The Coroner

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

The first dead body Jenny ever saw was her grandfather's. She had watched her grandmother, sobbing into a folded handkerchief, draw the lids down over his empty eyes and then, as her mother reached out to comfort her, sharply push the proffered hand away. It was a reaction she could never forget: accusatory, vicious and utterly instinctive. And even as an eleven-year-old child, she had sensed in this moment, and in the exchange of looks that followed, a bitter and shameful history that would rest and settle behind the older woman's features until, seven years later, she too shuddered unwillingly from her body in the same bed.

When, at the graveside, she stood behind her father as the coffin was lowered awkwardly into the ground, she was aware that the silence of the adults around her contained the poison of something so dreadful, so real, it gripped her throat and stopped up her tears.

It would be many years later, when she was well into troubled adulthood, that the sensations of these two scenes crystallized into an understanding: that in the presence of death, human beings are at their most vulnerable to truth, and that in the presence of truth, they are at their most vulnerable to death.

It was this insight, gained the night her ex-husband greeted her with divorce papers, which had stopped her driving off a

cliff or tumbling under an express train. Perhaps, just perhaps, she managed to convince herself, the morbid thoughts that had dogged her were no more than signposts on a dangerous and precipitous road which she might yet navigate to safety.

Six months on she was still a long way from her destination, but far closer than she had been that night, when only a flash of memory, given meaning by far too much wine, brought her back from the brink. To look at her now, no one would know that anything had ever been wrong. On this bright June morning, the first of her new career, she appeared to be in the prime of her life.

ONE

TEEN TERROR FOUND HANGED

Danny Wills, aged 14, was found hanging by a bed sheet from the bars of his bedroom window in Portshead Farm Secure Training Centre. The discovery was made by Mr Jan Smirski, a maintenance worker at the privately run facility, who had come to investigate a blocked toilet.

Mixed-race Wills had served only ten days of a four-month detention and training order imposed by Severn Vale Youth Court. Police were called to the scene but DI Alan Tate told reporters that he had no grounds to suspect foul play.

The son of 29-year-old Simone Wills, Danny was the oldest of six siblings, none of whom, according to close neighbours, share a father.

His criminal record comprised drugs, public order and violent offences. His imprisonment followed a conviction for the violent theft of a bottle of vodka from Ali's Off-Licence on the Broadlands Estate, Southmead. During the robbery, Wills threatened the proprietor, Mr Ali Khan, with a hunting knife, threatening to 'cut [his] Paki heart out'. At the time of the offence he was in breach of anti-social behaviour and curfew orders imposed only two weeks earlier for possession of crack cocaine.

Stephen Shah of Southmead Residents' Action today said

that Wills was 'a well-known teen terror and a menace whose death should stand as a lesson to all young hooligans'.

Bristol Evening Post

Danny Wills's short stain of a life had come to an end shortly before dawn on a glorious spring morning: Saturday 14 April. He was, perhaps by fated coincidence, aged fourteen years and as many days, earning him the dubious honour of being the youngest prison fatality of modern times.

No one – apart from his mother and the oldest of his three sisters – shed a tear at his passing.

Danny's six-and-a-half-stone corpse was wrapped in white plastic and lay on a gurney in a corridor of the mortuary of Severn Vale District Hospital over the weekend.

At eight o'clock on Monday morning, a consultant pathologist, Dr Nick Peterson, a lean, marathon-running forty-five-year-old, glanced at the bruises rising vertically from the throat and decided it was suicide, but protocol required a full autopsy nonetheless.

Later that afternoon, Peterson's brief report landed on the desk of Harry Marshall, Severn Vale District Coroner. It read:

I *Disease or condition directly leading to death*	*(a)* ***Asphyxiation due to strangulation***
Antecedent causes	*(b)* ***None***
II *Other significant conditions contributing to the death but NOT related to the disease or condition causing it*	***None***

Morbid conditions present but in the pathologist's view NOT contributing to death	***None***
Is any further laboratory examination to be made which may affect the cause of death?	***No***

Comments
This fourteen-year-old male was found in his locked room at a secure training centre, hanging by a noose improvised from a bed sheet. Vertical bruises on his neck, absence of fracture to the hyoid bone and localized necrosis in the brain are consistent with suicide.

