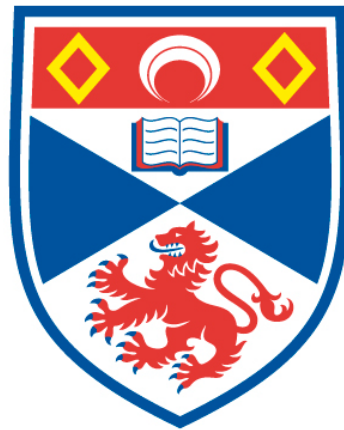


# 'Carnal acts': from theory to publication

Paul Johnston

A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD  
at the  
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## ABSTRACT

*Carnal Acts: From Theory to Publication* consists of two parts.

The first comprises Chapters 1 to 40 of the police novel *Carnal Acts*, written under the pseudonym Sam Alexander, followed by a synopsis of the remaining chapters, 41 to 155. Potential jacket copy will refer to the protagonists, Detective Inspector Joni Pax and Detective Chief Inspector Heck Rutherford, of the Police Force of North East England. The former is a female, mixed race former Metropolitan Police officer, who has moved out of London after leading a raid that ended in disaster; while the latter has only recently recovered from a near fatal stabbing. The plot concerns white slavery and is set into motion when an Albanian prostitute escapes from a brothel, killing a pimp. Two more apparently unconnected murders expand the investigation across Northumberland.

The second part of the thesis is a critical study of *Carnal Acts*. Literary theory and critical methods are used to investigate the writing process and to explicate the text's layers of meaning, not all of which were clear to the author at the time of writing. Chapter 1 considers literary and creative writing theory, paying particular attention to conceptualisations of author and reader. In Chapter 2, the chosen pseudonym is explained and compared with those of other authors; the novel's title is also examined. Chapter 3 covers the issue of genre, looking at theories and discussing both crime novel and Gothic fiction. In Chapter 4, critical approaches to character are applied to *Carnal Acts*. Chapter 5 does the same with plot. Chapters 6 and 7 take account of the manifestations of power. Chapter 6 covers the body and gender, while

Chapter 7 deals with race and class. As a conclusion, Chapter 8 describes how the first draft was transformed to one acceptable for publication.

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I, Paul Ronald Johnston, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 80,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

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*Carnal Acts*

## PROLOGUE

Somehow Gaz had managed to sleep, on his side with knees drawn up and arms folded over his chest. The bed was wide and the sheets fresh. The only light came from the crack beneath the door. It was enough for him to see the toilet through the other door, that one open. After drinking thirstily from the tap, he realised that his clothes had been removed. He was wearing some kind of loose gown, white. His heart missed a beat when he understood what it was – he'd seen his father in one when he was coughing his life away in hospital.

He ran to the door and banged on it, shouting. The wood was thick and the handle round, cold and immobile. Turning to the bed, he saw there was food – rolls, cheese, apples – and kneeled by the low table to satisfy the hunger that suddenly raged. Then he sat on the bed and tried to remember what had happened.

He'd been pissed, all right – the usual Friday night pints in the pubs he and his mates visited. It had been damp in Newcastle, but only drizzle so his nuts hadn't frozen off for a change. They'd gone for a curry and downed plenty of Indian beer. Then his memory got rough around the edges. They'd gone to the night club, he remembered that, and he'd danced with a fit bird, long dark hair and a foreign accent. And after that? A big car. Had he passed out in the back seat? Must have done. But what the fuck was he doing locked up in a room that had blacked out windows? Never mind the soft mattress and clean sheets, the place smelled damp and old, like a

dungeon.

Gaz cried out again, a chill running through him. The place was warm enough, but he was afraid. He might have been over six feet and the hardest centre back in the amateur leagues, but this was way beyond his experience. What could anyone want from him? His job at the warehouse didn't even pay enough for him to get his own place. He thought of his mother. She wouldn't be wondering where he was. He often spent the weekends at friends' places. She'd be at the kitchen table, smoking and throwing back voddie and orange. He held up his wrist in the dim light and saw that his watch had gone. How long had he been here? Another shiver took possession of him.

Then he heard footsteps, heavy as they approached, boots like the steel toe caps he wore at work. He shouted, then his voice dried up as bolts were drawn and a key turned in the lock. There was a light in what he could see was a stairwell, stone steps leading upwards. A barrel-chested figure wearing a black balaclava, thick jersey and jeans filled the space. What really scared him was the object in his captor's hands. It was long and metallic, with a point.

'Lie down!' the man ordered.

'Fuck you!' Gaz said, making a dash for the door. He was poked by the pole and a jolt of electricity threw him to the stone-flagged floor.

'On the bed!'

Quivering, Gaz got to his feet and did as he was told.

'Arms out, legs open! I'm aiming the cattle prod at your cock.'

Gaz felt metal on his right wrist and heard a click as the cuff was closed. The same happened on his other hand and both ankles.

'Don't you piss yourself,' the man growled. 'That'll earn you an arse that'll



sting for days.’ The heavy head came close to his face, dark eyes boring. ‘Aye, you’ll do,’ his captor said. ‘I see you’ve stuffed your guts.’ He straightened up and raised the gown so that Gaz’s groin and abdomen were bare. ‘One more thing.’ He took a balaclava from his pocket and pulled it over his captive’s head. This one didn’t have eyeholes. ‘Enjoy yourself,’ he said, with a sick laugh.

Lying there immobile, blind and defeated, Gaz reckoned the chances of pleasure were less than zero.

He couldn’t have been more wrong.

## 1

Joni Pax was at the window of her flat near Corham Abbey. For the first time since she'd transferred from the Met to the newly constituted Police Force of North East England three months ago, she felt that the chill had left her bones. The rain and cold winds had been a shock; the snide comments of her colleagues in the Major Crime Unit less so; for some of them, black people, even mixed race Caribbean and Caucaasian like Joni, couldn't survive in the wild north. She'd proved them wrong about that and numerous other things, but she had a way to go before they accepted her fully. In the meantime, she was going to enjoy what was left of the first real weekend of spring. She'd got to know the city and had read up about its most famous custom, as well as picking her colleagues' and neighbours' brains. She'd also driven around it in the nine-year-old Land Rover Discovery she had reconditioned.

All over Corham, midway between Newcastle and Carlisle, preparations for May Sunday were coming to an end. The evening of the first Sunday in that month was traditionally an unofficial parade. The real thing, with groups of medieval monks, Viking raiders, Border reivers and Roman legionaries, took place the following Saturday, in daylight. May Sunday, despite the religious significance it used to have (pagan Beltane and Walpurgis Night, replaced by Christian Roodmas), had for decades been an opportunity for citizens, especially the young, to let off all the steam they could raise.

When the blast furnaces and foundries on the south side of the river had still been in operation, workers had competed with each other to find the most outrageous

costume, crossing the bridges in unruly groups. Burly bearded men would prance around in short skirts, wearing their wives' bras stuffed with oranges or swedes. Pirate queens, Dusty Springfield imitators in three-foot beehives, hairy-chested Marilyn Monroes in swimsuits braved the often terrible weather. As for the women, they never had as much interest in fancy dress as their men. They wore the latest fashions – the ones they could afford – and clutched each others' arms as they swayed through the narrow streets, squealing like schoolgirls. Meanwhile, in the back lanes, the real schoolgirls were getting down to serious tongue and other business with the schoolboys. It was a demographic fact that more Corham babies were born in February than any other month, particularly to underage mothers.

In recent years May Sunday and the Saturday after had been two of the few events that produced a degree of harmony in Corham. Perhaps there was a homogeneous population in Roman times, though the presence of legions raised in continental Europe and even Asia Minor suggested otherwise, but in the final decades of the twentieth century the divisions between the town's northern and southern halves had attracted sociologists from the universities in Newcastle, Durham and beyond. The medieval town, built on a strategically salient hundred-foot cliff above the River Derwyne, had become a centre of worship and commerce because of the large abbey and monastery. It encompassed the remains of the Roman town, an important camp servicing the Wall fifteen miles to the north. In later centuries, tanning and distilling developed outside the old walls, still on the northern side. There had also been a large sugar mill, owned by the ennobled Favon family. It was only with the discovery of iron ore a few miles south of the town that the steel works and surrounding workers' communities grew up there. The area was called Ironflatts and Corham's burghers paid little attention to the rapid development there, until they

realised they could make money, serious money, from the works and the workers, as well as turn their town into a nascent city. They even built a second bridge to supplement the still operational medieval one. Pride was swallowed and profits pocketed.

But not by the poor. They had always been Corham's problem, and the multitudes that colonised Ironflatts made it worse. The tanneries, sugar processing plants and distilleries needed more labour than was available locally, so families had moved from the Derwyne and Wear urban areas. The landowners, bankers, lawyers and preachers who controlled Corham saw them as a necessary evil, but made sure only a minimum of the town's wealth was spent on them. Cheap two-up, two-down houses in narrow streets ran outwards like the spokes of a wheel from the old town centre, the abbey and its environs occupying a tear-drop shaped peninsula that the river wound round in a U-bend.

Ironflatts and its neighbouring communities south of the river were even worse. Terraced houses to the west and Sixties tower blocks in the east stood up to the disparaging gaze of the Northies, as the people beyond the Derwyne were known to the Southies. The blocks' expanses of glass reflected the red explosions from the foundries as well as the weak northeastern sun. True Corham natives blinked before shaking their heads. The brief presence of Ironflatts Rovers in the 1970s First Division was also a shock, but the team plummeted along with the local heavy industry. When the works were finally shut down in the mid-Eighties, thousands of people left the area, turning it into a social and industrial waste land. Drugs were the only burgeoning commercial venture and generations of Southies had been raddled by heroin, crack and any other poisons the disaffected youth could get a hold of. AIDS took a swathe as well. Meanwhile Northie kids did alcopops, weed and ecstasy at

weekends, dutifully doing their homework over the weekend. But not on May Sunday.

Joni went over to the picture window, which was one of the first floor flat's few features. Abbey Walk ran behind the ecclesiastical building. Its stone flanks were now even more like honey under floodlights, the square tower surmounted by the yellow-and-red-striped Northumberland flag.

Preparations of all kinds were over and it was time to hit the streets. Having been for a two-hour run, Joni was looking forward to it; not least because her mother wasn't coming.

Gaz heard the door open again. It could only have been a few minutes after the gorilla had left. Listening intently, he realised that it hadn't closed. He could see a blur of light through the wool of the balaclava. For moment he forgot about his bonds and tried to get up. A soft hand was laid on his stomach. He breathed in through the damp wool and picked up a hint of perfume. It was more subtle than any used by the women he got his end away with.

Then the hand began to move slowly downwards. He gulped involuntarily as his body responded to a shock almost as violent as the cattle prod's. He was erect before the fingers closed around his cock. He tried to raise his arms, desperate to touch the woman's breasts. A thought struck him. Maybe it wasn't a woman. Maybe the shithead who'd tied him down got off on dabbing perfume beneath his ears and slathering on hand cream.

He breathed out as he felt himself being guided into what was without any doubt a cunt, moist and welcoming. The woman began to move slowly up and down on him. The sensations were so overwhelming that Gaz came in seconds, thrusting his groin upwards in a series of jerks. He was still breathless when he took a hard slap on the cheek. The balaclava absorbed some of the force, but his head whipped sideways. Obviously he had disappointed her.

He heard the door close. What now, he thought. This is fucking crazy. Despite the painful rubbing of the cuffs, he laughed. His mates weren't going to believe this. Tied down and used as a sex toy? It was like something out of a porn film. Then he

remembered the man with the prod. What the fucking hell was going on?

Some time later the door opened again. Fingers touched his damp cock again and worked it. Then he felt the woman's breath through the wool.

'Make it last this time,' she whispered, 'or I'll cut your balls off.'

Gaz made it last.

Heck Rutherford spent a couple of hours walking on the Roman Wall on Sunday morning. There was a time when he'd have been in church, but he'd lost his faith after six months undercover with a particularly vicious Newcastle drugs gang a decade ago. Then again, it wasn't as bad as the one he'd been investigating at the end of the previous year. He made the mistake of thinking the men his unit caught exchanging cash for heroin and crack cocaine had all been disarmed. A piece of shit called Ned Sacker had a boning knife up his sleeve. He plunged it into Heck's belly and ripped it sideways harakiri-style before being truncheoned to the ground. Heck was in hospital for six weeks, lost a foot of his large intestine and was on sick leave for three months. He'd only been back for six weeks at the headquarters of the new Police Force of North East England, Pofnee as it was already widely known. Starting the Major Crimes Unit had been challenging and he hadn't fully shaken off the effects of his wound. He still had pains in his abdomen at the end of every week and walked to work them off. But that did nothing to help the fear that had gripped him. Being a northern man and an ex-rugby player, he hadn't told anyone - not even his wife. The problem was, it was getting worse. Fortunately it had no giveaway signs like shaking hands or eye twitching. He saw Sacker in his dreams, though, and felt the knife cut through his belly. How would he react if he ever had to face an armed criminal again?

Ag Rutherford heard the sound of the Cherokee as her husband pulled into the drive. They had moved to a rundown farm house ten miles northwest of Corham five years back. Heck and her father-in-law had done a lot of work on it, despite the fact



that the former's grasp of DIY was shaky. Their closest neighbours were fifty yards down the road, Henthaw being less a hamlet than a line of separate houses. She had never liked their home's name – Whiffler's Close – but had agreed to keep it because Heck, who was sentimental off duty, had a friend who'd lived there when he was a kid. Her husband wasn't great with change and he'd had to cope with a lot of it recently.

She went out as Heck was on his way to the garage, his hiking boots over his shoulder. He was trying ineffectively to push away Cass, their Golden Retriever.

'Catch any criminal Picts?'

He gave her a long-suffering look. 'The tribe that occupied the area north of the wall didn't paint themselves. They were the--'

'Votadini, a.k.a.Otadini,' Ag interrupted. 'I do know something about local history, sweetheart. 'She stepped closer. 'You look tired.'

'No worse than usual.'

'Well, that's something. Are you going into town later?'

'No chance. Morrie Sutton's on duty. Let's hope he doesn't cock anything up.'

'Dad!' Their twelve-year-old son Luke ran up and thumped his shoulder into Heck's thigh, his back bent in the approved rugby tackle position. Cass jumped up, forepaws scrabbling on the boy's sweatshirt.

Heck winced as he returned Ag's wry smile, which said, 'You wanted him to play rugby, now take the consequences'. His own nose, broken when he was nineteen and never properly reset, was a permanent reminder of the sport's hazards.

'Very good, lad,' he said. 'What've you been up to?'

'A bit of this, a bit of that,' Luke said, acting the wide boy from some TV show. Heck only ever watched the news, sport and the History Channel.

‘Hi, Daddy.’ Kat stood at the garage door, her black hair in a pony tail and pretty face damp beneath dark brown eyes.

‘Not again,’ Heck said. His daughter might only have been fourteen, but she was already showing a worrying propensity for affairs of the heart. ‘I’ll break his legs.’

She laughed. ‘Don’t be daft. He’ll be on the phone again in a few minutes.’ She held up the ludicrously expensive mobile he’d been talked into buying for her last birthday.

‘Ah, the strider returns.’ David Rutherford came under the retractable door, bowing his head with its bush of demented professor’s white hair. ‘See any interesting birds?’ he asked, with a wry smile.

His father had an encyclopaedic knowledge of wild birds, but he also retained an eye for women.

Heck shook his head in resignation.

‘Come on, you lot,’ Ag said. ‘Lunch is nearly ready.’

‘Are you doing roast spuds?’ Luke asked. His face was a mass of freckles, his red hair cut short in imitation of his father’s.

‘I might be,’ his mother replied, pulling him away from Heck. ‘Leave your Dad alone. He’s knackered himself on the Wall. Come on, Cass.’

Kat slipped her arm under her father’s. ‘You should rest more,’ she said. ‘And spend more time with us.’

Heck nodded, his eyes meeting David’s. ‘I know, pet. I need time to get my head together, that’s all. How about Monopoly after lunch?’

Kat shook her head. ‘Grandpa always steals money when he thinks we’re not looking. Cluedo?’

‘Cluedo it is,’ Heck agreed. If only catching real criminals was so easy; not that he often won the game. He’d been in love with Miss Scarlett since he was Luke’s age and he cut her all kinds of slack.

Gaz was still panting five minutes after he came. He was trying to work out what the woman was doing. This time she hadn't slapped him. He was pleased with himself because he'd made her moan and scream, but what the fuck was she up to now? He could feel her head against his thigh, but none of the rest of her body. In the light from the open door, he made out a vague shape. Was she doing a head stand against the wall?

Then a figure appeared in the door. All the pride and pleasure vanished. Heavy feet came close. He felt a sharp blade along his throat beneath the balaclava.

'Do anything except what I tell you and you'll be having a shower in your own blood,' the man said. 'Got that?'

'Yes, yes,' Gaz said, his voice embarrassingly high.

'Good. I'm taking your cuffs off, all right? After that, you're going to the bathroom. Clean yourself up, especially down there.' A gloved hand grabbed his balls.

When he was free, Gaz was walked on unsteady legs to the other door and pushed through. The door was closed behind him and an external lock turned. The light was switched on. The room was small and there was no bath, only a shower without a curtain in one corner. There was soap and shampoo, but nothing he could use as a weapon – no razor, no mirror to be smashed; even the toilet lid had been cemented against the cistern.

At least the water was hot and there was plenty of it. When Gaz finished, he

found there were no towels, only a pile of face-clothes. What was the gorilla scared of? That he'd flick his eyes out? The bastard had a fucking cattle prod. Then he had a thought. Maybe they'd taken precautions against him topping himself. That made his stomach flip. What else might be in store?

'I'm opening up,' came the gruff voice. 'You don't need to wear the balaclava now.'

When Gaz came out, hands over his groin, the man was pointing the prod at him, his face still covered.

'There are clean clothes for you and more food.' He laughed emptily. 'Get a feed down. She might be back any time.'

When he'd gone, Gaz huddled under the covers in the dark and ate more bread and cheese. He and his mates had often joked about being gigolos or toy boys. The reality wasn't funny at all; even though the sex was amazing.

Suzana - she could hardly remember her surname, the Noli family having so little significance to her any more – ran her finger across the tines of the fork. It was a heavy piece of cutlery, steel, she thought, one that must have originally belonged in a rich house. She'd found it beneath a floor board in the room that had been her prison for months, filling the gap with hair and dust so it wasn't discovered during the daily searches. The second-floor window was barred and the glass covered with black tape, but she peeled back a corner every day and had seen winter turn to watery spring, and now the first days of sun. She had no other means of telling the time, just as she had nothing of her own. Her captors had taken everything.

Although she could only vaguely remember her mother's tear-stained face and the defeated way her father had raised his arm in farewell, Suzana could still see the mountains around the village, snow on the peaks even in early October. She had grown up in their embrace and had been proud to be a 'child of the rock fathers', as the villagers called themselves. They were poor, but every family had strips of land on the terraced slopes and a few beasts. There were trees in abundance as well: almonds, chestnuts, even some bitter cherries. The river that rushed down the crack in the mountains kept the small valley fertile, while the ridge at the western end cut it off from the rest of Albania. Even Hoxha's functionaries had given the villages there a wide berth, in awe of the powerful clans that ran things the traditional way. Deals were done with the Communist state, a few lanky boys sent to do their national service and some truckloads of logs sent to the capital.

Suzana, seventeen a month before she left, brought the fork close to her right eye. She could put it out, she could rip apart her cheeks and slash open her breasts – that would reduce her value to the men who pimped her. Only one thing stopped her, and it wasn't fear for her parents. Once she'd arrived in London – how she had dreamed of that moment - and passed legally through the border control at the airport, her passport had been taken by the shaven-headed brute Leka. Later that day he and three other men raped her. She immediately knew why her father had looked at her the way he did; he had sold her, knowing full well she wasn't destined to work in a restaurant or as a cleaner. He had sold her into sex slavery to save himself. She had decided to forget him. The only way to save herself was to be harder than stone with everyone else, family included. She had shed her last tear weeks ago.

There was no mirror in the room, only a cheap wooden bed, a chair for the customers' clothes – though many of them did nothing more than undo their trousers – and a small table. On it were a box of condoms, tissues, lubricating jelly and a pair of nipple clamps. Two men liked to attach them to her (she still hadn't got used to the pain), while there was one with breasts larger than hers who clamped his own nipples. There was also a metal waste bin. When she was working, it soon filled up with sodden paper and used rubbers. During the few hours she got to herself, it served as a chamber pot.

The absence of a mirror was a blessing from God, not that Suzana had any faith. There had been an imam in her village since the end of Communism – the imposition of atheism had been one of the few things the state had been rigid about – but her family had not gone back to being Moslems. What faith would have helped her in these months of violent coupling, sometimes twenty times a day, often without protection because the customers preferred it that way? She hoped she had

passed on diseases to them. The doctor Leka brought in regularly had given her antibiotics more than once, but she wasn't allowed to stop working.

Even without the mirror, Suzana knew how she looked. She could feel the swellings on her cheeks and was sure that bones had been broken that first night when she'd fought till she was subdued. The acne that had plagued her when she was younger was still there, made worse by the chocolate she was given as a treat - the only one. Her nose was broken too, though it seemed to have reset itself in a fairly straight line. The strands of black hair that hung in front of her eyes were greasy. She thought today was her turn for the shower. It didn't matter. The customers fucked her even when she stank of the previous ones who had spurted on her face and in her mouth. They were animals, as was Leka. He had peered at her after he stripped her that first night, ogling her breasts but mocking her skinny legs and thin arms. There was more meat on them now as the 'girls' – she wasn't sure how many others were in the house – were fed a lot of white bread and tasteless yellow cheese, and on rare occasions salty sausage. But never fruit or vegetables. Her skin was pasty and slack, and she hated herself, though not as much as she hated Leka.

She heard heavy steps on the stair and darted to the loose floorboard to conceal the fork.

'Up, bitch,' Leka said, slamming the door against the wall. He gagged. 'And take that shit-can with you. Make yourself decent. It's a festival. There'll be a lot of customers.'

Suzana carried the bin against her chest, hoping he wouldn't follow her into the bathroom. He had taken her in the shower more than once, forcing her to bend over till the top of her head touched the cracked tiles on the floor. Instead, he watched her from the door-less entrance as she emptied her waste into the toilet and flushed it,



then got under the shower. There was no curtain, but she'd got used to being stared at. She scrubbed herself with the pungent brown soap and rubbed thin shampoo into her hair. She was thinking about what the bastard had said. Plenty of customers. That meant the house would be busy. Leka and his friends would be making sure the correct money was handed over and the drunken men kept in line.

It was her chance. Tonight. Suzana couldn't wait any longer. If she wasn't free by this time tomorrow, she would mutilate herself beyond all recognition and use.

Joni looked at her watch, a cheap thing she'd bought from a street seller in London who claimed he was from Nigeria, though she thought his accent was more Brixton. Growing up with money permanently in short supply had made Joni oblivious to fashion and status symbols. Her mother, Moonbeam, was an art teacher in a comprehensive, but she spent most of her salary on robes and other Wicca impedimenta, rather than saving to get out of the council flat she'd been assigned when she was a single mother; whence Joni's nine-year-old Land Rover, identical dark grey trouser suits and pairs of heavy duty black boots. Her only weakness was for blinding blouses, though she generally kept to white for work. She pulled on a tan leather jacket and headed out.

