

PART 1

*Beware the stranger
in the night...*

Dead Man Walking

PAUL FINCH

A DS Heckenburg thriller

Paul Finch

Dead Man Walking (Part 1 of 3)

Аннотация

Dead Man Walking can be read either in three parts or as a full-length ebook (available 20 November 2014). The fourth unputdownable book in the DS Mark Heckenburg series. A killer thriller for fans of Stuart MacBride and Luther, from the #1 ebook bestseller Paul Finch. His worst nightmare is back... As a brutal winter takes hold of the Lake District, a prolific serial killer stalks the fells. 'The Stranger' has returned and for DS Mark 'Heck' Heckenburg, the signs are all too familiar. Last seen on Dartmoor ten years earlier, The Stranger murdered his victims in vicious, cold-blooded attacks – and when two young women go missing, Heck fears the worst. As The Stranger lays siege to a remote community, Heck watches helplessly as the killer plays his cruel game, picking off his victims one by one. And with no way to get word out of the valley, Heck must play ball... A spine-chilling thriller, from the #1 ebook bestseller. Perfect for fans of Stuart MacBride and James Oswald.

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PART 1

**Dead Man
Walking**
PAUL FINCH

A V O N

Copyright

Published by Avon an imprint of
HarperCollins *Publishers* Ltd
77–85 Fulham Palace Road
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB
www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins Publishers
2014

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Cover design © Andrew Smith 2014

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Source ISBN: 9780007551279

Ebook Edition © 2014 ISBN: 9780008116866

Version: 2014-10-21

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Prologue

August, 2004

The girl was quite content in her state of semi-undress. The man wasn't concerned by it either. If anything, he seemed to enjoy the interest she attracted as they drove from pub to pub that sultry August evening.

They commenced their Friday night drive-around in Buckfastleigh, then visited the lively villages of Holne and Poundsgate, before penetrating deeper into Dartmoor's vast, grassy wilderness, calling at ever more isolated hamlets: Babeny, Dunstone and finally Widecombe-in-the-Moor, where a posse of legendary beer-swilling reprobates had once ridden Uncle Tom Cobby's grey mare to an early grave.

The girl was first to enter each hostelry, sashaying in through the guffawing hordes, and wiggling comfortably onto the most conspicuous bar stool she could find, while the man took time to find a place in the car park for his sleek, black and silver Porsche. On each occasion, she made an impact. The riot of noise under the low, gnarly roof-beams never actually subsided, but it never needed to. Looking was free.

She wasn't behaving overtly flirtatiously, but she clearly revelled in the attention she drew. And why not? She had 'all the tools', as they say. A tall, willowy blonde, her shapely form

showcased to perfection in a green micro mini-dress and strappy green shoes with killer heels. Her golden mane hung past her shoulders in a glossy wave. She had full lips, a pert nose and delicate, feline cheekbones. When she removed her mirrored shades, subtle grey shadow accentuated a pair of startling blue eyes. In each pub she made sure to sit prominently: back arched, boobs thrust forward, smooth tan legs sensually crossed. There was no denying she was playing it up, which was much appreciated by the taproom crowd. For the most part, these were beefy locals, countrymen to the last, but there were also visitors here: car-loads of lusty lads openly cruising for girls and beer; or bluff, gruff oldsters in denims and plaid shirts, down in Devon for the sailing, the fishing, or the moorland walking. They might only be away from their wives for a few days, but they too revealed an eye for the girls; in particular, an eye for this girl. It wasn't just that she smiled sweetly as they made space for her at the bar, or that she responded with humour to their cheeky quips, but up close it could be seen that she wasn't a girl after all – she was a woman, in her late twenties, and because of this even more of a taunting presence.

And still the bloke with her seemed oblivious to – or maybe was aroused by – the stir his girlfriend (or perhaps his wife, who knew?) was causing. He was well-dressed – beige Armani slacks, a short-sleeved Yves St Laurent shirt, suede Church's brogues – and of course, he drove an impressive motor. But he was plumpish, with pale, pudgy features – 'fucking snail', as one leery

barfly commented to his mate – and a shock of carrot red hair. And he drank only shandies, which made him seem a little soft to have such a tigress on his arm – at least from the locals’ point of view. And yet by the duo’s body language, the man was the more dominant. He stood while she sat. He bought the drinks while she disported her charms, leaning backward against the bar, her exposed cleavage inviting the most brazen stares.

