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All the Colours of Darkness

Written by Peter Robinson

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**PETER
ROBINSON**

**All the Colours
of Darkness**



HODDER

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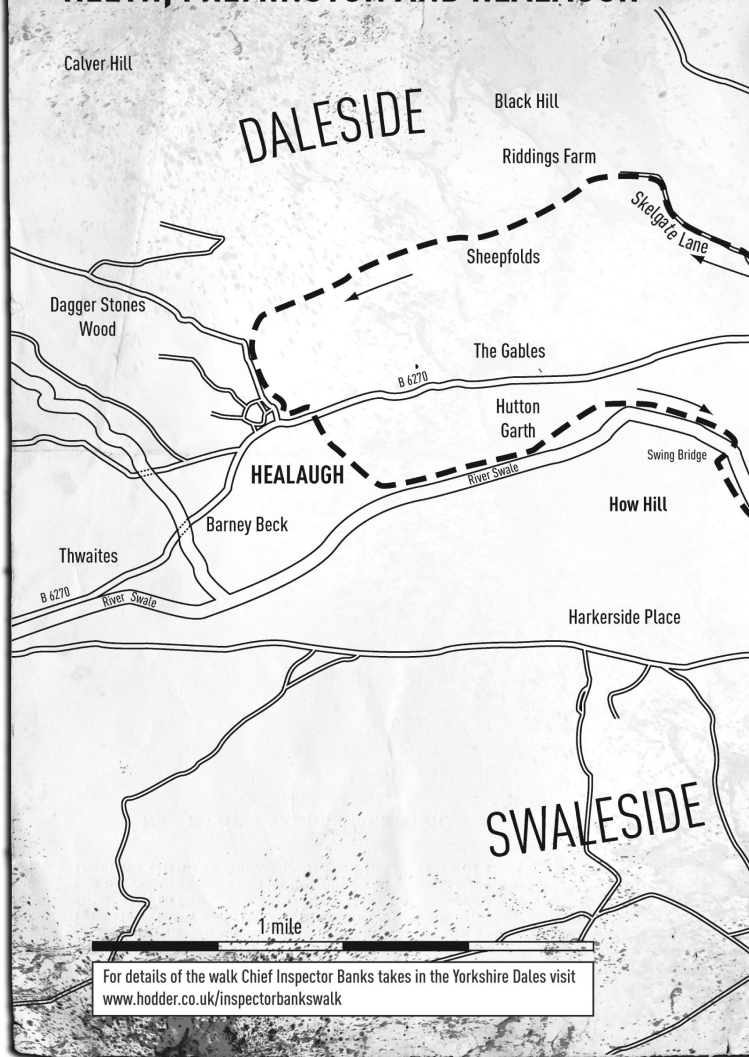
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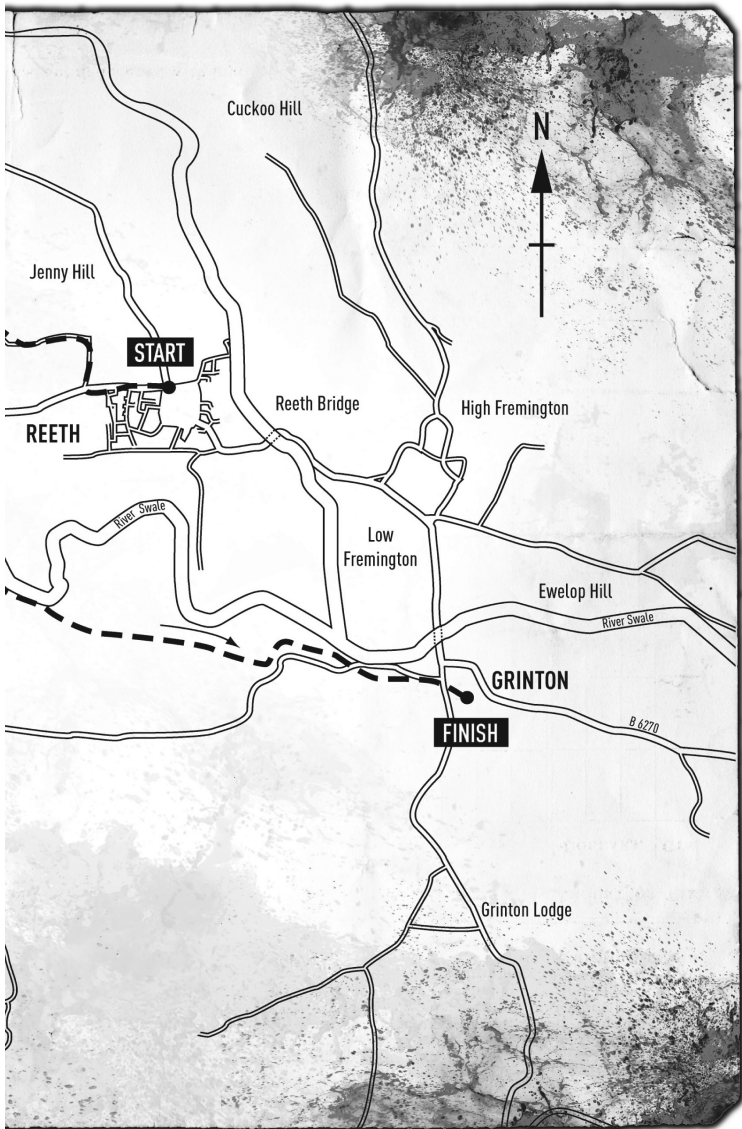
To Dad and Averil,

‘Although the world is full of suffering, it
is also full of the overcoming of it.’

