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## Clean Cut

Lynda La Plante

### Chapter One

#### day one

Anna was in a foul mood. He had not turned up for dinner. Work commitments sometimes took precedence, obviously – she knew that – but he only had to call and she would understand. In actual fact, she had put understanding of their profession right at the top of the pluses on her list. It was a Friday and she had a long weekend due; they had planned to drive out to the country and stay overnight at a lovely inn. It was unusual for them both to have time off, so it made it even more annoying that he had not phoned. She had left messages on his mobile but did not like to overkill, as it was possible he was on a call out; however, she knew that he was meant to be winding down the long and tedious enquiry he had been on for months.

Anna scraped the dried food off the plate into the bin. Tonight had not been the first time by any means and as she sat, tapping her teeth with a pencil, she tried to calculate just how often he had missed dinner. Sometimes he had not even turned up at all, but had gone to stay at his own flat. Although they did, to all intents and purposes, live together, he still kept his place in Kilburn; when he was on a particularly pressing case and working round the clock, he used it rather than disturb her. It was not a bone of contention; sometimes she had even been relieved, although she never admitted it. He also liked to spend quality time there with Kitty, his stepdaughter from his second marriage. All this she could take in her stride, especially if she was also up against it on a case of her own.

They did not work together; they had not, since they became an item. This was partly due to the Met's once unspoken rule that officers were not to fraternize, especially if assigned to the same case. It had bothered Langton more than Anna, but she had understood his reservations and was quietly relieved that, since the Red Dahlia case, they had been allocated to different enquiries. They had a tacit agreement not to bring work home to each other; she adhered to it, but Langton was often in such a fury that he started swearing and cursing as soon as the front door opened. She had never brought this up, but it had become very one-sided. As he ranted and railed about his team, about the press, about the CPS – about anything that had got under

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his skin that day – he rarely, if ever, asked what her day had been like. This went onto the list of minuses.

Anna went to stack the dishwasher; God forbid he ever considered moving his cereal bowl from the sink to the dishwasher. He was often in such a rush to get out in the morning that she would find coffee cups in the bedroom, the bathroom, as well as something she had grown to really detest: cigarette butts. If there wasn't an ashtray within arm's reach, he would stub his cigarettes out in his saucer or even in his cereal bowl; to her knowledge, he had never, since they had been together, ever emptied an ashtray. He had never taken the rubbish out to the bins either, or washed a milk bottle and put it out; in fact, he almost used her Maida Vale flat like a hotel. She was the one who sent the linen to the laundry, collected it and made up the beds with fresh sheets; then there was the washing and the ironing. He would leave their bedroom like a war zone: socks, underpants, shirts and pyjama bottoms strewn around the room, dropped where he had stepped out of them. There was also the slew of wet towels left on the floor in the bathroom after his morning shower, not to mention the toothpaste without its cap. She had brought up a few of these things and he apologized, promising he would mend his ways, but nothing had changed.

Anna poured herself a glass of wine. The list of minuses was now two sheets long; the pluses just a couple of lines. Now she got onto bills. He would, when she asked, open his wallet and pass over a couple of hundred pounds, but then often borrowed it back before the end of the week! It wasn't, she concluded, that he was tight-fisted; far from it. It was just that he never thought. This she knew: often he was complaining about his flat being cut off because he'd forgotten to pay his own bills. When he was at home, he ate like a starving man, but had never once accompanied her to do a grocery shop. The plus, if you could call it a plus, was that he did say anything she placed in front of him was good; when she knew her culinary expertise left a lot to be desired. He also downed wine at a rate of knots, and never went to bed without a whisky; this particular minus was underlined. Langton's drinking had always worried her. He had, on various occasions, gone on one of his drying-out periods; they usually lasted a week or so and were often done to prove that he was not, as she had implied, bordering on alcoholism. He could get into quite an angry mood if she brought it up, insisting he needed to wind down. She kept on writing, however; the drinking at home was one thing, but she knew he also hit the pub with his cohorts on a regular basis.