Harry, a world-wearied man of fifty-eight who struggled with his weight, mild angina and the financial burden of four teenage daughters, duly opened an inquest on Tuesday 17 April which he immediately adjourned pending further enquiries. He sat again two weeks later on 30 April, and, over the course of a day, took evidence from several staff employed at the secure training centre. Having heard their mutually corroborative accounts, he recommended to the eight-member jury that they return a verdict of suicide.

On the second day of the inquest, they obliged.

On Wednesday 2 May Harry decided not to hold an inquest into the death of fifteen-year-old drug user Katy Taylor and instead signed a death certificate confirming that she died as the result of an overdose of intravenously administered heroin. This was to be his last significant act as Her Majesty's Coroner. Thirty-six hours later, on waking from an unusually restful night's sleep, his wife found him lying stone cold next to her. The family doctor, a long-standing

friend, was happy to attribute his death to natural causes – a coronary – thereby sparing him the indignity of a post-mortem.

Harry was cremated a week later, on the same day and in the same crematorium as Danny Wills. The operative charged with sweeping ashes and bone fragments from the retort of the furnace into the cremulator for fine grinding was, as usual, less than conscientious; the urns handed to the respective families contained the mingled remains of several deceased. Harry's urn was emptied in a corner of a Gloucestershire field where he and his wife had once courted. In a touching impromptu ceremony, each of his daughters read aloud from Wordsworth, Tennyson, Gray and Keats.

Danny's remains were scattered in the crematorium's Garden of Remembrance. The marble plaque set among the rose bushes read 'Beauty for Ashes', but in deference to every religion except that which had provided these words of comfort and inspiration, the Bible reference had been chiselled out.

Harry would have smiled at that, would have shaken his head and wondered at the small, mean minds who decreed what portion of the truth others should know.

TWO

JENNY COOPER, AN ATTRACTIVE BUT not quite beautiful woman in her early forties, sat wearing her determined, resistant face opposite Dr James Allen. The community psychiatrist must have been at least ten years her junior, Jenny guessed, and was trying hard not to be intimidated by her. How many professional women could he encounter here at the small modern hospital in Chepstow – a one-horse town by anybody's measure?

'You've experienced no panic attacks for the last month?' The young doctor turned through the many pages of Jenny's notes.

'No.'

He wrote down her reply. 'Have any threatened?'

'What do you mean?'

He looked up with a patient smile. Noticing the neatness of his parting and his carefully knotted tie, Jenny wondered what it was about himself that he was suppressing.

'Have you encountered any situations which have triggered panic symptoms?'

She scanned back over the last few weeks and months: the tension of the job interviews, the elation of being appointed coroner, the impulsive decision to buy a home in the country, the exhaustion of moving without any help, the overwhelming guilt at acting so decisively in her own interests.

'I suppose – ' she hesitated – 'the time I feel most anxious is when I phone my son.'

'Because . . . ?'

'The prospect of his father answering.'

Dr Allen nodded, as if this was all well within his infinite experience.

'Can you be any more specific? Can you isolate exactly what it is that you fear?'

Jenny glanced out of the ground-floor window at the patch of garden, the green, sterile neatness defeating its purpose.

'He judges me . . . Even though it was his affairs that ended our marriage, his insistence that I keep up my career while trying to be a mother, his decision to fight for custody. He still judges me.'

'What is his judgement?'

'That I'm a selfish failure.'

'Has he actually said that to you?'

'He doesn't have to.'

'You say he encouraged you in your career . . . Is this a judgement you're passing on yourself?'

'I thought this was psychiatry, not psychoanalysis.'

'Losing custody of your son is bound to have stirred up all sorts of difficult emotions.'

'I didn't lose him, I consented to him living at his father's.'

'But it's what he wanted, though, wasn't it? Your illness shook his trust in you.'

She shot him a look intended to signal that was far enough. She didn't need a thirty-year-old quack to tell her why her nerves were shot, she just needed a repeat temazepam prescription.

Dr Allen regarded her thoughtfully, seeing her as a case – she could tell – to be cracked.

'You don't think that by taking this position as a coroner you're in danger of overstretching yourself?'

Jenny swallowed the words she would like to have hurled at him and forced a tolerant smile.

'I have taken this position because it's predictable, safe, salaried. There's no boss. I answer to no one.'

'Except the dead . . . and their families.'

'After fifteen years in childcare law the dead will be a welcome relief.'