‘Got a right couple, here!’ Harold Hopkinson, portly landlord of The Grouse Beater, said from the side of his mouth. ‘Talk about putting his missus on show.’

‘She’s loving every minute of it,’ Doreen, his foursquare wife, replied.

‘Bit old to be making an exhibition of themselves like that, aren’t they?’

‘Bit old? They’re just the right age. Where do you think they’ll be off to next?’

Harold looked surprised. ‘You don’t mean Halfpenny Reservoir?’

‘Where else?’

‘But surely they *know*? I mean ...’ Harold frowned. ‘Nah, can’t be that. Look, she’s a bonnie girl, and he likes showing the world what he’s got.’

Doreen pulled another pint of Dartmoor IPA. ‘You really believe that?’

Briefly, Harold was lost for words. It all made an unpleasant kind of sense. Halfpenny Reservoir wasn’t Devon’s number

one dogging location – it was a long way from anywhere of consequence – but it was well-known locally and it got busy from time to time; at least, it used to get busy before the panic had started. He eyed the fulsome couple again. The woman still perched on her bar stool, sipping a rum and lemonade. Now that he assessed her properly, he saw finger and toenails painted gold, a chain around her left ankle decorated with moons and stars. That was a come-on of sorts, wasn't it? At least, it was according to some of his favourite websites. Of course, it wouldn't have been unusual at one time, this. The swinger crowd would occasionally trawl the local boozers en route to Halfpenny Reservoir – somewhat more covertly than this, admittedly, but nonetheless 'displaying their wares', as Doreen liked to call it, looking to pick up the passing rough that seemed to be their stock-in-trade.

Things were markedly different now, of course. Or they should be.

'They must be out-of-towners,' Harold said. 'They obviously don't know.'

'They'd have to be from another planet not to know,' Doreen replied tersely.

'Well ... shouldn't we tell them?'

'Tell them what?'

'I don't know ... just advise them it's a bad idea at the present time.'

She gave him her most withering glance. 'It should be a bad

idea at *any* time.’

Harold’s wife had a kind of skewed morality when it came to earthy pleasures. She made her living selling alcohol, and yet she had a problem with drunks, refusing to serve anyone she suspected of sampling one too many, and was very quick to issue barring orders if there was ever horseplay in the pub. Likewise, though she consciously employed pretty local girls to work behind her bar, she was strongly antagonistic to ‘tarts and tramps’, as she called them, and was especially hostile to any women she identified as belonging to the swinger crowd who gathered for their midnight revels up at the reservoir – so much so that when ‘the Stranger’ had first come on the scene, targeting lone couples parked up late at night, she’d almost regarded him with approval.

Until the details had emerged, of course.

Because even by the standards of Britain’s most heinous murders, these were real shockers. Harold couldn’t help shuddering as he recalled some of the details he’d read about in the papers. Though no attack had been reported any closer to The Grouse Beater than a picnic area near Sourton on the other side of the moor, twenty miles away as the crow flew, the whole of the county had been put on alert. Harold glanced around the taproom, wondering if the predator might be present at this moment. The pub was full, mainly with men, and not all of the ‘shrinking violet’ variety. Devon was a holiday idyll, especially in summer – it didn’t just attract the New Age crowd and the

hippy backpackers, it drew families, honeymooners and the like. But it was a working county too. Even up here on the high moor, the local male populace comprised far more than country squire and Colonel Blimp types in tweeds and gaiters; there were farm-labourers, cattlemen, farriers, hedgers, keepers; occupations which by their nature required hardy outdoor characters. And hadn't the police issued some kind of statement about their chief suspect being a local man probably engaged in manual labour, someone tough and physically strong enough to overpower healthy young couples? Also, he was someone who knew the back roads, so was able to creep up on his victims unawares, making his getaway afterwards.

There were an awful lot of blokes satisfying those criteria right here, right now.

