



# DYING LAND

DS LEAH WEST BOOK NINETEEN

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Nic Roberts & Ari Thorne

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# LOVE TO READ DETECTIVE THRILLERS?



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## PROLOGUE

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**S**he was still having trouble believing that this was her life.

In truth, she'd pictured it several times over and taken the necessary steps towards it, but she always felt like it was completely out of her reach. Like it was a fantasy that would never become a reality.

When she entered her first lecture hall, she had the gripping paranoia that somebody would recognise her.

It was a ridiculous idea, she knew. Most of these people wouldn't have heard of her original name, let alone the incidents attached to it.

But she felt she was living on borrowed time for those first few weeks. She didn't want to enjoy this second chance of life in case it got snatched away from her.

This was why when her fellow students invited her out for an evening out, she'd politely declined. She was content to stay in her room and continue her studies.

But after a fortnight, she was conscious that people would take note of her withdrawal. There was only so much isolation one could chalk up to being the class wallflower. They might think she was hiding something.



And they'd be right.

So she decided to head out with them one evening, just to make an appearance. She was sandwiched between two girls, and at first, she was content to sip her non-alcoholic beverage in peace. The last thing she wanted was to risk slipping up and disclosing all her darkest truths.

It turned out she didn't need alcohol to worry about that. When asked why she wasn't drinking, she explained it was because she had bad memories of her dad, which earned her some sympathetic looks.

It was only when they offered their condolences that she realised how close she'd come to talking about her previous life.

But then the topic turned to celebrity crushes, and she wondered if this was what normal people had to worry about, who they fancied, when the next shag was coming in, and which shirt went with which jeans.

She thought about her own attire, or rather what she hadn't come along with. There was a time in her life when she'd never leave her room without possessing a gun or a knife or anything that could be used as a weapon. At one point, she was able to fashion a weapon out of a pack of razors and a toothbrush when she was going undercover for an assignment.

But there was something about the mundaneness that she lapped up. And by the end of the evening, she was laughing and swapping jokes with the rest of them, winning them over with her sense of humour.

It quickly became a regular thing, going out for drinks in the evening, which expanded into meeting up for lunch on the university campus.

And there was even the promise of romance. There was a boy in her class that she'd been making regular eye contact with. Maybe there was something that could develop from there.

But she knew every moment of happiness that she took back for herself was a gamble. Maybe the feeling of uncertainty would always be there to sabotage her happiness.

Because it would never be safe to be Suzie Dano.



**T**he man in the car was growing increasingly claustrophobic in his limited surroundings.

He hadn't been able to keep a base of operations. And at first, he favoured the idea of the car, thinking that the mobility suited him better. But he'd been living on the edge of Bedford for half a year now, not really settled.

It was the lack of progress that frustrated him more than anything. He would have thought by now he would have somewhere set up and some legal businesses giving him a financial foothold.

But he'd been knocked back at every single opportunity.

The name Eddie Knightley used to mean something in the criminal underworld. There were only two types of people in the world: those who'd never heard of him and those who were scared shitless of him.

But he'd been on the run from the authorities for eighteen months after Detective Inspector Olivia Austin had driven him out of Newquay. He knew that heading back there would be a risky move. She was on the lookout for him and he did not want to meet her again at a disadvantage.

He instead set his sights on Bedford, where he figured it'd have a much easier time taking on the more inexperienced CID members. The then-DS West had recently taken down a notorious serial killer, but he didn't think she'd give him much trouble.

So, using a middlewoman, he enlisted the aid of Suzie Dano to cause some havoc in Bedford, and set the detectives on the wrong foot. And she'd done a good job of it, at first.

She'd nearly killed DS West in a brutal attack, and with a corrupt DCI based in Bedford CID, Knightley's return to power was all but guaranteed.

But West was found to be alive, and she'd managed to bring down the entire operation, leaving Dano in a coma and all other participants arrested.

Knightley had considered fighting back, but one small mercy from the events was that none of the conspirators had any information that could be tied directly back to him. Any further action would draw the attention onto him. The only logical thing to do was get the fuck out of Dodge until it all blew over.

Six months later, he'd heard that Suzie Dano had awakened from her coma. And to his surprise, she hadn't carried out any revenge against Leah West. Instead, she'd disappeared into thin air.

But Knightley figured it was as good a time as any to make a move. And with Jeff Rowan supposedly in his pocket, he felt like he had a good chance of making a stand against West. He thought that if he could discredit her, then he'd be able to solidify his hold on Bedford.

But no matter what he threw at her, she never seemed to go down.

All he had to show for his efforts were some wasted bodies and a comatose sergeant.

But he needed to know how desperate things were before he made any further moves.

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CHRIS BAXTER WAS SAT in the closed club, posturing in his seat. He wasn't a regular name to the police. He often oversaw petty crimes but tried to keep himself free of some of the 'heavier stuff', such as murder. He enjoyed the same anonymity that Eddie Knightley had once had, a point that drove the nomadic criminal wild with envy.

When Knightley sat down opposite him, he didn't look intimidated. Instead, he looked... bored.

"The next few days are going to be very busy," Knightley began, trying to make a show of looking like he was focusing on the future. "And I'd like to know that I can rely on your support."

Baxter sniggered at this.

"I'm sorry, is that supposed to be my concern?" he asked, playing the part of the comedian.

"I've got major operations, and after the latest drug smuggling scheme at the funeral parlour fell through, I need all hands on deck," Eddie explained, trying not to sound too desperate.

"I hear what you're saying," the younger criminal replied through a stifled yawn. "But I'm failing to see how any of this

applies to me. I'm out, Eddie. Normally, I steer clear of the more extreme side, but you assured me that there would be no risk at all. And lo and behold, you've had the police descending on you like a pack of fucking vultures! How long is it going to be before they're knocking on my door with a search warrant?"

"That's not going to happen." Eddie spoke firmly, trying to maintain control of the situation.

"Oh, and you can assure me of that?" the younger man asked coyly, allowing a small smile. "There was a time when you would have told me that and I would have believed you. But after the tidal wave of shit you've let loose on the town over the last few months, I'm amazed you're still standing here thinking you've got a chance. You want my advice? Admit you got beat and get out of here while you still can."

"Do you have any idea who I am?" Knightley roared, not used to somebody speaking to him so brazenly.

"I know who you were," Baxter responded, unfazed by the outburst. "And you're only a shadow of your old self. The Eddie Knightley I knew would have been able to hold his own. Hell, the fact that you are even here trying to keep me on your side tells me how much shit you're in. This is what you get from flying too close to the sun."

Eddie wanted to explode in anger. He was not going to sit here and take shit from a man twenty years younger than him. But at the same time, he could understand where he was coming from. Every move he'd made since arriving here had backfired on him. And if Baxter was already expressing doubts about his incompetence, then how long would it be until the rest of his contacts were doing the same?

It was clear that the only way to regain his lost dignity was to take out Leah West. And Baxter was going to be no help.

He didn't like the option he would have to turn to. He needed to run his operation like a business.

But it felt ironic that the only way he'd be able to get his business back would be to hire a psychopath.



He watched the man lying on the ground with focused interest. He wondered if the camera would capture the minimalist movements of the chest moving up and down as the body took its last breaths. It was only a small detail, but it would add so much weight to his work.

As far as most of his neighbours were concerned, photography was just something he did to pass the time. They had no idea of his loftier ambitions.

He had faint hopes that one day, his work would be shown publicly. It had always been his dream to showcase his work in a gallery of some kind. Discreetly, of course. He knew that the current mood would work against him. But it was still art, after all.

Although the man slumped on the kitchen floor would perhaps beg to differ.

He'd never met the photographer in his life. Never laid eyes on him or had anything to do with him.

But the photographer had already chalked up several things he disliked about the man—his middle-class swagger, his shit-eating grin that had charmed many people, the



expensive cologne that he insisted on wearing even for the simplest of activities.

It was as though he needed to flaunt his superiority.

When the photographer had originally approached him, he'd played the role of a neighbour looking to borrow some utensils for a garden party. Already, the man came across as possessive but retreated into the house to retrieve them... unaware that the photographer was following him in.

He'd armed himself with a thin metal rod, and it only took a few swift moves to puncture the man through the lungs. He staggered to the floor, eyes wide with shock, and the photographer had to whip out his digital camera quickly to focus on the man's shocked face. He was clearly unable to comprehend that his perfectly organised life was about to come crashing down at the hands of someone he did not suspect at all.

The photographer could feel himself elevated. Under normal circumstances, they would have passed each other on the street without much notice. But now, the photographer was the man who was everything to him. The man that would be there at the end.

He watched the man bleeding out, trying to breathe through his punctured lungs, and continued taking the pictures, capturing every moment of the man's final ones.

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HE PRINTED off the photographs and hung them up, looking at them admiringly. He always regretted that the act itself was a one-and-done deal and that he could only rely on the recreation of the photos and his own memory for stimulation.

And just looking at the photos, recalling the final ragged breaths, the photographer felt a wave of euphoria about to envelop him...

...when suddenly, he was interrupted by a knock on the door.

He wondered who it could be. The police? That could not be possible. He'd made a point of covering his tracks and ensuring that there were no leads that would come back to haunt him.

He wasn't a social man. He didn't involve himself in the lives of other people. It wasn't a friend or a neighbour...

Hesitantly, he went to the door and answered it.

A tall man dressed in a winter coat was standing there, his face hard to read.

"Someone would like a word with you," he stated in a tone that didn't sound local nor was an invitation. It was clear that this man wasn't the police.

Part of the photographer felt the urge to run. But his natural curiosity won out and he found himself getting into the car alongside the man. Neither said a word throughout the entire journey.

They finally pulled into an old car park where the photographer was escorted out of the car and over to another car, where inside, a man in a crumpled suit was waiting.

"You probably don't know who I am, do you?" the man asked, casting the photographer a scrutinising look.

The photographer in turn studied his face, trying to see if he'd seen the man anywhere before. But the face did not any ring any bells.

“A few years ago, you drowned a man and took pictures of him,” the man explained matter-of-factly, as though he were describing a banal event.

The photographer gulped, unable to hide his nervousness. He wondered if he should try playing dumb, see if he could bluff his way out of it.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he tried, already knowing the attempt would fall flat. This was not a man who would confront people without utmost certainty... which he clearly possessed.

“Do you take me for an idiot?” the man asked, annoyed by the insult to his intelligence. “I know everything about your victim. He used to work for me. He wasn’t the best of employees, to be honest, and if you hadn’t killed him, I probably would have had for stealing from me. So in a way, you did me a favour.”

This was confusing. There were so many questions he’d wanted to ask the man, but it was clear that he wasn’t squeaky clean.

“So...what happens now?” the photographer asked, wondering if they were going to be famous last words. “Is this the part where you kill me?”

“If I wanted you dead, I would have done it the moment I found out what you’d done,” the man replied, folding his arms and making no show of being a threat. “But the way I see it, you have quite the talent for killing and getting away unscathed. That’s a skill I can always make use of. I simply tucked your details away for a rainy day until I could make use of them.”

The photographer wasn't sure if he liked what he was hearing. "Are you saying you need a hired gun?" he asked, not keen on the idea of killing to indulge someone other than himself.

"Nothing so official," the man explained, clearly having all this worked out. "Mostly, you'll be acting on your own discretion with minimal oversight from me. All I want is to turn your attention to a new hunting ground for a few weeks, maybe a month."

"So let me get this straight," the photographer asked, struggling to comprehend the situation. "You want me to follow you where you say and kill as many people as I like?" As he spoke the words, the proposition sounded more and more appealing. But he couldn't help feeling sceptical. "So what's in it for you?"

The man smiled at this. "Let's just say I get to tie up some loose ends."



**A**ndrea Sutton had long since become accustomed to her day-to-day routine in the prison. She'd long since accepted that she was never going to pursue a life outside those grey walls ever again.

She got up, had breakfast, went to the exercise yard, and mingled with some of the prisoners. She felt it necessary to socialise if only to pass the time. There was a certain irony that she had seldom mixed with other people in her previous life, having trusted very few. And now she had at least six people that she could consider acquaintances if not close friends. It helped that she'd smuggled several items into the prison for them, earning their trust and support.

But Andrea felt a frequent sense of envy for these women. Some of them were in for manslaughter and would be up for appeal in a few months. The youngest, a girl who'd committed grievous bodily harm, was going to be released any day now. Andrea would miss her presence.

When the girl came into the prison, she was full of rage and wanted to lash out at the world, not unlike someone Andrea had known in her previous life. Feeling that life had done the girl an injustice, Andrea had taken her under her wing, helping her to overcome her illiteracy and find a positive

outlet for her rage through martial arts. If they'd met on the outside, Andrea was sure that she could have done so much more with her.

But there was still the sense of envy. All of these women were simply taking a break from life. They still had people who loved them on the outside, a second chance that was just around the corner. But Andrea would die behind bars. And she was sure that no one on the outside would care.

She often thought about the events that had led her to this current set of circumstances. The black-ops operations she'd run, the glamorous lifestyle she'd been able to live as a result of those activities, and now she had lost it all... yet she couldn't bring herself to regret any of it. She'd do it all over again in a heartbeat.

"Sutton!" a guard called out, a skinny man in his mid-forties whom Andrea was convinced was shagging some of the younger, more vulnerable prisoners. They'd locked horns before, and she was tempted to take a pair of scissors to his genitals.

"You've got a visitor," the screw told her, and Andrew felt a twinge of fear.

Now and then, she'd received visits from the police and other intelligence agencies asking for information on the work she'd undertaken. But Andrea had not told them a single word. The people with influence knew that she hadn't grassed, and they'd made sure she was treated well. While there were plenty of downsides to prison life; the major upside was not being killed.

She steadied herself and got ready to tell the police to fuck off once again.

But when she got to the private visitor room, it wasn't the police who were waiting for her.

It was Eddie Knightley.

She took a seat opposite him and asked, "How the hell are you even here?" She looked to the guards standing a few feet away from them, wondering if they could speak so openly.

"You have no idea how much it cost me to be here for the world's most expensive prison visit," Knightley commented, leaning in close, keeping his voice down. "So please, don't let this be a waste of my time."

Andrea knew that Knightley would only bother making such an appearance if he was either desperate or on the warpath. "I haven't said anything, if that's what you're worried about," she insisted, wondering if she was being lined up for a garrotting.

"I know you didn't," Knightley assured her, clearly unconcerned with the prospect of her talking. "I'm here about your old protege, Suzie Dano."

"What about her?" Andrea asked, surprised by the question. Not a single day had gone by when Andrea hadn't thought about her best assassin.

"You know at the beginning of the year, she woke up from her coma," Knightley explained, not sure how in the look Andrea was over the latest developments. "I would have thought the first thing she would do was take the fight to Leah West. But instead, she disappears off the face of the earth. And so far, no one has been able to find her."

Andrea allowed herself a small smile. She was pleased that Suzie had managed to slip away. She'd trained her well. "I don't see what this has to do with me?" she asked, the smile

faltering, knowing that whenever people requested Suzie's services, it was never for anything good.

"Because I want to know where she is," Knightley answered, frustrated by the supposed stupidity. "That girl has a lot of talents. Until Leah West came into her life, her record was practically spotless."

"You aren't exactly doing so well in that department," Andrea quipped, instantly regretting it, knowing that Knightley was not the kind of man who took well to being insulted.

"My point is that I think she will be a major asset to an operation I have going forward," Knightley replied, confirming the prisoner's worst fears.

Andrea sighed at this. "And you don't have any other contract killers gagging for the job? Not that I have any problem with you taking another shot at DI West."

"Well, because Dano and West have history," Knightley replied, before adding, "Dano is a diamond in the world of assassins. She shouldn't be hidden away. What's she going to do? Live an ordinary life? What if our best people decided not to showcase their talents?"

"Well, that's not for you or me to decide," Andrea replied, feeling a surge of protection for her former charge. "Most of us don't leave this business alive. If she's managed it, then I don't see any reason to undo that."

Knightley sighed, realising that this was not going to be such an easy conversation. "I need your full cooperation in finding Dano and bringing her in to finish what she started. And you knew Dano better than anyone. Hell, you were practically like a mother to her."



Andrea's facade faltered at that. Though she was adamant that Suzie was a soldier to her first and foremost, she had developed a maternal instinct for the girl. She knew that there'd been a part of Suzie that had wanted to live a normal life, who deserved a normal life. And Knightley was asking her to disregard that.

"I understand that you have a lot of loyalty towards the girl," Knightley explained, trying to come across as sympathetic. "But I'm curious... how much is that worth to you... against your freedom?"



**D**etective Inspector Leah West felt like the streets of Bedford were quiet. Too quiet.

There hadn't been any major crimes reported over the last few weeks. Given that Leah had spent the better part of six months fending off conspiracies from Eddie Knightley, and her own officers, she wanted to be able to enjoy the lack of turbulence in her life. Christmas was just around the corner, and she wanted to see the new year in peace. Her partner and lover, Detective Constable Sam Jones, was trying to get into the festive spirit. And given that he'd undergone his fair share of trauma over the last year, she figured that she owed it to him to enjoy the peace.

