Die With Me

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Extract

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1

The tombstone was nearly six feet tall, weathered and mottled with lichen. A pair of fat-cheeked cherubs framed the inscription: 'How short is life, how soon comes death.' Soon comes death. So very true. She was late, his bride, his partner 'til death do us part. More than ten bloody minutes late, he noticed, checking his watch yet again. Had she no sense of occasion? Didn't she care that he was standing there in the cold, waiting for her? Soon it would be dark. People would start leaving work to go home and they would miss their chance.

He glanced towards the entrance to the churchyard, his breath a pale cloud blown away by the wind. Still nothing. Stamping his feet hard on a horizontal grave slab for warmth, hands jammed deep in the pockets of his overcoat, he backed into the recess of the church porch. For ceremony's sake he had thought of pinning a flower in his buttonhole but had decided against it. Too noticeable. Besides, he hated flowers.

Where the hell was she? Maybe she had never meant to come. Maybe she had just been stringing him along all the time. Digging his nails into his palms at the thought, he jerked his head over his shoulder and spat on the ground, imagining what he would do to her if she stood him up. Telling himself not to worry, he examined the thick skeins of cobwebs that stretched like gauze between the pillars of the porch, focusing on a fat, dead fly imprisoned in the sticky mesh. She'd be here. She had to come. She wouldn't dare let him down.

He caught a movement out of the corner of his eye and swung round to face the road. Framed by the wrought iron archway at

the end of the path, she stood at the top of the steps looking up towards him, eyes startled. Her white face, curtained by long waves of hair, seemed like a full moon, featureless. Sweat pricked his palms and a swell of excitement swept over him, tingling down his back, making the hairs on his neck stand on end. He exhaled sharply. Moistening his lips with his tongue, he smoothed down his hair with his fingers, watching as she came through the gate and walked towards him up the path. Her movements were jerky, like a little bird, nervous, hesitating, never taking her eyes off him. She was younger than he had imagined, no more than fourteen or fifteen. His maiden, his bride. She was perfect. The breath caught in his throat and he was unable to speak.

Dressed in nothing but black, as he had insisted, she was wearing an old raincoat, several sizes too large, that looked as though it had been borrowed or bought in a second-hand shop. Beneath it peeped the uneven fringe of a long skirt and heavy boots with a strap and silver buckle at the ankle. He noticed all the details, pleased that she had done as she was told.

She stopped a few feet away as if unsure, peering short-sightedly at him. 'Are you Tom?'

Her voice was pitched high, her enunciation childlike. He detected a slight accent but couldn't place it. Trying to contain his excitement, he stepped out of the shadows and smiled, reaching out his arm to welcome her.

'Gemma.'

Trembling, tentative, she offered him a small hand from beneath the rolled-up coat sleeve. Her fingers were icy and limp as he pressed them briefly to his lips. As he touched her skin, he caught the faint smell of Pears soap, kindling old, unpleasant memories. He let her hand drop a little too quickly and she looked away, embarrassed, folding her arms tightly and hugging herself. Gently, he took her by the elbow and pulled her towards him.

'Dear Gemma. You're so beautiful, you know. Much more than I'd imagined. Much, much more. So very beautiful.'

Still gazing at her feet, she flushed, giving a shy wriggle of

pleasure. No doubt it was the first time anyone had ever said those words to her.

'You're sure you want to do this?' he said.

She glanced up at him, her pale-lashed eyes searching his face, looking for reassurance, maybe, or something else. Did she like what she saw? Did she find him handsome? Of course she did. He could see it in her eyes. He was everything she had hoped for, and more. He had filled her dreams for so long and now here he was, Prince Charming, standing in front of her, flesh and blood.

On a hot summer's night, would you offer your throat to the wolf with the red roses? Why did that bloody song keep popping up in his mind? *Will he offer me his mouth? Yes. Will he offer me his teeth? Yes. Will he offer me his jaws? Yes. Will he offer me his hunger? Yes. And will he starve without me? Yes.* The hunger. The yearning. So difficult to control. *And does he love me? Yes.* He had said that he loved her.

He bent down to kiss her properly. Again that foul whiff of Pears. Had she scrubbed herself all over with it? He tried to block it out, watching as she gave a little sigh, screwing her eyelids tight shut as she yielded, her lips in a tight moue, like a child's kiss. He was surprised at her inexperience. Most girls her age were little better than whores.