The more Harold thought about it, the more vulnerable the young couple looked in the midst of this rumbustious crowd. Even if the Stranger wasn't present, the woman ought not to be displaying herself like that. The man should realise that several of these fellas had already had lots to drink, especially those who were openly ogling; he should know that temptation might get the better of them and that it would be so, so easy just to reach out and place a wandering hand on that smooth, sun-browned thigh. If that happened there might be trouble, swingers or not, and that was the last thing Harold wanted.

'We have to say something,' he muttered to Doreen, after they briefly stepped away together into the stock-room.

‘What?’ she sneered. ‘Casually tell them all the local dogging sites are closed? How do you think that’ll go down? They might just be show-offs. Might just have come out for a drink.’

‘But you said ...’

‘Just leave it, Harold. We don’t need you making a fool of yourself. Again.’

‘But if they are swingers, and they go up there ...?’

‘They’ll be taking a chance. Like they always take chances. Good God, who in their right mind would go looking for sex with strangers in the middle of nowhere?’

‘But darling, if they don’t know ...’

‘They’re adults, aren’t they! They should make it their business to know.’

Three minutes later – much to Harold’s relief – ‘the adults’ left, the woman swaying prettily to the pub door, heads again turning to watch, the man digging a packet of cigarettes from his slacks as he idly followed. In some ways it was as if they weren’t actually together; as if the man was just some casual acquaintance rather than a partner, which was a bit confusing. Still, it was someone else’s problem now.

Harold edged to the diamond-paned window overlooking the pub car park.

The duo stood beside the Porsche, the man smoking, the woman leaning on the car with her arms folded, her bag dangling from her shoulder by its strap. They chatted together, in no apparent rush to go anywhere – perhaps they were just a dressy

couple out for a few drinks after all? Harold felt a slow sense of relief. Probably a nice couple too, when you got to know them; it was hardly the woman's fault she was hot as hell.

It was approaching nine o'clock now and the sun was setting, fiery red stripes lying across the encircling moorland. Maybe they were all set to go home? But then, when the man was only halfway through his cigarette, he stubbed it out on the tarmac and placed it in a nearby waste-container. And when they climbed into the Porsche together and drove away, it wasn't along the B3387 to Bovey Tracey, or even back through the village towards Dunstone and ultimately Buckfastleigh – it was along the unnamed road that ran due northwest from the pub. The next inhabited place it came to was Beardon, some fifteen miles away.

But long before then, it passed Halfpenny Reservoir.

It had been a vintage August day in the West Country, but the heat was finally seeping from the land, the balminess of the evening receding. An indigo dusk layered the hills and valleys of Dartmoor.

By the time they reached the reservoir it would be near enough pitch-black.

The woman checked their rear-view mirror as they drove. Fleeting, she thought she'd glimpsed headlights behind, but now there was nothing; only the greyness of nightfall. Ahead, the road sped on hypnotically, the vastness of the encircling moor oppressive in its emptiness. Tens of minutes passed, and they didn't spot a single habitation – neither a cottage, nor another pub

– though in truth they were too busy looking for the reservoir turn-off to indulge in any form of sightseeing. Even then, they almost passed it; a narrow, unmade lane, all dry rutted earth in their headlights, branching away between two granite gateposts and arcing off at a slanted angle amongst dense stands of yellow-flowered furze.

They slowed to a halt in the middle of the blacktop.

‘This must be it . . .?’ the man said. It was more a question than an observation.

The woman nodded.

They ventured left along the rugged route, bouncing and jolting, spiky twigs whispering down the Porsche’s flanks, following a shallow V-shaped valley for several hundred yards before starlit sky broke out ahead; the radiant orb of the moon was suspended there, its reflection shimmering on an expansive body of water lying to their right. Like most of the Dartmoor reservoirs, Halfpenny Lake was manmade, its purpose to supply drinking water to the surrounding lowlands. A row of wrought-iron railings flickered past in the glow of their right-side headlamp as they prowled the shoreline road, and the solid, horizontal silhouette of what looked like a dam blocking off the valley at its farthest end affirmed the mundane purpose of this place.

There were several sheltered parking bays along here, a dump site for used condoms, dog-eared porn mags and pairs of semen-stained knickers – though any such debris now would be old and

rotted; there was no one present to add new mementoes.

Apart from the man and the woman.