Corham Square, the Abbey on one side but refurbished shops and pubs on the others, was full of braying and squawking humanity. Joni's uniformed colleagues had cordoned it off, but that hadn't stopped some idiot dressed as a traffic light standing in the middle of one of the access roads. He had rigged up functioning red, amber and green panels, which he changed every so often. People paid due attention, egged on by his friends, waiting when he displayed red and then moving on with green. The level of hysteria this provoked drew Joni closer. She had to push her way through a group of men in bikinis with peacock feathers sprouting from their heads.

'Come on, Nick!' shouted a short-haired youth with a red plastic fish on his head. 'Beer time!'

Joni saw there was a slit in the tall cardboard rectangle the traffic light had erected on his shoulders. The eyes behind it were creased in amusement.

‘A few more minutes,’ he said. ‘This is fucking brilliant!’

Joni wasn’t sure whether impersonating a traffic light was illegal, but swearing in public definitely was, under section 5 of the Public Order Act 1986. Not that she particularly cared. There were no small children nearby to be harassed, alarmed or distressed and this Nick was hardly the only person using profane language. She watched as the red light above his head came on. Then his friends lost patience and grabbed him, driving him like a battering ram into the Coach and Horses. Not all of them looked over eighteen, but that wasn’t her problem either.

The crush of people headed down Derwyne Street, the main thoroughfare, and Joni went with them. There was a lot of drunken bonhomie, mainly concerning the amount of flesh that individuals were displaying. A guy dressed as a mermaid, tail and all, was sitting on a fat man’s shoulder. The beast of burden was naked to the waist. On closer inspection, Joni realised the black and white stripes on his abdomen were a tattoo.

‘Like what you see, lass?’ the man asked, with a grin.

Joni glared at him till his bravado departed. ‘Two things. I’ve got a judo black belt. And I’m a police officer.’ She watched as he took a step back, provoking an angry yell from the man whose toes he’d trodden on. ‘Fancy your chances?’

He patently didn’t. She let them go, the mermaid bending down to find out what had happened. Maybe her mother was right, Joni thought. Moonbeam claimed that Wicca was about harmony and not doing harm to anyone. If only life, let alone work, was so straightforward.

Over the hours Gaz had worked himself up to a state of serious anger. He was ashamed at himself for being used by a woman – he was used to telling the cows what to do – and he was fucked off big time by the gorilla who had rolled all over him. What the shithead didn't know was that Gaz had form for dishing it out. He'd knocked out plenty of guys who asked for it behind nightclubs and pubs. He'd even lain in wait for a forward who made a fool of him during a football match and done major damage to his toes. He wasn't going to take being kidnapped and used as a sex slave lying down.

When the door crashed open, Gaz was ready. The man in the balaclava wasn't carrying the prod this time, though he did have the knife in his belt. Gaz stood up, shoulders slumped to make it seem he was defeated.

'Sit down, fuck face,' his captor said.

Gaz thought about it, then complied. Anything to get the gorilla up close.

'You're in luck, bonnie lad. Her highness wants another dose.' He looked at Gaz's groin. 'I hope that's clean.' He laughed. 'Otherwise it'll make a great sausage for my dog.'

That did it. Gaz had no idea what the woman was planning for him, but he was getting a major bad vibe off her enforcer.

'I'm clean, me,' he said softly, dropping his head.

'Lie down then. Cuff time.'

Gaz made his move, grabbing the knife and pressing the point against his

captor's belly.

'Back!' he shouted. 'Get away from me! And take that fucking balaclava off!'

The man was a couple of yards from him now and the knife wasn't an immediate threat any more, but he uncovered his face all the same. It was that of a classic hard man, gaze unwavering, square jaw, heavy moustache.

'You think you'll get far, bonnie lad?' he asked contemptuously.

Gaz had thought it through. He knew there would be more doors. 'Keys,' he said. 'Now!'

'You really don't want to be doing this.'

'Yes, I fucking do. Take off your boots an' all.' Although he'd been given clothes, Gaz had no footwear – not even slippers. 'Sit down while you do it!' The man's boots were thick-soled and heavy, and would do damage if he threw them.

A couple of minutes later Gaz had the keys and the boots, though he didn't waste time putting the latter on now. He took a step towards his former captor, the knife extended. 'I should cuff you and slash your wrists,' he said. 'But I'm not a cunt like you. I'll just lock you in for her.'

He turned and ran for the door, slamming it hard and fumbling to get the key in the lock and turn it. He shot the bolts too. Then he laughed and sat down to put on the boots. They rang loudly on the first stone steps.

The whistle from inside the room was loud and high-pitched. Gaz looked round, then turned to the front again. The dog – he recognised it immediately as a Doberman – was already in the air, its spittle-flecked jaws wide apart.

Gaz's head hit the floor hard and he lost consciousness. In that, he was lucky. The dog tore his throat out seconds later.

Joni had followed the crowd to the Old Bridge, where it split. The Northies hung around the riverside park, waiting for the firework display, while the Southies crossed the refurbished medieval structure, claiming that the view was much better from their side. She looked around, taking in the willows whose branches were touching the water, and the lights on the wall that had been built along the bank. Some idiot teenagers – the males dressed as well-endowed school girls in short skirts and the females as mechanics in gaping overalls – climbed up, but they were soon shouted down by the few adults who weren't the worse for alcohol. Joni had only drunk from the water bottle in her pocket, not having a head for booze. That had been another thing that differentiated her from her colleagues in the Met. She'd never smoked either, let alone touched drugs. Growing up in Hackney, she'd seen the damage they did.

'Hey, Nick, get up on the wall!'

She turned when she heard the shouts to her right. The guy in the traffic light rig was being carried towards the river bank. As she watched the group of lively young people, a tingling started at the top of her spine and then invaded her mind. It wasn't the first time this had happened. A month after she started in plain clothes, she'd reacted without conscious thought: she'd become aware of a small boy at the edge of the pavement near her flat in Vauxhall. She got to him when he had one leg in the air, pulling him back as a white van flashed past.

'Let him go!' a thin woman with rat tail hair screamed from a shop doorway.

‘Oy! That brown bitch is taking my kid!’

Fortunately a middle-aged man in a suit, white like the woman, had seen the whole thing and told the mother she should be thanking Joni for saving her boy, and what did she think she was doing letting him so near the road unattended? The woman eventually mumbled thanks. Back home, Joni sat down and closed her eyes. The boy was still there, his back to her as it had been before she’d clutched him. The boy. He was mixed race too. Would she ever have a son or daughter? Her mother was forever pressing her.

The traffic light was on the wall now, showing green. The youth’s mates were chanting, ‘Red! Red! Red!’ None of them noticed that his legs were unsteady and his back was angling towards the river. He was very close to falling.

Joni came at him from the side, leaping on to the wall and lowering her left shoulder so that he would topple towards the others. They were both caught before they hit the ground.

‘What the...’

‘Jesus, Nick,’ one of the boys laughed. ‘You’ve pulled another older woman.’

The laughter died in their mouths when Joni got up and stared at them. She pulled the traffic light to his feet.

‘That was dumb,’ she said, peering at the eyes through the slit in the cardboard. ‘Grow up before you do yourself an injury.’ She looked around the made-up male and dirt-streaked female faces. ‘Now go away.’

The young people started muttering but did what she said, moving eastwards along the bank. Joni watched them go, aware that she hadn’t put her body on the line often since the big Met operation that had finished her career down south. She was expecting the tingling to fade. It didn’t, and that hadn’t happened before. She

suspected she needed to see a shrink. She should go to the police doctor, but that was the last thing she wanted so soon after she'd taken the job in Corham. Besides, the sensation seemed to have a purpose. It was some kind of warning. She moved through the jovial crowd, keeping the top of the traffic light in sight.

'Hello, lass,' came a soft voice to Joni's left.

She turned and saw the small figure of Maureen Hughes, her sixteen-year-old son looming behind.

'Maureen. How are you?'

'Oh, you know,' the woman said, grimacing. The bruises on her face had almost gone, though her right arm was still in a sling. 'Wayne here's been helping out.'

Joni nodded at the boy, who avoided her eyes. He'd been knocked out by his father when he came to the aid of his mother. It had been Joni's first case in Corham and the trial was coming up. Vince Hughes was unemployed, a drinker who took it out on his tiny wife.

Maureen looked down. 'He'll...he'll be sent away for a long time, won't he?'

'I should think so,' Joni said, though she knew how random the justice system could be.

'I canna...I canna thank you enough for what you did,' the woman said. 'He's been hurting us for years.'

Joni nodded, trying to keep sight of the traffic light bobbing through the crowd. She had tracked Vince Hughes down to an abandoned shed on the moors and broken his arm after he'd laid out the DC accompanying her. She'd had her photo on the front page of the Corham Bugle and been door-stepped by a reporter from Newcastle, as well as being required to do a press conference by Assistant Chief



Constable Ruth Dickie, who was keen to publicise the new force's commitment to gender equality and racial diversity.

'I'm sorry, Maureen, I've got to go.'

'That's all right.' The woman squeezed her arm. 'Work to do, eh?'

Joni did her best to conceal the shock of being touched, her skin hyper-sensitive even through the layers of leather and cotton. The intense feeling that something important was about to happen had made her very jumpy.

'I'll see you soon,' she said, nodding to Wayne and his mother, and set off again through the crowd. What were the boy called Nick and his friends up to now? Surely they'd have learned from what had nearly happened to him. Some of them were drunk, but none was raving or raging. She knew that could change at any moment. She followed the group down the road that led to the former tanning and distillery district, now being redeveloped but still the location of several dodgy bars and clubs. This was Corham's dope dealing centre, though the serious business went on across the river in Ironflatts. Was that what the kids were doing down here? If so, she was going to step in.

Suzana rolled over and felt the weight of the man, then his prick. He was the eighth, she reckoned, and the discomfort was worse than usual; as if her body, aware of what she was planning, was resisting the abuse it had become accustomed to. At least the man with the long hair and moustache was the one wearing the nipple clamps, but he might soon attach them to her. The street light was making yellow rectangles around the blacked out glass, but she had no clear idea of the time. Evening, and a lot of noise. Leka had been right. There was some sort of festival going on.

The man grunted and then cuffed the side of her head, saying words she didn't understand. Except she did. Bitch, whore, cocksucker, cunt. The tone meant they didn't need translation. She lay still for a moment and then something broke inside her, a zigzag crack across the surface of her mind. Using all her strength to shove him off, she went to the floorboard and pulled it up, then ran back and jabbed the fork at the man's groin. He let out a shriek like a lamb that had been castrated, though she could see the fork hadn't done that much damage. She stood over him, the weapon quivering as she aimed at his eyes. He curled up in a ball and didn't see as she grabbed his jacket, the wallet weighing down the breast pocket.

Trying to control her breathing, Suzana opened the door. A burst of noise came from the men on the ground and first floors. Leka was standing on the top step down the hall. She was at him before he realised, ramming the fork into where she hoped his kidney was and wrenching it out. He screamed and went down the stairs head first, chin bouncing on the uncovered wood. She ran barefoot over his prone

form, waving the fork around and making the men move back. Many were dressed as women or what looked like old-fashioned soldiers. One of Leka's pig friends was guarding the next stairs. He stepped forward to see what was going on. She missed his eye, but the fork pierced the side of his forehead. She let it go and it vibrated as he bellowed. That gave her the chance to pull the combat knife from his belt and slash it at him as she slipped past.

It was impossible to calm her heart or regulate her breathing now. She heard herself screech like a witch in the folk tales, men retreating in panic as she headed for the street door. There stood the skinny runt who told Leka what to do, a long knife in his hand. He had once made her stick a finger up his ass before he came over her breasts.

'What have you done, shit girl?' he said, in Albanian. 'You're dead meat.' He made a horizontal cut that drew blood on her upper chest, narrowly missing her neck.

Suzana lowered her head and charged him, straightening her right arm. The knife sank into something soft and she felt an expulsion of breath on her scalp. She tried to pull the knife out but the bastard had a hand on it. Stepping to the side, she screamed again to scare off the nearby men, pushed the blood-leaking whoremaster aside before pulling open the front door. There were more men on the steps leading down to the street. She ran past them, shrieking, and bounced off a traffic light in the middle of the road. It was only as she made contact that she realised it was someone in a cardboard costume. Then she was sprinting away across the asphalt.

After she turned several corners and found herself in a quiet area, she realised that she was naked apart from the jacket she had stolen: naked, with her feet and chest bleeding, but free. Then she heard pounding behind her and scrambled for purchase on a high gate.

Joni kept her distance from the group of young people as they went past the high walls of a run-down factory. It seemed they'd lost interest in the fireworks – or perhaps they knew a good viewpoint down here. She looked over her shoulder. The golden abbey in its shroud of lights was still visible, but not much else of the town centre stood out. The tingling had turned into a prickling sensation, as if insects were crawling around in her brain. There seemed to be some connection with the youth in the traffic light she'd tackled on the embankment. He and his friends turned left behind a dilapidated building. Others followed them. Joni stayed back as they reached a narrow street of three-storey Victorian buildings that would have been occupied in the old days by people who had worked their way up from the slum housing further out from the centre of Corham. At the far end were the lights of a dingy pub, people standing outside to smoke. About a hundred yards before it, on the left hand side, a crowd of men was gathered on the steps of one of the houses. The crawling sensation in Joni's head worsened, then she heard a high-pitched scream. A few seconds later the people outside the house, who now included Nick and his mates, parted suddenly and a slim figure appeared.

The woman had tousled black hair that reached down to an over-large leather jacket. She wasn't wearing anything on the bottom half of her body and her right hand was covered in blood. She shrieked and ran into the cardboard traffic light, then continued in the opposite direction, turning right at the corner about thirty yards before the pub. Joni sprinted to the steps and saw a thin man at the top. He was on his

back, groaning and clutching a knife in his abdomen.

‘Nobody move!’ Joni ordered, pulling out her warrant card. In the first few weeks she had felt that it was someone else’s despite the presence of her photograph; she was only gradually getting used to the Pofnee crest. She knelt by the wounded man, aware that people were rapidly taking their leave, brushing past her as she went. ‘I said, nobody move.’ She pointed at the traffic light. ‘Especially not you, Nick. You’re a witness.’

She called the dispatcher at Force HQ and asked for an ambulance, as well as for DI Sutton and the Corham Major Crime Unit. But the tingling was still with her. The woman: she had to find the woman. Looking through the open door, she saw other females in next to no clothing peering out. It was obvious what the house was. Then a man staggered along the corridor with what looked like the handle of a piece of cutlery sticking out from the side of his brow.

Joni glanced around. Heads down, men were hurrying away, including one with a beard and monk’s robe and another she thought she’d seen recently. She couldn’t keep them all there, but Nick wasn’t going anywhere. She pulled out her cuffs – she never went anywhere without them – and closed one round his wrist and the other round the railing outside the house.

The moment she started after the half-naked woman, the crawling in her skull faded. She was a couple of back streets away from the brothel when there was a series of tremendous cracks and booms. The night sky filled with coloured lights that briefly blinded her. Fireworks just when she didn’t need them.

When she could see again, she made out the woman climbing over a high gate and dropping into the dark beyond.

Heck and Ag were in front of the TV, paying minimal attention to the news. After tea, they had played Cluedo and Heck had duly lost. The kids complained about their bed times, but Ag was firm. In the end they went mildly enough, Cass following them to the foot of the stairs, her tail thumping against the wall. Kat seemed to have made up with her current beau and was all smiles, looking forward to a chapter of Malorie Blackman before she dropped off. She picked Adolf up when her mother turned away and took him to her room. He would sleep half the night on her duvet and then go out to crunch baby rabbits' heads.

David had declined to play, preferring to consume a bottle of murky local ale while reading a book about industrial architecture. He had worked his way up to a low-level management position at the steel works before they were shut down and he hankered after old times. At seventy-six, he still worked three shifts a week at a DIY store outside Corham. His wife, Olive, had died in 2001 after suffering from breast cancer for nearly a decade. When Heck had been seriously wounded, David had thought his world would end. But his elder son was tough, even if he wasn't yet what he had been. At least Peter, two years younger than Heck, was in one piece, but he was practising law in Chicago and rarely came home. He was also a bit boring.

'I'm off,' the old man said, closing his book. 'Get to bed, lad. You're worn out.'

'Night,' Heck said, waving a hand. He was glad Ag had agreed that David could live with them after his mother died, but sometimes the old bugger got on his

nerves. He had his own sitting room in what had been the cow shed, but he liked company. ‘Don’t forget to brush your hair,’ he called after him.

David laughed. There was no brush in existence that could get through his tangled locks and that was the way he liked it. Heck had threatened to take sheep clippers to him when he was asleep, but he knew his son wouldn’t dare. They lived to take the mickey out of each other and without the thatch Heck would be bereft.

‘Honestly,’ Ag said, squeezing her husband’s arm. ‘I’ve got boys in Year Three who are more mature than you two.’ She kissed him on the cheek.

‘It was Year Two last week,’ Heck said, returning the kiss.

Ag settled back on the sofa and pulled him closer, then planted her lips on his. ‘Fancy messing around?’ she said, after coming up for air.

Heck frowned before he could stop himself. ‘Well, Mrs Rutherford, this is most irregular.’ In truth, it was. His interest in sex had gone walkabout when he was on sick leave and it hadn’t really returned. On the few occasions they’d made love he struggled to climax, though he made sure Ag did. She was loving, imaginative, even daring in her suggestions, but he wasn’t able to respond fully. The six years he had on her and the violence done to his gut were undermining him in the worst possible way.

Ag had managed to get his zip open and was doing things with her tongue that most men of his age would have to pay for. And she was definitely having an effect. Then his mobile rang.

‘Ignore it,’ Ag said indistinctly.

But, of course, he couldn’t. He wasn’t on duty, but he was still responsible for major crime across a huge area. And it was May Sunday...

‘Rutherford,’ he said, his voice rising as Ag applied her teeth.

‘It’s Morrie, sir. We’ve got a situation.’

Heck listened to what he was told and hung up. Five minutes later he was in his Cherokee on the way to the scene.



Joni's breath was even as she took long strides to the gate at the end of the street. The lighting was poor and she couldn't see a sign of anyone behind the metal bars. She looked around. The houses on both sides appeared to be empty, no lights showing. The residents would be out on the streets. The two-up two-down buildings didn't have basements so there was nowhere to hide. Besides, had seen the half-naked woman go over. What she found hard to understand was how she'd done that. The gate was at least ten feet high. Joni was pretty sure she could make it, and even made an attempt to jump and grab the top. It would have been hard and she had to get back to the brothel in Burwell Street. Although she wasn't responsible for Corham major crime, she didn't want to hand the case over to Morrie Simmons completely.

Then she saw a trail of blood high up on the gate. The young woman hadn't looked much more than five feet eight. She must have either been as fit as a special forces operative or extremely desperate. Remembering the damage she had done to the men back there, Joni put her money on the latter.

'Hello?' she called. 'Is anyone there?' She paused, aware how ridiculous she sounded. 'I can help. Really.'

There was no sound in the derelict factory beyond the gate.

'Please, listen to me.' Joni thought of the woman, naked apart from the jacket she had presumably stolen from one of the men inside the house and bloody; perhaps she was seriously injured. 'I can help. Please, come back.'

Stupid, she said to herself. The poor woman probably can't even speak

English. The others looked distinctly foreign, with their dark complexions and the rings under their eyes. And she'll be scared of anyone who comes after her.

Then she had a thought. She had heard there were Albanian prostitutes in Newcastle and she knew that many Albanians understood Italian. She took one of her cards from her wallet, turned it over and wrote in that language, 'I can help. Please call me on my mobile number. PLEASE!' She pushed the card under the gate.

As she jogged back, Joni was struck by an intense sadness. She'd grown up in a sink estate in Hackney and knew exactly what deprivation and cruelty could do. It was one of the reasons she had joined the Met after Oxford. She was going to help the women, especially the one who had got away. She was a victim, no matter what she'd done.

Joni, atheist that she was, had always been one for missions.

‘What?’ Heck said, surprised. ‘Joni Pax is down here?’

DI Morris Sutton nodded, his comb-over shifting precariously. He was forty-four, overweight and a heavy smoker. ACC Dickie hadn’t been at all keen on having him at Force HQ, never mind heading up the MCU in the Corham conurbation, but Heck had insisted when the initial planning was being done. Morrie was a good cop, even if his manner was abrasive and he had problems with women, gays, and ethnic minorities. Ruth Dickie’s idea, put into operation when Heck was on sick leave, was that Joni would erode the former and latter of those prejudices, even though she was DI responsible for major incidents outside Corham and thus had a much larger brief. The fact that both Simmons and Pax reported to Heck meant they would have to co-operate. Sutton was Heck’s sop to the major crime unit in Newcastle, where he and Morrie used to work. He wanted to show that Ruth Dickie didn’t get everything she wanted, as well as build bridges with the officers, many of them senior, who resented both his past involvement in the anti-corruption unit and his new position. That was one reason he had declined promotion to detective chief superintendent. The others were that he wanted to stay as close as possible to investigations and that he was unsure how he would perform after he’d been wounded. He now had the impression he’d played into the ACC’s hands. She was building her fiefdom and could exercise more oversight since he was still only a DCI. It also saved money from her budget.

‘Where is she then?’ Heck asked, looking around. There were few men in the

street now, only some locals standing behind the crime scene tape that had been unrolled. The lad in the traffic light was still attached to the railings, but the cardboard box had been taken off his shoulders. He looked longingly at the bystanders, waving listlessly at another young man who departed shortly afterwards.

‘She went after the woman who wounded the victims,’ Sutton said. ‘I’ve tried her mobile, but she’s not answering.’

‘We’d better organise a search party. The fugitive is probably armed.’

‘People say she wasn’t, at least not any more. What about the knocking shop?’

Heck raised an eyebrow. ‘Forgotten the procedure, Morrie? Search it from top to bottom. There are usually drugs and weapons in these places. We might even get lucky and find something that’ll incriminate the fuckers who run the dump.’

‘One of the women said she was from Albania. I think the wounded men were too – they don’t look English - but I can’t get confirmation.’

‘Albanians, eh? Surprise, surprise.’ Clan-based criminal organizations from that country had spread all over England, controlling prostitution and moving into the drugs trade. There had already been some vicious fights with long-established Newcastle gangs. ‘If they’re pimps or heavies, they won’t open their mouths.’

Paramedics had removed the prone figure from the threshold, as well as another man who’d been found unconscious with a punctured kidney at the bottom of the stairs leading to the second floor. Both were alive but needed surgery. The traffic light boy had seen another man stagger off down the street with a piece of cutlery in his head. A couple of WPCs were looking after the five working girls, none of whom could speak much English. Social services and the Border Agency had been informed, but would take their time to show up on the Sunday night before a bank holiday.

‘I can squeeze the women,’ Morrie Sutton said. ‘Get them to talk.’

‘Talk?’ Heck said, with a laugh. ‘Know much Albanian, do you? Even if they speak English, they’ll pretend they don’t. Then a lawyer in a sharp suit will turn up and bail them out. Unless the girls identify the men, we won’t be able to prove the scumbags were even involved with the place. You know how scared they’ll be of saying anything. And none of the customers is going to talk voluntarily.’

‘What if we find an interpreter?’ Sutton asked.

‘A lot of them speak Italian.’

Heck turned on his heel. ‘Joni,’ he said. ‘DI Pax. Glad to see you’re still in one piece.’

‘I lost her,’ Joni said, her breathing regular.

‘Didn’t you hear your phone?’ Sutton demanded.

‘I was undertaking a high speed pursuit, Morrie.’

‘Apparently not high speed enough.’

‘That’ll do,’ Heck said. ‘What was that about Albanians speaking Italian?’