He kissed her again, allowing his lips to linger for a moment, touching her mouth ever so lightly with his tongue, feeling her soften beneath his grasp as he observed her, the un-plucked eyebrows, the fine golden down on her cheeks, the faded dusting of freckles on her nose. The winter light bleached the colour from her face, giving her a deathly pallor. He was sure she was a virgin, although that had no special appeal for him.

After what he considered to be long enough, he stepped back and she opened her eyes. They were a clear blue, without doubt her best feature. Trusting eyes, soft and innocent. She really was perfect. He smiled at his good fortune, showing her his beautiful white teeth.

'You're really sure? You're not just wasting my time?'

She looked away as if his gaze burnt her, fingers fiddling with a thread hanging from the end of her coat sleeve.

'I'm serious about this, you know,' he said, watching her closely. 'You're not going to let me down?'

She shook her head slowly but he was unconvinced. He touched her lightly under the chin, making her look up at him again.

'Come on. We're in this together. *Together, forever, you and I.*'

The words came from another song but it was the sort of trite thing she liked. Easily pleased, she had lapped up the poetry he had sent her, all about love and about death. It seemed to touch a chord, opening a floodgate of confession and neediness. The pain, the loneliness, the sad catalogue of neglect and unhappiness. He understood her so well. He was her soul mate, her first and only love.

'Us. Together. Never parted. It's what you wanted, isn't it? It's what you said.' He stared at her, trying to inject warmth into his expression, trying to tamp down his impatience. 'We don't belong in this world. You know it's the only way.'

Gulping, she nodded slowly, tears welling.

'Good. I've got everything we need in here.' He patted his rucksack and swung it over his shoulder. Bending forward, he kissed her quickly again. 'Come, my darling. It's time.' Clamping an arm around her, he marched her into the dimly-lit interior of the church.

The air was stale; damp mingling with the stench of rotting flowers from various stands of wilted white roses and chrysanthemums placed at intervals along the aisle. He couldn't imagine why anyone would choose this church to be married in. There was no atmosphere, nothing remarkable about the bare, cavernous interior with its marble plaques, war memorials and anonymous rows of brown pews, nothing to attract tourists or other casual visitors. It was a neglected place, unloved and unfrequented. Security was also extraordinarily absent, although there was nothing worth taking. He had done his research and chosen it carefully. Weekday mid-afternoons were a void time, perfect for what lay ahead.

Gemma stood transfixed, gazing up at the round stained-glass window at the end of the nave above the altar, its jewel colours illuminated by the dim light from outside. The martyrdom of St Sebastian, early nineteenth century, he remembered reading in the church pamphlet. St Catherine or St Joan would have been a more appropriate backdrop but female martyrs were thin on the ground in London.

He jerked her by the elbow. 'Come on. Someone could come along any minute and we can't risk being disturbed.'

She allowed herself to be propelled towards the heavy-curtained archway near the pulpit. Behind was a long flight of stairs leading to the organ and the empty gallery high above the nave. As he pulled back the curtain, she stopped and peered up into the dark area above.

'It's so high,' she said, drawing out the word 'high' as if it were something shocking.

He knew he was going to have trouble. He wanted to say that 'high' was the whole point, as she damn well knew. 'High' was what it was all about. They'd discussed everything at length. Now was not the time for doubts. For a moment, he pictured her wheeling above him, spinning through the air, her black raincoat fanning out behind her like the wings of a huge crow. He could hear the sound of it flapping and he felt almost feverish.

'Come on, I'm with you. Just a little further now.' He took hold of her wrist and started to drag her up the first flight of stairs.

She tried to pull her arm away. 'You're hurting me.'

He caught the puzzled look in her eyes and let go. 'Sorry, my darling. I'm just feeling nervous, that's all. I've waited so long for this. For you. I'll follow you, shall I?'

He watched as she stumbled up the stairs. At the top, she wavered, then collapsed in a heap on the landing. Putting her head in her hands, she bent over double, her hair falling over her face and down her legs like a sleek, brown cloak. Half choking, she started to sob.

Shit. This was all he needed. Even though the sound was

muffled, somebody might hear. He wanted to jam his hand over her mouth but he mustn't alarm her. He knelt down on the stair below her, holding her knees, which were clamped tightly together. He would do anything if it would only make her shut up. Slowly, he started to massage her thighs through the thick woollen layers of her skirt.