They parked close to the entrance of the second lot, and there, as per the manual, turned the radio down – it was tuned to an ‘easy listening’ station, so was hardly intrusive in any case – opened all the windows, and climbed into the back seat together. Here, they sat apart – one at either end of the seat, exchanging odd murmurs of anticipation as they waited for their audience.

And so the minutes passed.

The stillness outside was near absolute; a gentle breeze sighing across the heathery moorland tops, groaning amid the tors. The couple’s gaze roved back and forth along the unlit ridges. The only movement came from tufts of bracken rippling against the stars. It was almost eerie how peaceful it was, how tranquil. A classic English summer’s night.

All the more reason why the fierce crackle of electricity jolted them so badly.

Especially the man, who stiffened and fell back against the nearside door.

It happened that fast. He simply froze, his eyes glazed, foam shooting from his rigidly puckered mouth. Then the featureless figure outside who had risen into view from a kneeling posture and reached through the open window with his Taser, now reached through again and opened the door.

All this happened too quickly for the woman to take it in. *Almost* too quickly.

As the lifeless shape of her beau dropped backward again, this time out onto the gritty tarmac, his head striking it with brutal force, she grappled with her handbag, unsnapping it and fumbling inside. It was a quick, fluid motion – she didn't waste time squawking in outrage – but their assailant was quicker still. He lunged in through the open nearside door. In the dull green light of the dashboard facia, she caught a fleeting glimpse of heavy-duty leather: a leather coat, leather face-mask, and a leather glove, as – *POW!* – his clenched fist caught her right in the mouth.

She too slumped backward, head swimming, handbag tipping into the footwell, spilling its contents every which way.

With thoughts fizzled to near-incomprehensibility, the woman probed at her two front teeth with her tongue. They appeared to wobble; at the same time her upper lip stung abominably, whilst her mouth rapidly filled with hot, coppery fluid. She coughed on it, choking.

And then awareness of her situation broke over her – like a dash of iced water.

She was lying on her back, but the intruder was now in the car with her, on the rear seat in fact, already positioned between her indecently spread legs. With one gloved hand, he kept a tight grip on her exposed upper left thigh; it was so high, his thumb was almost in her crotch. With his other hand, he was slowly, purposefully unfastening his coat.

From some distant place, the woman heard a new song on the

radio. A rich American voice poured through the nicely central-heated car.

Wondering in the night what were the chances ...

A beastly chuckle, hideous and pig-like, snorted from the leather-clad face. Still dazed, the woman strained to see through the greenish, pain-hazed gloom. Frank Sinatra, she recalled. One of her father's favourites. Old Blue Eyes, The Voice, the Sultan of Swoon ...

'Looks like they're playing my tune,' the intruder said, as the final button snapped open and his coat flaps fell apart. If she'd had any doubts before, she had none now.

Strangers in the night ...

He hadn't spoken before. Not a single word – not to her knowledge. But then who would know? The weird sex-murderer who'd begun his crimes by attacking anyone he encountered who was out after dark, but had then begun stalking lovers' lanes and dogging spots all over Devon and Somerset, had not left a single living witness. All those he'd targeted had been eliminated with precision, ruthlessness, and great, great enjoyment; the men with skulls crushed and/or throats cut, the women sexually mutilated in a ritual that went far beyond everyday sadism. Each one of them, man and woman alike, subjected to one final desecration, when their eyes were stabbed and gouged until they were nothing but jelly.

We were strangers in the night ...

'Definitely my tune.' He chuckled again, using his left hand

to fondle the array of gleaming implements in his customised inner coat lining: the tin-opener, the screwdriver, the mallet, the hacksaw, the razor-edged filleting knife.

The woman could barely move, yet her eyes were now riveted on *his* eyes: moist baubles framed in leather sockets; and on his mouth, the saliva-coated tongue and broken, stained teeth exposed by a drawn-back zipper. But that voice – it could only have been a whisper in truth, a gloating guttural whisper. But she would remember it as long as she lived.

It was Scottish.

The Stranger was a Scotsman.

The key thing now, of course, was to ensure that she *did* live.

Perhaps he was too busy drawing out that first instrument of torture – the tin-opener, an old-fashioned device with a ghastly hooked blade – to notice her right hand working frantically through the debris littering the footwell.

As he raised the tin-opener to his right shoulder – not to plunge it down as much as to tease her with the terror of it – her fingertips found something she recognised.