Her answer seemed to interest him. He leaned forward with an earnest expression, ready to explore it further. Jenny cut in: 'Look, the symptoms are easing all the time. I can work, I can function, and mild medication is helping me to regain control. I appreciate your concern, but I think you'll agree I'm doing everything to get my life back on the rails.' She glanced at her watch. 'And I really do have to get to work now.'

Dr Allen sat back in his seat, disappointed at her reaction. 'If you gave it a chance, I'm convinced we could make some progress, perhaps remove any danger of you having another breakdown.'

'It wasn't a breakdown.'

'Episode, then. An inability to cope.'

Jenny met his gaze, realizing that young and gauche as he was, he was enjoying the power he had over her.

'Of course I don't want that to happen again,' she said. 'I'd love to continue this discussion another time, you've been very helpful, but I really do have to leave. It's my first day at the office.'

Assured of another date, he reached for his diary. 'I've a clinic here a fortnight Friday – how about five-thirty, so we can take as long as we need?'

Jenny smiled and pushed her dark brown hair back from her face. 'That sounds perfect.'

As he wrote in the appointment he said, 'You won't mind if I ask you a couple more questions, just so we've covered ourselves?'

'Fire away.'

'Have you deliberately purged or vomited recently?'

'You've been thorough.'

He handed her an appointment card, waiting for her answer.

'Occasionally.'

'Any particular reason?'

She shrugged. 'Because I don't like feeling fat.'

He glanced involuntarily at her legs, reddening slightly as he realized she had spotted him. 'But you're very slim.'

'Thank you. It's obviously working.'

He looked down at his notebook, covering his embarrassment. 'Have you taken any non-prescription drugs?'

'No.' She reached for her shiny new leather briefcase. 'Are we finished now? I promise not to sue.'

'One final thing. I read in the notes from your meetings with Dr Travis that you have a twelve-month gap in your childhood memory – between the ages of four and five.'

'His notes should also record the fact that between the ages of five and thirty-five I was relatively happy.'

Dr Allen folded his hands patiently on his lap. 'I look forward to having you as a patient, Mrs Cooper, but you should know that the tough defences you have built for yourself have to come down eventually. Better you choose the time than it chooses you.'

Jenny gave the slightest nod, feeling her heart beginning to thump, a pressure building on either side of her head, her field of vision fading at the edges. She stood up quickly, summoning sufficient anger at her weakness to push the rising sensation of panic away. Trying to sound casual but businesslike, she said, 'I'm sure we'll get on very well together. May I have my prescription now?'

The doctor looked at her. He reached for his pen. She sensed him reading her symptoms, too polite to comment.

*

Jenny picked up the pills from the dispensary and popped two with a mouthful of Diet Sprite as soon as she climbed into her car, telling herself it was only first-day jitters she was feeling. Waiting for the medication to hit, she checked her make-up in the vanity mirror and for once was mildly encouraged by what she saw. Not bad, on the outside at least; wearing better than her mother was at her age . . .

After only seconds she felt the pills begin to work their magic, relaxing her muscles and blood vessels, a warmth spreading through her like a glass of Chardonnay on an empty stomach. She turned the key in the ignition and drove her ageing Golf out of the car park.

With Tina Turner blasting from the stereo, she crawled through the queue of traffic to the roundabout on the edge of town, joined the eastbound M4 motorway and pressed her foot to the floor. Driving into the sun, she flew across the three-mile sweep of the old Severn Bridge at eighty miles per hour. The twin towers, from which the bridge was implausibly suspended by nothing more than steel cables a few inches thick, seemed to her magnificent: symbols of unbreakable strength and promise. Glancing out over the bright blue water stretching to a misty horizon, she tried to look on the positive side. In the space of a year she had endured an emotional collapse which forced her to leave her job, survived a bitter divorce, lost custody of her teenage son and managed to start afresh with a new home and career. She was bruised but not broken. And determined more than ever that what she had endured would serve only to make her stronger.

Jockeying through the traffic into central Bristol, she felt invincible. What could that psychiatrist know? What had he ever survived?

To hell with him. If she ever needed pills again, she'd get them from the internet.

*

Her new office was in a fading Georgian town house in Jamaica Street, a turning off the southern end of Whiteladies Road. Having struggled to find a parking space nearby, she approached it for the first time on foot. It couldn't be called grand. Three doors from the junction with the main road, it stood between a scruffy Asian convenience store and an even more down-at-heel newsagent's on the corner. She arrived at the front door and looked at the two brass plates. The first and second floors were occupied by an architect's practice, Planter and Co.; the ground floor was hers: HM Coroner, Severn Vale District.

