

Chapter One

July 2019: Stonesend, Oxfordshire

The day started like any other. No one could have predicted the tragedy that would later end it. It was just another summer's day. There was no hint of danger in the air or the smell of evil. Life was as it always was. At precisely 8.45, Nat Gordon, the butcher, lifted his shop shutter revealing bloody lumps of meat and naked chickens hanging from hooks. Inside, it smelt of blood and sawdust, but its cool, tiled interior offered a refuge from the heat, which later would become unbearable, the sun beating down on the residents of Stonesend with unrestrained brutality. Even now, at nine in the morning, the mugginess was oppressive. Next to the butcher's, the village newsagent opened its doors; fans were switched on, and windows thrown open. Children, their tiny hands clasped by weary mothers, trotted towards the village primary school, lingering for a few moments outside the shop, where the smell of liquorice and chocolate was difficult to resist. The school overlooked the playing fields, and here the mums would sit, chat, and smoke for fifteen minutes after dropping off their offspring. Beth Harper edged her car out onto the busy high street. The humidity pressed down on her with a vengeance, and she wished her car had air conditioning. She could feel her loose shirt clinging to her back. The heat wasn't helping her hangover in the least. She shouldn't have drunk so much at Geoff's retirement do last night, but it had felt good to finally let her hair down. It was the first night in months that she hadn't thought about Ben. Was he thinking of her now, today, on their wedding anniversary?

'Expect another sizzler,' warned the Radio 1 DJ. 'No end to the heatwave yet. How are you all coping out there? Let us know what you're doing to keep cool. Phone us on....'

Beth switched off the radio. She wasn't coping, and the heat was adding to her feelings of depression. She stopped the car outside the newsagents and stepped past a group of youngsters who had ignored the sign, 'Two children at a time in the shop' and headed to the counter.

'Don't they teach you to read at school?' she asked, pointing to the sign.

'Yes, but they don't teach us maths,' said one of the kids cheekily.

She recognised him. It was Danny Carpenter.

'Enough of your cheek, Danny.' She smiled. 'I know your dad, remember.'

'They're no trouble,' said Ron, the owner.

'Don't encourage them.'

She placed a packet of paracetamol and a bottle of water onto the counter.

'Feeling fragile, are we?' asked Ron.

'Geoff's leaving do last night,' she explained.

'Yes, we heard all you law-abiding citizens living it up. Almost called the cops, we did.' He winked good-humouredly.

'It's going to be another hot one,' she said, wiping the sweat from her forehead.

'Need some rain for my sweetpeas,' grumbled Ron.

She drove slowly past the school and the cars parked on double yellow lines and manoeuvred her car into the police station car park. She swung the Polo round expertly and then pushed her foot hard on the brake.

'Who the...'

Some arsehole had parked in her space.

'Shit. I don't believe this,' she groaned.

Like she wasn't late enough. She parked behind the blue Clio and hurried into the station. The air inside was cooler, but not that much. Give her winter any day.

'Okay, which one of you wankers parked in my space?' she demanded.

There was a deafening silence as her work colleagues turned to look at her.

'What? Why are you all looking at me like that?'

'Good morning, Detective Sergeant Harper,' said a voice behind her.

She turned to her chief. Sweat trickled down her back. Why weren't the offices better air-conditioned?

'Sorry I'm late, Sir. Gridlock outside the school,' she lied.

Beth then noticed the dark-haired man standing beside the Super. He looked familiar, but she couldn't quite place him. He was looking at her intently.

'I think the wanker might be me,' he said.

Beth noted it wasn't said with any kind of humour. Much to her annoyance, she felt herself blush.

'Well, that's my parking space,' she said defensively, attempting to cover her embarrassment.

'You missed the introductions, DS Harper,' interrupted Chief Superintendent Lewis. 'This is DI Tom Miller. You'll be working together. He's Geoff's replacement.'

Beth could feel everyone's eyes on her. DI Miller held out

'I'm looking forward to working with you,' he said softly. 'I should warn you, I'm a stickler for punctuality.'

