped his tea. “That’s him finished,” he said. “And to be honest, I won’t be sorry, though he is a good firefighter. Causes trouble. Lots of complaints.” Pretty’s mouth shut, as if he didn’t want to say any more.

Good luck with that, mate, with Ravensbourne here.

“Complaints?” Ravensbourne asked. “Complaints from women and people of colour? Complaints that he is vehemently anti-immigrant? Or don’t you worry about those kind of complaints?”

Pretty’s eyes flashed, and his lips tightened. “We aren’t in the nineteen-eighties any more,” he snapped.

Ravensbourne simply lifted her eyebrows.

“He just never shuts up. Everything’s a conspiracy. He can bore for England about how the Jews and the Blacks are taking over and we white folk are being replaced, only the government won’t admit it. White men going with coloured women are betraying their race. Dear God, he can go on for hours, quoting his bloody evidence . None of the others want to sit near him. Maybe there is something in what he says, it’s just that he won’t stop going on about it.”

Ravensbourne raised her eyebrows again. “That is an interesting perspective,” she said.

They didn’t stay long after that.

“I wonder if they really will sack him?” Charlie wondered aloud.

“Convict him of spraying racist graffiti in Llanfair, and it’ll be hard not to. Convict him of murder, and the question won’t arise. Though wouldn’t the world be a better

place if he got the sack just for being a nasty bigot?”

“As opposed to being a boring, nasty bigot? We can dream.”

The rest of the journey passed peacefully enough. Ravensbourne was good company when she wasn't giving Charlie horrible jobs to do. She was even sympathetic when he told her about Unwin's brother ringing Mal Kent and accusing Patsy of the murder.

“Looks like you'll be visiting the Unwins again after you drop me off. Take Eddy. Get a second opinion on their relationship with Patsy.” she said, and that was more like the Ravensbourne he was used to.

20

Monday afternoon

Somehow the bungalow looked less well kept than it had last time. Perhaps after the shock of Unwin's death no one had had the time or inclination to water the plants in pots leading up to the front door. Or perhaps it was all in his imagination. As he and Eddy walked up the path, the sound of raised voices came towards them from inside the house. One of the voices was very familiar.

"What on earth is Patsy doing here?" Charlie asked.

Eddy shrugged. "I haven't seen her since this morning, to be honest. Mam said she was going to leave her in bed for a lie in." he said.

Bed, or rather sex, was the subject of the shouting match they could hear through the open window. Charlie put his hand on Eddy's arm, signalling to him to stop and listen.

"Just admit you were jealous," an unknown male voice was saying, and not quietly.

"But I wasn't." This was Patsy. "Yes, Unwin had other lovers. That was his choice. So, what? It's not a crime and no one got hurt. I could have had other lovers if I'd wanted, but I didn't." Patsy sounded remarkably calm, but then, in a crisis, she usually was.

"Listen to yourself, Patsy. This is the real world, not some self-help book. Josh would

sleep with anyone, and you wanted to get married. Does not compute, sweetheart.”

“He’s right,” Eddy said, in a quiet voice. “Unwin was some kind of sex addict. But Patsy didn’t kill him.”

“Shh,” Charlie said, wanting to hear Patsy’s response. It came in a convincingly measured tone.

“There is nothing wrong with liking sex,” she said. “Unwin was always open and honest about his affairs. Sometimes they included me, sometimes they didn’t. You don’t want to hear the truth. Open relationships are a thing. That’s what we had, like it or not.”

There was a cry and the sound of breaking glass. Adrenaline spiked in Charlie’s body. Patsy shouldn’t have been there, but she was his colleague, and all his protective instincts engaged. A glance at Eddy told Charlie that he felt the same way.

Let’s get in there.

“Police!” Charlie shouted and tried the door. It was open, and they could see through to the kitchen at the back of the house, where Patsy stood with her hand against her cheek, which was streaked with blood. In two strides, Eddy was next to her, wrapping her in his arms. Patsy shook him off, with an I’m OK. Don’t fuss.

Charlie turned to see Patsy’s assailant, angry enough to charge them with assault on a police officer, and angry with himself for letting it happen. He saw a man with his hands on his hips, staring fixedly at Patsy from the other side of the room.

The man flicked his eyes between Patsy and Eddy. “Hah! didn’t take you long to find a replacement.”

From his appearance, the speaker could only be Unwin's brother. Charlie automatically checked to see if the man had any possible weapons to hand. There was nothing, but Charlie felt the handcuffs in his pocket itching to click around the man's wrists. Instead, he

produced his warrant card.

"Mr Unwin, I'm DS Rees, one of the team investigating your brother's death. What's going on, please? Why is my colleague bleeding?"

Unwin's brother was bright red with anger or frustration, or both. "What should be going on is you arresting Patsy here."

"PC Hargreaves is a police officer as well as a visitor to your home." Charlie looked at the floor, where shards of a heavy juice glass were scattered on the floor. "If you threw that glass, it's assault, at the very least. Now, what's going on?"

"She's not telling the truth," Unwin's brother said. "She killed him."

"I asked what happened here," Charlie said. "Patsy? Did he throw that glass at you?"

Patsy shook her head. "At the wall. The bits bounced. It looks worse than it is. Only a graze, honestly." And wasn't that typical Patsy? Always the truth, even after she'd been injured and accused of murder. The amount of blood looked like more than a graze.

"Take her to the car and check those cuts. First aid kit under the passenger seat." Charlie said to Eddy. Then to Alex Unwin: "If PC Hargreaves has more than a superficial cut, I will be arresting you."

When the two of them had left, Charlie turned to Unwin's brother. "Suppose we sit

down, and you tell me all about it,” he said as calmly as he could, though his worry about Patsy made calmness an effort. He stepped over to the table, avoiding the broken glass, and pulled out two chairs. “Start with your name and address.”

Unwin’s brother sat down with a bad grace, slumping in the chair, but poking his head forward aggressively. “Alex Unwin. Flat 12, Hayday Mansions, Cambridge. I’m a PhD student.”

“Thank you,” Charlie said. See, wasn’t that easy? “You are accusing Patsy of murdering your brother Josh?”

Alex nodded repeatedly, his face still red.

“What evidence do you have for that allegation?” Charlie asked.

“She was jealous as fuck. She wanted to keep him to herself, and it wasn’t happening. Josh wasn’t ready to settle down.”

“Is that what Josh told you?”

There was a moment of silence. “He didn’t have to. He was still seeing lots of other people.”

“So, he didn’t tell you that he was unhappy with Patsy? You guessed it from his behaviour? You see, Patsy says that she knew Josh slept with other people; that it was an accepted part of their relationship.”

Alex slapped his hand down onto the table. “No one believes that! That’s not how relationships work.” He shook his head. “For God’s sake, tell me you don’t believe that crap.”

Charlie didn't know what to believe. He had seen Unwin put himself in danger to protect Patsy. They had seemed happy when they were together, and there was no doubting Patsy's devastation at his loss. But plenty of people had told him about Unwin propositioning his colleagues, enough to suggest there was truth in the stories. At the same time, he had never caught Patsy in a lie, so if she said the relationship was genuinely open and ethical, he was inclined to believe her. He put the question of belief to one side.

"Apart than the nature of their relationship, do you have any other evidence that Patsy meant any harm to your brother?" Charlie asked.

"You're on her side. I might have known. The police always stick together." Alex gave a hollow laugh. "I'm wasting my time here."

That will be a no, then.

"Regardless of what you think of the police, Mr Unwin, I should remind you that assault is a serious offence. I don't know whether PC Hargreaves will wish to press charges so I would advise you to keep away from her and be careful about what you say about her in public."

"Don't you want me to make a statement?" Alex's expression implied that he wasn't inclined to be sensible.

"Not at this point, Mr Unwin. If you think of anything else I might need to know, please get in touch." He gave Alex a card. But he still didn't know what to think.

Thankfully, Patsy had been telling the truth about the extent of her injury. When Charlie got out to the car, she was sitting on the passenger seat with the door open. Eddy was crouched in front of her, very carefully cleaning dried blood from her face with an antiseptic wipe.

“It really isn’t much,” Patsy said.

Eddy growled – no other word for it -- and Charlie wanted to do the same.

“That’s not the point,” Charlie said. “You could have been badly injured.”

“But I wasn’t,” Patsy protested.

“You’re still going back to Mam’s,” Eddy said.

“And this time, you stay there,” Charlie added. He could hope.

Monday evening

For the first time in days, Charlie wanted to go home to Tom. So, naturally, he had to stay at the police station writing his reports and returning phone calls. Mags and Eddy needed to know what they had learned about Jeff Burton, aka Britton, as well as updates on Dylan and Alex Unwin. Adding Mal Kent's thoughts about Patsy took thought and care, especially as Patsy herself kept appearing in all the wrong places. But eventually, Charlie had read everything that he needed to and completed all the outstanding reports. He let himself out of the police station, locked up and strolled home, to find Tom had laid the table outside in the garden.

"Take a seat," Tom said and disappeared into the house, returning with plates of smoked salmon with lemon, and a huge bowl of salad. He disappeared again, this time bringing a bottle of something fizzy and two champagne glasses. "Home grown strawberries, ice cream and cake to follow," he said, and popped the cork from the bottle.

Charlie sighed with pleasure. "This is wonderful," he said, and it was.

The house was too hot, and even with a well-insulated roof, it got hotter as they fell upstairs and into their bedroom. The only bed covering was a top sheet, still twisted from the morning. Charlie picked it up and threw it onto the floor. Ignoring the heat, Charlie pulled Tom towards himself, wrapping his arms around his husband, feeling the prick of tears behind his eyelids. He felt Tom's arms come round him in return and they stood there together hugging as hard as they could. Charlie felt his emotions

flow into Tom and drew strength in return. The world settled back onto its axis.

Charlie took a step backwards and unfastened his shirt buttons until he could slip the shirt over his head where it joined the sheet on the floor. Then his trousers went and his briefs and socks.

“Are you just going to stand there?” he asked Tom.

“No,” Tom said, and sat down on the edge of the bed.

Charlie stepped forwards, and felt Tom’s hands on his arse, big hands, hard and strong, and then, Tom’s tongue on the tip of his half-hard cock. He swayed a little as all his blood headed in that direction. Without conscious thought, he grabbed Tom’s hair and thrust. Tom opened his mouth and ... it was so, so good, and if it continued, he wasn’t going to last.

“Stop,” Charlie said.

Tom pulled away, but not without running his tongue around the tip of Charlie’s erection and making him shiver.

“My turn,” Charlie said, “Get naked.”

Tom smiled and ran his hands down the back of Charlie’s thighs, before sucking Charlie into his mouth again. Charlie felt the gentlest scrape of Tom’s teeth, and felt his orgasm begin to build.

“Stop,” he said again, realising that he was still gripping Tom’s hair.

“No,” Tom said. “I want you to come.” His voice was deep, with the authority of a man determined to get his own way. Charlie wanted to object, but Tom gave him no

choice; wrapping his lips tightly around Charlie's dick, his tongue pulling him deeper into the hot wetness, until it was too late, and Charlie had no choice but to let the pressure build and then release in glorious waves of bliss. Tom swallowed, and then lay back, dragging Charlie on top of him and kissing him roughly, so that Charlie tasted himself and Tom mixed together, until he was lightheaded and helpless.

"Now I'm going to fuck you," Tom said. "If that's OK."

Charlie had enough strength to mutter, "Yes, please," before Tom rolled him gently onto the bed and stood up to remove his own clothes. He had missed this so much that he felt the tears again. Not tears of unhappiness, simply an overflow of love.

It wasn't fucking, though, it was making love. Slowly, slowly, with lots of kissing and words of love, until Charlie lost track of time. He wrapped his legs round Tom's hips, and his arms around his broad shoulders, until he couldn't tell where he ended, and Tom began. Tom's beard was soft against Charlie's face, and their skin was slick where it came together. It seemed for a long time, that there was no urgency, no rush to a conclusion, and then suddenly there was. Charlie felt the change in himself as much as in Tom, and they came together, crying out their pleasure. Tom rolled them onto their sides, still wrapped around each other, and Charlie saw that his husband's eyes were shiny.

"I've missed you, so much," Tom said. "I don't care how late you finish or how early you have to leave, but please come home. I need you."

Charlie snuggled himself even closer to Tom. "I need you too," he said.

Tuesday morning, very early

By the time Charlie's phone woke him from a deep and dreamless sleep, fire had destroyed most of the warehouse. The roof had been on the point of collapse when the fire brigade arrived, and nothing they could do would save it. Tom mumbled something incoherent as Charlie fell out of bed and into his clothes. It would have been hard to get off the couch of torture at the police station at this hour, but leaving a warm bed with Tom in it was all but impossible.

When Charlie arrived, there wasn't much left of anything remotely flammable. The buildings on either side of the warehouse had burned in places, and smoke damage was visible on others. Charlie took in the devastation: the road running with water, lit mainly by the firefighters' temporary floodlights reflecting off the wet ground, the stink of burned wood and the chemical smells of burned plastics and melted carpet. The firefighters were in full rig — heavy boots, big coats and yellow helmets — as they stood chatting, one eye always on the remains of the burned-out sheds. As before, the scene had attracted onlookers, though in far fewer numbers.

The warehouse fire was in a building on the out-of-town trading estate, home to a garden furniture company, a car parts firm, a plumbers' merchant, and some people who packed organic vegetables. There were others, but Charlie couldn't see much more than blurred signs through the drifting smoke and steam. These observers, in hastily donned clothes, faces still creased with sleep, looked as if they had skin in the game. There were a few houses close by and as he made his way towards the cluster of firefighters, a couple came out of one of them. Even in the poor light, Charlie

could see the shock on their faces. All the householders would need to be interviewed, but first, he wanted to talk to the firefighters, and Eddy, who had managed to arrive before him.

Charlie recognised most of the firefighters; it was a small town after all. But Eddy knew them from school and was deep in conversation with a man as big as himself, who looked even bigger in his coat and helmet.

“This is my boss, DS Rees,” Eddy said to the big fireman. “Sarge, this is my old mate Kev Watchett, who’s also the senior officer on tonight.”

Charlie and Kev nodded at each other. Charlie saw Eddy was fully dressed in the same clothes he’d had on the day before.

“This looks bad,” Charlie said.

Kev gave a snort of laughter. “This could have burned half the town to the ground and poisoned the other half. We’re just lucky there’s no wind, that’s all.”

The building gave a groan and a cascade of something noisy fell down somewhere out of sight. The firefighters turned as one to look at the remains of the warehouse. When nothing else happened, Charlie felt them all relax.

“What can you tell me?” Charlie asked.

“Not a lot,” Kev said. “These buildings are cheap as chips, so there could be dodgy electrics somewhere. Lots of electrical equipment in all of them, and this was the car parts place, so some pretty toxic stuff in there as well as stacks and stacks of cardboard.”

“Another arson attack?” Charlie asked.

“Too early to say. I can tell you that my impression is that this fire started at the back of the building, just from the way it was starting to collapse when we got here. We won’t be able to get any closer than this tonight. If there’s any breeze, we’re going to have to tell people to keep their windows closed.” He held up crossed fingers. “And we could all move a bit further away, because we don’t want to breathe this crap.”

They duly moved away, reconvening behind the nearest fire engine. A woman appeared with a tray of steaming mugs which she passed around the firemen and included Eddy and Charlie. There was a mess of sugary spoons on the tray by the time she got to them, but the drinks were hot, wet, and didn’t taste of smoke. She clearly knew Kev Watchett, who promised faithfully to collect and return the empty mugs.

“I know you will, bach,” she said to Kev.

“Or you’ll tell Mam,” Kev said with a grin.

“I don’t suppose you saw anyone acting suspiciously last night?” Charlie asked her hopefully.

She laughed. “I’m in bed by ten, love.” She waved over at the houses. “But there’s a couple of younger ones who stay up later, and a house full of lads who work in the chicken place. Worth asking them. They do shifts.”

Charlie thanked her and put his finished mug back on the tray with a smile. He told Eddy to drink up. “Let’s go and find out if anyone saw anything useful.” Eddy grunted as he replaced his mug, and truthfully, Charlie didn’t have a lot of hope. Most people would have been asleep when the fire started, and those who weren’t would hardly have been staring out of their windows with a set of night vision binoculars. Still, the night was warm and clear; maybe they would get lucky. “We’ll start with the people here. Do you know who called it in?” he asked Watchett.

“Anonymous, English accent. I’ll get them to send the recording over.”

“Cheers,” Charlie said, then he and Eddy began questioning members of the public. Had they seen the fire start? Did they see anything suspicious? Did they own or work in one of the buildings? Did they know of any disputes that might lead to an arson attack?

They learned that the car parts firm had recently installed CCTV cameras — mainly to spy on their own employees, they were told by one of them, with some bitterness. “In case we go to the bog too often.” Charlie wondered if that lack of trust could lead to a disgruntled worker burning the warehouse to the ground but concluded that the staff were more likely to be laid off, than to get paid while the rebuilding went on. He made a note to check whether any of the cameras had survived the inferno, and where the recordings were kept — hopefully somewhere online, which could help determine the time the fire started.

He was about to set off to start knocking on the doors of the houses opposite, when a familiar voice assailed him. He spun round.

“Boss? What are you doing here?” Charlie asked.

Ravensbourne put her cigarette out on the floor and carefully stowed the stub back in the packet.

“This is the second fire in three days in the same small town. Of course I’m here. Where else would I be?”

Ravensbourne didn’t look as if she’d just got out of bed, though Charlie supposed that she could have napped during the drive from Wrexham. She interrupted his thoughts: “I was at a domestic violence incident when I heard. Some poor soul being harassed by a bloke she met on the internet. Victim’s a friend of a friend.”

He told her the little they had learned about the fire. “It could be an accident. Dodgy electrics in the car parts place. We were just off to see if anyone from the houses saw anything.”

Ravensbourne opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by Charlie’s phone. Mr Hassan’s name flashed up.

“I’m sorry to ring you so late,” he said. “But I thought you should know, there is someone moving around with lights in our new shop. I can see a light upstairs.”

“Are you calling from somewhere safe, Mr Hassan?” Charlie asked.

“I’m just outside the front door,” Hassan replied.

“Get across the street, please. Do not enter the shop. We’re on our way,” and beckoned to Eddy. He only realised Ravensbourne had followed, when he heard her get in the car behind him.

Tuesday morning, early

Eddy drove them back into town at speeds far exceeding the mandated twenty miles an hour, and by Charlie's reckoning, the journey took about ten seconds and involved several corners on two wheels. The car stopped outside the takeaway and Ravensbourne was out of the car first, with Charlie close behind.

Mr Hassan was on the opposite pavement, looking at his shop, which stood between The Crown pub and a haberdashery. It was a pretty part of town, nicer than the slightly run-down area where the old shop had been. Not that there was much distance between them. Looking along the street, Charlie detected the merest hint of pale pink in the eastern sky.

Mr Hassan pointed at his shop.

"Can't see anything now," he said. "But there was a light, and someone moving, I swear."

Hassan was fully dressed, albeit in a pair of yellow shorts and a polo shirt, with trainers on his feet. He shrugged. "I heard the sirens, so I came to check."

Charlie couldn't blame him. And it seemed that maybe Hassan had been right to do so -- if there was someone inside the supposedly closed shop. They all stared at the takeaway. Downstairs, the window was covered in advertisements for the food on offer. Upstairs the two windows were empty. Unlike the previous shop, this had only

two storeys.

“What’s upstairs?” Charlie asked.

“Storage, a bathroom, a room with an armchair and a kettle for breaks,” Hassan said.

The windows remained stubbornly dark.

“Have you been round the back?”

Hassan shook his head. “Not yet. The alley is very dark.”

Mmm. Dark alleys. Right up my street. It’s probably in the job description.