'It's going to be OK. If you don't want to do it, we don't have to.' He cupped his hands around her head and kissed her hair over and over again, feeling almost high with worry. 'Please stop crying. Really, it's OK. I'm just so glad I met you.' If only she would look at him, he was sure he could win her around. 'We don't have to do it. We don't have to, you know.' He took her tiny hands in his and peeled them away from her face, forcing her to raise her head, eyes still tight shut. 'Look at me, Gemma. We'll do whatever you want. Really… I mean that. I love you.'

Slowly she opened her eyes and he rewarded her with one of his softest smiles, brushing her wet, sticky hair off her face, using the edge of her coat sleeve to wipe away the slime around her nose and lips.

'I don't want to,' she whispered, trembling as she gazed at him. 'I don't want to…' She couldn't finish the sentence. Die. Die with me. Be mine forever. That's what he had said.

He rose, went over to her and sat down on the step beside her. Wrapping his arm tightly around her, he pulled her into him, cradling her head against his shoulder.

'Nor do I, my darling, nor do I.' Stroking her soft hair, he kissed the top of her head. 'Not now I've met you, anyway. Do you feel that too?'

She nodded, pressing her head hard into his coat sleeve.

'You've saved me, you know. You're so very special. My little Gemma. Shall we do the ceremony anyway? I have everything ready. Shall we exchange rings as we planned?' She gave a squeak of assent, burying deep into him, nuzzling his shoulder like a kitten. 'Very special,' he said, still stroking her hair, trying to soothe her. 'So very special.'

She started as if stung by something, her hand flying to her mouth as she looked up at him.

'What's the matter?'

'The note. I left a note like you told me. What happens when Mum finds it?'

Was that all? He smiled with relief. 'Don't worry. We can either get it back or…' he let the sentence hang before continuing, 'you can come and stay with me. Then it won't matter. You don't have to go home, if you don't want to. There's no way they'll find us. No way at all.'

She blushed, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye as she returned the smile. For a moment, in spite of her swollen eyes and blotchy face, she looked almost pretty.

'Come on then. I think you'll like the gallery. It's very private, a really special place. Nobody will bother us there.'

He stood up and helped her to her feet, patting down the folds of her coat and brushing away the dust and fluff from the floor. Barely able to contain himself, he took her by the hand and kissed it one last time, closing his eyes briefly as he pictured again what was to come. She was his. All his. He was sure.

2

There was no justice in life. DI Mark Tartaglia gazed through the glass porthole of the door to the intensive care room where his boss, DCI Trevor Clarke, was stretched out in bed, at the centre of a spaghetti junction of wires and tubes. Apart from the dark strip of moustache visible beneath the oxygen mask, Clarke was unrecognisable. He'd been in a coma ever since the accident, his head held fast in a clamp to protect his injured spine, with his shattered pelvis and legs surrounded by a metal cage. Thank God he'd been wearing a helmet and proper clothing when he came off his motorbike. But the prognosis wasn't good.

Sally-Anne, Clarke's fiancée, sat by the bed, head bowed, one of Clarke's huge hands cupped in hers. She was dressed in a bright pink and white checked suit, her long, blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail tied with a gold ribbon. Tartaglia had just missed her the day before when he had called by and he didn't relish seeing her now. For a moment he thought about coming back later. But sod it, Clarke was one of his best mates; he had every right to be there too. He rapped on the glass panel, opened the door and went in.

Sally-Anne looked round briefly. Her eyes were red, rimmed with mascara. He wasn't sure if she was crying for Clarke or for herself. Any woman who could up sticks and leave two small kids and a husband for another man, even if it was someone as nice as Clarke, had to be selfish beyond belief. And it had all happened so fast. Impulsive as always, Clarke never did things by halves. One minute she was just the new bit of squeeze, brought along for the occasional drink or bite to eat. Next thing, she was living in his flat in Clapham, he'd put her name on his mortgage and bank

account and now that her divorce had come through, they were talking about getting hitched. But that was before the accident. Maybe Tartaglia was being harsh, but he couldn't imagine Sally-Anne looking after a paraplegic for the rest of her life.

'Any progress?' Tartaglia asked, walking over to the foot of the bed. He'd already heard from Clarke's nurse that there was none but he didn't know what else to say. The longer Clarke stayed in a coma, the worse the likely outcome.