‘They get Italian TV from across the Adriatic,’ Joni replied. ‘And there’s been a lot of trade between the countries since the end of communism.’

‘A lot of illegal immigrants too,’ Sutton added.

Joni looked at him. ‘And legal ones, would you believe? I spent four months in Bari. Plenty of Albanians actually get their papers sorted and work in the city above board.’

‘So you think you’ll be able to get something out of the girls?’ Heck asked.

‘I can try. How many are there?’

‘Five,’ Sutton said. ‘Plus the one you let get away.’

‘Shut up, Morrie,’ Heck ordered. ‘All right, we need to make sure social services and the UKBA keep them in the vicinity. In the meantime, we’ll take them

into custody overnight so you can talk to them.'

'Em, hang on, sir,' Sutton said. 'This is a Corham MCU case.'

'Jesus, Morrie, no one in your team can speak Italian, right?'

'Don't think so,' the DI muttered.

'While DI Pax has an Oxford degree in the language. With French, if memory serves. What's your problem?'

'Nothing, sir.'

'You should be thanking your colleague for her offer of help, not glowering at her.'

'I'll wait till she comes up with something useful, if you don't mind, sir.'

Heck raised his eyes to the night sky.

'I'd like to have a word with the traffic light too,' Joni said. 'He's about the only witness we've got left.' She looked at the faces behind the tape and saw none she recognised. 'His mates seem to have left him in the shit.'

'I can handle that,' Sutton said.

'Do it together,' Heck said. 'Joni cuffed the boy.'

'And followed him from the town centre.'

Morrie Sutton stared at her. 'Why did you do that?'

Joni raised her shoulders.

'Women's intuition?' Sutton scoffed.

'Maybe.' Joni smiled. 'You're forgetting something.'

'And what might that be?' Heck asked impatiently. He wasn't a female cop hater like Morrie, but he didn't like being strung along any more than the next man.

'Traffic light – his name's Nick – didn't only see the woman close up. He saw the men who came out of the house - the customers. Judging by their rapid

departures, I don't think they'll want their names in the papers.' Joni gave Heck a more expansive smile. 'Who knows? Maybe we'll catch a town councillor or a paragon of local business who had his pants down.'

Heck exchanged glances with Sutton. Neither of them looked hugely enthusiastic about the prospect.

Michael Etherington had watched as his grandson stowed the bulky costume into the back of his mother's Rover. 'I hope you aren't going to do anything illegal with that.'

'Cool it, General Gramps,' Nick said. He was a handsome lad, recently eighteen and taller than his father had been, his hair raven black and, to Michael's mind, too long. 'It's a bit of fun. Remember fun?'

His grandfather, who had commanded British forces in Bosnia and Kosovo before ending up at a desk in Whitehall, didn't have it in him to be strict with the boy. Not only was he in his last year at the private Abbey School and almost ready to leave home, but he'd lost his father. Michael's only son, Alistair, had died of a heart attack fifteen months earlier. In addition, Michael's wife Christine had died a few weeks later. She'd driven into a tree. Nothing had been found wrong with the car, though there was black ice on the road so suicide could at least not be talked about. Michael had realised Christine would never recover from Alistair's death, but he couldn't be sure she'd killed herself. Helping out Nick and his daughter-in-law, Rosie, was a way of coping – that was why he'd moved in with them. They needed help, too. Alistair, a lawyer, had invested badly and lost clients because of his drinking.

'Of course he remembers fun,' Rosie Etherington said, squeezing Michael's arm. 'That's why neither of us is going anywhere near the town centre tonight. Omelette aux fines herbes and a nice Chablis will do for us.'

Nick rolled his eyes as he closed the car door. 'Fun means a lot of things, but not those.' He smiled. 'Well, maybe the Chablis.'



‘One beer, all right?’ Rosie said, her tone sharpening minimally.

‘Yes, Mum.’

‘And back by midnight,’ Michael added.

Nick, dressed in a grey boiler suit, saluted. At least the afternoons he’d spent in the school cadet force had taught him something, even though his smile was ironic.

‘Yes, Gramps.’ He got into the car and reversed smoothly down the drive.

They watched him head down the village’s main street.

‘He didn’t kiss me,’ Rosie said, lowering her gaze.

Michael put his arm round her thin shoulders. ‘He’s eighteen. Kissing his mother isn’t high on his list of priorities.’

Rosie gave him a serious look. ‘He was unhappy recently.’

‘You have to let him go,’ Michael said, remembering what he’d got up to at his grandson’s age.

‘Yes,’ Rosie said softly. ‘I suppose I do.’

They went into the former merchant’s house and turned on the lights.

Outside the brothel, Joni said, 'Go home, sir. You need your sleep and we've got this under control.' She glanced at Morrie Sutton, who nodded.

'I want to interview the boy,' Sutton said.

'Both of you,' Heck repeated. 'Then DI Pax can talk to the women. You've got plenty on your plate, Morrie. The house search, canvassing the neighbours. They must all have known what was going on here.'

'This street's full of squats and dope dealers,' Morrie said. 'You think they'll say anything to us? Plus, the Albanians will have put the shits up them.'

Heck ignored his objections. 'You've also got to organise the search for the missing woman.'

Sutton shrugged. He knew of old that when Heck Rutherford was in this mood, there was no arguing with him. He moved over to his senior subordinate, DS Nathan Gray, and went into a huddle with him and his DCs.

'Anything you want to tell me, Joni?' Heck asked, his eyes on hers. 'I hope we catch the woman. It looks like she's responsible for three serious attacks.'

'Having been forced to work as a sex slave for God knows how long,' Joni said, in disgust. 'I could have climbed the gate, but I felt I'd be more use here. I gave Nathan the location.'

'Anything else?'

Joni ran her fingers over the scar that bisected her right eyebrow. It was the result of a knife attack in Hackney when she was seventeen. The boy responsible

hadn't been able to walk for two weeks. She should tell her boss that she'd left her card with the message in Italian. 'There's blood on the gate. I'll let the techies know.'

'All right,' Heck said, leaning against the Cherokee. 'Don't step on Morrie's toes any more than you have to.' He frowned. 'And don't let yourself get emotionally involved with the women. We need to keep our distance, especially as they may be illegals.' He didn't mention Maureen Hughes, but he'd had to tell Joni that he thought she'd lost her objectivity in the battered woman's case. He'd been impressed that she hadn't allowed the publicity to go to her head. If it had been Morrie Sutton, he'd still be walking around like a pigeon with its chest puffed out. As it was, he had struggled to hide his jealousy.

'OK, I'm for my bed,' he said, opening the door of the Jeep. 'One last thing, Joni. Why did you follow the lad in the traffic light from the town centre?'

She looked at him, then dropped her gaze. 'I don't know, sir. Hunch?'

Heck looked at her dubiously, then got into the 4x4. There was something strange about Joni. At first he'd thought she needed time to get used to Pofnee and the North in general but, if anything, she was getting weirder: the faraway look, the intuitive leaps that usually turned out to be on the button, the quick reactions, like her pursuit of the woman earlier. Joni Pax was a smart cop, she'd already proved that, but she wasn't like any other. And there was the issue of why she'd left the Met. He had no idea how much the last operation she'd run still preyed on her mind.

He watched as she swung her long legs into a patrol car, then started his engine and pulled away from the scene. He was heading for bed, but he wasn't sure how much sleep he'd get. He had hunches too, though he put them down to his years of experience. The people who controlled the now defunct brothel in Burwell Street wouldn't be happy and someone would have to pay. He hoped the missing woman

turned herself in before the men who saw themselves as her owners found her.

Driving through the now quiet town, Heck Rutherford told himself to get a grip. Maybe Ag would wake up when he slipped into bed. Then his phone rang. It was ACC Dickie, requiring a status update; and telling him she wanted a meeting at nine the next morning. So much for the May Day bank holiday.

Suzana had waited for at least ten minutes after the footsteps retreated down the street, then slipped back and picked up the rectangular card. In the light from the street lamp beyond the gate she made out a name she could pronounce – Jo-ni Pax - under a red and blue shape, something like an old-fashioned shield. The word ‘Police’ was easy enough to understand: it was almost the same in Albanian. So a woman police had nearly caught her. Why hadn’t she tried to get over the gate? And why had she written in Italian that she wanted to help? It must be a trick. Her captors would have friends in the police.

She knew it wouldn’t be long until other police started searching. Men from Leka’s clan would be on her trail too. She retreated into a crumbling building, the remnants of its roof long collapsed on the floor. She cut her the soles of her feet even more on the broken stone and wood. There was very little light, but she came across an old sack and tore it up, wrapping strips of the rough material around her feet. She shivered as she stood up again, her naked legs covered with goose pimples. She fumbled her way round a corner and stopped, alerted by the smell of wood smoke. Ahead was a light at floor level. Suzana waited, then crept forward slowly, feeling gingerly with each foot before putting her weight on it. Finally she made out a motionless figure wrapped in ragged blankets on the other side of the fire’s dwindling flames. She clutched about with her hand and found a length of wood she could use as a weapon. Then she made her approach.

A loud snore broke the silence. Suzana waited, but there was no movement

from the man lying on his side, the light playing over a long beard and filthy hands. She saw an almost empty plastic bottle on its side by the sleeper, the smell of raw alcohol pricking her nostrils even through the smoke. She was in luck. The man was comatose. He never stirred as she went through the shopping trolley full of plastic bags to the rear. She found a pair of trousers that fitted her when she fastened an old neck tie round the waist, as well as a thick shirt with holes in the armpits, a pullover and – she stifled a shout of joy – some socks and a pair of trainers big enough for her rapidly swelling feet. Deep down she found a woollen hat that she pulled low, hiding her hair beneath it completely.

As the flames guttered, she took out the wallet from the jacket she'd stolen from the long-haired pig with the bristly moustache. She removed a couple of notes, both with the number twenty on them. She left them by his hand, hoping they would be enough to recompense her unknowing benefactor. Then she moved on, the length of wood still in her hand, and searched for a way out. She found one behind a makeshift door, climbed over another gate and hobbled painfully down a street with few lights.

She had taken her revenge on Leka and his vile friends, she had escaped them, she had dressed herself and she had money. Now she had to do was find out where she was. England, but where in England? There had been a long journey in a windowless van. Could she even be in Scotland? The men wore skirts there, she had seen on Italian TV, but none of her rapists had worn those. So probably England, but far from London. After she had fed herself, she would disappear. The world was big, they would never find her.

Suzana almost dropped the police card in the gutter, but she stopped herself. It might be she could use the officer if she had no other choice. There was no harm

keeping it in the wallet. She did drop the rapist's credit cards through an evil-smelling grating, feeling another wave of exhilaration. The man, whatever his accursed name, was now in the sewer where he belonged. But she knew that wasn't enough. She had to seek him out. Without restoring at least some of her honour, there could be no new life.

Joni found Morrie Sutton in the entrance hall on the ground floor of Force HQ, arguing with a well dressed couple. The man was quite a bit older than the woman. The building had been a tannery owned by the local big shot Favon family, but now it smelled of fresh paint and new carpets. Large windows had been cut into the walls and bushes planted outside. The conversion had been shortlisted for a prize, despite the fact that a committee had imaginatively decided to call it Force Headquarters – cue endless jokes about excessive force, forced labour, force majeure, forced entry... Apparently top brass had also given serious consideration to Leather House.

‘...call our solicitor,’ the man was saying to Morrie. The wrinkles on his face and neck suggested he was in his early sixties, but his upright bearing and broad shoulders made him look younger. The woman he had his arm round was pale, with straggly fair hair. She looked like life had become almost too much for her.

Joni introduced herself, getting a glare from her colleague.

‘Michael Etherington,’ the man said, extending a hand. ‘I’m Nick’s grandfather. This is his mother, Rosie.’

‘I’ve been explaining that Nick isn’t under arrest,’ Sutton said impatiently. ‘We just need to talk to him.’

‘But he said on the phone he’d been handcuffed,’ Rosie Etherington said, her eyes damp.

‘Ah,’ Joni said, ‘that was my doing. Just a precaution. I didn’t want him to leave the scene. He’s a witness.’



‘The lad would have stayed put if you’d asked him,’ said Michael Etherington. His tone and body language suggested he was in the habit of giving orders. He’d been in the services, Joni surmised.

‘His friends didn’t,’ Morrie Sutton said, with a slack smile.

‘Bloody cowards,’ the older man said, under his breath. ‘Well, may we be present?’

‘That wouldn’t be helpful, sir,’ Joni said, with an apologetic smile. ‘If you wait here, we’ll arrange coffee.’

She headed for the secure door and punched in the code. Sutton caught up with her before it closed. ‘You know he was a Major-General?’ he said.

Joni had a dim recollection from TV. ‘Was he in Yugoslavia?’

‘Allied commander in Bosnia and that other place. He was on the news all the time.’

‘Right.’ She turned to him. ‘And your reason for disliking him so vehemently is?’

‘Can’t stand the army, especially officers. Arrogant shits.’

Joni let that go. Morrie stank of smoke and she tried to put some space between them.

‘I’m handling the interview, OK?’ he said.

‘Whatever you like. It’s not formal, is it?’

‘Nay, lass. Meaning I can squeeze his nuts all the better.’

Joni stopped and put a hand on the arm of his cheap anorak. ‘Call me “lass” again and I’ll remove your nuts, Morrie. No anaesthetic. Lay off the boy. He saw some bad things and we need him.’

‘I’m handling it,’ Sutton repeated, spots of red on his cheeks. He suspected

Joni could do him serious damage, but he wasn't going to let her scare him, at least on the surface. 'I know what I'm doing.'

They went into the interview room. Only a few months in service and already it reeked of sweat and something worse: a mixture of fear and deep unhappiness. Nick Etherington was sitting on the other side of a table bolted to the floor. He was no longer restrained and Joni was sorry to see a red weal on his right wrist. He was supporting himself on his elbows, his head bowed.

'Bring him a fizzy drink, please,' Joni said to the custody officer. 'Are you hungry?'

The young man shook his head. 'When can I go home?'

'When I've finished with you, lad,' Morrie Sutton said, taking off his anorak and rolling up his sleeves.

Joni gave Nick an encouraging smile, but didn't speak.

'So, a traffic light,' Morrie said. 'What was that about? You know how many regulations you contravened, especially with lights that actually changed?'

'Sorry,' Nick said, his eyes narrowing. 'But it's May Sunday. Everyone dresses up. Surely you aren't going to arrest the whole of Corham.'

Joni twitched her head. Giving Sutton lip was not a good idea.

'Don't try that on, boy,' the DI said, his rheumy eyes on Nick's. He broke away when the constable came in and put a can of cola on the table. 'Right, what were you doing in Burwell Street?'

Nick Etherington drank thirstily before answering. 'Heading for the Brown Bull. There was a band.'

'Aye, right. You and your mates were off to the knocking shop, weren't you?'

Joni blinked, but otherwise sat still.

‘No, we weren’t!’

‘Don’t raise your voice at me.’ Sutton’s fist clenched and unclenched on the table.

‘No, we weren’t,’ the young man repeated at normal volume. ‘Jesus, some of the girlfriends were with us.’

Joni nodded, having seen that herself. Morrie ignored her.

‘Been to the brothel before, have you?’

‘No. I didn’t even know that’s what it was.’

‘A likely story.’ Morrie Sutton leaned over the table. ‘If I find your fingerprints in there, you’ll be in deep shit.’

The door opened again and DS Gray came in. He whispered to his boss, who stood up immediately.

‘He’s all yours, DI Pax,’ Sutton said and left at speed.

Wondering what had got him so excited, Joni called in the custody officer before continuing. Although it wasn’t a formal interview, she didn’t want any complaints from the high powered lawyer she was sure the ex-army man would bring in.

‘Listen, Nick,’ she said, smoothing her hair back with her hands. ‘I was watching you even before I saved you from a dousing in the river.’

‘Why?’ the young man asked, his brow furrowed.

‘I’d never seen a mobile traffic light before,’ she said, with a smile. ‘I know you were only messing around and I saw the girls. One of them yours?’

He shook his head.

‘Never mind. I’m sure you weren’t heading into the brothel.’

‘I didn’t even know there were brothels in Corham.’ Suddenly he looked much

younger.

‘Are you still at school?’

‘A-levels next month.’

‘Bad news. I remember what they were like.’

‘Really? What did you do?’

‘English, French and Maths.’

‘No way. That’s what I’m doing too.’ He paused. ‘What did you get?’

This time it was Joni who hesitated. ‘Three A’s.’

‘Fu...sorry. I hope I manage that. I have to if I’m to get into uni.’

‘Where are you aiming for?’

‘Cambridge.’

‘More bad news. I was at Oxford.’

‘Bleugh.’

She laughed. ‘All right, let’s get this over with. I’m sorry I handcuffed you, but I had to be sure at least someone would stay put.’

‘You didn’t catch the woman?’

Joni shook her head. ‘I need you to tell me exactly what you saw.’

The young man gave some thought to that. ‘For a start, you have to remember I had no peripheral vision in the box. My mate Pe--’ He broke off. ‘My mate told me if there was anything I had to look out for.’ He looked at her entreatingly. ‘You won’t make me tell on them?’

‘They’ll have to be interviewed, Nick. It’s not a problem. None of them did anything wrong except leave you in the lurch. Your grandfather isn’t very happy about that.’

‘Gramps is here? Shit. I’ll be grounded for months.’

Joni smiled. 'I don't think so. He struck me as a reasonable type. Is your Dad not around?'

'He...died last year.'

'I'm sorry.' Joni stretched her hand across the table and put it on his for a few seconds. 'That must be really hard.' She paused before speaking again. 'Let's get on. What did you see through the slit?'

'Well, there were people hanging around the steps of the house. Then I heard a scream – really high-pitched, like when a fox catches a rabbit. The door opened and the woman came out. She was screaming too, but hers was more like a war cry. She only had on a leather jacket. I saw her face when she crashed into me. She was scary.'

'You didn't see any weapon?'

'No. There was blood on her hand and her...chest, but I'm sure she wasn't holding anything. Then people pulled away and I saw the guy lying inside the door.' He paused and licked his lips. 'Is he dead?'

'I don't think so, but he's in a bad way.'

'I could see the handle of a knife sticking up from his belly. Blood everywhere...'

'All right, take a deep breath. This is important. Did you see anyone else run out?'

'Well, no. I mean, most people who were near the house got moving, but I don't think they were doing anything except getting clear before the co...before your people arrived.'

'There were two other men inside who'd been injured. Did you see anyone else with a wound apart from the guy with the fork in his head?'

Nick's eyes dropped. 'With a wound? No...no, I didn't.'

‘Nick?’ Joni’s voice was harsh. ‘Don’t lie to me.’

The young man’s eyes stayed down. ‘I’m not,’ he mumbled. ‘I didn’t see anyone like that.’

Joni knew he wasn’t being straight with her, but it was better to change tack than have him clam up completely. ‘OK,’ she said lightly. ‘One more thing. Did you see anyone you know?’

The question made him rock back. ‘Anyone I know? You mean apart from my friends?’

‘Obviously apart from your friends, Nick.’

‘Em, no...no, I didn’t.’ He looked away. ‘Can I go now?’

Joni studied him for longer than he was comfortable with. ‘I’m going to have a word with your mother and grandfather.’

That made him turn to her, his eyes wide. ‘Don’t...I...’

Joni waited, but he didn’t speak again. She left the interview room and went to find DI Sutton. She was told that he and DS Gray had gone back to Burwell Street. She considered following them there - something interesting must have been found - but she had the women to deal with. Before that, she had one last go at Nick Etherington, but he stuck to his story. She asked one of Sutton’s team to take his statement and went to tell his relatives that he’d soon be out.

What she really wanted was to ask the general to put the squeeze on the boy, but there was no point. Nick would either keep what he wasn’t telling her to himself, or he’d come clean to his family. Given that they were apparently upstanding members of society, she hoped they might pass the information to her, but there wasn’t much she could do if they didn’t. One thing was in her favour. Michael Etherington hadn’t shown the least reaction to her colour. Perhaps the general had

commanded some efficient black squaddies.

In the meantime, she would tell Morrie about the men she'd seen outside the brothel: the bearded monk and the one with black and white stripes tattooed on his gut, who had earlier asked her if she liked what she saw. They both struck her as likely regulars.

While her parents were out doing their things on May Sunday, the Honourable Evelyn Favon, Evie to her friends, had spent the day in the library as usual. The table in front of her was covered in books, many of them over two hundred years old. She put carefully cut slips of white paper between the pages and made notes on her laptop. The family's history had become her obsession.

The door at the far end of the long room opened and Cheryl came in.

'Can I get you anything, Miss?'

'No, thanks,' Evie replied, glancing up briefly.

'I'll be off for the night, then.' The dumpy middle-aged woman turned away.

Evie didn't wish her good night. Although Cheryl Reston and her husband Dan had been with the family for over a decade, Evie had always sensed antipathy from them. It was a class thing, her mother explained. Lord and Lady Favon were the Restons' employers and provided them with a cottage on the estate. It was natural for them to feel resentment – the underprivileged always did – though unacceptable for them to show it.

'But Victoria,' Evie had said – since she'd left school the previous summer, she occasionally used her parents' first names, much to their disgust. 'Isn't it natural for the dispossessed to feel aggrieved? We have the Hall and thousands of acres, not to mention stocks and shares and the wealth our ancestors built up so...assiduously, while they have our grace and favour.'

That hadn't gone down well. Although Victoria wasn't born a Favon, her



father had been Bishop of Tyne Tees and she'd attended the best schools. She was very defensive of the family name, though her behaviour could be what the mother of a friend of Evie's described as 'erratic'. Andrew, Viscount Favon, had given Evie a talking to, but she paid no attention to him. The accident had dissipated what trust she had in him.

Although Evie was fascinated by the story she was transcribing, she couldn't help thinking about the foggy morning the previous October. It was a week before she was due to fly to Nairobi to spend her gap year teaching in a primary school in the Ngong Hills. She had skipped down the Hall's main steps for her favourite walk around the lake. The geese were honking louder than usual, probably because the factor Dan Reston's dogs were in the vicinity. Perhaps that was why she didn't hear her father's 4x4 reversing towards her at speed until it was too late.

Evie felt no pain in her legs initially. She was more aware of the gravel that had been embedded in her scalp when she hit the ground. Then her father tried to lift her and she screamed before fainting. She woke up in the ambulance with tubes attached to her arms. Her mind was mush and she kept thinking of the cries from the outraged geese. Again, her legs were not hurting...nothing was hurting at all.

That state of affairs continued in Corham General, at least until the physiotherapy started. Both her legs had been broken above the knees. Fortunately the fractures were clean, but months of agony in the hospital exercise hall had scarred her mind, turning her from a happy and enthusiastic schoolgirl to a skeptical and suspicious young woman. She still needed a forearm crutch, but at least the wheel chair had been sent back to the hospital.

Her parents had reacted in different ways to the accident. Victoria had been surprisingly supportive, at least during hospital visits. When Evie finally got home,

her mother was openly less involved, even complaining when the sewing room on the ground floor, which she never used, was converted to a temporary bedroom. Andrew had never apologised for running into his daughter and was unhappy when the payment for the Kenya trip was not fully refunded. The burden of care fell on Cheryl. Evie had thought that might bring them together, but she was wrong. The factor's wife, heavily built with a face twisted by permanent scowling, resented what she saw as extra work, even though Evie insisted on doing as much for herself as she could. There were nearly five months to go till she started her course at Exeter. She had deliberately chosen a distant university for her history and politics studies.

Apart from the toxic atmosphere in the Hall, which was nothing to do with her, there was only one problem. Going to uni meant Evie wouldn't see Nick for months. He was planning on spending his gap year in the Far East. She wasn't sure how she was going to cope with that.