He kept her pinned in place with his other hand, a grip so hard in that soft, sensitive spot that it was now agony, as he crooned along to the tune.

They'd first dubbed him 'the Stranger' in the West Country press because of the sex-with-strangers scene he'd so viciously crashed. It now seemed even more appropriate. 'You're a taunting, godless bitch,' he added matter-of-factly, still in that

notable accent. ‘A whore, an exhibitionist slut, a prick-teasing slag ...’

‘And a police officer,’ she said, pointing her snub-nosed Smith & Wesson .38 straight at his face. ‘Move one muscle, you bastard ... open that filthy yap of yours one more time, and I’ll put a bullet straight through your fucking skull!’

The expression on his face was priceless. At least it probably would have been, had she been able to see it. As it was, she had to be content with his sudden almost-comical paralysis, the whites of his eyes widening in cartoon fashion around his soulless black pupils, his gammy mouth sagging open between zippered lips.

‘Yeah ... that’s right,’ she said, thumbing back the pistol’s hammer. ‘The fun’s over. Now drop that sodding blade.’

Of course, it couldn’t be over in reality, and her heart pounded harder in her chest as this slowly dawned on her. He couldn’t let it end like *this* – so abruptly, so unexpectedly; or in *this* fashion: trapped like a rabbit by one of the frail, sexual creatures he so brutally despised. Warily, she transferred the .38 from her right hand to her left, keeping it levelled at him as she lay there. With her empty right hand, she again reached into the footwell. Her radio was down there somewhere, but she was damned if she could find it. All the time, he sat motionless, nailing her with that semi-human gaze, strands of spittle hanging over his leather-covered jaw. And now she saw his mouth slowly closing, those discoloured teeth clamping together in a final, hate-filled grimace. He wasn’t frozen with shock anymore, she realised; he

was taut with tension – like a spring set to uncoil.

‘Don’t you do it!’ she warned, but it was too late; he arched down with the tin-opener, intent on ripping her wide apart with its wicked, hooked point.

BANG!

The slug took him in the left side of his upper chest, just beneath the collar bone, flinging him backward out of the car and down onto the tarmac, where he lay silently twisting alongside the prone form of Detective Constable Maxwell.

She found the radio and slammed it to her lips as she threw herself forward through the cordite. ‘All units, this is DC Piper! Converge on Halfpenny Reservoir! Repeat, converge on Halfpenny Reservoir ...’

Her words tailed off as a stocky figure rose to its feet outside. For a half-second she tried to kid herself that this was Maxwell, though she knew it couldn’t be. The DC’s head had struck the tarmac with a hell of a whack.

Without a word, the figure swayed around and blundered across the car park.

‘Repeat, this is DC Piper! Decoy unit Alpha. One shot fired. Suspect suffering a chest wound, but on foot and mobile.’

There was a scrabble of static-ridden responses, but even as Piper watched, the lumbering form of the Stranger scrambled over the car park’s low perimeter wall, the dark blot of his outline swiftly ascending through the furze on the other side. He was hurt badly; that was clear – he lurched from side to side, but kept

going in a more or less straight line, uphill and away from her.

‘Suspect heading west ... away from the reservoir, over open ground,’ she added, clattering onto the tarmac in her tall, strappy shoes. ‘We need an ambulance too.’ She dropped to one knee to check the carotid at the side of Maxwell’s neck. ‘DC Maxwell is severely injured ... he’s received a massive shock from some kind of stun-gun and what looks like a head trauma. Currently in a collapsed state, but breathing, and his pulse feels regular. Get that ambulance here, pronto! In the meantime, I’m pursuing the suspect, over.’

She hurried across the car park, but once she was over the wall into the furze, her heels sank like knife-blades in the soft earth. She kicked the shoes off as she ran, flinching as twigs and sharp-edged stones spiked the soles of her feet, and thorns and thistles raked her naked legs. Very briefly, the Stranger appeared above her as a lopsided silhouette on the night sky. But then he was gone again, over the ridge.

‘Get me that back-up now!’ she shouted into her radio.

‘Gemma, you need to hold back,’ came a semi-coherent response. *‘DSU Anderson’s orders! Wait for support units, over!’*

‘Negative, that!’ she replied firmly. ‘Not when we’re this close.’

