

*She hated this man with the kind of hostility she usually reserved for former lovers. Yet she didn't even know him.*

*Her mind deviated to a holiday she'd had the previous summer in Greece and a sign outside a bar in Zakynthos which had made her chuckle: "our beer is as cold as your ex's heart". She considered whether this man actually had a heart.*

*She braced herself for the pain. That was what she expected whenever she saw him, although that hadn't been very often.*

*Every muscle in her body flinched as she tried to haul herself up. She was on an old-fashioned, single bed with a brass headboard which fitted in well with the surroundings. Retro, she thought – but not in a trendy way.*

*She didn't get far before her efforts were hampered by handcuffs which fixed her right arm firmly to the metal behind her. She recognised them as being similar to a pair she'd bought from an adult shop for her best friend's hen night. They were a constant source of amusement that evening; she wasn't laughing now.*

*Where was her mobile? She looked around but didn't even get a glimpse of her smartphone with its distinctive, multi-coloured case.*

*The man hovered over her. She was almost overcome by the smell of fatty food, cheap cigarettes and unwashed armpits. He undid a corner of the gaffa tape that covered her mouth, then yanked off the whole strip. She winced and closed her eyes, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry.*

*When she opened them she saw again the red and gold floral wallpaper which must have gone out of fashion several decades ago and the curtains which despite their age refused to allow even a shaft of light to penetrate them. A single light bulb without a shade hung from the ceiling; prison couldn't be as bad as this, could it?*

*The only noise she heard was the rain hammering against the windowpane. She hated being out when it was wet and always made sure she had a coat and an umbrella at hand – even if the weather forecast suggested only an occasional light shower. How she wished she were out in the rain right now . . .*

*Who lives in a house like this, she wondered: a mummy's boy who never escaped his mother's clutches? A single man whose attempts to attract a woman were totally inadequate?*

*Her eyes opened wide as she recalled a similar property: the one her grandmother had lived in for sixty years. Her dear grandmother, a kind-hearted Christian who always put others before herself. Even to the extent that she refused to bother anybody when she was ill. Her grandmother who thought she would get better on her own. Her grandmother who'd been dead for two days before anyone found her.*

*It was the sort of house the woman wouldn't normally be seen dead in. She stiffened: would it be days before she was found dead, just like her grandmother?*

## 2

The Mickleover to Etwall country path was a delight during the day. Its tranquillity and natural beauty offered an appealing break from the freneticism of the city suburb which had tried but failed to overwhelm it.

Whether the route was responsible for any frightening episodes at night wasn't generally known because so few people bothered to use it once daylight had faded.

It didn't bother Bob Fairfax. He knew there'd be no riders on the National Cycle Network Route 54 after dark: serious cyclists plotted their journeys days in advance and those who went on the occasional bike ride stayed away because there were no street lights to guide their way.

Bob used it simply because it was the quickest way home. He'd grown tired of the pubs in Mickleover and walked the three miles to Etwall where he felt the beer was better and the conversation too.

The trek back home wasn't too taxing for the former railway maintenance man. He was light on his feet despite just passing his seventieth birthday. Walking was his main form of exercise and with a few pints inside him he found he could go faster even if he had to be more careful because of the sodden leaves which at this time of year were falling freely from the trees.

Thankfully the rain that had caused meteorologists to issue flood warnings across the East Midlands had died down; if his clothes were wet by the time he arrived home it would be through sweat rather than showers.

He looked up. Only two days from a full moon and there was enough illumination to guide him, although the murky, gunmetal clouds had every intention of obliterating the light before Bob reached the first of several farm gates that blocked his way.

The only thing he'd heard for several minutes was the sound of his sturdy shoes grinding against the path's surface. But then a rustling in front of him caused him to frown. He peered into a gloomy, almost impenetrable hedge at one end of a field where cows usually spent their mind-numbingly tedious days.

Stupid old fool, Bob chided himself. Just a fox or some other animal that preferred this time of day.

He subconsciously pulled up the lapel of his thin coat as the wind gusted on his bare neck.

He set off again and had gone only a few yards when something glinted through a small gap where the moon penetrated ancient trees that hung over the path. He relaxed when he realised it was a bike, relatively new but abandoned because of a twisted front wheel.

As he walked on he recalled the heyday of the railway line. It used to be vital for the local community. But passenger services had stopped when he was a lad and freight trains had been phased out by the time he'd become a teenager.

