
Opening Extract from...

Saturday Requiem

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NICCI FRENCH

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To Kersti and Patricia

She isn't afraid. Being stabbed doesn't cause a stabbing pain. It had felt more like a punch, with an ache flowing through her body in waves, and then her legs had given way and she was on the floor, her knife rattling on the hard surface.

She hadn't realized it was happening, even though it was with her own knife. She'd stolen it and kept it beneath her mattress and brought it with her, tucked into her waistband. But it had all gone wrong.

Now she is slumped on the tiled floor, her back against the wall. Her bare feet are wet and warm with her own blood.

She hears a voice and a light is switched on. Two strip lights hang from chains, giving out a dim, sour glare. One of them, the one on the left, flickers and buzzes. She looks down at her blood with a detached interest. It isn't red, more like a sort of maroon, and it looks sticky and thick. Her head sinks back and she looks upwards.

She hears rushing feet, rubber soles squeaking on the tiles. All she sees at first is the green fabric of their scrubs. The faces lean in close, she feels hands on her body, clothes being cut away, muttering voices.

'Where did she go?'

The woman doesn't say anything. She tries to shake her head but it feels like too much effort.

'Where'd you get the knife?'

The question doesn't seem worth answering. More footsteps. She hears a man's voice. One of the doctors. The Asian one. He sounds calm. A light shines on her, into her eyes, so that when it moves away, the darkness looks purple and swirly.

'Messy,' he says. 'But it's all right. Where's the other one?'

'There,' says one of the nurses, pointing at a smeared footprint. Several

more lead out into the corridor and down to the right, then fade away. The corridor is dark but the disturbance is attracting attention. From behind bars, there are groans and cries. Someone shouts for help, the same phrase over and over: 'Get me. Get me.' She is an old woman and that is what she always says, in a shout or a whimper, when she is awake and afraid, sometimes for the whole night. An orderly stands looking at the last footprint, then into the darkness down the corridor. He hears running footsteps behind and looks round. Two more orderlies in their white scrubs and T-shirts. One of them rubs his eyes. He has been asleep.

'What do you think?'

'She'll be in rec,' says the man.

'How do you know?'

'The floor's locked down. There's nowhere else.'

'You bring the meds?'

He held up a syringe.

'Have you got enough?'

'For a fucking horse.'

'She'll be really wired.'

'There's three of us.'

'Has she got a knife?'

'She dropped it. It wasn't hers.'

'She might have another.'

They pad down the corridor. Looking into the shadows on either side, listening for a movement. The only light is from the moon, in stripes through the bars and across the corridor.

'Can't we get the lights on?'

'Only from downstairs.'

The wind blows outside and rain splatters on the windows, like it's being thrown, then a pause, then thrown again.

The recreation room isn't really a room, but a space at the end of the corridor where it widens out into an area with chairs and a sofa. They can see the glow of the TV on the walls, as if a fire is burning. The men speak to each other in whispers.

'Shall we wait?'

'There's only one of her.'

'You saw what she did back there.'

'Are you scared?'

'I'm not scared.'

At first they can't see anyone. The TV is silent but still on, a shopping channel, a flash of cheap jewellery. Empty chairs, a low table with an open magazine. They see a shape in the corner, hunched up, arms folded around itself. In the light of the TV they can make out the tattoos along the arms – faces, stars, spirals. One of the arms is stained dark. The head is bent down, hair obscuring the face. She is murmuring something they can't make out and begins to move her head down, then up again, each time banging it back against the wall. One of the orderlies steps forward.

'Calm down. We'll take you to your room.'

She continues her low murmur. It isn't clear if she even knows they are there. The orderly steps closer and she lifts her head and her thick mat of hair parts. Her eyes are as bright and fixed as those of a cornered animal. His skin prickles and for a moment he falters. In that pulse of hesitation she flies forward. It isn't clear whether she is going for him or whether he is in the way. He falls back over the table with her on top of him. He lets out a scream. The other two orderlies try to drag her off. One eases his arm round the woman's neck and pulls harder and harder but the man underneath is still crying out. An orderly raises his fist and punches her hard in the ribs, again and again. They all hear the soft thud of each blow, like a mallet sinking into earth. At last she releases her grip and they pull her away. Her whole body flexes and flaps even as they try to hold her still.