It sounded so formal, so Establishment. She was a forty-two-year-old woman who had tantrums, read trashy magazines in bed, listened to reggae and smoked cigarettes when she'd drunk too much. But here she was, responsible for investigating all unnatural deaths in a large slice of north Bristol and South Gloucestershire. She was the coroner: an office which, according to her limited research, dated back to the year 1194. Feeling the temazepam glow begin to recede, she fished out the bunch of keys she had received in the post and unlocked the door.

The entrance hall was drab and painted a sickly light green. A dark oak staircase wound up to the first floor and beyond, its grandeur spoiled by the industrial grey carpeting which covered the uneven floorboards. The dreary effect was completed by the wall-mounted plastic signs which guided visitors upstairs or left to the door, partially glazed with grubby frosted glass, marked 'Coroner's Office'.

The interior of her new domain was even gloomier. Shutting the door behind her, she flicked on the strip lights and surveyed the large, dingy reception area. She made a mental note to redecorate as soon as possible. An elderly computer and telephone sat on a desk which looked older than she was. Behind it stood a row of grey filing cabinets of similar vintage

and a dying cheese plant. On the opposite side of the room were two sagging sofas set at right angles around a low, cheap coffee table on which were arranged a selection of tired *Reader's Digest* magazines. The high point was a tall sash window overlooking a spacious light well in which the architects upstairs – she presumed – had placed two potted bay trees and a stylish modern bench.

There were three internal doors: one led to a functional, recently modernized kitchenette, another to the cloakroom and the third, a solid, original feature, to her office.

The modest fifteen by fifteen room could only have belonged to a middle-aged man. In the centre sat a heavy Victorian desk scattered with files and documents. More files and disorganized papers were stacked on the floor. A dusty venetian blind hung over what should have been a splendid shuttered window overlooking the street.

Two walls were taken up with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lined with the *All England* and *Weekly Law Reports*. The remaining wall space was hung with traditional prints of rural and golfing scenes and a matriculation photograph from Jesus College, Oxford, 1967. Jenny studied the faces of the long-haired students dressed in their academic gowns and white bow ties and picked out Harry Marshall – a slim, playful teenager pouting sideways-on to the camera like the young Mick Jagger.

She spotted a half-drunk cup of coffee sitting on the mantelpiece above an elderly gas fire. Some ghoulish instinct made her pick it up and study the thin film of mould floating on the surface. She imagined Harry, heavy, breathing through his mouth, sipping from it hours before his death, and for a fleeting moment wondered what the bookends of her own career might be.

Her eye was caught by a blinking light on the desk. An answerphone which looked like a relic from the 1980s had

two messages. She put down the cup and pressed the play button. The voice of a distressed young woman fighting tears crackled out: 'It's Simone Wills. The things they said about me in the paper aren't true. None of it's true . . . And I *did* call the Centre and tell them how Danny was. That woman's lying if she says I didn't . . .' She broke off to sob, then continued tearfully, 'Why didn't you let me give evidence? You told me I'd have my say. You *promised*—' The machine bleeped, cutting her off short.

The next message was also from Simone Wills. In a much more controlled, determined voice, she said: 'You got it wrong, you *know* you did. If you haven't got the guts to find out what happened, I'll do it myself. I'm going to get justice for Danny. You're a coward. You're as bad as the rest of them.' Clunk. This time Simone beat the machine to it.

Danny Wills. Jenny recalled reading about the young prisoner who had died in custody. She had the idea that his mother was a drug addict, one of the feckless underclass she had grown so accustomed to in her previous career. Hearing her angry voice brought an unwelcome sense of déjà vu. As a lawyer whose daily routine consisted of wresting neglected children from their incapable and occasionally abusive parents, she had had her fill of hysterical emotion. As coroner, Jenny had hoped she would be at a dignified arm's length from the distressed and grief-stricken.

'Hello?' A female voice called out from reception. 'Is that you, Mrs Cooper?'

Jenny turned to see a woman in her early fifties with a neat bob of dyed blonde hair standing in the doorway. She was short, substantial without being overweight, and wore a beige raincoat and smart navy business suit, her skin suntanned against her white blouse.

'Alison Trent. Coroner's officer.' The woman gave a guarded smile and offered her hand.