Heck rolled over in bed, away from Ag's warm back. It had been against his abdomen all night and the residual pain from his wound was gone. Then he remembered the previous night. She had been accommodating, very much so.

'Where are you going?' she said, sleepily. 'It's a holiday.'

'Got to go in,' he said, heading for the en suite bathroom. 'People got stabbed in a brothel.'

'For goodness sake,' Ag said, sitting up and ruffling her hair. She usually confined herself to pupil-friendly expressions, though she could swear like a constable when necessary. 'Can't Joni and Morrie handle that?'

'They both need monitoring. Anyway, Ruth Dickie's expecting me.'

Ag sank back on the pillows. 'We were going to do something with the kids.'

'I'll try to get back in the afternoon – take them for a kickabout.'

She laughed. 'Kat'll love that.'

'She will, actually. There's nothing she likes better than sending Luke running around like a rabbit on heat.'

'Go away, silly man,' she said, a smile on her lips.

Driving to Corham, Heck took in the mist rising from the fields. It was another cloudless day, the sun already a bright orb. Birds flitted across the road between the trees like small coils discharging energy. Heck enjoyed the trip every morning. For years he'd gone through the drab suburbs of Newcastle, the traffic thundering until it ground to a halt in tailbacks. Corham was more user-friendly. On the north side the

roads could handle the traffic even during rush hour, while the wide roads in Ironflatts that used to service the steel mill were never congested now. Besides, there weren't many cars around early on the first of the May bank holidays.

He saw Assistant Chief Constable Dickie getting out of her dark green Audi as he pulled into his parking place outside Force HQ. She waited for him, her black jacket and skirt immaculate and her briefcase full as ever. Until she spoke, she appeared to be 'Mrs Normal', her nickname – average height, weight, looks; bobbed mousy hair in an old-fashioned Alice band; a couple of unostentatious rings on her left hand. Her husband – she hadn't taken his name – really was Mr Normal: an insurance broker in Newcastle, who played golf and looked after the garden. The only thing that marked them out was that they didn't have the standard two children; they didn't have any. The general feeling was that the ACC didn't do sex.

'Good morning, Heck,' she said, a faint smile on her unpainted lips. Make-up was surplus to requirements unless there was a press conference. 'Busy night.'

'Ma'am.' Although Ruth Dickie had been a WPC when Heck was a DI, her rise had been rapid. She was a shrewd operator, good at police politics – Heck's bugbear – and hard-working. She had taken the weight off her then superiors during the early planning of Pofnee and had been rewarded with responsibility for crime across the whole force area.

'Something major go down in one of the cities?' Heck found it unlikely that she was referring only to the brothel stabbings.

'Nothing worse than usual,' she said drily.

Heck knew that could mean anything from running fights in central Newcastle to student bashing in Durham to drugs gang violence in Sunderland.

'I'm interested in the Albanian connection,' the ACC said, as they went across

the entrance hall.

Heck had a flash of Gene Hackman with pistol in hand. 'Is that right?'

'They're becoming a real problem in Newcastle.' She tapped in the door code. 'We don't want them operating under our noses in Corham, especially if they're being overtly violent. That wouldn't be at all good for the Force's image.'

Heck nodded. It was all about appearances. If it hadn't been a holiday, the local press would have been clamouring for a statement.

'My office in five minutes,' Ruth Dickie said, as the lift doors opened. 'You and your DIs will be sufficient.'

Heck swallowed a laugh. Why couldn't the ACC use normal words like 'enough'? He knew the reason: because she wasn't normal at all, no matter how she looked. She was a woman rocketing through the glass ceiling with the chief constable's job in her sights. He admired her, but he wasn't envious. He'd rather have walked the Roman Wall in winter wearing swimming trunks than occupy the sixth-floor corner office.

'Morning, Joni,' he said, as he walked into the MCU suite on the fourth floor, having taken the stairs and almost lost his breath.

DI Pax was hammering away at her keyboard. 'Sir,' she responded, without looking away from the screen. 'ACC want us?'

'How did you guess?'

Joni shrugged.

'Where's Morrie?'

'At the brothel. He and Nathan are being very secretive.'

Heck speed-dialled the other DI's number. 'Morrie? You have a minute to get over here. The ACC's office.' He terminated the call. 'That should get him

moving. In truth he's got three minutes.'

Joni went to the printer and started collating papers.

'Anything you want to tell me before we get grilled?' Heck asked, dumping his bag in his glass-walled office. There was no one else around.

'Nothing that won't wait, sir.'

'Thanks a lot. Let's go then.' He looked at her. 'Aren't you knackered?'

'It's not the first time I've pulled an all-nighter.' Joni's face softened. 'Thanks for the concern.' She followed him to the stairs, knowing his habit of avoiding the lifts. 'There is one thing.'

Heck looked over his shoulder.

'The brothel. It's owned by a company based in Liberia.'

He groaned.

Suzana watched the birds swarm over the park. They were like the shoals of fish she had once seen on Italian TV, circling and clustering in a dance only they could understand. She had spent the rest of the night behind thick bushes that lined a park by a river. In the early morning she had gone through nearby rubbish bins, finding half-eaten meat and bread and unfinished bottles. She ignored the beer and drank water and juice. Then, clutching her legs in her arms and leaning against the wall behind the bushes, she managed to sleep; not deeply and only in short bursts, but enough to refresh her. The wound in her chest was painful, as were her feet. She had taken off the trainers and socks and unwrapped the bandages, pouring water from a bottle she had saved over the lacerated soles. She didn't know if it would be enough to fend off infection, but it was all she could do. When it got dark, she would see if she could find an unoccupied house to break into for food and hot water, maybe even ointment and clean dressings. She wasn't going near any hospital. Leka and his stinking friends would be there if she hadn't killed them, though she knew how unlikely it was that all three were dead. Even if they were, others would come after her. The clan could never allow a woman to get the better of it.

She kept still as children came close, a ball crashing through the foliage. Fortunately the clothes she'd stolen weren't brightly coloured and she wasn't seen. Eventually the shouts and screams grew distant. Suzana was thinking about the kids in her village. They had nothing, certainly not the sturdy shoes and good quality clothes these ones wore. They used the heads of hens that had been slaughtered instead of

balls, the boys with their heads shaven against lice and the girls never allowed far from their mothers or elder sisters; until they became old enough to go the way of many sisters, the way that led abroad to the worst kind of slavery. She wished she still had a weapon. That would be her priority when she found a house: a knife she could use on them when they came for her, then draw quickly across her own throat.

As the day passed, sleep evaded her. She pulled out a sheet from one of the newspapers she had taken from a bin and was sitting on. The print was faded and the photographs blurred. The word 'Corham' appeared in the title and in many other places. Was that the name of the place she had been living in for months? Cor-ham. She pronounced the word under her breath, wondering if she was saying it correctly. Cor-ham.

Then she looked closer. There was a photograph of two women coming out of a house, one of them short and white, the other tall and dark-skinned. Suzana had never seen a black person in the flesh until she was in the airport in London. This woman looked powerful, as if she was a queen, but she was different. Even though Suzana would have nothing in common with her, she felt a strange connection. She peered at the words underneath. The ones that began with capital letters were probably names. Ma-ur-een Hug-hes, she voiced. Jo-ni Pax. This was the police officer who had left the card. Pax was like Albanian 'paqe'. Was that what the name meant? 'Peace'? Suzana laughed silently. Peace was the opposite of what she had experienced in this land.

She fumbled for the wallet and took out the rectangle of card. There was a telephone number and an address under Jo-ni Pax's name, but she wasn't going to visit any police station. Free was what she was now, free until death. Still, this Joni woman looked capable. Maybe she really could protect her...



Suzana slapped her cheek. That was weakness. Only she could save herself. She had to plan, she had to steal, she had to be forever on the watch for Leka's people and those who would betray her to them, she had to stay in the shadows. No police woman, especially not a dark goddess, could help her.

Suzana put the card back in the stolen wallet and tried to understand why Jo-ni Pax was in the newspaper. She understood some words that were similar to her own language and to Italian, but not enough to make sense of the story. If Jo-ni Pax was anything like the Albanian police, she would be taking money from criminals. Maybe Ma-ur-een Hug-hes thought she had been helped by her, but she would be just another victim. The police helped no one but themselves.

When the sun sank and darkness gathered, mist rising from the river as it did in the mountains back home, Suzana crawled carefully out of the bushes, having waited until the last people with dogs left. Then she slipped away, anonymous, no longer a slave but fully committed to remaining free.

ACC Crime Ruth Dickie leant against the window ledge and looked at the three officers sitting on the other side of her desk. She liked to have height advantage, even though she was no more than five foot five in her flat shoes.

‘Let me recap. One of the men attacked in the brothel is dead from the head injuries he suffered. Another, who was stabbed, is recovering from surgery and out of danger. Predictably, he hasn’t said a word. There’s been no sign of the man who walked down the street with what was described as a piece of cutlery sticking out of his head. Apart from confirming they’re from Albania, none of the women has said anything material to the investigation.’ The ACC looked at Joni.

‘Correct, ma’am. They’re terrified for their families back home.’

‘They didn’t even give you the missing woman’s name?’

Joni shook her head. ‘They say they don’t know it. That may be true. They don’t seem to know each other well. The pimps probably kept them in separate rooms.’

‘Vile but not unheard of,’ Ruth Dickie said. ‘As for you, DI Sutton, you found a safe at the house in Burwell Street. Unfortunately, raising a magistrate has been a slow process, but we should have it open in the afternoon.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ Morrie confirmed, looking pleased with himself.

‘But canvassing of the vicinity has been singularly unproductive.’

Heck struggled not to smile. Ruth Dickie’s standard operating procedure was to skewer subordinates when they thought the pressure was off.

‘Well, the people down there aren’t exactly our biggest fans. A lot of the men would have been customers of the knocking shop. We did find one old lady willing to talk, ma’am.’

‘The witness who said the man had a fork in his head because she recognised the distinctive handle? The forked man.’ If the ACC was proud of her witticism, she didn’t show it. ‘She also told you that a very tall person in a red hat was outside the house in question.’

This time Heck had to raise a hand to his mouth.

‘Yeah, she got confused by the lad dressed as a traffic light.’

Ruth Dickie turned her gaze back to Joni. ‘Who told you little of substance, DI Pax.’

‘I’m going to do a follow up interview, ma’am.’

‘No, you’re not,’ Morrie Sutton expostulated. ‘This is my case.’

The ACC had no interest in turf wars. ‘DCI Rutherford?’

‘DI Sutton left the interview before it got going, so DI Pax will continue for the sake of consistency.’

‘Thank you. Your priorities as of now are what?’

‘Joni...DI Pax will see if she can get anything out of the man in hospital when he’s fit to talk.’ Heck glanced at Morrie. ‘While DI Sutton will act on what is found in the safe, as well as coordinate the SOCO and uniform reports.’

Ruth Dickie nodded. ‘And the house? It’s all very well it being owned by this Liberian company, but someone local must be paying the bills.’

‘DI Sutton’s team will look at that, Ma’am,’ Heck confirmed.

‘Very well. I’ll see you at the morning briefing tomorrow.’

Joni stood up and looked at the ACC. ‘Pardon me, ma’am, but what about the

women?’

Dickie showed little interest in the question. ‘Didn’t you say they were in a hostel until the Border Agency’s checks are completed?’

‘Yes, but it’s not secure. They’ve been sexually abused for who knows how long, but at the same time they don’t want to antagonise the men who brought them here. I’m worried they’ll slip away.’

‘We don’t have the resources to baby sit them, DI Pax. Unless you want to volunteer.’

‘Maybe I will, ma’am,’ Joni said, glancing at Heck. ‘But there’s someone else at risk.’

‘I presume you mean the woman who murdered one man, put another in hospital and forked another.’ This time the ACC did smile, but there was little sign of amusement. ‘I should have thought the citizens of Corham are the ones at risk. Her description has been circulated, has it not, DI Sutton?’

Morrie nodded, giving Joni a sly smile. ‘Yes, ma’am. We’ll catch the...we’ll catch her soon enough.’

‘That will be all,’ Ruth Dickie said, looking at Joni doubtfully. Displays of emotion were not to her taste.

‘It’s OK, Nick,’ his mother said, handing him a plate of bacon, sausage and scrambled eggs. ‘You didn’t do anything wrong.’

Michael was already halfway through his breakfast. ‘That’s right, lad. But if I get my hands on those so called friends of yours, they’ll be sorry.’

His grandson looked at him blankly. ‘Leave them alone. Perce hung around for a bit. Anyway, I’d have done the same.’

‘I sincerely hope not. Friends are the most important thing in life. I still have...’ He broke off when he saw his daughter-in-law’s face. ‘Come on, eat up. We don’t want to be late for the fishing.’

‘Not coming,’ Nick said, pushing his plate across the table and getting up.

‘Wait, darling,’ his mother said, holding on to his arm as he tried to leave the kitchen. ‘We have to talk about this.’

‘About what?’ Nick said, pulling gently away and walking out.

They heard his footsteps on the stairs.

‘I don’t understand,’ Rosie said, her eyes wet. ‘He’s never been like this before. Not even when...when Alistair died.’

‘He saw some bad stuff last night,’ Michael said. ‘And he should never have been handcuffed, let alone interrogated. I thought that black woman had her head screwed on, but now I’m not so sure.’

Rosie sat down and stared at her son’s untouched food.

‘Don’t worry,’ her father-in-law said. ‘I’ll go and have a chat to him when

he's cooled down. You know what it is?'

'No...oh...you mean girl trouble.'

Michael nodded. 'I can understand the females in his party clearing off, but his male friends shouldn't have run.'

'They're just kids,' Rosie said softly. 'Don't judge them as if they were in the army.'

The general didn't respond. His daughter-in-law still hadn't got over the loss of Alistair, for all his faults, and letting go of Nick was proving difficult for her. He hated to imagine how she'd be when Nick went to the Far East. He found himself thinking about the female detective with the curious name. Pax. Good name for a law keeper. She reminded him of a sergeant who'd served in his communications unit in Bosnia. Mavis Westron. He'd never touched her – he hadn't done that kind of thing with female personnel – but there was an aura about her, a strange mixture of 'come hither' and 'do so and I'll break your fingers'. DI Pax had something similar.

'I'll take him a coffee,' Michael said. He went to the cafetière on the sideboard, poured himself one and put another full mug on a tray.

He paused outside his grandson's door. Usually there was ear drum-shattering music coming from it, but today he could hear the birdsong in the meadow behind the house. He knocked and turned the handle. To his surprise, the door was locked.

'Nick? I've brought you a coffee. Come on, chap. I won't bite.'

There was a pause and then the key clicked. The door still didn't open. Michael turned the handle, balancing the tray on his other hand. Nick was sitting with his arms round his drawn up legs in the far corner of his bed.

'I don't want anything to drink, Gramps,' he said fiercely.

Michael raised his shoulders. 'I'm not going to pour it down your throat.' He

smiled. 'Though I could if I wanted to.' That didn't raise even the ghost of a smile. They had always had a tactile relationship, the older man hugging his grandson and tugging his hair. They still occasionally played touch rugby in the back garden, but it didn't look like that would be happening today.

'Spit it out, lad. Problem shared and all that.'

Nick remained silent.

'Your Mum thinks it's girl trouble.'

'Why? What have you told her?'

Michael raised a hand. 'Nothing.'

Nick stared at him, his eyes red-veined. He obviously hadn't slept much. 'You promised you wouldn't, Gramps. You know it'll upset her.'

'I won't. But you have to promise me something in return.'

'What?'

'Forget her. You need to concentrate on your exams. Then it won't be long till you're backpacking your way to the other side of the world.'

Nick blinked and ran his forearm across his eyes. 'I can't, Gramps,' he said hoarsely. 'I can't...I love her.'

The general smiled. 'Everyone has that problem at your age. But you have to prioritise.'

'She's helping me with my English revision.'

Michael nodded. 'Evie's a great girl, but think about it. You won't see her for nearly a year. Then, if everything goes to plan, you'll be at Oxford and she'll be...where is it she's going?'

'Exeter.'

The general laughed. 'As far away as she can get from her crazy parents.'

‘That’s what she says.’ Nick caught his eye. ‘What’s so crazy about the Favons?’

‘It’s a long story and one for another day. Come on. The fish will be harder to hook the higher the sun gets.’

‘I’m sorry, Gramps, I’m not coming.’ Then Nick Etherington, captain of rugby and cricket, head of house and governors’ prize winner, lay back and pulled the covers over his head.



Joni got home in the late afternoon. She kicked off her boots and looked out at the birds in the garden behind the house. It had been an eighteenth century merchant's home, with tiny servants' rooms in the attic and a dim basement with barred windows. Developers had bought the building when the last member of the family died ten years back and split it into six apartments. Joni's was one of two on the first floor. It had a spacious living area, a reasonably sized bedroom, and functional kitchen and bathroom. Her mother had told her she could get a detached cottage where she lived further north for half the rent, but Joni didn't listen. She needed to be in the town, even if it was tiny compared with London. The countryside made her nervous.

A couple of female blackbirds were picking what at the shared lawn, tchook-tchooking as they went. She liked the birds. The females lacked the males' show-off yellow beaks and the feathers, especially on their chests, were mottled brown. They were like her; less dark and seemingly disconnected from their male counterparts. Joni had never felt much in common with black people of either sex. She didn't enjoy black music of any kind, sticking resolutely to the classical recordings she had first heard on cassettes borrowed from the public library. She didn't like black dance, black literature or black cooking. A soon-to-be-ex-friend at Oxford told her she was in denial about her racial heritage. Joni denied that vehemently. She was in touch with her white heritage and that was enough; not that she liked the hippy stuff her mother played incessantly, Joni Mitchell to the fore.

DCI Rutherford had told her to take the rest of the day off, almost marching

her out of Force HQ when he left. She played along because she needed a shower and change of clothes. There was plenty she still had to do, not least since the injured Albanian had been cleared to talk by the doctors. Putting Brahms's second symphony on as loud as was feasible – her neighbours above were retired doctors with the hearing of bats – she stood under the hot water for five minutes, before dousing herself with cold for another three. As usual, that concentrated her mind.

Morrie Sutton had got his warrant and gone off with DI Gray and a locksmith to open the safe in the basement of the Burwell Street brothel. Although none of the women had made a complaint, Joni had insisted social services have them examined by a doctor. No one was in any doubt that they'd been subjected to prolonged sexual abuse and their lack of possessions suggested they were hardly there by choice. Morrie hadn't told her what had been found in the safe, saying only that he'd meet her at the hospital later. The man was a dick, but she had to work with him. At least Nick Etherington lived outside Corham and she'd been given responsibility for him, though reinterviewing him would have to wait till he finished school tomorrow.

As she dried herself, Joni thought of the Albanian women. She had gone to the hostel and spoken to them again, telling them to stay there. They looked at each other, and exchanged sentences in their own language. Only two of them spoke Italian, saying the others came from Kosovo.

'We will look after you,' Joni said, even though she had no idea what social services and the UKBA would decide. 'Don't go back to the people who made you do those terrible things.'

There was more chatter in the language she couldn't understand.

'We have stay here?' one of them asked, in Italian. She was thin and physically underdeveloped – a girl still. 'We go?'

‘Not yet,’ Joni replied, with a sigh. Maybe moving the focus away from them would bear fruit. ‘The other woman. Is there nothing you can tell me about her?’

The thin girl translated for the others, one of whom spoke at some length.

‘OK, we say this. Her name Suzana. This woman here, she in room below. She many times hear screaming from woman. Much – how say? – noise on floor. She fight with man Leka.’

One of the others hissed at her. Joni looked as impassive as she could. It was the first time a male name had been mentioned.

‘He kept you in the house?’ she asked, her voice low.

‘Yes, Leka bad,’ her interlocutor said, ignoring the objections. ‘He...he hurt us, he beat us if not...make men happy.’ She paused, staring at Joni. ‘This Suzana, she always fight. We...we frightened.’ She let out a sob.

Joni squeezed her knee, wondering if Leka was the dead man. The women had been given ill-fitting but clean clothes and the thin one was wearing faded jeans.

‘Listen to me. You never have to work for this man or his friends again. You are safe now.’

The young woman shook her head. ‘We never safe. We work till old and ugly.’

Nothing more had been said, but Joni felt she’d established a link, albeit an indirect one, with the fugitive woman Suzana. If she’d found Joni’s card, they knew each other’s names. Suddenly they had become closer.

24

‘Where the fuck’s Gaz?’

‘Dunno, Kylie. He isn’t answering his phone.’

‘I fuckin’ know that, Pumpkinhead.’

‘I called his mother. She told me he wasn’t there and if I saw him to say she’s thrown out his sweaty footie kit.’

‘Jesus, he won’t like that.’

‘Then she told me to fuck off.’

‘Get that a lot, don’t you?’

‘Fuck off.’

‘Ha ha. You call the others?’

‘Aye. Hot Rod was still asleep.’

‘Bet he told you to fuck off too.’

‘Aye. Jackie was shagging his lass. He told me to fuck off an’ all.’

‘What about Darryl?’

‘He didn’t tell me to fuck off.’

‘That must have been nice. Anything else?’

‘Nah. He was getting ready to go for a run.’

‘He’s too fucking healthy, that lad. So no one’s got a clue then?’

‘Including you.’

‘Fuck off.’

‘See you in the Grapes later?’

‘Aye. Gaz’ll probably turn up with some tart.’

‘Aye. Got any pills?’

‘I told you last night, those things’ll mess your head up even more.’

‘Aye. So have you?’

‘Aye.’

‘Good.’

‘Fuck off.’

Morrie Sutton and Nathan Gray were waiting for Joni on the third floor of Corham General.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘Nothing,’ DS Gray said quickly. He was fair-haired and blue-eyed with a reputation as a skirt chaser, though he’d never had the nerve to try anything with Joni.

‘What do you think about the fact that this is now a murder case?’ DI Sutton said, smiling slackly. ‘My murder case.’

Joni eyed him with distaste. ‘You’ve got even more reason to go after the woman who carried out the attacks. Despite the fact that she’d have been forced into sex slavery and was probably defending herself.’

The two male detectives avoided her gaze. She’d heard Gray refer to her as ‘Pam’ rather than the more common ‘Jackie’, but that didn’t bother her. Pam Grier had done serious damage to numerous men in her movies, not that Joni enjoyed them.

‘Are you going to tell me what you found in the safe?’ she asked.

DI Sutton nodded. ‘Passports for all the girls, including the missing one – Suzana Noli is her name. They all came in legally through Heathrow last October. The guy who died was called Leka Asllani. I asked DC Andrews to run him and the rest of them through HOLMES and the other digital databases.’

‘What are the other women’s names?’ Joni asked.

They stared at her.

‘I’m going to talk to them again. Can I have copies of the passport pages with

their photos so I can match them to their names?’

Sutton nodded without enthusiasm. ‘In the meantime, you and I need to talk to the surviving pimp.’ He handed her an open passport in a clear plastic bag. ‘Blerim Dost. Jesus, these people have crazy names. Born in some God-forsaken hole called Bajram, 19/11/1976. Like all of them, he’s got a ninety-day visitor’s visa that expired in January. He probably has documentation in other names – most of the pimps and hard men do - but it wasn’t in the house.’

Joni stepped back as a nurse hurried down the corridor. ‘What else did you find?’

Morrie Sutton grinned. ‘Over ten grand in well used notes and a load of credit cards that are probably clones.’

Joni looked at the two of them impatiently. ‘I can tell there was more.’