'Pin her down.'

They turn her over onto her front. One grasps each arm and the third sits on her back but she still kicks at the air. He pulls the plastic tip off the hypodermic needle with his teeth.

'Keep her still.'

He jabs the needle into the woman's thigh and eases the lorazepam slowly into her. He tosses the needle to one side and lies down across her legs, holding them still. She wriggles under him, squealing and crying. He smells her: tobacco, sweat, the hot reek of fear, almost like sexual excitement. At first there is no change but then, after a minute, the movements and the sounds fade away and the body seems to die under him. He counts slowly to twenty, just to make sure. They stand up and step back, panting, from the prone body on the floor.

'Are you all right?'

One of the orderlies raises a hand to his neck. 'She bit me.'

'She's fucking strong. Three isn't enough.'

'It wasn't her fault. They came for her.'

'They'll come worse for her next time.'

ONE

The wind tunnelled down the road towards Frieda Klein and the rain fell steadily. She walked through the darkness, trying to tire herself out. This time of night, the small hours when the streets were almost deserted and foxes scavenged in the bins, was when she felt London belonged to her. She reached the Strand and was about to cross over to get to the Thames when her mobile vibrated in her coat pocket. Who would ring at this time? She pulled it out and looked at the screen: Yvette Long. Detective Constable Yvette Long.

'Yvette?'

'It's Karlsson.' Yvette's voice was loud and harsh in her ear. 'He's been hurt.'

'Karlsson? What happened to him?'

'I don't know.' Yvette sounded as if she was holding back tears. 'I just heard. It's all a bit confused. Someone's been arrested, Karlsson's in hospital. He's being operated on. It sounds serious. I don't know any more. I had to call someone.'

'Which hospital?'

'St Dunstan's.'

'I'm on my way.'

She pushed the phone back into her pocket. St Dunstan's was in Clerkenwell, a mile away, maybe more. She hailed a taxi, and stared out of the window until she saw the grimy upper floors of the hospital ahead.

The woman at Reception couldn't find anyone called Karlsson on the system. 'Try A & E,' she said, pointing to the right. 'Across the courtyard. There's a corridor directly ahead.'

At A & E Reception, Frieda had to join a queue. A man at the front was asking why his wife hadn't been seen yet. She'd been waiting for two hours. More than two hours. The receptionist explained to him very politely and very slowly how the queues were managed according to urgency. Frieda looked at her phone. It was twenty past four in the morning.

The man seemed reluctant to leave. He restated his complaint more loudly, then got into an argument with a tracksuited teenager behind him whose right hand was wrapped in a grubby dishtowel. An old man in front of Frieda turned round to her and sighed. His face was greenish-grey. 'Bloody waste of time,' he said. Frieda didn't reply. 'My wife made me come. It's just my arm. And my indigestion.'

Frieda looked at him more closely. 'What do you mean? What do you feel like?'

'It's my indigestion.'

'Describe it.'

'Like a clamp round my chest. I just need some Alka-Seltzer.'

'Come with me,' said Frieda, and she dragged the confused man to the front.

The man at Reception stopped his complaint and looked round. 'There's a queue.'

Frieda pushed him aside. 'This man may be having a coronary,' she said.

The receptionist looked puzzled. 'Who are you?'

'Coronary,' said Frieda. 'That's the word you need to hear.'

And then there were a few minutes of shouting and banging doors and the man was lifted onto a trolley and suddenly it was calm again and Frieda and the receptionist were looking at each other.

'Is he your father?'

'I'm here about Malcolm Karlsson,' said Frieda. 'Chief Inspector Malcolm Karlsson.'

'Are you a relative?'

'No.'

'Are you a colleague?'

'No.'

'Then I'm sorry. We can't give out information.'

'Actually, I was a colleague. We did work together.'

The woman looked doubtful. 'Are you a police officer?'

'I was employed by him and he's a friend.'

'I'm sorry.'

'At least let me know his condition.'

'Excuse me, could you please step aside? There are people waiting for treatment.'

'Do you have a supervisor?'

'If you don't move aside, I'll call security.'

'All right, call security, I can –'

'Frieda.'