Ravensbourne gave Charlie a nod, and the two of them headed up the street and round the back of the terrace into the alley, which was indeed very dark. Charlie checked off the buildings as they walked by the light of their phone torches, watching where they put their feet on the uneven ground. A noise broke the early morning quiet. A cough. Charlie started forwards. Ravensbourne followed, moving faster than Charlie expected given the number of cigarettes she smoked. There was a clanging noise from along the alleyway, as if a steel door was being slammed. Charlie ran, flashing the torch on his phone, but there was no sign of anyone.

“This one,” he said. There had been no need to check the buildings. The steel gate had Llanfair Fast Food stencilled on it. Charlie tried the gate. It wasn’t locked.

“Police!” he shouted. “Show yourself!”

Silence, except for his own and Ravensbourne’s breathing.

Charlie shouted again.

Still nothing.

Ravensbourne pushed the gate open, shining her own torch into a neat yard, with three paladin bins along one side, and several empty five-gallon cooking oil containers next to them. The small rear windows of the shop reflected their torch light back at them. The back door was wood, painted red and also signed Llanfair Fast Food, the letters blurred where the stencil had slipped.

The yard was quiet and tidy, the air humid and still. There was no sign of life from within the building, but something was wrong. Charlie felt the hairs stand up on the back of his neck. He looked round again, and saw nothing different or disturbing: the bins, the oil containers, the stencilled door. The door Ravensbourne was about to open.

The door that was leaking the smell of gas.

“No!” he shouted, and sprang across the yard, grabbing his boss by the waist and pulling her backwards towards the gate. He got them through it, as the world turned upside down. The sheet of steel, with its crudely painted words, probably saved their lives.

Lightning-fast flames flashed out of the building pushing everything out of their way: bricks, door, windows, oil containers, bins. Heat rolled over him as he tried to protect Ravensbourne with his body, cowering under the small protection of the fallen steel gate. He felt his trousers burn, and the hairs on his legs, and then heard Eddy shouting, and sirens.

Behind him, Charlie could feel the building was aflame, burning hotter and more fiercely than the blaze three days before. Even the ground beneath him seemed to be on fire. He could hear the fire roaring, pulling the oxygen from the air. In the chaos, Charlie couldn't tell if Ravensbourne was alive or dead.

Suddenly, there was water. Vast high-pressure buckets-full of water, hammering on the steel door, dangerously hard, but dousing the flames licking around them.

“Help! Here!” he screamed about the clamour, his mouth and throat filling with water and smoke. He tried to shift, to crawl, to drag himself and Ravensbourne clear of the boiling debris.

And finally, voices, and hands shifting the gate and moving the bricks, lifting his body.

“Help the boss,” he gasped, as strong arms pulled him upright. “I’m OK, help her.”

Charlie began to shake, scorching pains gripping his ankles, unable to draw more than shallow breaths, but he could move. Sort of. Ravensbourne was still. “Help her,” he gasped again, and to his relief, paramedics with their big green bags of equipment appeared behind the firefighters and bent over the prone figure, feeling for a pulse and shouting over the noise. One of them turned to Charlie. “She’s alive,” and Charlie took another agonising breath, feeling tears of gratitude.

“She didn’t smell the gas,” he said.

“No, mate,” one of the firefighters said, and took Charlie under the arms, walking him away from the fire, towards the emergency vehicles at the end of the alleyway. “Let’s get you checked out.”

“I’m fine,” Charlie said, “just need a drink.”

“You’re shaking and your leg is burned,” the firefighter said. “Not fine. Tell him to get checked out.”

Charlie looked to see who the firefighter was talking to and saw Eddy and Patsy

between two fire engines. Patsy started forward, arms outstretched, a look of horror on her face.

“What happened? Oh, God, sarge, what happened?”

And all Charlie could think was what the hell is Patsy doing here?

Tuesday morning, still too early

As the adrenaline ebbed out of Charlie's body, his leg began to hurt even more. He peered down to see what the paramedic was doing and flinched at the sight of his reddened, blistered flesh. The paramedic looked up in alarm.

"What's hurting?"

Charlie took a deep breath and winced again. "As well as my leg? My chest," he said. "I must have landed badly or something when the explosion threw us across the yard."

"Let me get this sorted, then you can get an X-ray at the hospital," the paramedic said.

Yeah, no . Not going to happen. With Freya Ravensbourne being blue-lighted to A & E, he, Charlie, was the person in charge until HQ sent someone else.

"How's my boss?" Charlie asked. "Do you know any more?"

"Just that she was alive when they loaded her up," the paramedic said. "You can ask when you get to the hospital."

Charlie didn't have time to say he wasn't going anywhere before Eddy strode over, with what almost seemed to be panic on his face. He kept glancing back over his

shoulder, and Charlie realised he was watching Patsy.

“What’s Patsy doing here?” Charlie asked.

“Tell you later,” Eddy said. “I’ve just had a call from my mate Kev down at the trading estate. They’ve found what they are pretty sure is a body in a burned-out van at the back of the car parts place.”

Charlie took a couple of deep and very painful breaths. His immediate instinct was to rush back to the trading estate to see the scene, but was that the right thing to do? What was now doubly certain was that he wouldn’t be going to the hospital. He also had to deal with whatever was causing the look of panic on Eddy’s face. He put all the confidence he could muster into his voice.

“Ravensbourne must have had a driver,” he said to Eddy. “Find him and call Mags. One here and one at the trading estate to monitor who has access to the scenes. I’ll call the big boss and get the scenes of crime guys and the pathologist. And then, you are going to drive me back to the trading estate, and tell me about Patsy, and why you haven’t been to bed.”

Eddy’s face began to relax, until Charlie beckoned Patsy over. She came, looking exhausted: eyes red, face white, clothes crumpled. Charlie saw that her trainers were damp and grubby, despite the heat of the last few days. She had a small band aid covering the cut on her cheek.

Charlie called up his inner Ravensbourne: the one who issued orders rather than the one who asked for opinions. He probably looked like Ravensbourne, too. The paramedic had cut up the side seam of his trousers to be able to bandage his burned leg, and the rest of his clothes showed the signs of being rolled in debris.

“Eddy is going to walk you back to his mam’s when he’s made a couple of calls,”

Charlie told her. “And I want you to promise me that you won’t leave for the rest of the day. If you don’t, I’m going to arrest you. Your choice. I’m just too busy to deal with you now.”

The paramedic muttered something that could have been you’re going to regret this, but Charlie ignored it. He also ignored the way Eddy’s mouth fell open at the word arrest. “Make the calls,” Charlie said in Eddy’s direction, and Eddy got his phone out and moved away.

The paramedic was wrapping Charlie’s leg in what seemed to be greasy clingfilm. “You need to get this properly dressed.”

Charlie shook his head. “Sorry, mate, too much to do ... I’d appreciate some painkillers though. The good stuff.” Because exactly no part of his body didn’t hurt. Maybe his ears. Nope, they were still buzzing from the explosion. He tried to straighten himself up and all the muscles in his chest protested. The paramedic rocked back on his heels, and looked at Charlie through half closed eyes, seemingly assessing his state of mind. Whatever he saw, he reached into one of the green bags and produced a strip of tablets. Then he turned round to the ambulance and brought a bottle of water. He handed them both to Charlie.

“Take one of these now, and then one every four hours if you need to. Which you will. No more than that if you want to keep your head clear and get yourself to the hospital asap with that burn. Burns get infected. Infections kill.”

“Then wrap it up really, really well,” Charlie said, and then added, “Please.”

“I’m bloody glad you’re not my boss,” the paramedic said.

“I said please .”

They grinned at each other and Charlie took his painkiller.

The sun was now well over the horizon, and the sky was empty of clouds. It was going to be another hot day. Eddy came back to report that there was now a uniformed officer at each of the crime scenes. He took Patsy's arm, and she went with him unprotestingly. Charlie breathed a sigh of relief. One less thing to worry about. For now, at least. The paramedic clapped him on the arm, reminding him painfully of Ravensbourne. He hoped she would be OK.

"You're done, sunshine. Remember, hospital, as soon as." But Charlie was already standing up, his mind full of the things he had to do and the calls he had to make. He gasped as the weight landed on the burned leg, and the gasp made his chest twinge.

"Shit," he muttered. He turned back to the paramedic. "Got any crutches I can borrow?"

But the paramedic was already holding them out.

"I know," Charlie said. "Hospital, asap."

The paramedic laughed.

Charlie hobbled back to the site of the explosion with Eddy who walked ahead, looking over his shoulder as Charlie got used to the crutches. The takeaway was in ruins. Joists with the remains of the first floor and the roof, hung out over a pile of broken bricks, pieces of wood and twisted metal, all overlaid with a thick coating of dust. With a jolt of horror, Charlie saw the metal gate to the back yard of the shop. It too was twisted, and the thought that it was all that had stood between them and the pile of rubble made his blood run cold. He cleared his throat.

"We need scenes of crime to check there isn't anyone under this lot," he said.

Eddy nodded.

A man in a gas company uniform hurried up to them.

“This area isn’t safe,” he said. “Didn’t you see the signs?” Then he took in Charlie’s appearance. “You the copper who got caught up in that?”

Seeing that Charlie couldn’t manage his crutches and his ID, Eddy produced his and introduced them both.

“What happened?” Charlie asked.

“Too early to know. We’ve managed to turn the gas off, but it’s going to be a while before we know how the leak happened and what set it off.”

Then Charlie saw Mags, in uniform, with a clipboard. She came over.

“The gas company have blocked the High Street,” she said. “Lots of spectators, and a couple of reporters from the local papers. But the main thing is the owner. He wants to talk to whoever is in charge, which I guess is you. He’s a bit upset, just so you know.”

Upset turned out to be an understatement. Hassan had been crying. He waved his arms at Charlie. “All our work. Gone. For nothing. So white people can drive us out of our own country. What are you going to do about it, hey? Tell me, does one of my family have to die before you act?”

25

Tuesday morning

Nothing Charlie could say was going to console Hassan for the loss of his business, or for the fear that this was an attack targeting him and his family. Nonetheless, he said what he could, handed over a card and promised to check in later that day. It must have worked a little, because Charlie saw Hassan take in his dishevelled appearance and the bandage around his leg, showing where his trousers had been cut.

“I know you didn’t do this,” Hassan said. “I’m sorry you were hurt.”

Charlie’s phone rang.

Det Sup Kent

“Sir,” Charlie said.

“I’ve told people that you can cope without Freya Ravensbourne, so you’d better. Not that I have a handy DI hanging around waiting for a job. OK, Charlie?”

“Yes, sir,” Charlie said, wondering who had told Kent that Ravensbourne had been injured, and who the ‘people’ were who had been told that Charlie could cope.

“You’ll be reporting directly to me. Start with what the fuck happened this morning, because it’s too damn early for all this.”

Charlie took a deep breath and regretted it. “Call out to a fire at the trading estate just outside Llanfair at four this morning,” he began, and described the collapsing building. “I’ve just learned that the fire brigade has found what they say is a body in a burned-out van behind one of the buildings. I was on my way there now.”

“Called the pathologist?”

“Not yet, sir.”

“I’ll do it. I’ll tell him to meet you there. Now what about this explosion?”

“Hassan’s new takeaway. Mr Hassan called and said he saw someone in his shop, so Eddy, DI Ravensbourne and I went to investigate. I smelled gas, started to pull the DI away, and it blew up. I was about to arrange scenes of crimes to have a look round the debris, and the gas company are here already.”

“What next?”

“I’ll go and look at this alleged body, interview everyone we can find, and start collecting forensic evidence. I plan to check the alibis for everyone we already have on our radar: the fake fireman, Unwin’s family, Dylan, the Hassans, the people in the estate agent ... Patsy. And, sir, I’d like to know how DI Ravensbourne is doing.”

As Charlie spoke, Kent murmured good, good, in his ear, until he got to the end. There was a moment of silence. Charlie held his breath. Then Kent said, “I am told that Freya is awake, very battered and bruised, and thanking you for saving her life. As for the rest, ring me again in an hour.” The call ended.

Charlie sighed as gently as he could, so as not to awaken the pain in his chest.

“The boss is awake, and seems to be OK,” he told Eddy. “Let’s go and see what’s

going on with this dead body, and then you can talk to me about Patsy.”

How the fire officers had found the body, Charlie had no idea. The van was so thoroughly burned as to be barely recognisable as a vehicle.

“Absolutely soaked in petrol,” Kev Watchet told them. “It must have been, because for one, it stank of the stuff, and for two, it wouldn’t have gone up quite so comprehensively otherwise. We can tell it’s a camper because of the windows and a few remnants of kitchen, but there isn’t a lot left of any of it.”

The three of them contemplated the remains of the van. The number plates had melted, and there was nothing left of the windscreen. Identification was going to have to wait until they could get the van recovered and look for the chassis number. Which couldn’t happen if there was a dead body inside.

“And the body?” Charlie asked.

“In the back.” Kev nodded towards the back of the van.

Charlie considered going closer for a look and decided not to. “We’ll wait for the pathologist,” he said.

Kev nodded again. “Give me a shout if you need anything,” he said and left Charlie and Eddy with the skeleton of the van.

“Patsy,” Charlie said.

Eddy blushed. “I don’t know what she’s playing at. She kept me up half the night talking about bloody Unwin, then she said she was going to the bathroom. I must have fallen asleep in the chair. I thought I heard the front door close — it creaks — but I dozed a bit before I put it all together. Went to Patsy’s room and she wasn’t

there, or anywhere else in the house. I was out looking for her when she turned up at the takeaway. She said she needed a walk.”

Charlie contemplated this in silence. Patsy didn’t seem to care that she was in the frame for her boyfriend’s murder, but try as he might, he couldn’t square what he knew of Patsy with killing someone, or arson, come to that.

“It’s not her,” he said, “but if she carries on, she’s going to convince people she murdered Unwin, and started at least one of the fires.”

Eddy nodded, then yawned, which started Charlie yawning, too. “Coffee,” Charlie said, hoping Eddy would volunteer. In the event, he didn’t have to, because the woman with the tray appeared, as if summoned by rubbing Aladin’s lamp, with another tray of hot drinks.

“Look at the state of you,” she said to Charlie. “Whatever happened?”

Eddy supplied minimal details. “Gas leak at the new takeaway. Went off like a rocket.”

“So, that was the noise. I heard the bang and then more sirens,” she said. “It’s been quite a night.”

Which had to be the understatement of the decade.

The woman bustled off with her tray, promising to return with bacon sandwiches “for you boys, and that nice policeman by the gate.” The nice policeman was presumably Ravensbourne’s driver, and as Charlie and Eddy stood sipping their coffee, they heard him shout:

“You can just clear off, back to whatever hole you crawled out of ...”

Eddy sprinted and Charlie hobbled to see what was going on, which was the uniform pushing a man with a camera back towards the gate. Behind the man was a van with multiple antennae, and the logo of a commercial TV station painted on the side. The press had arrived.

Just before eight am, an articulated lorry arrived at the gate. The driver jumped down and began gesticulating for the gate to be opened.

“No can do, mate,” the uniformed officer said. “It’s a crime scene.”

“But I have delivery to make,” said the driver. “Oil, batteries.”

Eddy stepped forward. “If you were thinking of delivering them to the car parts place, it’s gone.” He showed the driver his ID and ushered him to where the destruction could be seen. The driver’s face dropped open in shock.

“I must deliver things,” he said, when he had himself back under control.

“There’s nowhere to deliver them to,” Eddy said. “You’ll have to take them back.”

“He can’t,” said a voice from the other side of the gate. Charlie saw a man wearing a pair of black trousers and a T-shirt with the slogan Mo’s Autoparts: Cheapest and Best . “The wagon is loaded in order. If he doesn’t unload our stuff, he can’t get at the next lot.”

“I hate to tell you,” Eddy said, “But that really isn’t something I can help with. The gate stays closed. This area is a crime scene, and you need to give me your names and addresses.” He produced his tablet to start noting them down. Both the driver and the man in the T-shirt looked worried, as did the four other people in the same T-shirts who arrived over the next few minutes. Eddy took all their names and addresses and ignored all the requests for information.

“If you don’t let us in, we won’t get paid,” a middle-aged woman said.

“I can’t help you with that, either,” Eddy said. “No one gets through the gate.”

Tuesday morning

Hector Powell, the pathologist, arrived less than an hour after the delivery wagon, together with a scenes of crimes team and a recovery vehicle for the burned-out van. The man with the camera tried to slip through the gate in the confusion, but the uniformed policeman had his wits about him. He did let their bacon sandwiches through though, for which Charlie was very thankful. The woman with the tray should be getting a bunch of flowers at the very least. Hector looked enviously at their sandwiches and muttered something about bloody diets as he shuffled himself into a white suit, overshoes and a less-than-flattering mask and cap. Charlie chewed and swallowed as quickly as he could.

Eddy went to collect Kev Watchet to show the pathologist and his assistant where he had found the body. There was no avoiding it this time, and Charlie followed. His leg had become a form of torture; he'd had to lean the crutches, and himself, against a wall so that he could eat and drink.

"That is indeed a body," Hector said. "And he or she is most certainly dead. Probably he, from the size, but I can't be sure."

Charlie flicked a few glances towards the remains of what had been a person but was now nothing but a charred lump of ... something he didn't want to think about. He cleared his throat.

Hector looked up.

“Can’t tell you anything, Charlie. I’ll do the PM as soon as I can, but for now, it’s probably a man and he’s definitely dead, is as good as it gets.”

“We need to know who he is — or rather was,” Charlie said.

“If he or she had any ID, it’s gone now,” Hector said. “Though if it comes to it, we can probably get DNA. Can’t you identify the van?”

Without licence plates or a Vehicle Identification Number, the answer was not yet. He and Eddy watched as Hector and his assistant delicately removed the remains from the van into a body bag. There was a collective sigh of relief from firefighters and police alike as the body bag was put into the mortuary van and driven away from the site. Charlie could hear shouted questions from the gate. The press were still there, then, and they would recognise the mortuary van. Dammit. He called Mags at the takeaway.

“We’ve got the press down here,” he said.

“Same,” Mags said, “and there’s only me. It’s all taped off, but they’ve taken lots of pictures. We need help, Sarge, or they’ll be in the building, collapsing and dangerous or not. I can’t keep them out on my own. The gas safety people are here now, but they are making noises about leaving soon.” Charlie heard the desperation in her voice.

“I’m sending Eddy,” he told her. “And ringing HQ for more bodies. Hang in there.”

Eddy had overheard the conversation, and headed towards the gate, ignoring the shouted questions from the media, who had increased in number. The sun had now well and truly risen, and Charlie could feel the heat beginning to build. A glance at his phone told him it was time to update Mal Kent, but he decided to organise the recovery of the burned-out van first, and that meant clearing the press and the lookie-

loos from around the gate. It wouldn't take a genius to realise that a mortuary van, followed by a low loader carrying the remains of a camper van, were probably related. And to get the gate area cleared meant getting more officers, which meant ringing Kent. With a sigh — instantly regretted as his chest twinged again — he got out his phone.

“We can't cope,” he said, when Mal Kent answered. “We've got the press hanging round both crime scenes, a lorry full of car parts trying to make a delivery, and half a dozen workers demanding to be let in. Plus, a body with no identification, on its way to the mortuary. We can't identify the burned-out van, because, well, it's burned out.”

“But apart from that, everything is fine?” Kent said.

Perfect, just peachy, thanks for asking.

“We need this body identified, and that means recovering the van, so we can get the chassis number,” Charlie said.

There was a silence from the other end, and then: “Just look underneath.”

“Leave it with me,” Charlie said.

“I'll send everyone I can find,” Kent said. “Get that address.” And ended the call.

Charlie gave himself a mental kick for thinking he would need to take the burned-out van back to the police yard before they could find the chassis number. He beckoned to one of the scenes of crimes officers, already dressed in his white suit, and explained what he needed. In turn, he called the driver of the recovery truck.

“Simple,” the driver said, and within a few minutes, the van was dangling in the air with a scenes of crimes officer looking (apprehensively) upwards to find, wipe clean,

and photograph the number. Then it was out from underneath and Charlie had what he needed.