Sally-Anne shook her head, stroking the top of Clarke's hand with her long pink nails, gazing fixedly at what could be seen of his face as if she were willing him to open his eyes or speak. Tartaglia wondered how long she had been there and what was going through her mind. Conversation seemed pointless and he stood behind her, feeling awkward, the silence punctuated by the bleeping of the monitors around the bed and the episodic shushing of the ventilator.

After a moment, Sally-Anne muttered something to Clarke that sounded like 'see you later', carefully placed his hand back on top of the sheet, patted it and stood up. Straightening her short skirt, she picked up her handbag and turned to Tartaglia, tears in her eyes.

'I hate hospitals. I hate the smell. It reminds me of having my appendix out when I was a kid and I feel so bloody useless. What's the point of coming? What good can I do? I mean, he doesn't even know I'm here.'

Avoiding her gaze, Tartaglia shrugged and stuffed his hands in his pockets. He was there because he cared about Clarke, because he wanted to see him, poor bastard. Of course it wouldn't do Clarke any good, in the state he was in. But that wasn't the point. Even if it was a pretty empty gesture, it was a mark of their friendship, of respect.

She took a tissue out of her bag and blew her nose. Her eyes fastened onto the motorbike helmet under Tartaglia's arm. 'Stupid prat. Why did Trevor have to go and buy that wretched bike? He hasn't ridden one in years.'

Her tone was bitter and Tartaglia wondered if somehow she held him personally to blame, as he was close to Clarke and the only other member of the murder team to ride a motorbike. For a moment he thought of the gleaming red Ducati 999 in the hospital car park and felt almost guilty. But if Sally-Anne thought he'd led Clarke astray, she was wrong. Mid-life crisis was the phrase that came to mind. At least, that was the joke around the office. Six months, almost to the day, after Clarke's wife left him for her yoga teacher, he'd started WeightWatchers and joined the local gym. Next came the motorbike, the contact lenses, the garish shirts and the leather jacket. What with the seventies-style moustache he refused to shave off, he was starting to look like one of the Village People. Just when they were all wondering if Clarke was going to come out of the closet, along came Sally-Anne, almost young enough to be his daughter, and his brief second stint as a single man was over. Clarke was well aware of what his work mates thought but he didn't seem to mind. He was just happy and at peace with the world. That should have been all that mattered but Tartaglia couldn't help worrying that Clarke would end up getting hurt.

Sally-Anne was still staring at Tartaglia, arms clasped tightly around her handbag. 'You know, I just keep hoping he's going to open his eyes. That's all I want. Just to know that he's still all there, up top, I mean. Anything else, we can learn to cope with together.'

The way she spoke sounded genuine and he felt a little surprised. Had he been wrong about her? Did she really love Clarke after all?

'Have you thought about playing him some music?' he said, feeling embarrassed, wanting to appear helpful if nothing else. 'You know, something he'll recognise. They say it sometimes works.'

'That's not a bad idea. I suppose anything's worth a try, given the state he's in. But a Walkman's definitely out.' Gulping, she gave a wry smile in Clarke's direction. 'I mean, where would you put the headphones?'

She had a point. You could barely make out Clarke's eyes, let alone his ears. 'What about one of those portable machines with speakers?'

She nodded slowly, as if he had said something important. 'We've got one in the kitchen at home. I'll bring it in this evening with some CDs. Trev really loves Celine Dion, for some weird reason. Maybe the sound of her voice will wake him up, even if mine won't.'

Tartaglia grimaced. 'God, I'd forgotten he has such crap taste in music. If I were you, I'd try and find something he really hates, like Eminem or 50 Cent. He's such an ornery bastard, you should play it really loud right next to him and see what happens. That'll do the trick, if anything will.'

She gave him a wistful smile. 'I can just imagine him shouting at me to turn it off. That would be good, wouldn't it?'

She looked up into his eyes for reassurance. Although her face had brightened momentarily, tears were still not far away. In spite of the make-up and sophisticated clothes, she looked like a young girl. She hesitated, head slightly to one side as if there was something else she wanted to say. But after a second she just touched his arm and walked past him, her impossibly high heels squeaking on the linoleum.

Opening the door, she glanced back at him. 'Maybe see you tomorrow. If there's any change before then, I'll let you know.'