*But Knightley is still out there.*

And she didn't think she could rest until the man was either in prison or dead.

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“SO AM I SAFE, or do I need to look at buying myself a bunker?” Clarissa Everett asked over a glass of wine.

It was a tradition Leah had kept up ever since she'd become friends with the journalist. These drinking sessions allowed Leah the perfect chance to unwind and share numerous tales of woe, and Clarissa had always been such a good listener. There were times when she worried that the journalist might get bored of the talks and look for company elsewhere. But Clarissa's loyalty and support were the only things that Leah was still certain about.

"Why do you need to do that?" Leah responded, refiling her glass.

"Because of all the attacks against you," the journalist noted with a wry smile that did little to cover her worry. "You've spent a long time on this guy's shit list. We both know he's not above playing dirty. And he's clearly done his research. So how long is it before I'm warding off bastards with a baseball bat?"

"Now that's a sight I wouldn't mind seeing," the inspector joked, knowing that the editor could certainly hold her own. Both women enjoyed the fleeting levity before the conversation turned serious again. "Do you think you might get out of town for a while? Maybe stay with family until it blows over?"

"Hell no!" Clarissa immediately shot her down, unwilling to entertain the idea. "You know how many death threats I've faced telling me to back off a story? Let me tell you, it's a lot. And if I decided to get the fuck out of Dodge the moment I realised it was going to make me public enemy number one, then my career would have been a very short one."

Leah conceded the point, knowing that her friend could handle herself. But with the threat of danger looming over all

of her loved ones, it left her feeling like she couldn't protect everyone.

*How long is it going to be until I'm standing over Clarissa's body?*

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BY THE TIME Leah got home, she was feeling the freeing effects of wine, but she wasn't truly plastered. *Shame, I could do with being a little lightheaded. It means I wouldn't have to think about all the shit going on in my life.*

Jonesy was waiting up for her. He should have gone to bed to catch up on his sleep, but instead, he was waiting up for Leah, clearly unable to sleep otherwise.

"You don't have to do this, you know," she started as she took off her coat. "You're going to knacker yourself out."

"Believe me," Jonesy began, downing a glass of coke, the only stimuli he'd had over the last few hours. "I'd have come out with you if I thought it wouldn't be bordering on stalker levels."

"Jonesy, believe it or not, I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself," Leah assured him, knowing this would do little to quell his paranoia.

"I know, you've got the scars to show for it," he fired back, his voice heavy, having lost much of the lightness since she'd first met him two years ago.

She couldn't bring herself to call him paranoid since she was facing the same fears.

She took a seat next to him on the sofa and rested her head against his shoulder, finding familiar comfort and safety in

him which she soaked up. “We’re going to get through this, you know,” she started softly, looking around the cottage that they’d made a home. There were so many memories here. She tried to assure herself that they weren’t all haunted.

“Every time someone’s turned up to take away our slice of happiness, we’ve been able to wrestle it back from them,” she continued, raising her head to kiss him on the cheek.

But Jonesy was far too distracted to reciprocate the kiss. “Don’t you get tired of fighting everybody off?” he asked, running a finger over the stomach where Leah knew he’d been damn near gutted on a previous case. “Because these bastards only have to slip up once.”

“That’s never going to happen,” Leah said, though she had to admit, there were times when it felt like she was just delaying the inevitable.

“I think what pisses me off most is Knightley hiding behind his team of twats,” the constable continued, getting all his feelings off his chest. “We’ve never actually seen him face to face. And sometimes, I’d rather he just burst through the door and try to take us on himself. At least then, that’d give me a chance to get my hands on him.”

The words scared Leah more than she was willing to admit.

She remembered a year ago when Jonesy had been confronted with the Self Killer, Jacob Sutcliffe, and the man was at risk of getting away again and wreaking all kinds of havoc on the world... until Jonesy had been the one to put him down. But what worried her wasn’t that her lover had killed a man. There’d been several cases where she’d needed to get her hands dirty. What worried her was that he might get used to it.

“Life’s always going to find something to throw at us,” she explained, taking his hand and planting soft kisses on it. “If it’s not Knightley, it’s somebody else. But the reason we’ve been able to survive is not because of luck, skill, or even because the arseholes have a brain rattling around up there. It’s because we have each other, Jonesy. As long as we’re together, there isn’t anything they can do to us.”

She saw him exhale deeply, clearly believing every word of it. “I do not want to imagine my life without you, Leah West,” he commented, looking directly at her for the first time, getting lost in her eyes.

“Well, it’d probably be much less eventful,” she commented ruefully.

The pair sat in silence for several minutes, drawing on each other for strength.

They were going to need it over the next few days.



**D**etective Sergeant Jeff Rowan had finally woken up from his coma.

According to one of the nurses, one of the first things he'd done was wake up screaming. Unsurprising, given that his last conscious memory was being shot several times in the chest. He felt a stab of pain rushing to greet him. He was so frantic that the doctors thought they needed to sedate him.

But his anxieties were instantly quelled by the presence of Detective Constable Farah Hussein. They hadn't been on the best of terms for some time now, owing to how his undercover work with Eddie Knightley had landed her in the firing line.

"How are you holding up?" she asked hesitantly, before realising the stupidity of the question.

"Well, none of my insides are outside, and everything seems to be working," Jeff replied, brushing off the pain and grateful that he and Farah were getting back to their previous camaraderie. "How long was I in that coma for?"

The prolonged silence that followed indicated that it was a lot longer than a few days or even a few weeks. And Jeff braced himself for the answer. "You know I'm only going to find out sooner or later, so I'd rather hear it from you."

“Three months,” she blurted out quickly, wanting to get the hard part over with.

“Christ,” Jeff muttered as he sat up in bed, grateful that there didn’t seem to be any lasting pain in his chest. Then his thoughts started trailing to the events that had put him in this hospital bed. And the man who put him there.

“What about Knightley?” he asked, suddenly alert, unable to relax. “Is he...”

DC Hussein’s face fell. In her eagerness to get over to the hospital to make sure her friend was all right, she’d forgotten that she was going to need to be the one to tell him that Knightley was still on the warpath.

“We haven’t taken him into custody yet,” she replied, trying to put a positive spin on the situation.

“Fuck,” he muttered, slumping back into bed. “I imagine he’s not going to be too happy that I’m still breathing.”

Clearly, nobody had told DS Rowan that a corrupt officer on Knightley’s payroll had snuck into the hospital to try and kill him. She did not want to be the one to tell him.

“We’re going to get him,” she insisted, though there was a part of her that wondered how much more carnage they’d have to endure before they pulled that off.

“How have you been since I last saw you?” Jeff asked, remembering that Farah had been toying with the idea of getting a transfer out of Bedford.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she assured him, having made up her mind to see things through.

“Listen, Farah,” he started, about to launch into an apology, though he wasn’t sure what it would take for her to



forgive him.

“Save it,” she dismissed with a handwave. “As far as I’m concerned, there’s no more bad blood between us. And besides, it’s so fucking exhausting being pissed off with you.”

She walked over to him and wrapped him in a hug. “Careful,” he muttered, wincing slightly. “Doctors haven’t cleared me for Farah hugs.”

The heartfelt moment was broken up by the arrival of two people—DI West and DC Jones.

“Good to see you’re awake,” Leah exclaimed, relieved that he’d pulled through.

“I’m just eager to get back to work,” Jeff stated, and they were all convinced that if he could haul himself out of bed and waltz right out of the hospital, he would.

Leah looked a little uneasily at this. “Yeah, about that, Jeff,” she began, trying to go over the words she’d prepared in her head. “We’ve been told by Superintendent Wade that you’re to stay off the case and stick to desk duties.”

“For how long?” the sergeant asked indignantly, wishing that Wade was here so that he could fight the decision.

“Until the gaffer thinks you can be out and about,” the inspector explained with perhaps too much bluntness.

“Don’t forget, mate,” Jonesy began, trying to take a more sympathetic approach. “You’re lucky to be alive. I can’t think of many people who can have a whole gun unloaded into them and live to tell.”

Farah cleared her throat in case the event was triggering for her friend.

“Sorry,” Jonesy muttered and stepped back, silently withdrawing from the conversation.

“I was with that man for months,” the wounded sergeant exclaimed, finally without any sense of shame. “I saw him get his hands dirty, I saw him organise things. I know *everything* worthwhile about him, and you’re sidelining me to do what? Sit at a desk and count paperclips?”

Leah frowned, having expected that Jeff would not accept the suggestion quietly. *Then again, I’d probably react the same way. I wouldn’t want someone benching me for the most important case of my career*

“Look, if it were up to me, I’d be having you out there working with us until either a lead pops up or Knightley gets sloppy, whatever comes first,” Leah noted, trying to balance out sympathy with practicality. “But what Wade says goes, and unless you want to march down to her office and pull this brass neck act with her, you’ll going to have to handcuff yourself to a desk.”

Jeff grumbled at this, knowing that this was the only option available to him other than paid leave.

“Fine, you win,” he sighed, rubbing his face, his mouth dry. “Can we just get out of here so I can get back to my life?”

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LEAH AND JONESY drove around Bedford, taking in the sights of people buying, shopping, and meeting up in cafes. But the inspector was scrutinising them more closely now, trying to pick up on anything that looked out of place.

“Somehow, I don’t think Knightley is going to be hiding amongst the local populace,” Jonesy suggested, trying for a joke to lighten the mood.

“You know he’s going to come at me,” Leah noted worriedly, not taking her eyes off the people. “As far as he’s concerned, I’ve ruined his career.”

“You’re forgetting that he’s at a huge disadvantage,” the constable explained, ever the pragmatist. “He’s got no set base. Most criminals probably won’t even touch him with a sixty-foot poll. He’s known to the police. He’s not pulling a smoking gun out of his arse.”

But though they’d never spoken face to face, Leah knew Knightley. Even if he had nothing but the clothes on his back, stripped of all resources, it wouldn’t matter. He’d still find a way to drag her down with him.



**S**uzie Dano had started coming out of his shell bit by bit at the university. She was running on the uni treadmill. Even though she'd left the lifestyle of an assassin beforehand, she still felt an inner drive to keep her body in perfect condition.

She could tell that some of the male students in the building were checking her out admiringly, but she fired them a quick look and they looked away. Two years prior, one man had tried to get forceful with her in a pub in Belfast... and all he'd received for his troubles was a corkscrew to the thigh.

After she'd been running for an hour with no threat of keeling over from exhaustion, she got off and dried herself off.

She had a free period for the day and she was trying to use it to keep in touch.

Some of the anxiety and fears were seeping out day by day. She didn't know what the future might bring, but she was able to fully enjoy the now.

She had finally taken up the boy's offer for a drink. His name was Ross. He seemed like a nice enough lad. Most of them were only interested in one thing from her, but she certainly wasn't giving it.

It was hard to tell whether Ross had similar intentions, but Suzie prided herself on being an excellent judge of character.

She was able to hold herself together as she rattled off the fake backstory she'd crafted for herself. She half expected him to start poking for holes in the story, but instead, he listened, enraptured.

Afterwards, they went to the cinema together and lost themselves in the film. It all felt so new to Suzie, but maybe this was what her life should have always been.

He insisted on escorting her back to her dorm room, and normally Suzie would have found the gesture somewhat patronising—if anything, he needed her to protect him.

When they got back to the building, he didn't ask to come in. He simply thanked her for a nice night out and said that he hoped to see her again soon before he walked home.

She entered the room and collapsed on the bed, soaking up the memory of the blissful night.

No sooner had her head landed on the pillow, her phone started buzzing. She knew that she and Ross had exchanged numbers, and she wondered if he was already texting her something fanciful.

But the moment she opened the message, her blood ran cold. She bolted upright on the bed, looking over it, hoping that the words would transform, that she was seeing things.

But the message was coming through loud and clear.

YOUR SERVICES ARE REQUIRED IN BEDFORD.

Suddenly, a second message came through.

SOME PEOPLE KNOW WHO YOU ARE.

Suzie grimaced before a third—and hopefully, final—message came through.

IF YOU DO NOT COMPLY, EVERYONE IN YOUR LIFE WILL FIND OUT THE TRUTH.

Suddenly, Suzie felt all of those drinks she'd consumed threatening to overwhelm her. She rushed to the bathroom, thankfully only a short distance in her small dorm, and threw up into the toilet.

She couldn't believe this was happening. She didn't dare go back to the phone on her bed. It felt like a wild animal, lying in wait to snare her.

She cursed herself for thinking that she could leave that part of her life behind.

It was as though the last few months of her life were a pleasant dream she now had to wake up from.

More to the point, how had these people found out about her? She'd been careful not to leave any trace of her past life on show. When she was setting herself up, she relied on cash. She didn't use any of the false identities she'd conjured up for herself. There was a complete divide from her old life.

So how the hell had they been able to find her?

Part of her was tempted to ignore the message. What could they do to her here?

Her imagination immediately started racing to answer those questions.

They could kill her, arrange for an assassin to take her out, perhaps during a walk through the campus. They certainly wouldn't think much about discretion. And on Suzie's first visit to the university site, she'd already had a look at several

of the surrounding buildings' vantage points. Force of habit, really, to see if any of them could be used to take her out.

But there was an even worse possibility. They weren't going to kill her. They were going to leave her alive.

They were going to let her watch as the comfortable, wonderful escapism she'd built up for herself came crashing down, and all her newfound friends would turn their backs on her after seeing her for what she really was.

She remembered the way Ross looked at her, as though she was the most wonderful thing on the planet. She didn't realise how intoxicating that feeling was.

And she knew how much it would crush her if Ross knew the truth.

She couldn't do that.

But maybe there was a way through this.

Maybe if she went back to Bedford and found out who was screwing with her life, then she could deal with them and then head back to uni as though it'd never happened. Yes. In theory, it sounded like it could work.

She wondered if she should enlist the aid of Detective Inspector Leah West. She automatically knew that she had nothing to do with the messages. West was the one to whom Suzie owed her second chance, after all.

But Suzie was convinced that whatever the reason for the messages, DI West had something to do with it.

She got in touch with the head of her course and told them that a family emergency had popped up and she needed to be out of town for a few days. She told herself that she could

solve the whole issue in a fortnight at most. She'd been able to track and kill targets in only a fraction of that time.

Suzie sighed as she realised how quickly she was returning to the cold-blooded mentality that had defined so much of her life.

But then again, she'd probably never left it behind.

It didn't matter what good she did in her life or how much distance she put up. She'd always be Suzie Dano, the hired killer.

Well, if that's who they wanted, she'd be happy to give it to them.





The scene was a horrific one that prompted all investigating officers to feel sick to their stomachs.

Leah assumed this had to be the work of another serial killer.

“Well, I think it’s safe to say our guy is fond of knives,” Jonesy muttered sardonically once he’d recovered enough to look over the body.

The body was covered in knives—some switchblades and some kitchen—but all were buried into the man’s torso, arms, and legs. Leah could tell that they’d all been strategically placed to puncture the man’s arteries from which he’d heavily bled out.

They’d received a report of a body left by the side of the road leading into Bedford. “The body was likely moved,” Forensic Investigator Priya Kapoor suggested as her team went to work gathering evidence. The question was, where had he been moved from?

Leah looked at the blade handles, knowing that despite an extensive search, they would not find anything close to a fingerprint.

Leah went through the pockets, acting on the thin chance that this was a burglary that had gone wrong.

Instead, she found a wallet and pulled out some ID, relieved that they weren't going to have to worry about a potential John Doe.

“His name's Chris Baxter,” Leah declared, handing the driver's licence to Jonesy. “We're going to need to find out who he was and who might have wanted him dead.”

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THE DEAD MAN told an interesting tale.

Chris Baxter's name had come up a few times as a young offender. At first, the crimes had been fairly minor, selling stolen vapes around the back of his school. The only thing that had been disturbing was that he was ten at the time. He'd been involved in selling burner phones used in criminal activities when he was only eleven years old. As he grew into his teens, he slowly graduated to more disturbing crimes involving vandalism, intimidation, and at one point, even threatening to cut off a schoolboy's fingers with a pair of bolt cutters.

It had been after this he'd been arrested. The officer in charge of the case didn't see a dangerous criminal mastermind in the making but instead a troubled kid who hadn't had the best start in life. To that end, he'd tried to be a supportive figure in the boy's life, getting him taken away from his permanently intoxicated mother and placing him with a foster family.

He'd settled down in school and shied away from criminal activities. Two decades later, he was seen as the shining example of 'bad guy gone good'.

But sixteen years later, somebody had decided to kill him.

“It’s got to be down to something dodgy in his past,” Jonesy suggested, increasingly ahead of the curve. “I cannot believe that a killer just happens to target a guy who had a noted criminal past.”

