

FROM THE DEAD

By

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PROLOGUE

For a few seconds after the petrol tank goes up, the woods are shocked into silence.

At least that's how it seems, as though it takes those moments of quiet and stillness after the whump of the explosion for every bird and insect and small mammal to release the breath it has been holding. For the wind to begin moving through the trees again, although, even then, it dares do no more than whisper. Obviously, as far as the men watching the burning car are concerned, it might just be that it takes that long for the ringing in their ears to die down.

And of course, the man inside the car has finally stopped screaming.

Ten minutes earlier, dragging him towards the Jag, the younger of the two men had needed to slap the poor bugger a few times to keep him quiet. As soon as he'd been bundled into the passenger seat though, there was no shutting him up. Not when he'd seen the handcuffs come out and the petrol can that had been taken from the boot.

Not once he'd realised what they were going to do.

"I didn't think he'd make such a racket," the older man says.

"They always make a racket." The younger man sniffs and smiles. "You're not normally around for this bit, are you?"

"Not if I can help it." The older man shoves his hands deep into the pockets of his Barbour jacket, looks up at the trees crowding in on the small clearing. The light is already starting to go and the temperature is dropping fast.

The younger man grins. "Don't worry, it'll warm up in a minute." He opens the back door of the Jag and starts sloshing petrol around.

The man who is handcuffed to the steering wheel is throwing himself back and forth in the front seat, the cuffs rattling against the walnut steering wheel and the spittle flying on to the dash, and windscreen. He starts shouting, begging the man with the petrol can to stop. He tells him he's got a family, tells

him their names. He says, "You don't need to do this." Then, "For Christ's sake," and "Please..."

The older man winces, like he's got a bad headache and tells his colleague to close the door. Shut the bloody noise out a bit. The younger man does as he's told, tosses the empty petrol can back in the boot, then walks across and offers his employer a cigarette.

It's refused, and he takes out a Zippo, lights one of his own.

"Happy?"

The man in the Barbour nods. "Just needed to get the details right. The clothes, you know? Jewellery, all that."

The younger man nods towards the car. "Shame about your watch."

The older man glances down at the outline of a wristwatch, pale against a Barbados tan. "It's all just...stuff, isn't it?" He shrugs. 'Watches, cars, what have you. Means nothing at the end of the day. Living is what counts, right?'

The younger man draws smoke deep into his lungs then hisses it away between his teeth. He takes two more fast drags then flicks the nub-end into the trees. Says, "Shall I get this done, then?"

He takes out the lighter again and a rag from the other pocket, which he twists between his fingers as he walks back to the car.

The man inside the Jag is crying now and banging his head against the side window. His voice is rasping and ragged and only audible for as long as it takes to open the door, fire up the lighter and toss the burning rag on to the back seat. No more than a few seconds, but it's easy enough to make out what's being said.

Those names again. His wife and son.

They're for nobody's benefit for his own this time and he repeats them, eyes closed, until the smoke stops them in his throat...

The two men move back towards the trees and watch the fire take hold from a safe distance. Within ninety seconds the windows have blown and the figure in the front seat is no more than a black shape.

“Where you going to go?”

The older man nudges the tip of his shoe through the mulch. “Now, why would you think you need to know that?”

“Just asking, is all.”

“Yeah, well. Just think about the worthless crap you’ll be spending your money on.”

“Your money, you mean.”

“Right. Can’t be too many like this, can there? How many times you been paid twice for one job?”

“Never had a job anything like this one—”

And that’s when the petrol tank catches and goes up...

Half a minute later, they turn and walk back towards where the second car is parked; away from the sounds that have begun to roll and echo around the clearing after those few dead seconds. The wind and the leaves and the creak of branches. The crackle and hiss as flames devour flesh and leather.

A hundred yards or so from the main road, the older man stops and looks up.

“Listen...”

“What?”

He waits, then points when he hears the sound again. “Woodpecker. Can you hear him?”

The younger man shakes his head.

“Great spotted, I’m guessing. He’s the commonest.”

They start walking again, the woods getting darker by the minute.

“How do you know stuff like that?”

“Reading,” the older man says. “Books, magazines, whatever. You should try it sometime.”

“Yeah, well you’ll have plenty of time on your hands now, won’t you.” The younger man nods back in the direction of the car, the blaze clearly visible a mile or more behind them, through the dark tangle of oaks and giant beeches.

“You can read about fucking woodpeckers ‘til the cows come home. Now you’re dead...”

PART ONE

A DECENT TRICK

ONE

Anna Carpenter had eaten sushi only once before, when some bloke she'd gone out with for about five minutes had been trying to impress her, but this was her first time in one of these conveyor belt places. She thought it was a good idea. It made sense, having the chance to look at the food before you took the plunge and it didn't matter if you let it go by half a dozen times while you made your mind up, because it was cold anyway.

Fiendishly clever, these Japanese...

She reached for a plate of salmon *nigiri* from the belt and asked the man sitting next to her if he could pass the soy sauce. He slid the bottle towards her with a smile, offered her the pot of *wasabi*.

"God, no, that's the really hot stuff, isn't it?"