—Helen Keller

REETH, FREMINGTON AND HEALAUGH





Cuckoo Hill

N

Jenny Hill

START

Reeth Bridge

High Fremington

REETH

Low Fremington

Ewelop Hill

River Swale

River Swale

GRINTON

FINISH

B 6270

Grinton Lodge

'For when my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In complement extern, 'tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at; I am not what I am.'

—William Shakespeare, *Othello*.

'The poison is working!'

—Puccini, *Tosca*.

I

Detective Inspector Annie Cabbot thought it was a great shame that she had to spend one of the most beautiful days of the year so far at a crime scene, especially a hanging. She hated hangings. And on a Friday afternoon, too.

Annie had been dispatched, along with Detective Sergeant Winsome Jackman, to Hindswell Woods, just south of Eastvale Castle, where some schoolboys spending the last day of their half-term holiday splashing in the River Swain had phoned to say they thought they had seen a body.

The river ran swift, broad and shallow here, the colour of freshly pumped beer, frothing around the mossy stones. Along the riverside footpath, the trees were mostly ash, alder and wych-elm, their leaves a pale, almost translucent green, trembling in the faint breeze. The scent of wild garlic filled the air, clusters of midges hovered over the water, and on the other side the meadows were full of buttercups, pignut and cranesbill. Tewits twittered and flitted back and forth, nervous about people encroaching on their ground nests. A few fluffy clouds drifted across the sky.

Four schoolboys, all aged about ten or eleven, sat

hunched on the boulders by the water, draped in towels or damp T-shirts, strips of pale skin, white as tripe, exposed here and there, all the spirit crushed out of their joyous play. They'd told the police that one of them had chased another off the path into the woods above the river, and they had stumbled upon a body hanging from one of the few oaks that still grew there. They had mobiles, so one of them dialled 999 and they waited by the riverside. When the police patrol officers and the ambulance crew arrived and took a look at the body, they agreed there was nothing they could do, so they stayed well back and radioed for the heavy brigade. Now it was Annie's job to assess the situation and decide on what action should be taken.

Annie left Winsome to take statements from the kids and followed the patrol officer up the slope into the woods. Through the trees to her left, she could see the ruins of Eastvale Castle high on its hill. Before long, just over the rise, she caught a glimpse of a figure hanging from a length of yellow clothesline on a low bough ahead of her, its feet about eighteen inches off the ground. It made a striking contrast to the light green of the woods because it – Annie couldn't tell yet whether the shape was a man or a woman – was dressed in an orange shirt and black trousers.

The tree was an old oak with a gnarled, thick trunk and knotty branches, and it stood alone in a small copse. Annie had noticed it before on her walks through the woods, where there were so few oaks that it stood out. She had even made a sketch or two of

the scene but had never translated them into a fully fledged painting.

The uniformed officers had taped off the area around the tree, into which entry would be severely restricted. ‘You checked for any signs of life, I assume?’ Annie asked the young constable making his way through the undergrowth beside her.

‘The paramedic did, ma’am,’ he answered. ‘As best he could without disturbing the scene.’ He paused. ‘But you don’t have to get that close to see that he’s dead.’

A man, then. Annie ducked under the police tape and inched forward. Twigs snapped under her feet and last autumn’s leaves crackled. She didn’t want to get so close that she might destroy or contaminate any important trace evidence, but she needed a clearer idea of what she was dealing with. As she stopped about ten feet away, she could hear a golden plover whistling somewhere near by. Further up, towards the moorland, a curlew piped its mournful call. Closer by, Annie was aware of the officer panting behind her after their trot up the hill, and of the lightest of breezes soughing through leaves too fresh and moist to rustle.

Then there was the absolute stillness of the body.

Annie could see for herself that he was a man now. His head was closely shaved, and what hair remained had been dyed blond. He wasn’t twisting at the end of the rope, the way corpses do in movies, but hanging heavy and silent as a rock from the taut yellow clothesline, which had almost buried itself in the livid skin of his neck, now an inch or two longer than it

had originally been. His lips and ears were tinged blue with cyanosis. Burst capillaries dotted his bulging eyes, making them appear red from where Annie was standing. She guessed his age at somewhere between forty and forty-five, but it was only a rough estimate. His fingernails were bitten or cut short, and she saw the cyanosis there, too. He also seemed to have a lot of blood on him for a hanging victim.

Most hangings were suicides, Annie knew, not murders, for the obvious reason that it was very difficult to hang a man while he was still alive and kicking. Unless it was the work of a lynch mob, of course, or he had been drugged first.