The other thing he needed was to sit down, ideally somewhere cool, so he could calmly chase up a name and address for the owner of the van — who might very well be their victim. Instead, he was standing in the sun, crutches bringing up blisters on his hands, listening to the uniformed officer by the gate trying to placate the car parts workers and the press. He called Will Wayward in technical services at HQ.

“I know it’s not exactly your job, but we’re stretched to breaking point, and I need the name and address for this vehicle,” he said.

Charlie heard Will rattling the computer keys, and then,

“Mr Joshua Cameron Pettifor, Thirteen Harvard Close, Colwyn Bay.”

“Thanks, Will. Could you email the information to the Chief Super?”

“No problem,” Will answered, and Charlie thought, no, it probably wasn’t. Will was that kind of person. Unwin had been that kind of person, too. The thought that someone had killed his colleague was a miserable ache.

Suddenly there was a yell from the back of the Mo’s Autoparts building. Charlie hobbled towards the noise. The camper van was now settled and strapped on to the recovery vehicle. The driver and the two scenes of crimes investigators were looking at a pile of debris with horror.

“What is it?” Charlie asked.

“It was a cage holding gasses for air-conditioning systems. If the fire had lasted another thirty seconds, the whole lot would have gone up like a rocket. You think the

camper van is a mess now? It would have been pulverised.”

Tuesday morning

Despite the painkillers, Charlie's leg ached, and his chest hurt. He was already too damn hot, and all he was doing was — nothing. Watching the SOCOs poke around among the rubble, listening to the grumblings from the gate and waiting for Kent to call him back. In the meantime, no one was co-ordinating anything. They were just reacting, and it wasn't working. Charlie's head was awash with things he should be checking up on, scheduling, writing down ... he wanted his whiteboard and to get off his feet. None of the promised reinforcements had arrived, so he called Tom. There would be a fuss, but needs must.

“Could you do me a favour,” Charlie asked, “and not get angry?”

Which was probably entirely the wrong thing to say, because it put Tom on instant alert. But then, he was going to ask Tom to drive him a distance that he could have easily walked in fifteen minutes.

“Could you meet me by the entrance of the Llanfair Trading Estate and drive me to the police station? And could you bring me a clean set of work clothes?”

“Ten minutes,” was all Tom said and ended the call.

Charlie made his way slowly and painfully to the gate. The reporters jumped to attention when they saw him, yelling questions and getting as close as they could with their cameras. He supposed his obvious injuries were the most interesting thing

to happen since the departure of the mortuary van. The Mo's Autoparts workers were now sitting on the grass verge, staring at their phones. They looked up hopefully. Charlie rested his bottom on the nearest wall. The uniformed officer came over and asked if Charlie was OK.

"No. But there's nothing else I can do here. I'm getting a lift to the station. I've asked for reinforcements, and they should arrive soon. I hope."

The uniform leaned closer, so the journalists couldn't overhear. "Any word on the boss?"

"The DI? Awake and talking, according to the Chief Super," Charlie said.

"I've been driving her about for a few years now," the uniform said. "Funny woman, but damn good at the job."

"I like her, too," Charlie said. "Do you know which of the autoparts crew is in charge?"

The uniform shook his head. "That woman with the tight T-shirt had the keys, because the manager had the day off. I'm pretty sure they've called him though. Someone called Mitchell. Surprised he wasn't here last night when it all went up."

Charlie was surprised, too. In his experience, a fire alarm would automatically call the manager to the site. Something else to add to his list.

Tom's car drew up, alerting the journalists again.

"Don't say anything ," Charlie said. Something in his tone must have been convincing. Either that or Tom caught sight of the cameras. Neither of them had any love for the boys and girls of the fourth estate. He got into the car with some

difficulty, throwing the crutches in before him, and Tom drove away from the gate, his mouth set in a grim line. “I’m OK,” Charlie said.

“You’re obviously not. You look like death warmed up. On crutches.”

Death warmed up was entirely the wrong phrase, but Charlie wasn’t going to share the image of the burned man with Tom. They didn’t both need to have nightmares. “Well, not completely OK, but mostly,” he said.

“I’m taking you home,” Tom said. “Don’t argue.”

“I have to go to work,” Charlie said. “Really, no choice. Sorry.”

Tom turned his head and looked Charlie in the eye. “You can go to work after you’ve had a meal and a drink and a wash. You’re an adult. I’m not going to argue about it.” He wanted to, though, Charlie could tell.

Charlie remembered just in time not to take a deep breath before he spoke.

“I got blown up,” he said. “I’ve got a burn on my leg under this bandage, and I think I’ve cracked a rib or two. It all hurts like hell, but I would love five minutes with you, and something to eat before I get back to it. I’m going round in circles, and I need to stop.”

In a very tightly controlled voice, Tom asked how and when Charlie had been blown up.

“It was a gas explosion at Hassan’s takeaway. Almost certainly not an accident. Mr Hassan called us because he’d seen a person moving about inside just before it all went to custard.”

“Someone’s got it in for the Muslims, then?”

Now it was Charlie’s turn to stare at his husband. “Muslims?”

“Hassan’s Takeaway and Mo’s Autoparts. I’m assuming Hassan is also a Muslim.”

“Jesus,” Charlie breathed.

Tom grinned. “Definitely not him. But since you ask, yes, Mo is short for Mohamed. It’s a national firm. One of the biggest in the UK.”

“Those are probably the only two Muslim-run businesses in this area of Wales,” Charlie said.

Could it be a coincidence that they were both targeted on the same night? Was this all the work of their fake fireman, along with the graffiti and the bogus social media posts? If it was, how did Unwin’s murder fit? Could that have been Patsy after all, in a fit of jealousy? No, he wouldn’t believe that.

“I need to check who owns the trading estate site,” he said, wanting a few minutes with Tom, but wishing for his whiteboard, or even a piece of paper, so he could get his thoughts in order. Maybe saying things aloud would stop him forgetting.

“I can answer that,” Tom said. “It’s the Art College, though we don’t have anything to do with the businesses there. We rent the land out, and it’s managed by an agent.”

“Here in Llanfair?”

Tom shrugged. “No idea. But that’s how I know that Mo is Mohamed, though I can’t remember his surname. I have to sign off the accounts each year, and they are on the list of tenants, showing the business name and the owners. I can find out if you like.”

Tom parked outside their house, and jogged round to the passenger door to help Charlie out, along with his crutches.

“I suppose I’d be wasting my breath if I suggested a trip to the nearest hospital?” he asked.

“I’ll go as soon as I can,” Charlie said. If he meant, so that he could talk to Freya Ravensbourne, rather than have the doctors poking and prodding him, that was something Tom didn’t need to know. “And yes, I’d be interested to see anything you’ve got about the trading estate.” Charlie was embarrassed by how much of Tom’s help he needed to get into the house, and very glad to sink into his favourite armchair, blessedly free of teen-girl clutter. Tom had gone into the kitchen when Charlie’s phone rang.

Will Wayward

“Hi Will,” Charlie said.

“That address I gave you for your camper van? No use. No one with a camper van lives there. So, I got on to the DVLA with the name, and I’ve got a driving license address for the same guy, here in Wrexham. Thought you might want to visit yourself. Or I could go.”

Charlie couldn’t help his groan. “I can’t. I’ve burned my leg and I’m on crutches. Not sure I can drive to be honest.”

“No problem,” Will said, sounding surprisingly chirpy. Was this the same Will who liked to spend his days in darkened rooms staring at computer screens? Apparently it was. “Everyone keeps telling me how nice it is outside. Maybe it’s time I went to have a look.”

Tuesday, getting towards lunchtime ...

When Tom returned from the kitchen with a plate of sandwiches and fruit, Charlie had almost fallen asleep, thanks to the effects of the early morning and his injuries. But he dragged his way back to full consciousness and took the proffered plate. Tom sat down beside him and helped himself to a sandwich.

“Hey, I thought those were for me?”

“The rest of them are, mostly,” Tom said, and took another.

Charlie put the plate out of his husband’s reach. The bacon sandwiches brought by the nice woman to the trading estate seemed a long time ago. “I’ve got some pills,” he said. “Painkillers from the paramedics. You couldn’t get me a drink?”

“I could,” Tom said and went back into the kitchen.

“So, attacks on Muslim-run businesses?” Tom asked when he came back Charlie swallowed a pain pill, because surely it had been four hours since the last one?

“It looks that way,” Charlie said. “Only two Muslim-run businesses in Llanfair.”

“But you’re not convinced.”

Charlie remembered that his husband wasn’t someone to take things at face value,

any more than he was himself.

“How many people know that the takeaway and the car parts place are run by Muslims? I mean, I didn’t know about the car parts place, and you only know because the Art College owns the land. And how does Unwin’s murder fit? I can’t make it add up.” But Charlie also knew that the media would force it to fit, because attacks on Muslim-run businesses would make a coherent story, when allied to the graffiti and the social media posts about refugees coming to Llanfair.

“What you don’t know,” he continued, “is that there was another body. In the fire at the trading estate. No ID yet, but I refuse to believe we’ve got two lots of arsonists and murderers running about the place. And I’m worried about Patsy.” As he spoke, Charlie realised that his concern about Patsy had been lurking at the back of his mind all day, nagging at him like a sore tooth.

“Patsy?” Tom asked.

“She keeps turning up, making herself look like a suspect ... all Unwin’s family are determined that she killed him out of jealousy. She says she wasn’t jealous. Is it possible not to be jealous? Is jealousy part of the human condition?”

Tom leaned back on the sofa, tilted his head upwards as if seeking the answer from the ceiling. “The girls are jealous of each other, but I wasn’t jealous of my siblings. I’m trying not to be jealous that you work with a hunk like Eddy ...”

Charlie snorted.

Tom sat up. “Come on, he’s a feast for the eyes compared to me.”

Charlie stared at his husband in amazement. “You can’t be serious. Eddy? ”

Tom blushed. “That’s the point, though, isn’t it? Rationally, I know you love me, but on the other hand, you spend all day with a guy who is much younger and fitter than me, who shares your working life and understands what you do in a way that I never will.”

Whereas , thought Charlie with a pang of self-awareness, I am not at all jealous of anyone at the college of art, but I am jealous of the attention Tom gives to the girls.

“So perhaps Patsy isn’t jealous of most of Unwin’s partners, but might be upset by someone new? Or not bothered by a casual hookup but not prepared to put up with something more serious.”

“Possibly the other way round,” Tom suggested.

“The problem is, I don’t believe it,” Charlie said. “I mean, I suppose I can believe Patsy could be jealous, whatever she says, but I don’t believe she would kill Unwin. I can’t get past that, no matter how much I try to make myself.”

Tom came and sat on the arm of Charlie’s chair and leaned over so that his beard brushed Charlie’s cheek. “Trust that instinct. My experience is that you are generally right.” He beamed at Charlie. “About crime things anyway.”

Charlie twisted around so that he could kiss Tom, and as their bodies touched, the pain disappeared, and he felt warm and loved. In different circumstances, he imagined suggesting they adjourn to bed. Only the circumstances were not different. His body hurt, he had a killer to catch, and the trail did not lead up their stairs, or if it did, it was for fresh clothes and nothing else.

“Dammit,” he said. “I really do have to go back.”

Tom sighed and stroked Charlie’s hair. “Eat some more and then I’ll help you get

changed and run you to the cop shop, or wherever you have to go next.”

The phone buzzed while Charlie was sitting on the side of the bed, wondering miserably whether anyone would comment if he went back to work in shorts, while knowing that it wasn't an option.

“Will,” he said. “What have you got?”

“I found somewhere else your camper van owner doesn't live,” Will said. “Because he apparently lives in the van itself. He did live at the address on his driving licence, but not any more, and to be honest, I don't blame him. Urgh.” Charlie heard the shudder over the phone. “One of the most hostile women I've met in a long time. Most hostile person in fact.”

“Tell me more.”

“I'm probably exaggerating. She didn't want to talk about camper van guy, except to say that he was using her for an address and somewhere to park. I think she'd hoped for something more, but it didn't happen, but she still got mail for him, and reading between the lines, the occasional booty call.”

“So, if he didn't live there, where did he park his van?”

Will sighed. “At work. Specifically at Mo's Autoparts in Llanfair. Apparently, the manager there let him plug into the electrical supply. He wasn't full time, but he was friends with the manager, and filled in on the weekend, or for holiday cover. The rest of the time he was supposed to be writing a book. I got this whole tirade about how living in the van gave him freedom, which Ms Hostile said was mostly freedom to shag other women, seeing as there was never any sign of an actual book ... you get the picture.”

Charlie did. Jealousy again. The trail had come full circle back to the trading estate. Was their victim camper van guy? It was the obvious solution. Time to get to the police station, a computer and his whiteboard.

“See what else you can find out about camper van guy,” Charlie said to Will. “He might not have an address now, but he must have had one once, and a birth certificate, a passport, parents or siblings, or something.”

29

Tuesday lunchtime

Before Charlie had time to move, his phone rang again, and this time it was Mal Kent.

“Sir,” Charlie said.

“Are you co-opting all my staff, or just a few?” Kent said.

Charlie didn’t answer. What answer could he give?

“Will Wayward hasn’t left the office in daylight hours in living memory,” Kent said, “but you have him checking up on missing persons.”

“Fair play, he volunteered,” Charlie said. “Sir.”

“Don’t start with the sir stuff,” Kent sighed. “I know you don’t mean it. I’m sending Will over to give you a hand, and there are half a dozen uniforms on their way as well. You’re going to need them. The press office has been inundated with calls about a second fire, and another body. The liberal press is convinced it’s hate crime against Muslims, and the rest of them just want the details, as gory as possible. And I’m getting grief from the local MP, and some bloke from the UK government about Mo’s Autoparts. Reading between the lines, Mo has a lot of friends in high places.” Kent sighed again.

“You’re saying: get this cleared up by this evening,” Charlie said.

“At the very latest.” Kent said. “Between you and Will, you should be able to ID the body, and then get Will onto finding your fake fireman. If it is a hate crime, we need to know, and we need arrests. If it isn’t, we are going to need a lot of proof that it isn’t. This is all about to get very political.”

“Got it,” Charlie said.

Thankfully, Tom came upstairs to help Charlie get the worst of the grime off his face and body — a shower being contra-indicated by the bandages. He felt much better in clean clothes, and better still once the pain pill started to work. Tom wrapped the handles of the crutches in soft dishcloths and together they went out into the heat of the day and drove to the police station.

The place was deserted, and very stuffy. Opening the windows did little to reduce the heat, but Tom uncomplainingly collected a couple of fans from upstairs in Charlie’s office and brought them down to the break room. He dragged the whiteboard out from behind the door, and propped it up, so that Charlie could write on it without standing up.

Charlie had started assembling coloured markers, and barely noticed as Tom kissed him goodbye and promised to be back in an hour with supplies of yet more food and drink.

When Will arrived soon afterwards, Charlie was in one of the armchairs, staring at the grid he had drawn on the board. On the left-hand side were a list of names: Patsy, Jeff ‘Britton’, Hassan, Mo, Dylan, AN Other(s), and across the top, the events: Fire in empty shop, Graffiti, Unwin’s murder, Gas explosion at takeaway, Fire at Mo’s Autoparts, Camper van man, Social media posts. Where he could, Charlie had filled in people’s whereabouts. There was a lot of information scribbled in all the boxes

next to Patsy's name.

"You need a proper spreadsheet for that," Will said, flopping down into the next chair.

"I like to see it all in one place," Charlie said. "And not on a tiny screen. I think there's something about the process of writing, rather than typing, that helps, too."

"Fair enough," Will said, and contemplated the whiteboard. "You need something about access," he said after a few minutes. "As in access to the buildings. The two shops in town, and the buildings on the trading estate. Because if you couldn't get in, you couldn't start a fire."

"I looked at access after the first fire, but haven't had time to check again," Charlie said.

Will picked up a green pen and began to look at the columns. "Difficult to see how Patsy could get into all these buildings."

"She was there, though," Charlie said miserably. "She could certainly have started the first fire."

"So could your fake fire officer," Will said, "And don't firefighters have keys to almost every lock, in case of emergencies?"

Charlie shook his head. He thought firefighters probably did have keys to a lot of buildings, but the key they probably used most often was an axe, or the kind of battering ram beloved of early morning police raiders.

"I'm assuming you've included Hassan and Mo on the list in case they were insurance jobs?" Will asked.

Charlie nodded. Though the notion that two businesses would set fire to their own premises in the same week stretched likelihood to breaking point and beyond. It also didn't make sense for Hassan to set fire to his empty shop before blowing up the newly refurbished takeaway, and he said as much to Will.

"I'll go and find out if either of them was about to go bankrupt," Will said, and stood up.

"Start with our second victim," Charlie said.

"My bad," Will said, and scrabbled about in his pocket until he produced a carefully folded piece of paper. "A factsheet on Joshua Cameron Pettifor for your delectation and delight. None of which answers the question of whether it was him in the fire. Right, I'm off upstairs to sit at a computer."

Joshua Cameron Pettifor

DOB: 3 rd August 1994

Address: NFA (lives in camper van)

Education: St David's School, Wrexham (left 2012)

Uni of Liverpool (completed first year of English lit degree, left 2014)

Occupation: former online journalist, writer, part time driver (Mo's Autoparts)

Next of kin: Ella Williams, spouse, Flat 5, Artemis Court, School Street, Wrexham, married 2017

Children: not known (Ella Williams has a son, aged 7. No father's name given)

Distinguishing marks: none

Eye colour: blue

Hair colour: brown

Height: 5'11"

Phone numbers were given for both Pettifor and Ella Williams. Charlie rang Pettifor's number, but the only answer was a robotic voice telling him that the number was not in service. He was about to call Ella Williams when Tom walked in.

"I bring food and information," he said, lifting a supermarket bag. "There are cakes, but there is also salad. Eat the salad first."

"Yes, boss," Charlie said. "What's the information?"

"I called in to work and looked up the trading estate. One of the estate agents here in town actually manages it for us: Huw Jones from Jones and Company. I bought our house from them when I came here. What's this?" Tom picked up the paper with Pettifor's information.

"Police business is what it is," Charlie said, though he was smiling as he spoke.

Tom gave him the paper. "I just saw the name Josh and thought it was Patsy's bloke."

"No, this is another Josh."

"One of Unwin's classmates? Weren't there supposed to be four of them?"

There were indeed, but surely that would be another unlikely coincidence. Wouldn't

it?

Charlie's leg hurt too much to hop his way up the stairs, so he sent Will a text.

Was Joshua Pettifor in Unwin's class at school?

30

Tuesday afternoon

Tom showed Charlie a plastic box of salad. There was cheese, and potatoes, plus lots of green leaves and tomatoes Charlie suspected came from their own garden. He didn't want to eat salad, he wanted sugary stuff, but it was nice to be looked after.

"Lunch, eat the salad. I'll put it in the fridge, along with some cakes. Salad before cake," he said. "I've got to go, Orianna wants to video call, dunno why. Says it's important and wants to talk while the girls are out."

Charlie's stomach lurched, just a little, at the thought of the twins' return. It would be good to get the case wrapped up before they came back so he and Tom could have some time together. At the moment it wasn't looking likely.

"OK," he said, and Tom left.

A minute later he was back.

"Sorry to add to your burdens, but there are a bunch of nazis outside, with some rather unpleasant placards."

Charlie's phone pinged. Will.

"Joshua P was one of the four Joshes. And did you know there's an anti-police demonstration in the street?"

I do now.

With Tom's help, Charlie struggled to his feet, and they climbed the stairs slowly to the CID room which had a window to the front. Outside were about a dozen people, mostly middle-aged white men, shuffling up and down with placards. One read: Cops protect foreign criminals — what about us? Another: Give us our country back. Some of the protestors wore scarves over their faces, along with heavy boots and black clothes.

"They must be boiling," Charlie said. "I hope they melt." He snapped a couple of pictures on his phone and called Mal Kent.

"There's a van full of uniforms on their way," Kent told him. "They'll be with you any time now."