“Assuming he had actually put his past behind him,” Leah noted, looking through all the information on the deceased. Since his supposed turnaround, he’d gone on to own a local pub. So far, there’d been no official reports of criminal activity on the premises, save for the occasional barroom brawl that needed breaking up.

There had been whispers of other activities taking place down there, but they’d been little more than whispers. At one point, a few PCs had gone down there to scope things out, but they’d never seen anything to open a criminal case.

But somebody had a grudge against the man.

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SUPERINTENDENT NORA WADE had become something of a hypocrite.

While she’d instructed DS Rowan not to involve himself in the case, she couldn’t help herself from peering over every single file she could find on Knightley, the activities he’d supposedly partaken in, and the crimes for which he’d never been convicted.

There had to be something in these files that they could use. Something that would lead them to him.

She knew criminals like Knightley. They would never admit when they got beat and just walk away, even when it

was in their best interests.

She was the third superior officer to be stationed at Bedford CID in as many years. Her two predecessors hadn't made it to retirement. Her immediate predecessor was in prison on corruption charges, and the one before her had been murdered by a serial killer. Nora had known when she took on this job that there was always going to be a risk that she would follow suit. There was a part of her that was tempted to lie low, only looking at the assignments that carried the least risk so that she could live to collect her pension.

But she knew if she hid behind the desk there was a risk that all the worst criminals, the ones that could afford to bribe or kill their way out of trouble, would continue to roam freely.

She had requested to look over the file on Chris Baxter, having remembered him as a youth back when she held the rank of Detective Sergeant. She would have thought if he was going to be killed, it would have been during his reckless youth. But dying now, in these circumstances? It flagged all sorts of questions. Why had they chosen to dump the body on the edge of Bedford? Was this connected in any way to the ongoing Eddie Knightley case?

There were so many questions, and she needed the answers to them.

But she didn't want to risk her officers in the process. She wondered if there was a way to get out there without risking Leah, Sam, or anyone else under her command. She'd always believed that a commanding officer's first duty was to the people under her command.

Nora decided that she was going to take a more hands-on approach to this case, and maybe they could get some results.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. “Come in!” Nora called out, quickly closing the file and trying to hide the uncertainty that had been etched over her face.

DI West entered the room. “Got everything you needed out of the file, ma’am?” she asked, looking equally troubled.

“I believe I have,” she muttered, putting it away and sliding it into a drawer. “I think the best thing we can do is maintain constant vigilance. I want Hughes spoken to again.”

Hughes was the corrupt officer who’d partaken in the attempted assassination of Jeff Rowan at the hospital. Leah wasn’t sure how forthcoming he’d be, especially with the possibility that Knightley could get to him from inside. They’d offered him immunity, but there were some people for whom there was no immunity.



**C**larissa Everett made her way back from work after an exhausting day. She'd thought that in the run-up to Christmas, things would get easier. But instead, it felt like it was a case of all hands on deck.

She wondered if she needed to feel the same alert as Leah. If Knightley couldn't get the inspector, he'd go after her. As Leah's best friend, she was the next point of target.

But she'd been taking extra precautions. She'd started taking martial arts classes in her spare time and was already a blue belt in karate. She'd also improved her home security, with an alarm system that would if not alert the police at least bring the full force of the neighbourhood down on anyone who came by.

But she always wondered whether it would be enough.

As she turned the lock in the door, she caught a glimpse of something in the glass...

...a man standing in the corner of the road...

...holding a pistol...

...pointing at her.

It all happened so fast. Acting quickly, Clarissa fumbled with the key in the lock, and when the door didn't open straight away, she tried to duck out of sight.

The gun went off.

The bullet hit her in the upper left of her back, and Clarissa fell to the ground just as the door opened.

She scrambled inside, too frantic to assess the damage from the gunshot wound.

She felt blood dripping down her shirt, and she tried to frantically kick the door closed...

...but a boot was jammed in the doorway.

Clarissa scrambled to her feet and rushed to the kitchen where she reached into the knife block and pulled out the largest knife she could get her hands on. She turned around just as the man raised his weapon at her, hitting her in the shoulder.

She fell to the ground, trying to maintain her grip on the knife even as she felt the muscles in her arm weakening.

The man stood over her. He looked to be in his late thirties, though he could be older. The shaved head didn't give anything away. He smiled down at her, though the way he did so indicated that he hadn't had that much practice when it came to smiling and probably didn't even know what a proper one looked like.

He reached into a bag and pulled out what looked like an old-fashioned camera. "Eyes wide open as much as possible, please," he instructed, treating her like the centrepiece for a photographic masterpiece. "I want to see the lights go out."

But before he had time to do so, alarms suddenly went off like a klaxon around the house, causing his head to whip around as he tried to pinpoint the source of the noise.

Still gripping the knife, she slashed at the man's leg, causing him to stumble back, exclaiming in pain.

He raised the gun, trying to take shaky aim at the journalist...

"What the hell is going on here?" A neighbour came to the doorway, a man in his early-fifties.

The assailant instantly whipped around and fired the gun, hitting the neighbour in the throat. He fell to the pavement, his hand futilely trying to stop the bleeding.

The assailant, suddenly conscious about being detected, rushed out of the room, limping on his bad foot.

Clarissa kept hold of the knife all the while in case he came back.

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HER HANDS SWEATING around the steering wheel, Leah was unable to hold back her panic. The moment she'd heard *who* had been targeted, she dropped everything she was doing and rushed off to get to the bottom of it.

Throughout the entire journey, she was convinced that she was too late. That Clarissa had died before she could get to her.

And when she saw the stretcher being brought out of the house, an oxygen mask strapped around Clarissa's face, the inspector almost sobbed with relief, sinking to the floor as Jonesy tried to grab her and hold her up.



She rushed over to her friend and looked down at her, her eyes fluttering as she thought to stay awake.

“Just hold on, Clarissa,” Leah pleaded, determined not to lose her friend. “I’m going with her in the ambulance.”

“But, Leah,” Jonesy protested, gesturing to the house and the open door. “We need to secure the scene and get forensics down here.”

“Then you take charge,” she growled back, her mind made up. “Or better yet, get DS Rowan down here. I’m sure he’d love the responsibility. But I’m going with her. And if you want to stop me, you’re just going to have to arrest me.”

Jonesy grimaced, knowing that his partner was lashing out. She’d be reacting the same way she would if it had been him who was targeted.

She looked over the scene, made her mind up and climbed into the back of the ambulance alongside Clarissa, clutching her hand and willing her to pull through.

As she looked over the injuries, Leah realised that perhaps she’d been a little bit hasty in leaving Jonesy to deal with the scene. She remembered the blood trail that had been left behind, and it only dawned on her now that it must have been the attacker’s blood, meaning that Clarissa would have got him, or at least wounded him.

“Attagirl,” she muttered, squeezing the hand more tightly.

And Leah was sure she felt the hand squeezing back—weakly, but with a pronounced grip.

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BACK AT THE CRIME SCENE, Jonesy was trying to console the neighbour's widow once the victim had been pronounced dead at the scene.

"I am so sorry for your loss," Jonesy began, wondering how many times he'd uttered those words before emphasising, "We are going to find the man who killed him, I promise you."

"He shouldn't have even been there," the widow sobbed, long past the point of reconciliation. "It was supposed to be his day off..."

She broke into a fresh bout of crying and allowed Jonesy to hold her in his arms. He looked back at the scene where Priya Kapoor was eager to speak to him.

"Sir," the lead forensic investigator began. "I thought you might like to know that we've spoken with a few people, and they say they spotted a man limping away from the scene holding a camera."

It was a fairly mundane description... and yet Jonesy felt a coil in his stomach.



Leah sat by Clarissa's bedside, unwilling to take her eyes off her friend until she was sure she was going to pull through.

Clarissa opened her eyes slowly, took one look at the inspector and wearily asked, "Is this hell?"

Leah couldn't help a chuckle. Clearly, her friend hadn't lost her sense of humour.

"How are you holding up?" she asked, leaning in close to the bed.

"Like some bastard's tried to pump me full of bullets," she replied matter-of-factly.

"I'm so sorry," Leah muttered, suddenly overwhelmed with emotion. "This is all my fault..."

"Okay, if you keep on with that shit, I'm going to have the nurse boot you out of here," the journalist insisted, giving a dismissive handwave. "You didn't put me in this bed. I just want you to focus on finding the guy that did."

"What did he look like?" DI West asked, ready to tear down the whole of Bedford just to find this guy.

"He had a shaved head," Clarissa explained, fixating on the most clear details. "White male, late thirties at a push,

clean shaven. I would say look for anybody who's sporting a limp. I managed to get him on the shin. I don't think he bled out."

"I saw some traces of blood on the pavement," she noted, knowing she'd have to answer for her unexplained disappearance.

"That's not the weirdest thing," she noted, making an effort to push herself against the pillows. "While I was on the floor, he stood over me and started taking pictures. Said he wanted to watch the lights go out."

Leah gulped at the sound of this. "I see," she noted, trying to hide her surprise and doing a poor job of it. "And those were his exact words?"

"I wasn't going fucking deaf," Clarissa snapped, leaving Leah to deal with the horrifying conclusion.

---

"IT'S GOT to be the work of the Cameraman," she exclaimed once they were in Nora's office giving out briefs.

Superintendent Wade muttered something under her breath at this.

"An old criminal turns up dead... and then a few hours later, a serial killer attacks a journalist in her home," Wade began gravely before her tone shifted to admiration. "Ms Everett is lucky to be alive. But are we sure this is the Cameraman? The last recorded victim was in Surrey."

"That's one of the known cases," Jonesy suggested, having done his research on the Cameraman case and being nauseated by what he'd found. "For all we know, there could be plenty of

other people who have fallen prey to the man and not gone on record.”

“So why Bedford?” Nora asked, searching the faces of her best detectives. “What is there here for him?”

“Maybe he’s working his way through the UK,” Leah suggested, knowing that the Cameraman had been killing people for at least six years. Three victims every six months, in a different town.

“Do you think it’s possible he could have killed Chris Baxter?” she asked, unwilling to leave anything to chance.

“The Cameraman has supposedly killed all his victims differently,” Leah suggested, knowing that if Baxter had indeed been killed by the serial killer, then being stabbed in every major artery was possibly one of the kinder deaths the murderer had afforded his victims.

“Well, let’s say he has killed Baxter,” Nora surmised, willing to entertain the theory for now. “And he attempted to kill Ms Everett. If he kills two more people, then he will disappear again. And we have no way of knowing when he might reemerge.”

“You want me to get Malcolm on this?” the inspector asked, feeling that the inside view of the doctor might be the only way they could predict the serial killer’s next move.

“At this point, I’ll take a tip from a perverted fantasist if I thought it was going to get us any closer to closing the case,” the superintendent acknowledged, feeling like she was taking on a heavyweight. “This man has managed to elude capture for years. Six different divisions have tried to locate this man. Tried and failed. I don’t plan on adding to that number. We’re going to find this guy and we’re going to stop him.”

Leah was surprised to hear the ferociousness in her superior's voice. She was used to Wade often acting like the voice of reason, trying to stop Leah from violating too many rules.

“Do you want to look at getting DS Rowan involved in the case?” she asked, and before Nora had time to refute her, she added, “I know, the man's not supposed to be stepping anywhere near a major case, but we're going to need everyone in on this. And he will be a major asset.”

The superintendent considered this. “All right, bring him up to speed when you next see him. But I want everybody to proceed with caution. The Cameraman is not to be underestimated.”

“I don't think we need to worry too much,” Jonesy suggested, trying to lighten the mood. “He's only one man.”

“One man who has a body count in the fifties, DC Jones,” Nora added curtly, wondering if she was going to regret taking on the challenge.

---

THE CAMERAMAN WATCHED the building from afar, bristling with every word they were saying about him.

It hadn't taken much to bribe the cleaner to plant a bug in Superintendent Wade's office and get an inside view into the case, allowing the serial killer—and the people he represented—to stay ahead of the curve.

He'd managed to apply some back alley first aid to his wounded leg, and though he felt he didn't need to go to the

hospital, he still wanted to get some antibiotics in case it got infected.

He tried not to be disappointed that he hadn't killed the journalist. His employer had already voiced his displeasure that for all his prowess, he'd been unable to take out the woman.

But he'd already decided on his next target.

And this one was also close to home.



**S**uzie Dano arrived in Bedford via train. In the interim between leaving her university and returning to Bedford, she'd cut her blonde hair and dyed it red. She was also wearing a pair of false contact lenses, her green eyes now looking brown. She'd also ditched the red jacket she'd been wearing for the past few weeks and was wearing an oversized jumper, suitable for the climate but hideous when it came to fashion.

She didn't care for these disguises and knew anyone who was looking for her would scratch the surface and find the real Suzie Dano underneath.

She started thinking about all the things she needed to do while she was down here.

She'd managed to find a B&B to stay at during her time in Bedford.

The whole journey was perhaps the most intense one she'd ever experienced. She understood now how much she enjoyed the cover of darkness as an assassin. One major advantage she'd always had was that nobody saw her coming. Nobody would look twice at a nineteen-year-old girl and assume she was going to kill them.



But knowing that there were people out there looking for her—the police and the mysterious texter—it made her realise how vulnerable she now was. And if somebody wanted to take her out, it wouldn't take much effort.

She was tempted to stay hidden among the members of the public, but it was clear that whoever was after her would have no moral qualms about adding to the collateral damage. And she had enough blood on her hands as it was.

As she walked, she came to the home that her sister Annie was staying at. It'd been nine months since she'd last seen her sister, and she felt an aching that had only grown in the time they were separated. But she could not risk bringing her sister into this mess. She wondered whether Annie would assume that Suzie had abandoned her, which wouldn't be too far off from the truth.

She'd told herself that to live, Suzie Dano needed to die.

She turned up at the B&B, collected her key and went straight to her room, locking the door behind her.

She knew she was going to need weapons to pull this off, but she didn't know how she was going to be able to obtain the necessary items without attracting police attention. They'd have no hesitation in locking her up for the various crimes she was being pursued for.

She thought about how she might reach out to Leah West. The detective had allowed her to get away to have a second chance at life. And she didn't want the detective to think that she was here now, squandering that chance.

She figured that nobody else at Bedford CID knew about the exact circumstances surrounding her escape. And she intended to keep it that way.

She loaded up the internet on a second-hand computer, moving aside the legions of coursework she had yet to do. She'd left all the tabs open to remind herself that she had something to go back to when all of this was done.

---

ANDREA SUTTON MOVED around the prison with a heavy heart.

She knew that Suzie was now going to be on Knightley's hit list. He'd assured the former black-ops runner that he wasn't looking to kill Suzie. She was brilliant, 'once in a generation', he'd called her. And such talent like that shouldn't be wasted.

But she wondered what kind of leverage Knightley would have over the girl.

She hated the idea of surrendering any information to the mob boss, but the prospect of freedom beckoned to her, and she knew she needed to get out of there.

She didn't know what strings Knightley would be able to pull to get her out of prison. Surely, that kind of action lay beyond her influence.

It wouldn't be long before Suzie descended on Bedford.

Maybe she could have her cake and eat it.

Maybe there was a way she could gain her freedom while also protecting Suzie.

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DR MALCOLM DOYLE looked over all of the case files with growing interest, no longer retching at the grisly sights but

instead watching with interest. Leah knew that he would be spending most of his time with the pictures.

“This is a very daring man,” the psychiatrist exclaimed heavily, no less horrified by the rampant cruelty on display. “I’d hate to meet him.”

“Is there anything we can use to find him?” Leah asked, itching to get back out there and find the man.

“Have you considered the possibility that he’s economically disadvantaged?” the psychiatrist asked, moving away from academic lingo whenever he was consulting on a case. “Or that he’s at a disadvantage compared to his targets?”

“It hadn’t exactly crossed our minds,” the inspector replied sarcastically, finding it too exhausting to get into the mind of a serial killer.

“Almost all of his victims are quite wealthy,” Malcolm explained, surveying the images of the deceased. “Not mega-rich but quite well-to-do. And several of them thrive in other areas, whether that’s a job or an athletic hobby. He didn’t pick these victims out of a lottery. He scouted them beforehand, trying to work out what they had that would build up that resentment.”

“Okay,” Leah noted, nodding along slowly, not sure how she’d use the information later on, but hopeful that something would come of it.

“However,” the psychiatrist added, looking over two separate police statements, drawing a new conclusion.

“You going to tell us or are you going to keep us in suspense?” Jonesy asked impatiently.

“Despite the time he takes to identify his prey, there’s a certain impulsiveness to his crimes,” Dr Doyle explained,

offering the report to Leah for a closer look. “He’d ambush them as they were going into their homes or in the back garden where entry to the home was all but guaranteed. He ambushed them when they were most likely on alert, as opposed to attacking them when they were in bed in the middle of the night. This implies that he’s meticulous in his stalking, but impatient in the execution. Look at how many close calls he’s had. And that’s probably why Ms Everett was able to survive. Because he hadn’t thought through a plan of attack. It was more of a brazen, ‘I’m going to storm in there and kill her.’”