If it was a suicide, why had the victim chosen this particular place to end his life? Annie wondered. This tree? Did it have strong personal associations for him or had it simply been convenient? Had he ever realised that children might find him, and what effect seeing his body might have on them? Probably not, she guessed. When you're that close to ending it all, you don't think much about others. Suicide is the ultimate act of selfishness.

Annie knew she needed the Scenes of Crime Officers here as soon as possible. It was a suspicious death, and she would be far better off pulling out all the stops than jumping to the conclusion that nothing much need be done. She took out her mobile and rang Stefan Nowak, the Crime Scene Manager, who told her to wait and said he'd organise his team. Next, she left a message for Detective Superintendent Catherine Gervaise, who was in a meeting at County

HQ in Northallerton. It was too early to determine the level of investigation yet, but the super needed to know what was happening.

Then there was Banks – Detective Chief Inspector Alan Banks, her immediate boss – who would normally be Senior Investigating Officer on something as serious as this. Should she call him? He had taken off early for the weekend, driving down to London that morning to stay with his girlfriend. Annie couldn't complain. Banks had plenty of time off due to him, and she herself had recently got back from a two-week stay with her father in St Ives, mostly sketching and lounging around on the beach, convalescing and recharging after a traumatic period in her life.

In the end she decided that Banks could wait. It was time to get back to the river and see what Winsome had found out from the kids. Poor buggers, Annie thought as she tottered down the slope behind the patrol officer, arms out to keep her balance. On the other hand, kids were resilient, and when they got back to school on Monday morning, they'd have one hell of a story to tell their mates. She wondered whether English teachers still handed out 'what I did on my holidays' assignments. If they did, they'd be in for a big surprise.

After the schoolchildren had been sent home to their parents and the uniformed officers had been sent to the car park across the river to see whether the victim had left his car there, Annie leaned against a tree in companionable silence with Winsome and watched

the SOCOs, along with police surgeon Dr Burns and crime scene photographer Peter Darby, work the scene in their disposable white oversuits. When they had finished photographing and examining the body *in situ*, they cut it down, careful to preserve the knot, and laid it on a stretcher the coroner's officer supplied.

There was something unnatural about all that morbid activity on such a beautiful day, Annie thought, as if it were merely some sort of exercise or practice run. But a man was dead; that much she knew. Counting her blessings, she realised that they had managed to get this far without reporters or TV cameras showing up.

The kids hadn't known much. About the only piece of interesting information Winsome had gleaned from them was that when they had first approached the shallows along the riverside path from Eastvale at about one o'clock, just after lunch, one of them had chased another up the slope and there had been no sign of the hanging man. It was 3.17 when the 999 call had been logged, which gave a window of just over two hours. With any luck, the SOCOs and Dr Glendenning, the Home Office pathologist, would establish cause of death pretty quickly, and she wouldn't have to watch her weekend go down the tubes as she had so many times in the past.

Not that she had any grandiose plans, only house-cleaning, washing, lunch with an old colleague from Harkside station on Saturday. But over the last couple of months, Annie had started taking more control of her life, and she valued her hours alone. She had cut

down on her drinking and started exercising more, even going so far as to join the Eastvale fitness centre. She also spent more time on yoga and meditation at home, and she was feeling so much the better for it all.

DI Stefan Nowak slipped off his face mask and goggles, ducked under the tape and walked towards Annie and Winsome over the stepping plates that now marked the common approach path to and from the scene. His pace was unhurried, but then it always was. Annie was glad that he had finally got his promotion to detective inspector and had been appointed Crime Scene Manager. Sometimes the invasion of police work by business terminology made her cynical – it seemed to be all managers, executives and vision statements these days – but she had to admit that a crime scene was a bit like a business in some ways, and it did have to be carefully managed.

Winsome whistled ‘Who Are You?’

Nowak rolled his eyes and ignored her. ‘You’re in luck,’ he said.

‘Suicide?’

‘The post-mortem should verify our findings, but from what Dr Burns and I saw, the only wound on his throat was that caused by the rope, and it was in exactly the place you’d expect it to be. Of course, there’s no saying he wasn’t poisoned first, and we’ll certainly ask for a full toxicology report, but there are no visible signs of serious physical trauma to the body other than those that can be related to the hanging. I take it Dr Glendenning is back on the job?’

‘Yes,’ said Annie. ‘He’s back. What about all the blood, if that’s what it was?’

‘It was. We’ve taken samples, of course. The only thing is . . .’ Nowak frowned.

‘Yes?’

‘It *could* have come from the superficial scratches he got when he climbed the tree – we do have plenty of indication from the ground and the bark that he did that alone, by the way, without the help of a lynch mob – but there’s rather a lot more blood than I would expect from a few scratches. We can get typing done pretty quickly, even this weekend, but, as you know, DNA and tox screens take quite a bit longer.’

‘Soon as you can,’ Annie said. ‘The rope?’

‘Cheap nylon washing line, the kind you can buy almost anywhere.’

‘And the knot?’

‘Perfectly consistent with the kind of knot a potential suicide might tie. Hardly a hangman’s knot. You wouldn’t even have to be a boy scout. It was on the left side, by the way, which indicates a left-handed person, and given that he was wearing his wristwatch on his right hand . . . I’d say all the indications we have here point to a suicide by hanging.’