Suddenly there was a crash and shouting from outside. The three of them crowded around the window. It wasn't clear what had made the noise, but some of the black-clad men were shouting at the driver of a car, who was yelling back. Another car, stuck behind, began to blow its horn. Charlie looked at Will, who looked about as keen as Charlie felt about going out into the heat to attempt to calm things down.

"Radio, body cam, hi-vis, baton," Charlie said, and began to limp his way to the rail of equipment by the door.

"You're surely not going out?" Tom said. "No way."

"That's what they pay us for," Charlie said. "Give me a hand into this jacket."

Tom's expression could only be described as mulish, but he did hold the jacket. Which was when the police van arrived, almost blocking the street, as six uniformed officers piled out and began to separate the protestors from the angry driver, waving

him on, along with the cars behind.

“Thank God,” Tom said, and hung the yellow jacket back up on the rail.

“I’ve still got to go and talk to them,” Charlie said. “And you’d better go and talk to Ori.”

In the end, it was Will who went to find out what was what with the uniforms and the protestors, returning with a Sergeant Susie Clement, who Charlie knew from his own days in uniform. She had seemed middle-aged to him then; now she must be coming up to retirement. But she still looked fit, and more than a match for a few masked placard-wavers.

“Social media,” Susie said disgustedly. “It doesn’t matter how many messages we put out, dickheads like that crewage would still rather believe some rando on the internet.” She flopped into a chair, flapping a hand in front of her face in an attempt to create a draught. “It’s the weather. Brings all the half-wits out from under their stones. Now, what about these murders?”

With a growing sense of relief, Charlie explained where the two crime scenes were, and arranged for some of Susie’s uniforms to keep them secure, releasing Eddy and Mags to have a break.

“So, you’re the boss, now,” Susie asked with a grin. “Young Charlie Rees, with his own police station. Who’d a thunk it?”

Charlie pulled a face. “Not doing such a great job today,” he said.

“You’ll get it sorted,” she said. “I have it on the best authority: the Chief Super says you saved Freya Ravensbourne’s life and so you can do no wrong.”

If only.

Susie bustled off to see whether she could persuade the protestors to go home, leaving Charlie and Will.

“Bring a laptop downstairs,” Charlie said, “because I want my whiteboard, and you want a computer, and it’s cooler down there. Also, there’s cake in the fridge. You might not want any, but I do.”

Will found that he could eat some cake but refused coffee in favour of mint tea. He showed Charlie the details of the four Joshes: Unwin, Joshua Pettifor, Josh Lineham and Josh Thomas. All had been at school together in Wrexham at the same time, and now one, probably two of them, were dead. Josh Lineham lived in Manchester, Josh Thomas in St Asaph.

“So, is the killer targeting Joshes?” Will asked. “Because if so, I’ve fallen into an Agatha Christie, and not even a very good one.”

“Same,” Charlie said. “I don’t believe it, but we should get hold of them anyway. Find out if they’ve had anything odd happen over the last few weeks. Find out if they were in touch with each other. I mean, it’s completely bonkers, but we can’t ignore it.”

“The other thing I did was have a quick look at the finances of the Hassans and Mo’s Autoparts. Mo’s is showing a healthy profit. Hassan’s not so much, but they must have spent a lot refurbishing the new premises. Neither look like candidates for insurance fraud.”

Charlie nodded. “I’m going to ask the forensics guys to make sure Hassan’s takeaway still had all its expensive new equipment before it blew up,” he said. “Just in case. Then, as soon as Eddy gets here, I’m going to see DI Ravensbourne.”

Tuesday afternoon

The urge to see Ravensbourne with his own eyes had been building ever since Charlie had watched the ambulance take her away after the explosion. He absolutely believed everyone who told him that she was going to be OK, but that wasn't the same as being able to ask her for himself. Charlie felt responsible for not having got her out of the way sooner, though rationally he knew that hadn't been possible. She was a heavy smoker, with the reduced sense of smell that created. He had smelled the gas and reacted straight away. He couldn't have done any more. Rationally . It was also dawning on Charlie how much he appreciated having Ravensbourne as a sounding board. He was generally left to his own devices in Llanfair, to run the little police outpost in his own way. But if there was any kind of serious or major crime, Ravensbourne was the senior officer in charge. She gave orders, and sometimes he didn't like them, but she always listened to his ideas before deciding on the next step. If she was wrong, she admitted it. If she was right, she didn't gloat. The police was not a democracy, but Freya Ravensbourne was at heart, a democrat.

Charlie contemplated taking an extra painkiller and driving himself to the hospital, but common sense prevailed. Eddy would get him there quickest, but Eddy was needed here. Tom was dealing with whatever Orianna wanted, and all the uniforms were busy keeping the crime scenes safe from nazis and reporters. So, he rang for a taxi.

Most people look diminished in a hospital bed. Not Freya Ravensbourne. Charlie found her sitting up, blankets tossed back, wearing a pair of flannelette pyjamas in a

purple checkered pattern, with a multicoloured shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Her face looked as if she had been in an explosion: red and blotchy, with patches of dark bruising and healing scratches, head wrapped in a turban of bandage. Oddest of all, she was holding hands with a long-haired man in jeans and some kind of artist's smock, who was sitting on the chair beside her bed. She had a private room, not large, and almost cosy with a cheerily curtained window with a view out onto the tiny patients' garden. Ravensbourne looked up as Charlie entered the room, and her face brightened through the bruises, though he could see it was painful for her to smile.

"Charlie," she said. "What happened to you?"

"A burn on my leg, nothing serious."

Ravensbourne didn't look convinced. "If you say so. This is my partner, Gavin." The long-haired man stood up and offered Charlie his hand.

"It's great to meet you. Thank you for what you did today. That was too close for comfort. For you, as well, by the looks of it."

Charlie shook hands. Gavin's was warm and roughened as if from manual work. "I'll leave you two in peace, to talk," Gavin said, and left the room. At a wave from Ravensbourne, Charlie took his vacated seat, leaning his crutches against the wall.

Charlie realised he was gaping like a fool. He dragged his wits back from wherever they had gone. "How are you, boss?" he asked.

"Alive, but concussed, and as you see, rather bashed about. They'll let me go tomorrow. I'm in your debt for saving my life and don't think I'm going to forget it."

Charlie blushed. "You would have done the same."

Ravensbourne just looked at him, making him blush harder. Then she smiled. “You may be sure that Gavin has pointed out that smoking very nearly killed me this time. I am now sporting a nicotine patch. I have been told that my cigarette days are over. I suppose I should be thankful.”

There was no answer to this, and anyway, Charlie was still struggling with the idea of Ravensbourne with a romantic partner. “I ... um ... he seems nice.”

“Yes. He is.” Ravensbourne smiled, and Charlie thought she was enjoying his discomfort, dammit. Why shouldn’t she have a bloke? “Now, Charlie, delightful as it is to see you, I sense you have a purpose beyond meeting Gavin. Care to share?”

Charlie told himself, for the second time, to get a bloody grip. “I wanted to run things past you, boss. I know you aren’t on duty, but if you don’t mind, I’d be grateful.”

“Tell me,” she said, and despite the bruises, the familiar Freya Ravensbourne was back.

Charlie described finding the second body and its likely identity, the arrival of the protestors, the possible Muslim connection between the two fires, Will’s suggestion that whoever had set the fires needed to have access to the buildings, their failure to find Jeff Britton, and even how Patsy kept appearing at the crime scenes. Ravensbourne shuffled back against her pillows, so that she sat more upright.

“Ow,” she said, “Bugger these bruises. Now then. Four Joshes. What have they got in common apart from their name?”

“They must have known each other. They were at school together.”

“Doesn’t mean anything. Who are you still in touch with from school?” Charlie’s answer must have shown on his face: no one. “Quite. Unwin was a police officer; this

Pettifor was, by all accounts, a waste of space. You need to talk to his co-workers and his boss. Find his family. See if he and Unwin did know each other. Come on, Charlie, you know this. And obviously get in contact with the other two Joshes if you haven't already. Get onto Hector Powell for the post mortem report on the second body. Did he die in the fire? Or was he dead already?" She paused. "Then Jeff Britton stroke Burton. Do whatever you need to do to find him. That's a priority. Get Mal Kent's help. If you want my opinion, Burton is a troublemaker and needs stopping. Will could be right about access, and firefighters have to be good at getting into buildings. Though you might find out if anyone else had access. Worst case scenario, Burton's a witness. Get Will onto who's behind all this social media crap. What else? Patsy. Do you think she's involved?"

"No, boss."

"Well then. Stop worrying about her and concentrate on the others. Now , please, because I'm getting a headache. Gavin will be outside. Tell him he can come back. And get that leg seen to on your way out. You look worse than I feel."

Ravensbourne had gone pale underneath her bruises and Charlie felt guilty for making her think about the case. He stood up. "I'm sorry. I hope you feel better." He realised he was hovering but couldn't find a way to stop. Ravensbourne provided it.

"Go," she said, so he went. Gavin was outside as predicted, sipping a drink from a paper cup. He looked up as Charlie approached, and smiled.

"Thanks again for what you did," he said, and then he clapped Charlie on the arm, exactly as Ravensbourne did, with the force of a baseball bat connecting with the ball.

32

Tuesday afternoon

Charlie stopped at the nurses' station on his way past and asked for directions to the minor injuries unit. The nurse behind the desk gave him both a concerned look, and directions, then called him back.

"Were you in that explosion as well?" she asked.

Charlie said that he was, and that he had a burn on his leg. He didn't mention his ribs. There was nothing to be gained from proving they were damaged.

"Let me have a look." She directed Charlie to a small room behind the nurses' station. Judging from the coats and lunchboxes on most of the chairs, it was the nearest thing to a break room. He limped in and sat down. Hobbling round the hospital in search of Ravensbourne hadn't done him any good. He rolled up his trouser leg and revealed the bandage, which was looking a bit damp.

The nurse tutted as she removed the bandage. "Did you get any antibiotics?"

Charlie produced the painkillers. "Just these."

She tutted some more.

"Fair play," Charlie said, "I did promise to come here as soon as I could, and here I am."

“Well, you’re bloody lucky there’s no sign of an infection, and even luckier that I can prescribe. I’m on loan from minor injuries. Stay there.”

Charlie sat with his leg up, thinking about all the things he should be doing, until the nurse returned carrying a tray with cotton wool, bandages and tape, plus some stainless steel implements he didn’t want to look at. She cleaned and re-bandaged his leg. The implements were for holding cotton wool, he was pleased to discover, though he didn’t want to look at the nasty mess of his burned skin. He told himself that if he didn’t look, it wouldn’t hurt. Wrong. Next up, a needle and syringe.

“Are you allergic to penicillin?” she asked, and when he shook his head, she told him to roll his sleeve up. “This is a big dose to get you started, and I’ve got some tablets for you to take from tomorrow morning. If it gets infected, it could kill you. Don’t say you weren’t warned.”

Charlie felt the needle go into the muscle in his upper arm and couldn’t help a small squeak. Then he said thank you and thank you again when she gave him the antibiotic pills, and once more for the drink of water to take another painkiller. It did all feel more comfortable, but even as she advised him to go home to bed, he could see that she knew he wouldn’t. As he hopped on his crutches away down the corridor, he could hear the tutting behind him. He just hoped the painkillers would start working again soon.

Dictating into his mobile phone as he sat in the back of the taxi to Llanfair was obviously possible—Mal Kent could probably do it without embarrassment—but Charlie wasn’t sure he could. So he rang Eddy, back at the police station, and let him write everything down.

“Get on to Hector Powell and find out when he’s doing the PM, then either you or Will ring the other two Joshes if you haven’t already. If anything sets an alarm bell ringing, we’ll go and see them. Make an appointment for me to meet whoever is in

charge at Mo's Autoparts, and another with Pettifor's ex. Someone should talk to his parents, too. It almost certainly is him, but no confirmation yet, so be gentle. Main priority is finding Jeff Burton, aka Britton. Ravensbourne suggests asking the Chief Super for help, so I'm going to ring him next."

He got all this out without stopping.

"Sarge, wait," Eddy said. "Stay where you are. Like, at the hospital. Dr Powell rang just after you left. He says if you go to the mortuary now, he'll do the PM. A sort of while-u-wait job."

Charlie leaned over into the front and asked the taxi driver to take him back the way they'd just come.

"Whatever you say, mate," the driver said and swerved into the first side street, jerking Charlie's ribs against his seat belt.

Jeez, that hurts.

"You couldn't have sent me a text?" he asked when he had his breath back.

"Erm, I did, and it's shown as delivered," Eddy said. "Hey, did you see Ravensbourne's fella? What's he like?"

"Gotta ring the big boss," Charlie said and ended the call. Because while he was annoyed that Eddy apparently knew that the DI had a boyfriend and he hadn't, he was damned if he was going to gossip about the guy.

"Sir, DI Ravensbourne suggested I ask for your help," he said when he got past Mal Kent's secretary to the man himself.

“Did she? From her hospital bed?”

“She seems to be doing well,” Charlie said. “It’s this Jeff Burton, the fake fire officer,” he continued. “We don’t have the resources to find him, even with Will’s help. We know his real name, and that he’s probably in touch with whoever’s behind a lot of the social media stuff, but he’s disappeared. Could be somewhere near Llanfair — I think he probably did the graffiti.”

There was a silence from the other end. Then a sigh. “Leave it to me. Sorry, Charlie. Unwin would have nailed him down in a heartbeat. Just brought it back.”

It brought it back to Charlie, too. He’d investigated other murders, and they were all awful. Unwin had been a colleague rather than a friend, but this was personal. Someone had been ripped out of his life, and out of the life of too many others. That had to be why Patsy was wandering the streets of Llanfair in the middle of the night. Nothing made any sense. When Tom had been shot, half of Charlie had carried on operating as a detective, while the other half could think of nothing but his injured lover — and that half was agony. Now he had to go and see the remains of another victim, watch as Hector Powell poked and prodded, and then he would get to go and ruin more lives with I’m sorry to have to tell you but your son, brother, husband, father is dead ... Sometimes his job was shit.

He directed the cab driver to the nearest entrance to the mortuary on automatic pilot. Before he hobbled in, he sent a message to Tom: Love you xxx.

Hector Powell was in his office, typing notes from scribbles on paper. There was no sign of his wife, or of any of the other mortuary assistants. Hector held up a finger to indicate that he needed a moment, finished his sentence and stood up.

“I’ve actually already done what I can,” he said. “I want to show you what I’ve found, and I’ve got dental X-rays and I’ve taken DNA.” He produced a box of gloves

from his desk drawer and pulled out a pair, then led the way into the mortuary. There was a lump underneath a sheet on one of the trolleys. It didn't look human-shaped. The space was otherwise empty but for the stainless-steel table on which post mortems were carried out. It was echoey and smelled of disinfectant and something less attractive. There was a low hum in the background. Refrigerated storage, Charlie thought, and as always, decided not to think about what was behind the stainless-steel door at the back of the room.

"Some things you don't need to see, and one thing you do," Hector said, walking over to the trolley and pulling back the sheet. Charlie looked, and bile rose in his throat. He gagged, and Hector covered the awful thing, and strode to Charlie's side.

"Just tell me," Charlie said.

"Back in the office, then," Hector said, taking Charlie gently by the elbow, so as not to unbalance the crutches, and leading him back to the office, peeling off the protective gloves and dropping them into a bin. Charlie thought he would see the burned body, blackened, skinless, every time he closed his eyes. "If it helps, he was dead before the fire started," Hector said. "That's what I wanted you to see. The back of his skull was damaged in the same way as your previous victim. The fractures were serious enough to have killed him. He hadn't inhaled any smoke, which means he wasn't breathing when the fire was burning."

Charlie thought it did help, a bit. He sat down, almost missing the chair in his distraction. "How could anyone do that?" he wondered aloud, not sure whether he meant the murder or the desecration of the body.

"That's for the psychologists to figure out," Hector said. "All I can tell you is that whoever did this made very sure that the body was thoroughly incinerated. I can only think the camper van was saturated in some kind of fuel, probably petrol, going on what the firefighters said at the scene."

“But not enough to cover up the cause of death?”

Hector shook his head. “Not from me.” It didn’t sound like a boast, simply a statement of fact.

Two murders, committed in the same way. Two fires. The first didn’t destroy the body, the second one did. Was the murderer learning how to set better fires? Charlie hadn’t meant to speak his thought, but he must have done.

“If he really wants to conceal his victim’s identity, he has to crush the bones after he’s burned them,” Hector said. “Because that would defeat even me.” Then he picked an envelope up from his desk. “Dental X-rays,” holding out the envelope for Charlie to take. “Catch this guy.”

Tuesday late afternoon

One advantage of being at the hospital was the abundance of taxis. Another was the improvement in Charlie's leg. The rebandaging had eased the pain. Or it might have been the painkiller. Either way, by the time the taxi reached Llanfair police station, Charlie felt almost human. Until he wriggled out of the car, and onto his crutches, and was reminded that the explosion was less than twelve hours ago. He wanted to go to bed and stay there until he felt better, or at least less exhausted. Instead, he pushed the door open with his shoulder while trying not to drop his crutches. The team were assembled in the break room. Will pulled a chair out and Charlie fell into it.

"There's cake in the fridge," he said, and thankfully, there was.

Once the inner Charlie was restored by caffeine and sugar, Eddy reported that the two remaining Joshes had a lot to say. Not about themselves, but about Unwin and Josh Pettifor. Eddy had spoken to Josh Thomas, and Will to Josh Lineham. Both had been upset to hear about Unwin's death and had nothing but good things to say about him.

Josh Pettifor got a more mixed reaction. As Pettifor hadn't been positively identified, Will and Eddy had been careful not to say he was dead, just asked about him in general.

"Josh Lineham told me that Pettifor wasn't bad looking," Will said, "so he usually had a girlfriend. But apparently he was a cheat, and word got round. That made me think, so I had a poke about on a couple of dating sites, and it wasn't hard to find him.

Pettifor, that is. He's on all the big ones. Haven't looked at the more, erm, specialist, sites."

"He means sex sites," Eddy said with a grin. "No gay sites though. Women only."

"Can we tell if he met anyone through those sites?" Charlie asked.

"Not without contacting the websites, and even then, I'm not sure they'll tell us. But there's a possible way to find out. I'm looking into it."

Will looked shiftier, which was quite an achievement for someone as innocent-seeming as Will. How had someone with his baby-faced looks survived this long in the police? Perhaps a result of spending his time in windowless rooms with only computers for company. Charlie decided not to enquire further.

"One more interesting thing was that we found Jeff Burton, and his alias, on a couple of dating sites, too," Eddy said. "Also only looking for women if that's significant."

"Do me a favour," Charlie said. "Look up everyone else we've spoken to on those dating sites. Maybe it means something, probably doesn't, but look anyway. Don't leave Unwin out. There's always the possibility he met someone for a hook up."

"What, Unwin's family, Mr Hassan, the estate agent, Patsy?"

"Everyone. Including the manager of Mo's Autoparts, who I hope I have an appointment with."

"No problem," Will said, looking cheerful at the prospect of spending hours exploring internet dating sites.

Eddy sent him a text with a phone number and an appointment, and then another.

“Mitchell from Mo’s first, and then Pettifor’s ex. Sorry, sarge, but that’s back to Wrexham. She’s at work until late. Should I send you Pettifor’s parents’ address, too?” Eddy sounded hopeful. Charlie thought about the envelope with the unidentified man’s dental X-rays and nodded. He didn’t want to talk to the parents any more than Eddy did, but if it helped with identification, it had to be done. And he was going back to Wrexham anyway. He was going to need his car to make all those visits. He sighed and wished he hadn’t when his bruised ribs hurt.

Stop doing that. Breathe gently. Eat some more cake. Take another painkiller.

The manager of Mo’s Autoparts, Llanfair branch, corrected Charlie’s Mr Mitchell. “Mitch is fine,” he said.

They were sitting in Charlie’s car, mainly because there was nowhere else. Driving had proved less painful than expected: discomfort, Charlie told himself that’s all.