The mention of Clarissa made Leah ball her hands into fists.

“But why has he come to Bedford?” Jonesy asked, the question that was on all their minds.

“It’s hard for me to say,” Malcolm noted with disappointment. “But I would suggest a contradiction to his pattern, especially when you consider where the last victim was based. It’s just a question of finding out what made him come down here. You know these serial killer types. They’re a law unto themselves. I find it hard to imagine anyone pointing the man in Bedford’s direction.”



“**O**ne of the reasons I hired you was because of your fearlessness and drive for getting shit done,” Knightley commented from the back of his car. “But I figured that you would be able to get any job done with little fuss.”

“I think ‘hiring’ is stretching it quite a bit,” the Cameraman commented, frustrated by the arrangement and already looking for ways to get out of it. “You strongarmed me into coming down here just to clean up the mess you made for yourself.”

Knightley gripped the leather on the seat. Normally, anyone who dared speak to him like that would have been murdered for impertinence. But he couldn’t afford to lose any more people. That didn’t mean he had to take the man’s crap.

“I still don’t see why you needed me to kill that bloke,” the Cameraman continued, feeling that the random criminal Knightley had instructed him to kill had been a waste of his talent.

“Oh, I’m sorry, was that death not personal enough for you?” the crime boss asked, aware of the serial killer’s capacity for sadism. “I wanted him dead, so he had to die. It’s that simple.”

“When you asked me to come along for the ride, I didn’t know about the risks attached,” the murderer protested, feeling that he would kill Knightley here and now if he thought he could get away with it. “I didn’t think you were going to deliver me straight into the hands of the police. Oh my God, that’s your plan, isn’t it? To take the heat off you? Are you planning to serve me up on a silver platter?”

“If that was the intention,” Knightley began, remaining calm even as he dug his nails into his palms. “Then I would have handed you over like a Christmas package the moment I stepped into your life. But I haven’t because I believe that you still have a part to play. And if we all play our cards right, all my problems will be over, and you’ll have a fresh set of victims under your belt.”

Given the Cameraman’s lack of a clear role in his hierarchy, Knightley felt that he’d been quite generous with the man, putting him up in one of the finest hotels in Bedford, all expenses covered. And he’d gifted the killer a tab that Knightley knew would make him wince when payday came around. But the Cameraman didn’t seem to care much for the finer trappings of life.

Knightley knew that if he was going to keep the serial killer on his side, he wasn’t going to do it by getting him to listen to reason. He’d have to appeal to his sense of sadism; the thrill of the hunt.

“Okay.” The Cameraman nodded slowly, enjoying the idea of gathering more bodies and new creative ways to kill. He made a point of finding a different murder method for each victim to keep the artistry fresh.

“But that means that I tell you who you kill,” Knightley instructed, speaking as if his word was God. “Once you get

their hands on them, you can do them however you prefer. But I tell you who dies.”

“Okay, Dad,” the Cameraman offered sarcastically, holding up his hands in mock surrender. “At least you’re not stifling my creativity like any other patron of the arts. I’ve never actually poured salt in an open wound, so I’m curious as to how that might come about.”

“If you pull this off, you’ll be walking away a rich man, able to live whatever life you want,” he continued, noting that the Cameraman didn’t seem as pleased with the suggestion as he had imagined.

That was okay. Knightley had already decided he was going to kill the Cameraman once he was done with him. He’d wait until he was sure he had everything he wanted and then put a bullet in his head. Simple, none of this sadistic crap. And Knightley was already counting down to the moment. He regretted that he’d needed to rely on the help of a serial killer just to regain his footing, feeling dirty just talking to the man.

“So, who’s next on my list?” the Cameraman asked, eager to get back out there.

“Next, I need you to accompany me to a meeting,” Knightley instructed, knocking on the glass to the driver’s seat and saying to the driver, “We need to move.”

The car drove them to a large pub which seemed to be bustling with life. The Cameraman couldn’t help but shrink back in his seat at the sight of so many people, feeling exposed.

Knightley reached into a briefcase lying on the passenger seat and pulled out a photograph.

The Cameraman was surprised by the result. It was a girl who couldn't be older than nineteen or twenty.

“And what is she supposed to have done?” the killer asked, wondering if this was some kind of practical joke, Knightley asking him to kill a girl. “Lifted from your wallet? She's only a kid.”

“Oh, don't think of her as being a kid,” Knightley cautioned him sharply, knowing how many people had made the mistake of underestimating Suzie and letting their guard down, giving her the opening to kill them. “That would be a huge mistake on your part. Her body count is double yours.”

“You've got to be joking,” the Cameraman muttered, looking at the picture more closely and trying to see if there was anything that gave away the reputation that the girl supposedly held. “And you want her taken out why?”

“I don't want her taken out,” Eddie quickly informed him, almost regretting pursuing this suggestion. “I want to make that clear. This girl could be a huge asset to my organisation moving forward. You've seen the number of people I've got on my payroll. She's worth twenty of them. But... she's a stubborn cow when she wants to be. You know how kids are today. So if she gives me any trouble, it'll be nice to know I have an insurance policy to fall back on.”

“And presumably, this is me?” the Cameraman asked, suddenly wondering who he was being pitted against.

“You think you can handle one little girl?” Knightley asked with a raised eyebrow, the question a test.

All of a sudden, the Cameraman felt a little sick. If this girl was as good as they said she was, she could be the death of him.



But he was sure he could fight his way out. He almost hoped that she did become a problem. She might end up being the crown jewel of his collection. The ultimate predator turned prey.



**L**eah West had never received a call like this before.

She looked at the phone which had said, NUMBER WITHHELD.

She wondered if she had time to get Royce to try hunting down the number.

Cautiously, she answered the call and held the phone to her ear.

“DI West?” a familiar voice came through, and it was a few seconds before Leah realised it was the voice of Andrea Sutton.

“How the hell did you get this number?” the inspector asked in a hushed voice, looking around the room and knowing she’d probably have to keep the conversation private.

“Just because I’m in prison, doesn’t mean I don’t still have influence,” the woman acknowledged, though her tone sounded subdued, less gloating than what Leah had come to expect from a year inside. “I’ve been able to get a phone smuggled in.”

“If this is some kind of revenge scheme,” the detective began, rushing out of the room while trying to look

conspicuous.

“Save the indignant rant for someone who needs it,” Andrea snapped impatiently, suddenly alert. “If I was planning anything against you, I certainly wouldn’t give you a heads-up. I need you to save a life.”

Coming from a woman who was used to taking them, the instruction almost made the detective double over in laughter.

“Whose life is that?” Leah queried, convinced this was a windup.

“Annie Dano,” the woman replied simply before going silent, knowing the name would have the desired impact

Leah’s gut tightened up. She remembered Suzie’s sister, a sweet girl on the autism spectrum who required regular support. There wasn’t anything that Suzie wouldn’t do for her sister.

Unfortunately, it meant that Annie inadvertently gave Suzie’s enemies a means of getting to her. The first time she and Leah had clashed with each other, the then-sergeant had been able to use the vulnerable girl to lure Suzie into a trap. The second time, a manic vigilante had abducted Annie as bait, and it had only been down to the unlikely alliance of Suzie and Leah that she’d been able to get away unscathed, if traumatised by her experience.

Before she’d escaped, Suzie had made Leah promise that she would look after her sister, and the detective had kept to her word. Now and then, she’d visited Annie, who seemed like a gentle soul who appreciated the company. At one point, Annie had commented how it was good that Suzie had such caring friends, the irony not being lost on Leah.

But the announcement of Annie's name brought a wave of disturbing implications. Why would somebody need to attack Annie Dano?

Unless her sister was back on the scene.

"Before you go all scorched earth on the town," Andrea reasoned, as though picking up on the detective's sudden alarm. "Suzie is probably out of that line of work."

*I should bloody hope so. I risked my career for her.*

"I don't know what happened between you two," the woman continued, trying to get out as much as possible despite the rising urgency. "But she left Bedford without killing you."

Leah was not ready to get into the ins and outs of her complicated relationship with the teenage assassin.

"Suzie is being lured back to Bedford," Andrea continued, finally getting to the meat of why she'd called the detective. "If she's not already here, she's going to be."

"I thought you'd be over the moon," Leah muttered, remembering the last time they'd spoken, during which Andrea seemed confident that Suzie would come after her and take down Leah and the rest of the Bedford CID.

"You know what, I did like the idea a lot," Andrea admitted, her voice diminished by the sound of something in the background. "But that was back when I thought that she was only ever going to be a killer. Clearly, she's been able to hide away and make something of herself. I always thought that it was a pipe dream she'd never fulfill. I have no desire to drag her back into this life... but someone does."

"Who?" Leah asked, though the name when it was revealed, didn't come as much of a surprise to her.

“Eddie Knightley,” Andrea responded, and Leah felt her blood run cold. “You remember when Suzie and I first arrived in Bedford? We were both paid by Knightley.”

The inspector began to realise that the crime boss had had his hooks into Bedford—and her life—stretching back far further than she could have imagined.

Maybe she could use this to her advantage. Maybe Andrea was the smoking gun that they’d been waiting for.

“You need to tell me everything you know about Knightley,” she commanded, trying to fight off the urge to get down to the prison and interrogate Andrea herself if she had to.

“All in good time,” Andrea stated, the urgency back again. “But first, you need to get Annie Dano into protective custody. Otherwise, that girl is going to be at risk from Knightley. Whatever you think about me or Suzie, Annie is innocent in all this.”

“I’ll look at getting a team together,” the inspector began but was then cut off.

“No,” the woman insisted, acting with authority now. “You get a load of police involved, that’s as good as killing the girl. This needs to be handled as discreetly as possible.”

Leah looked back into the room where all her colleagues were waiting for her. She was being asked to keep them all in the dark as she retrieved Annie, all on the word of a woman who’d tried to kill her.

It wasn’t that she didn’t trust them or thought they were in league with Knightley. That ship had sailed with DS Rowan. It was the risk of everything else coming out.

It was the risk of everything else coming out. It was the risk of them knowing that when she'd had the chance to bring Suzie Dano in, she'd instead let her go, out of some possibly misplaced belief that she deserved a second chance. If Jonesy knew that she'd aided the woman who'd tried to kill him...

“West,” Andrea barked, bringing her back to reality. “I’m going to need you to do this. For Annie’s sake, if not for mine or Suzie’s.”

“All right,” Leah replied with a heavy sigh, feeling that she was about to jump into an abyss. “I’ll get something sorted out. And then afterwards, I am going to come and see you, and hopefully, you will tell me everything you know about the man.”

“I will, I promise,” Andrea solemnly assured her, and then the line went dead.



**S**uzie knew she was taking a huge risk in doing this.

She'd mulled over it so many times, trying to put up excuses and justifications and worse-case scenarios. But in the end, she'd decided, she was going to see her sister.

There was a possibility that Annie would not comprehend how her sister had changed or why she'd disappeared for over a year.

But Suzie hoped that she would have the time to correct all that.

Bedford had become a battleground, but the assassin would have gladly braved it all for Annie.

It occurred to her that her sister could be put at risk. Whoever had sent her the text message, knew enough about her to know that she always had a blindspot where her sister was concerned.

The night was already settling over Bedford, so maybe she could work under cover of darkness. She knew the route to the centre. She'd taken it a thousand times before.

But she had no idea what would be waiting for her.

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“I NEED to pop out to run an errand,” Leah declared abruptly, getting up from her seat and heading for the door.

“Well, I’ll come with you,” Jonesy offered, moving to follow her.

“No,” she insisted with more force than she intended. “No, Sam,” she tried again, this time more softly. “This is something I have to do myself.”

“But...” Jonesy began, surprised by the sudden secrecy.

“No buts,” Leah commanded, sounding less like his partner and more like his commanding officer. “I want you to do as you’re told.”

And she left without another word.

Jonesy went back to his desk as some of the other people looked on, feeling pity for the public chastising.

There was something about those last words that left him concerned.

Leah looked like she was desperate to get out of the place, and he imagined that any other officer who spoke to her would receive a similar brush-off.

She was hiding something. That much was obvious. But what?

He looked around the room. There wasn’t much in the way of urgency, and it was clear that he wasn’t going to be missed, so he got up from his desk and began following Leah.

He tried to make sure to keep his distance from her, to ensure that she didn’t spot him at any point. He watched her



get into her car and drive away. He took off on his own, wondering what the hell was happening.

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DURING THE DRIVE, Leah's mind was racing, trying to think of what she could do with Annie Dano. Bringing her into police headquarters would mean that she would have to acknowledge the call with Andrea, along with the other more complicated issues. Clarissa would have been her best bet were she not in the hospital.

There was also the possibility of Dr Doyle, but she knew she'd have to give some explanation. There was no other way around it. She needed to take Annie into protective custody.

She wondered for a moment whether Andrea had set all of this up to force her into a corner.

And yet the woman had seemed so authentic over the phone. There was no element of a bluff. And she'd promised them information on Knightley. Leah could only hope that that would all balance it out.

She parked her car outside and rushed up the steps and into the main reception area. "DI West," she announced, flashing her ID badge. "I need to pick up Annie Dano."

"Why?" the receptionist asked, the protective instinct kicking in.

"Because there's a possible threat to her life and she will be safer in police custody," Leah reasoned, not having the time to argue with the woman.

"I'm going to have to clear this with some people," she protested, scrambling to pick up a phone. "She's a vulnerable

adult, after all.”

*Oh, she's vulnerable.*

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JONESY FOLLOWED Leah to the edge of Bedford. He didn't know what he would likely find. A part of him wondered if it was to a makeshift grave.

But then he recognised the building she was stopping at. The care home where Annie Dano was housed.

What the hell was Leah doing here? Suzie Dano had disappeared from Bedford months ago and Jonesy was happy to see the back of her. And since then, there hadn't been so much of a whiff about her.

He hated the woman with every fibre of his being and had often imagined what he'd do if he ever saw her again. Of all the criminals DC Jones had gone up against in his career, Dano was the one that he felt he needed to bring in.

He considered following her inside but realised that probably wouldn't look good. He'd simply wait until she was outside to explain herself. He leaned against the car, folded his arms, and waited.

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SUZIE REGRETTED that she hadn't had time to gather a weapon, a gun or a knife, anything that she could use to defend herself.

But she told herself that such a sight would only end up startling Annie. And it wasn't like she was going to need a weapon for visiting her older sister.

She came to the edge of the road and could see the building. She made it to the crossing and was about to cross to the pavement...

...when she noticed DC Jones standing outside in seeming vigilance.

Leah hurried down the steps alongside Annie, who was confused and a little scared as to what was happening, but she trusted Leah.

As they stepped down the stairs, Leah halted as she saw Jonesy waiting for them. “Jonesy, what the fuck?” she exclaimed, taken aback by the sight of him.

“My thoughts exactly, Leah; what the fuck?” he asked, his tone dripping with tranquil fury. “You want to tell me what the hell is going on?”

Leah stammered, trying to think of an explanation, but before she could say anything...

“Suzie!” Annie chirped brightly, pointing across the street where a woman was standing by the crossing.

Both officers turned in the direction, looked past the haircut and the unflattering clothes, and recognised Suzie Dano in the flesh.



**T**ime drew to a standstill.

All four people stood in silence in the street, waiting for somebody else to make a move.

Leah was clocking the appearance of Suzie, silently knowing all along that it would only be a matter of time before she saw her again.

Jonesy was trying to burn the image of her into his memory for when he hunted her down any moment now.

Suzie looked at the two detectives and her sister, wondering what was happening. Was all this part of a trap to lure her out? Using Annie to get to her.

Annie was the only one who seemed happy to see her, completely oblivious to the carnage about to unfold.

She stepped into the street, arms outstretched, preparing to see her sister again... when Leah pulled her back from the curb and onto the ground just as a truck came roaring past across pavement.

Seeing her sister place herself in danger for her, Suzie immediately began to cross the road towards her...

...and then caught the glare of DC Jones.

Even from a distance, she could pick up on the burning hatred in his eyes.

He took a step in front of Leah and Annie, as if saying, 'You'll have to go through me to get to her.'

Suzie looked to her sister, who was being tended to by West. She wanted more than anything to pull Annie into an embrace, tell her it was all going to be all right, and she'd never leave her behind again...

...but then DC Jones started towards her, sprinting at full force.

Suzie took off down the street.

As she ran, her mind raced. She was at a major disadvantage. She had no weapon, and the B&B was a considerable distance away. All she could do was keep running until she lost the constable.

Normally, she would have lured him into an ambush and gutted him. But even if she were armed, she wanted to move away from that murderous mentality. And also, Leah had helped her last time. She might need the detective to get out of this, and she wouldn't feel inclined to help if Suzie murdered her boyfriend.

Jonesy sprinted after the woman, determined not to lose her. He could foresee a great sense of calm washing over him. If he could take this woman out, then everything would be all right again.