‘Any idea who he was, a name, address?’

‘No,’ said Nowak. ‘He didn’t have a wallet with him.’

‘Keys?’

‘No. It’s my guess that he drove out here and left them in his car, maybe in his jacket. He wouldn’t have had any further use for them, would he?’

‘I suppose not,’ said Annie. ‘We’ll have to find out who his next of kin is. Any signs of a suicide note?’

‘Not on or near him, no. Again, it’s possible he left something in the car.’

‘We’ll check when we find it. I’d also like to know what his movements were this afternoon. As far as we know, he killed himself some time between one and three. Suicide or not, there are a few gaps we have to try to fill in before we go home. Most of all, we need to know who he was.’

‘That’s easy,’ said one of SOCOs, a civilian soil expert by the name of Tim Mallory.

Annie hadn’t noticed him come up behind them. ‘It is?’ she asked.

‘Sure. I don’t know his second name, but everyone called him Mark.’

‘Everyone?’

‘At the Eastvale Theatre. That’s where he worked. You know, the restored Georgian theatre on Market Street.’

‘I know where you mean,’ said Annie. For years the local amateur dramatic and operatic societies had put on their Terence Rattigans or Gilbert and Sullivans at the Community Centre and in various church halls around the Dale, but the Town Council, aided by an Arts Council lottery grant and private funding from local businesses, had recently restored an old Georgian theatre, which had been used as a carpet warehouse and then left in a state of disrepair for years. For the past year and a half, it had been the centre for all thespian endeavours in town, along with the occasional

folk or chamber music concert. 'Are you sure it's him?' she asked.

'Certain,' said Mallory.

'What did he do there?'

'He had something to do with props and scenery, that sort of thing. Backstage stuff. The wife's a member of the amateur operatic society,' Mallory added. 'That's how I know.'

'Know anything else about him?'

'Nah, not really.' Mallory flapped his wrist. 'Except that he's a bit flamboyant, you might say.'

'He's gay?'

'He didn't hide it. It's pretty common knowledge around the place.'

'Know where he lived?'

'No, but one of the theatre crowd would.'

'Any family?'

'No idea.'

'I don't suppose you know what kind of car he drives, do you?'

'Sorry.'

'OK. Thanks.' What Mallory and Nowak had told her should certainly make her job a lot easier. Now she was beginning to believe that she and Winsome might get home before dark. She nudged Winsome. 'Come on, let's get over to the theatre,' she said. 'There's nothing more we can do here.'

Just then a young PC came trotting up the path, out of breath. 'Excuse me, ma'am, but we think we've found the car. Want to see it now?'

The car was a dark green Toyota, an even earlier model than Annie's old purple Astra, and it had definitely seen better days. It stood in the tarmacked parking area beside the caravan site, between the river and the main Swainsdale road. There were only three other cars in the car park, which was how the officers had found it so quickly. They couldn't be certain it belonged to the victim yet, of course, but as soon as Annie saw the jack-in-a-box with its paint peeling off and the elephant's-foot umbrella stand on the back seat, she immediately thought of theatrical props.

And the driver's door was unlocked, the key in the ignition, which was what had drawn the attention of the uniformed officers. The inside was a mess, but it was only the kind of a mess a person makes in his or her own car, to which Annie could well attest. Maps, petrol receipts, sweet wrappers and CD cases littered the passenger seat. The CDs were mostly opera, Annie noticed, something Banks would have appreciated. In the back, along with the props, were a broken windscreen wiper, an unopened bag of pork scratchings and a roll of cling film. There was also a black zip-up windcheater.

Annie found the victim's wallet in a side pocket of the windcheater, along with a set of keys. He had forty-five pounds in notes, credit and debit cards in the name of Mark G. Hardcastle, a couple of business cards of local cabinetmakers and theatrical suppliers, a driving licence complete with photograph and an address not far from the centre of town, along with a date of birth that put his age at forty-six. As far as

Annie could see, there was no suicide note. She rifled through the wallet again, then went through the pile of stuff on the passenger seat and on the floor, under the seats. Nothing. Next she checked the boot and found only a large cardboard box full of old magazines and newspapers for recycling, a flat spare tyre and a few plastic containers full of antifreeze and window-washing fluid.

Annie took a deep breath of fresh air.

‘Anything?’ Winsome asked.

‘Do you think he just happened to be carrying a length of clothesline with him?’

‘Unlikely,’ Winsome answered. She jerked her head towards the car. ‘But just look at some of the other stuff he had in there. Who knows? Maybe it was a theatrical prop.’

‘True enough. Anyway, I was thinking there might be a receipt. Obviously if he was planning to hang himself, and he *didn’t* have any rope conveniently stashed in his car, he’d have had to buy some, wouldn’t he? We’ll get Harry Potter to check the local shops. It shouldn’t be too difficult to trace.’ Annie showed Winsome a handful of receipts from Hardcastle’s wallet. ‘Three of these are from London – Waterstone’s, HMV and a Zizzi’s restaurant. All dated this past Wednesday. There’s also a petrol receipt from an MI service station at Watford Gap dated Thursday morning.’