Mitch had been talking to the forensic investigators when Charlie arrived, telling them, he said, what things had been where, and what the unidentified lumps of plastic and metal strewn the collapsed building might have once been.

“I should have been here last night,” he said. “I’ll probably lose my job over it, though your people say there was nothing I could have done.”

Charlie raised an eyebrow.

“I took a day off, promised to take my wife and kids to the beach, and the eight-year-old turned my work phone to silent. I’ve been called in too often on my days off so ...”

Charlie could relate to that. He’d been known to turn his own phone to silent on occasion. “There really was nothing anyone could have done,” he said. “The place

was flooded with petrol, and no one heard an alarm. The fire brigade will back me up, if you need help with your employer.”

“Thanks,” Mitch said. “You wanted to know about Josh?”

“Anything you can tell me, like why was he here, and is it likely it wasn’t him in the van?”

Mitch rubbed his hands through his hair and stroked his beard — longer and more straggly than Tom’s.

“The van was where he lived, so if you only found one ... person, then it was most probably Josh. He worked for me when I needed him — covered holidays and sickness. Bright bloke, he could do pretty much all the jobs, but he didn’t want full time. He liked to travel. Went off for a few weeks every couple of months.”

Charlie didn’t get the sense that Mitch liked Josh, but rather that he was useful. The comment about only finding one person was interesting though. “Did Josh have companions? Girlfriends? Staying with him in the van?”

Mitch blushed. “Um, yeah. I had to tell him, not to, you know, in the day. People complained. And there were a couple of girls who came here, looking for him. It wasn’t ... he didn’t treat women very well, I think.”

Which exactly chimed with what Will and Eddy had found. “No one regular then?”

“He went out with one of the staff here, Priya, for a bit, but she found he was cheating on her, so she dumped him. One thing, all the girls he slept with, they were mostly Black, or Asian. I overheard Priya saying some stuff about that being Josh’s thing.”

Charlie asked where he could contact Priya, and alarm flared on Mitch's face.

"She wouldn't ... she works in the office ... you can't think ..."

"I don't think anything yet," Charlie said, "I'm just trying to find out as much about Josh as I can."

Mitch reluctantly gave Charlie the details.

They talked for a bit longer, but it was clear Mitch had nothing else to add. He got out of Charlie's car and wandered back over to the wreck of his business, head down, hands shoved into his trouser pockets. If he was right that not attending the fire would lose him his job, then he at least had no motive to kill Josh Pettifor.

The phrase "white men going with coloured women are betraying their race," came into Charlie's head as he drove towards Wrexham for his second visit of the day. He remembered Jeff Burton's boss telling him and Ravensbourne that it was something Britton was in the habit of saying. Josh Pettifor preferred women of colour. Had that brought him to Burton/Britton's notice? If Burton was behind the attacks on Muslim businesses, perhaps it had. If someone was as looney-tunes enough to spout that crap, were they also mad enough to kill? Mad enough to blow up a takeaway and burn down a car parts warehouse?

Tuesday evening

By the time Charlie got to Wrexham, both his leg and his ribs were aching like a bitch. Vile word, but the only one that worked. He stopped at a garage for petrol, chocolate, and a machine coffee to take more painkillers. It was technically too early for another one, but he figured the instructions were probably on the conservative side. And he was taking it with food. Well, chocolate.

His appointment with Ella Williams wasn't for an hour, so he went to the Pettifor house, dreading the conversation to come, sitting in the car outside, gathering his courage. In the end, he made himself get out of the car and knock on the front door.

It was opened by a red-faced man in his fifties or early sixties, who had clearly been too long in the sun. Pale rings around his eyes showed the shape of his sunglasses. The sunburn looked fierce, the skin on his nose already beginning to peel. Charlie's leg ached in sympathy. He'd left the crutches in the car and was regretting it.

"Mr Pettifor, I'm Detective Sergeant Charlie Rees," he said, showing the man his ID. "May I come in?" The man looked puzzled but let Charlie into the house. "Is Mrs Pettifor at home?" Charlie asked.

The man nodded. "What is this?" he said.

"Perhaps you would call your wife, sir, and I could talk to you both."

Charlie could see fear in the man's eyes. "Jen," he called, and his voice was shaky.

A well-tanned woman came into the room, drying her hands on a tea towel. "What's up, love? Who's this?" she asked.

Charlie asked if they could sit down and was led to the front room, where the Pettifors perched on a very shiny red leather sofa in front of an enormous TV set. Charlie sat on a matching armchair. "This morning, we found the body of a man, who we believe may be your son, Joshua," he said. Mrs Pettifor put her hand over her mouth, and her eyes widened until they were almost round.

"No," she said.

"You said may be Joshua," the man said. "So, it might not be him."

Charlie started to take a deep breath and remembered not to, just in time. This was the worst part. "The person was found in your son's camper van, in Llanfair at the car parts firm where he worked. There is no evidence that anyone other than your son was using the van. I'm afraid there had been a very bad fire, and it means we aren't able to identify ..."

Mrs Pettifor interrupted. "Let me see. It won't be my Joshey."

Oh, God. Charlie thought of the remains of whoever had been in the van.

"That won't be possible, Mrs Pettifor. As I said, the person is unrecognisable. They were very badly burned in the fire."

"I'd know," she said.

No, you wouldn't.

“The doctor who carried out the post mortem examination has given me a set of dental X-rays. Can you tell me who your son’s dentist is? If he had been to the dentist recently ...”

This time it was Mr Pettifor who interrupted. “That would be Gareth Rhidian. He’s a friend. I’ll call him.” Pettifor got out his phone. “Gareth. We’ve got a detective here who says Joshua ... may be dead.” Pause. “He’s got some X-rays. He wants to know if they are Josh’s.”

Charlie couldn’t hear what the other person said. Pettifor was holding the phone too tightly.

“It isn’t him,” Mrs Pettifor said. She was shaking, and her teeth began to chatter. “It isn’t him.”

Pettifor’s call ended. “He says to meet him at the surgery with your X-rays. It’s the one on Dynefor Street. He’s going there now.”

Charlie stood up.

“Gareth is Joshua’s godfather,” Pettifor said.

Dynefor Street was only a few minutes’ drive. Charlie parked outside, gathered his crutches and knocked at the surgery door. It was opened by a tall, handsome man in casual clothes. Charlie showed him his ID.

“Dr Rhidian,” Charlie said. “Thank you for doing this.”

“Who took the X-Rays?” Rhidian asked, holding out his hand for the envelope.

“Hector Powell, the pathologist,” Charlie told him and got a humph in return.

Rhidian turned on a computer on the reception desk, and once it had booted up, rattled the keys, as he shook the X-Ray films out of the envelope. He held up Hector's X-Rays and peered at the computer screen. Then he said "Shit," and put his head in his hands on the desk.

"It's a match?" Charlie asked, knowing the answer.

Rhidian lifted his head, and Charlie saw tears in his eyes. "He was a lovely boy," he said. "This is going to kill them."

"I'll need to take a formal statement from you, Dr Rhidian," Charlie said. "But there's no hurry. I'll go back to Mr and Mrs Pettifor now." He couldn't help wondering whether he was a lovely boy perhaps implied that Josh hadn't been a lovely man.

"I'll go," Rhidian said. "Let me tell them. They're my best friends."

It was Charlie's job to go, and he was about to say so when his phone rang: Alun Evans MP .

Charlie apologised and allowed Rhidian to escort him from the building.

"Mr Evans," Charlie said, watching as Rhidian got into a BMW 4x4 and drove off. "What can I do for you?" His heart sank at the thought of another press conference, or more questions from the MP, none of which he could answer. He gritted his teeth against the pain in his leg.

When Evans spoke, it was in a whisper. "There's a man in my house. He's got a knife, and he says he's going to kill my family."

"Ring 999," Charlie said. "Do it now."

“No, wait, he says no police ...”

Charlie wanted to say he was the police, but he heard the fear in Evans’ voice. “Are you somewhere safe?” he asked.

“Downstairs toilet,” came the whispered reply. “I think he’s mad. My wife will be back with the children soon. He’s waiting for them. She’s not answering her phone. I didn’t know who else to call.” There was a barely concealed sob in Evans’ voice.

Charlie opened his mouth to ask for the address when there was a crashing noise, and a scream.

“Who the fuck are you talking to?”

Charlie knew that voice. Jeff Burton. The phone went dead.

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Tuesday evening

The first thing Charlie did was call Will.

“Find me Alun Evans MP’s home address right now. Jeff Burton is in his house, with a knife, issuing threats. I’ll go there and then you send as much backup as you can get.”

Charlie heard the phone being dropped onto a hard surface, then the rattle of keys.

“Ty Castell, Bryn Road, Pont Derwen,” Will said. Charlie put the address into his map app.

“On my way,” he said. The app told him it would take him fifteen minutes, and looking at the route, the first fourteen would be spent finding his way out of Wrexham on the right road to Pont Derwen. “My ETA is fifteen minutes. Tell the back-up to come without blues and twos. We don’t want to spook Burton. I think he’s already unhinged.” Navigating his way around a roundabout on guesswork, Charlie missed Will’s next comment. “Say that again,”

“There isn’t any back-up,” Will said. “What there is, is a riot, a full-blown one, on the coast. Looting, cars overturned, riot shields, the lot. The uniforms the Chief Super lent us have gone to join the party, along with Mags. The back-up is us. We’ll get there as soon as we can. No noise.”

Charlie went round another roundabout, counting the exits as he listened to the prissy voice on his app. It seemed like the wrong direction, all the signage pointing to places he definitely didn't want to go, and then there was another roundabout which disgorged him on to a narrow road with high hedges on both sides, and a half-hidden sign to Pont Derwen, three miles away. Three miles on these kinds of roads could stretch to half a lifetime of blind bends, missed turns and edging past tractors.

Trees cast deep black zebra stripes onto the road, alternately blinding Charlie and plunging him into darkness. The sun was beginning to dip, but it was still bright enough to create watery mirages on the tarmac. He kept blinking, pushing the sun visor up and down, accelerating as hard as he could, imitating Eddy's speed round the corners, wishing for X-ray vision.

"In about three hundred yards, your destination is on the right," the prissy voice informed him. Charlie kept driving. He would stop beyond the house, so that he could see it before he had to try to get in. Ty Castell was on the edge of the village, with fields on three sides. Despite its grandiose name, it was a simple detached stone-faced house, almost identical to the one he shared with Tom. He drove past and started to look for a place to stop.

"Perform a U-turn," the prissy voice said, and then began telling him to "return to the route."

"Shut up," Charlie told it, and pulled into a gap in the hedge in front of a gate. He put a Police Officer On Duty card in the windscreen and cancelled the prissy voice, turning the phone to silent and slipping it into his pocket. As for weapons, he had none. No pepper spray, no baton and no stab vest. Only a pair of crutches. Because he'd been going to tell a family that their son was dead, not to go up against a knife wielding nutcase.

His leg had stiffened up during the drive, and getting out of the car was painful. It

would ease. It would have to. The sound of distant tractors filled the air, along with the squeal of red kites and even the scratches of crickets. That noise, together with the heat, made the evening seem more dreamlike. Charlie limped carefully back along the road until he could see the house. Close to, nothing looked out of place. Plenty of windows were open, but no sounds came from within. He drew back into the hedge and got out his phone, calling the MP's number. He heard the phone ring inside the house, loud enough that it must be at the front. Confirmation came with a shout from Britton. Right then, round the back it was. Charlie cut the call, and silence fell again inside the house. He worked his way back to the car and climbed, painfully, over the gate and into the field.

The grass was still green and uncut in the field, reaching to Charlie's knees. He was hidden from the house by the hedge, which somehow he was going to have to get through, bad leg or no bad leg. But thank all the gods, someone had made a gate from the back garden of Ty Castell into the field. It was overgrown and rusty, but it would do. Charlie pushed, and the gate collapsed towards the house, with a screech of tearing metal. Charlie froze, heart pounding in his chest, his breathing shallow and fast. Nothing happened. Should he try the phone again? To check that they were still at the front of the house? Or would that make Britton more jumpy?

An enormous tractor and trailer came towards the house down the narrow road, the engine loud in the evening calm, the empty trailer bouncing on the road. Charlie stepped over the fallen gate, and hopped to the house wall, using the noise as cover. If anyone was looking out of the back window, he would be seen. But the garden was laid to a perfect lawn and flower beds. Nowhere to hide. The back door was open. Charlie flattened himself against the wall outside and listened. Nothing. Then, as his heart slowed, he heard it. Steps, very faint, so that he knew they were from the front of the house. Someone was walking up and down the living room, and, he strained his ears to listen harder, muttering.

Grasping the crutches, Charlie stepped through the open door and into the house.

Tuesday evening

The kitchen layout was the same as in Charlie's own house. But where the walls of Charlie's kitchen were covered in Tom's sketches of the girls, the cat, and also, embarrassingly, of Charlie, these walls were painted a fresh pale yellow with a single canvas: one of those posed family pictures, where the members were all at odd angles to each other. The MP was recognisable, and the others must be his wife and children, all brown-skinned, with dark eyes and black hair; two girls and a boy. Here was another white man who had married a woman of colour, being threatened by a man who thought it was a betrayal of all that he believed was right.

Fuck this noise.

Charlie moved silently through the kitchen door, and towards the front of the house. The pacing and muttering became louder. He put one of the crutches under his arm, eased the phone from his pocket and called Alun Evans. As the ringing started, Charlie moved, dropping the phone and holding the crutch like a club. Burton swung round as Charlie charged towards him, crutch upraised. He almost made it, but Britton was too close to Alun Evans who was tied to a dining chair. Before Charlie could strike, Burton had the knife against the MP's neck. The phone was still ringing, until it suddenly stopped. In the quiet, Charlie could hear Burton breathing heavily, and Evans whimpering.

He's going to faint. And then he did. Eyes rolling up, face turning grey, Evans fell backwards, and the knife in Britton's hand traced a thin line of blood down his neck

and onto his chest.

“Drop it,” Charlie said.

“You drop it,” Burton sneered, and poked the tip of the knife into Evans’ skin. A pearl of blood welled up beneath it.

Mindful of his lack of balance, Charlie put the crutches down carefully beside him.

“This is over, Jeff,” Charlie said. “My colleagues are coming, and they will be armed. You can still walk away. I would.”

Burton didn’t move. Blood began to soak into Evans’ T-shirt. “People will have to listen,” he said. “They can’t keep this quiet. You think I care what happens to me? Let them shoot me. They can’t cover that up.”

“I don’t understand,” Charlie said.

“You would, if you could see what was in front of you. The white race being watered down, held back by the Jews and the Blacks. Only no one admits it’s happening.”

“Is that why you killed Josh Pettifor? Because he married a Black woman?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. This man. This so-called MP. This is who I’m going to kill. Because then people will know the truth. ”

“The camper van behind Mo’s Autoparts. You killed a man there and burned the place down.”

“What the fuck? I’m a fireman. I don’t burn things. That takeaway place, though. They deserved it.”

To say that Burton had lost touch with reality was an understatement of epic proportions. But Charlie thought he was telling the truth about Josh Pettifor. Which didn't help Charlie, or Alun Evans. The blood dripping from the wound on his neck had made a stain the size of Charlie's hand on Evans' shirt. His eyes were beginning to flutter open, and he gave a small moan. Burton grabbed him by the hair and yanked. Evans cried out.

"Be quiet," Burton said. "You're giving away everything that makes this country great. You have no right to fair treatment. What about those people who will lose their homes so that you can give them to immigrants, hey?" Yank. "Making our people homeless," Yank.

"It isn't true," Evans said weakly. "I keep trying to tell you, but you won't believe me. There are no plans to house asylum seekers here."

"You think people won't believe the British government would do something so outrageous. That's what you rely on. Don't keep any records and keep denying it. But look at parliament ... Africans, Asians, Arabs, creeping in. Taking over. The country is starting to wake up, brothers ..."

Burton's eyes were glazed as he spoke from his imaginary soapbox about a future where the poor oppressed white people would rise up and reclaim their rightful places.

He saw something move outside the window.

"Whatever you think of Mr Evans' politics, this isn't the way," he said, wanting Burton's attention on him. "Blowing up Muslim-owned shops and knifing MPs are short-cuts to prison."

"I'll get my day in court," Burton spat. "A jury of my peers who will understand the

truth when they hear it.”

The movement outside the window was beginning to resolve into a figure.

“Maybe not. Maybe what you’ve done, and the things you’re planning, will be considered terrorism. Terrorists don’t get public trials. You’ll just disappear without trace. Or you could let Mr Evans go, and we will both help you talk to the media.”

“That’s right,” Evans said, trying to shrink his body away from Burton and his knife.

“You want to be heard?” Charlie asked. “Step away from Mr Evans. You’d get more publicity attacking me than him. He’s not going anywhere. You tied him up. I could just walk out and there would be nothing you could do. Then the armed police would come, and you’d never be seen again.”

Burton’s eyes were fixed on Charlie as his brain tried to make sense of the waffle and contradictions Charlie was spouting.

“They’re probably already outside,” Charlie said. “You don’t have long to make up your mind. Trial or disappearance. Publicity or cover-up. All you have to do is step away from Mr Evans.”

Charlie saw the moment Evans realised what was happening, his eyes widening and his body tensing, and Britton saw it, too. Britton whipped round and Charlie dived to the floor, as Eddy stepped through the door and fired the Taser, hitting Britton in the middle of the chest with 50,000 volts.

Tuesday evening

By the time paramedics arrived to check Alun Evans, and to seal up his cuts with glue and dressings, the sun had set. Mrs Evans and the three children returned from their day out — Charlie never discovered where they'd been — and there was much crying and hugging. Jeff Britton was taken away in handcuffs, having been arrested for kidnapping, false imprisonment, actual bodily harm and on suspicion of causing an explosion. Crime scene technicians turned up to take fingerprints and photograph bloodstains.

Mags called Eddy to say that the riot at the coast had been contained, and Clywd Police were being praised by the local media for swift and decisive action. Mal Kent had apparently given a superb press conference, which had made the national news. The cells were going to be very full, and local magistrates were being contacted to provide extra courts and thus speedy justice for the rioters. The protestors from Llanfair were almost certainly amongst their number, having abandoned the tiny town for the bright lights and better riots of the seaside. No doubt local solicitors were rubbing their hands at the thought of lots of extra work. Or, given the low rates of pay for legal aid cases, possibly not.

But Charlie felt numb. It was likely that they had caught the man who had blown up Hassan's takeaway, and injured Ravensbourne and himself. Britton would be remanded in custody for months, then convicted, and sent to prison, where he would probably find plenty of supporters. Or not. Charlie didn't honestly care. There had been a few hours this evening when he had thought, or rather hoped, that Britton had

killed Unwin and Pettifor. True, he had no motive for Unwin's murder, but Pettifor would have been at the top of Britton's hit list. Except Charlie believed Britton's denial. If he had killed Pettifor, he would have boasted about it. Instead, he had looked blank. Pettifor's name had meant nothing to Britton. He gave no indication that he knew Mo's Autoparts was Muslim-owned. All of which meant Charlie still had two unsolved murders, and attention was going to swing back to Patsy. They were back to square one.

It didn't help that Eddy was on a high, talking excitedly to Will and anyone else who would listen. The big man had saved the day, though he was going to have to answer some questions about why he hadn't given a warning before firing the Taser. Charlie was just glad he'd been there, and would happily say so.

"Let's go home," he said wearily to Eddy and Will. "It's going to be a long day again tomorrow, and we need some sleep. Well, I do anyway." Eddy looked like he was ready to go dancing.

Charlie found Tom sitting in the garden in a pair of shorts and nothing else. He had a bottle of beer in one hand, and an e-book reader in the other. The e-reader screen provided the only light. The night was dark, and it was still oppressively hot. Tom stood up as soon as he heard Charlie and patted the reclining chair next to his own.