As the door closed behind her, Tartaglia's mobile rang. In spite of the hundreds of notices plastered around the hospital, he had forgotten to switch it off. He flipped it open and heard the smooth tones of Detective Superintendent Clive Cornish, at the other end.

'Are you with Trevor?'

'Yes, but I'm about to leave.'

'Any progress?'

'None, I'm afraid,' Tartaglia said, turning away and whispering into the mouthpiece, as if Clarke might somehow be able to hear him. 'But at least he's still alive.'

Cornish gave a heavy sigh. Clarke was well liked and respected

by everybody, even Cornish, a man not normally known for warmth or feelings of compassion towards anyone. 'That's something, I suppose. Anyway, I need you over in Ealing right away, at a church called St Sebastian's. It's on South Street, just off the main drag. I've told Donovan to meet you there. There's been a suspicious death. With Trevor out of action for the foreseeable future, you're now the acting SIO.'

St Sebastian's was set back a little above the road in a leafy residential area, a high wall with iron railings forming the boundary. Bathed in bright winter sunshine, the church was plain, with simple, graceful lines and tall stone pillars flanking the entrance. Georgian, Tartaglia thought, from the little he knew of architecture. It seemed at odds with the endless criss-cross streets of ornate Edwardian redbrick terraced houses that surrounded it, as if it had been taken from somewhere else and plonked down in the middle of Ealing by mistake.

DS Sam Donovan stood huddled by the main gate, hands jammed in her coat pockets, eyes watering and nose red from the cold.

'You took your time,' she said, shivering. 'It's bloody freezing out here and I'll probably catch my death now.'

Tiny and slim, with brutally short, spiky brown hair that framed an otherwise pretty, regular-featured face, she was wearing a purple coat, baggy trousers and Doc Martens, her chin tucked into the thick folds of a long, woolly, lime green scarf, wrapped several times around her neck.

'Sorry. The traffic was bad. I've been over at St Mary's, seeing Trevor.'

'How is he?' she asked, ducking under the crime scene tape and leading the way up the steps to the churchyard.

'Unfortunately, no change. But I'll fill you in later.' They started to walk together slowly up the long path that curved towards the church door. 'Cornish said we've got an unexplained death.'

She nodded, taking a crumpled paper tissue from her pocket

and blowing her nose loudly, as if she was trying to make a point. 'I've had a full briefing with DI Duffey from the on-call MIT. The victim's a fourteen-year-old girl called Gemma Kramer. She fell from the organ gallery inside the church two days ago. Ealing CID initially assumed it was an accident or suicide.'

'Was there a note?'

'No. But they didn't find anything suspicious about her death and, after what sounds a pretty cursory forensic exam of the ground floor, the crime scene was released.'

'Released?' he said, pausing in the middle of the path and turning to her.

'Afraid so. Apparently there'd been some pressure from the vicar and some locals to reopen the church for a christening.'

Shaking his head, he moved on again, Donovan at his side. Manning a cordon around a crime scene twenty-four hours a day was an expensive business and with resources stretched, as always, it wouldn't be the first time such a thing had happened.

'So what changed their minds?'

'Just after the church was cleaned up and re-opened for business, a witness materialises out of the woodwork saying she saw the girl going into the church with a man a couple of hours before her body was found. Somebody then has the sense to ask for a full tox analysis and when the report comes back, it's panic stations. The girl had traces of alcohol and GHB in her system.'

'GHB? Was she sexually assaulted?'

'Not according to DI Duffey. The crime scene was re-sealed immediately and a thorough forensic investigation was carried out of the whole church. It was only a cursory clean, hopefully not much damage was done.'

'We should be thankful for small mercies, I suppose,' he said, stopping again for a moment and glancing around the churchyard, wanting to get his bearings.

The graves were so crowded together that the whole area was almost entirely paved, with hardly a blade of grass to be seen. The stones were deeply weathered and most of the inscriptions barely

readable. It seemed that nobody had been buried there for many years. He pulled out a Marlboro red from a pack in his pocket and turned his back to the wind to light it, letting the sun warm his face for a moment.

'Is the girl local?' he asked, taking a long, deep drag and watching the smoke gust away on the cold air.

'No. She's from Streatham. Nobody has a clue what she was doing around here.'

'Tell me about the witness.'