Nathan Gray held up another plastic bag, this one containing small sachets of white powder.’

‘There was over a kilo of this. The rest’s at the lab, though there’s a skeleton staff till tomorrow. Cocaine, and it’s pretty heavily cut.’

Joni decided against asking how he’d ascertained that. Gray didn’t give the impression of being an innocent when it came to drugs.

DI Sutton took the bag from him. ‘Oh, and there were three sets of knuckle dusters, all encrusted with blood, two combat knives and...what else, Nate?’

The DS grinned. ‘Three Sig P239 9mm semi-automatic pistols and twenty-four full eight-round clips. The lab will check them for prints and draw up ballistic profiles.’

Joni knew that Nathan Gray was a guns freak who spent his summer holidays in countries where pistol shooting was legal. That didn’t mean she was going to

encourage him. She'd seen what guns could do in London. One of the big advantages of working for Pofnee was that she hadn't come up against firearms. Until now.

'See if you can borrow a photocopier and run off DI Pax's copies of the hookers' passports, lad.' Morrie Sutton felt the intensity of Joni's gaze. 'What? That's what they are.'

'Sex slaves is a more accurate term. All right, how do you want to play this?'

'Simple. I ask a question, you translate it, then you translate the scumbag's answer. If there is one, which I'm not holding my breath for.'

'Sure you don't want a fag first?' Joni asked. 'Good, because I'm pressed for time.' She had no intention of acting as Morrie's interpreter. How was he to know what she said to the Albanian? 'You brought the coke to loosen his tongue, I presume.'

Sutton nodded, turning away.

'I presume DCI Rutherford knows about these developments,' Joni called after him.

'Aye, he does. Wouldn't do to keep the senior investigating officer in the dark, would it, lass?'

Joni went after him, biting her tongue. He was nothing compared with the worst of the Met's male officers, but he still irritated her. Which, of course, was exactly what he wanted.



Michael Etherington's fishing trip was a waste of time. The sun brightened quickly and he gave up at midday. He first went to his own house to drop off his fishing tackle. It was a couple of miles west of the one he'd been sharing with Rosie and Nick after his son and wife died. He told himself he was doing that to support his daughter-in-law and grandson, but that was only part of the story. The fact was, he missed Christine badly and didn't like sleeping in the house they'd shared. It had been his refuge and he thought of it daily when he was on active duty abroad; his wife too.

Rosie was preparing lunch. She gave him a sad smile. 'Nick still hasn't come down.'

He touched her shoulder. It was fleshless like much of her body. She'd always been slim, but since Alistair's death she'd become a wraith. The curious thing was she'd never given the impression that she cared much for his son, especially not when the drink took him over. She was an unfathomable woman.

'I'll go and talk to him.'

Nick was still under the covers.

'Bloody farce,' Michael said. 'You were right not to come. Not a bite all morning.' He sat down on the bed. 'Tell you what. How about we go up to Favon Hall in the afternoon? You can drive – you need the practice. We'll put your bike in the back so you can come back under your own steam. I don't want to hang around like a wallflower.'

Nick's head appeared. 'Thanks, Gramps. I'll call Evie.'

Michael winked. 'Why not make it a surprise? In my experience women like surprises.'

'OK.' Nick smiled tentatively. 'She never goes out anyway.'

The trip north was smooth enough. Nick was a decent driver but, to his embarrassment, had failed his test six months earlier. He was calm enough and his reactions were good. According to the examiner, he had pulled out twice without checking his mirror. Michael had been surprised by that, as well as concerned. Did his grandson's usually imperturbable exterior conceal roiling depths like those that had done for Alistair?

'Well done, lad' he said, as Nick turned into the gate of the Favon estate. A long, tree-lined drive led to the Hall. 'Smooth as...I don't know what.'

'An attack by Julius Caesar?'

Michael laughed. Clearly the prospect of seeing Evie had restored the boy's spirits. He looked at the buildings ahead.

Favon Hall had been built by the first lord in the 1760s. It was a rather ugly Palladian block. Beside it, slightly to the rear, rose an older building, a medieval tower that had often been besieged by Scottish raiders under the original owners. The last scion of that family, an unmarried twenty year old, had been killed at Culloden, enabling the newly ennobled Favon to buy the tower and a large area of surrounding land, both arable and moor, at a bargain price. Nowadays, the house and formal garden were open to the public during June, July and August, but the rest of the grounds were private throughout the year.

Nick pulled up by the wide staircase that led to the main entrance, beside a black Mazda sports car.

'Looks like Victoria's home,' Michael said. 'I'll come in for a word.'

Nick was already out of the door, bag of books in his hand. There was no doubt he was passionate about the girl. Michael followed him, happy that his grandson was experiencing love but worried about the young people's future together. And they were very young...

Lady Favon answered the door herself.

'Nicholas!' she said, her meticulously painted red lips parting in a smile that was more than just welcoming. 'What a lovely surprise! I'm so pleased to see you.' She looked past him. 'Hello, Michael. Babysitting?'

'Good afternoon, Victoria,' the general said coolly, running his eye over the viscountess. She was dressed in a well-cut white blouse and a black skirt that hung just above the knee. As ever, her heels were high and her legs sheathed in black stockings or tights, he couldn't tell the difference. Knowing Victoria, he'd bet on the former. 'Nick would like to do some revision with Evie.'

'Oh, never mind her,' Victoria said, smoothing back strands of blonde hair. 'She's got her nose in the family secrets as usual. Come and sit down for a minute, the pair of you. I haven't had two good-looking men in the drawing-room for weeks.'

Nick gave his grandfather a reluctant look and then followed him and their hostess across the black-and-white tiled floor. Portraits of Andrew Favon's ancestors hung in the hall and up the marble staircase, their faces bland but their eyes piercing and acquisitive.

Victoria opened the double doors that led into a spacious room with French windows and surprisingly chintzy décor. The furniture was a mixture of faded heirlooms and incongruous modern additions.

'Here, Nicholas,' Lady Favon said, sitting on a floral-covered settee and patting the cushion next to her. 'Tell me what you've been up to.'

Michael watched from across the low table as Victoria turned her gaze on his grandson. Although she must have been forty, she was still a striking woman – if anything, even more attractive than when she was younger. Her figure was stunning. It was all Nick could do to keep his eyes from focusing on her breasts.

‘Oh, nothing much,’ he muttered.

‘What did you get up to last night?’ Victoria asked, lighting a cigarette with deft movements.

The question brought red patches to Nick’s cheeks. ‘Well, I...’

‘He dressed up like a traffic light,’ Michael said, in attempt to distract the siren.

‘Gramps,’ Nick complained.

Lady Favon laughed. ‘Don’t worry,’ she said, giving the older man a conspiratorial look. ‘I’m sure we’ve done much worse.’

I’m sure you have, Michael thought. Victoria’s reputation was...

‘Nick!’ Evie came through the open doors faster than someone using an arm crutch would be expected to do. Tall, slim and with short brown hair, she was attractive, but not in her mother’s class. She sat down beside the young man and kissed him on the cheek. ‘What a lovely surprise!’

Michael couldn’t suppress a smile. Victoria looked put out as the youngsters started to talk to each other in low voices.

‘We’re going to the library,’ Evie said, standing up in a practised move that still made her frown. ‘I’ve found the most amazing story.’

‘I’m sure,’ Victoria said icily. ‘Have...fun.’ Her eyes were fixed on Nick as the pair headed away.

‘Andrew not around?’ Michael said, breaking the silence that ensued.

‘What? Oh, he’s out on the moors with Dan Reston. Something to do with

sheep.’

Michael stood up. ‘I’ll be off then. Nick’s coming home on his bike. I’ll leave it by the steps.’

Victoria Favon nodded, her thoughts clearly elsewhere.

‘No more than twenty minutes, please,’ the female doctor said.

Morrie Sutton brushed past her into the private room. A heavily built constable was posted outside on an inadequate chair.

‘Look at this piece of shit,’ Sutton said.

Joni took in the patient, tubes leading to him from drips and from him to transparent bags hooked on the side of his bed, one half-full of dark urine and the other collecting bright blood. The Albanian was small, the skin on his face tight, but his eyes were shiny and malevolent. She felt a frisson. He hadn’t been secured to the bed as the doctors said he was in a weakened state post-surgery. Besides, he hadn’t yet been charged because the women from the brothel refused to incriminate him.

DI Sutton held up the bag of drugs. ‘What have you got to say about this, you asshole?’

If Blerim Dost understood English, he kept it to himself. His eyes moved to Joni and she read the race hatred in them. Taking a deep breath, she opened her notebook.

‘I think we’d better do this properly, Morrie,’ she said. ‘Shall I ask him to confirm his name?’

‘Oh, all right.’

Joni spoke in Italian. The Albanian listened, but didn’t respond. Sure that he understood, she motioned Sutton over and took the bag containing the open passport.

‘Mr Dost,’ she said, ‘this proves your identity. Or at least the one you used to

enter the country. Your visa has now expired.’

Nothing – not even a blink.

‘Evidence we have found suggests you’ve been involved in operating a brothel.’

The cold grey eyes stayed on her, but the patient didn’t speak.

‘Tell him about his pal,’ Morrie said.

Joni nodded, but did not immediately comply. First she asked Dost what he had to say about the women in the house. When he kept silent, she asked who had attacked him and why. Then she took the rest of the material from her colleague. The sample of drugs and photographs of the weapons found in the safe and the piles of bank notes were held up in front of him. Still no reaction.

Joni smiled to put him at ease, then leaned closer. ‘Leka Asllani,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry to tell you that he died from the wounds he received.’

That did elicit a response. The Albanian’s eyes opened wider, but still he remained silent.

‘Tell him I’m going to rip the tube from his cock and wrap it round his neck if he doesn’t talk!’ Morrie yelled.

Blerim Dost was way ahead of him. He pulled the bag of urine off the bedstead and looped the catheter tube round Joni’s neck, dragging her closer as he tightened it. Urine dripped on to her blouse.

‘I kill her,’ he said in English. ‘If you not sit over there, I stop her breathing.’

Sutton took a few steps backwards, staring at Joni as she struggled for air. The Albanian may have been slight, but he was strong. Although there was some give in the tube, he reduced that by twisting it round his fingers.

‘Now, black bitch, you stand.’ Dost clenched his teeth as Joni complied,

the stitches in the wound in his abdomen straining. 'We go to table.'

Joni looked out of the corner of her eye. She could see a stainless steel tray with dressings, bandages and a pair of pointed scissors on it. The latter was what her captor was after. The tube was hard for him to handle, especially in motion, but the scissors would be a lot easier, enabling him to threaten her with instant death if he held them to her jugular.

So she moved her left shoulder slightly, let the muscles across her body go slack – earning herself a gasp of air as Dost involuntarily released the pressure on her throat – and threw him over her shoulder. The Albanian screamed as the catheter was wrenched out, urine spraying in all directions.

'Jesus Christ!' Sutton said, as Joni cuffed the Albanian to the bed, leaving him on the floor.

She loosened the tube from her neck and stood up. 'You'd better get the doctor,' she said. She squatted down by Dost, who was now whimpering, his free hand over his groin. 'You like hurting women, don't you?' she said. 'Now two of us have shown you what we can do. Wait till you meet a woman called Dickie.'

Her attacker stared blankly at the wall.

'This is going to get official – lawyers, recorded interviews, jail. You have very little time to talk freely.' She loomed over his face. 'Who's your boss? He's in Newcastle, isn't he? Tell me his name and I'll do what I can for you.'

Blerim Dost looked back at her and then laughed, before grimacing. Blood dripped steadily from the dressing on his abdomen.



Suzana had been waiting in the bushes outside the house for nearly two hours; she knew that from the chimes of the clock on a nearby church tower. It had been seven o'clock when she got there, flitting down the streets like a ghost and standing behind the equally spaced trees when people approached. There weren't many as the evening was surprisingly cold. The houses were joined together in pairs but large, light flooding from front rooms with wide windows. People in nice clothes were watching television, eating, drinking - one elderly couple was dancing. There were rich people's cars parked on the street and in driveways, except by the house she had chosen. It showed no lights, apart from a small one flashing on a box between the first floor windows. Suzana had seen those on the clan leaders' homes in Tirana while they were waiting to be flown to London. If she tried to get in, bells would ring.

That didn't put her off. This house had a passage at the side and she went down it in a crouch. There was a wooden gate, but she was agile enough to get over it in one bound. She found herself in a garden surrounded by trees and tall bushes, an expanse of grass in the middle. At the rear was a small building made of wood. She raised her eyes and checked the windows of the house. She had been hoping that one might have been left open by a child or an old person. She was out of luck.

Everything was secure and there was another box with a flashing light on the rear wall. But at least there were no people around. The wooden outbuilding beyond the grass was her only hope. Did they keep chickens or rabbits there? She hoped they did - she would tear them apart with her bare hands, so great was her hunger. But she

realised as she got closer that this was no animal shed.

She looked in the window. There was some light from the house next door and she made out a desk, a high-backed leather chair and, behind them, a low bed. There was also what looked like a small refrigerator. There were plastic boxes on shelves above it and – could it be true? – tins of food. Heart pounding, Suzana went to the side of the building and examined the door. It was secured by a padlock. Again, she wished she'd had time to pull the knife from the pig's belly. Dropping to her knees, she felt around for a stone or a piece of metal. This time she was lucky. Round the corner her hand fell on an old screwdriver. A minute later she was in the shed.

Or rather, in paradise. There was a tin opener on the shelf and soon she was gorging herself on fish and beans, gulping down cold soup, cramming biscuits from one of the plastic boxes into her mouth. She had no idea how long she ate, but eventually she sat back against the wall, panting. She closed her eyes and sleep took her, deep and drowning, into scenes from the last twenty-four hours – the soft stab of the fork in Leka's back and the crashing as he went down the stairs, head bouncing against the floor and wall; the split-second of terror in the second man's eyes before she planted the fork in his forehead; the feel of the last bastard's chest against her head as she stuck him with the knife; then the screaming, her own and others', the strange traffic light person in the road, the slap of her bare feet on the asphalt, and the pounding of her pursuer's boots.

Suzana woke with a start and took a few seconds to work out where she was. Remembering, she raised her head above the bottom of the window frame. The house beyond the grass was still dark. The neighbours were having a party, music blaring and the lights brighter than they had been. It seemed she was still safe. She looked around the wooden hut. It was like no outhouse she had ever seen. The ones in her

village had been basic, walls unplastered, floors earthen and windows without glass. This place was like a second home; but why have one so close to the larger building?

Opening the long drawer under the surface of the desk, Suzana found a laptop computer. It was no use to her, she had never learned how to use the machines. Some of the men who paid for her had them in their bags. She considered stealing it, but didn't want the trouble of finding a buyer - one who would remember the woman in ill-fitting clothes who couldn't speak English. There was a small knife, its extending blade sheathed in a plastic holder. She took that. There was also a bag like those carried by the men in suits who fucked her. She filled it with tins of food and packets of biscuits.

Suzana weighed up her options. She could risk staying here overnight. The bed, though only a flimsy thing, was inviting. Or she could wait till the party was over - she didn't want to risk creeping back to the passage at the side of the house - and find somewhere safe to sleep under the stars. She swallowed a laugh. When she was ten, her ambition had been to spend a summer night up on the mountain, looking at the stars until their patterns burned into her memory. When she asked her father, he had hit her with the back of his hand. It was not for females of any age to sleep outside the family home and the guardianship of men. Now she found the prospect less inviting after shivering through the night before.

Then she saw the heavy garment hanging on the back of the door. She took it down and tried it on. It was thick and soft, a deep red colour, and it almost reached her feet. There was also a hat, a wide-brimmed leather thing that could have been worn by a cowboy. It would protect her from the rain that she had heard falling so often in this accursed place, even though it would make her stick out in a crowd. She found a plastic bag and stuffed it inside.

Then Suzana took off her trainers and unwrapped the makeshift bandages from her feet. The smell was bad. Fortunately there was some water in an electric kettle and she was able to bathe the wounds. When she finished, exhaustion seized her and she stretched out on the bed. But she didn't allow herself to sleep, determined not to be caught and see again the faces of the men who had forced themselves on her and kept her captive. Maybe all three were dead and, if she was taken by the police, she would spend the rest of her life in prison. She laughed bitterly. Leka's friends would catch her first and her death would be long drawn out and merciless. Even if they didn't, the same would happen in jail.

Much later, the lights went off in the house over the garden fence. Suzana put the tins and wrappers from the food she had consumed into a metal bin that reminded her of the one in her room of slavery. Pushing the door shut after her, she made her way stealthily to the street beyond. It was quiet. Laden with bounty, she walked quickly away.

Heck Rutherford found Joni at Corham General. She was talking to the uniformed constable outside the Albanian's room.

‘What the hell happened?’ he asked, after he'd led her down the corridor. ‘Morrie said you were almost strangled.’

‘With a catheter tube, would you believe?’ Joni gave him a crooked smile, but it was clear she'd been rattled. ‘I'll survive.’ There was a line around her neck, but the skin hadn't been broken. ‘But I stink like a urinal.’

‘Never thought of using mine to do that,’ he replied. ‘Though there was one ward sister...’

‘They have a way, don't they?’ Joni said ruefully. ‘I had the riot act read to me about endangering a patient and damaging hospital property. As you can imagine, Morrie was a lot of help.’

‘Is he all right? The Albanian, I mean.’

‘Suddenly found his tongue, English-speaking version. After a lot of squealing – his wound reopened - he said I'd be hearing from his lawyer.’

‘Aye, right,’ Heck said, with a laugh. Then his expression changed. ‘I remember these slime bags when I was in Newcastle. They were beginning to move in and they weren't afraid to use extreme violence. You'd better watch your back.’

Joni nodded. ‘They're in London too. The problem is, they can't be infiltrated. Everyone's related and they only use outsiders for jobs they can't handle or don't want to get fingered for.’

‘Come on,’ Heck said. ‘I’ve been stalling her, but you’ll have to report to the ACC. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure she doesn’t steamroller you.’

‘Good luck with that,’ Joni said, under her breath. ‘Sir, what about the women? They should be told that one of the pimps is dead, as well as that Blerim Dost is unlikely to be a danger to them for several years.’

‘Ah,’ Heck said, stopping on the stairway. ‘I had a call from the hostel on the way in. They made a run for it.’

‘All of them?’

‘Afraid so.’ He put a hand on her arm, then removed it when he saw her expression. ‘There was only one staff member on duty and they were well away before a patrol car got there.’

Joni slapped the wall. ‘I knew it. We should have had people watching them.’

‘You heard what the ACC said about that.’ He risked a smile. ‘Maybe now she’ll see the error of her ways.’

‘And maybe she’ll be wearing a see-through top. Where’s Morrie?’

‘He went back to the brothel. Now this is a murder case the SOCOs are going over it much more carefully.’

‘What do you expect them to find?’

Heck shrugged. ‘If we’re lucky, fingerprints that are in the databases. Hairs, male bodily fluids that can be DNA-tested, fibres from clothing – it’s amazing the stuff they can pinpoint these days.’

‘But we know who the killer is: Suzana, the woman I ran after.’

He shook his head. ‘It isn’t that straightforward. It’s likely she stabbed Dost, though none of the few witnesses Morrie’s tracked down had a clear view. Her fingerprints will be on the knife if she did and they’ll obviously be in at least one of

the rooms, not that we have any originals to compare with. But we don't have any witnesses to the murder of Leka Asllani. He was at the bottom of the stair from the second floor, which may mean that Suzana's room was up there.'

'We don't have the fork that did for the dead man's kidney either.' Joni pushed the door on the ground floor open and held it open for Heck. 'No one's seen the Albanian with the fork in his head, I suppose?'

'No. He's a problem.'

'Because he'll bring the heavy brigade over from Newcastle?'

He nodded. 'Though Dost will also be alerting them via the lawyer. That third man – what's his name?'

Joni looked at the list attached to the bag with Blerim Dost's passport. 'Elez Zymeri. Not that he'll be calling himself that now.'

Heck stopped by his car. 'Doesn't matter what identity he uses. He'll be back to track down the woman who forked him, as Dickie so neatly put it. I suspect the disgrace of being bested by a member of the opposite sex is massive for them.'

'Probably,' she said, flexing her shoulder. 'That means Dost will get a contract put on me.'

'Yes,' Heck said despondently. 'It probably does.'

‘You swallowed those pills, didn’t you, Pumpkinhead?’ Kyle Laggan shook his head as his mate came back from the bog. ‘I fucking told you to wait till later.’

‘Away wi’ you,’ Daryll said, slamming down his empty pint glass. ‘The Grapes is a free house.’

‘Not if this pillock falls over in a trance.’

‘Lay off him, Kylie.’ Jackie had his arm round a girl whose name he hadn’t bothered to mention. She looked totally out of it. ‘Who elected you president?’

Hot Rod guffawed. ‘President. Nice one. Whose round is it?’

‘Yours,’ Kyle said.

‘Aw reet, aw reet. I’m on ma way.’

‘Hot by name, not hot by nature,’ Kyle muttered. He looked round the table. ‘Where the fuck’s Gaz? He’s never missed a bank holiday session since we were bairns.’

‘Calm down, man,’ Daryll said. ‘He’ll be pigsticking some tart.’

‘Charming,’ said the nameless girl.

‘Yeah, mind your fucking gob, Daz,’ Jackie said, with a glare.

‘Here you go,’ Hot Rod said, putting a tray on the table.

‘Newkie Nectar,’ Jackie said, putting the bottle to his girl’s lips. She drank reluctantly. ‘What’s the matter, lass? Fancy something more sophisticated?’

‘Piss off.’

‘Charming,’ chanted all five males, before bursting into raucous laughter.



Kyle speed-dialled Gaz's mobile again. 'Voice mail again,' he said. 'Gaz! Answer your fucking messages, mon!'

There was a brief silence as they drank.

'Maybe he's gone fishing,' suggested Pumpkinhead. 'I ken he used to go wi' his old man.'

Kyle snorted. 'These days Gaz's old man can't lift his cock, never mind a fishing rod.'

'But Gaz could still have gone off to one a' they trout rivers by Rothbury,' Pumpkinhead insisted.

'He could have gone anywhere in the North East,' Hot Rod said. 'I still think he's with some lass. You know how they go for him.'

There was a bout of nodding.

'Lucky bastard,' Daryll said. 'I wish I had a co--'

'Shut it,' Jackie interrupted, glancing at his girl. 'I'm the one with the python around here.'

'Oh aye?' she said. 'I was thinking adder meself. Baby adder.'

The outburst of hysteria that ensued led the long-suffering barman to consider barring the wankers. Then again, they were a major source of his income.

Joni survived the meeting with Ruth Dickie, who was solicitous about her well-being. Afterwards Heck reminded her how important gender and racial minorities issues were to the ACC. Joni asked if officers could be detailed to look for the Albanian women around the town. That was denied – there was insufficient personnel because of the bank holiday - though the ACC did agree that officers on patrol be apprised of the Albanians' potential presence on the streets.

Joni went home to change her urine-spattered clothes, had a shower and then started driving around Corham. She was sure the women would be bewildered by their surroundings, having probably never been allowed out by their captors. They also had no money, though it wouldn't take them long to make some. She wondered if they knew to go to Newcastle to find other Albanians, or if they would aim for London. Either way, it was likely they would be trying to hitch, probably having split up. She headed to the eastern edge of the town. The dual carriageway led to Newcastle in one direction and Carlisle in the other. Decelerating as she approached the last roundabout, Joni saw a shadowy figure in the twilight. It was one of them. She slowed down more, trying to keep her head back so she wasn't recognised. The woman was one of those who spoke Italian, but she must have worked on roads before because she leaned down to inspect the driver before coming close. The instant she saw who it was, she turned away and dashed into the undergrowth. Joni got out and shone a torch around, but planners had helpfully located a pine wood by the roundabout and she had little chance of finding anyone in the deepening gloom. She

considered calling a patrol car, but decided against it. The women would go to ground the moment uniformed officers appeared. Short of driving round the vicinity all night, there was little Joni could do. The last thing she wanted was persecute the Albanian women. She needed to find some other way of helping them.