Jenny smiled back and shook it. 'Jenny Cooper. I was beginning to wonder if you were still here.'

'I haven't like to come here since Mr Marshall died. I didn't know if I should disturb anything.'

'Right.' Jenny waited for further explanation, but Alison offered none. She sensed awkwardness, hostility even, coming from her. 'So, if you haven't been here, who's been handling the caseload for the last four weeks?'

'I have,' Alison said, sounding surprised and a little indignant. 'I don't work from here. My office is at the police station. Didn't they tell you?'

'The police station? No. I just assumed—'

'I'm ex-CID. Perk of the job – they give me an office. A bit nicer than this one, I'm afraid.'

Jenny looked at her with a half smile, realizing that here was an employee who thought she was returning to business as usual. From what she had already seen, that couldn't be allowed to happen.

'I suppose I should let you settle in before dumping any files on you,' Alison said. 'Not that there's much on at the moment – just the usual from the hospital, a couple of road deaths.'

'You can't have been signing death certificates?'

'Not personally. I phone Mr Hamer, the deputy in Bristol Central. He's been giving me the OK and I pp them for him.'

'I see,' Jenny said, forming a picture of this cosy arrangement. A deputy coroner in another part of the city, not even troubling to look at the files, taking the word of a retired police officer that no further investigation was required. 'I don't know what you've been told, Mrs Trent, but it was made plain to me by the Ministry of Justice that I was to overhaul this office and make it part of the modern Coroner's Service. The first step will be to bring it all under one roof.'

Alison was incredulous. 'You want me to work from here?'

'That would make sense. I'd like you to fetch over whatever

you have at the station as soon as possible. Make sure to bring the file on Danny Wills. And I'd like to see any current files this morning – get a taxi if needs be.'

'Nobody said a word to me,' Alison protested. 'I can't just leave. I've been there five years.'

Jenny adopted her most formal tone. 'I hope you won't find this process too trying, Mrs Trent, but it has to be done. And quickly.'

'Whatever you want, Mrs Cooper.' Alison turned abruptly, marched out into reception and headed for the outer door.

Jenny leaned back against the desk and took stock. Another thing she hadn't counted on: a difficult subordinate, doubtless jealous and aggrieved for a hundred different reasons. She resolved to stamp her authority from the outset. The very least she needed to get the job done was the unquestioning respect of her staff.

Time to prioritize. The office was badly in need of a clean, but that would have to wait. The most pressing task was to wade through Marshall's papers and see what needed attention.

First she needed coffee. Strong coffee.

She found a Brazilian café around the corner on Whiteladies Road, Carioca's, which sold take-out ristretto and small, bite-sized custard tarts. She bought one of each and was back in harness within ten minutes.

Next to the desk on the floor she found a stack of twenty or so manila case files, each of which contained a death certificate signed in the last few days of Marshall's life. They all seemed to be routine cases, mostly hospital deaths, waiting to be absorbed into whatever manual filing system Alison operated.

On the surface of the desk were two disorderly heaps of files. The first contained papers and receipts relating to the

office accounts. A letter from the local authority – the body which, due to a quirk of history, employed the coroner and paid his or her salary and expenses – reminded Marshall that this year's figures were overdue.

The second consisted of a random selection of cases, some of them years old. On top of the pile was a clear plastic wallet stuffed with newspaper cuttings dating back to the early 1990s, all reporting on cases Marshall had investigated. He had marked passages on most of them. Some were carefully cut out, others roughly torn, but all were dated.

In the midst of all this Jenny unearthed a collection of personal correspondence weighted down by a crusty bottle of writing ink: credit card bills, bank statements, a reminder from the dentist. She weeded out the junk, gathered the rest together and searched for an envelope large enough to take it. She rummaged through the untidy desk drawers, finding broken pencils, paperclips and accumulated detritus, but no envelopes. Having ransacked all of them and ready to give up, she noticed a further shallower but much wider drawer set back under the lip of the writing surface. She tugged at the handle. It was locked. She glanced around for a key and spotted the plastic desk tidy, which held a selection of chewed ballpoints. She upended it and among the dust and small change found what she was looking for.

She pulled the drawer open. There were envelopes sure enough, in all manner of sizes, but also one of the now familiar manila files. She quickly stuffed a Jiffy bag with the correspondence, scribbled 'Mrs Marshall' on the front, then opened the file.

