

EXTRACT

The Killer Next Door
Alex Marwood

Prologue

He checks his watch and downs the last of his coffee. 'Okay. Miss Cheryl should be done with her fag break. Let's take you down to her.'

She follows him down to the interview rooms and he surreptitiously checks his reflection in the wired glass of a door as he passes it. DI Cheyne's a bit older than he usually goes for, but she's a good-looking woman. Slightly hard-faced, but a life in the Met doesn't make for a lot of childlike innocence. Doesn't hurt to keep your options open, anyway. Women who understand your unorthodox working hours are few and far between; attractive ones even fewer.

'You should probably know,' he tells her, 'she's pretty tired and upset, and we've still got a lot to get through, so if you could keep it shortish, that would be good.'

'Sure,' she says. 'I don't suppose it'll take that long, anyway. How is she? Cooperative?'

'Pissed off,' he says. 'In the custody of Social Services, so you can't blame her. So she's a bit sulky. And she's not the sharpest tool in the shop. No point asking her to read anything, for a start.'

'That's okay. Think she can look at a photo?'

'Oh. I should think so. We'll give it a go, anyway.'

Cheryl Farrell is back in the interview room after her cigarette break, elbow on the table and tear-streaked face resting wearily on her hand. She's pale and, DI Cheyne guesses from the dampness of her forehead, still in some degree of pain. The orthopaedic pink of the shoulder brace that holds her collarbone in

place does nothing for her complexion. Probably could be pretty, thinks DI Cheyne, if it wasn't for the generally sulky demeanour. Golden-brown skin, curly African hair that she's bleached until it's a coppery shade of bronze, overplucked eyebrows, almond-shaped brown eyes that she rolls at the newcomer.

The lawyer looks like he hasn't sifted from his seat in a decade. He's still scribbling furiously, just as he was when DI Burke left to collect the visitor. The social worker sits, sensible hair and sensible shoes and an air of New Labour sanctimony pouring off her, in the chair next to the girl. 'All done!' she says brightly. 'She's had her cancer stick.'

'Oh, fuck off, you,' the girl gives her a look that would melt ice.

Merri Cheyne is longing for a smoke herself. Those nicotine tabs give her terrible indigestion. She ignores the social worker – best thing to do in most circumstances if you can manage it, she's found – and takes a seat on the other side of the table, next to Chris Burke. Cheryl turns back to DC Barnard and looks at him sullenly.

'So what were you on about?' Her strong Scouse accent is surprising in one who's been in the south so long.

'The television,' says DC Barnard.

'Oh, yeah.'

There's a silence. The girl looks like she would be slumping, if the brace would let her. Truly, thinks DI Cheyne, not the sharpest tool in the shop. He did warn me.

DC Barnard clears his throat. 'So tell us about the television, Cheryl? How did it come to be in your possession?'

'You what?'

'How did you get it, Cheryl? Where did it come from?'

'Oh.' The girl sniffs heavily and wipes her nose with the back of her hand. 'He said it was spare,' she says. 'Said he'd bought a new one and did I want it?'

'And you didn't wonder why he was offering you televisions?'

'I knew exactly why he was offering it,' she says, with a glare of defiance.

'And you accepted it?'

'If you're asking if I shagged him to get a second-hand telly, no. But there's no law against letting a fella give you a present because he thinks it might get you to, is there?'

'Fair point.'

'Anyway, I needed a telly. D'you know how bloody boring it is if you've got not money and no telly? I wasn't going to give him a –' she sneaks a look at the social worker to see if she's going to get a rise ' – blowjob, but I wasn't going to tell him to fuck off either, was I?'

'Well, I can see that there might have been some chance that things could get a bit unpleasant when he realised...'

'Whatever,' says Cheryl. 'Most of your lot –' she narrows her eyes at her minder again ' – think they can get a feel for a bag of crisps and a Fanta. At least I *wanted* a telly.'

The social worker stiffens beside her, offended. Amazing, thinks DI Cheyne. Even after a deluge of scandals, they're still blanking suggestions that their own might not be perfect.

'And when was this...?'

'Don't know. Two, three weeks? Ages before the weather broke. It was still boiling bloody hot and he kept looking at my tits cause I was wearing a vest. I just

thought he was another dirty old bloke. C'mon. Nobody else thought he was up to anything, either. D'you think I'd've stayed in that house, if I did?'

'So you don't think any of your neighbours had any suspicions, either?'

'No! I've told you! Place smelled like shit, but it's not exactly the first time I've been somewhere that smelled like shit. Anyway, they all had their own stuff to worry about, I should think. We hardly talked to each other, 'til it happened. It wasn't a flatshare or anything. We weren't *friends*.'