Anna emptied her wine glass and poured another; she was getting quite piddled herself, but was determined that when he did come home, it was time for a long talk about their relationship. She knew it was unsatisfactory: very obviously so, when she read through her list. What invariably happened when she had previously attempted to try and make him understand how she felt, was that the plus side of their life together made it never the right moment. He would draw her into his arms at night, so they lay wrapped around each other. She adored the way he would hold her in the curve of his body and nuzzle her neck. His hair was usually wet from the shower and he smelt of her shampoo and soap; many nights, he would shave before coming to bed, as his dark shadow was rough to her skin. His lovemaking left her breathless and adoring; he could be so gentle and yet passionate, and was caring and sensitive to her every whim – in bed ...

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Langton's presence filled her small flat from the moment he walked in the front door until the moment he left, and without him there was such an awful quiet emptiness. Sometimes she enjoyed it, but never for long; she missed him, and loved to hear him running up her front steps. She was always waiting as he let himself in, opened his arms and swung her round as if he'd been away weeks instead of a day. He then dropped his coat and briefcase, kicked off his shoes, and left a trail of discarded garments all over the place as he went into the bedroom to shower. He always showered before they had dinner; he hated the stink of cells, incident rooms and the stale cigarettes that clung to his clothes. After his shower, he would put on an old navy-blue and white dotted dressing gown and, barefoot, go into the lounge to put the television on. He never settled down to watch any single programme, but would switch between news items and the various soaps that he hated with a vengeance. As she cooked, he would yell from the lounge what a load of crap was on TV, then join her to open the wine. Perched on a stool, he would talk about his day: the good, the bad and, sometimes, the hideous. He always had such energy and, in truth, when he did discuss his cases, she was always interested.

DCI Langton had a special gift; anyone who had ever worked with him knew it and, on the two occasions Anna had been assigned to work on his team, she had learned so much. In fact, living with him made her even more aware of just what a dedicated detective he was. He always looked out for his team and she, more than anyone, knew just how far he had gone to protect her when she had not obeyed the rules. Though he often bent them himself, he was a very clever operator; he had an intuitive mind, but his tendency to be obsessive made him tread a very dangerous line. During the eighteen months they had lived together, even when he had been hard at work all day, she had often seen him working into the early hours, going over and over the case files. He never missed a trick and his prowess at interrogation was notorious.

Anna sighed. Suddenly all her anger over him missing dinner and her urge to make lists evaporated; all she wanted was to hear his footsteps on the stairs and then his key turn in the lock. After all, she knew he was wrapping up a murder enquiry; doubtless he had just gone for a celebratory drink with the boys. She finished her wine and took a shower, getting ready for bed. She wondered, as it was so late, whether he had gone to his own flat. She rang, but there was no reply. She was about to call his mobile again when she heard footsteps on the stairs. She hurried to be there waiting for him, when she froze, listening. The steps were heavy and slow; instead of hearing the key in the front door, the bell rang. She hesitated; the bell rang again.

'Who is it?' she asked, listening at the door.

'It's Mike - Mike Lewis, Anna.'

She hurried to open the door. She knew instinctively something was wrong.

'Can I come in?'

'What is it?' she asked, opening the door wide.

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DI Lewis was white-faced and tense. 'It's not good news.'

'What's happened?' She could hardly catch her breath.

'It's Jimmy. He's over at St Stephen's Hospital.'

Langton and his team had just charged the killer they had been tracking down for weeks. When the man had put in the frame two other members of his street gang, Langton, accompanied by Detectives Lewis and Barolli (close friends, as well as members of his murder team), had gone to investigate. As they approached the two men, one had knifed Langton in the chest, then slashed his thigh. He was in a very serious condition.

By the time the speeding patrol car reached the hospital, Anna had calmed herself down: no way did she want him to see her scared. As she hurried through the corridors leading to the Intensive Care Unit, she was met by Barolli.