‘Any signs of a mobile phone?’ Winsome asked.

‘None.’

‘What next, then?’

Annie glanced back at the car, then over the river at the woods. 'I think we'd better make a few enquiries around the theatre, if there's anyone there at this time of day,' she said. 'But now that we've got his address, we should call at his home first. God forbid there's someone there waiting for him.'

Branwell Court branches off Market Street just a hundred yards or so south of the square. A broad, cobbled street lined with plane trees on both sides, its main features of interest are a pub called the Cock and Bull and the Roman Catholic church. The houses, among the oldest in Eastvale, are all weathered limestone with flagstone roofs, cheek to jowl but varying greatly in width and height, often with ginnels running between them. Many have been renovated and divided into flats.

Number twenty-six had a purple door with the name MARK G. HARDCASTLE engraved in a brass plate beside the doorbell to the upper floor. Just in case there was somebody home, Annie rang. She could hear the sound echo inside the building, but nothing else. Nobody came down the stairs.

Annie tried the keys she had taken from the pocket of Mark Hardcastle's wind cheater. The third one fitted, allowing them into a whitewashed hall leading to a flight of uneven wooden stairs. A raincoat hung on one of the hooks behind the door. A few letters lay scattered on the floor. Annie picked them up to examine later, then climbed the narrow, creaking staircase, Winsome behind her.

The flat, once the upper floor of a small cottage, was tiny. There was hardly space in the living room for the television set and sofa, and the dining area was a narrow passage with a table and four chairs, between the living room and the kitchen, which was nothing more than a few feet of linoleum-covered floor surrounded by countertop, tall storage cupboard, oven and fridge. The toilet was beyond the kitchen, a sort of capsule attached to the side of the building at the back. A ladder led up from the dining area to the converted loft with a double bed at the centre of the claustrophobic inverted V of timber beams. Annie climbed up. There was barely room for a bedside table and a chest of drawers. Very quaint, she thought, but almost uninhabitable. It made her little cottage in Harkside feel like Harewood House.

‘Strange place to live, isn’t it?’ said Winsome, catching up with her in the attic, standing with her head and shoulders bowed, not out of reverence, but because she was over six feet tall and there was no way she could stand upright there.

‘Definitely bijou.’

‘At least there’s no one waiting for him at home.’

‘I doubt there’d be room,’ said Annie.

The bed had been slept in, its flower-patterned duvet askew, pillows used, but it was impossible to tell whether one or two people had lain there. Winsome checked the dresser drawers and found only socks, underwear and a few folded T-shirts. A well-thumbed Penguin Plays volume of Tennessee Williams sat on the bedside table next to the reading lamp.

Downstairs again, they checked the kitchen cabinets, which held a few pots and pans and tins of mushroom soup, salmon and tuna, along with various condiments. The fridge was home to several wilting lettuce leaves, an almost empty tub of Flora, some wafer-sliced ham with a sell-by date of 21 May, and a half-full carton of semi-skimmed milk. There were two butter-and-garlic Chicken Kievs and a stone-baked margherita pizza in the freezer. The tiny sideboard in the dining area held knives, forks and spoons and a set of plain white plates and bowls. Three bottles of bargain-price wine and a selection of cookbooks sat on top of it. Half a loaf of stale Hovis almost filled the bread-box.

In the living room, there were no family photographs on the mantelpiece, and there certainly wasn't a convenient suicide note propped up against the brass clock. In the bookcase next to the television were a few popular paperbacks, a French-English dictionary, several historical books on costumes and a cheap complete works of Shakespeare. The few DVDs Mark Hardcastle owned centred on TV comedy and drama – *The Catherine Tate Show*, *That Mitchell and Webb Look*, *Doctor Who* and *Life on Mars*. There were also a few 'Carry On' movies and some old John Wayne westerns. The CDs were mostly operas and show tunes: *South Pacific*, *Chicago*, *Oklahoma*. A search behind the cushions of the sofa yielded a twenty-pence piece and a white button. Hanging over the fireplace was an old poster for a Stoke-on-Trent repertory production of *Look Back*

in Anger with Mark Hardcastle's name listed in the stage credits.

Annie scanned the letters she had left on the coffee table. The oldest was postmarked the previous week, and they were either utility bills or special offers. Still, Annie thought, that was hardly surprising. Since email, letter-writing had become a dying art. People just didn't write to one another any more. She remembered a pen pal she had once had in Australia when she was very young, how exciting it had been receiving airmail letters with the SYDNEY postmark and the exotic stamps and reading all about Bondi Beach and The Rock. She wondered whether people had pen pals these days. She wondered what hers was doing now.

'What do you think?' Winsome asked.

'There's nothing really *personal* here, have you noticed?' Annie said. 'No address book, no diary. Not even a computer or a telephone. It's as if he only lived here part time, or he only lived part of his life here.'

'Maybe he did,' Winsome offered.

'Then let's see if we can find out where he lived the rest of it,' said Annie. 'Fancy going to the theatre?'