Bob knew he'd soon come to a couple of bridges. One, Badger's Bridge, got its name because there were setts nearby. It reminded him of a fictional location in the television drama series *Midsomer Murders*.

He was approaching Heage Lane Bridge where in the past he'd seen copies of the New Testament and religious pamphlets left by Christians who were keen to share their faith. This time there was something else which seemed out of place.

As Bob walked on he realised it was a man slumped on a bench.

'You all right, mate?' Bob said, an opening line in a conversation which usually elicited a standard and not always truthful answer.

No reply. Not even an acknowledgement.

Stuff you, thought Bob. Manners cost nothing but if you can't be bothered to grunt out a reply, I'm not going to waste any more breath.

As Bob passed the bench, he noticed the man's head was nestling in his chest; he looked like someone who'd nodded off in front of the television.

Bob crouched down for a closer look – and saw the man wasn't breathing.

Trying to jump up and run off in the same movement, Bob fell backwards. He turned on one side and put his hand out to steady himself. He sat for a few moments, the dampness of the path turning his trousers a darker colour.

Think, you idiot, Bob chastised himself. What would a detective on one of those television series he was so fond of do in this situation?

He got to his feet. Looking around, he realised there was no one else nearby. Relief. Whoever had attacked this man was nowhere to be seen. Had he made a swift getaway? Or had this poor guy been here for some time with not even inquisitive wildlife to disturb him?

He pulled his antiquated mobile phone out of his jacket, composed himself and dialled 999.

Detective Inspector Miles Davies took an album out of its cover and slid it from its inner sleeve, holding it by its edge and centre without getting his fingerprints on the vinyl.

*Tubular Bells* by Mike Oldfield. Miles' father had bequeathed him his record collection when he died. Everything from avant-garde and trad jazz to blues, gospel, soul music and heavy rock.

The troubled genius that was Oldfield. The first release on the Virgin Records label and used on the soundtrack of *The Exorcist*. Music lauded as daring as well as experimental. Miles didn't care about its history; he just found it relaxing late-night listening.

He sat down with the latest edition of the East Midlands Express, bought at a nearby convenience store along with a ready meal which lay half-eaten on a well-used coffee table, milk and a box of cereal for the following morning's breakfast.

He scanned the usual reports of second-tier criminals being sent down for everything from fraud to assault before moving on to a story about a council's complaint that the government gave it "inadequate" funding.

He skipped over uninteresting, syndicated features which were in the paper only because they were cheap to buy rather than being intellectually stimulating.

When he turned to the sport, his curiosity was piqued by a headline right across one of the pages:

#### MYSTERY SURROUNDS STORM'S AMERICAN STAR

Written by Kevin Michaels, the story filled a spot usually reserved for the latest news from one of the region's football teams. The revelation that a player who'd made only a few first-team appearances had picked up a groin strain would make the lead on a quiet day – but here was something about the Derby Storm basketball club. With a headline like that, Davies thought, it won't be about anything they've achieved *on* the court.

*'Allegations about Derby Storm's latest American import Yandel Eliot have emerged only a few weeks after the former Duke University player arrived in the city.*

*There are reports that police wanted to speak to him about the murder of a friend who was stabbed to death after visiting a nightclub in Durham, North Carolina.*

*Storm management have remained tight-lipped about the speculation. We have tried to reach the 6ft 10in centre for comment.*

*But Storm fans have been asking why a player of Eliot's calibre is playing in Derby. He averaged an impressive 12 points and 11 rebounds in his senior year at Duke and there was a surprise when he did not put himself forward for the world's greatest league, the NBA.*

*He was then expected to sign for a top European club where he could command a six-figure salary.*

*But whether he could not take the pressure of playing at such a high level or if there is a secret behind Eliot's appearance in Derby remains to be seen.*

*For now, Storm supporters are basking in the quality and flair that Eliot brings to the team. The question on all their lips, though, is: will he still be here at the end of the season?*

Davies re-read the report, trying to think of a reason why Eliot would choose to come to Derby. He must have had the right papers and he wouldn't have a criminal record or he wouldn't get a work permit to play in this country.

Davies made a mental note to check for any comments on social media. He was determined to see what else he could find out about Yandel Eliot.

He was startled as his phone rang. He groaned, not because he knew he would have to go back to work but because he'd get little sleep tonight.

'DI Davies.'

'Sorry to bother you, sir. I know you're not on call but we're struggling at the moment. The on-call detective inspector's already dealing with one major incident and now we've got a body. This one's near your home, so can you deal with it?'