Back at her flat she did half an hour of yoga, then prepared a vegetable stir fry. She had given up meat and fish when she was thirteen, although her mother hardly noticed. Moonbeam rarely cooked, preferring to be taken out by the men she was involved with, so Joni had taught herself how to make nourishing meals. After eating, she sat on the sofa with a cup of mint tea and tried to get her thoughts in order. It had been a strange day, and not only because someone had tried to kill her. The fact that she'd been able to handle Blerim Dost was reassuring. Since the disaster in London, she'd been wary about taking on hard men. Breaking the wife beater's arm had helped, as had the tackle she'd put in on Nick Etherington before he fell into the river. That reminded her. She would speak to Nick's mother in the morning to find out when he'd be home from school. He had definitely seen more outside the brothel than he admitted in interview.

Joni thought back to the conversation she'd had with the Albanian women. It was the first time she'd spoken Italian since she moved north. In London there was no shortage of Italian restaurants and shops where she could keep the language alive, but the Bar Roma in Corham was staffed by Australians. She could have gone to Newcastle at weekends easily enough. For some reason that didn't appeal; as if, having decided to move out of the big city, she didn't want to be drawn back into another on her days off. She also disliked shops, multi-storey car parks and pubs full of screaming pissheads. Heck and the others had told her Newcastle was well stocked with all of those. No, Corham was enough for her now, and she kept up her languages

by reading French and Italian newspapers and criminology articles on the Internet.

She had a sudden flash of Aurelio Moretti, the harbour at Bari in the background. He was the most beautiful man she had ever seen, dark hair running back in waves from his perfectly proportioned face, full lips revealing marble white teeth. She had been twenty-one when she first went to Italy, for a teaching job arranged by the university during her year abroad. Aurelio was a games master at the same school and she fell for him the day she started work.

‘Hey, beautiful brown lady, you wanting come for coffee?’

His English had made her laugh and she replied in Italian that was fluent but lacking any regional inflection. They ended up in bed that night. He wasn’t her first lover. Having avoided sex completely when she was at school, she had slept with three men and one woman in her first two years at Oxford, but had never been satisfied. Aurelio did things to her body she had never imagined. She didn’t even mind that he was married. He gave her the standard story about his wife not understanding him. A functioning feminist at the time, Joni knew she should have planted a knee between his legs, but she couldn’t resist him. He was mad about cars and started her off on the tinkering with engines that she had later perfected. They were together until the day she left Bari to take up another teaching job in Marseille. He had begged her to stay, told her he would follow her, cried as she boarded the train. She still had the charm bracelet he had given her, but she never wore it. Not my style, she would tell herself. Maybe if he’d come to France she’d have put it on. But he never showed up, never wrote apart from one card declaring his love. She hadn’t replied, seeing that her future was different and elsewhere, even if she didn’t yet know the details.

And now she was reduced to using the language of love – not just of Dante

and Petrarch, but of her stunning Puglian man – to question sex slaves and their pimps. The starkness of the situation almost made her weep, but she pulled herself together. At least there were no French gangsters in Corham, probably not even in Newcastle or Sunderland. She could keep that language for memories of love. In Marseille she'd been a hit with the mixed race teenagers in the run-down suburb where she was posted. She argued with the headmaster for more time with her pupils and eventually he agreed. Julien Sorel was divorced, bald and as different from Aurelio as was possible. He didn't even like bouillabaisse, which Joni would sure her Italian lover, a sea food gourmet, would have consumed by the litre. But he was a kindly lover and an intellectual. Without him she would never have borne the initial harshness of the kids, brought about by the society they had to grow up in.

Looking back, Joni saw that her decision to join the police was rooted in the squalid streets of Marseille, where drugs were king and prostitution queen, as much as it was in her Hackney childhood. She had lost touch with Julien soon after her return to Oxford. One of the other teachers sent her a note a few months later, saying he'd been killed by a hit-and-run driver after he had stormed into a café that sold drugs to teenagers.

That had made her even more determined to right society's wrongs.

Nick and Evie were at the table in the library, the afternoon light shining through the tinted yellow windows. Their shoulders were touching as they studied the laptop screen.

‘Read it,’ Evie said, tugging her ear nervously.

Nick turned and kissed her on the cheek before she could react.

‘What...what was that for?’

‘Don’t know,’ he said, his long eyelashes flicking.

Evie stared at him. She wasn’t surprised. She’d had feelings for him for weeks, but she hadn’t been sure what he thought about her. She’d liked him at school, even though he was in the year below. He was a star of the rugby and cricket teams. Everyone knew him and most people - girls, boys and even some members of staff - looked up to him. At first she’d thought he was a typical good-looking sporty type, but he was smart and hardworking too. And he’d been sweet to her after the accident, visiting her in hospital, though always with others from the Abbey.

‘Let me think about it,’ she said, and then kissed him on the lips. It hadn’t been easy for her. Growing up in proximity to her mother, whose undisguised interest men she’d become aware of when she was small, had put her sexual development back by years. There was no way she wanted men to look at her the way they did at Victoria: with desire but also contempt. Finally it was Nick who had got to her.

‘You’re going to uni in the autumn,’ he said, when they broke off. ‘And I’ve got my gap year. What’s the point?’

Evie laughed. 'For a start, there's the whole summer ahead of us. We're young, Nick. Every day counts.'

They kissed again and, pushing back their chairs, embraced.

'Did I hurt you?' he asked, seeing her brow furrow.

'Just my leg. Don't worry about.'

So he didn't. They ended up on the floor under the table, caution tossed to a gale-force wind. Evie expected it would hurt and it did, but it was worth it. With Nick everything was good.

'I love you,' he said, when he'd got his breath back.

'I love you for saying so.' Her forehead creased. 'Love's a big word, but, yes, I love you too.'

They laughed, then got dressed. Sitting together, they were looking at the screen again when the door opened.

'Don't you two want to go outside?' Victoria said, her eyes on Nick. 'It's a lovely day.'

'We're working, Mother,' Evie replied.

'Oh well, you're only young once, as they say.' The door closed behind her with a loud click.

'Cow,' Evie said. 'Now, read this. I put it together from the diary and letters of the first Lord Favon. God, this family makes me sick.'

Nick was surprised by her venom, but did as he was told.

'This is the story of a slave called Jaffray. Today he would be seen as high-spirited if he came from a rich home and be in prison if his family were poor. But in eighteenth century Jamaica there was no mercy for black men who took what belonged to their

masters. Jaffray was tall and strong, and he worked in the estate sugar boiling factory. Temperatures were high and the slaves were frequently scalded by spits and splashes of the sweet liquid. Some lost eyes and fingers. Some even dropped dead from the strain on their hearts. Jaffray had been two years in the inferno and was trusted for his steady hand and quick reactions. But his fate was sealed when he fell in love with a black woman, a housemaid in the master's huge abode. Jaffray looked for her at night, climbing the wall to her garret room and charming her with his devotion. For a while, a month at most, they were happy. They were discovered when the master himself came for the woman. He had taken a fancy to her when she was cleaning the drawing-room.

The master struck hard with the butt of his pistol before Jaffray could move; no doubt the slave was protecting his lover from their lord's violence. When Jaffray awoke he found himself in the sugar factory, tied to a makeshift St Andrew's cross. Through the steam from the cauldrons he saw his master holding the long shaft of a deep spoon, manoeuvring it over his naked body. His genitals were first to go. He bore that without a sound. Then the boiling liquid was dripped over his belly and he felt it burn through the skin and reach his very entrails. Next went his eyes, but still he did not scream. They left him bound and alone for over a day.

When the master returned he spoke to Jaffrey. He told him that his love, the housemaid, had been returned to the cane fields, where she would work until she died from exhaustion or disease. But Jaffray could save her. All he had to do was beg for mercy. His owner would rescind the order and bring the woman back into the big house. He had already had her, of course: had spent all night pleasuring her. He gave Jaffray the details. 'So, my brave fellow,' he said, 'will you save the woman you love?'



But Jaffray, owner of a soul considerably greater than the white man's, would not speak. Perhaps he thought the woman was better in the plantation than near the master. Some said his mind had already broken, but that is disproved by the action Jaffray took next: he spat in the white man's face. The slaves at the cauldrons could not believe what they had seen. The owner's fury was terrible. He ordered the tongues cut from the four men who had witnessed his shame. Then he had Jaffray smothered in hot but not boiling sugar, before hanging him from a gibbet by a rope tied tight around his midriff. There are no reports of how long he bore the attentions of the birds and insects. No one knew when his ribcage finally cracked and his innards ruptured fatally. The master, my ancestor, rode by the gallows frequently and taunted Jaffray, but the black man never responded. His silence was his power and his glory.'

Nick looked at Evie. 'It's fantastic. I mean, the writing. This really happened?'

'So it seems.' Now that she had shown the fruits of her research to someone, Evie felt drained. 'Like I said, the Favons are disgusting people.'

'Not you.'

'I...thank you.' She kissed him on the lips again. 'You'd better go. I'm very tired.' When she saw his face, she laughed softly. 'That isn't a brush off. I really am ready to keel over.'

'It's OK.' Nick helped her up.

A few minutes later he was on his bike, his heart ready to burst.

‘Ah!’ Luke Rutherford yelled, falling backwards as if he’d been axed by a particularly unbending pole.

‘Bloody hell, Kat,’ Heck said, under his breath. He went to his son, who was clutching his lower abdomen and writhing on the lawn.

‘Sorry!’ Kat said, running across the grass. ‘I didn’t mean it, Luke. Honest.’

‘Piss...off,’ the twelve year old gasped.

Heck picked up the rugby ball that his daughter had accurately kicked into her brother’s groin and chucked it at her without much force. ‘Go and practice grubber kicks against the garage wall.’ He kneeled down. ‘Come on, lad. Deep breaths.’ He pretended he hadn’t seen the tears in Luke’s eyes. ‘It was an accident,’ he said, even though he suspected it wasn’t. Luke had been winding Kat up and she’d let it get to her. She wasn’t in any of the girls’ teams at the local club – too worried about her looks – but she’d followed plenty of Heck’s coaching sessions in the garden.

‘I’ll...I’ll kill her,’ Luke said, getting unsteadily to his feet.

‘Don’t talk daft. Come on, I’ll test you under the high ball.’ Heck sent up a few garryowens, which his son took with aplomb. There was no doubt the boy had talent.

Ag appeared on the terrace with a tray of tea and biscuits.

‘One of the usual injuries, I saw,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘Maybe you could let his balls drop before they get atomised.’

‘If you were watching, you’d know your daughter’s the guilty party.’

‘I saw you hand her the ball and point in Luke’s direction, Heck Rutherford.’

Her husband’s head dropped. ‘Well, he’s got to learn how to--’

‘Suffer?’ Ag asked sharply.

‘Ah, Dad,’ Heck said, relieved by the distraction of the old man as he came out of his quarters. He had an amazing ability to detect sweet food; it was a miracle he wasn’t diabetic. ‘Fancy packing down against Luke?’

‘He’s seventy-six, Heck,’ Ag said. ‘This place is going to turn into Corham General.’

Activities on the lawn became a general rabble with no reference to the ball, David joining in. Cass ran across, chased by Adolf, who had also smelled food.

‘Tea’s up!’ Ag called, pouring out the last of the pot. ‘Get away, you stupid dog. And stupider cat. You can’t have chocolate digestives.’ But she surreptitiously broke one up and slipped pieces to both animals under the table.

‘Ah, bliss,’ Heck said, stretching out his legs and taking a mug.

‘I suppose this is what they call family time,’ Ag said, watching as her son pushed his grandfather backwards, the old man slipping and falling flat. ‘More like mad people time.’

Heck looked at her. She was as beautiful to him as the first time he’d met her, at a party. She was only a couple of inches over five feet, full breasted and the owner of long auburn hair that a Pre-Raphaelite would have killed for. Agnes Sweet (‘You wonder why I want to take your name?’) was twenty-five at the time, six years younger than Heck and already a primary school deputy headmistress who took no prisoners, but was loved by her pupils. Then he remembered her in the days after his operation, when it still wasn’t clear that he’d pull through. His head was woozy from the morphine, but her words were clear.

‘Listen to me, Heck. I’ll tell you what you have to live for.’

‘I know...what I have to...’ He broke off when she squeezed his arm. She was small, but she had the strength of a wrestler.

‘You have a wife who loves you more than she loves herself. That’s pretty unusual, you know.’ She paused, waiting for him to smile, which he eventually managed. ‘And two kids who worship the ground you walk on and are wetting themselves about what’ll become of you. Not forgetting a father who’d happily take your place in this bed, a dog who waits at the door for you every night and a cat--’

‘That doesn’t...give a shit about me,’ Heck mumbled, blinking back tears.

‘You may be right there,’ Ag said, smiling. ‘All Adolf cares about is his food. The little bugger’s taken to sleeping with his paws over the bowl.’ Kat and Luke, ten and eight at the time, had found the stray kitten in the garden and fallen for it on the spot. They didn’t know that the diagonal black stripe above his eye and the black splotch beneath his nose marring otherwise completely white fur had a historical connotation. The fact that the animal seemed to possess the dictator’s character had also been beyond them, although both had since done Nazi Germany projects at school.

‘I’m serious, Heck,’ Ag said, squeezing again. ‘You’re going to come through this and you’re going to be fine. For yourself and for all of us.’

He let her wipe his eyes with a tissue. ‘Oh yeah, school marm? Whatcha...gonna do if I don’t?’

‘Enough of the wisecracking. You’re DCI Plod, not Philip Marlowe. What am I going to do? Run off with the gym teacher. Your father can look after the kids.’

Heck managed to stop the laugh before it hit his wounded belly. As if Ag, the most devoted of mothers, would ever desert their children. She’d also look after his

father till his dying day, even though she often found David a pain.

She leaned over and looked into his eyes. He couldn't resist the pale green of hers; they'd enchanted him from the off. He'd been divorced for over three years, his first marriage having been hell in the hot season. What he soon realised was that in Ag he'd found a lot more than he'd been looking for. He'd found his saviour.

'I wouldn't...be able to do this...without you,' he said, grimacing as the pain suddenly returned.

'Look at me,' Ag commanded. 'You will come round, you will recover, you will be back with us, a better man than before.'

'Oh...great...I've had a personality...transplant an'all, have I?'

'You will recover,' she said, smiling but focusing all her intensity on him. He felt it course through him. 'For me. For us.'

And he did, though it was a close one. He had a string of infections and his system was badly weakened. Having spent most of his life as a six-foot-one hunk, he now resembled a vertical stick insect, as Ag had pointed out caustically when he declined one of the no-nonsense puddings she'd started making.

Heck smiled at the kids. They were dragging his old man to the table, their faces wreathed with smiles. David was laughing, though it didn't sound too healthy.

Ag stood up. 'I forgot the cake.'

'Has it got cream?' Luke asked.

'Wait and see.'

'Oh, Mum.'

Kat repeated the words sarcastically.

'Calm down, jungle creatures,' Heck said. 'Where did you find that decrepit giraffe?'

His father gave him two fingers, dropping his hand when Ag came back from the kitchen.

‘No cake for you then,’ Heck said, prompting loud laughter from Kat and Luke.

Joni's phone rang as she was getting ready for bed.

'Mother,' she said, seeing the number on the screen. 'I thought you'd be out on a blasted heath boiling up frogs' eyes and bats' spleens. It's late enough.'

'Very droll.' Moonbeam Pax, who had changed her name by deed poll from Mary Higgins during her hippy days, wasn't endowed with a sense of humour. 'For your information Beltane, also known as Walpurgis Night, was last Wednesday.'

'And did you go to a blasted heath?'

'If you'd ever shown the slightest interest in modern paganism, I'd answer your question. As it is, you mock things you don't understand.'

Joni heard plangent music in the background and felt her skin prickle.

Moonbeam knew how much she hated Joni Mitchell's music, but she never missed an opportunity to play it when her daughter was in earshot. The fact that she'd been given the singer's assumed first name and her real one, Roberta, as her middle name was another sore point. Joni had sworn she'd change all three when she came of age but, in the end, she hadn't. For all the tension between them, her mother was the only person she'd had any kind of lasting relationship with.

'Turn that racket down, will you?' she said. 'So what have you been up to? No, let me rephrase that. What do you want?'

'Some idiots are riding motorbikes up and down my road.'

Joni took a deep breath. 'Is that so? And what do you want me to do about it?'

'Throw them in jail.'

‘That’s hardly very liberal of you. Anyway, public order’s not my responsibility. I’m a detective, remember?’ Her mother had never come to terms with her choice of career or with her refusal to countenance any kind of illegal drug use.

‘I know. Are you working on that brothel killing?’

‘I can’t discuss that.’

‘So you are.’

‘Wow, you really are a witch.’

‘Oh, grow up.’

Joni laughed. ‘Like you?’

‘At least I had you. When are you going to--’

‘Don’t even go there. Did you really phone me up to hassle me about my fertility?’

‘You aren’t getting any younger.’

‘I’ll be thirty-five in July. Still quite a springy chicken. Can I go to bed now?’

Moonbeam sighed. ‘We never see each other, even though I’m only twenty-five miles away. I thought you’d find somewhere closer to live when you came up here.’

Joni suddenly felt sorry for her mother. ‘Why don’t you come in one evening? We could have dinner.’

‘You expect me to spend half an hour trying to find somewhere to park and risk having the Beetle vandalised, all to eat overpriced food in some restaurant and disagree with you on every subject under the sun?’

‘Or moon,’ Joni muttered. ‘I meant I could cook. What’s the reason for this call, Mother?’

There was a pause. ‘To find out how you are. Is that so strange?’



‘It wouldn’t be if you actually asked that.’ Joni recognized the song that was being played, something about Amelia Earhart – it was one of the singer’s less excruciating efforts. ‘Fine is the answer.’

Moonbeam gave one of her soft but caustic laughs. ‘If you’re fine, I’m a member of the BNP. Why can’t you tell the truth? You’re still upset about what happened in London. It’s time you let it go and got on with your life.’

Joni kept her mouth closed.

‘I’ve been mentioning your name in spells, you know. I can feel your resistance, but eventually I’ll break it down.’

This time Joni let rip. ‘Leave me out of your crazy magic, Mother. Just because I came to Northumberland doesn’t mean I want anything to do with that side of your life. Goodbye.’ She broke the connection. Moonbeam’s experimentation with the occult had exasperated her since she was a little girl, leading her to declare at the age of ten – in a manner she now realised was horrendously precocious – that she was an atheist. She’d rehearsed all the arguments, but her mother had only shrugged and said, ‘Whatever does it for you, babe’.

She got her breathing under control and told herself to calm down. For once, Moonbeam had been helpful when Joni was on gardening leave after the botched operation, coming to stay in her flat in Vauxhall and cooking for her. She’d also worked on her daughter to leave the metropolis and its police force, and had been amazed when Joni agreed. The fact was, despite that brief period of solidarity, they had never been close and never would be. Moonbeam was only interested in herself and what she called her ‘sexual being’. That meant Joni had borne witness to dozens of men entering the flat in Hackney when she was growing up, most of them departing rapidly, often with hollow cheeks. One of them described Moonbeam to the

teenage Joni as ‘a terrifying lover’. That only made her more committed to her studies, the yellow brick road that led away from the ramshackle flat she’d done her best to keep clean and tidy.

But her mother had brought the worst night of her life back to her and she lay on the bed, certain that sleep would be long in coming. She was back in South London, ready to prove herself and convinced that she would...

...in the Homicide Division Southwest car in Brixton on the evening of June 18<sup>th</sup> 2012, talking to the surveillance team leader on the radio.

‘All six are in the warehouse,’ he said. ‘We need to go in now. Who knows how long they’ll stay?’

Joni glanced at blonde-mopped Detective Sergeant Roland Malpas, who was at the wheel. Only a few months in the unit, he had a tendency to make rash decisions. She didn’t have to, but she’d decided to mind his front as well as his back. He had potential, as well as a reasonably pretty face.

‘Pax to Tinsley,’ she said, calling her DCI, the senior investigating officer.

‘Tinsley receiving.’

‘All suspects at location.’

‘CO19?’

Joni confirmed that the Authorised Firearms Officers were in position.

‘Uniform backup?’

‘Ready to move.’

‘OK,’ Tinsley said, harshly. He’d never been a fan of Joni, viewing graduates on the accelerated promotion scheme as bogus police officers. She was pretty sure he was unconcerned about institutional racism too. ‘It’s your call, DI Pax.’

Although it was standard procedure to assign control over to the senior officer on the ground, Joni got the impression he was washing his hands of her. Then again, she knew she could be over-sensitive. Most women in the Met were.

‘Pax to AFO commander. Final check.’

‘Ready to roll.’

Joni nodded to DS Malpas. ‘Move in. Slowly.’ She advised the other units that they were on their way.

The last rays of daylight were dying on the grey walls of the former bonded warehouse. According to council records, it had been empty for five years and the rust on the gate suggested that was right. A young ex-con Joni had been cultivating for over a year told her that Paul ‘the PM’ Blair’s gang of hard men had recently taken to using it, a fact confirmed by surveillance from the abandoned scrap yard across the road. Blair was suspected of dispatching more than one of his enemies with a cricket bat, as well as organising the recent raid on a security van at Waterloo that had cost both driver and guard their lives.

Because the information came from her informant, Joni was given the responsibility of planning the operation. She’d taken advice from officers with greater experience - that was one of her strong points – and left nothing to chance. Except, as she knew well enough, things could always turn to shit when armed headbangers with little to lose were confronted.

She inhaled deeply as the unmarked Mondeo, showing no lights, moved slowly down the street. Other members of her team were at different directions, covering all the building’s known doors. The original bars were still on the windows.

Joni looked at her watch. The street lights in the vicinity had been disabled, her plan being to hit the gang when twilight was at its darkest without raising

suspicion among the men inside. Full night made things harder to direct.

‘Ram squad?’ she said.

‘Ready,’ responded the leader.

She nodded at Malpas, who was looking avidly at the wide door fifty yards ahead. ‘Stay with me at all times, Ro, all right?’

‘Sure, ma’am.’

She nodded, then spoke the critical words.

‘Assault units, move in!’

Officers in dark blue overalls and helmets piled out of a van that pulled up in front of the warehouse entrance, tyres screeching. Two of them approached the doors and smashed the heavy steel cylinders against the wooden panels. When they gave way, AFOs rushed in, rifles and machine-pistols raised in two-handed grips. There was a lot of shouting, but no shots were fired. Joni held her breath, then slowly let it out. Her worry had been that Blair’s men would have had time to reach the sawn-off shotguns they’d used against the security guards; they had been loaded with magnum 12 gauge shells.

‘AFO commander,’ Joni heard. ‘Warehouse secured. All six suspects apprehended.’

‘Yay!’ said Malpas, getting out of the car.

‘Cool it,’ Joni said, opening her door. ‘Let the AFOs bring them out.’ She looked over to the van. ‘Lights on the doors!’

Drivers manoeuvred their vehicles so they were facing the warehouse, dipping the headlights. Men started to emerge, hands behind their heads and eyes towards the ground. AFOs had each one covered.