The man told her it was just a question of not overdoing it and she said that she'd rather not risk it, that she was something of a novice when it came to eating raw fish.

"This your lunch hour?" the man asked.

"Yeah. You?"

"Well, I'm my own boss, so I usually manage to sneak a bit more than an hour, if I'm honest." He expertly plucked what looked like a small pasty from his plate and dipped it into some sauce. "You work nearby?"

Anna nodded, her mouth full of rice, grunted a yes.

"What do you do?"

She swallowed. "Just temping," she said. "Trying not to die of boredom."

A waiter appeared at her shoulder with the bottle of water she'd ordered and by the time he'd left, she and the man sitting next to her were all but strangers

once more. Anna felt as awkward as he obviously did about picking their conversation up again, and neither needed any condiments passing.

They ate and exchanged smiles. Glanced and looked away. A nod from one or the other when something was especially tasty.

He was in his mid-to-late thirties – ten years or so older than she was – and looked good in a shiny, blue suit that probably cost as much as she had spent on her car. He had a crinkly smile and had missed a bit just below his Adam's apple the last time he'd shaved. He looked like he worked out, but not too much, and she guessed he was not the sort who moisturised more often than she did.

He was still sitting next to her by the time she had finished.

“Maybe I'll be brave and try the *wasabi* next time,” she said.

“Sorry?” He looked round at her in mock surprise, as though he had forgotten she was there, but Anna wasn't fooled for a second. She had been aware for the last ten minutes that he had finished eating. She'd seen the pile of empty plates next to him, watched him eke out a cup of green tea and known very well that he was waiting for her to finish.

She leaned in close to him. “We could go to a hotel.”

Now the surprise was genuine. He had not been expecting her to make the first move. He opened his mouth and closed it again.

“Seeing as you can sneak more than an hour.”

He nodded, but could not make eye contact with her.

“Why don't we find out how much you *really* like eating sushi...”

It was deliberately crude and she felt herself redden as she said it, but she could see straight away that it had done the trick. He muttered, “Christ” as the crinkly smile became a stupid grin. He waved the waiter across, pointing to

Anna's empty plates as well as his own to indicate that he would be paying for both of them.

The hotel was a five minute walk away. Tucked behind Kingsway and within conveniently easy reach of Holborn tube station and a well-stocked chemist. A notch or two up from a Travelodge, without being silly money.

He took out his wallet as they approached the reception desk.

"I'm not a hooker," Anna said.

"I know that."

"I'm perfectly happy to pay my share of the room."

"Look, it's not a problem," he said. "You said you were temping, so..."

"Fine, whatever." She caught the eye of the young man behind the desk. He nodded politely, then looked away, sensing he should not show any sign that he had seen her before. "If you *want* to be flash, you can order us a bottle of something," Anna said, then turned and walked across the lobby.

In the lift, he asked what her name was.

She shook her head. "Ingrid...Angelina...Michelle. Whatever turns you on the most. It's more exciting that way." She closed her eyes and moaned softly as his hand moved to stroke her backside.

As the lift juddered to a halt at the first floor, he said, "My name's Kevin..."

The room was larger than she had been expecting – a decent-sized double – and she guessed that he had splashed out, which made her feel oddly sorry for him.

"Nice," he said, slipping off his jacket.

She headed straight for the bathroom. "Give me a minute," she said.

She sent the text while she was using the toilet, then stood in front of the mirror and wiped away the excess make-up. She could hear him moving around

on the other side of the door, heard the bedsprings creak and imagined him pushing down on the mattress, testing it out like some sitcom gigolo, with that grin still plastered to his face.

When she came out, he was sitting on the edge of the bed in his boxer shorts, his hands in his lap.

“Where’s that sushi then?” he said.

“Aren’t we going to have a drink first?”

As if on cue, there was a knock at the door and he nodded towards it. “They didn’t have champagne,” he said. “So I got some sparkling wine. It’s more or less the same price, actually...”

Anna moved quickly to the door and opened it, then turned and saw Kevin’s face whiten and fall when his wife stepped into the room.

“Oh, shit,” he said, one hand still covering the rapidly dwindling erection, while the other scrabbled for shirt and trousers.

The woman watched him from the doorway, clutched her handbag to her stomach. Said, “You sad wanker.”

“She picked me up, for heaven’s sake.” He jabbed a finger in Anna’s direction. “I was just having my bloody lunch, and this...*tart*...”

“I know,” his wife said. “And she had to drag you here kicking and screaming, right?”

“I can’t believe you did this. That you set this up.”

“What, you can’t believe I didn’t *trust* you?”

Anna tried to squeeze past the man’s wife towards the door. “I’d better get out of your way.”

The woman nodded quickly and stood aside. “The money’s already gone into your firm’s account,” she said.

“Right, thanks...”

“You bitch,” Kevin shouted. He was still struggling to yank his trousers on and almost tumbled, bracing himself against a chest of drawers.

Anna opened the door.

“And don’t flatter yourself either, love. It was only because it was on offer.”

The wife had tears in her eyes, but still managed a look that was somewhere between pity and rage. It seemed to Anna that both were aimed as much at her as at the woman’s husband.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Anna said.