Uppermost on the slender pile of documents was a copy death certificate dated 2 May. It was a Form B: notification by the coroner to the Registrar of Births and Deaths and Marriages that, having held a post-mortem, an inquest was not considered necessary. The deceased was named as Katherine Linda Taylor,

aged fifteen years and three months, of 6 Harvey Road, Southmead. Place of death was recorded as Bridge Valley, Clifton – the spectacular gorge spanned by the Clifton Suspension Bridge. Jenny's immediate thought was of the many suicides who jumped from it each year, but cause of death was recorded as 'intravenous overdose of diamorphine'. The Certificate for Cremation section had been left blank save for the word 'burial'.

Intrigued, Jenny turned over to find a two-page police report handwritten in turgid, ungrammatical prose by a Police Constable Campbell. A member of the public had chanced on Katy's partially decomposed body in shrubbery some thirty yards from the main road. She was found in a seated, hunched position with an empty hypodermic syringe at her side. The dead girl had been reported missing by her parents seven days previously and had a history of truanting, absence from home and minor crime.

She wasn't prepared for what came next: a Xeroxed copy of a police photograph picturing Katy's body where it was found. A small, slender figure dressed in jeans held up by a wide, white belt, high-heeled sandals to match and a short pink T-shirt. Her delicate hands, mottled with decay, hugged her bony knees. A mop of untidy blonde hair hung forward, obscuring her face. Her chin rested on her chest.

Jenny gazed at the image for a long moment, horrified, absorbing every detail. It was the colour of the teenager's skin which fascinated her: the brilliant white of her sandals against the mouldering flesh. Her mind created a picture of the scene had the body not been found until weeks later: would there still be tissue, or just a skeleton inside the clothes?

Banishing the image, she turned the page, expecting to find a copy of the post-mortem report, but there was none. Strange. The pattern in every other file she had seen so far was the same: police statements, post-mortem report, death certificate. And why was the file locked away in a drawer?

Although she had spent the best part of the last three weeks boning up on coronial law, Jenny felt in uncertain territory. She opened her briefcase and brought out her already well-thumbed copy of Jervis, the coroner's standard textbook and Bible. It confirmed what she had suspected. Section 8(1) of the Coroner's Act 1988 required an inquest to be held where the death was violent or unnatural. There was no more unnatural death than a possible suicide or accidental overdose, so how could Marshall have certified it without going through the lawful procedure?

She checked the dates: body discovered 30 April, police report 1 May, death certificate signed 2 May. She recalled that Marshall died later in the first week of May. Perhaps he was already feeling unwell and was cutting corners. Or maybe he simply wanted to spare the dead girl's family the ordeal of an inquest. Either way, failing to hold one was a flagrant breach of the rules. Just the sort of practice all coroners were being instructed by the Ministry of Justice to stamp out.

Alison returned an hour later. Jenny felt the waves of resentment crashing over her even before she pointedly knocked on the partially open door.

She tried to sound cheerful. 'Come in.'

Alison hefted a heavy nylon holdall into her office and dropped it on the floor.

'That's everything I could find that's been dealt with since he died. The ones in the blue files at the top are still open. We get about five deaths a day on average, sometimes more.'

'Thanks. I'll try to get through them.'

'I've arranged a van, but he can't do it till tomorrow afternoon. There's half a dozen filing cabinets. I don't know where you think you're going to put them.'

'I'm sure a lot of it can go into storage,' Jenny said, refusing to acknowledge Alison's martyred tone. 'As long as we have

the last couple of years' worth on site. We'll be computerizing the system more or less immediately anyway.'

'Oh?'

'You must have worked with computers?'

'Only when I couldn't avoid it. I've seen how they go wrong.'

'There's a standard system all coroners are being required to use. In future GPs and hospital doctors will notify us of all deaths by email, not only the ones they can't write certificates for. You know Harold Shipman managed to murder two hundred and fifty of his patients and not one of their cases crossed the coroner's desk?'

'That wouldn't happen here. We know all the doctors on our patch personally.'

'That's been part of the problem.' Jenny drove the point home: 'I hate bureaucracy more than anyone, but abusing trust was the reason he got himself into the record books.'

Alison frowned. 'I suppose I couldn't have expected to carry on just as we were. It's only human nature to want to change things.'

'I hope we'll get on well, Mrs Trent.' Alison's face remained stony. 'I've heard great things about you. My interview panel said Mr Marshall found you indispensable. I'm sure I will, too.'