The Eastvale Theatre was a masterpiece of restoration, Annie thought, and it managed to pack a great deal into two storeys hardly more than forty feet wide. Clearly its original patrons hadn't cared much about wine bars and cafés, so they had been added on to the side of the original building in the same stone

and design. Only the large, long plate-glass windows on the addition bowed in the direction of a more modern style. Beside the entrance were posters for the major production now running, the Eastvale Amateur Dramatic Society's version of *Othello*.

The foyer was far livelier than she would have imagined at that time of day, mostly because a children's matinee of *Calamity Jane* put on by the Amateur Operatic Society had just finished. Annie and Winsome went first to the box office, where an overly made-up woman sat talking on her mobile phone.

They showed their warrant cards. 'Excuse me,' Annie said. 'Is the manager here?'

The woman held the phone against her ample bosom and said, 'Manager? Do you mean the stage manager, dearie?'

'I mean the person in charge,' said Annie.

A gang of children dashed by singing 'The Deadwood Stage' and pretending to shoot at one another. They almost knocked Annie over. One of them apologised as he backed away, but the rest just ran on as if they hadn't even noticed her. One of them whistled at Winsome.

The woman in the box office smiled. 'Kids,' she said. 'You should see the job our cleaning staff have to do after these shows. Chewing gum, sticky sweet wrappers, spilled Coke. You name it.'

It sounded like the local fleapit Annie used to go to with her boyfriend in St Ives. 'The manager?' Annie said.

The woman excused herself, spoke into her mobile for a few moments, then ended her call. ‘There isn’t one, really,’ she said. ‘I mean, I suppose there’s the stage manager, or the director, but he’s not really—’

‘How about someone who works with the props, sets?’

‘Ah, that’ll be Vernon Ross. He’s in charge of all the technical stuff.’ The woman squinted at Annie. ‘What’s this about?’

‘Please?’ said Annie. ‘We’re in a hurry.’

‘And the rest of us aren’t? I’ve been here since—’

‘If you’d just point us in the right direction, you can go home,’ said Winsome, smiling.

‘Yes, well . . .’ The woman frowned at Winsome and nodded towards the theatre entrance. ‘If you walk through those doors down the aisle to the stage, you should find Vernon. If he’s not there, go through one of the doors beside it. They’ll be clearing up, getting ready for tonight.’

‘OK. Thanks,’ said Annie.

They headed through the double doors. Both stalls and circle were fitted with the restored wooden benches, cramped like pews. There were also a few boxes close to the stage for dignitaries. It might have been better if the renovators had modernised the interior, Annie thought, though she understood why they wanted to keep the authentic Georgian experience. But the seats were hard and uncomfortable. She had watched a performance of *The Mikado* there once, her only visit, shortly after the

grand opening. The mayor had looked miserable in his box most of the evening, constantly shifting in his seat, his wife glowering beside him, and Annie's bum and back had ached for a week. She knew that Banks had taken Sophia to see concerts by Kathryn Tickell, Kate Rusby and Eliza Carthy there, even though Annie gathered she didn't really like folk music, but he hadn't complained. No doubt *his* bum had been floating a foot above the hard surface on a cushion of bliss.

Love.

The house lights were on, and a group of people in jeans and old T-shirts were carrying around pieces of furniture and shifting backdrops. A young woman glanced over as Annie and Winsome approached.

'The performance is over,' she said. 'Sorry. We're closed.'

'I know,' said Annie. 'I'd like to talk to Vernon Ross.'

A man came down from the stage and walked towards her. Older than the rest, he had curly grey hair and a red complexion, as if the exertion had got to him. He was wearing khaki overalls and a checked work shirt with the sleeves rolled up. There were cuts on his hairy forearms. 'I'm Vernon Ross,' he said, extending his hand to both of them in turn. 'How can I help you?'

The young woman returned to her duties, glancing back occasionally. Annie could tell that her ears were well attuned to what was going on. She shook Vernon Ross's hand. 'DI Annie Cabbot and DS Winsome Jackman, Western Area Major Crimes.'

Ross frowned. 'Well, that's quite a mouthful,' he said. 'But as far as I'm aware we haven't had any major crimes around here.'

'No,' said Annie with a smile. 'At least, we hope not.'

'What's it about, then?'

'Were you a friend of Mark Hardcastle's?'

'Was I? We all are. Yes. Why?' His forehead creased into a frown. 'What is it? Has something happened to Mark? Has there been an accident?'

Annie became aware that work had ceased on and around the stage. People put down the chairs, plates, tables or whatever they were carrying, sat on the edge and looked towards her and Ross. Winsome had her notebook out. 'Do you happen to know if he has any next of kin?' Annie asked.

'My God,' said Ross, 'so this is serious?'

'Sir?'

'No. No,' said Ross. 'His parents are dead. He did once mention an aunt in Australia, but I don't think they were at all close. Why? What—'

Annie turned to face everyone. 'I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad tidings,' she said, 'but it very much seems as if Mark Hardcastle has been found dead in Hindswell Woods.' She turned back to Vernon Ross. 'Perhaps you can help us identify the body, sir, after I've asked you all a few questions?'