She looked round. Yvette was out of breath, her cheeks flushed. She fumbled in her bag, produced her badge and showed it to the receptionist. Frieda saw that her hands were trembling. The receptionist took the badge and examined it closely, as if it might be a prank. Finally she gave a sigh. 'Through the door on the far side of the waiting room and ask there. Is this woman with you?'

'Sort of,' said Yvette.

'Please take her with you.'

'Nobody knows anything,' said Yvette. She pushed open a swing door out of the waiting room and the two women almost collided with a uniformed officer.

'Is Karlsson here?' said Frieda.

The young man looked at Frieda in puzzlement and Yvette held out her badge. 'How is he?'

'Not well.'

'Is he in danger?'

'Danger?' said the officer. 'He's along there. In the cubicle at the end.'

Frieda and Yvette walked past the other cubicles. From one came the sound of a woman sobbing. They reached the final cubicle, screened with a blue curtain. Yvette looked at Frieda questioningly. Frieda pulled the curtain back. All at once, Frieda saw a young female doctor and, on the bed, Karlsson, half sitting up, in his white shirt, his tie, and the trousers of his suit, with one side cut almost away to reveal a bruised and swollen leg.

'I thought . . .' Frieda began. 'We thought . . .'

'I've broken my fucking leg,' said Karlsson.

'They've got him,' said Yvette. 'He's in custody. He'll pay for this.'

'Pay for what?' Karlsson glared at them both. 'I fell over. He started to run and I started to run and tripped over a broken paving-stone. It's the sort of thing you get up from and brush yourself down and keep on running but it turns out I'm an old useless fucking idiot. I fell and heard it, like a stick snapping.'

'Yvette phoned me,' said Frieda. 'We thought it was something terrible. I mean really terrible.'

'What does this look like?' Karlsson looked at the young doctor. 'Tell them. It's a fractured what?'

'Tibia and fibula,' said the doctor.

'There's going to be an operation,' said Karlsson. 'With nails and screws.'

'We're waiting for the consultant. He should be on his way.'

'Does it hurt?' said Yvette.

'They gave me something. It's strange. I can still feel the pain but I don't care about it.' There was a pause. Karlsson

looked down at his bruised shin. Frieda could see now that it wasn't quite straight. 'It's going to be weeks. Months.'

The doctor looked embarrassed. 'I'm going to see what's happened to the consultant,' she said. She pushed her way through the curtain and they were left alone.

'Can we get you something to eat or drink?' asked Yvette.

'Better not,' said Frieda. 'Not if they're going to operate.'

When Karlsson next spoke, he sounded woozier, slurred, as if the drugs were taking hold. 'This is all your fault.'

'Me?' said Frieda. 'I haven't seen you for weeks.'

'You got me reinstated,' he said. 'You and your friend Levin. If you hadn't done that, I'd be safely at home.'

'I don't think it's exactly –' Frieda began, but Yvette interrupted her.

'Who's Levin?'

'Frieda was going to jail,' said Karlsson. 'You know. And I was going to be disciplined or fired or arrested or all three. The reason none of this happened is that a man called Levin appeared.'

'From the Met?' asked Yvette.

'I don't think we're supposed –' began Frieda, but Karlsson interrupted.

'Oh, no. Not him.'

'Home Office?'

'He never said. He was keen on Frieda. Interested. But he never said why.'

'He said I owed him. But I don't know what that means.'

'It's dangerous,' said Karlsson, 'owing someone a favour. I've sat across the table from people who said, "I was just doing it for a friend." I'd point out that they'd killed someone and they'd say, "But I owed him." As if that was a defence.' He sank back on the bed. The effort seemed to have tired him. 'So you haven't heard from him?'

'I didn't say that. In fact, he recently left a couple of messages on my voicemail.' He'd left four, asking her in an amiable voice to call him as soon as she could. 'I haven't got back to him yet.'

Karlsson didn't seem to be paying attention. 'The doctor talked about screws and bolts in my leg.'

'You said that.'

'I'll set the alarm off going through Customs.'

'Probably.'

'So Levin's going to steal you away from me.' Karlsson spoke dreamily.

'Nobody's stealing Frieda away,' said Yvette. 'The police aren't going to employ her again. Not after last time.'

'Thanks, Yvette,' said Frieda. 'Not that I want to be employed.'