The older woman softened a little, the tightness leaving her face. 'I apologize if I seem a little tense, Mrs Cooper.' She paused. 'Mr Marshall and I had become good friends over the years. He was such a nice man. Concerned for everyone. I hadn't been in here since . . .' She trailed off, a slight catch in her voice.

'I understand.' Jenny smiled, genuinely this time, and Alison smiled back.

The tension between them eased. An unwritten truce was declared.

Alison glanced at the empty cardboard coffee cup on Jenny's desk. 'Fancy another? I'm just going to get one for myself. Sorry there's not much in the kitchen. I'll pop out and stock up on supplies later.'

'Thanks.' Jenny reached for her handbag in search of her purse.

'It's all right, I'll get them.'

'No, I insist.' Jenny brought out a twenty-pound note and handed it to her. 'That should cover the other things, too.'

Alison hesitated briefly before taking the money, then folded it gratefully into her raincoat pocket. 'Thank you, Mrs Cooper.' She ran her eyes around the room. 'I expect you'll want to smarten this place up. Hasn't been touched for years.'

'I'll live with it for a couple of days, see what inspiration strikes.'

'Harry always said he was going to redecorate, but he never quite got round to it. Pressures of life, I suppose – a wife and four daughters all at school and university. He was an old father, too.'

Jenny remembered the photograph of Katy Taylor. 'Before you go, Mrs Trent—'

She reached for the file.

'Alison is fine.'

'Of course—'

'Don't worry, I'll call you Mrs Cooper. I'm happier with that anyway.'

'Whichever you prefer,' Jenny said, relieved she'd been spared the embarrassment of insisting on her formal title. She couldn't abide being called by her Christian name at work. She opened the file and produced the death certificate. 'I found this locked in a drawer.'

'I remember. The young girl who took the overdose.'

'Two things seem odd about it. There's no post-mortem

report, and where there's a possibility of suicide, surely there should have been an inquest.'

Alison reacted with surprise. 'The police made no suggestion of suicide. Junkies are always accidentally topping themselves.'

'It's still an unnatural death.'

'Mr Marshall never liked to upset families where there was nothing to be gained from it. What would be the point?'

Jenny chose not to embark on an explanation. It was going to take more than a brief lesson on the Coroner's Act to re-educate her officer.

'What about the post-mortem report? He can't have signed a death certificate without seeing one.'

'He never had any choice. We're lucky if we see a written report three weeks after a death. The pathologist would phone him up with his findings after the p-m, the paperwork would arrive whenever.'

'Three *weeks*?'

'We are talking about the National Health Service.'

Alison's phone rang. 'Excuse me.' She fished it out of her pocket and answered. 'Coroner's officer . . . Hello, Mr Kelso . . . I see . . . Of course. I'll let Mrs Cooper know straight away . . . Yes, she's just started. Will do.' She rang off and turned to Jenny. 'That was an A&E consultant from the Vale. Fifty-four-year-old homeless man dead on admission. Suspected liver failure. Post-mortem this afternoon.'

'And a report next month?'

'I'll give you the morgue's number if you like. You can give them a ring and introduce yourself.'

She reached for a scrap of paper and wrote down a Bristol number. 'That'll get you through to Dr Peterson's answer-phone – the consultant pathologist. He's usually pretty good at calling back.'

Jenny glanced again at the file and felt an uneasy stirring in the pit of her stomach. Whatever Marshall's motives may have

been, his handling of the case was negligent at best and it was her responsibility to clear up his mess.

'No, I think I'd better pay him a personal visit, see if we can't speed things up a bit.'

'You can try,' Alison said. 'Do you still want the coffee?'

Jenny got up from her chair and grabbed her handbag. 'I'll wait till I get back.'

'Have you been to a mortuary before?'

'No.'

'Just to warn you – it might be a bit of a shock. Wild horses wouldn't drag Mr Marshall down there.'

Alison waited until she heard Jenny's footsteps disappear through the front door of the building, then sat quietly at her desk for a long moment before reaching into her briefcase and drawing out a thick, bound document. She turned through its pages, her eyes flicking anxiously towards the door as if fearing that at any moment she might be seen. At the sound of voices on the stairs she hurriedly closed it again and returned it to her case. Long after the voices had gone she remained in her chair, staring across reception into the office where Harry Marshall should have been, her eyes burning with tears that refused to come.