"Sit down and put your feet up. I'll get you a beer. Do you want a sandwich? Chicken salad? Ice cream?"

"Ice cream and beer," Charlie replied, dropping into the soft recliner with relief. He wanted to be in just shorts, too, but that would mean moving. He could hear the occasional sound from nearby houses, and the odd car from the street, passing with a burst of music through an open window. But it was quiet, and peaceful, and this was home. Painkillers and beer probably shouldn't be mixed, but he didn't care.

“Aren’t you hot in all those clothes?” Tom asked. He handed Charlie a cold beer and put a bowl of ice cream on the grass.

“Can’t be bothered to get changed,” Charlie said. He took a swig of beer, wriggled the painkillers out of his pocket and took one with another swig. Probably too early, but after the drive home, he didn’t care. Then he swapped the beer for the ice cream, loving all the creamy, sugary deliciousness. He was conscious of Tom watching him and smiling. He finished the ice cream with a sigh of pleasure and put the bowl down.

“Better?”

“Much,” Charlie said. He told Tom about Jeff Burton, knowing it would go no further.

“So, that means you still don’t know who killed Unwin? And it might have been Patsy?”

“I don’t think it was Patsy,” Charlie said. There was nothing else to say. He was too tired, achy, and demoralised to think about it. As well as hot and sticky in his work clothes. He flicked his shoes onto the grass and lay back on the recliner.

“At least take your shirt off,” Tom said.

Charlie nodded slowly but made no move. It was cooler than it had been, and if he kept still, he would be OK. Tom turned round in his chair, took the bottle out of Charlie’s hand and began to undo Charlie’s shirt buttons. “Sit up,” he commanded, and Charlie wriggled himself free of the shirt. Carefully, because twisting was seriously painful. Then Tom pulled Charlie’s socks off and dropped them on the grass. “Trousers,” he said, “don’t worry, I’ll be careful.” He undid Charlie’s trousers and slid them off, lifting the fabric so that it didn’t touch the bandage. The night air caressed Charlie’s bare skin. His leg still hurt, but less than it had. Breathing was

painful, but only if he took a deep breath, and he didn't need to, not lying here in the dark. He began to drift.

Then he felt a hand on his thigh, and another sliding under his briefs.

"No one can see," a voice whispered in his ear, and the hand slipped lower.

"You're an exhibitionist," he whispered back.

"Yes, and you love it."

Charlie closed his eyes, sighed and felt himself harden under Tom's hand. "I can't ... reciprocate ..." he murmured, and Tom wrapped his hand around Charlie's cock and began to stroke, slowly and gently.

"So?"

And then he felt his briefs pulled down and Tom's mouth around his erection, hot and tight and wet. It was perfect, and he wasn't going to last. It was too dark to see, but he heard Tom jerking himself as he sucked Charlie's cock, and then he stopped thinking at all as his orgasm rolled over him. He groaned with pleasure, before remembering where they were. Tom giggled in his ear and then came.

Later, in bed, with the windows open and only a sheet for cover, Tom said, "I've got to tell you about Orianna's phone call. Only not tonight."

Charlie heard the words, but was asleep before he could make sense of them.

38

Wednesday morning

“The thing is,” Tom said, “it’s a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

That didn’t make Charlie feel any better. Over a blessedly quiet breakfast, after the best night’s sleep, Tom told Charlie about Orianna’s call.

“It’s a year in London for Ann and Ori. And a year in this house for Amelie and Ziggy.” Charlie said flatly.

Tom nodded.

“A whole year of ear-splitting Taylor Swift, bathroom hogging and never having any bread.”

“And the arguments. Don’t forget the arguments.” Tom added.

“You want to do it.” Charlie knew there was no choice, not really. The poet-in-residence job Orianna had been offered was simply too good to turn down. There was even a tiny flat to go with it. Ann was an experienced PA and would easily get work in London. But the girls were coming up to their first set of important exams, exams they had been preparing for throughout the last year. If they couldn’t stay with Tom and Charlie, Orianna wouldn’t be able to take the job.

“Honestly? No. I don’t want to do it. I was only ever supposed to be a babysitter, but

things change,” Tom said. “If it was just me, I’d put up with the noise and the mess and the rows, because, well, they are my kids, and Ori and Ann are my friends. Only it isn’t just me any more. This affects you, too. If you say no, I’ll support your decision. If you say yes, then we will agree some rules.”

Which made it impossible for Charlie to say no. “Tell Orianna to take the job,” he said. The way Tom’s face lit up, made his agreement – almost – worthwhile. “Before you do, could you take me to work?” Even with extra painkillers, his leg still hurt. They could discuss the rules later.

Charlie pushed the thought of a whole year living with Amelie and Ziggy to the back of his mind. He was almost grateful that he had a murder — two murders — to deal with.

When Charlie arrived at the police station clutching his crutches, Will and Eddy were both already in the break room with laptops, and Mags walked in looking exhausted two minutes later.

“Baby kept us awake,” she said.

Once the coffee was made, Will disappeared, returning with a large parcel. He unwrapped it to reveal a flip chart stand, and a pad of paper to hang on it. He grinned. “For when there just isn’t enough room on the whiteboard,” he said. Then he stood next to the pad, produced a set of coloured markers and started to write a list of names:

*Josh Pettifor (with aliases) three sites

*Corrine Bailey (with aliases) six sites, plus moderates: Is This Your Boyfriend?

*Jackie Price three sites

*Megan Mills one site

*Huw Jones (alias) one site

Jeff Britton one site

Dylan Gayle one site

*Josh Unwin

*Patsy Hargreaves

*Lola Unwin (U's sister)

*Gerald Unwin (U's father)

*Tansy Unwin (U's mother)

Josh Lineham

Josh Thomas

Ella Williams (Josh P's ex)

Alex Unwin (U's brother)

The other three studied the list. "So, the stars are for people who live in or close to Llanfair, sites are internet dating sites. Is This Your Boyfriend? is an online group for women to share the details of men they suspect are cheating on them." Will explained.

Mags looked puzzled. "I've heard of Is This Your Boyfriend? but I can't believe there's a lot of call for it here. I mean, everyone already knows everyone else and who's going out with who. Or should that be whom? And is that Corrine Bailey who works for Huw Jones, the estate agent?"

Charlie said it was that Corrine Bailey, then looked at Will to answer the rest.

"There's a lot of traffic on Is This Your Bofriend? " Will said. "No sign of anyone we know, but plenty of women putting up pictures and requests for information. There are also warnings about serial cheaters, or men alleged to be violent or abusive. I didn't have much time to read the individual posts, but there are some nasty stories in the ones I did read. I'm wondering if Corrine Bailey spends a fair bit of time tracking blokes through dating sites. I've got a bit of software that looks at writing styles, and I'm getting a lot of hits on Corrine on all the dating sites. It means that even when she uses a different name, or profile, I can be reasonably sure it's her."

"I guess everyone needs a hobby," Eddy said.

Charlie remembered Ravensbourne saying she had been to a domestic violence case involving internet dating. He should have asked for details. He also made a mental note to ask Will for more information about exactly where he could get this writing style software. "Any other connections?" he asked.

Will shrugged and took a different coloured pen and put circles around Corrine Bailey, Jackie Price, Megan Mills and Huw Jones. "People who work in the estate agent's," he said. "I'm just looking for connections."

"What about the Mo's Autoparts people?" Charlie wanted to know. "Surely someone there has a connection to the victims?"

Will made a note. "I'll check," he said, "and I'll check if any of the others has a

connection with the firm. I'll do the same with the Hassans. All I was looking for was membership of dating websites."

"I suppose we shouldn't ask how you found out who was on which site?" Mags said drily.

"No, you almost certainly shouldn't," Charlie said as Will blushed.

"Or how he knows about people's aliases," Eddy said, and Will blushed harder.

"People put their photographs on dating websites," Will said. "All I have to do is a reverse image search. It's not being sneaky, everyone does it."

"Which presumably means you're a member of all those dating sites?" Eddy asked with a wink.

"Moving on," Charlie said, and went back to his whiteboard. "We're at a dead end. There might be something in this dating site business, or there might not. I'm working on the assumption that Jeff Burton blew up the Hassans' takeaway, so that's a win. But we're no nearer knowing who killed Unwin and Josh Pettifor than we were three days ago. Though as Patsy would point out, Josh Pettifor wasn't dead three days ago." Silence fell, interrupted only by the hum of the refrigerator.

"OK then," Eddy said, "Where do we go from here?"

"Back to the beginning, Charlie said. "Re-interview everyone on the list. Concentrate on where they were at the time of the murders. Find out who's been buying cans of petrol ..."

"And hammers," Mags interrupted.

“And hammers,” Charlie said. They ought to have done that days ago. “Read through the whole file: interviews, forensics, post-mortem reports, everything, and work out what questions haven’t been asked, or properly answered.” And then, “Is it just me, or has it gone dark early?”

The police station had tiny windows, and it had taken Charlie a while to get used to the pervasive gloom in the building. But the days and days of bright sunshine had penetrated even here. Eddy stood up and went to the window, twisting round so that he could see out.

“Sun’s gone in,” he said. “In fact, it looks like rain.” He cranked the window open the inch that was permitted by the bars and a cool breeze — with the scent of rain — blew through and into the room. Charlie imagined the first big drops hitting the boiling pavements and evaporating instantly, of the dry earth that would drink in the water, and less happily, of the loss of more long evenings in the garden with Tom.

“Let’s get reading,” he said.

Wednesday morning

Charlie could feel that his leg had stiffened up, even with the short time sitting still. It was only two hours since the last painkiller; too early for another. Would moving around help or hinder the healing process? Surely it was worth a try? At the very least, he could get a breath of the newly fresh air. He forced himself onto his feet and out of the break room. From the police station front door, Charlie could see the Everything Shop, unofficial name of what he supposed was a hardware store. Except that it sold teapots and tablecloths, reading glasses and light-up reindeer for Christmas, as well as the more traditional galvanised buckets and screwdrivers. From a tiny storefront on the High Street, it led both upstairs and down. Three floors of everything you might need (except for a meat thermometer when you need one, Tom had said bitterly, after trying to guess how long to cook a joint of beef for Sunday lunch.) If anywhere had sold both petrol cans and hammers to someone in Llanfair, it would be the Everything Shop. Whether they would remember selling them was another matter. He would hobble across the road and find out.

Of course, Charlie hadn't taken into account that Llanfair was a small town, small enough for everyone to be related (whether by blood or friendship) to everyone else. He enquired of the middle-aged woman on the till. There was no need to introduce himself, and he had difficulty persuading the woman that he was there to collect information, not give it out.

“Hammers, you say? That was an awful thing, the takeaway. Blew up. Gas, apparently. That's why you're on crutches. Who would do that, now?”

“Hammers,” Charlie repeated. “Two of them.”

“There’s more than one kind of hammer, you know. It all depends what it’s for. What about that down the industrial estate? I blame the hot weather.”

Charlie peered at the name badge on the woman’s green nylon tabard. “Gwenann. I can’t talk about Mo’s Autoparts or Hassan’s takeaway, but I need to talk about hammers. Do you have a display? I could show you what one of them was like.” He could remember the hammer that had been dropped by Unwin’s murderer, though if he tried to describe it, he would undoubtedly get some technical term wrong. Gwenann didn’t seem like the kind of woman to let him get away with it.

She came out from behind the counter, revealing that she was wearing a flowered skirt and the kind of strangely shapeless shoes worn by people who were on their feet all day. She led him to the back of the shop to a display of all kinds of tools, ranging from the tiniest set of watchmakers’ screwdrivers up to a cement mixer, along with everything in between. In the middle were the hammers, and in the middle of the hammers, Charlie saw a replica of the wooden-handled hammer they found next to Unwin’s body. He peered at the price: ?8.95. A very cheap way to kill a man.

“It was one like this,” he said.

“That’s a ball pein hammer,” Gwenann said. “She should have had a claw hammer to put up pictures, but no, she wanted this one. It’s three pounds cheaper, see, and then she went and lost it. Back two days later, she was, for another one.”

Charlie tried not to grind his teeth. “Who bought the hammers?” he asked.

“That girl from the estate agents. Said her boss wanted to put some pictures up, and took some hooks and nails, and one of these. I said, you need a claw hammer in case you have to take the nails out see, but she said she’d been told to get the cheapest. Is

it true they found a dead body on the industrial estate? A foreigner I was told.”

“It’s an ongoing investigation,” Charlie said, repressively, with no expectation that it would stop the questions. “Do you happen to know the young woman’s name, or which estate agent she came from?”

“Huw Jones, round the corner. That other lot, they’re all lads with shiny suits and pointy shoes with the labels still stuck on the soles. Not locals, not like Huw Jones. Now let me think what her name is. It’ll come to me.”

“When it does, I’d be grateful for a call.” Charlie held one of his cards out to Gwennan, who took it and tucked it into a pocket. She looked up and tipped her head to one side, like a bird. “Well, the rain’s started. I should think the firemen would have been glad of that, the other night. Did you have to go to the fire as well?”

Mention of the fire reminded Charlie of the other item the shop might have sold. “I don’t suppose she brought a petrol can while she was here?” He really ought to have been able to predict the answer.

“Why would they need a petrol can to put pictures up?” A pause. “Oooh. Is that what they used to start the fire? Except the estate agents wouldn’t want to start a fire anyway.”

“So, the young woman didn’t buy a petrol can?” Charlie decided to ignore the rest.

Gwenann shook her head, pursing her lips at Charlie as if he were wasting everyone’s time with foolish questions. He wanted to know why the estate agents wouldn’t want to start a fire, but he wasn’t sure he had the mental strength to listen to the answers. Instead, he thanked her for her help and headed back up the stairs to the shop door.

“Aren’t you going to buy that hammer?” Gwenann called after him.

Charlie rehearsed several answers:

I'm not putting pictures up, and if I was, I'd buy a claw hammer. I already have one just like it in the evidence store. We got it from a dead body. I'll get one off the internet now I know which one to buy, so thanks for that ...

Tempting though it was, he simply said "not today, but thanks" and left, manoeuvring himself and the crutches through the door with some difficulty.

Outside the sky was dark and heavy with unshed rain. The air felt chilly after the days of heat, and Charlie shivered in his summer shirt. He debated going around the corner to the estate agents, and as he dithered, the first heavy drops fell, leaving dark circles on the dry pavement. Charlie tried to run, but could only hobble, nowhere near fast enough to save being soaked to the skin by the time he let himself into the police station.

He was stripped to his underwear and scrubbing with a towel at his cold wet skin, and hoping the bandage wasn't too wet, when Eddy came into the men's locker room.

"What do you know about Huw Jones the estate agent?" Charlie asked.

"Only that they own half the town," Eddy replied.

40

Wednesday late morning

There was a clean, dry shirt in Charlie's locker, but no trousers or socks. Could he ask Tom to bring more clothes? Or should he wrap the towel round his waist and ignore strange looks from his colleagues? He stood wearing a shirt and underwear, trying to decide.

"Here," Eddy said, and thrust a bundle of dark grey sweatshirt fabric into his hands. "It's clean."

The fabric turned out to be a hoodie and a pair of sweatpants, and a moment later, Eddy presented him with a pair of thick socks.

"You're a lifesaver," Charlie said, "I'm bloody freezing." The clothes fit where they touched, and he had to roll the trousers up — a lot — but he was dry and warm, and for that he gave thanks. He padded his way along to the break room, trying not to trip over the oversized socks, or get them tangled in his crutches. To his surprise, Mags and Will were already there, working on laptops rather than at their desks upstairs. Mags raised her eyebrows at his attire.

"I got soaked coming back from the Everything Shop," Charlie explained. "And now I want a hot drink."

Will was closest to the kettle and took the hint.

“Huw Jones,” Charlie said when they all had drinks. “Local estate agent, and according to Eddy, owns half the town. More to the point, he sent one of his staff to buy a hammer exactly like the one we found by Unwin’s body, and then another one a couple of days later when the first one got lost.” He wiggled his fingers into virtual quote marks around “got lost.” “We need to know more about Huw Jones.”

“He was at the first fire,” Eddy said, “and he had a lousy alibi for the evening before.”

Charlie cast his mind back. Jones had told them he had driven to a pub and spent the evening chatting to people whose names he had forgotten. Unconvincing at best. He also recalled that Tom had told him the industrial estate was managed by an estate agent, and he would have put money on it being Huw Jones. The estate agency — or perhaps Huw himself — owned both the Hassan premises. All that was missing was a connection to Unwin, and to Josh Pettifor.

“OK. We need to find out everything we can about Huw Jones. The man and the company. Could the fires have been insurance fraud? Does he have a connection to Unwin, or Pettifor? Did he, or any of his staff buy a petrol can, or even two? Can we check that alibi? Obviously, we’ll have him in to ask for an alibi for the Mo’s Autoparts fire, but let’s get all our ducks in a row first.”

“What about the petrol?” Mags asked. “Whoever set those fires must have taken the petrol with them, and they would have to buy it somewhere. We can contact the local garages to see who bought petrol in a can.”

“They’ll have CCTV,” Eddy said.

The atmosphere in the room became charged with purpose. Will wrote the jobs on his Flipchart. Eddy said he’d go round the local filling stations, and “I’ll be close enough to call into the pub where Jones said he was.”

“I’ll come with you, and we can drop Mags at the Everything Shop ,” Charlie said, and turned to Mags. “Get a statement from Gwenann who works there and see if she’s remembered which of the women bought the hammers. There are only three of them, so a description will do. Don’t let her pump you for gossip — she’s desperate for the inside story. Then ring here, and one of us will pick you up.”

Mags protested that it was two minutes’ walk, just as thunder crashed overhead, rattling the windows in their frames and making them all jump. “OK, I’ll ring,” she said with a smile.

“Will,” Charlie said. “You are going to turn Huw Jones’ life inside out. Does he, in fact, own half the town? Is his business in need of a cash injection? Why is he on a dating site even though he’s married? What else does he do for fun? What’s the connection between him and our victims? Once we know all that, it’ll be time for a chat with the man himself.”

Charlie put his wet shoes back on to get out to the car and nodded when Eddy asked if they would be going to Charlie’s house first for a change of clothes. He almost wished he didn’t have to change. The sweatpants and hoodie were well-washed and felt warm and soft against his skin. Clothes maketh man he thought, and grinned internally, imagining turning up to interview petrol station staff dressed this way.

Walking up the path, Charlie heard the unwelcome sound of Taylor Swift. Please don’t let the girls be back ... possibly for ever, only he wasn’t going to think about that. Tom appeared at the kitchen door.

“Are our mistresses back early?” Charlie said.

Tom blushed. “I’ve decided I quite like this music.”

“We certainly hear enough of it.”

“Are you two grown men being bossed around by two teenage girls?” Eddy asked and then laughed when Tom and Charlie both nodded vigorously. Charlie laughed, too, but it wasn’t funny.

“Be right back,” Charlie said and limped upstairs for fresh clothes and dry shoes. Tom left Eddy in the living room and followed Charlie. Once they were in their bedroom with the door closed, Tom enfolded Charlie in his arms.

“How’re you doing?” he asked.

“Better for seeing you,” Charlie said, and Tom kissed him.

They were interrupted by a phone ringing.

“No peace,” Tom muttered. “Never any peace. Let’s get you some clean clothes. He sighed.

“Could you do me a favour?” Charlie asked him, “Can you find out which agent is managing the college’s properties?”

“I already did,” Tom said, “Jones and Company, in town. I don’t deal with them, but you can be sure that our new finance team is very careful to check the bona fides of anyone we deal with.”

The sky was dark as Charlie and Eddy headed for the first petrol station, on the outskirts of Llanfair. They had worked out a route, taking in as many places as they could. From above it would look as if they were tracing the pattern of a spider’s web, but with Eddy’s driving it would take no more than a couple of hours ... or so.

It began to rain in earnest as they left the town, and the sky was black with more to come.

“It’ll be floods next,” Eddy said. “Have you noticed that it’s always floods? Either the ground is so dry and hard that the water runs off it, or it’s too saturated to absorb any more. Either way, floods.”