She was moving at a faster pace than he was, putting a lot of distance between the two. It wouldn't be long before he lost her altogether. If he had his gun on him, he'd fire two rounds into her back. He definitely had a clear vantage point with the lack of people in the street.

But he was going to lose her. Again.

Suddenly, a truck pulled by, and Jonesy tried to flag it down. “STOP, POLICE!” he commanded, and as it slowed down, he jumped onto the footplate and spoke to the man through an open window. “Keep driving as fast as you can!”

The driver nodded and continued driving.

The truck sped along the street in pursuit of the woman, closing the gap between them, and turning into a busy high street.

“She’s going left,” Jonesy shouted, the wind whipping against his face. “Go with her.”

Jonesy hunkered down on the footplate, wrapping one arm around the open window to steady himself.

She turned into a street corner out of sight and Jonesy commanded the driver, “Drive on.”

He jumped down from the footplate and onto the street. He saw her disappearing down an alleyway and took out his phone, thumbing it frantically as he kept up the chase.

“DC Jones?” Nora’s voice came through a few seconds later. “What’s happening?”

“Suzie Dano is back in Bedford,” he panted heavily, looking around the darkened streets for a glimpse of the assassin. “It’s definitely her. I’ve got eyes on her right now.”

“And where is DI West when all of this is happening?” the superintendent asked frantically, clearly scrambling to get an armed response unit together.

“She’s back with...” but then Jonesy broke off. He still had no idea what Leah was doing at Annie Dano’s home in the first place. “I’m currently the only one in pursuit.”

“Listen to me, Sam,” Nora cautioned, clearly remembering the constable’s bitter hatred for the assassin. “Maintain visual contact, but do not approach. We’ll get an armed response unit down to your area, but do NOT approach.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied before hanging up the phone, hoping that he could get to her before they could. He turned sharply to his left and ran into a car park.

He looked at the parked cars, wondering if she was hiding among them...

...when he felt something explode in his back.

He fell to the ground, a throbbing pain shooting up through his spine.

Suzie Dano was standing over him clutching a copper pipe.

He looked up at her, at a clear disadvantage, and braced himself for the finishing blow...

...but it seemed to be delayed.

She was standing over him panting heavily from the running.

“Listen,” she pleaded, not threatening him, but sounding desperate. “I’m not looking to kill you. I’ll stay out of your way if you stay out of mine.”

“Do you really think that I’m going to let you go after everything you’ve done?” Jonesy spat disbelievingly.

“My fight is not with you,” she insisted, and to prove her point, she threw the pipe onto the ground where the clatter echoed. “You don’t like me, and I don’t like you, and I get that. But I’ll keep out of your way and Leah’s way if you keep out of mine.” She turned to walk away before turning back and

adding, “And for the love of God, don’t follow me. Just because I’m not looking to kill you, doesn’t mean there aren’t others who will.”

And then she was gone, leaving Jonesy winded on the pavement. He pounded the ground in frustration at having allowed Dano to once again slip through his fingers.

There was going to be hell to pay, he would make sure of that.

But right now, he needed answers. And there was only one person he could get them from.

Leah was definitely hiding something. And he was going to find out what.





**A**ndrea tried to make peace with the decision she'd made. She breathed heavily, hoping that DI West had got to Annie in time.

In truth, she'd felt guilty ever since she'd sent the text to Suzie asking her to come back to Bedford. She knew where Suzie would have gone had she been an ordinary girl. God knows they'd discussed it enough times. She felt it had to be her because if it was Knightley or any of his men, they wouldn't have thought twice about going down there and threatening her. She told herself that by taking the responsibility herself, she was protecting her protege.

But as soon as she'd sent that last message, she'd instantly regretted what she'd done. She was asking Suzie to squander that second chance. And all for the sake of Andrea securing her freedom.

She'd had plenty of time to think it over. And she was sure that even though Knightley talked a big game, there was little he could do to get her out of prison. She knew he had a reputation for discarding people who were closest to him, often when they'd outlived their usefulness.

And she thought about Suzie's sister Annie, a fragile girl who represented the best of Suzie. It wasn't a matter of *if* Knightley decided to use her as leverage, but *when*.

So she'd used a burner phone she'd smuggled inside to make a private call to Leah West, relying on a series of middlemen passing along messages to get the number. And then she'd told her that Annie Dano was at risk and needed to be protected. Andrea could only hope that West's desire to protect people would override her hatred for her. But she had no way of knowing whether the information had been a success.

She was lying on her bunk when the phone rang. Warily, she answered it and held it to her ear.

"Have you heard about what's been going on on the outside?" Knightley's chipped voice came through. It was interesting how he always dialled up the politeness when he was pissed.

"Believe it or not, I wasn't gifted with clairvoyance," Andrea noted sarcastically, trying to play dumb for all the good it would do.

"Apparently, there was a bit of an altercation outside the building where Suzie Dano's sister was living. A chase broke out between Dano and one of the officers. I believe it was..." Knightley briefly left the phone to double-check the name. "... DC Jones."

Of course. Who else could it be? Andrea knew that Suzie had damn near killed the detective constable, a slight that wouldn't be forgotten any time soon. "And what was the outcome?" Andrea asked, sitting up on her bunk and wondering if Suzie had been taken into police custody and was going to be joining her in prison soon.

“Apparently, Dano got away,” Knightley explained, managing to sound both relieved and pissed off at the same time. “It’s a shame about her sister. She could have been a great bargaining chip.”

“Can’t you still get to her?” Andrea asked, being coy despite herself.

“No chance of that now,” he muttered, irritated with the outcome. “They’ve got security up the arse. And I’m not going to take on the whole of the police just to get to her. We’ll just have to make do. It is disappointing. Dano would have danced to whatever tune we played for her if we’d been able to get our hands on her sister.”

“I’m sure there are other ways to force her cooperation,” Andrea noted, though this was a lie. Suzie Dano wouldn’t do anything she didn’t want to do. She held back her relief that DI West had acted on the information and retrieved Annie in time. She didn’t want to imagine what would happen to her in the hands of a monster like Eddie Knightley.

“Of course, I’m still confused by how everything came about,” he continued, his voice going dangerously low again. “We had considered extracting the sister, but DI West beat us to the punch. And I’m not sure how she even knew where to look. Technically, she shouldn’t have even known that Dano was back in Bedford.”

Andrea kept her nerves about her, having expected Knightley to come to this conclusion sooner or later. “Maybe someone let it slip,” she suggested, not caring whether Knightley believed her or not.

“Yes, I’m sure that’s exactly what happened,” he commented knowingly, and though nothing more was said, the implication was clear. Clearing his throat, he suddenly

changed tactics. “You know, I’m having a bit of difficulty securing your release,” he added, and Andrea closed her eyes as she tried to take in the knowledge that the deal was most likely off. Assuming it was even on to begin with.

“You’ll be hearing from me regarding the next steps.” And then the line went dead.

Andrea knew what was happening. Knightley was onto her. But he wasn’t going to waste precious energy in telling her as such. He was going to leave her to stew for a while and reflect on what she’d given up to support Suzie.

She went through the next morning in a daze, trying to tell herself that she’d made the right decision, that Knightley would have only reneged on his promise, that she owed Suzie after all the years of loyalty.

Maybe this was karma. When she first met Suzie, she should have recognised that she was a vulnerable girl who needed support. But instead, Andrea had fallen in love with her ability to kill and had taken it upon herself to mould the girl into a weapon. She wasn’t sure at what point she’d started seeing Suzie as a daughter, but now, that same maternal instinct overrode any sense of self-preservation.

This might be the first and only time in her life that Andrea had done right by Suzie.

She had no idea it would also be the last time.

Later that morning, she stripped off her clothes and stepped under the shower, feeling cleansed from her actions.

Then she saw another girl enter the scene, a spry young thing who kept quiet for the most part.

But she wasn’t getting under the shower. She was standing there observing Andrea, never once taking her eyes off her.

Then the door opened and three more women joined her, standing before Andrea. Andrea looked from the women to the door, at which point one of the women stood in front of the exit, blocking her view.

That's when Andrea realised they were stopping her from leaving.

And then her eyes drifted down to their hands.

That's when she saw the knives.



**J**onesy made his way back to the care home, a hand pressed against his back all the while.

By the time he got there, an ambulance had pulled up outside the home and two police cars were parked outside.

He limped over to the ambulance where Annie Dano was being checked over but was otherwise unhurt.

“Did you know that your sister was going to be here?” Jonesy asked, but the woman didn’t respond, clutching onto a plushie and hugging it to her chest while looking down at the ground. “DID YOU KNOW!?” Jonesy suddenly shouted, causing Annie to scream in terror.

“Sam!” DC Farah Hussein cautioned, stepping between him and the girl. “Get hold of yourself, man. She’s not going to know what’s going on with her sister. She’s as much a victim as anyone else.”

Jonesy stepped back, realising what he was doing. “I’m sorry,” he muttered, hating himself for directing his anger at an innocent girl. “I’m sorry.”

He looked around the street for Leah. Normally, he would have sought her out as a form of comfort.

But he didn't want comfort. He wanted answers.

Leah was coming out of the main entrance, having just assured the carers that Annie was going to be okay.

He wasn't sure when would be the right time to speak to her but then decided to just throw it in there.

He marched up to her, not trying to corner her but certainly leaving her feeling like she couldn't walk away so easily.

“So, are you going to tell me what you were doing here, or are we playing twenty questions?” he asked, arms folded.

“You want to tell me why you were following me?” Leah asked, unwilling to back down that easily. “I gave you specific instructions to stay behind, and you end up stalking me! I thought I could trust you!”

“Oh, you're going to talk about trust?” he demanded, things getting heavy now. “You're seriously going to go there? You telling me you just went off to speak with Annie Dano on a whim, just as her sister shows up?”

“I had no idea that Dano was going to appear,” Leah assured her, though she couldn't stop the shaky tone in her voice.

“So why did you go to the home?” Jonesy asked, and it was clear that he wasn't going to let it go.

Leah went silent. She had no excuses for him, no lies, no covers. There was no way she could spin this without everything else being exposed.

“I'll tell you, but I'd rather do it at the station,” she insisted, hoping that the extra time would allow her to properly phrase her response.

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“EARLIER TONIGHT, I received a call from Andrea Sutton from her prison cell,” Leah explained once she, Jonesy and Farah were standing in the superintendent’s office. “She told me that people would try and target Annie Dano and use her as leverage for getting to Suzie.”

Nora nodded along with this. She’d seen the girl when she’d been brought in and had been particularly tender with her, making sure she was all right and comforted. “We’re going to look after her,” Nora assured them, nodding slowly. “No one is getting to her, not on my watch.” Then she turned serious again and Leah knew she was going to dislike the next part.

“DI West, I’m sorry to ask you this, but I think it’s necessary,” she began, taking off as much edge to her voice as possible to soften the blow. “Did you know that Suzie Dano was back on the scene?”

As Leah pondered her response, she knew that Jonesy was looking directly at her, waiting with bated breath.

“No, I didn’t,” she responded, shaking her head. “I have no idea where Suzie Dano is. I thought she’d dropped off the face of the earth. Until her old handler called me and told me that someone might be using Annie as a way of controlling Suzie.” She paused, getting ready for the next bombshell. “There’s something else, too. During the phone call, Sutton told me that the first time she and Dano came to Bedford... that was down to Knightley. They were working for him.”

She said this partially to bring everyone into the know, and to Jonesy in the hopes that it might redirect his anger towards



the crime boss and away from the assassin.

“So, it appears that Ms Sutton knows more than we assumed the first time,” Nora muttered, rubbing her lips. She looked to DC Hussein. “I want you to call up the prison. I want us to get her down here and in an interview room. I want her spilling everything she knows about Eddie Knightley.”

“On it, ma’am,” Farah nodded and quickly left the room.

Superintendent Wade got up from her seat and circled the room. “We’ve got Eddie Knightley trying his hand at sabotaging Bedford, we’ve got the Cameraman running rampant, and now we’ve got Suzie Dano back on the scene. I refuse to believe that these are all separate cases. Knightley’s at the centre of it all.”

“So, how do we go about it?” Jonesy asked, wanting to kill three birds with one stone.

“I don’t know,” Nora replied, closing the blinds, conspicuous about other people listening in. “When Dano saw you guys at the home, it would have been simpler to kill the pair of you. It’s not like she hasn’t tried before, and I don’t see why she wouldn’t again.”

“Yeah, I was wondering that,” Jonesy noted, flinching with pain at the memory of the copper pipe. “I thought that she was going to finish me off first chance she got.”

“She would have solved a lot of problems killing both of you,” the superintendent stated matter-of-factly. “Which begs the question, why didn’t she?”

Realising that she was on the verge of becoming an advocate for the assassin, Leah suggested, “When Andrea contacted me, she suggested that Suzie was trying to stop. That she didn’t want to be a paid killer anymore.”

Jonesy looked like he was trying to force himself not to laugh. “You’ve got to be joking. That bitch will always be a stone-cold killer. That will never change.”

“And you’re suddenly an expert in human psychology?” Leah asked turning on her partner.

“Leah, have you forgotten that she tried to kill us both?” Jonesy asked, lifting up his shirt and revealing the scars from when Suzie had nearly disembowelled him. “Who’s side are you supposed to be on, anyway?”



“Do you even need to ask that?” Leah fired back indignantly, feeling like she was losing Jonesy in more ways than one. “I’m simply saying that it’s not as simple as you might think.”

“Oh, I think it’s pretty simple to me,” Jonesy retorted, standing his ground. “She’s a killer, and we’re coppers. I think that pretty much sums it up, don’t you?”

“Use your head, Sam!” she insisted, pointing to her skull. “Firstly, if she wanted to kill you, she would have done it by now. She was standing over you. She had you at a disadvantage. But she didn’t.”

“And do you think that just negates everything else she did beforehand?” Jonesy asked, feeling vengeful.

“I’ve got to say, Leah, I understand what DC Jones is trying to say,” Nora cautioned, trying to keep the argument from escalating. “Whatever Sutton might have told you is still subject to debate. Suzie Dano once managed to run circles around all of us, and it was not just down to skill on her part, but also because we severely underestimated her. We can’t afford to let our guard down, especially if she and Knightley are on the same page.”

“If they were working together,” Leah reasoned, surprising herself with how fiercely she was willing to defend the assassin, “would Knightley have really needed to threaten Dano’s sister?”

They both nodded at the logic of this.

“Perhaps you’re right,” Nora replied, weighing up all the possibilities in her mind. “Perhaps she is trying to break away from that lifestyle... but there are a few issues you’re forgetting DI West. Firstly, a lot of the recent developments in Bedford are centred around her, and I think I’ll sleep a lot easier at night knowing that she is here where we can keep an eye on her. And secondly, it doesn’t matter whether she’s managed to reinvent herself. It doesn’t matter that she’s no longer in the business. She is still responsible for the murders of several targets that we know of, and so far, those victims have gone without justice.”

Leah couldn’t help but wonder if the superintendent knew more about the circumstances behind Suzie’s original escape than she let on and this was just a way of chiding her for those actions. She’d thought she was doing the right thing in giving Suzie a chance at life that she wouldn’t have got otherwise, certainly not from inside. But she was forever conscious that there were people out there who would think otherwise.

“If Dano is not working with Knightley or the Cameraman,” Jonesy suggested, still looking for ways to carry out his vendetta. “Then maybe there’s a way that we can push them towards each other.”

“You suggesting take each other out?” Nora asked, her tone neutral and not indicating whether she approved of the plan or not.

“That would suit me just fine,” the constable declared, surprising Leah with how bloodthirsty he sounded. She looked to Nora, fully expecting her superior officer to shoot down the idea with as much venom as possible.

But she was disturbingly quiet, and Leah could almost see the wheels turning in her head as she weighed up the pros and cons.

“Guv,” the inspector began, having never thought she’d see the day she’d have to take her boss down from an extreme course of action. “Please tell me you’re not seriously considering entertaining this idea.”

“Leah, we’re getting desperate,” Wade fired back, clearly pushed to her limit over the whole debacle. “People are dying left, right, and centre. And somewhere in Bedford, that smug shithead is laughing at us. Every minute he spends outside a cell, he is just finding another way to screw with us. And we don’t have any other leads.”

“We have Andrea Sutton,” Leah suggested, knowing that normally, she wouldn’t have been above setting two criminals on a course of mutually assured destruction. “She could blow the whole thing open, at least that’s what she implied.” She didn’t say any more, knowing that she had already landed herself in hot water.

“Which begs the question,” Nora said with suspicion, walking close to the inspector as though she were cross-examining her. “When she called, why didn’t you tell the rest of us? If you had done so, then we could have organised a team to retrieve the sister and maybe have a better chance of intercepting Suzie and taking her into custody.”

She had to be very careful with what she said. The last thing she wanted was for the rest of the team to think that she

was aiding and abetting a known criminal... which wouldn't be too far from the truth.