'I'll always employ you,' said Karlsson.

'That won't be possible.' Yvette sounded cross now.

'This is just the drugs talking,' said Frieda. 'You need some rest.'

Karlsson shifted on the bed and flinched. 'What I need is some more drugs. What day is it anyway?'

'Saturday,' said Frieda. 'But not yet dawn.'

'I hate Saturday.'

'Nobody hates Saturday.'

'That's the thing. You're supposed to like Saturday. Going out on Saturday and getting drunk and having so-called fun. It's compulsory.'

'Well, you won't be going out tonight,' said Frieda.

'Now that I can't, I almost want to.'

Karlsson was speaking drowsily and before anyone could reply he was asleep.

TWO

It was midday on the following Monday, wild and wet, rain streaming down the windowpanes so that it was impossible to see the swollen grey sky beyond. Frieda had seen two patients and made notes, and now she had time to go to Number Nine for a quick lunch before her afternoon sessions. In the past few months, ever since the last terrible summer, she had taken pleasure from the steady pattern of her life: her little mews house with its open fire, the work here in her consulting room and at the Warehouse, the small circle of friends, the hours spent alone and in silence, making drawings in her garret study or playing through chess games. Gradually the horror had receded and now it stood far off, on the rim of her consciousness.

She picked up her coat and slung her bag over her shoulder. She was going to get wet, but she didn't mind that. As she pushed open the door into her anteroom, the first things that she saw were the shoes: brown brogues, old. Then the legs, stretched out in their brown corduroy trousers, ending in blue socks. She opened the door fully.

Walter Levin sat up straighter in the armchair and pushed his spectacles back up his nose. He beamed at her.

'What are you doing here?'

Levin stood up. He was wearing a tweed jacket with large buttons that reminded Frieda of men's clubs, open fires, wood-panelled rooms, whisky and pipes. When she shook the hand he held out, it was warm and strong.

'I thought we could have a chat.'

'No, I mean, literally what are you doing here? How did you get in from the street?'

'A nice woman was coming out as I was coming in.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Does it matter?'

'Why couldn't you have rung to make an appointment, like a normal person?'

'I tried that and it didn't work.' He raised his eyebrows at her. Frieda didn't reply. 'Can I carry your bag for you?'

'No, thank you.'

He took his coat from the back of the armchair and buttoned himself into it, then wound a checked scarf round his neck. 'I have an umbrella,' he said genially.

'I'm probably going in a different direction from you.'

'I'm here to ask you to dinner.'

'Dinner?'

'Not just any dinner.' He patted his pockets vaguely, one after the other, then bent down to look in the leather briefcase at his feet. 'Here we are,' he said, pulling out a cream envelope and handing it over to Frieda.

She slid out a thick card. In gold-embossed letters she was cordially invited to a gala dinner at a hall near Westminster on the coming Thursday. An auction of promises to raise money for the families of soldiers fallen in the line of duty. Black tie. Carriages at ten.

'What is this?'

'A gathering of the great and the good.'

'Is this the favour?'

'It's an introduction to the favour.' He took off his glasses and rubbed them against the hem of his scarf. His eyes were cool, like pale brown pebbles.

'Can't you just tell me?'

'It isn't necessary. Shall I send a car for you?'

'I can make my own way.'

Frieda waited until he was gone before leaving herself, walking out into the wild February day with a sense of relief. Water was running down the sides of the streets and collecting in puddles on the pavements. The shapes of buildings dissolved. All over the country there were floods, a deluge. She walked fast, feeling drops of rain slide down her neck, and soon was at Number Nine, enveloped in its warmth, the smell of coffee and fresh bread. She pushed the thought of Thursday evening away from her.

After Dory is sewn up, they put her into bed with a drip in a private ward, full lockdown. They don't want her talking to other patients. Or prisoners. Patients. Prisoners. Even the guards get confused with the distinction and drift between one word and the other. It doesn't change the reality, whichever word they use. She is at the far end of wing D, by a window. Two owls hoot at each other the whole night. Dory can't separate the sound from the sounds in her head, from the sounds in her dreams, from the memories of her own screams as Hannah pushed Dory's own knife into her, their faces so close they were like lovers.

But she knows that Mary needs to be told. Mary will know what to do. Hannah will be dealt with.