His dark brown sultry eyes met hers. Beth kept hers steady. Tom Miller, where had she heard that name before? Beth knew the face, knew the name. Then, she realised. Now she knew why he looked familiar. He was even more handsome than he had looked in the newspaper photos.

'You're joking, right?' she exclaimed.

There were murmurs around the room. Christ, did they have to do this in front of everyone?

The Chief Super's lips tightened, and he said, 'A word, Detective Sergeant.'

He indicated his office, and Beth followed him in.

'What's he doing here?' Beth demanded as soon as the door closed.'

'Detective Sergeant Harper, I would request you keep your voice down.'

'You can't be serious. Doesn't he have a drink problem?'

'Don't you have a hangover?'

'I don't have one every day.'

'He's been transferred. He's a good copper.'

'Good coppers don't mess up.'

'Don't they?'

'Not as far as I'm concerned.'

'He was under a lot of pressure.'

'He left a crucial murder witness alone in a hotel room so he could get a drink. Anything could have happened to her.'

'We all know the story, Beth. He's been transferred to a quieter division.'

Beth shook her head in surprise.

'A quieter division? Are we babysitters now? I could do the job better.'

'You had a chance to apply for the position. You chose not to.'

'My marriage had just fallen apart. I thought I wouldn't be up to it. But if I'd known alcoholics were eligible, I might have thought twice...'

Chief Superintendent Lewis banged his hand down on the table. Beth jumped.

'Enough,' he said. 'He doesn't drink now. Get over it, Beth. You've got to work with him.'

'Against my better judgement,' she said.

'We don't make judgements. We try to be considerate.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Because I knew you'd react like this.'

'He's fragile, Brian. How the hell can he be in charge?'

'You're dismissed, DS Harper.'

'But...'

'There is nothing else to discuss.'

Beth sighed and left the office. Miller was nowhere to be seen.

'In Geoff's office,' said Matt, nodding towards the door. 'Didn't anyone tell you? I thought you would have been the first to know.'

Beth shook her head.

'I didn't apply for the position because I didn't think a broken person would be good for the job,' she said miserably. 'I don't believe this.'

'I know,' said Matt, tapping her gently on the arm.

Beth pulled off her shoulder bag and hung it over her chair before knocking on the DI's door.

'Come in,' he called.

She stepped into the room and closed the door behind her.

It was strange seeing someone else behind Geoff's desk. All the familiar things she'd come to know over the years had gone. The timeless portrait of him and Tina, smiling with their two boys, had always been a comfort, a reminder that even her boss was human. There were no photos on the desk now.

'I want you to know that I would have voiced my objections had I known you were coming,' she said bluntly.

His steady gaze met hers.

'Thanks for telling me.'

'You should know I'm not happy,' she said.

'I'd never have guessed.'

He didn't get up from behind the desk.

'I'm never late,' she said defensively.

'I'm pleased to hear that. Is that all?'

'You're in my parking space,' she said and left the office.

'Being angry doesn't suit you,' said Matt as she sat at her desk opposite him. She forced a smile; she wasn't in the mood for Matt's chatter. His energy wore her out. It seemed endless some days. He was young, and she felt ancient. He played for the village rugby team and challenged everyone to a game of squash except her. Everyone knew she only ran when chased and avoided exercise in the same way she avoided church. For all that, she managed to stay, as she would put it, 'in good nick'. She didn't look thirty-five. At least, she hoped she didn't. She certainly felt more like seventy-five these days.

'He's in my bloody parking space,' she said and then laughed when she realised how ridiculous it sounded.

'He's going to find Stonesend a lot quieter than London. He'll probably go out of his mind with boredom and move on before you know it,' said Matt.

'A quiet division was what they wanted for him, apparently.'

'Can't get quieter than here. Perhaps we should ask him to come out for a drink tonight? Make him feel welcome. Cut him a bit of slack, you know.'

'I'm having dinner with my sister. It's her birthday. Besides, don't you think inviting an ex-alcoholic for a drink is rubbing salt in the wound?'

'It could be worse, you know', smiled Matt.

'Could it?'

'It could have been a woman,' he grinned.

'Oh, sod off,' she said.