“The way Andrea phrased it,” Leah began slowly, choosing her words carefully, “she made out that there may be people in CID who couldn't be trusted. That they would be another plant like Knightley. And they wouldn't think twice about gunning for Dano.” She looked hard at Jonesy as she said this. “She also said that if there was too much visibility in retrieving Annie, then it could get back to Knightley.”

She waited to see if the explanation would land. She knew that there was a risk that everything would come out sooner or later. All they needed to do was ask Andrea about what she'd said and then they'd start to wonder what else Leah had lied about.

“It's a fair point,” Nora muttered, settling back into her seat. “But I would have hoped that you'd know by now that you can trust us all, DI West. Despite the debacle with DS Rowan, we're all on the same side. That much is clear. We can't afford to go behind each other's backs.”

*God, if she only knew.*

“We could always go and speak with Annie,” Jonesy suggested, trying not to sound like he was clutching at straws. “She probably knows her sister better than everyone.”

Nora raised an eyebrow. “Sam,” she started in a scrutinising tone. “The girl's autistic, and I think it's safe to assume that Suzie would not have told Annie about the finer points of her career. She needs our protection, not our scrutiny.”

Jonesy silently conceded the point, and it was clear that he wasn't going to get any further with this.

Suddenly, Farah burst back into the office, not even pausing to announce herself. Her face was stricken with sweat and she looked like the world was ending.

“DC Hussein, what’s happened?” Nora asked with dread.

“I’ve just got off the phone to the prison,” she panted, holding herself against the doorframe for support. “Andrea Sutton is dead.”



**E**veryone went white. Even though he wasn't present, Leah could feel Knightley's influence spreading through the office.

"How did it happen?" Superintendent Wade asked in a hushed voice. "How did she die?"

"According to some of the screws," Farah began, trying to recapture as many details as possible, "she was stabbed to death in the showers by four women."

"Jesus Christ," Leah muttered, picturing the scene; Andrea standing under one of the prison showers, ambushed by her fellow prisoners, and unable to run for cover or defend herself as she was impaled several times over.

"This has got to be Knightley's work," she suggested, unable to think of anyone else with that kind of reach. "He did this because she spoke to me and warned me about Annie."

"Well, I suggest you get down to the prison and find out exactly what happened," Wade instructed, feeling exhausted.

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THE EARLY MORNING sun was still rising as they drove to the prison.

“Do you think Suzie knows about Andrea dying?” Jonesy asked, and she knew it was less out of concern for the girl and more trying to find another way to get to her.

“I don’t know,” she answered, keeping her eyes on the road.

“Why are you going into this half-arsed?” Jonesy asked, no longer caring that she was his partner or his girlfriend. “Most of the time, you’re happy to break every rule in the book to get to these people. If this was the Self Killer, you’d have been all for organising a lynch mob. I mean, this isn’t some crime of passion or even some deluded serial killer. This is Suzie Dano, who’s probably got a higher body count than most of our cases put together. So why are you so dead set on treating her with kid gloves?”

“Maybe because she is a kid,” Leah fired back, fed up with having to justify herself. “You ever consider what kind of life she had? How she fell into this line of work?”

“She tried to kill us both,” Jonesy stated stubbornly, refusing to back down.

“I know, I have the scars to prove it,” she reasoned, trying to get through to him. “She’s twenty years old and has got a body count higher than her actual age. You did not think that maybe if life had been kinder to her, she could have been something better? And I know she is trying to be better. The Suzie Dano you and I met a year ago would not have thought twice about tearing through half of Bedford just to get to you and me. She could have killed you then and there and made her escape. But she didn’t.”

Jonesy went silent, knowing she was only going to have another justification for what she was doing.

“People can change,” Leah insisted as the prison was on site. “Look at Andrea. It would have been simpler to just sit back and let Suzie be used as she always had. It certainly would have been easier. But for better or worse, she tried to do right by her.”

“Yeah,” Jonesy nodded sardonically, unimpressed with the impassioned plea. “And look where that got her.”

Leah didn't have a response to that.

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PRIYA KAPOOR MET them at the prison, and as they went inside, she cautioned, “I hope none of you have had any breakfast, because it's better to approach the scene with an empty stomach.”

Indeed, the sight was a grisly one. Andrea's body was lying slumped amongst the tiles. Leah quickly lost count of how many times she'd been stabbed. But the frenzy hadn't just stopped at her torso. There were deep cuts in her face and throat where the knives had impaled her.

A prison guard was on the scene, looking over the mess.

Leah felt a surge of frustration at the sight of the dead woman. Their biggest possible lead to Suzie and Kingsley was dead. She should have picked up on it, the urgency in Andrea's voice, the clear threat to her life. If she'd known that Sutton would have ended up dead hours after talking with her, Leah would have had her transferred to a private wing away from the other prisoners.

“How the hell did this happen?” Leah asked the guard, who looked dumbfounded. But Leah’s question brought home all the fears about him possibly losing his job. “How do you miss four women going into the shower with blades?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, shrugging his shoulders numbly. “We didn’t think Sutton was at risk.”

“Clearly!” the inspector exclaimed loudly as Priya studied the scene. There wouldn’t be any guesses for how she died. “Where are the killers?”

“We’ve got them locked up in their cells,” the guard offered, trying to be useful in the face of everything that had happened.

“I want to speak to all of them,” Leah insisted, before looking to Jonesy and adding, “And I want Sutton’s cell searched.”

Even if the woman had died, there was still a possibility that she could have left something solid for them behind.

All four killers were consulted about their role in the death. They were all serving life sentences with no chance of getting out, so the idea of adding another murder to their counter meant little to them.

They explained that somebody had reached out to them, ensuring that they’d all be taken care of while inside if they could do a favour. Leah already knew exactly who that person was. She pressed them hard on the ‘why’, but ultimately, it didn’t offer them anything they could use.

As she and Jonesy looked through the cell, she saw there were very few possessions, with Leah realising how little she’d known the woman who’d caused them so much grief.

“We need to look at getting all of this bagged up and back to the station,” she insisted, looking around the cramped space. “Maybe Royce can make something of it.”

But Jonesy didn't respond. He was standing in the corner of the room with his back turned.

“Jonesy?” she asked, noticing his posture, and how he looked slightly hunched over. She approached him slightly, picking up on the tension.

He turned around and she could see something in him had changed. Possibly forever.

Her eyes drifted down to his hand. In it was a note written in felt tip. WEST AND DANO POSSIBLY WORKING TOGETHER.

She looked up at him, trying to find some remnant of the man she'd fallen in love with, willing him to say something.

“You fucking bitch,” he spat with as much venom as he could muster.



Whatever happened in Leah's life moving forward, she'd never forget what she saw. She wished more than anything that she could tear her own eyes out.

But even blind, she would always see the hateful glare Jonesy fixed her with.

"Jonesy, that's not what it looks like," she began in a hushed voice, conscious of other people overhearing her.

"All this time, I wondered why you were defending her," he continued in a low voice, his anger palpable. "I thought you were going soft because she was a kid."

"That's not exactly untrue," she replied, trying to salvage something from the situation.

"No, going soft would have been better," the constable continued, crumbling the note in his hand. "You have been actively colluding with that bitch for God knows how long. How long have you and her been best friends? Was it when you..." He broke off mid-rant as the realisation fell on him like every scalding thing on earth. "Oh, my God," he muttered shaking his head, still trying not to believe it even as the proof landed in front of him. "You let her get away, didn't you?"

Leah hesitated a second too long, and she knew she wasn't dreading her worst nightmare. She was living it. "Sam, you need to understand..."

"You knew who she was, what she'd done..." Jonesy was now shaking with rage and Leah wondered if he was going to attack her right then and there. "And yet you still let her walk away to live the life she wanted, ignoring the entire graveyards she's filled, the lives she's ruined, the people she's crippled! You know what? I would have thought that I would have been the biggest trigger point for you. I would have done the same for you!"

And with that, Jonesy left the room, unable to say anything more.

Leah had no way of knowing what was going to happen. Was he going to tell anyone? It shamed her that this was her first thought. She told one of the FIs to collect any evidence she could find and rushed out through the prison to keep up with Jonesy.

"Sam!" she called after him, but he would not stop.

She finally rushed up to him outside the prison gates and grabbed him by the arm.

"Don't fucking touch me," he snarled, wrenching her hand away.

"Sam, I haven't been working with her, I promise you," she explained rapidly, knowing that the note was a fabrication, most likely a plant from Knightley, but unable to articulate it. "I've been on your side from day one. I love you!"

"So why did you lie to me?" Jonesy asked, his voice quivering as he spoke. "Did you not trust me with the truth?"

“I....” Leah faltered, knowing that there was no way she could put a positive spin on this at all. “I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“By letting Dano walk free!?” he roared, suddenly angry again, causing her to jump back in surprise.

“I know you blame me for all the shit that’s happened to you,” she pleaded, remembering how carefree and optimistic he’d been when they first started working together, how in awe of her he’d been. That felt like a lifetime ago.

“You think that’s what this is about?” Jonesy asked, suddenly lowering his voice as though conscious of other people hearing him. “That all the shit that happened to me was because of you? You give yourself too much credit. Everything that happened... it happened because we’re coppers. It’s practically a rite of passage when someone is trying to kill you! Leah, I don’t blame you for any of those incidents. For anything that’s happened to me. But why on God’s earth is that pint-sized bitch walking free, living a life that she doesn’t deserve! How many people did she have to kill to get to that point?”

“If she’d gone to prison, she would have served life without parole,” the inspector insisted, trying to give a voice to the justifications that’d been floating around her head for the past few months. “You and I both know that the prison service is geared more towards incarceration than rehabilitation.”

“Yeah?” the constable spat, wholeheartedly agreeing with the point. “It’s better than what most people get, and it’s certainly better than what she deserves. The Leah West I met wouldn’t have thought twice about hunting her down on a one-woman crusade.”

Leah nodded at this, remembering her more blinkered mentality and realising that she had changed, but not in the way she'd expected.

“You know the last time I saw her,” Leah began, remembering when she'd been taken hostage with Suzie and sat in a car with her, listening as the girl poured her heart out. “We come across the worst kinds of people, the kind that would kill legions and not feel a shred of remorse over it. And we're trained to see that. We're trained to see the worst in people. But when I last saw her, I didn't see some cold-blooded killer who killed for the payday. I didn't see an assassin who would kill without thinking twice. I saw a scared and confused kid who regretted everything she'd done in her life but felt like she was in far too deep to change. I gave her that chance.”

Seeing Jonesy's nostrils flare, she continued speaking, calmly and rationally. “I love you, Sam. I love you with all my heart. I'm as good a person as I am right now because of you. You're the best of both of us. But... Suzie had to be let go. She had to be given a chance. I knew it was the wrong thing to do, and I knew the service would hail down fire and brimstone on me for doing it. Everything I've learned about being a copper was telling me to do the exact opposite of what I did. I had to disregard years of lessons and service. Because I thought it was the right thing to do. I'm sure there are plenty of people who will tell me how I've betrayed everything and everyone I believed in.”

She went quiet, and Jonesy pondered what he'd heard. The words had certainly taken the wind out of his sails. He'd been treating it as an act of betrayal. A sign of Leah going against him instead of a misplaced attempt at doing the right thing.



“I know you thought you were giving her a chance,” Jonesy replied, folding his arms and trying to quell his anger. “And I can understand why you would do that. And you know, maybe you’re right. Maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s easier for me to believe that she’s born bad. But... you lied to everyone in the service. You lied to the guv, you lied to your colleagues. Hell, you lied to me. The one person I thought you would be honest with. And you got a fucking promotion for it.” He stopped short of saying that she didn’t deserve it.

“There’s a point, Sam,” she started calmly, exhaling deeply. Even though she felt petrified at the thought of her life crumbling around her, there was a certain calm that washed over her, as though speaking about it had freed her. “Where you look at everything you’re told and it’s all just one-sided. You can’t do right without doing wrong. And vice versa. One day, you might find yourself faced with a similar position. And when that day comes, I hope that you can make a rational decision.”

Jonesy nodded at this, wanting to listen to her but too swept up in his anger. “Maybe I will. Maybe I would have done things differently.”

“The Jonesy I met would have been more open to giving her a chance,” she noted, and she knew it was a cheap shot, inadvertently reminding him how hardened he’d become in the past two years.

“Yeah, well, that guy probably would have crashed and burned early on,” he admitted and she wondered how much of his changing and becoming more merciless was down to the cases inflicted upon him, and how much of it was down to him using it as a coping mechanism.

“I need... time to think,” he began slowly and began to walk away.

“What happens now?” Leah asked, having heard him ask that question so many times before, but now it had never felt more loaded.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Jonesy offered with a shrug, the crumpled note still in his hand. “You tell me that you’re not working with Dano. I believe you. But you still lied to us. You had us believing that we couldn’t be trusted. I know I’m a little hot-headed, and when confronted with Dano, there’s no telling what I would have done if I’d been at her with a gun. And you’re right. We’ve both changed since we started working together. I knew that that was going to happen, and I was prepared for it. I knew that we were going to get our arses handed to us and there’d be no end of people lining up to take us out. Even when we were on the ropes, I always thought we’d at least go down together. But this... I honestly don’t know how we can come back from this.”

“You going to speak to anyone at the office?” Leah asked and winced as she realised that was one of her biggest priorities.

But Jonesy looked far too deflated to call her out on it. “Maybe if I thought it would make any difference towards the investigation, get us a step closer to Dano. But I know I’d only be throwing you under the bus. And I don’t know if I want to take it that far.”

“We can work through this,” Leah pleaded, following him as he walked down the road. “I know I messed up...”

“Do you, though?” he asked wearily, stopping and looking her in the eye. “Because from where I’m standing, I imagine if

you had the chance to do it all over again, you would in a heartbeat.”

Leah looked down at the floor, giving him all the confirmation he needed.

“If I can keep your name out of it with Wade, I will,” he confirmed, and she felt ashamed for his continued loyalty. “But in doing this, you’re making me complicit. I’ll be taking the same plunge as you.”

And with that, he walked away, leaving Leah standing alone by the gates.

She stood there for a long time, feeling that her life was imploding and there was nothing she could do about it.

She started to feel like this was the beginning of the end, that after this, nothing would be the same. All of her decisions—both good and bad—were being laid bare.

And suddenly, it became clear that thinking about the future was a very dangerous thing to Leah. She didn’t want to think about what life would look like without Jonesy.

She thought back to their earlier conversations at the beginning of the week when they’d had a late morning in and held each other in their arms, her tracing her finger around his well-defined muscles and him playing with her hair. It was a truly blissful moment that made everything else in life melt away.

And now she wondered if that was the last time they’d ever hold each other, the last time they’d say they loved each other, the last time they were the centre of each other’s universe.

The possibility drove Leah to tears, and she wept for the damage done to her life.



The Cameraman watched the scene with a hint of glee, snapping shots of the couple from down the street with a zoom-in lens. He'd never taken images of people in the throes of life, so this was a creative detour for him.

He snapped with relish. Though he couldn't make out what was being said from a distance, he knew that the note planted in Andrea Sutton's cell had done the trick.

And now he was witness to the crumbling of Leah West and Sam Jones' partnership in every sense of the word. He watched as DC Jones walked down the street, lost in a daze as he tried to recover from the revelations.

West was standing by the street corner, clearly trying to think of a way she could come back from it and realising that there wasn't one.

Starting up the rental car he was using, he took out his phone and dialled a number.

"Knightley," the professional voice came through, and though the Cameraman had prized himself on being a lone wolf throughout much of his career, he couldn't deny he was starting to enjoy the pull of this life and all the lucrative perks that came with it.

“It’s done,” the killer explained, eyeing the two and knowing he only had a few seconds before he had to decide which one he was going to tail.

“Good,” the crime boss replied, sounding satisfied with himself. “I’m quite pleased with how it all came together.”

“I agree,” the Cameraman offered, finding himself enjoying the camaraderie despite the circumstances that had led to it. “If this life doesn’t work out, then you should be in theatre.”

“Well, I can only credit the note with so much,” the criminal explained, still sounding pleased with himself. “All of the elements were already there between them—the mistrust, the lies. That little revelation in the cell was just the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

“So, do you want me to go after DI West?” he asked, knowing that he’d never taken on a copper before, but confident that if he needed to, he could certainly make short work of her. After all, if a girl like Suzie Dano—practically a child—could make short work of coppers, what was there to say he couldn’t?

“No,” Knightley replied, surprising the killer, who imagined he’d be gunning for the chance to get even with her. “I would have liked to have killed her myself for all the times she’s inconvenienced me, but at the end of the day, there’s only so much time. And to be honest, it will only look too suspicious to kill her now. Unless you plan on braving the entire prison service to get to her.”

“Not,” the killer replied, pulling the car out and following DC Jones, making sure that he kept at a short distance.

“Keep your eye on Jones for now,” his employer instructed evenly. “He’s going to be hurting hard from everything he’s learned. He’s just found out his girlfriend’s stabbed him in the back.”