'How is he?' Lewis asked.

'Holding his own, but it's touch and go.' Barolli reached out and squeezed Anna's hand. 'Bastard knifed him with a fucking machete.'

Anna swallowed. The three continued to the ICU.

Before Anna was allowed to see him, they met with the cardiothoracic surgeon. The weapon thankfully had missed Langton's heart, but had caused severe tissue damage; he also had a collapsed lung. She could hardly take in the extent of the injuries: she felt faint from shock and had to continually take deep breaths. Both Lewis and Barolli were pale and silent. It was Lewis who asked if Langton would make it.

The surgeon repeated that he was in a very serious condition and, as yet, they could not estimate the full extent of his injuries. He was on a ventilator to assist his breathing; his pulse rate was of deep concern.

'Will I be allowed to see him?' Anna asked.

'You can, but only for a few moments. He's sedated, so obviously will not be able to talk. I must insist that you do not enter the Unit, but look through the viewing section. We cannot afford any contamination; he's obviously in a very vulnerable state.'

Langton was hardly visible among the tubes. The breathing apparatus made low hissing sounds as it pumped air into his lungs. Anna pressed her face close to the window; the tears she had tried so hard to contain flowed, yet she made no sound.

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Lewis had a protective arm around her shoulders, but she didn't want it. She wanted to be alone; she wanted to be closer to Langton – above all, she wanted to hold him.

Anna remained at the hospital all night; Lewis and Barolli returned to their homes.

The next morning, Langton went into relapse. Again, she could only watch helplessly as the medics worked to resuscitate his heart. Drained by anxiety, and both emotionally and physically exhausted, she finally returned home after being told he was stable.

## day two

She was back again by mid-morning to sit and wait, in the hope she might be able to at least see him closer. The hours passed at a snail's pace; she constantly stood in the Intensive Care viewing room, watching the array of doctors and nurses tending to him. She hadn't cried again since first seeing him; she now felt as if she was suspended in a state of panic. Her head ached and she felt physically sick. It was Lewis who made her go and get something to eat; he would stay watching.

The hospital café was almost empty. She ordered a coffee, some soup and a roll. She hardly touched any of it, but picked at the bread, rolling it into small balls. She could hardly take it in: Langton might die. It was just so unthinkable that such an energy force could suddenly be terminated. Closing her eyes, she twisted her trembling hands in her lap, whispering over and over, 'Please don't let him die. Please don't let him die.'

When Anna returned to Lewis, he was sitting on a hard-backed chair, reading the Evening Standard. The headline read: Top Detective Knifed. Lewis had numerous other papers, all running the attack on the front page. It had created considerable political impact: the number of knife attacks in London had been escalating. Langton had become one of the first police officers to be wounded, and by an illegal immigrant; the list had mostly comprised murdered schoolkids until now. The news programmes all covered the knife amnesty arranged by the Met; the summation was that there were hundreds of thousands of armed kids in schools alone.

Lewis folded the paper, sighing. 'Makes me sick, reading these articles. What they don't say is that those two bastards are still being hunted, but with no luck tracing them. At least we got the bugger.'

'The man who attacked him?'

'No, the case we were working on – murder of a prostitute, Carly Ann North. He was picked up trying to slice her head off. A local cop caught him at it, rang for back-up and when they turned up, the two so-called pals did a runner.'

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'Is that when you were brought in?'

'Yeah. Jimmy questioned him – he's a twenty-two-year-old Somali illegal immigrant called Idris Krasiniqe. He served six months in prison for robbery and was then released! Bloody mind-blowing, the fucker was let loose. He's now held at Islington station. Without Jimmy, I'll have to handle the trial.'

'These other men that were with him – have you got any trace on them at all?'

'No. We went to try and find them after; we had a tip-off from Krasiniqe. That was when it happened.'