THREE

The party was at a gentlemen's club in St James's. Women were excluded, except on special occasions. When Frieda entered the hall, she was dazzled by the chandeliers, the glint of jewellery, the gleam of light off the wine glasses. She heard the noise, a bray of voices, little screams of laughter. She smelt perfume, leather, money.

'Splendid,' said a voice.

Levin was beside her, putting a flute of champagne into her hand, tucking her arm through his, leading her into the crowd, murmuring niceties, his eyes behind their glasses darting this way and that. There were men wearing medals and ribbons. Levin pointed out a senior politician and her portly husband, whose speech was already slurred, a sprinkling of CEOs, a general.

'Is everyone head of something?' asked Frieda.

'Apart from you.'

She glanced at him suspiciously. His face was bland. He introduced her to a woman who was something important in finance but, before she could say a word, led her away again. Dinner was announced. They sat at a table with the head of a company that made solar panels, a lawyer who said she specialized in divorce settlements, a man with beautiful silver hair and an aquiline nose, whose name and job Frieda never discovered, an architect with a glass cane, and the architect's wife, who drank too much and kept poking the silver-haired man with her forefinger whenever she wanted to make a point. They ate scallops, then duck lying on a daub

of pomegranate, plums and tiny yellow mushrooms. Frieda couldn't stomach it and drank only water. She thought about sitting by her fire with a bowl of soup, looking into its flames, hearing the wind and rain outside. The man at the table next to her pushed his chair back and rammed into her.

'Sorry,' said a familiar voice.

Frieda turned and found herself staring into the florid face of Commissioner Crawford, the man who had wanted to discipline Karlsson, who had dismissed her, who had wanted her sent to jail. He gazed at her, still chewing slowly. He glanced back at the people at his table and found them watching with interest. He fixed a smile to his face. 'I didn't expect to see you here.'

'I didn't expect to see myself here.'

'What brings you?'

'I'm here as a guest.'

'Aren't you going to introduce us?' asked the woman at his side.

Crawford frowned and introduced them.

'And how do you two know each other?' asked the woman, playfully. 'Business or pleasure?'

'Neither,' said Crawford, and turned back to Frieda. 'Are you up to something?'

'Don't worry,' said Frieda. 'I won't do anything to embarrass you.'

'I'll be the judge of that.'

She turned back to her table and saw Levin watching her with a speculative air. There was a break before the auction of promises. Levin came round to her chair and said, 'Let's mingle, shall we?'

He led her to the long table at the end of the room where they were serving coffee, one hand lightly under her elbow. 'I was considering bidding for a weekend cookery course in

Wales. What do you think?' His expression altered. 'Ben. I didn't see you there.'

Frieda's immediate impression of the man he was addressing was that he seemed larger than life. He was broad-shouldered, barrel-chested, chestnut-haired, white-toothed, tanned, exuding an air of bonhomie and genial, slightly flashy charm. He made Levin look small and plain and he towered over the people around him. He laid his hand on Levin's shoulder. 'You do pop up in the most unlikely places.'

With an equable smile, Levin introduced him to Frieda as Ben Sedge. His eyes were very blue. He took her hand in his firm grasp. 'Bidding for anything?' he asked, looking around. 'The prices are a bit steep for me.' He bent slightly towards Frieda. 'More money than sense, wouldn't you say?'

'It's in a good cause, I suppose,' said Frieda. She noticed that Levin had slipped away.

'So they say. You're not a journalist, are you?'

'No.'

'What do you do?'

'I'm a psychotherapist. What are you?'

'I'm a police detective,' he said. 'Best job in the world.'

Before Frieda could say anything else, Levin reappeared. He handed her a cup of coffee and put his hand under her elbow once more. 'If you'll excuse us,' he said to Sedge, and led Frieda back into the centre of the room.

'I think we'll give the auction a miss,' he said. 'If that's all right.'

'Are we leaving?'

'Yes.'

'So why did we come?'

He blinked at her. 'I wanted you to meet Detective Chief Inspector Sedge.'

'Why?'

'I'm interested in him.'

'What's that got to do with me?'

He dipped his hand into his breast pocket, brought out a small card and handed it to her. 'Nine tomorrow morning, please. Then I'll tell you what your favour is going to be.'