As Annie had expected, a deep hush followed the collective intake of breath at her announcement. Vernon Ross turned pale. 'Mark? But how? *Why?*'

'We don't have the answers yet,' said Annie. 'That's

partly why I'm here. Did any of you see Mr Hardcastle today?'

'No. He didn't come in,' said Ross. 'I . . . I'm sorry, but I can't quite manage to take this in right now.'

'That's understandable, sir,' Annie said. 'Would you like to sit down?'

'No, no. I'll be all right.' He rubbed the backs of his hands across his eyes and leaned against the edge of the stage. 'Please, carry on with your questions. Let's get this over with.'

'Very well. Excuse me if I sound as if I don't know what I'm talking about, because so far we've got practically nothing to go on. Was Mr Hardcastle expected in to work today?'

'Well, he said he was going to try and come by. He was going down to London for a couple of days with Derek Wyman, the am dram director.'

'Is Mr Wyman here today?'

'No. He's still in London. He's due back tomorrow.'

'You don't need him for tonight's performance, or this afternoon's?'

'No. *Calamity Jane* is being put on by the Amateur Operatic Society. They have their own director and cast. Quite separate.' He gestured to his co-workers. 'Mark and us are the only ones actually employed by the theatre – along with the box-office staff, of course. We're the only constants, you might say. And everything's in place for tonight. We can manage without Derek for a couple of nights.'

'So Derek Wyman isn't employed by the theatre, but Mr Hardcastle was?'

‘That’s right. Derek teaches drama at Eastvale Comprehensive. Amateur dramatics is only his hobby. Mark trained professionally in theatrical costume and set design.’

‘Do the actors all have other jobs, like Mr Wyman?’

‘Yes. It’s an *amateur* company.’

‘I’ll need to talk to Mr Wyman when he gets back.’

‘Of course. Sally in the box office should be able to give you his address.’

‘When did Mark Hardcastle go to London?’

‘Wednesday.’

‘Was he supposed to be back here this morning?’

‘He said he was driving back up Thursday afternoon.’

‘Weren’t you concerned when he didn’t show up for work today?’

‘Not really. As I said, Mark’s our set and costume designer. His job is mostly done by opening night. We’re the ones who do the donkey work. He doesn’t carry lamps and bookcases around the stage – though in all fairness he helps out with the heavy stuff when we need him. Mostly he creates the vision of the production, the blueprint of how every scene and costume should appear. Along with the director, of course.’

‘In this case Derek Wyman?’

‘Yes. For some reason, they settled on German Expressionist sets for *Othello*, so it’s all big, unusual cut-out shapes, light and dark, angles and shadows. Very *Nosferatu*. That’s why they went to London, why Derek’s still there, actually. There’s a celebration of

German Expressionist cinema at the National Film Theatre.'

'Do you know if Mark Hardcastle had a mobile phone?'

'No. He hated them. Used to go spare every time one went off during a performance. And that was more often than it should be, despite the warnings. What's happened to Mark? I still can't make any sense of this. You say he's been found dead. Has there been an accident? Did someone kill him?'

The others all sat on the edge of the stage listening closely. 'What makes you think that?' Winsome asked.

Ross looked at her. 'Well, *you're* here, aren't you? Major Crimes.'

'We don't know what we're dealing with yet, Mr Ross,' Winsome said. 'In all cases of suspicious death there are certain protocols to follow, certain procedures.'

'So he didn't just drop dead of a heart attack, then?'

'Did he have a bad heart?'

'It was just a figure of speech.'

'No, he didn't drop dead of a heart attack. Was he ill?'

'His health was fine,' said Ross. 'As far as we knew. I mean, he was always healthy enough, lively, full of energy and vitality. Mark loved life.'

'Did he take drugs?' Annie asked.

'Not that I was aware of.'

'Anyone?' Annie glanced around the room. They all shook their heads. She counted six people on the

stage; that made seven including Ross. 'I'll need to talk to you all individually at some point,' she said. 'For the moment, though, can any of you tell me anything at all about Mr Hardcastle's recent state of mind?'

'Did he commit suicide?' asked the young woman who had been paying close attention from the start. She had a pleasant, heart-shaped face, free of make-up, and her light brown hair was tied back in a ponytail. Like the rest, she wore jeans and a T-shirt.

'And you are?' Annie asked.

'Maria. Maria Wolsey.'

'Well, Maria, why do you ask?'

'I don't know. Just the way the two of you are talking. If it wasn't an accident or a heart attack, and he wasn't killed . . .'

'Suicide is one possibility,' Annie said. 'Was he depressed or upset about anything?'

'He'd been a bit edgy lately,' Maria said. 'That's all.'

'Edgy? In what way? Why?'

'I don't know why. Just . . . maybe, like there was something worrying him.'

'I understand that Mr Hardcastle was gay,' Annie said.

'Mark was quite open about his sexuality,' said Vernon Ross. 'Open without being . . . well, without overdoing it, if you understand what I mean.'

'This trip to London with Derek Wyman,' Annie went on. 'Anything in it?'