Anna could see Lewis was physically shaking; he kept swallowing, as if he was having trouble catching his breath.

'So, this tip-off?' she prompted.

Lewis stood up. 'That was when it happened. We were at this shithole in Brixton, walking up the stairs and ...' He sighed and shook his head. 'Bastard's probably gone back to where he came from. It beggars belief, doesn't it? The one held in Islington was supposed to have been fucking deported, but the Home Office alleged that if he returned home, he'd be in danger – so they let him loose on our fucking streets! World is going crazy.'

Anna nodded. She knew about the massive media coverage of the issue of illegal immigrants, not just how many per se, but how many had been released from prison to disappear without trace, and not just robbers, but armed killers and rapists. It was, as Lewis said, beyond belief; now Langton was paying a terrible price. Lewis, she could see, was also suffering. She changed the subject.

'Why haven't they allowed any of us to see him?' she asked.

'Well, he was taken back down to surgery earlier, so I dunno what's happening, just that he's not doing too good.'

As if on cue, a surgeon approached them – one they had met previously. Hugh Huntingdon was a big, affable man and young, considering his qualifications. He drew up a chair to sit beside them.

'We've been working on your friend all day, and I think it's time to bring you up to date. Until now we've not been able to ascertain the extent of the damage. So, you want it straight?'

Anna nodded; he was so calm and easygoing, she felt relaxed. She noticed that both Lewis and Barolli were calmer, too.

'Okay. We have two ferocious machete wounds – one to the chest, and one to the front of the left thigh. The one to his chest sliced through his ribs, just above his nipple, thankfully avoiding, by some miracle, his heart.'

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Huntington had a clipboard; he flipped over a couple of pages until he found one blank, and took out a felt-tip pen. 'Okay,' he said, rapidly sketching, 'this is the chest and lung area: his right lung is incised, and so are some of the blood vessels. This has caused a haemopneumothorax, which makes breathing very difficult, and that's why he's been on a ventilator since he was admitted. This situation can be fatal. One of the reasons we are keeping him in the ICU is to avoid any kind of possible contamination; if he were to get pneumonia, I doubt he'd have the strength to combat it.'

Huntingdon looked at his cell phone, on silent; he clicked the caller onto his voicemail and then returned it to his pocket. 'Sorry about that. Okay, I have no wish to sound such a doom courier, but you wanted it straight. Mr Langton lost a lot of blood, so he needed transfusions; he also had to have his chest drained. All this, combined with his leg injury ... It's really very serious. The wound to his leg has affected the joint. He will need an operation but, due to the chest injury, we've got that on hold for the time being. The most important thing right now is we keep him clear of infection. Knee joints are buggers, and he'll be in a lot of pain, but now for the good news: he's one hell of a fighter and he is right now holding his own, so all I can say is: keep your fingers crossed.'

He smiled and flipped the pages back over to cover his drawing. 'You were lucky to have him brought here. We've got a great team working on him. I'm one of the best around!'

Huntingdon stood up and shook their hands. His cell phone must have trembled again in his pocket; he took it out as he walked off down the corridor.

They remained silent for a moment. Then Anna stood up too.

'He's going to make it, I know. I liked that doctor a lot.'

'Me too,' said Lewis.

Barolli remained sitting, looking at the floor. 'Yeah, but that's his career down the tubes. He's never going to be able to get back to work.'

Anna turned on him angrily. 'Yes, he will, and don't even go there. He's going to be working and he won't need any kind of negative response; we keep his spirits up when we are allowed in to see him. Agreed?'

They all nodded, but there was a very uneasy feeling between them. They each, in their own way, adored their Gov. It was just unthinkable that he would not pull through.