She too crested the ridge. The starlit moor unrolled itself: a sweeping georama of grass and boulders, obscured by patches of low-lying mist but rising distantly to soaring, tor-crowned summits. On lower ground now, but a hundred yards ahead of

her at least, a dark blot was struggling onward.

The ground sloped steeply as she gave chase, ploughing downhill through soft, springy vegetation, shouting that he was under arrest; that he should give it up.

Perspectives were all askew, of course, so she wasn't quite sure where she lost sight of him. Though he wasn't a vast distance ahead, curtains of mist seemed suddenly to close around him. When she reached that point herself – now hobbling, both feet bruised and bleeding – she found she was on much softer ground, plodding through ankle-deep mud. He ought to have left a recognisable trail, but it was too dark to see and she had no light with which to get down and make a fingertip search.

Further terse orders came crackling over the airwaves.

Again, she ignored them. It occurred to her that maybe the suspect was wearing a vest and therefore not as badly injured as she'd thought. But if that was the case, why had he fled ... why not use the advantage to go straight on the attack, ripping and mauling her in the car? No – she'd wounded him; she'd seen the pain in his posture. If nothing else, that meant there'd be blood.

Unless rain came before the forensics teams did.

'We need the lab-rats up here ASAP!' she shouted, cutting across the frantic exchanges of her colleagues. 'At least we'll have his DNA ...'

There was a choked scream from somewhere ahead.

She slowed to a near-halt. Fleeting, she couldn't see anything; liquid mist, the colour of purulent milk, drifted on all

sides. But had that cry been for real? Was he finally succumbing to his wound? Or was he trying to lure her?

There was another scream, this one accompanied by a strangled gurgling.

She now halted completely.

This was Dartmoor. A National Park. A green and hazy paradise. Picturesque, famous for its pristine flora and fauna. And notorious for its bottomless mires. The third scream dwindled to a series of choked gasps, and now she heard a loud splashing too, like a heavy body plunging through slime.

‘Update,’ she said into her radio, advancing warily. ‘I’m perhaps three hundred yards west of the reservoir parking area, over the top of the ridge. Suspect appears to be in trouble. I can’t see him, but it’s possible he’s blundered into a mire.’

There was further insistence that she stop and wait for back-up. Again she ignored this, but only advanced five or six yards before she found herself teetering on the brink of an opaque, black/green morass, its mirror-flat surface stretching in all directions as the mist seemed to furl away across it. She strained her eyes, but nothing stirred out there; not so much as a ripple, let alone the distinctive outline of a man fighting to keep his head above the surface.

There was no sound either, which was worrying. Dartmoor’s mires could suck you down with frightful speed. Their bowels were stuffed with sheep and pony carcasses, not to mention the odd missing hiker or two. But all she could identify now were

the twisted husks of sunken trees, their branches protruding here and there like rotted dinosaur bones.

Even Detective Constable Gemma Piper, of the Metropolitan Police – wilful, fearless and determined – now realised that caution was the better part of valour. Especially as the mist continued to clear on the strengthening wind, revealing, despite the darkness of night, how truly extensive this mire was. It lay everywhere; not just ahead of her but on both sides as well – as though she'd strayed out onto a narrow headland. It was difficult to imagine that even a local man could have lumbered this way, mortally wounded, blinded by vapour, and had somehow avoided this pitfall. And if nothing else, she now knew their suspect was not a local man – but, by origin at least, from the other end of the country.

As voices sounded behind her, torches spearing across the undulating landscape, she sank slowly and tiredly to her haunches. The delayed shock of what had nearly happened back in the Porsche was seeping through her, leaving her numb. In some ways she felt elated; she'd almost nailed the bastard ... but not quite. It was like a no-score draw after a football match. It was a result of sorts, but it was difficult to estimate how much of one.

Within an hour, the Devon and Cornwall Police, with assistance from Scotland Yard, had cordoned off this entire stretch of moor, were searching it with dogs, and had even brought heavy machinery in to start dredging the mire and its

various connected waterways. At the reservoir car park, the conscious but weakened form of DC Maxwell was loaded into the rear of an ambulance. Gemma Piper meanwhile sat side-saddle in the front seat of a police patrol car, sipping coffee and occasionally wincing as a medic knelt and attended to her bloodied feet and swollen face. At the same time, she briefed Detective Superintendent George Anderson.