He was right. The river burst its banks regularly throughout the year, turning the low-lying fields beside it into an enormous lake — not that developers were deterred from applying to build homes on those lovely flat fields with river views. Luckily the planners could turn them down as quickly as they applied. Discussion about the inevitability of floods kept them occupied as they visited the first two garages, neither of which had anything helpful to offer.

They hit pay dirt at the third garage.

Wednesday lunchtime

The garage was about ten miles from Llanfair, sharing a site with the local farmers' co-op. It also doubled as the village shop, offering the same range of goods as a much bigger supermarket, though not at supermarket prices. Charlie looked appreciatively at the display of iced doughnuts as he hopped his way to the counter to introduce them and their errand.

“Yeah, we did have someone with a petrol can a few days ago,” the balding middle-aged man behind the counter told them. His name badge read brIAN. “Said her mate had run out about a mile up the road. I told her to go ahead and get a can from the display and fill it up. She had one of those plastic ones.” He waved his arm, and Charlie saw a small display of car necessities: wiper blades, air fresheners, stick-on cup-holders, and fuel cans in both green and black plastic, alongside a much bigger metal jerrycan. “They don’t hold much, but there would be enough to get her mate this far. But they never came. Probably headed for the nearest supermarket petrol station. Silly really, we’re the cheapest round here.”

Eddy asked whether the man could describe the woman with the petrol can. Brian shrugged.

“Lots of make-up is all I can remember. Like one of those Kardashians off the telly. Sorta puffy, painted-on lips and big eyebrows. It was red hot and she said she’d walked a mile, but you wouldn’t know it to look at her. She had a hat on, too. I remember that.”

Faced with this unhelpful description, Charlie asked if there was any CCTV.

“Sure,” Brian said. “Do you want to see it? She’s most probably on there.”

“That would be very helpful, seeing as we’ve come all this way in the pouring rain,” Charlie said, hoping the passive aggressive tone wasn’t coming across. But the man only nodded.

“You’ll have to come round the counter,” he said.

The CCTV screen was smaller than most laptops and divided into six segments. As Charlie watched, the cameras showed a car pulling up by one of the pumps, a figure getting out and opening the petrol cap. It was impossible to tell — on the screen — whether the figure was male or female. Charlie sighed.

“When did the woman come in to buy the petrol?” he asked. “I mean roughly what day and time?”

“I’ll have to have a look through, and I ought to discuss it with the boss,” Brian said. “Excuse me while I serve this gentleman.” The blurred figure on the tiny screen was now standing in front of the counter, credit card in hand. Charlie pulled Eddy aside and spoke quietly.

“This is useless,” he said.

Eddy nodded. “Even if he finds it, it’s probably not going to help. But I suppose we should get it anyway. Just in case.”

“Just in case,” Charlie repeated. He and Eddy waited until the customer left, then made arrangements to talk to the area manager, and for Brian to call them when he’d found the right bit of footage. It could be the same young woman who had bought the

hammers. Equally, it could be someone completely different.

Brian's garage was close to the pub where Huw Jones had claimed to be the night of Unwin's murder, so Charlie said they'd go there next. The Pelican had a reputation, at least according to Eddy, of being a pick-up joint. "For straights," he added. "If Huw Jones is hoping to do the dirty on his missus, then the Pelican is exactly where he'd go."

"A kind of real-life dating site," Charlie suggested.

"That's the one," Eddy said.

From the outside the pub looked pleasant enough, though the gloom and the rain didn't do much to enhance its charms. Inside, it was all beams, dark panelling, a few semi-private nooks with sofas and low tables, and lots of room at the long bar. A couple were chatting in one of the nooks, and there was another couple at the bar buying drinks. Apart from that, the place was empty. Charlie waited for the couple at the bar to take their drinks to a table and showed the barman his warrant card. He asked if the barman had been working the nights of the two murders. The man nodded.

"We're trying to check the movements of this man," Charlie said, showing him a picture of Huw Jones.

The barman nodded again. "Huw, dunno his last name. Comes in a coupla times a week. Chats to whoever's here. Makes out that he's up for it with the women, but I don't think he's serious."

"Could you be certain he was here on those two nights?" Charlie asked, but the barman shrugged.

“If he says he was, then probably.”

Eddy asked if the boss was around, or any of the other bar staff who had been working on those nights. The barman grinned and pointed to himself.

“I am the boss, temporary boss anyway. I can look up the rota, see who else was on, but most of them are new. Place has just changed hands. Lots of the old staff don’t like the new owners.”

They left with the names and phone numbers for three other bartenders, but little hope of getting a definitive alibi for Huw Jones. It was still raining--not hard, but persistently enough that Charlie was glad to get back into the car.

“Let me ring Will,” he said, “Maybe he’s getting somewhere, because we surely aren’t.”

Will had been busy. “Jones and company files all its accounts on time, which dodgy businesses almost never do,” he said on the phone. “They make modest profits, don’t make excessive payments to the directors, and invest heavily in property. The directors are Huw Jones, his father and mother, and his wife. Their accountant is local, which could mean they are best mates, and I can’t trust anything they say, or could equally mean that Huw Jones has nothing to hide. My gut feeling, for what it’s worth, is that he’s legit. I looked at the Land Registry as well.”

Charlie and Eddy heard that Huw Jones owned a lot of the town’s real estate, if not as much as the art college, and almost none of it was mortgaged. Jones and his family lived in an enormous house set in an equally enormous garden, with again, no mortgage. “Either I’m missing something, or this guy is both wealthy and prudent,” Will said. “The company could leverage all that property and buy a whole lot more. This doesn’t look like someone in financial trouble.”

It was true. “And there’s no obvious Josh connection,” Charlie said. “He’s too old to have been at school with them. I suppose they might share a hobby — golf or something. His alibi might even be true. On paper, this just doesn’t feel like our guy.”

Eddy nodded in agreement.

“We’ll talk to him again,” Charlie said.

“Mags has already set it up for tomorrow,” Will said. “Huw Jones, Corrine Bailey, and Megan to ask about buying the hammers.”

“Who did she talk to?” Charlie asked.

“Corrine Bailey, I think. She’s the manager.”

And suddenly, it all made sense.

Charlie turned to Eddy. “Get us back to Llanfair as fast as you like. Blues and twos.” He reached for his seatbelt and managed to fasten it before Eddy screeched out of the car park.

Wednesday afternoon

“What’s going on?” Eddy asked as he drove, flicking a glance towards Charlie, then returning to look at the road. Eddy was driving at least twenty miles an hour faster than Charlie was comfortable with, but Charlie told himself that Eddy had years in Traffic and knew what he was doing. Which didn’t stop him clinging on for dear life. He tried not to look at the rain slicked roads, or the sharp bends, or to imagine the heavily laden forestry wagons coming the other way.

Taking a calming breath, he said, “Megan told Gwenann in the Everything Shop that her boss had sent her to buy the hammers. We assumed that she meant Huw Jones, who owns the firm. But Megan’s immediate boss is Corrine Bailey, the manager. We’ve told Corrine we’re coming to interview them all again. Megan will tell us who wanted the hammers.”

“You’re thinking that’s put Corrine on her guard?” Eddy asked.

“Or Huw, but I don’t think it’s Huw. Either way, I’m afraid we’ve inadvertently put Megan in danger, and the sooner we get back there, the better.” Charlie closed his eyes as the car went round a series of zig zag bends on two wheels.

“Shouldn’t you be sending Mags and Will to the estate agents?”

Charlie shook his head. “Nope. I want Will to do some more digging, and I don’t want Mags going on her own. So, we’d better get back there.” It was ridiculous, these

protective feelings he had about Mags and Will. She had, after all, helped quell the riots on the coast. But his instinct was to keep her safe. Will had also done his time in uniform. But Charlie couldn't get beyond thinking of him as the nerdy guy who did clever things with computers. If there was a violent offender to arrest, he should be the one to take the risks. He called Will again.

“Will. No idea if you can do this, but can you find any connection between Corrine Bailey and either of the Joshes on any of the dating sites? Also, any connection between the Joshes and anyone else on our list?”

“Hang on,” Will said, and they heard Will mumbling to himself and the clatter of the keys on his laptop. “I’m looking for Unwin and no sign of the guy anywhere, but Josh Pettifor is mentioned more than once on Is This Your Boyfriend? Or rather men with the initial ‘J’ and Josh Pettifor’s picture are mentioned ... chatted to this guy for ages, set up a date and he never showed up ... went on a date and he was clearly all about sex and not interested in anything else. Blew him out ... Red flags galore with this one, definitely not looking for serious relationship ... don’t trust him ladies, he talks the talk, but he’s active on all the sites ... lots more like that. No way of knowing who posted these messages, because the site allows anonymity. I’ll have to ring you back about the other things.” Will ended the call.

“How can he find out if Corrine matched with Josh on any of the dating sites?” Eddy asked.

“No idea,” Charlie said, “we wouldn’t understand if he told us.”

Eddy grunted agreement.

The phone rang. “OK, so I’m pretty sure that Corrine herself posted one of the messages about Josh Pettifor, saying he made a date and then didn’t show up. I think he might also have matched with Jackie from the estate agents. Mags has been

looking at all the messages about him, Josh Pettifor. His pattern seems to be lots of chat via messages, and then either not show up to a date and block the woman without warning or show up and be unpleasant if she didn't put out straight away."

Mags interrupted. "He left quite a trail of broken dreams," she said. "Will can't access the messages between Pettifor and the women on the dating sites, but some women say he was all charming and seemed interested, until he suddenly disappeared and blocked them. Ghosted, the word is."

"Is that a reason to kill someone?" Eddy asked. Charlie had no answer. Motives only had to make sense to the perpetrators of crime. All he was allowed to care about were the practicalities: could someone have committed the crime or not?

"Maybe not a reason for murder in our eyes," Mags said, echoing his thoughts, "but some of the women posting sound really hurt. As if they'd been convinced they had made a genuine connection and then ... nothing. No contact, no sorry this isn't working for me , so they feel as if they were stupid to have been taken in. Like they've been scammed. There's lots of research saying that scam victims feel shame about being fooled. Makes their losses even worse."

"Painful," Charlie said. He couldn't hear the reply because the rain began to hammer down hard, reducing visibility so much that even Eddy was forced to slow down. They were on the outskirts of the town, and although the shop windows were lit, no one was on the streets. Water was building up in the gutters, overflowing the gulleys and beginning to spread across the roads. Eddy's predictions about floods appeared to be coming true.

"Stop by the estate agent's," Charlie said, reaching over to turn off the blue light.

"It's a double yellow," Eddy said.

“Screw it.”

Eddy stopped as close to the door as he could. It wasn't close enough for Charlie to avoid stepping in ankle-deep water. Thankfully, the bandage stayed dry.

Like the rest of the shops in the parade, Jones and Company was brightly lit. Jackie was sitting at her desk in the front of the room, wrapped up in a long cardigan. As they entered, there was a scramble as she put her phone down on her lap and out of sight. When she saw who her visitors were, she visibly relaxed, and gave Charlie a tentative smile.

“Can I help?” she asked.

“We were hoping for a word with Corrine Bailey and your colleague Megan,” Charlie said.

“Sorry, but there's only me this afternoon. Mr Jones was here, but he had a viewing. Corrine has taken Megan to do some valuations. I was feeling well fed up at being left here until this rain started.”

“We really do need to talk to Corrine,” Charlie said. “Do you know where they've gone?”

Jackie gave them a doubtful look. “I suppose I could check. They were going to a few places. Should I ring the boss and find out where they are?”

“Yes please, that would be great,” Charlie said. If Corrine was intent on harming Megan, she might think twice if she knew the police were on their way.

But there was no answer from either Corrine or Megan.

“Can you do us a list of the places they were going to?” Charlie asked, “And keep ringing.”

He sensed Jackie’s desire to know why, but she simply nodded and clicked her mouse to wake the computer, clicked around for a moment and said, “diary.” Then she found a pad and scribbled a few addresses, tore the sheet off and handed it to Charlie.

“Three in town, and two in the villages,” Charlie said. He led the way outside and they stood in the shelter of the shop doorway. “You take the car, I’ll do town.” Eddy gave him a dubious look. The rain had diminished slightly, but water was creeping across the pavement. “Look, I’m already wet. None of these places are very far. I’ll be OK with the crutches. But keep in touch.”

“You, too,” Eddy said, and picked his way back to the car.

He wasn’t going to be OK with the crutches but needs must.

Wednesday afternoon

The first place Charlie reached was a terraced house. Grubby and yellowing net curtains hung in the front window, water stained the rendering like rust, and the house name hung crookedly from its screws. It looked like the before in a property renovation show. Charlie hammered at the door, but it was obvious no one was inside or had been for a long time.

Next on his list was an office on the other side of the main road and down an alley between the town hall and the supermarket car park. He hopped as fast as he could, crying out each time his injured leg took any weight. He would take it easy as soon as he knew Megan was safe. Thanks to the gloom and persistent rain, no one was around to hear.

He'd seen the door to the office on his visits to the supermarket but always assumed that it was a back entrance to the town hall, or one of its neighbours. Now he could see that this was an extension tacked on to another building (which one wasn't obvious) at some time in the last century. The door was marked DLNG, which meant nothing in either Welsh or English.

Charlie lifted his hand to try the door and smelled petrol, faint but definite. He lowered his hand. He'd found the right place, and if Corrine was in there, intent on starting another fire, he didn't have long.

The rain changed from steady back to downpour. Memory told him that the office, or

whatever it was, had no windows, but he hobbled up and down on each side to double check. It was only a single storey, so the inhabitants must have relied on skylights. He briefly contemplated climbing onto the roof, going so far as to look around for bins to give him a starting foothold. But Charlie was no Ethan Hawke or Jack Reacher, able to swing down through a hole in the roof, ready to knock out the bad guys with a single blow. He was a country policeman and an injured one at that. He would have to be enough as he was, crutches and all. He stepped up to the door, and began to turn the handle, as slowly and quietly as he could. It was unlocked.

Water from Charlie's hair ran down under his collar and onto his neck. His cuffs were soaked already, and his trousers stuck to his legs like cling film. The chances of the bandage not being wet had reduced to zero. Charlie hoped the rain would conceal the noise of the door opening. He pulled the door towards him, stepping awkwardly on his bad leg, biting back a curse.

As the door opened, a cloud of warm, petrol-scented air rolled out. In front of him was a short corridor, lit as he had expected via a skylight, though it did little to lift the gloom. To his right, an open door showed a small kitchen, and to the left, two closed doors with the symbols for male and female toilets. Ahead of him was a partially opened door. Though it came the sound of heavy breathing, and yellow light from electric bulbs. He needed to get in there before Corrine noticed the draught.

A gust of wind threatened to tear the door from Charlie's hand. He quickly moved inside, glad of the muffling effects of the carpet, and then pulled the door closed behind him, holding the wet handle so that there was no click. The heavy breathing went on, more distinct now that the weather was safely outside. Only then did he let a breath of his own go. Quietly. He listened. Nothing. He crept towards the door until he could see through the gap.

The tableau before him could have been straight from the West End stage. Illuminated by a single lamp immediately above them, Corrine stood over the prone

body of Megan Mills. She wore her estate agent outfit of a neat suit and heels, but her hair had lost both its shape and its gloss, and her face was wet with rain and sweat.

Blood lay in a pool around Megan's head. Charlie couldn't tell if she was alive or dead. But if she was still alive, it wasn't going to be for long, unless he acted. Corrine had a disposable pink plastic cigarette lighter in her left hand, thumb poised to flick it into flame. Her other hand held a green plastic container. Petrol vapour filled the air. The room was empty, although there must have been some form of heating because it was warm.

"Stop!" Charlie shouted, throwing the door open. "Police!"

Corrine's reaction was to fling the petrol container at Charlie, and to lift the lighter above her head. The container hit the floor, and petrol splashed onto Charlie's legs and onto the floor around his feet. The vapour smell choked him, and he coughed.

"Corrine, stop this!" he spluttered, coughing again, the petrol felt greasy on his wet skin. "The room is full of fumes. If you click that lighter, we both die."

"Maybe I don't care." Corrine waved the lighter, lamplight glinting on the shiny plastic.

"I think you do care. I think you want people to know what you've done."

Corrine laughed — a wild, bitter laugh, that made her eyes bulge, and her lips look black with strain. "No one gives a shit. If they did, those so-called dating sites would be closed down. Men pretend to be interested, say they want a serious relationship when all they want is to get their dicks wet and move onto the next one."

"Josh Unwin wasn't like that, though." Charlie couldn't help himself.

“Yes, he was. They are all like that.”

“He was non-monogamous. That’s different.”

“No. It. Isn’t.” And Corrine waved the lighter again.

“People care enough to join your group, exposing the predators.”

She leaned towards Charlie. As she spoke, spittle flew from her lips. “And do you know what happens? Those men invent women’s identities and join, too. Or the pick me girls tell them. Predators is right.” The intensity of her gaze was frightening. “Do you know how many women agree to unsafe sex, and get pregnant? I’ll look after you , he says when he wants sex. Once there’s a baby on the way, he disappears and reappears on another dating site. Or the ones who turn into stalkers when a woman says she’s not interested? Men who borrow money and spend it on other women. I say borrow , but they never give it back. Men who keep weapons and threaten to use them. Day in, day out and nobody cares, because those sites make money. ”

“Corrine, if you stop this now, you’ll get heard. Your day in court. The press will hear what you have to say. Other women will come forward with their stories. People will understand. Some of those men will go to jail.”

Day in court? Charlie sounded as if he’d taken a leaf from Jeff Britton’s playbook.

“I killed two people. That’s what will get noticed. Not the reason they had to die. What do a few more matter?”

“We all matter, Corrine. You matter, Megan matters, I matter. It’s not too late to stop this.” He wasn’t foolish enough to mention Unwin or Josh Pettifor, though they had mattered too.

Charlie began to move very slowly towards Corrine, trying to look as unthreatening as he could.

Which was when Patsy launched herself through the open door with a scream, hitting Corrine in the stomach, knocking them both on top of Megan's body. Megan gasped.

Wednesday late afternoon

Charlie didn't question Patsy's sudden appearance. Megan was alive. Now he had to keep her that way and get them all out of this petrol-soaked hell. He dragged at Patsy, who pushed him away with unexpected strength.

"Get Megan," Charlie said, and grabbed Corrine to pull her off Megan. Corrine was winded, gasping for breath in the noxious air, but she kept her grip on the lighter—thankfully, still unlit—as she struggled to roll away from Charlie's grasp. But Megan was free, and Patsy grasped her by the shoulders and began to pull her towards the door although unconscious, Megan must have been a dead weight. She reeked of petrol. Her hair and clothes were sticky with blood, and as Patsy moved her, the head wound began to bleed afresh.

Charlie had nothing to staunch the bleeding, and no desire to stay a moment longer in the room with Corrine and her lighter. With horror, Charlie saw a bloody hammer on the floor beside where Megan had lain.

"You'll have to help me," Patsy said.

Charlie let go of Corrine, who appeared to have retreated into shock and silence, and moved to take one of Megan's arms over his shoulder, with Patsy on the other side.

"Fuuuuck," he moaned as his injured leg took the strain.

The unconscious woman made a small groan, spurring them to greater efforts. Once she was outside, they could call for help and go back for Corrine, with handcuffs. Charlie tried not to think about the petrol on all their clothes and Corrine's lighter. Somehow, they staggered to the door and pulled it open. The rain continued to pour down relentlessly, and cold, wet, air rushed in. For the first time since opening the office door, Charlie could breathe without a lung full of petrol. The relief was overwhelming.

"We can't take her out there," Patsy said.

But there was no choice. "Supermarket," Charlie gasped. "Quickly." It was the nearest place with light and heat, less than a hundred yards across the car park. He heard Patsy draw in a deep breath and take more than her fair share of Megan's weight as they started to half-run, half-fall-forward towards the entrance. Charlie wriggled his phone out of his pocket and call for help.