“Are you not worried that he might go to the police?” the Cameraman queried, knowing from the research he’d been provided that Sam Jones could be quite the goody-two-shoes when he wanted to be.

“He won’t,” Eddie Knightley explained abruptly, not considering the point even worth debate. “He’s hurting, but he’s far too loyal to West to even consider throwing her under the bus. He won’t go anywhere near the station until he’s worked out what he’s going to do. Wherever he goes, just make sure that he’s isolated from everyone else.”

“I’ll be sure to do that,” the man replied, petting his camera and getting it ready for what came next. “When I do get my hands on him, you don’t mind if I have a little fun with him first, do you?”

He could imagine Knightley sighing on the other side of the phone. “If you think about it, this guy has caused you a shitload of headaches over the past year. And this could be your way of getting even, through me of course.”

Knightley considered this on the other end, and for once, the professional businessman was willing to indulge the vindictive sadist inside him. “All right, you do what you want with him. And if you can record it, even better.”

The line went dead and the Cameraman allowed one last look down the street at West retreating into the prison and picked up the pace after Jones.

He felt that the detective could be the centrepiece of his collection. He remembered his very first victim; his photography teacher who had a pedantic eye when it came to photography. True, the man had taught him all about precision, but he'd been needlessly picking over the other elements of the Cameraman's work.

He regretted that he hadn't been able to get any pictures of the man on account of murdering him in the darkroom, literally under cover of darkness. But he'd tried to compensate for that for every victim since then.

They were all the same, people who who believed that the world owed them everything and were looking down on people like him. They were all spoilt, overgrown children. They had no natural predators... except for him.

He always loved the purity that came with his work. He felt that contemporary photographers always missed a trick. They never truly captured people in their element. When he killed people and photographed them while dying, he was able to savour all the little emotions; the shock, the horror, the fear, the tears, the stoic dignity from time to time. In some way, he was able to capture the human experience better than anyone else.

He wondered how DC Jones would come across at the moment of his death. He imagined that a man like that would have made a deal with death every moment of his waking life, possibly even prepared for it.

But he was confident that he could find a way to make him cry and beg, make him wish that it was over.

It was going to be an interesting experiment.

He'd already prepared some new recording equipment for the event, deciding that he wanted to record the event for posterity.

Of course, while the film would be wonderful, it wouldn't be nearly satisfying as the act itself.

It was tempting to jump DC Jones now and take him somewhere that'd been prepared. But instead, he decided to wait until he could get the man in a more isolated setting.

As he drove the car and considered all the things he was going to do to the man when he saw him, the Cameraman was unaware that he was being followed.





**S**uzie Dano had had a busy morning, waking up to a world changed.

When she woke up in the B&B, she checked the internet for any news. She wanted to be prepared in case people were putting her picture out there.

After she'd escaped from DC Jones, she'd walked down some of the alleyways. It had been stupid going to see Annie. If she'd been able to apply a bit of restraint, then maybe she could have remained hidden during her time here. But instead, the police had spotted her and were now alerted to her presence. She had to deal with them and not Knightley.

She'd been momentarily alarmed to see Annie being escorted by DI West. But she remembered that Leah was ultimately a good woman who bore Annie no ill will. Thinking about it, it'd been a relief to see her sister taken away by the police. As long as she was still in that care home, it would be easy for people to get to her and use her to get to Suzie.

She struggled to sleep that night, imagining that at any moment, the police were going to kick the bedroom door in, slap the handcuffs over her, and take her away, locking her up

and throwing away the key. Maybe she could have shared a cell with Andrea.

She thought about the handler frequently. At first, she'd felt that she owed much of what she had to the woman who'd given her opportunities and encouraged her to excel, got her a car, and a flat.

And the job...

The job which had taken up so much of her life. She couldn't believe that there'd ever been a time when she'd looked at her long tally of victims with pride. Instead, she felt like she'd sullied herself forever.

She remembered that Leah had given her a second chance. And she couldn't deny, that there were moments when she felt like she didn't deserve that second chance. Maybe it would be better for everyone if she were locked away and never let out again.

But then she decided that maybe she could be better. Maybe she could let Suzie Dano die. So that one day, people would be telling a better story than the one the police would be telling about her.

She didn't know how she was going to get through this. In an ideal world, she'd get through it without any real bloodshed. But she didn't feel like that was going to be possible. She was sure that by the time she was done in Bedford, at least one body was going to fall.

As long as it wasn't hers.

She thought about DI West, who now knew that she was back in Bedford. Did Leah assume that she was up to her old tricks?

She left that morning with the intent of getting DI West alone and explaining to her the status quo. Leah had already helped her out once before, and she had no reason to believe that she wouldn't do so again.

But she needed to get her alone. She knew that there were people in Bedford CID who wouldn't think twice about taking her into custody with no questions asked.

So, she'd stood outside the police station, waiting for the moment Leah would go out on patrol.

As expected, DC Jones was with her and he looked like he was still smarting from the events of last night. She knew that deep down, his anger was justified, and if he ever got a shot at her, he'd be well within his rights to take it.

She took an Uber, unable to be forthcoming regarding the destination, only asking him to follow the car.

Suzie was surprised to see Leah and Jonesy enter the prison and wondered if this had anything to do with the ongoing case involving Knightley.

She kept herself hidden for an hour, making sure that no one spotted her and waiting for the moment West and Jones emerged.

When they finally exited, she was completely taken aback by what she was seeing. The two detectives, who she'd previously thought inseparable, were in the throes of a colossal argument.

She was too far away to make out anything that was being said between the two, but she could tell from the deflated body language that something heated had happened between them.

Was it anything to do with her?

After a few more minutes of arguing, Jonesy walked off down the street, leaving Leah standing alone on the verge of tears. More than anything, Suzie wanted to rush over to her and check that she was all right.

But then she noticed a car pulling away from the side of the road.

And it was moving dangerously close to DC Jones.

Suzie looked to Leah to see if she'd spotted this, but she'd already retreated into the prison.

Deciding to follow the car, Suzie stayed at a close distance behind.

She wondered if this was one of Eddie Knightley's flunkies, no doubt targeting Jonesy as a way of getting to West.

Whoever was in the car was not very skilled at tradecraft.

Jonesy didn't seem to notice, simply having his hands in his pockets as he moved down the road, lost in his thoughts.

Suzie felt like she was in a difficult situation. If she kept herself hidden, then God knows what this guy could do to Jonesy. And if she revealed herself, she'd not only be showing her hand to Knightley, but she'd also be incurring the wrath of DC Jones, who had plenty of reasons for wanting her dead.

But if Jonesy died, then she knew that regardless of what had happened between them, Leah would feel less inclined to protect Suzie if it ever came down to it.

This was one of those moments where she missed the carefree life she'd lived as an assassin, not concerning herself with moral quandaries.

She watched as Jonesy walked into a pub, surprised that he'd started drinking at half eleven in the morning. After a few seconds, the pursuing car opened and a man got out. He was in his mid-thirties with a shaved head and a cap on, clearly a half-arsed attempt at a disguise. He had his hands stuffed in his pockets, clearly hiding something.

He entered the pub and Suzie watched from the sidelines, knowing she needed to act, but whatever course she took would end up exposing her and leaving her in a much more vulnerable position.

The only choices she had were bad ones. But she still had to choose.

Finally, she stepped towards the pub, bracing herself for what could be the end of her life.



**L**eah had moved back to the prison in a zombie-like state.

She couldn't believe that any of this was happening. Everything she loved and valued was at risk of being lost forever.

As she walked back through the prison block, the inmates jeered at her and shouted, and a part of Leah almost wished they would break out of their cells and tear her to shreds.

Priya Kapoor was still going over the scene diligently, photographing everything that could pass for a personal belonging. "Where's DC Jones?" she asked, completely unaware of the altercation that had occurred between the two.

"He had to step out," she muttered through a dry throat. She felt like she was living on borrowed time, and sooner or later, whether it was Jonesy or Dano, or Wade or Knightley, someone would show up to take a sledgehammer to her life.

"Well, we haven't been able to find anything noteworthy," Priya commented with mild disappointment. "But I won't deny, I've been looking over the place, and the whole scene feels stage-managed."

"You don't say," the inspector muttered bitterly before catching herself and asking, "How so?"

“Well, Sutton died supposedly taking a treasure trove of secrets with her,” Priya explained, giving the bed another lookover for the final time. “You say that she was able to contact you with a contraband phone? We’ve turned the whole cell upside down trying to find it, and we’ve had no luck whatsoever. So, either Sutton had the foresight to remove the incriminating item beforehand...”

“...or somebody came in here and removed it afterward,” Leah replied, momentarily forgetting about the altercation between her and Jonesy and throwing herself into the case with renewed gusto.

“Now, I don’t think we’re going to lift many fingerprints,” the lead forensic investigator noted sadly. “We’ve probably had half the prison in here at some point.”

Leah nodded at this, feeling that another promising lead could have led somewhere was now another dead end.

“Okay,” she sighed, willing to admit defeat. “Round up all the FIs and we’ll see if the technicians can take this any further.”

She walked out of the cell down the stairs, feeling that somewhere, Knightley was laughing at her. He’d stage-managed the whole thing.

“Excuse me, DI West?” one of the guards asked, attracting her attention. “I’ve got a young woman who wants to speak to you. She says she knew Andrea.”

Leah’s eyes widened at this.

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TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Leah was sitting opposite Jodie Ramsey in one of the spare rooms. The girl was roughly twenty years old, the same age as Suzie, and Leah had been told that she'd been locked up for setting her abusive stepfather's bed on fire.

But looking over the girl, she could see that prison wasn't the place for her. She looked terrified, as though she should be expecting danger from every corner. The words came out as a slight mumble.

"When I got here, I was scared shitless," Jodie explained, looking down at the floor. "I was sure that one of the other girls in here would kill me. But Andrea took me under her wing and taught me about surviving. She was always kind to me, always looking out for me."

Leah silently wondered if Andrea had looked at the girl as a replacement for Suzie.

"I wouldn't have made it this far without Andrea," Jodie continued, managing a small smile beneath the shell shock. "I'm getting out very soon, and I owe it to her that I have that second chance to look forward to."

The inspector nodded along at this, glad that the handler had been able to do at least some good in her life. "Jodie, did you know about Andrea smuggling items into the prison?" she asked, before quickly adding, "You're not going to be in any trouble, and this is not going to impact your release in any way, I promise you."

That seemed to sway Jodie into talking. "She did it for favours. Stuff like chocolates and cigarettes. It was how she got a good reputation here. I saw some of them myself... as well as just before she died."



“Oh?” Leah asked, wondering if she’d been witness to something.

“The morning she died,” Jodie began, looking a little teary at the recollection, “she came to my cell and told me that she needed me to do her a favour. She handed me a bunch of phones in a plastic bag and she told me to keep it safe for her. And she told me that as soon as I was able to, I should give it to the police.”

Leah was surprised by the amount of foresight that Andrea had shown. *She must have known she was going to her death.*

“And then, about an hour later, I found out she was dead, killed in the shower,” the girl continued, now shaking at the memory. “I was the one that found her. I never saw who did it, but I wondered, ‘What is to stop them from coming for me next?’ That was the time I was most scared, waiting for my turn. I didn’t even want to go and speak with the guards in case any of them were in on it. I just had to wait until you guys turned up.”

Leah couldn’t imagine the fear Jodie had gone through, waiting for the killers to make a move against her. “Do you still have the bag?” she asked, betraying her self-interest.

Jodie reached under the table... but then stopped. “If I do this, they will know that I’ve spoken to you. Can you promise me that you can protect me?”

Nowadays, that felt like a hollow promise considering how many people had been dying recently. “I will do my utmost,” she assured the girl.

Finally convinced, Jodie took out a blue carrier bag, spilling the contents onto the table. Inside were four burner

phones. “Andrea used these quite a lot. Hopefully, you can get some mileage out of them.”

“Here’s hoping,” Leah offered gratefully, gathering up the bag and rising from her seat. “We’re going to make sure that you’re looked after. You have my word.”

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LATER THAT DAY, she presented the phones to Royce in the hope that he could make something of them.

“This could take some time,” he noted as he studied the phones, laying them all out on his workstation. “But, we still have the SIM cards in there, so that should give us an edge.”

“You think it’ll lead us to Knightley?” the detective queried, holding out for a miracle.

“It’s too early for me to say,” Royce muttered, wishing he could do more. He was able to start inspecting the phones when he clocked the absence of something. Or someone. “Where’s DC Jones?”

Leah was surprised by the absence of her partner. She thought that he would have at least come by the station. “He’s not been in at all?”

“No, not once,” the technician explained, leaving her wondering where he was and what he was thinking.



**E**ddie Knightley enjoyed a rare bottle of scotch. It was estimated that a single sip of it would be worth a month's worth of wages for the average person. He could have sold the bottle on for a small fortune. But he felt that he should keep it close by in case he ever needed to celebrate. And he was sure that time was upon him.

He'd managed to do what nobody else had even thought to do; he'd broken up the solid partnership of DI West and DC Jones. So many people had assumed that she was the biggest pain in the arse, but the younger constable had proven himself to be quite resilient, and, in some cases, even more willing to follow through on the more volatile actions.

He knew that several people had tried and failed to kill them... but nobody had thought about separating them. An empire toppled by its enemies could rise again. But one that crumbled from within? That would stay dead forever.

So, he'd made the necessary moves to separate them. He didn't know for sure the specifics of West and Dano's relationship. But he knew that given West's fearsome reputation, the only way she would have been able to get out of Bedford intact would be if West slipped up... and she never slipped up.

So he'd ensured that a note was smuggled into Andrea Sutton's cell, indicating that she knew that the detective and the assassin were collaborating. He wasn't sure how long the theory would hold water. But he figured that at the very least, he would be able to do some serious damage to West and Jones' relationship. And it certainly seemed to be the case. They no longer trusted each other, and Jonesy had taken himself off, leaving him incredibly vulnerable for what came next.

He still wanted to see how he could engage Suzie Dano's services. Killing her would have been the simpler option, but she was far too good at what she did. It would be an insult to everyone else if she didn't use that talent to do what she did best.

He definitely had his work cut out. He was sure Suzie wouldn't take too kindly to the murder of her mentor, regardless of the state of their relationship.

Now that everything was going his way, Knightley leaned back in the car and sipped on the whisky, thinking about what he could do once he was properly positioned in Bedford. He'd already had meetings with several local business owners involved in less than shady dealings.

He'd told them that he was bringing them together at the club once owned by Chris Baxter to offer his protection from investigations by the police and any other agency looking to shut them down—in exchange for twenty percent of their monthly earnings. Naturally, many people had scoffed at this suggestion, thinking that Knightley was washed up and grasping at straws. They didn't recognise his authority anymore and were sure that the whole meeting was an elaborate con with Eddie trying to buy himself another month

out of prison... so Knightley had had the offending person killed by one of his underlings, thus raising the tax to twenty-five percent. After that, they all fell in line.

It felt good to be able to exercise that level of control over people. But he knew that even if he managed to get back everything he'd lost over the past two years, there was one thing he'd always be missing and could never retrieve—his son Tom.

He remembered the circumstances that had led to his exile, killing his volatile nephew because he'd seen him as an unworthy successor to his legacy. But his son Tom, an up-and-coming genius, had the eye for leadership but not the stomach for it, and Knightley had hoped that one day, he could bequeath his empire to his son.

But instead, he was living a shadow of his former existence. There were times when he wondered what would have happened if he'd just let his nephew take over the business as originally planned. Could all of this have been avoided?

Knightley felt weary asking himself those questions and drank deeply from the whisky in an attempt to numb the regret.

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LEAH TRIED CALLING Jonesy's number several times, but every single time, it was going to voicemail. She wondered—and hoped—if it might be a case of her calls not getting through. But she knew that he was perfectly aware of her attempts to call him. He just wasn't answering. He didn't want to speak to her.

A few people now had noticed Jonesy's absence from the station throughout the day, and Leah had tried making excuses for him, saying that he was chasing down an important lead. But every time she used that lie, it seemed increasingly farfetched.

Eventually, Superintendent Wade took her to one side and asked gently, "Leah, has something happened between you two?"

"What makes you think that?" she snapped, before realising how guarded she sounded.

"Come on, DI West," Nora exclaimed, looking unimpressed. "I was a detective myself. I know a lover's spat when I see one. Last night, the tension between you two was so sharp you could have cut it with a knife. Something's happened. And it's not my place to get involved. I'm not a couples' counsellor. But I don't want this getting to the point where it's impacting the integrity of this station. This is the heaviest case we've all worked on, and I need to know that all hands are on deck for what we've got moving forward. So your partner decided a funny day to go AWOL."

There was a part of Leah that wanted to confide everything to the Superintendent to unburden herself. But she knew where that would lead. She'd been seen as emotionally compromised, removed from the case, accused of misleading an ongoing criminal enquiry, and served with a red notice signifying the termination of her contract as a police officer. And that was assuming that criminal charges weren't brought against her.