## **six weeks later**

It had been six frustrating weeks with still no result. Anna had been given special leave for three, and those she had spent visiting Langton daily. There had been emotional moments that she had found difficult to deal with, not just because of her

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relationship with Langton: it brought back memories of visiting her beloved father when he was dying of cancer. They were similar in many respects, both such fighters, but her father was resigned to his death and, by the end, wanted to go quietly and peacefully. They had been so close; his love for her and his constant encouragement never faltered, and she adored him. There was never any need for any kind of reproach. His intention was that she should be strong when he had gone. He worried that she would be on her own, but she assured him he had given her a backbone like his; she would be able to cope with life without him. He asked often if she was lonely; she had always insisted that she had lots of friends and had made many new ones at the Academy. This was not actually the truth; she did not have many close female friends and had no boyfriend at the time. Her father had died peacefully, holding her hand, but her loss felt all-consuming. She was glad he had never seen her distraught; never seen her grief become almost unbearable.

There was no such grief with Langton – he was going to survive. When she had at last been allowed near him, he often asked for her; sometimes when he dozed off, he woke saying her name. She would then grip hold of his hand and whisper that she was there beside him.

‘Good; it’s good to know you are here.’ He had a rasp to his voice that sometimes made it difficult to understand what he was saying.

She had told him often how much she loved him, but he had never reciprocated by saying it back. She wished he would; but took as confirmation the way he smiled when she walked over to his bed. He complained about the food, so she often brought M&S sandwiches and chicken; however, he hardly touched it and it was usually Anna who polished off the grapes left by his many visitors from the murder team. Visiting hours were almost all day and she had to ask the nurses not to allow him to tire himself out.

Anna had just got home one evening when she received the call to return to the hospital. Just as it seemed Langton was on the road to recovery, they had a terrible setback. They had successfully operated on his knee joint, but he caught a chest infection, which developed into septicaemia. When she was told the news, she almost fainted. For two days and two nights, Langton’s life hung in the balance. The time spent waiting to hear if he would survive was dreadful. Yet again though, he surprised the nursing staff: to their amazement, he pulled through.

## **six weeks and four days**

Eventually, Langton recovered enough to be sent to a police rehabilitation home. Glebe House nestled deep in the English countryside; its location was deliberately kept secret from the public by the Met. The atmosphere was ordered and yet very relaxed. The house had a fully equipped gym, spa and medical facilities, as well as a bar and a restaurant, and only 140 beds. In the previous year, almost 3,000 police officers had been there, mostly on a short-stay basis. Priority was given to injured officers; the staff were therefore well prepared for the amount of physiotherapy Langton would require. There were also a number of highly qualified psychiatric staff, as many officers arrived with stress-related issues and required counselling.



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Anna had been relieved when Langton agreed to be transferred; she knew she would be unable to deal with him in her small flat until he was physically recovered. He was a dreadful patient; even the nursing staff at St Stephens were glad to see him leave. They didn't make Langton aware of it; quite the reverse. A few had written cards wishing him a speedy recovery, and two had bought flowers, but the way they gave encouragement to Anna, and warned Langton to behave himself, made her aware of how much trouble he must have caused. He even got angry about being helped into the wheelchair to take him down to her car; he had wanted to walk, but he was so unsteady that he had been forced to sit on the bed whilst she packed up his few belongings. He moaned and groaned, but did at least thank the staff, handing the boxes of chocolates that Anna had brought around to the nurses.

Wheeling him out of the ward and down to the car park, he carried on complaining about the bloody place and how glad he was to be getting the hell out of it. Next, she had the pleasure of helping him into her Mini; again, he muttered about her having such a small car, saying that was the reason he found it difficult to get from the wheelchair into the passenger seat. Anna could see how much it pained him to stand and then ease himself into the seat, his face twisting with agony and his breath rasping. She even had to help him with his seatbelt, as he was unable to turn his body to draw the strap around himself.

The drive down the M4 was just as hard going: he went into a rant about having to be shipped out to 'fucking no hopers' Glebe House'. Few, he maintained, were there as victims of injury. Most of the men there were time-wasters, he grumbled, or nutters who couldn't stand the strain, or had booze problems.