DI Burke opens the cardboard folder that the boss handed to him when he introduced DI Cheyne. On the top, an A4 photo of a woman: streaked blonde hair, low-cut white mini-dress, white slingbacks, white handbag, Versace jacket, oversized sunglasses perched on the top of her head. As unmistakably Essex as Stansted crotch crystals. She's looking away from the camera, holding a half-drunk glass of champagne. It looks like a picture taken at a public event of some sort, the races, perhaps. He studies it for a few seconds. Wonders if this will be the picture the papers go with. Clears his throat pointedly, and DC Barnard stops and turns.

'Sorry, Bob,' he says. 'Cheryl, this is DI Cheyne. She's from Scotland Yard.'

The same bovine unresponsiveness. Cheryl pouts and rolls her eyes again.

'The Metropolitan Police Headquarters?'

'Organised Crime Squad,' interjects DI Cheyne. 'You can call me Merri, if you like.'

Usually announcing this will produce some signs of interest, but the girl just gives a don't-care shrug of her good shoulder.

'DI Cheyne's not working on this case,' he says, 'but we think there might be a connection with something else she's working on.'

'Right,' says Cheryl, suspiciously.

DI Cheyne smiles at him and takes the folder. Lays it on the tabletop in front of the girl. 'Cheryl,' she asks, 'does the name Lisa Dunne mean anything to you?'

Cheryl shakes her head, her face a mask. She opens the folder and slides the picture across the table so she can see it. 'Well, can I ask you, Cheryl? Do you recognise this woman?'

The girl slides the photo towards her, mouth turned down. Looks up, her spidery eyebrows arched. 'That's Collette!' she says. 'I thought you said Lisa something.'

DI Cheyne and DI Burke exchange a look. Damn, it says. It really was her, then. 'Collette?'

'She lived in no1. Didn't look like this when she was there, but it's her. Where did you get this?'

'Collette?'

'Collette. She moved in in, ooh, early June. After Nikki went...' she suddenly looks sick again, and her eyes fill with tears. '...went missing.'

'And have you seen her lately?'

'No.'

'What sort of no? Can you be a bit more specific?'

The girl looks blank. DI Cheyne simplifies. 'Can you remember when you last saw her?'

'Not for a few days,' says Cheryl. 'But I didn't really think about it. She was never going to be here long, though. I think she only took the flat for a bit, while she did some... business or something. Something to do with her mum. I don't know, really. She wasn't friendly, exactly. Sort of person who wouldn't recognise you if you

passed her in the street, if you see what I mean. We said hello on the stairs a few times, that sort of thing. Why?’

Chris Burke puts his prepare-yourself face on. ‘Cheryl, I’m afraid that there were some body parts in the flat that didn’t match up with the known victims. The ones in the flat, I mean. There was more in the surrounding area. Down on the railway embankment. In the old bonfire at the end of the garden.’

Cheryl looks like she’s been socked in the face. Grips the table as though she’s about to faint.

‘Are you okay, Cheryl?’ asks the social worker. ‘We can take another break, if you need.’

‘Are you saying there were more?’

‘Um... We’ve not established it as fact. But yes. Things are pointing that way, I’m afraid.’

‘Oh, God,’ she says.

‘And there were... among the remains... you know he was keeping stuff in the freezer compartment of his fridge, right? Well, there were a couple of fingers in there. So we took prints, and ran them, and, well, they matched up with this woman. Lisa Dunne. She’s been missing for a while. Three years, as a matter of fact. We’ve been looking for her.’

‘Why? What’s she done?’

‘Doesn’t matter now. She was a witness to something, you don’t need to know the detail. But... well, we just need to confirm if this is her.’

‘Oh, God,’ she says again. She’s visibly shaken, her brown skin gone grey and her eyes as big as soup plates. ‘Oh, no. He can’t have. She was in Nikki’s room. It’s like he was...’

The police wait while the news sinks in. Well, thinks DI Cheyne. That's one avenue shut off, and we were days off tracking her down. All that work, and Tony Stott's still scot-free.

'I'm sorry,' she says. 'I know it's a shock. But we need you to tell us what you remember about her.'

'What do you want to know? Oh, God. I can't take this in.'

'I'm sure,' says DI Cheyne gently. 'It must be a terrible shock. But we need you to concentrate, Cheryl. For Lisa's sake.'

Cher Farrell swipes an arm across her eyes and clears her nose. Glares at the police, the lawyer, the social worker. 'Collette,' she insists. 'Her name was Collette.'