She stepped quickly out into the hotel corridor as Kevin began shouting again and winced as the door slammed shut behind her. She walked quickly past the lift and took the stairs down to the lobby two at a time.

Tried not to think of his face and his pale, hairless body and the things he must have thought they were going to do.

The words he’d shouted after her.

“You’re kidding yourself, love,” he’d said. “If you think you’re not a hooker.”

On the tube back to Victoria, Anna picked up a tattered *Metro* and tried to read, did her best not to think about her afternoon’s work.

“You’re kidding yourself...”

She knew that the man whose marriage she had probably screwed up was bang on the money in more ways than one, that almost everything about what she was doing was wrong. She’d seen some of the flashier websites and knew how the bigger and better agencies handled the more radical end of ‘specialist matrimonial investigations’. There were always at least two investigators involved in any honey-trap operation. The well-being and safety of the

investigator was always put first. The bigger agencies used hidden cameras and microphones and had systems of pre-agreed secret signals.

Yeah, right.

She could see the sneer on Frank's face; his gravelly voice thick with sarcasm.

"So, why don't you sod off and work for one of the *bigger* agencies, then?"

She imagined herself calmly giving it him right back. Blithely announcing that *one* of these days she just *might* do *exactly* that. The truth was, that even if she had walked into that sushi restaurant with armed back-up, a concealed tape-recorder and a pen that squirted acid hidden in her knickers, it would not have made her feel any better about what she was doing.

The direction her life was taking.

Money might have helped a little, might have eased her discomfort, but there was not a great deal of that either. In one of those rare moments when Frank Anderson had not been angry or pissed or unreasonably vituperative, he had sat Anna down and tried to explain the financial situation.

"I'd love to pay you a bit more," he had said, sounding almost, just for a second or two, as though he meant it. "I'd *love* to, but look around. Everything's gone tits up in specialist services like ours and this credit crunch is biting us all in the arse. You understand?"

Anna had considered reminding Frank that she had a good economics degree, but guessed where the conversation would end.

"So, why don't you sod off back to that flashy bank, then?"

That was a trickier question to answer...

Because you promised me things. Because I thought this would be a challenge. Because I was bored stupid playing with other people's money and

you told me that if there was one job that was never predictable, that was always interesting, it was this one.

Because going back means giving up.

Anna thought back to the day she'd phoned *F.A. Investigations*, excited about the ad she'd seen in the local paper; keen as mustard and green as grass.

Eighteen months and a lifetime ago. What the hell had she thought she was doing, walking out on a well-paid job, on friends and colleagues, for...this?

Ten pounds an hour to make tea and keep Frank's accounts in order. To answer the phone and come on to men who couldn't keep it in their pants.

And yet, despite the way things had panned out, Anna knew that her instincts had been right, that there had been nothing wrong with her ambition. How many people were stuck, too afraid to make a change, however much they yearned for it?

How many...settled for jobs, partners, *lives*?

She had wanted something different, that was all. She had thought that in helping other people she would be helping herself. That, at the very least, it would stop her turning into one of those hard-faced, City bitches that click-clacked past her all day long in their Jimmy Choos. And yes, she had thought it might be a little more exciting than futures and sodding hedge-funds.

Kidding herself.

Same as she had been when she picked up the leaflet about joining the army, or when she'd thought about a career in the police force for all of five minutes. A year and a half before, several of her friends had described her radical career shift from banker to private detective as 'brave'. "Braver than me," her friend Angie, a triage nurse, had said. Rob, who was a teacher in a rough north London school, had nodded his agreement. Anna had suspected they really meant 'stupid', but had relished the compliment all the same.

A soldier, though? A copper? Certainly not brave enough for *that*...

Anna stood as the train pulled into Victoria and caught the eye of the woman who had been sitting opposite. She tried to summon a smile but had to look away, convinced suddenly and for no good reason that the woman had got the measure of her. Could see what she was.

She felt over-wound and light-headed as the escalator carried her up towards the street; desperate now to get back to the office and change. She wanted to get out of the stupid heels *she* was click-clacking around in and back into her trainers. She wanted the day to end and the dark to wrap itself around her. She wanted to drink and sleep. It wasn't until she got to the ticket barrier and fumbled for her Oyster card that she realised she had a torn-out page of the *Metro* crushed into her fist.

The office was wedged between a dry-cleaners and a betting shop; a cracked brown door with dirty glass. As Anna was reaching into her handbag for the keys, a woman who had been hovering at the kerb walked towards her. Forty-odd, and something fierce in her eyes.

Anna backed off half a step. Got ready to say "no". The typical London response.

"Are you a detective?" the woman asked.

Anna just stared. No, not fierce, she thought. *Desperate*.

"I saw your ad, and I need a bit of help with something, so..."

There was no light visible through the glass, and Anna guessed that Frank's lunchtime drink had turned into several. He would have diverted any calls for *F.A. Investigations* to his mobile and would almost certainly not be back for the rest of the afternoon,

"Yes," Anna said. "I am." She took out her keys and stepped towards the door. "Come on up..."