'Well, you'll get on well with them,' she tried to joke, but he wasn't amused. He snapped that he'd not had a drink in weeks; and that he was sick and tired of her insinuating that he had any kind of problem.

Changing the subject, she promised that, as soon as he felt stronger, he could come home and she would care for him there.

'Christ, I'll go mental in that small flat of yours.'

'Well, if we have to, we'll get a bigger place.'

He glared and then gave a derisive snort, muttering about where the money would come from. In case she'd forgotten, he only rented his flat.

Nothing she could say could make his dark mood lift; not once had he thanked her for arranging extended leave to be able to spend time with him at the hospital, nor acknowledged that she would now have to give up every weekend to drive back and forth to Glebe House.

He was rude to the staff who greeted him and helped him from the car into the waiting wheelchair. He was stony silent as they tried to make conversation, wheeling him through the reception area and towards the elevator to the wing where he

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would be staying. His room overlooked the gardens; although small, it was bright and pleasant, but he glared around as if it was a prison cell.

After they had both been shown around, it was obvious that he was very tired, so they returned to his room. He had been asked to choose his dinner from a menu; he left it to Anna. He lay on the small bed, eyes closed.

'I'm going to go off now,' she said quietly. He made no response. She was sitting in an easy chair by the bed, and she took his hand. 'I have to get back.'

His fingers tightened on hers. 'When are you coming again?'

She leaned forwards to kiss his cheek. 'Tomorrow, and I'll be here as often as I can.'

'What time tomorrow?'

'Lunch; we'll have lunch together.'

'Okay.'

Still his eyes were closed, but his grip had not lessened on her hand. She waited; slowly, his fingers relaxed.

She crept out of the room and inched open the door, not wanting to wake him; then looked back towards him.

'I love you,' she said softly.

His eyes opened. In his gruff voice, he said, 'You want some advice? Don't come back. You get your own life on track. I'm just going to be a noose around your neck. I've wanted to tell you this for a long time. I've got no strength left, Anna, and I don't know if I am going to get out of this one. Maybe I am not going to make it back to work.'

She went back to his side and leaned over him, but he closed his eyes.

'Look at me,' she said. Then: 'Just you damned well look at me, Detective Chief Inspector James Langton!'

He looked up into her face.

'You are going to get well and you are going to get out of here! They won't have you here for more than a few weeks anyway, so just stop talking like some bloody loser. You make damned sure you are fit to come home to me, or I will move in here with you and make your life hell!'

'Can't be worse than it already is,' he muttered.

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'Oh yes, it can. If you don't help yourself, nobody else will. It's up to you now. I just wish you could stop being in such a foul fucking mood and start trying to be a bit pleasant to people around you, because all they are trying to do is help you. They love you, they respect you – and they want you back!'

'Yeah, yeah, I hear you, but you have no idea what it feels like to be me. I hate being like this – I hate it! I can't get the strength up to even fucking walk by myself.'

'I'm going – I refuse to listen to you. Did you hear me? I'm off.'

'Go on then,' he snapped.

'No, I won't, not until you –'

'Until I what, Anna!? Get up and tango across the floor? I can't walk, I can't breathe properly and I've got pains in every part of my body. You tell me, what would you do?'

She leaned close again.

'I would fight every minute of every day to get my strength back, fight to get back to work so I could catch the son of a bitch that did this to me. That's what I would do.'

He reached out and drew her close, kissing her. 'You take care driving back, now. You were over the speed-limit more times than I could count.'

She could feel the tears welling up. 'Goodbye, see you tomorrow.'

'Thank you, Anna. I know I don't say it as much as I should do, but thank you.'

'I'd do anything for you, you know that.'

'Yeah, but I reckon you wouldn't change places with me.' He smiled.

It was the first time she had seen him smile since they had left the hospital – that smile of his that never ceased to touch her heart. She kissed him again. 'I love you.'