She'd never felt so trapped. And she imagined this was exactly how Knightley wanted her.

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JONESY WASN'T sure how many pints he'd downed since sitting down. He'd stopped counting or caring.

All he could do was think about Leah's unforgivable betrayal.

It felt like she had prioritised the freedom of a criminal—possibly their deadliest opponent—over her love for him.

He wondered if he should consider leaving the police service. He'd given everything he had to CID—his health, his years, his youth, his principles.

He caught his reflection in the pint glass. Nothing much had changed over the last two years. Granted, he carried a lot more stubble than he used to, and the bags under his eyes were more prominent than ever...

...but it still felt like a completely different person was staring back at him.

What had happened to him? Wind the clock back a few years ago, and he probably would have made the same decision that Leah had made, letting Suzie go so she could have a better life. But the idealist in him had been thoroughly crushed.

He still hadn't made up his mind about what he was going to do when he got back to the station. He knew exactly what the consequences were of dobbing Leah in. He'd often floated around most of them. And he was either going to be going down alongside her, or he was going to be helping put her away.

Either way, there was no positive way out of this.

Then there was the issue of Eddie Knightley. After all the misery and the grief that he'd piled on over the years, the man needed to go down. Too much had been lost for them to let him walk away.

He decided then that he would keep quiet, bury the hatchet at least until after the case was over. But afterwards, he had no idea what was going to happen.

He didn't think he could go on living a lie, especially if it was for Leah's sake.

Jonesy set down his glass and decided that enough was enough for him. He wasn't going to go back home tonight. He could not stand the sight of Leah. He didn't know what was more likely to make him throw up, her standing before him or the beers he'd just finished necking.

He walked outside, remembering that he'd walked here and Leah had the car. That was okay. He could do with a walk around the town. It would give him some time to clear his head and work out what it was he wanted from any future with Leah moving forward, assuming they still had a future after all this was done.

Suddenly, he felt spry arms behind him, and a rag was clamped over his mouth. He tried to fight them off, but he'd already gasped, inhaling much of the fumes from the rag. He tried to fight off his attacker, fumbling weakly at the person behind him. But he could feel his grip weakening, his legs starting to buckle, his eyes going heavy, the world slowly being lost to him.

The last thing he heard was, "I think you and I are going to have a lot of fun together."



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SUZIE WATCHED the scene from afar, and a part of her had wanted to rush over and intervene, not that Jonesy would thank her for such an action. And she reasoned that the man wasn't going to kill the detective constable straight away. Instead, he was going to take him somewhere else to have fun.

She watched him bundle Jones into the car and tried to keep up as he drove steadily through Bedford.

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WHEN JONESY AWOKE, he felt a ringing in the side of his head, the pull of gravity heavier than ever.

As the world slowly came back into focus, he looked at his surroundings. He saw that he was currently lying in a makeshift studio with equipment and lights set up around him.

He tried to pull himself into a sitting position, but his limbs weren't functioning properly. Jonesy tried for his arms, but they weren't working. It was as though they'd been welded together. He ran a finger over the bindings. Duct tape. And some of it was wrapped around his ankles. He certainly wasn't getting loose any time soon.

The whole place looked dilapidated, like it hadn't been used. Indeed, much of the equipment had been hastily set up.

Suddenly, a door opened and a man entered the room. Jonesy took one look at the camera in his hand and the manic glee that was spreading over his face and immediately put two and two together.

“The Cameraman, I presume?” he asked with a complete lack of surprise.

“My reputation precedes me,” he exclaimed, grateful for the acknowledgement.

“So, what am I going to be?” the detective constable queried, surprising himself with how calm he sounded despite everything that was happening. “One of your latest masterpieces?”

The Cameraman looked a little deflated at having his intent outlined for him. “They told me that you were good,” he acknowledged in an attempt to cover. “But yes.”

“So how exactly is this supposed to go?” Jonesy asked, all too familiar with the mentality of these serial killers. “You torture me and then jerk off on making me plead for my life?”

It was a small triumph to see the serial murderer put out by the comments.

“You are, aren’t you?” the constable exclaimed, getting the measure of the man. “You’re hoping that I’ll cry. That I’ll beg for my life like all the others did.”

“No,” he protested, even though it was clear this was his intent. “I want you to know that everything you’ve fought for, everything you’ve sacrificed, it’s all going to come tumbling down.”

Secretly, the reason Jonesy had no tears to shed before this man was because he was sure he’d already exhausted them thinking about Leah.

But he wasn’t going to give the man the benefit of seeing him broken. “You ever considered trying for a self-portrait?” he quipped, waiting for the drugs to wear off entirely, not helped by the booze he’d glugged down beforehand.

“There’s no need,” he replied confidently, so sure of his abilities. “I know who I am.”

“You’re just a killer who’s been forced to be somebody’s lap dog,” Jonesy continued, certain that his appearance had something to do with Knightley. And looking at the shock on his face, he knew he wasn’t too far off from the truth. “That’s what it was, wasn’t it? He strong-armed you into being his triggerman, and you hated every single second of it.”

“It has its perks,” the Cameraman muttered, busying himself with the equipment.

“But it goes against your logic, doesn’t it?” the detective replied, having seen Dr Doyle’s profiling enough time to peg the killer’s psyche. “And you need that logic. Because these people are murderers worthy of you. You’re not just a killer. You’re something more. A God. Because you fucking love it. That’s why you killed all those people. And tortured them. Because you get off on it. Stabbing them over and over. That’s the only way you can get hard, isn’t it?”

The Cameraman rushed over to him, gripping Jonesy by the chin and holding a knife just over his mouth. “You won’t have such a mouth on you when I cut out your tongue.”

Suddenly, a gunshot went off.

## EPILOGUE

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**J**onesy was frozen in shock. He hadn't seen a gun on the Cameraman. He looked down at his body to find any entry wounds.

But there wasn't one.

And then the Cameraman toppled over onto the ground, and he could see a bloody stain on the man's shirt between the shoulder blades. "WHAT THE FUCK!?" he exclaimed, looking around for the identity of his shooter.

Jonesy looked towards the now-open doorway and was surprised by the sight before him.

Of all the things he'd imagined happening in his near future, he never imagined he'd be saved by Suzie Dano.

She was standing there, a gun pointing at the Cameraman, who was writhing on the floor and scrambling for the knife which was just out of reach...

...but then Suzie fired off another round, this time hitting the Cameraman in the hand.

She walked over to him, making sure he wasn't a threat. "You won't be using your clicker hand any time soon," she exclaimed, reaching into his duffel bag, pulling out a roll of

duct tape, and wrapping it around the Cameraman's arms and legs.

"You bitch!" he spat at her, at which point she pressed some tape over his mouth.

"Quiet," she commanded, holding up a spare strip. "Or I'll put this over your nose."

But he continued to scream at her through the gag.

Turning her attention to the restrained constable, she picked up the discarded knife and used it to cut his bindings, freeing him. "Can you stand?" she asked, holding out a hand.

Jonesy was still numb from everything that had happened at the last minute and was not yet ready to extend any gratitude towards Suzie for saving his life.

Instead, he pulled himself to his feet and limped out of the room.

He came into the corridor and propped himself against the wall, coming down from the rush of euphoria.

"You want me to take you to a hospital?" Suzie asked, appearing beside him.

"Oh, so I can give you another chance to stick a knife in me?" Jonesy protested belligerently.

Suzie rolled her eyes at the indignant mentality. "I just saved your life, you stupid bastard!" she shouted, waving the gun around. "If I wanted you dead, don't you think I would have done so back in there?"

"You don't fool me," he muttered, not quite believing his words. "I know that you will never change." He looked at her, his anger coming out. "You know, I've lost everything because of you. I could have been a better person if you hadn't come

into my life. You've managed to cripple me, and you've wormed your way into Leah's head, convincing her that you're a good person."

Suzie's face fell. "So... you know about that?" she asked hesitantly.

"Of course, I know!" Jonesy shouted, not caring who heard him, not that he even knew where he was. "We were always going to find out eventually. For some reason, Leah seems to think you're worth saving."

"Leah didn't have to save me," Suzie stated calmly, trying to be reasonable. "She could have set me up and left me to die several times over. Hell, she'd probably get a medal for it. It's not like anyone would have missed me except for Annie. But she figured I deserved a chance and let me go. And that's what I've been trying to do over the last year. I've been trying to put Suzie Dano behind me. I enrolled in university; I made some friends. I have tried to be better."

"So what are you doing back here?" Jonesy asked, lost in his anger and the PTSD she'd only added to since he last saw her.

"They messaged me and told me that they wanted me back here for a job, threatened to reveal everything to my new friends and torpedo my life if I refused," she explained evenly. "Believe me, I wanted to put Bedford in the rearview mirror altogether. And I could have. If it weren't for that bastard Knightley."

"Yes, he's going to a lot of trouble to get hold of you," Jonesy noted bitterly, remembering their visit to the prison. "He killed Andrea Sutton."

Suzie froze at the mention of her former handler. “What?” she asked, sounding like a lost child.

“Andrea called up Leah to warn her that Knightley might try and get to your sister,” the constable told her, studying the former assassin for a reaction. “That’s why Leah was at the care home picking her up and taking her into protective custody.

Suzie gulped heavily. She’d spent a lot of time thinking about her relationship with Andrea and was shaken to know that she’d given her life to keep Suzie and her sister safe.

“I shouldn’t have come back,” Suzie replied, holding a hand over her mouth.

“Too bloody right you shouldn’t have!” Jonesy snapped before looking her up and down and asking, “What the hell happened to you?” It wasn’t just a question brought on by outrage. He genuinely wanted to know what it was that had turned her into the woman she was today.

“I didn’t have the best childhood,” Suzie explained, sounding increasingly vulnerable. “I killed my dad when I was a teenager. He was hurting my mum, and it wouldn’t have been long before he started on my sister. And at the time, I was positive I’d made the right decision. But I haven’t had a single day go by where I don’t wish I’d made a different choice.

“And you’re right, Sam. There is something in me. When someone has hurt me, I’ll pull out all the stops to get even with them, bollocks to the consequences. Andrea picked up on that. At first, I thought I owed everything to her. I didn’t realise back then I’d be handing over my childhood. And my soul.”

She slumped against the wall alongside him. “I know what I am. And I know that I don’t deserve a second chance. If I

could go back in time and speak to my younger self, I'd tell her that she doesn't have to be this way. That killing Dad would be the stepping-off point. When I was a kid, I wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to save lives." She managed a mirthless chuckle. "The irony is not lost on me. But I can't change anything. All I can do is just try to be better moving forward."

Suzie pointed a thumb to the room where the Cameraman could still be heard struggling inside. "There was a time when I would have happily blown that bastard's head off and felt nothing for it. But I don't want to kill anymore. I don't want a body count going against my name."

Jonesy was silent as he listened to her speaking. He'd spent so long demonising the woman in his mind, seeing her as this devil incarnate. But instead, Leah was right. She was a scared child who'd lost her way.

"I know you've got every reason to hate me, and I don't blame you. So..." She took his hand and placed the handgun she'd used to disarm the Cameraman. Afterwards, she sat directly in front of him. "So, if you want your pound of flesh, you're welcome to fire."

"Is this a joke?" Jonesy asked, holding the gun in his hands and trying to find the energy to bring it up to her face.

"No joke, no lies," she insisted, holding up her hands as if in surrender. "I want to make it clear to you that I'm not looking to cause any more trouble for you or Leah. So if you want to kill me, then do it."

Jonesy had rehearsed this moment in his mind so many times. He'd always thought about the moment when Suzie would finally die and he would be the one to deal the killing blow. But he always thought it was a fantasy that he would never get to fulfil.



And now the opportunity was here, being handed on a silver platter. And there was no sign of a bluff from her. She was ready to die if it meant carrying out his vendetta.

But Jonesy's grip faltered around the gun. And he realised that if he did this, it didn't feel like a police officer exacting justice. This would be a murderer gunning down an unarmed woman.

Once again, Jonesy was confronted with the reality of how much he'd changed. He was getting a good look at himself and he didn't like what he saw.

Finally, he lowered the gun. "I've done my fair share of cold-blooded murder," he explained, reflecting on his brutal killing of Jacob Sutcliffe, the Self Killer. "And I have no intention of adding to that number. But where do we go moving forward?"

Suzie sighed as she considered this, unwilling to think about her future until she had some assurances she had one to look forward to. "First and foremost, we need to get Eddie Knightley out of the picture. The man's many things, persistent being one of them. We need to put him out of commission for good in a way he can't come back."

"We?" Jonesy asked, surprised by the pronoun.

"I've got just as much to lose from Knightley being loose as you do," she reasoned pragmatically. "Whatever happens to me moving forward, I want to be able to take some comfort in knowing that my sister is safe."

"And the Cameraman?" he asked, knowing they needed to do something with his kidnapper and attempted killer.

"If he's been working with Knightley, he's going to have a lot of inside knowledge on hand," the former assassin

reasoned. “That’s why I didn’t kill him. Because I thought you might be able to make use of him.”

Jonesy wasn’t sure if he could trust Suzie. He couldn’t just go from despising the woman and wishing every ill feeling he could think of to treat her like a fire-forged friend.

“Okay,” he muttered, getting to his feet and brushing himself off. “But I don’t trust you.”

“I’d be surprised if you did,” Suzie admitted with a shrug of her shoulders.

The two were about to enter the room when Suzie placed a hand on his shoulder, causing him to flinch. “Just a little word of advice. Whatever happens between you and Leah, don’t break up because of me,” she pleaded, remembering how much she truly owed the detective. “I get that it’ll take some time to get around her decision. But she didn’t do it because she’s corrupt. It doesn’t take much to take life, but she gave me mine back. Most coppers would have pumped me full of bullets and then paraded my corpse through the streets. I bet Leah could have milked my death for all it was worth. But instead, she let me go. Because she’s one of the good ones. That woman is many things. But she’s about as far away from corrupt as you can get.”

Jonesy turned her words over and over in his head. While he had been beyond angry with Leah, Suzie’s words reminded her of the good woman and partner that she’d always been. He didn’t know if he was at the point where he could forgive Leah for the hurt and the mistrust...

...but he was willing to try.

---

LEAH ARRIVED HOME EARLY, convinced that there would be no more breakthroughs for the remainder of the day.

She expected Jonesy was stay with a friend until things cooled down. She probably wouldn't be seeing him for a while.

As she pulled up, she noticed a van parked outside the house and wondered who the owner was.

No sooner had she got out of the car, than the door opened and Jonesy emerged... accompanied by Suzie Dano.

“I think we need to talk.”

THE END

**TO BE CONTINUED IN BOOK 20–**

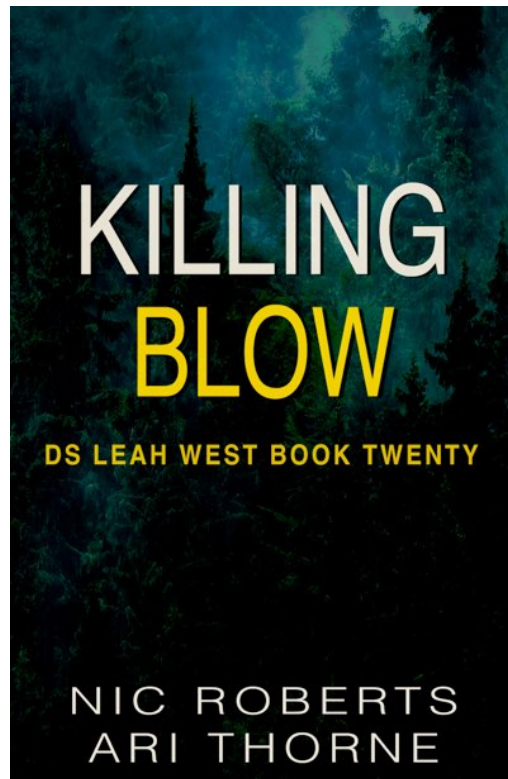
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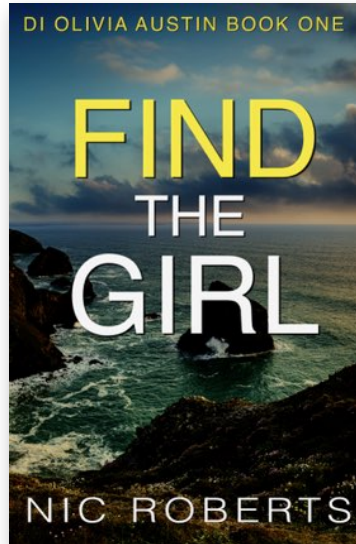
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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I've always had a passion for writing stories and loved being able to create a world and have my characters live inside it. Being able to do this has been a dream come true and I'm so grateful that you could join me on this journey .

I live in the United Kingdom with my Husband and four young children who keep me busy and who I wouldn't ever be without.

I hope you enjoy reading my books and please feel free to join me on social media where I love to interact with my readers!

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