"DS Charlie Rees, Llanfair Police. We need an ambulance to Llanfair supermarket, front entrance, unconscious woman, head wound, shock."

Then he called Mags and told her to round up whatever back-up she could find. Which would probably be no more than herself, Will, and Eddy.

As they approached the supermarket door, the few shoppers stared. Two soaked figures, holding up a young woman covered in blood, stumbling into the shop, next to the wire baskets and special offer avocados. One man, in a supermarket uniform, stepped forward to help, bringing a wheelchair. Gently, Charlie and Patsy eased Megan into it, and within minutes the green-clad paramedics ran in, carrying their suitcases full of equipment. Thankfully, they were locals who recognised Charlie and Patsy.

"Head injury found unconscious five minutes ago, her name is Megan," Charlie

rattled off. “I have to go.” And staggered back towards the DNLG office. Sweat ran down his face, competing with the rain. Every breath was painful, and he wasn’t going to think about how much his leg hurt.

The door was open, banging against the wall. Inside, the carpet had darkened with rain, but the smell of petrol was still discernible. At the end of the short corridor, through the doorway to the open-plan office, Charlie could see Corrine, sitting on the floor by the petrol can, lighter in hand. His crutches lay beside her, just out of easy reach. She was crying, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Corrine,” he said, and she looked up, wiping her face with the hand not holding the lighter. “Corrine,” he said again. “It’s time to go. Let’s get out of here, have a clean-up and some warm clothes. Something to eat.”

“I don’t think so,” Corrine said, in a small voice, a Welsh accent noticeable for the first time. She sounded utterly defeated, nothing like the confident, well-dressed estate agent Charlie had met on the night of Unwin’s death. He remembered the misery in the anonymous posts about men on dating sites. If Corrine had been spending her evenings reading those posts, it was no wonder she was crying. But she had killed two people.

“I need you to come with me,” he said, putting some authority into his voice.

“I don’t want to go to prison,” Corrine said. “I’ll stay here.” She picked up the petrol can and began to pour the last of it onto her own clothes.

“Jesus, Corrine, no.” Charlie started forwards as Corrine flicked the lighter.

A sheet of yellow flame shot up to the ceiling, concealing Corrine from his view. At the same time, he felt his arm grabbed and pulled so hard that he thought it would dislocate.

“Get the fuck out of there,” Patsy shouted, and kept pulling.

“We can save her,” Charlie shook his arm, but Patsy held on with a bruising grip.

“No,” she said.

They heard a scream from the office. Corrine’s clothes were on fire. The scream went on and on.

Charlie yanked his arm away and tried to step back into the office. Which was when Patsy kneed him in the balls. The pain sent him stumbling, tears of agony stinging his eyes.

“I said, no ,” she said, and curled her foot around his ankles so that he fell against her. From inside the room, the screaming continued; Charlie thought it would haunt his dreams forever. Evil-smelling smoke drifted towards them, the result of smouldering carpet and ceiling tiles. Patsy reclaimed her hold on Charlie’s arm and dragged him to the outside door. Behind him, the screaming stopped abruptly, and something inside Charlie hurt worse than his balls.

Foul smoke billowed out behind them as Patsy hauled Charlie into the car park.

“You alright, mate?” A man asked. One of the gawpers who had accompanied Charlie everywhere he’d been this week. Charlie gasped for breath.

No, since you ask. My colleague has just kneed me in the nuts and a woman has just burned herself to death in front of me.

“Fire brigade,” he wheezed.

“Done it, sarge,” said a familiar voice, and he looked to see Eddy in a hi-vis coat,

standing next to his car. Will and Mags were there, too, trying to move people away from the office, their yellow jackets marked POLICE in big letters. The same sort of jacket Patsy was wearing the night Unwin died, the jacket that covered her body cam ... Charlie realised he was disassociating. He grasped at Eddy's car for balance and to the last vestiges of his reason, forced himself to stand up straight, and took charge.

45

Wednesday late afternoon

The paramedics were clustered around the entrance to the supermarket.

“Was Megan OK?” Charlie asked Eddy.

“As far as I can gather, she’s not great, but she’s alive. What happened in there?”

“I found Corrine Bailey,” Charlie said with a sigh that hurt his ribs. “And then Patsy found me.” He explained everything that had happened, including his attempt to rescue Corrine. “She wouldn’t let me even try,” he said.

“Look at it,” Eddy said. The office was wreathed in clouds of filthy black smoke. “It’s still burning. I reckon a lungful of that would see you off.”

But inside his head, Charlie could hear Corrine screaming.

Patsy butted in.

“She’d covered herself in petrol and set fire to her clothes. She knew what she was doing.”

Except we still have to prove Corrine murdered the two Joshes. Which would have been much easier if she was alive and able to give us a confession.

A siren and a spinning blue light announced the arrival of the fire brigade. Charlie left Eddy to tell them what to expect and limped across the car park. Megan was now on a trolley, hooked up to some kind of drip, being wheeled towards the waiting ambulance.

“Gonna be touch and go,” one of the paramedics said, as they came past. “Nasty head wound.” He told Charlie which hospital they were taking Megan to, and after a bit of a shuffle, handed him her phone. “Locked, but you can access In Case of Emergency info.”

Charlie thought about all the pieces of bad news he’d delivered this week. Now he could add another. Great. He wondered what it would be like to deliver good news for a change. Corrine must have a family, somewhere. No doubt he’d have to talk to them, too. Corrine’s death might be easier than a trial, but there would be an inquest — no, three inquests — and he’d have to attend them all. A wave of depression rolled over him at the prospect.

Shouting stopped his reveries. Mags was threatening to arrest a man with a TV camera on his shoulder, while his companion, demanded to know if this was another attack on Muslim-run businesses.

Suddenly, the car park was full of uniformed police, and an authoritative voice was telling them to clear the area. “Contact the press office for information; stop harassing my officers,” Mal Kent said. He came over to Charlie and took him gently by the arm. “Quick question,” he said. “Leave the supermarket open, or is it part of the scene?”

Charlie shook his head. “It was just the nearest place to get her — Megan — out of the rain.” He realised the rain had stopped, and when he looked up, the clouds were beginning to clear, leaving tiny patches of blue. His mind reverted to Corrine. “I would have tried to save her,” he said. “I wanted to, but Patsy ...”

“You’re gabbling,” Kent said. He beckoned one of the uniformed officers and gave him a couple of £20 notes. “Coffee all round, including the firefighters, and some kind of sugary buns for Charlie.” The officer bustled off, counting heads. “Now, take a deep breath, and talk me through it. Calmly.”

“That’s just it, sir. I can’t take a deep breath.” Charlie didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. He needed to sit down. He needed not to be wet and cold. He needed his crutches, which were probably burned to cinders.

“Then take a shallow one. Just tell me who Corrine Bailey is, why yet another bit of Llanfair is on fire, and whether the firefighters are going to find another body. And don’t forget PC Hargreaves, who I noticed sneaking off behind the shops.”

Charlie did as he was bid, outlining his reasoning for suspecting Corrine, his discovery of her and the unconscious Megan, and Corrine’s confession.

“I was trying to talk her down when Patsy appeared. We got Megan out between us, and then I tried to go back for Corrine. To arrest her. But she ... she set herself on fire ... and Patsy dragged me away. She’s stronger than she looks.” Charlie could still feel the ache in his groin and the bruise where she had grasped his arm. He shivered, which just made everything hurt more. Sitting down was becoming essential, so he opened the door of Eddy’s car and perched on the side of the seat. It took the pressure off his leg but did nothing for the fatigue rolling over him in waves.

“It sounds to me like Hargreaves did you a favour,” Kent said. “Not that she and I won’t be having a conversation about her behaviour.”

The uniformed officer returned pushing a supermarket trolley full of cardboard cups with lids. “Coffee, milk, sugar,” he said. “And doughnuts.” He looked at Kent and then handed the bag to Charlie. They helped themselves to coffee and watched as the officer trundled away to distribute the rest.

“Jeff Burton, aka Britton, has got himself a solicitor,” Kent said. “I’m not convinced he didn’t set the first fire, though from what you tell me, he’s probably off the hook for the murders. When things here have sorted themselves out a bit, I’d like you to come and question him.”

Charlie nodded, mouth full of doughnut.

Getting things sorted out a bit involved the firefighters putting out the remaining fires, formal statements, scenes of crime investigators and the return of Hector Powell and the mortuary van for Corrine’s remains. At least Charlie was spared the trip to break the news of her death to her parents. They lived in Norwich, on the other side of the UK. A local officer was sent to do the deed. Kent ensured that all the wheels were in motion, then left, telling Charlie to meet him at HQ in an hour. “Spend the hour getting cleaned up,” he said. “Leave all this to Eddy. He can cope.”

So Charlie went home to Tom, who helped him up the stairs to the bathroom, and very gently eased him out of his petrol-soaked clothes and equally gently washed him clean. The bandage was a mess: wet with rain and petrol.

“I’ll redo this,” Tom said, unwinding it.

Charlie didn’t want to look.

“It’s not too bad, considering. No sign of infection,” Tom said, and Charlie risked a glance, then wished he hadn’t.

The clean, dry bandage was an improvement, and so were a set of clean, dry clothes. A painkiller would improve things still further.

Tom made him an omelette stuffed with cheese, and some oven chips to go with it. Charlie sat at the kitchen table and enjoyed every mouthful.

“There would be cake,” Tom said.

“But you ate it?” Charlie asked, though he was past caring. They were all alive and that was enough.

Tom smiled, then his face darkened. “I ate some of it,” he said, “and your friend Patsy ate the rest. This isn’t the first omelette I’ve made today. I don’t think she’s been eating, or sleeping either, come to that. She’s asleep in the living room. Or she was.”

Charlie turned as the kitchen door opened.

“I need to explain,” Patsy said. “I knew you’d find them. The person who killed Unwin. So, I’ve been following you. I wanted to make them pay, you see.”

“Corrine paid,” Charlie said. “Is that why you dragged me away?”

“No. I dragged you away because you were soaked in petrol and the room was on fire.”

Tom went as white as a sheet. “What the ...”

“It was fine, Tom,” Patsy said. “I knocked him over and kicked him in the goolies.”

She sounded so matter of fact that Charlie burst out laughing, and once he started, he couldn’t stop. It made his ribs hurt, but he was past caring. Tom and Patsy stared at him, as if he was mad.

“I suppose you also know why Unwin was meeting Corrine in an empty shop?” Charlie asked when the laughter had subsided.

“I have an idea. The estate agents want to sell that shop, and it’s cheap. I think Unwin went to see if we could convert it into flats, one for us to live in, one to sell or rent out. We should check if they made a viewing appointment.”

And she killed him because he was called Josh. He was just the wrong one.

It wasn’t difficult to persuade Tom to drive him to meet Mal Kent at HQ. Or to drop Patsy off at Dylan’s house.

“I want to tell him what happened,” she said.

46

Wednesday late

Charlie and Mal Kent sat opposite Jeff Britton and his solicitor — a young woman who looked barely old enough to have finished school — in an interview room at police HQ. It being HQ, the room was relatively modern, though without natural light. The carpet still looked blue, and there were cameras, plural. It was still an interview room, with a tightly wound suspect, facing a long wait for a court date, and hopefully (from Charlie's perspective) a lengthy jail term. He might get bail, but Charlie had hopes of custody. Jeff Britton was too good at dropping out of sight to make bail a comfortable option for the police.

"Mr Burton," Kent began.

"Britton, I'm changing it." Britton interrupted.

"Mr Britton, then, Jeff, if I may," Kent said, his voice deep, and as smooth as honey.

"Don't fucking bother," Britton said, "I'll admit to everything, except I never killed anyone."

"So, that would be the kidnapping and assault on Alun Evans MP in his home?"

Britton nodded and then said "yes," when Kent told him he needed to say the word aloud.

“The graffiti on the town hall in Llanfair?”

“Yes.”

“The explosion at Hassan’s takeaway?”

“Yes.” He looked decidedly smug about that, which made Charlie’s leg hurt.

“The fire in the empty shop on Llanfair High Street?”

Britton smiled. “You can’t prove it. All those coppers and you can’t prove I was even there.”

“Actually, I think we can,” Kent said. “One of my colleagues put out an appeal to the public for their phone photographs of that night. Photographs of the areas not covered by CCTV. You might have avoided CCTV, but you weren’t looking out for people with phones.”

Which was Kent essentially saying that he didn’t have any pictures of Britton at the scene, whilst implying that he did. The solicitor’s face showed that she knew what Kent was doing, but she wasn’t quick enough.

“So what if I did?” Britton shouted; his voice very loud in the small room. “I might have chucked a bit of petrol around, but that bloke on the top floor was dead when I found him.”

“Why go upstairs at all?” Kent asked, silkily. “You’d started a fire and made your escape, why go back?”

It took several other questions before Britton admitted to the dispiriting truth: he had simply wanted to see how far his fire had extended.

After far too long in the claustrophobic room, Kent explained that they would be asking the Crown Prosecution Service for a charging decision. “But I am confident that you will shortly be charged with all the offences we have discussed today,” he said. The solicitor looked as if she was confident about it as well.

“I’ll get my day in court,” Britton said, smiling. “People will have to listen.”

“You’ll probably be in court tomorrow,” Kent replied.

In the corridor outside, Kent blew out a breath. “Did we miss anything?” he asked Charlie. Charlie shook his head.

“After that lot, he’s going to have to plead guilty. There won’t be a trial. He won’t get to spout all his anti-immigrant rubbish. Tomorrow will only be a remand hearing.”

“As I’m sure his solicitor is explaining right now,” Kent said, and the satisfaction in his voice was almost visible.

Charlie’s next port of call was the hospital, if Tom was prepared to continue his chauffeur duties. Tom was. He’d been to get coffee and was listening to an audiobook on the car’s sound system. “At your service, guv’nor,” he said.

Charlie laughed. “You need a peaked cap.”

He wanted to check on Megan and ask someone in minor injuries for some more crutches. He could manage without them, but it was much more painful. He was surprised to meet Gavin, Ravensbourne’s Gavin, in the foyer.

“Is the boss OK?” Charlie asked, forgetting to move away from the reassuring ‘pat’ on his arm, which given his leg, almost knocked him over.

“She’s fine,” Gavin said. “Go and see for yourself, same place. She’ll be home tomorrow.”

Megan first, Charlie decided, then Freya Ravensbourne.

Enquiries about Megan sent him to Intensive Care, and the charge nurse who simply said he didn’t know. “Her parents are here, sitting with her. She hasn’t regained consciousness, but she isn’t getting any worse. All I can say is, don’t give up hope.”

Charlie had no intention of giving up hope and said so. Then he went to find Freya Ravensbourne.

His boss was sitting up on the same bed, in the same room, but she was dressed in what appeared to be a new pair of black polyester trousers, and an artist’s smock like the one Gavin had been wearing on Charlie’s last visit. Unlike on his last visit, Ravensbourne looked almost well. All the visible cuts and bruises turning from purple to yellow, and though she still had a turban of bandages around her head, it was a thinner, neater, turban.

“You’re looking better, boss,” Charlie said. “I thought you were going home yesterday.”

“Stupid, pointless fussing. I’m fine, but the doctors insisted. Home tomorrow. Now tell me about your murders.”

Charlie told his story. At the end, Ravensbourne had only one question.

“Why was Patsy there?”

“Because she’s been following me. Chief Superintendent Kent told her to keep away, put her on paid leave until further notice. But she couldn’t leave it alone.” Charlie

blushed. “She, um, said I would catch whoever killed Unwin, and she wanted to be there. To, um, make them pay. She wouldn’t have hurt them obviously, and in the event, she didn’t, but I think she wanted to. That’s why she was at every crime scene.”

And I still don’t know if that’s why she pulled me away from Corrine.

“Understandable, I suppose. I’d probably feel the same way if Gavin was murdered. I felt a bit like killing someone myself after Unwin’s death, to be honest.”

Charlie contemplated the idea of a murderous DI Ravensbourne.

Then she asked: “Did you find out why Unwin was at the empty shop? Was he meeting someone for sex, as everyone thought?”

Charlie smiled, if bitterly. “Nope. Patsy was right about Unwin. Multiple partners, yes, but not behind her back. He went to meet Corrine in her role as an estate agent. Turns out one of his ambitions was to do some property development. Apparently, that shop is on the market at a knockdown price, and he’d been sounding out the planners about converting it into flats and looking round for builders. My guess is that Corrine killed him because of his name and his willingness to meet her in the evening and didn’t realise she’d got the wrong one until later. The fire Britton started must have given her ideas.”

This time it was Ravensbourne’s turn to contemplate the unthinkable.

“What a fucking waste,” she said.

Charlie stayed to talk to Ravensbourne until the nurses told him to go. They discussed the case, and then Patsy’s future. Ravensbourne was confident Chief Superintendent Kent would find her something new. “He sent you to Llanfair, after all,” she said.

“He’ll find a new start for Patsy if that’s what she wants.” Charlie hoped she was right. He also hoped Patsy would decide to stay in Llanfair

Tom drove them home through the summer dusk, after a stop at Minor Injuries where his leg was pronounced to be ‘healing nicely, keep your weight off it.’ Tom’s bandaging was praised, and after some tutting, new crutches were provided.

“Look after these ones,” the nurse said, but she smiled.

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Thursday and Friday were spent writing reports. Charlie kept his weight off his leg as instructed, and let Eddy drive him home at the end of the day.

Outside, the air was warm and soft, smelling of summer after all the rain. Charlie took the time to check his weather app. It was going to get hot again, but not tonight. He wasn't in a rush to get back. The last three days with just the two of them had reminded Charlie of how much he loved Tom, and how comfortable they were without two teenage girls in the house.

At home there was an ominous hush. No loud music, no TV noise, though the lights were on. Maybe they'd stayed in London.

"Tom?" he called.

The living room door opened, and Ziggy put her head out. "You're back," she said. "We've been waiting."

"We made you something," Amelie's voice said from the living room. "Let him in for God's sake, Zig."

Ziggy waved him in and stood aside. On the coffee table stood a cake stand, and on the cake stand was a collection of the stickiest, moistest over the top cupcakes Charlie had ever seen. There were blue ones with silver balls on top, pink ones with coconut sprinkles, and chocolate with chocolate shavings. Which is to say, white icing with dark chocolate shavings and dark chocolate icing with white chocolate shavings. Each was contained in a 1960s style paper case decorated with peace signs and happy faces.

“All for you,” Amelie said.

“Because we haven’t been very nice, and it’s not your fault.” Ziggy said.

In the corner of the room, Charlie saw his husband holding a sketchbook and pencil, trying to conceal a grin behind his beard.

“We are going to be much better from now on,” Ziggy said.

“So, we made some cake to prove it. Dad said cupcakes with lots of icing were your favourite, and we found a recipe online. Mum video called as well, gotta be honest.”

Charlie swallowed. “They look fantastic, thank you so much,” he said. “But if you don’t mind, I’ll get changed out of my suit before I try one.”

The twins smiled identical smiles, like two teenage angels. Tom was looking hard at his book.

Charlie went upstairs to the bedroom he shared with Tom, carefully removed his suit and hung it up, before dressing in lovely soft and battered jeans and an equally vintage T shirt. The cakes looked over the top, even for a sugar addict like him. But he was going to eat them in the same spirit in which they had been made: the spirit of making amends. Amelie and Ziggy were teenagers, and he remembered how hard it was to be that age, how the world didn’t understand, and most of all how your parents didn’t understand. He was one of the grown-ups, and he was going to behave like one. If the girls could make him cakes to say sorry, he could make an effort in return.

He dropped his phone on the bed, wondering whether to stick it in his pocket, or leave it here to charge. Leave it here, he thought, because I’ve done enough for this week, and surely Llanfair will get a bit of peace? If it rings, I’ll pretend I can’t hear it.

The charger should have been plugged in to the socket by his bedside table. Except it

wasn't. Of course it wasn't. In its place was a smear of blue icing.

This was going to be a very long year.