She was out quickly this time, not wanting to prolong it again; she didn't want him to see her getting upset. She left so quickly that she didn't see the tears well in his eyes as he began to weep.

Anna had no one she could confide in. The strain of the past weeks had taken its toll. She looked dreadful, and had lost a considerable amount of weight with worry. Often, two or three times a day, she had driven to the hospital and back, and would stay late into the night beside him. She had let everything else go. She had not cleaned her flat or done any washing, so that was all stacked up. She had not cooked for herself, but eaten at the hospital or ordered takeaways. When she got back Glebe

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House that first day, she flopped down on her bed and lay there for ten minutes before forcing herself to get up and get organized.

Anna spent the next two hours hoovering, washing and making shopping lists. It was after eleven when she showered and finally got into bed with clean fresh sheets. She was asleep within minutes. It was the first night she had slept soundly for weeks. The fact that Jimmy was being cared for at the House made her less stressed. She knew by the following week she would be back at work; on which murder enquiry, she didn't yet know, but it was strange to think she had not even thought about work during the entire time Langton had been hospitalized.

### **six weeks and five days**

Anna woke refreshed and was out very early doing a marathon grocery shop. She bought mounds of fruit to take to him, as well as stocking up her freezer and fridge. By ten, she had unpacked everything, eaten a good breakfast and arranged to have her hair cut and blow-dried. Having spent no time on herself over the past few weeks, she now enjoyed the luxury of having a pedicure and a manicure. She returned home at two, feeling so much better.

She tried on a couple of different outfits before she was satisfied; the weight loss was the only good thing about all this. She was only five feet four and was always intending to try and lose some weight; with the trauma of Langton's attack and the fear for his recovery, she had shed pounds. She decided she would start going to the gym for a workout a few mornings a week, or maybe visit the local swimming baths. She had always loved swimming, and remembered the day when her mother had suggested she cut off her long plaits so her hair didn't take up so much time to wash and dry. Anna had cried; she hadn't wanted to have her hair cut. Eleven years old, sitting in the salon, she had been heartbroken when her thick, wavy red hair was chopped and shaped into a bob. However, she had not been unhappy with the result – quite the reverse. The short hair had framed her heart-shaped face and the fringe accentuated her wide blue eyes. The smattering of freckles that, even now, were visible across her snub nose no haircut could hide, but she had hardly changed the style. She never wore much make-up, but she now made herself up with care, putting on a light-brown eye shadow and mascara, with a pale coral lipstick. Giving herself a good once-over in the bathroom mirror, she couldn't help but smile. She had lovely white even teeth; all the months she had worn braces as a child had paid off. Anna had come a long way from being the rather dumpy, red-haired, freckle-faced kid with glinting braces. She was very much a woman.

By two o'clock, she was driving back to Glebe House to see Langton, refreshed and feeling a whole lot more in control.

If he was pleased to see her, he didn't show it. He looked more morose than ever and said he'd had a terrible night: he'd hardly slept a wink. Instead of complimenting her on how she looked, he seemed almost petulant. 'You've had your hair cut.'

'Thank you – surprised you even noticed,' she said, making light of it, as she produced grapes, vine tomatoes and some smoked salmon.

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'They do feed me here. I thought you were coming for lunch.'

'I know, but I had things to do and I just thought if you needed a snack ...'

He plucked at one of the grapes; she saw that his hand was shaking.

'So, when do you go back to work?' he asked.

'I don't know. Probably next Monday.'

'Mmm, suppose you can't wait; give you an excuse not to have to drive out to this godforsaken place.'

'It isn't godforsaken. You know I only come because I want to see you, so it would be nice if you showed that you wanted to see me.'

He shrugged. 'Just seems a long schlep out here and I've nothing really to say - well, not as yet. I've not met any of the inmates, though I've heard them; you wouldn't believe how many of them are bawling their eyes out. Night nurse said they get a lot of it - call it post traumatic stress syndrome now. Well, I've got a better word for it: nutters! It's not as if they've been out in Iraq, for Chrissakes.'