Comprehension dawned on Ross's face. 'Good

Lord, no,' he said. 'Derek's a happily married man. With children. Has been for years. They're just colleagues with a shared interest in theatre and film, that's all.'

'Did Mark Hardcastle have a partner?'

'I think so,' said Ross, clearly a bit embarrassed by the whole idea.

'Maria?'

'Yes, he did. Laurence.'

'Do you know his surname?'

'I don't think it ever came up.'

'Were you a particularly close friend of Mark's?'

'I suppose so. I like to think so. I mean, as much as you could be. He never let you *really* close. I think things had been difficult for him. He'd had a hard life. But he was one of the best men I've ever known. Surely he can't be dead? Just like that?'

'Was this relationship recent?'

'Six months or so. Just before Christmas, I think,' said Maria. 'He was very happy.'

'What was he like before?'

Maria paused, then she said, 'I wouldn't say he was unhappy, but he was definitely more restless and superficial. He lived for his work, and I also got the impression that he was doing the rounds, you know, going through the motions, sexually, like, but that he wasn't very happy. Don't get me wrong. On the surface he was always cheerful and had a kind word for everyone. But deep down I think he was very unhappy and unfulfilled in his life until he met Laurence.'

'For God's sake,' said Ross. Then he turned to

Annie. 'You'll have to forgive Maria,' he said. 'She's our resident romantic.'

Maria blushed, with equal parts of anger and embarrassment, Annie guessed. 'I can forgive her that,' she said to Ross, then turned to Maria again. 'Did he talk much about this relationship?'

'Not in any sort of detail. He was just more . . . comfortable, more settled, relaxed than I'd seen him before.'

'Until recently?'

'Yes.'

'Did you ever meet Laurence?'

'A few times, when he came to the theatre.'

'Could you describe him?'

'About six foot, handsome, a bit sort of upper class. Dark hair with a touch of grey at the temples. Slender, athletic. Very charming, but rather remote. Maybe a bit of a snob. You know, a sort of public school type, to the manor born.'

'Do you know what Laurence does? What his job is?'

'Mark never mentioned anything. I think he might be retired. Or maybe he buys and sells antiques, works of art, something like that.'

'How old?'

'Early fifties, I'd say.'

'Do you know where he lives? We really need to find him.'

'Sorry,' said Maria. 'I don't know. I think he's fairly well off, though, at least his mother is, so he's probably got a posh house. I know Mark was spending more

and more time with him. I mean, they were practically living together.'

Annie saw Winsome make a note of that. 'This change you noticed in Mr Hardcastle lately,' she went on. 'Can you tell me a bit more about it?'

'He'd just been a bit moody this past couple of weeks, that's all,' Maria said. 'He shouted at me once for putting a table in the wrong place on the stage. He never usually does that.'

'When was this?'

'I don't remember exactly. Maybe about ten days ago.'

Vernon Ross glared at Maria as if she were betraying state secrets. 'Lover's tiff, I should imagine,' he said.

'Lasting two weeks?' Annie said.

Ross gave Maria another stern look. 'It didn't appear serious at the time,' he said. 'Maria *did* position that table in the wrong place. It was a silly mistake. It would have put the actor completely off his timing. But that was all. It wasn't *that* serious. Mark was just in a bad mood. It happens to all of us. There was nothing that would drive him to *suicide*, for crying out loud.'

'If he did commit suicide,' said Annie. 'Do *you* have any idea what it was all about, Mr Ross?'

'Me? No.'

'Do any of you know if Mr Hardcastle *did* have anyone he was close to, outside the theatre scene? Someone he might have talked to, shared his problems with. Other than Derek Wyman.'

No one said anything.

‘Anyone know where he was from?’

‘Barnsley,’ said Maria.

‘How do you know that?’

‘He made jokes about it, said he had to support the local football team when he was growing up, or people would think he was a poof. Naturally, it came up when Barnsley got to Wembley for the FA Cup semi-final and everyone was talking about them beating Liverpool and Chelsea. Pity they didn’t go all the way. And Mark mentioned his dad once. Said he worked down the pit. I got the impression it was a tough place to grow up gay.’

‘I should imagine so,’ said Annie, who had never been to Barnsley. All she knew about it was that it was in South Yorkshire and used to have a lot of coal mines. Certainly she wouldn’t have expected most mining communities to be sympathetic towards gays.

She addressed the others. ‘Is there anyone else here apart from Ms Wolsey and Mr Ross who was close to Mark Hardcastle?’

One of the other girls spoke up. ‘We all felt close to Mark. He made you feel special. You could talk to him about anything. And there was nobody more generous.’

‘Did he talk to you about his problems?’

‘No,’ the girl said. ‘But he’d listen to yours and give you advice if you wanted it. He wouldn’t push it on you. He was so wise. I just can’t believe it. I can’t believe any of this.’ She started crying and took out a handkerchief.

Annie glanced at Winsome to let her know they

were done, then she took some cards from her briefcase and handed them out.

‘If any of you think of anything, please don’t hesitate to call,’ she said. Then she looked at Vernon Ross again and said, ‘Mr Ross, can you come to the mortuary with us now, please, if it’s convenient?’