Joni and Malpas went forward. Blair was at the front, grimacing as

uniformed officers fastened his wrists behind his back with plastic restraints.

‘FUCK!’ he yelled, provoking laughter from some of the uniforms.

‘Quiet!’ Joni shouted, looking at the faces on her iPad as the men came out. Five of them matched the photos from their Met and Prison Service files. The sixth, Marcus Ainsworth, a twenty-eight-year-old Mancunian without a record, glanced at the police officers nervously, his shoulders slumped. Joni had identified him from a family photo Greater Manchester Police had obtained. His face was spattered with acne.

‘Read them their rights, Ro,’ Joni said, as she reached the officers with the restraints.

Suddenly a knife appeared in Ainsworth’s right hand from his sleeve. He brought it down in a blur, making the policeman holding the plastic cuffs scream and clutch his face. At the same time, Blair stuck out a heavy leg and tripped Joni so she stumbled forward into Ainsworth’s grasp. He had his back to the wall as he held the knife against her throat, shielding himself from the AFOs’ weapons.

‘Let her go!’ Roland Malpas yelled, moving closer.

‘Screw you!’ Ainsworth replied. ‘She’s my ticket out of here.’

Joni looked at the AFO commander. His lips were tight, suggesting his men didn’t have a clear shot. Then she took in Roland Malpas. He was bulkier than his captor and his blood was definitely up. Surely he wasn’t going to...

Malpas took off his jacket and stab vest, held up his hands to show they were empty and stepped closer

‘Take me instead,’ he said. ‘You don’t want to hurt a woman.’

Marcus Ainsworth laughed manically. ‘Want a bet?’

‘Only cowards hurt women. They’re weaker than us. Take on someone your

own size.'

Joni felt rage course through her. It was bad enough that a junior officer was intervening, but what he'd just said riled her. She opened her mouth, then felt the blade draw blood from her throat.

'Keep quiet, you black bitch,' Ainsworth warned. He looked at Malpas and laughed again, taunting him. 'All right, hero. Come and try your luck.'

Joni was pushed aside and Malpas pulled into her place.

'Fuck off now if you want him to stay alive,' Ainsworth said. 'Now, you cunt! Tell the rest of these shitheads to stay where they are too. Me and Officer Hero are going for a stroll.'

'You heard him,' Joni ordered. 'Everyone, keep your distance.'

Roland Malpas, knife at his throat, gave her a faint smile.

'Careful now,' Ainsworth said. 'Walk like a crab. It's not that fuckin' difficult.'

But for Malpas it seemed to be. His legs moved awkwardly as they went sideways and once he almost fell. If it was an act, it was a convincing one. Buying time was Malpas's best option. Joni watched as they approached the end of the building. The junction ahead was in darkness, out of reach of the lights from the police vehicles. The roads had been closed, so there was no other traffic nearby.

Roland made his move as they turned the corner. He smashed his elbow into his captor's belly and tried to throw him over his shoulder. There were three problems with that. Ainsworth was ready and he was solidly built. He was also very handy with the knife.

By the time Joni got to her subordinate, he'd already lost a lot of blood from a deep slash to his throat. That wasn't what condemned him to life in a wheelchair.

Ainsworth had smashed him against the wall before he ran. The back of Roland's neck took the worst of the blow and he suffered irreparable nerve damage.

Although DCI Tinsley was surprisingly supportive, Joni was sent home while the operation was scrutinised. The fact that Marcus Ainsworth had somehow managed to evade capture counted against her too. Joni had visited Malpas in hospital. He'd given her the same faint smile, but hadn't spoken. His family asked her not to come again. They couldn't hold her any more responsible for what had happened than she did herself. The job in Pofnee came up at exactly the right time. The Met were happy to see the back of her and she was desperate to get out of London.

But she still felt Roland Malpas's sad grey eyes on her every night before sleep came to save her.

Nick Etherington slept fitfully. He was too excited by what had happened with Evie. He hadn't really believed that she would return his feelings. It wasn't that he was inexperienced with girls. He'd spent the last couple of years fighting them off and had been in several short-term but fun relationships. But Evie wasn't like the others. It wasn't just that she was older. Although she'd had plenty of friends in her year, she maintained a distance from them. He suspected it was something to do with her wanting to be as different as possible from her mother. Victoria Favon - she really was something else. He felt like the flesh had been stripped from his bones when she looked at him and the way she called him 'Nicholas' – something not even his mother did – made him feel like a naughty child. Not that the punishment would be unpleasant...

Evie was right. Who cared about the autumn? They had months to spend together, especially after he finished his exams. Evie. She was so sweet. Then he remembered the story of the slave that she'd written. No wonder she had problems with her family if that was how they'd treated their workforce. 'Their slaves,' Evie had corrected. 'Favon Hall was built with blood money.' Nick agreed, but he didn't understand why she was so worked up about it. Britain was full of big houses whose owners had exploited workers and peasants.

He hadn't felt so good for along time. Even gathering together his school books was a pleasure. He whistled a Coldplay tune as he went down to breakfast. His mother and grandfather smiled at him. Gramps had realised as soon as Nick came in



the door last night that something had happened. His mother was less observant. She was still upset that he'd been questioned by the police.

'Back to work today, young man,' Rosie said, unusually severe. 'You've had your fun. It isn't long till exams.'

'Yes, Mum,' he mumbled, mouth full of bacon and egg. He saw Gramps wink at him.

A few minutes later they were in the general's Jaguar. An unofficial routine had set in after Michael had moved in: he took Nick to the Abbey in the mornings and Rosie picked him up in the afternoons, unless her charity work got in the way.

'Your mother's right, you know,' his grandfather said. 'You really have to nail those exams.' He smiled. 'Like you've nailed so many tackles and tries. Half-centuries too. That reminds me. Is it cricket practice as usual this afternoon?'

'Yes. I can get a lift to Perce's if you like.'

'No, one of us will come down.'

As they neared Corham, Nick found himself thinking about Sunday night. Even with his vision restricted by the traffic light, he'd seen things he'd rather not have: the man with the knife in his belly, the skinny bodies of the women, the one who'd run into him, her lower half bare and blood on her hand... But something else troubled him: the heavy man without a jacket who'd come down the steps after the woman left screaming. Was it really him? There was blood on the fingers of the hand he was holding over his upper thigh and his features were twisted in pain. No, it couldn't be right. What would a man of his status be doing in a brothel in one of North Corham's dodgiest areas? And then there was the hair. If it was him, he must have been wearing a wig. The problem was its length. Rather than disguising him, it made someone of his age stick out. Would he really have taken the risk of being

recognised to screw one of those sad women? Nick's eyes had met his through the slit. His heart missed a beat. What if he found out who'd been wearing the cardboard costume? It wouldn't be hard for a man in his position.

'You look worried. Tell me what you're thinking.' His grandfather's voice was a mixture of command and concern.

'I...oh, it's nothing. Exam tension.'

'You can take it. You're a hard one.'

Nick struggled to keep his lips in a straight line. He'd certainly had a hard one with Evie, not that she'd complained. He hadn't expected her to be a virgin. That made him feel even more privileged. She had trusted him to be her first lover. He blinked away a tear.

'Listen,' his grandfather continued. 'You had a bad time on Sunday night. You should talk to me about it, get it off your chest. Believe me, you'll feel better.'

'OK, Gramps. Maybe later.'

'Whenever you want, lad.' There was hint of disappointment in the general's voice.

Minutes later Nick was walking into the Abbey School. He was immediately surrounded by friends wanting to know what had happened with the police; he'd kept his phone off when he was with Evie and afterwards. He was embarrassed to find that he'd become even more of a hero. At least no one knew about him and Evie. That was one thing he was going to keep to himself. Some secrets were good.

‘All right, people, gather round.’ Heck Rutherford was leaning against the wall at the front of the MCU. Morrie Sutton and his team were on his left, and Joni Pax with her people to the right. It was nine a.m. and the holiday weekend meant that things had piled up. Officers had been in since 8 a.m., collating reports and making their own to-do lists for Heck’s approval.

Heck looked at Joni. ‘By some miracle the bank holiday weekend was pretty quiet - at least outside Corham.’

‘So it seems,’ she agreed. ‘Uniform were out in force and there were several arrests for drunk and disorderly and damage to property.’ She glanced at the young man standing beside her. ‘DS Rokeby has something to report.’

Heck waited for Peter ‘Pancake’ Rokeby to speak. He’d had him on his team in Newcastle and found him a solid performer. He’d taken some stick when other officers discovered he was gay, but he stood up to it well. ACC Dickie had been keen to have him at Corham because of her diversity drive. His nickname referred to his predilection for the food item, though some smartass claimed it had to do with make-up. Pete whispered something that made the guy blush like a schoolgirl, refusing afterwards to say what it was. He was a good man, Pete: discreet but deadly.

‘Em, yes, ma’am,’ Rokeby said. One of his few weaknesses was discomfort with public speaking. He could question a suspect as effectively as the next officer, but he hated addressing the morning meeting.

‘Come on, Detective Sergeant, we haven’t got all day.’

Heads turned and people took in Ruth Dickie, who had slipped into the room.

‘No, ma’am. I mean, yes, ma’am. Traffic police up in Alnwick stopped a driver in a BMW speeding on the A1. He was doing over a hundred. When they went to breathalyse him, one of the officers saw the grip of a pistol sticking out beneath the front seat. They managed to immobilise the guy and cuff him. He refused to answer questions, didn’t even give his name. Just said the name of a Newcastle brief.’

‘What name?’ Heck asked.

‘Richard Lennox.’

There were groans around the room. Lennox was notorious for his list of criminal clients, many of whom he’d kept out of jail by practices that came close to getting him disciplined. He benefited from the criminals’ financial resources, which enabled him to hire the sharpest legal minds, as well as former detectives now working as private investigators.

‘The superintendent at Alnwick let the driver call Lennox, who arrived an hour later. By then, as well as the pistol, nearly a kilo of cocaine had been found in the BMW. The man is foreign, probably Albanian. He’s been charged with possession of the weapon and drugs and is in custody.’

‘Interesting.’ ACC Dickie walked to the front of the room and stood next to Heck, with whom she exchanged glances before continuing. ‘Albanians seem to be flavour of the weekend.’ There was a hint of excitement in her voice. ‘DCI Rutherford, you’d better send our resident Italian speaker to Alnwick to see if she can get anything out of this latest miscreant.’

Heck nodded at Joni, then looked to her side. ‘Pan...DS Rokeby, you go too.’

‘Any further developments with the Albanians here, DI Pax?’ the ACC asked.

Joni saw Morrie Sutton’s cheeks redden. He resented being overlooked, but

that wasn't her fault. She said that she'd spoken to the hospital and been told that Blerim Dost was in a stable condition. His room was still under guard. Joni added that none of the Albanian women had been spotted overnight. 'After we've been to Alnwick, we'll stop off to interview Nick Etherington again,' she concluded. 'I'm sure he saw something at the brothel that he hasn't come clean about.'

Ruth Dickie kept silent, so Heck nodded to DI Sutton.

Unlike Pancake Rokeby, Morrie loved spouting to the gathered masses. The problem was, he had absolutely no talent for it. After several minutes of chaotic rambling, Heck cut in. The upshot was that DI Sutton was told to intensify the search for witnesses and for the missing female suspect, while DS Gray was assigned to liaising with the SOCOs and the lab over their findings in Burwell Street. DC Eileen Andrews – short, plump, in her mid-forties and with a permanent look of amusement on her soft face - was asked about her trawl of the databases.

'The Border Agency has Leka Asllani, Blerim Dost and the man last seen with a fork in his forehead--'

'Elez Zymberi,' Joni supplied.

'All the zeds, DI Pax,' Andrews said, smiling. 'As I was saying, the UKBA has the three of them plus the six women as having overstayed their ninety-day visas. Apart from that, none of them appear in HOLMES or any other of the databases.'

'Is it worth giving Interpol their names and mugshots?' Heck mused.

'Hold off on that,' the ACC said. 'We need to build more of a case.' She looked at him. 'On the other hand, DCI Rutherford, you should talk to your former colleagues in Newcastle – see if the names mean anything to them.'

Heck's shoulders slumped. He'd suspected she would suggest that.

Suzana had spent the rest of the night in a park. The walls of what she took to be an old church were shining in yellow lights about a kilometre away. The red coat, almost like the cloaks the women in her village wore in winter, kept her warm and the wide-brimmed hat protected her head from the drops of dew that fell from the trees. She woke early and considered what to do. The longer she stayed in this town, the greater the chance of being found by Leka's friends. But leaving would bring its own dangers. Taking a bus or a train – she used to hear the sound of engines and carriages clacking from her room - would mean that other people would see her, people who might talk. She could have tried to whore herself on the roadside, but she'd vowed that no man would touch her. So she had to walk; but before that she needed to locate this Cor-ham place on a map and decide where to go. The other problem she had was the bags of provisions. She needed to hide them somewhere after she'd eaten again.

Rolling up the coat, Suzana hid it and the bags behind a thick bush. She kept the hat on as, combined with the good-quality leather jacket, it made her look less like a person who lived on the streets. Her feet were still painful, but they were better than yesterday, as was the wound on her upper chest. As long as she kept the jacket buttoned, she would not attract too much attention. If she opened it, the sour stench of sweat and men's fluids would cause people to gag. She was taking a risk by heading for the town centre, and not only because of the Albanians. The police would be looking for her too. She knew stabbing men wouldn't be seen as acceptable, no matter what had been done to her. She'd been brought up to understand that women

did what they were told, respecting the superiority of their fathers, brothers and husbands. She did not think things would be so different in England.

For all that, a man with a small white dog said something to her in a friendly voice as she left the park. She kept her head down and mumbled something in return, keen to fit in. The buildings around here were smaller than the one with the small wooden house, but not as shabby as the ones in the streets around the slave house. There were trees and in daylight she saw that the leaves were bright green and that buds had begun to appear. She looked up at the sky: high cloud in narrow white strips - what her grandfather on her father's side called 'goose-feather heaven'. She shuddered, remembering what the old man had done to her when she was ten, then blocked it out. At least there wouldn't be rain today.

There were few people around. Did they stay in their beds so late? Then it struck her. Living in towns meant you didn't have to rise with the sun to tend the animals. Why did the people put ropes around their dogs' necks? In the village they ran free, scavenging for food and receiving savage beatings if they nipped the goats and sheep. Here it seemed people looked after them. Why would they do that at the same time as depriving the creatures of their freedom? This was a strange country.

She came to a wide road with cars moving slowly. The few vehicles in her village were driven as if they were in a race, even the big tractors that had appeared in recent years. Young men rode motorbikes with their heads lowered, never with the helmets she saw in Cor-ham and always at full speed. Two of her cousins had been killed, one hitting a wall and the other catapulting into a ravine. It had taken the men a whole day to bring his body back.

Suzana came to the first shop. It was closed, but she stood at the window with her eyes wide. She had never seen so many toys: dolls, grown-up dolls with short

skirts and huge hair like the street women in Tirana, trains and cars for boys. In the corner was a house nearly as tall as she was, with furniture in every room and tiny plates and cups on the tables. There was even a toilet like the one in the slave house. The first time she had used one like that was in the airport. She had asked one of the other girls, who told her to put her feet on the seat and squat. Was that what fat men and old women did too, she wondered. Leka had laughed when she climbed up on the seat in the bathroom down the corridor from her room. 'Put your skinny ass on the plastic, bitch,' he said. 'You're not a peasant now.'

No, she'd been something much worse: a plaything of men; a doll like the ones in the shop, despite her lank hair and pale skin; a vessel for their seed. She looked around, suddenly afraid that she stood out. But people walked past, the younger ones paying little attention to her and the older ones giving her tentative smiles. She nodded to them, wishing she could respond to their words. She didn't even know how to say 'Good day' in English.

Moving on, Suzana came to a street full of shops and restaurants. There was a stone column in the middle of a broad square and, beneath it, a map in a plastic display case. She headed for it, jumping at the horn blast from a car and ready to bolt. The man at the wheel shook his head at her and drove on. She berated herself. This is not the mountains. Here there are many vehicles. Be careful, idiot.

She spent a quarter of an hour making sense of the map. Beside it was a tall post with signs at different heights, pointing in various directions. She followed them with her eyes and spoke the names under her breath.

'Cor-ham Ab-bey. Riv-er Der-wyne. Tan-ning and Dis-till-ing Mus-e-um. Ra-il-way Sta-ti-on. Bus Sta-ti-on. I-ron-flatts.' She didn't understand the words, but she found where they were on the map, seeing pictures of a train, a bus and three bridges.



She worked out the location of the riverside park where she'd spent her first night of freedom. There was a red dot in the Ma-in Squ-ar-e. She realised was where she was standing. She memorised as much as she could. Having been to school with one teacher for all the classes and few books or writing materials, she had come to rely on her memory. In recent months it had grown weak from lack of use, but now she had a purpose. She would sharpen her memory and every other part of her mind. They would be among her most important weapons.

That reminded her. The small plastic-covered knife she'd taken from the wooden house was in her pocket, but she needed something more lethal. Looking around and waiting till there was a gap in the increasing flow of cars, Suzana crossed back to the shops and looked for one that sold knives. She had begun to lose hope when, on a road leading to the river, she found a place with not only knives in the window, but also screwdrivers, pliers and other tools.

She went in to stock up.

‘That was a waste of time,’ DS Rokeby said as he and Joni Pax came out of Alnwick Police Station.

‘Mm,’ his boss replied absently. She was looking at the walls that rose above the town. ‘What is that place, Pete?’ She never used his nickname; she never seemed to use anyone’s if she could avoid it. That made him uncomfortable about calling her Jack or Jackie Brown behind her back, as most of the others did.

‘Alnwick Castle. Where they filmed Harry Potter.’

She looked at him blankly.

‘Haven’t you read the books? The films have been on the telly.’ Then Pete Rokeby remembered. He’d experienced Joni Pax’s ignorance about popular culture before. He put it down to her being an Oxford graduate, the fact that she didn’t know much about black culture reinforcing that conclusion. ‘Sorry, I forgot you only watch the news.’

‘And the Proms.’ They reached the Land Rover. Joni tossed him the keys. ‘You drive. I know you’ve been desperate to get your hands on her.’ After she’d strapped herself in, fumbling with the passenger seat belt, she sat back and nodded as he successfully manipulated the gears. ‘Yes, you’re right. Visiting Mr Hekuran Kondi was probably not the best way to spend our morning.’

The Albanian hadn’t responded to her attempts in Italian, while one of Richard Lennox’s junior lawyers sat in, shaking her head when the questions were

voiced in English. Kondi was in his late twenties, Joni estimated. He had no ID on him apart from a gym card, though his wallet was full of cash.

‘On the other hand,’ Rokeby said, manoeuvring through the narrow streets, ‘you did seem to touch a nerve. What did he say when he gave you that look?’

Joni thought back to the stocky man with the clipped hair and dark-ringed eyes. His voice had been low and emotionless. ‘He said that I would be raped and murdered.’

‘What?’ the DS said, glancing at her, then looking to the front and correcting his course. ‘You should have told the lawyer.’

‘I didn’t want her to know.’

‘Why the hell not?’

‘Because that wasn’t all he said. I told him that the missing woman had been too much for his friends in Corham, having killed one, sent another to intensive care and stuck a fork in the third one’s head. What kind of men were they, I asked. Child fuckers?’

Pete Rokeby shook his head. ‘You fight dirty, ma’am. So what else did he say?’

‘He let slip a name.’ Joni glanced at him. ‘The Popi. He said the Popi would fix me. Mean anything to you?’

‘Fraid not. Albanian gangs weren’t on my agenda in Newcastle.’

Joni called Heck Rutherford. He didn’t know the name either, but would run it past his former colleagues.

‘Actually,’ she said, as they headed back down the A1, ‘I have an admission to make.’

‘Oh aye?’

‘Em, aye. Child fuckers wasn’t the only thing I called the Albanians.’

Rokeby looked at her and laughed. ‘Let me guess. You used some choice homophobic terms.’

Joni nodded, her eyes down. ‘Sorry about that. I read in an Italian criminology article that Albanian mafiosi have a thing about gays. A thing as in “they hate their guts”.’

‘Chill, ma’am,’ the DS said, laughing. ‘What did you actually say?’

‘Well...I said I thought they must have been busy sticking their pencil-thin dicks in each other’s soft pink anuses.’

This time Pete Rokeby guffawed loudly. ‘I love it! Don’t worry, it was in the line of duty.’ He glanced at her. ‘We Pofnee minorities need to stick together.’

Joni watched as a flock of small birds rose up and banked over a small wood. ‘Are you talking about my colour, my gender or my sexual orientation?’

‘Em, the first two.’ The MCU had been rife with speculation about Joni Pax’s love life since she’d arrived. No one had seen her with a partner of either sex.

‘To tell you the truth, I don’t see myself as belonging to a minority on either count. Obviously there are fewer women in Pofnee than there should be, but the statistics show there are more women than men in the world. And, if you count most of the occupants of Africa and the Eastern continents, you’ll have a pretty large number of black people.’

Pete Rokeby accelerated past a lorry. ‘But there aren’t many blacks in Pofnee. I think you’re the only detective if you discount people of Indian and Pakistani origin – and there isn’t exactly a legion of them.’

‘The Chief Constable would say the police force should reflect the make-up of the local population. I haven’t seen many black people in Corham, let alone rural

Northumberland.’

‘True. Then again, gays make up between six and twenty per cent of the population, depending whose statistics you believe. I only know three other gays in Pofnee and two of them are lesbians.’

Joni laughed softly. ‘Gays can keep their orientation to themselves. They probably have to in the more macho units. I don’t have that choice, either as a woman or a person of colour.’

‘So what you’re saying is that different minorities shouldn’t stick together?’ Rokeby said testily.

‘No, of course not.’ She pointed ahead. ‘Why don’t we follow that sign and get something to eat?’

They found themselves at a pub called the Yellow Cat. A chalked board claimed it did the best value meals in the county.

‘We can always do them under the Trades Descriptions Act if it’s shite,’ Pete Rokeby said. He parked and handed over the Discovery’s keys.

They ordered toasted ciabatta sandwiches, Joni’s with grilled vegetables and the DS’s with spicy sausage.

‘Good enough,’ Rokeby said, after he’d finished well ahead of Joni and drained his pint of lemonade.

She nodded. ‘So why did you come out, if it isn’t too personal?’

‘Haven’t you heard the story?’

‘No one gossips with me, Pete. The DCI gives me the odd bit of background.’

Not that Heck Rutherford was much of a gossip merchant, Rokeby thought. ‘It was in the old Newcastle HQ about a year and a half ago,’ he said, meeting Joni Pax’s eyes. He felt at ease with her. ‘Some of the guys got suspicious when I kept avoiding

the weekly trip to a pub with strippers. The nasty remarks started. So one morning, at the end of the briefing, I stuck up my hand and DCI Rutherford gave me the nod. I said, "I'm gay. Anyone got a problem with that?" Strangely enough, no one did. I got slaps on the back for having the balls to come out with it.'

Joni wiped her mouth. 'But that wasn't the end of it?

He shook his head. 'There's never an end to it, you know that. They call me Pancake because I like my food, but there are still comments. Jokes, like, but with razor blades in them.'

'Sounds familiar. You have to be stronger than everyone else all the time. It's exhausting.'

'It is.'

Joni patted his arm. 'This is on me. We'd better get a move on. Nick the Human Traffic Light will soon be home from school.'

Pete Rokeby watched while she paid. Till then he'd thought DI Pax was a typical hard-bitten female cop, a taller, darker version of Ruth Dickie. Now he wasn't so sure.