'I've just been to see her. She's called Mrs Brooke. She's in her late sixties or early seventies and lives a couple of streets away. Don't be put off by her age,' she added, no doubt seeing the sceptical look on his face. 'She used to be a ladies fashion buyer for Selfridges and has quite an eye for detail. She seemed pretty reliable to me.'

He smiled. 'OK. I'll take your word for it. What time was all this?'

'Just after four in the afternoon. She was going out to tea with a friend and was sitting in the shelter across the road, waiting for a bus.'

Turning, he saw an old-fashioned bus shelter about twenty yards away, partially obscured by a tight row of tombstones and an ancient yew tree.

'According to Mrs Brooke, Gemma came from that direction,' Donovan continued, pointing across him to the left. 'The Tube's that way, so we assume that's how she got to Ealing. Gemma crossed the road and went up the steps into the churchyard. The next time Mrs Brooke looked over, she was kissing some bloke just over there, in front of the porch. She said she felt a bit shocked as Gemma looked very young and the man was quite a bit older. Then they went into the church together.'

'Mrs Brooke saw all of this from where she was sitting?'

'So she says.'

Tartaglia strode up the path to the porch and wheeled round. 'According to her, they were standing here?'

'That's right.'

He looked back across the churchyard to the road in front. At four in the afternoon it would have been getting dark but the line of sight to the bus stop was relatively clear and he felt reassured that Mrs Brooke would have had a good view.

'How old did she say the man was?' Tartaglia asked, taking another pull on his cigarette as Donovan caught him up.

'She thought he was in his thirties or possibly early forties, but she couldn't be sure. He was a lot taller than Gemma, as he had to bend right down when he kissed her. Although, given that Gemma was apparently about my height, that's not saying much.' Donovan smiled. She was not much over five foot and proud of it.

He glanced back again at the shelter. Even at this time of day, the interior was shadowed. From where he was standing, it was almost impossible to see if anyone was inside. Maybe Gemma and her friend had been unaware that they were being observed, or maybe they didn't care.

'Do we have a description of the man?'

'White, with dark hair, wearing a dark coat or jacket. He must have been waiting in the churchyard for Gemma, as Mrs Brooke didn't see him arrive.'

'Did she see him leave?'

Donovan shook her head. 'After a few minutes, the bus came along and she got on. She didn't think anything more about it until she saw the CID boards appealing for witnesses. So far, she's the only person to come forward.'

'What have forensics turned up?'

'Just the usual condoms, sweet papers and cigarette butts in the churchyard. But don't get too excited. None of it's recent.'

'With the weather we've been having, I'm not surprised.'

'I didn't know cold weather was ever a deterrent,' she said with a wry grin. 'Anyway, I'm going to catch my death out here. Can we go inside?'

He nodded, stubbed out his cigarette and pushed open one half of the heavy panelled door, Donovan slipping under his outstretched arm.

The interior of the church was barn-like, with a high, vaulted ceiling. Light flooded in through various ornate stained glass windows, casting a kaleidoscope of colours and patterns on the walls and the black and white marble floor. The temperature was almost as cold as outside, and an unpleasant musty smell hung in the damp air, coupled with a strange sourness. Decay, he thought. Things rotting away. The smell of neglect and penny pinching. Like so many English churches, the place was redolent of the past, a past with little relevance or connection to the present, the brass work tarnished, the embroidered kneelers threadbare and disintegrating, the memorial plaques that plastered the walls commemorating people long since dead and forgotten.

Although born and brought up a Catholic in Edinburgh, his Catholicism was well lapsed and not a matter that caused him any loss of sleep. But the churches of his youth were places of warmth, much frequented and loved, an integral part of family life and the community, very different to St Sebastian's. The last time he'd set foot inside a church had been at least a year before, when his sister, Nicoletta, had dragged him along to Sunday mass at St Peter's, the Italian church in Clerkenwell, before one of her marathon family-and-friends lunches. The atmosphere in the church had hummed: the air thick with the smell of incense; the rows of crystal chandeliers shimmering; every surface waxed and gleaming; and the metalwork polished within an inch of its life. The pews had been packed, with everyone in their Sunday best. It was a riot of colour and richness. Afterwards, hundreds of people thronged the pavement outside, gossiping and stopping at one of the many local bars and cafés for an espresso or grappa. Looking around the drab interior of St Sebastian's, he couldn't imagine such a scene. It felt unused and uncared for. A sad and lonely place for a young girl to die.