The hard-headed young female detective, already impressive to every senior manager who'd encountered her, had just assured herself a glowing future in this most challenging and male-dominated of industries. But of the so-called Stranger, the perpetrator of thirteen loathsome torture-murders – as reported in the *Dartmoor Advertiser*: 'These crimes are abhorrent, utterly loathsome!' – there was no trace.

Nor would there be for some considerable time.

Chapter 1

Present Day

There was no real witchcraft associated with this part of the Lake District. Nor had there ever been, to Heck's knowledge.

The name 'Witch Cradle Tarn' had been applied in times past purely to reflect the small mountain lake's ominous appearance: a long, narrow, very deep body of water high in the Langdale Pikes, thirteen hundred feet above sea-level to be precise, with sheer, scree-covered cliffs on its eastern shore and mighty, wind-riven fells like Pavey Ark, Harrison Stickle and Great Castle Howe lowering to its north, west and south. It wasn't an especially scary place in modern times. Located in a hanging valley in a relatively remote spot – official title Cragwood Vale, unofficial title 'the Cradle' – it was a fearsome prospect on paper, but when you actually got there, the atmosphere was more holiday than horror. Two cheery Lakeland hamlets, Cragwood Keld and Cragwood Ho, occupied its southern and northern points respectively. For much of the year the whole place teemed with climbers, hikers, fell-runners and anglers seeking the famous Witch Cradle trout, while kayakers and white-water rafters were catered for by the Cragwood Boat Club, based a mile south of Cragwood Keld, near the head of Cragwood Race; a furiously twisting river, which poured downhill through natural gullies and steep culverts

before finally joining the more sedately flowing Langdale Beck.

The single pub at the heart of Cragwood Keld only added to this homely feel. A rather austere-looking building at first glance, all grey Westmorland slate on the outside, it was famous for its smoky beams and handsome oak settles, its range of cask ales, its crackling fires in winter and its pretty lakeside beer garden in summer. Its name – The Witch’s Kettle – owed itself entirely to some enterprising landlord of decades past, who hadn’t found The Drovers’ Rest to his taste, and felt the witch business a tad sexier, especially given that most visitors to the Cradle were always awe-stricken by the deep pinewoods hemming its two villages to the lakeshore, and the rubble-clad slopes and immense granite crags soaring overhead. Its inn-sign was a landmark in itself, depicting a rusty old kettle with green herbs protruding from under its lid, sitting on a stone inscribed with pagan runes. It was just possible, visitors supposed, that current landlady, Hazel Carter, might herself be a witch – but if so, she was a far cry from the bent nose and warty lip variety.

At least, that was Heck’s feeling.

He’d only been up here two and a half months, but was already certain that whatever magic Hazel wove, it was unlikely to be the sort he’d resist easily. Not that he was thinking along these lines that late November morning, as he entered The Witch’s Kettle just before eleven, made a beeline for the bar and ordered himself a pint of Buttermere Gold. It was early in the day and there were few customers yet. Only Hazel was on duty. Like Heck,

she was in her late thirties, but with rich auburn hair, which she habitually wore very long. She was doe-eyed, soft-lipped, and buxom in shape, a figure enhanced by her daytime 'uniform' of t-shirt, cardigan and jeans.

They made close eye-contact but only uttered those words necessary for the transaction. However, as she handed him his pint and his change, the landlady inclined her head slightly to the right. Heck pocketed the cash and sipped his beer, before glancing in that direction. Beyond a low arch lay the pub's vault, which contained a darts board and a pool table. One person was in there: a young lad, no more than sixteen, with tousled blond hair, wearing a grey sweatshirt, grey canvas trousers and white trainers. He looked once, fleetingly, in Heck's direction as he worked his way around the pool table, ignoring him thereafter. All the youth had seen, of course, was a man about six feet in height, of average build, with unruly black hair and faint scars on his face, wearing jeans, a sweater and a rumpled anorak. But he'd probably have paid more attention had he known that Heck was actually Detective Sergeant Mark Heckenburg of the Cumbria Constabulary, that he was based very near here, at Cragwood Keld police office, and that he was on duty right at this moment.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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