Anna listened as he ranted on; then there was a pause. He seemed to have exhausted himself.

'You know,' she said carefully, 'after a tragic event or, say, a particularly gruelling enquiry, some of our guys really suffer. It's actually called hyper-arousal or hyper-vigilance.'

'Oh, really! You been reading up on it, have you?'

'No. I was waiting for one of the nurses, to ask how you were getting on; she kept me waiting and when she did see me, she was a bit tensed up, so I asked her what was wrong. She said one of the patients had been very worrying; he would only sit with his back to the wall. All night, this was; he was in constant fear that something beyond his control was happening.'

'Seeing aliens next,' Langton said, like a grumpy old man.

Anna was able to change the subject by asking if she should go round to his place and see if there was any mail for him, or if there was anything he needed from there; she could then bring it in the next time she came to see him.

'Oh, ready to leave already, are you?'

She wanted to snap back at him; he was like a naughty child, trying anything he could to get her temper up. 'No, but I don't have a key, and if there is anything that might be important ...'

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'There won't be. I've nothing of any importance anyway.'

'Is there anyone you would like me to contact, to come and see you?'

'No.'

'How about Kitty?'

His face went red with anger. 'I don't want her anywhere near this place.'

'She might be worried about you; you've not seen her for so long.'

'I know exactly how long it's been, and no, I do not want to see her – nor anybody else for that matter.'

'Oh, I see. Does that include me?'

'Yes. You've no need to come out here; it's a long drive.'

'You don't mean that.'

'Yes, I do.'

There was an uneasy pause; he appeared more like a petulant child than ever. 'Well, you can come when you've nothing better to do,' he added eventually.

'Oh, thank you.'

'Sorry,' he muttered, not looking at her.

'I've made out a list of things you might need me to bring in.' She opened her bag and took out her notebook.

'God, you and your lists,' he said, but he sounded more like himself. Anna passed over her notes: books, pyjamas, shaving items.

'Yeah, I need all these.'

'Anything else?'

He closed his eyes. 'Yes, a miracle would be nice – one that will get me out of here fast, so I can track that bastard down who did this to me.'

'You might have used your quota up,' she said, smiling, and he gave a soft laugh. He knew just how close to death he had been; thankfully, he was at least able to see the funny side of his request.

Anna stayed for the rest of the afternoon. He talked about the amount of physio he was down to have for his knee, which pained him greatly. He was still unable to

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walk. The only good thing that had come out of the attack was that he could not smoke; he had been warned that, if he started again, it would create breathing problems, as his chest was still very weak.

By the time she left, he had added numerous items to her list, mostly books, and he had also given her his house keys. This was quite a big step as, although he had keys cut for her flat, he had never at any time suggested she have access to his. He had such a private and controlling nature, Anna had never even suggested it. To her astonishment, he even said that, given a week or so, maybe Kitty could be brought to see him by his ex-wife, but only when he was able to stand up straight and walk; he didn't want her to see him wheelchair bound. He wrote down their contact numbers. Again, this was a first; Anna had never even known where Kitty or his ex-wife lived. He sat scribbling in her notebook, before snapping it closed and handing it back to her.

It was not until she had driven home that she read what he had written. It was at the end of his list, and underlined. She burst into tears.

I'm a moody bastard, but I'll get better. Don't move anyone else into that box flat of yours. I will be coming home soon.

Beneath it, he had drawn a small heart with an arrow, and a small round smiley face. She had wanted to hear him say it to her so many times, but now he had written it: I love you. For all his bad temper and anger, those three words made up for it.

Anna had not applied for her special leave to continue, as she felt that she really needed her own space to be able to cope with him. She didn't know how she would deal with him coming home, especially if she was back at work, as she would be any day soon. She just hoped to God he would recover, because if he were a bad patient now, God knows how he would react if he had to quit the force.