He followed Donovan down the nave, stopping in front of a large dark green stain that spread messily outwards across the marble floor.

'This is apparently where the girl fell.'

In order to pinpoint the spot where Gemma Kramer had died, the forensic team had used the chemical LMG to reveal the original blood traces. Around the outside, spatters and tracks from a mop and some sort of brush used to scrub the floor were easily visible, the wash of green fading into a pale verdigris at the edges, shot with bright blue and yellow light from one of the huge, arched windows. Tartaglia gazed up at the wide gallery that spanned the full width of the nave high above, an ornately carved balustrade running along the edge. The thought of the girl plummeting down from such a height made him shiver. Short of a miracle, no one could survive that fall.

'What time was the body found?' he asked, still staring up into the dark space of the gallery, the tall gilt pipes of the organ just visible at the back.

'Just after six, when someone came to tidy up for the evening service. They have Holy Communion at seven-fifteen on a Wednesday.'

'So nobody came in here between four and six?'

She shook her head. 'According to Duffey, the vicar leaves the main church unlocked for prayer but it's usually empty in the afternoon. I don't think they get many worshippers or visitors.'

Finding it extraordinary that it was left unsecured, particularly given its apparent state of disuse, Tartaglia wondered what had brought the girl to such a place. Was it by chance? Or had she and the man known that the church was left unlocked?

'How do we get up to the gallery?' he said.

'Follow me.' She walked over to a narrow archway to one side of the pulpit. As she pulled back the heavy red velvet curtain that hung across it, a cloud of dust flew up into the air, the particles dancing in a shaft of sunshine from above. She fumbled around behind the curtain, switching on a series of lights and illuminating the staircase and gallery.

Tartaglia started up the long, steep flight of stairs, Donovan making heavy weather just behind him.

'You know, you really should give up the fags,' he said to her when she finally reached the top.

She smiled, still out of breath. 'You're hardly one to talk. Anyway, I've been trying the patches but I think I've become addicted to them too.'

'They didn't work for me either.' Instinctively he felt in his pocket for his cigarettes.

She gave him a withering look.

He turned away, glancing around the gallery. Apart from the organ and the rows of stalls for the choir, it was empty. He walked over to the balustrade and gripped the heavy wooden rail with his hands, trying to see if there was any give. But the whole thing felt solid as stone. It was also a good four feet high. There was no way the girl could have fallen over it by accident. He stared down at the wide green stain way below. The area was now streaked with deep red and gold light and for a moment he pictured her lying there, a small, dark form, broken on the marble paving. Whatever had happened, it was a violent and horrible death.

He turned back to Donovan. 'Are there any signs of a struggle?'

She nodded. 'They found several clumps of long hair near the edge of the balcony which may belong to Gemma. The hair was pulled out at the root, so they'll be able to compare the DNA. They also found traces of candle wax and incense and what looks like red wine spilt on the floor.'

He shrugged. 'We are in a church, after all. Are they sure it's recent?'

'There was choir practice on Monday night but the floor was apparently cleaned on Tuesday morning. The vicar says nobody's been in the gallery since. Samples have gone off for analysis and we should get the results back soon.'

The combination of incense, candle wax and wine instantly conjured up the idea of a mass or some other sort of ritual. Maybe it was black magic or a form of New Age ceremony, he thought. A young girl and an older man. Even though there appeared to be no evidence of sexual assault, the presence of the

GHB in Gemma's system rang alarm bells. The drug, like Rohypnol, was becoming increasingly common in date rape cases. He wondered if the choice of a church as the location was significant in some way. Had Gemma been a willing participant in whatever had gone on, or had she been forced? Had the man dragged her or held her down by her hair for some reason? Had she struggled? Hopefully the post mortem results would reveal more. The main question now was what had become of the man?

'If you've seen enough, we ought to be going,' Donovan said, checking her watch. 'We've got a meeting with the pathologist in just over half an hour, in Victoria.'

'Who did the PM?' he asked, as they started to walk back together towards the stairs.

'Dr Blake.'

Tartaglia tensed, glancing quickly over at Donovan. But there wasn't a glimmer of anything untoward in her expression. Being realistic, there was no way she could know what had been going on. No way any of them could. At least he hoped so. He sighed. Shit. Shit. Why did it have to be Fiona Blake?