‘Is Gaz there?’

‘No. The fucker isn’t answering his phone. I’ve got three cars in for service and two MOTs. I’ve had it up to my back teeth with the shithead.’

‘Don’t be too hard on him. He’s been missing for nearly four days.’

‘Who the fuck are you? His social worker?’

‘His best mate, Kyle Laggan.’

‘I suppose they call you Kylie.’

‘Only my mates. Or scumbags who can run fast.’

‘Hard man, eh? When you find Gaz, tell him I’m docking his wages and he’ll have to make up the time.’

‘I’m going to call the cops, report him missing.’

‘Good for you. Won’t do any fucking good.’

‘I know. Still, I got to do something.’

‘Here, now I come to think of it, one of the lads said they saw him on Friday night. Oy, Johnnie, get over here. Talk to this lad. He’s called Kylie.’

‘Fuck off.’

‘What?’

‘Not you. Your boss is a pillock.’

‘I’ve noticed. What do you want?’

‘He said you saw Gaz on Friday night.’

‘Aye, I did. He was with this guy round the back of the Stars and Bars.’

‘About two o’clock?’

‘Probably. I was pissed and I was smoking something reet skunky.’

‘So what was going on?’

‘They were having a chat, nothing nasty that I could see. They got into a black Bentley Continental GT Speed and drove off. It had tinted windows so I couldn’t see inside. Fucking brilliant motor, that.’

‘What the fuck?’

‘What?’

‘Gaz in a Bentley? He’s got a knackered old Micra.’

‘I know. Maybe he’s got friends in high places.’

‘I’ve known him since primary school. The highest place we’ve been is the Get Carter Car Park.’

‘Shame they knocked that down. It was fuckin’ ugly though.’

‘The guy Gaz was with - what did he look like?’

‘Bouncer-type. Black suit, big, shaved head. And his nose was all flat.’

‘Did you see anything else at the club?’

‘Nay, you know what them places are like. Headbangers speaking funny languages on the door, local headbangers trying to get into the knickers of lasses inside.’

‘What funny languages?’

‘I heard that lot are from Albania. Hey, the pillock’s giving me the death stare. Got to go.’

‘Albania? Where the fuck’s that?’



‘Come off it, Heck, the ACC’s having a hot flush.’

DCI Lee Young was number two in the Newcastle MCU. He was in his early forties, had a chip on his shoulder about officers who’d been to university and didn’t like the way the new force had been constituted. ‘Stabbings at a knocking-shop in Corham, then an Albanian caught near Alnwick with a gun and a kilo of coke and she thinks the wankers are taking over the region? That’s bollocks.’

‘Maybe. I don’t see the weeklies you send her. Are the Albanians getting ahead over there these days?’ Heck and Young had an up-and-down history. They’d worked together to nail a couple of violent gangs a decade back, but Heck had sent down one of his former colleague’s best friends when he was in the anti-corruption unit. As a result, he had to squeeze hard for cooperation.

‘Are they getting ahead? Not really. The local mobs still rule the roost, but it would be fair to say the Albies are making inroads.’

‘Women?’

‘Big time.’

‘Drugs?’

‘Medium time, I’d say. The Turks still control things up the east coast. The Albies have a go from time to time.’

‘I saw there were three dead down by the river a few weeks back.’

‘None of them Albanian. We caught one of the knifemen, who was, but he didn’t say much. That dickhead Lennox was all over us the minute we turned the heat

up.’

Heck looked out his office window and watched a pair of scowling teenagers being walked to the main entrance by uniformed officers. ‘If they can afford Lennox, they must be making serious money.’

‘Not necessarily up here. They could be being subbed by their big bosses in London.’

Heck paused for a moment, then pressed the phone against his ear. ‘The Popi mean anything to you?’

Young was silent for more than a moment. ‘The Popi,’ he repeated, stretching out the syllables. ‘Might do. What have you got for me?’

‘The tip of ACC Crime Dickie’s shoe, and she’s taken to wearing winkle-pickers.’

‘Ha fucking ha.’

The thought of Mrs Normal in anything other than sober flatties almost made Heck laugh too, but he restrained himself.

‘All right,’ Young said. ‘But I want to see the file on the dead man and his crew.’

‘Fair enough.’ That was no concession on Heck’s part. The files would soon be available to the Newcastle MCU on the force database, but Lee Young had to keep face.

‘The Popi have turned up the odd time in the last couple of months. The guy we caught on the riverbank mentioned them when he was talking to Lennox. The interpreter picked it up. Did you know Lennox can speak Italian? Apparently Albanians understand it. And we ran a phone tap before we raided a knocking shop off the Gallowgate – the name was mentioned. We’re guessing it’s a family or clan,

but we don't know if it's up here or down south.'

'None of the names we sent over rang any bells?'

'Only Leka. It cropped up half-a-dozen times on that phone tap. Then again, Leka might be their equivalent of John.'

'Aye, and Popi might be the Albanian Smith. OK, Lee, thanks. I'll be in touch.'

Heck glared at the uniformed sergeant who was standing at his door. 'What is it, Len? I'm up to my ears.'

'It's a woman, sir,' the wizened officer said. 'She insists on seeing you. Says she's a friend. A Mrs Alice Liphook?'

'Oh Christ. What does she want?'

'Says she's been burgled.'

'Well, get one of your lads to take a statement.'

'Tried that. She started ranting and raving, even threatened to tear down some of the notices...'

'Sounds like you should have arrested her. All right, I'll talk to her. Bring her up, but don't leave me on my own with her.'

The sergeant stared at him. 'She doesn't look like she'd--'

'Don't even think that!' Heck suddenly looked bilious. 'She's one of the governors of Ag's school.'

'I did wonder, sir.'

'When I say the word "crow" in any form, usher her out at speed. I'll be about to tear her head off.'

A few minutes later Alice Liphook was sitting on the sofa that ran along one side of Heck's office. Sergeant Moody stood in the doorway like a sentry. There were several female officers visible through the glass windows, so procedure was more or

less maintained.

‘Does your colleague have to be present, Hector?’ Mrs Liphook asked, her voice high-pitched.

‘Standard practice, Alice,’ Heck replied. ‘We do everything in twos here.’

The woman peered at him through large round glasses. ‘No wonder crime’s going through the roof.’ She lifted one thick thigh over the other, giving a flash of support stockings beneath her long tweed skirt. ‘As in the case of my shed.’

‘Your shed?’

‘Yes,’ Alice Liphook said, her small head tilting back and forth as if it were coming undone. It looked incongruous on top of her well upholstered body. ‘Someone broke into it and stole a valuable velvet dressing gown and my favourite hat, as well as a lot of food.’

‘A velvet dressing gown...’ Heck busied himself taking notes. Mrs Liphook – her husband had sensibly died over a decade ago – was Corham’s number one busybody.

‘A lot of food was consumed on the spot as well. And the place smelled like a sweatshop.’

‘You live in Corham Gardens, don’t you?’ Heck remembered dropping Ag off once in the expensive suburb. ‘And this was your garden shed?’

‘My study shed. I need to get out of the house to read and write. I stay there all day.’

‘I see. And had the house itself been broken into?’

‘No, they hadn’t even tried as far as I can see. I was at my daughter’s up in Rothbury. I stayed the night and drove back this morning.’

‘And you saw no sign of the culprit or culprits when you arrived?’

‘No, luckily from them they’d gone. I’d have given them what for in no uncertain terms.’

Heck frowned at Len Moody, whose lips were twisting as he tried not to laugh.

‘Did anything else catch your attention, Alice?’ It was hard to be sure about her age because of the heavy layers on face, eyes and lips. Seventy-five was as low as he’d be prepared to go.

‘Yes. These were no ordinary thieves. They didn’t take my laptop or radio.’

‘Why do you say “thieves” plural?’

Mrs Liphook stared at him. ‘Because of the amount of food that was consumed, my dear man. Three tins of soup, two of beans, and two of sardines, as well as three packets of biscuits. And that’s just what was eaten there. They took a lot more away with them.’

Heck glanced out of the window and prepared to make an ornithological observation.

‘Oh, one last thing, Hector. There were rags in the bin, rags with blood on them. The smell...just awful.’

Heck thought about the woman Joni had chased outside the brothel. She had bare feet and was in need of clothes; food and shelter too. Had she found some cast-offs and made it as far as Corham Gardens?

‘I tell you what, Alice. I’ll send some people down. They’ll check for fingerprints. Please don’t go back into the shed until further notice.’

The woman looked as if she’d been evicted. ‘Oh, but my work.’

‘I’m sure you can manage in the big house for a day or two,’ Heck said, standing up. ‘Now, Sergeant, I have an appointment with Inspector Crow. Please have someone take Mrs Liphook’s statement and fingerprints so we can distinguish them

from those of the intruders.’

‘Thank you, dear Hector,’ the woman said, gathering together her possessions.

‘Do give my best to Agnes.’ She was one of those people who refused to use diminutives.

Dear Hector. That would be around Force HQ before the hour was out.

### Synopsis of Remaining Chapters (41-155)

Evie finds the record of an 18<sup>th</sup> century slave ship partially owned by the Favons. The horrors endured by the captives appal her, as does her family's involvement. Joni interviews Nick Etherington and is unconvinced by his denial that he saw anyone he knew at the brothel. Suzana, having bought knives and a map, is assaulted by three youths. She fights them off, inflicting injuries, and escapes. Joni tells Heck she suspects Michael Etherington may have connections with the Albanians from his time in Kosovo. Moonbeam Pax, a tenant of Lord Favon, reflects on her Wicca activities, her new lover and her drug-dealing. Joni is antagonised by Morrie Simmons. She asks a former colleague in the Met for information on the Popi. Nick, holding Evie's hand surreptitiously, is driven home by Lord Favon. He is worried when Favon asks him about Sunday night. Heck recalls his undercover experience and his stabbing. He is overwhelmed by fear.

Suzana walks northwards from Corham. She remembers the brutality of her upbringing and reasserts her decision to kill her oppressors. Kylie and his mates kidnap the Albanian nightclub doorman. Joni thinks of her London lover, Zak Cotter, who cheated on her. She remembers meeting Heck on the Roman Wall and is unsure what he made of her.

A naked male body without head or hands is found in the River Coquet. The MCU morning briefing: there has been no sign of the five Albanian women, and an alert is out for Suzana. The discovery of the body is phoned in. Evie Favon warns her mother off Nick. She writes about *The Seeker*, a Gothic novel by one of her ancestors.

She wonders if her parents love her; and if her father drove into her by accident. Heck and Joni attend the crime scene at the river. Dr Volpert thinks the victim was killed elsewhere, while Joni wonders if Suzana was involved. Kylie and his mates torture the Albanian, but he escapes without telling them anything about Gaz. Joni and the SOCO leader discuss the crime scene. Joni realises her mother's cottage is only three miles away.

Ag and Heck's father see a gang of foreign workers in a field, then pass a young woman in a leather jacket. Ag tells Heck about the woman. He leaves to look for her. The ganger Wayne Garston tells the Albanians that he has seen Suzana. He is instructed to go after her. He makes another call and a red pickup arrives on the other side of the wood where Suzana took refuge. Elez Zymberi, the Albanian forked by Suzana, arrives where she was seen by the ganger and follows her. Heck and other officers go to the kale field where Ag saw the woman. Further on, they find the lorry and motorbike. After disabling the latter, Heck heads for a small wood, fighting his fear. Suzana takes Zymberi by surprise, injuring him, and escapes. Heck conquers his fear and brings the armed Zymberi down. Suzana has disappeared.

Nick arrives at Favon Hall and is warmly greeted by Victoria. He and Evie quarrel after she shows him a piece she has written about the West African vodoun religion taken to the Carribean by the slaves. Joni takes over from a shivering Heck. She intends to use a loud hailer and speak Italian to Suzana, who is in the forest across the road. Suzana escapes through the trees. She hears Joni pleading with her. She doesn't give herself up.

With Hot Rod in hospital, Kylie and his friends decide to grab another Albanian. Heck is taken home. Ag is annoyed, but impressed that he put his body on the line. ACC Dickie asks where Heck is, then warns DS Gray that only Heck is to



contact other MCUs. The post mortem of the head- and handless man is set for the next morning. Joni and her team are forced to give up the search for Suzana when night falls. Suzana kills a sheep on the moor. She recalls her grandfather, who killed a member of the Popi and in turn was murdered, leading to Suzana's enslavement.

Joni is told by her former Met colleague that the Popi are highly dangerous. They sometimes use non-Albanian contract killers. Moonbeam is interested by the headless man, attributing occult significance to it. She will bring Joni to understand the powers she has inherited.

MCU briefing, followed by the p-m on the headless man. Heck's Newcastle counterpart Lee Young says that he knows the victim's identity. Michael Etherington is worried that Nick is being distracted by Evie. Nick tells him that Victoria came on to him the day before. Joni and Pancake question the ganger, Garston. He tells them that the Spahia clan owns his company and that the driver of the red pickup was Dan Reston, Lord Favon's factor. Joni and Heck meet DCI Young in Newcastle. The Albanian kidnapped by Kylie and his mates reported them to the police, and they are in the cells.

Suzana is attacked on the moor by a man, who is knocked out by another wearing a balaclava over his face. Suzana is hit too. Nick is again accosted by Lady Favon, who later catches Evie and him naked under the library table. She threatens to tell her husband and Nick's mother. Heck and Joni return to Corham. They discuss DCI Young's strategy to deal with the Albanians, then head for the moors.

Sex-crazy farmer Oliver Forrest wakes up, secured in a dark room. He remembers being phoned about the Albanian woman by DS Rokeby, as well as catching up with her and ripping at her clothes. Then all went black. Heck meets Lord Favon on the moor. The latter claims no knowledge of the whereabouts either of

Suzana or Forrest. There is no love lost between the farmer and the aristocrat.

The police are directed by an anonymous call to the quiet spot where Nick Etherington has been run off the road and killed. His mother and grandfather arrive. Joni shows Michael the body: Nick's face has been smashed to a pulp. Rosie is distraught, while Michael is evasive about whether Nick had a girlfriend. Moonbeam Pax is shocked by the death. She reflects on man's abuse of the natural world, holding the landowners responsible.

Joni can't sleep. When she does, she sees ghostly figures, including that of Nick, who tells her he still can't tell her who he saw at the brothel. Joni wakes, determined to find his killer. Kylie is taken to identify the headless body. MCU briefing: the Nick Etherington case is given priority, while the searches for Suzana and Ollie Forrest continue. Forrest is visited by a mystery woman, who has sex with him. He is puzzled when she subsequently does a head stand on the bed. Joni and Heck attend the post-mortem on Nick. He had sex before he was killed and was knocked out before his face was smashed.

Michael Etherington searches Nick's room for anything that could point to his killer. He wants vengeance. Joni interviews Rosie Etherington, winning her trust. She learns that Nick and Evie Favon were together. Suzana is locked in a small room. She remembers being driven by a man in a balaclava. There were dogs in the back of a pickup. She vows to fight whoever comes for her with the small knife she has hidden.

Joni and ACC Dickie interview Michael. He claims he knows nothing pertinent to Nick's murder and is angered when Joni asks if he has links with Albanian criminals from Kosovo. Morrie Simmons interviews staff and pupils at the Abbey School. He finds out from Nick's friend Perce that the former had an affair with an older woman over Easter. Heck has Michael followed. When he goes into a

remote cottage, Heck knocks on the door. It is opened by Moonbeam Pax, who says she is casting a spell to help the general find Nick's killer.

Evie is distraught at the news of Nick's death. She refuses to be comforted by her parents, blaming her mother for what happened. Joni coerces Rosie Etherington into telling her that Michael left the house on Sunday evening; he returned to take her to police HQ. Ollie Forrest is again mounted by the mystery woman. After he talks to her, he is hit twice with the cattle prod and left cuffed to the bed.

Confronted by Joni about Sunday evening, Michael Etherington admits to being gay; at the time in question he was visiting his lover in Newcastle. Pete Rokeby is on the moors, where the SOCOs have found a tyre print. He wonders if Suzana could have overwhelmed both Forrest and the other driver, and taken the latter's vehicle. Joni asks Moonbeam if her relationship with Michael is only professional. Her mother says it is and tells her to open her mind and soul if she wants to get over what happened in London.

Heck joins Rokeby on the moor, asking if he's heard anything about General Etherington being gay. The answer is negative. DC Andrews has interviewed General Etherington's lover, Julian Dorries, and thinks he is genuine. SOCOs report no scrapes or paint on Nick's bicycle. Morrie Simmons tells Joni that 'Goat Skin' Shackleton, member of an anti-Albanian gang called the Steel Toe Caps, was at the brothel on Sunday night. Ruth Dickie calls DCI Young and tells him to apply zero tolerance against suspect Albanian businesses, as well as to cut Kylie and his friends some slack.

Joni and DI Sutton visit Goat Skin Shackleton, who admits to having been in the army under Michael Etherington. (Joni has realised that a man with half a beard outside the brothel was the general.) The Steel Toe Caps consist of other

ex-servicemen. Etherington has them monitoring Spahia clan activities. Suzana is forced into the bathroom, jolted by the cattle prod. From a gap in the covered window, she sees a heavily built man with a moustache leaving and swears she will kill him before escaping.

At the MCU briefing Joni is surprised to hear that Nick Etherington had an affair with an unknown older woman. The ACC forbids Morrie Simmons from further contact with the Steel Toe Caps and orders that everything concerning General Etherington be kept confidential by Joni's team. Evie refuses to speak to her parents, staying in the library and thinking about the family's inglorious past as slave owners. Deprived of her freedom of movement after the accident, she feels like a slave herself. She vows she will never return home after she starts university, but will first uncover the family's secrets and obtain justice for Nick.

The ACC is irritated by an intimidating call from Lord Favon and authorises Heck to investigate him and his wife, given that Nick was at the Hall before his final bike ride. Michael Etherington has lost his police tail. His lover Julian Dorries is grilled by Joni and Pancake. When Joni mentions that Dorries did contract work for the Ministry of Defence when Etherington was there, he clams up. Pancake doubts Dorries is gay, just as Heck is dubious about Etherington's claimed sexuality. Ollie Forrest is finally released from the cuffs. He hasn't been visited by the woman again. He hears screams from above and decides he will rescue the female prisoner before escaping and going back to his wife. Now that he has experienced captivity and sexual assault, he is ashamed of his womanising.

Joni researches the Favon family. She and DC Andrews ask Rosie Etherington about Nick and the older woman. She had suspicions, but doesn't know who she was; Michael had seen them together once. Joni believes that Rosie doesn't know where

her father-in-law is. Moonbeam meets her man for sex in a wood north of Corham. He tells her to get a grip on Joni. The tyre tracks on the moor could belong to a Favon estate vehicle. The ACC authorises a visit to the Hall. She also tells them that the Albanian-run Stars and Bars night club in Newcastle has been blown up by a sophisticated explosive device.

Evie imagines that the spirits of the old slave gods are talking to her, promising her redemption. When people arrive at the Hall, she makes use of its hidden passageways to eavesdrop. On the way to Favon Hall, Joni wonders if Victoria was Nick's older lover, and if she's trying to get pregnant with a male heir. Heck tells her that Andrew was once caught with S&M equipment in a Newcastle brothel. Suzana stands firm against her captor, deciding she will attack him the next time he comes in.

Joni, Heck and Pancake question Lord and Lady Favon. The latter admits to having been Nick's older lover, saying she and Andrew have an open marriage. Pancake checks the tyre marks from the moor against the estate vehicles. Andrew says that his factor Dan Reston and his wife are away and refuses Heck leave to search their house.

Skender Spahia, head of the clan in the UK, authorises the Popi to organise the murders of two police officers in northern England, following a phone call from one of the people he is in business with there. Heck reflects on how intuitive Joni is. Back home, he asks his family about the Corham Rugby Sevens tournament. Ag saw Michael Etherington sitting close to the Favons.

Evie overheard everything when the police spoke to her parents. She is horrified that her mother seduced Nick and decides to find out more. Pancake has found scratches and what appear to be dog hairs on the Favon estate pickup. Joni and

he discover that Cheryl Reston served time for soliciting child prostitution. They decide to ask questions about the factor and his wife in the local pubs.

Heck learns from a former colleague that Andrew Favon was caught in a Newcastle brothel using nipple clamps. He was whisked away by his lawyer, Richard Lennox, who also works for the Albanians, and paid off the aggrieved prostitute. Heck also hears that DCI Young is close to the Albanians; and that the brother of the man who stabbed him is keen to finish the job.

Morrie Simmons and Nathan Gray are in the pub. Only 'Goat Skin' Shackleton doesn't have an alibi for the time of the bombing and he has clammed up. Morrie wants Heck's job. Nathan goes off to meet a woman. Rosie Etherington finds that Michael's camouflage gear is missing, as well as his lap top, a rifle, a pistol and a combat knife. She takes the other knife upstairs and lies on her bed, thinking of Nick.

At the MCU briefing, Joni says that she and Rokeby visited pubs near the Favon estate, discovering that Dan has a reputation for threatening people and Cheryl one for picking up teenage boys. The ACC wants evidence before applying for a warrant to search the Restons' house. An armed Michael Etherington is watching Favon Hall. Moonbeam's man told him he's been blackmailing Andrew, and that he made the call to the police when Nick came off his bike in the vicinity of the Favons' 4x4. Michael intends to interrogate Victoria and her husband. Dan Reston's Dobermans pick up his scent and run towards him.

Heck looks at photos from the rugby sevens tournament. Victoria Favon clearly had the hots for Nick. His grandfather was behind her – could Michael have found a link between their affair and Nick's death? If so, he could be dangerous. The Popi meet the man who is to kill Joni. They discuss the operation and hand over weapons.

Joni asks Garston, the ganger, about the Restons. He says Dan is impotent and has taken to killing sheep with his bare hands; and that Cheryl once tied Garston down and raped him, biting him on the neck.

Evie sees a camouflaged man shoot the Dobermans. Victoria goes to comfort Dan Reston. Evie tells her she heard her admit to the affair with Nick, as well as both her parents lie about the Restons' whereabouts. Andrew takes away her crutch and locks her up. Heck hears from Joni about the Restons. It still is not enough for a warrant. Suzana has not been fed and wonders if she has been left to die. She considers killing herself with the plastic-sheathed knife she has hidden in her vagina, but decides to use it on her captor if he reappears.

Joni goes to Heck's for Sunday lunch. She has a good time and manages to persuade her boss to call the ACC later about searching the Favon estate. The killer codenamed Gazelle gets into Moonbeam's house and restrains her. She is to call Joni and tell her to come urgently. Michael Etherington approaches the Hall. He sees a dark figure in a balaclava get out of the pickup by the tower, carrying a cattle prod. He wonders if Reston has imprisoned the Favons there and runs to investigate.

The killer known as Leopard has been waiting in the trees near Heck's house. After Joni leaves, he moves in. Evie sees the pickup arrive at the tower and breaks out of her bedroom window to go there. She has a second crutch, but fears it won't be an adequate weapon after she hears screaming. Joni takes her mother's call and immediately realises something is wrong. She alerts Pete Rokeby, telling him to go to Heck's, and calls for backup. She sees a masked gunman and looks for a weapon. In an outhouse she finds Morrie Simmons, Moonbeam's new man. They manage to overpower the gunman, who is Marcus Ainsworth, the armed robber who crippled Joni's Met colleague. More shots are fired from outside.

The masked man forces Heck to gather his family in the sitting room. Before he can shoot, Pete Rokeby throws a stone through the window. He and Heck disarm the man and force him outside. Moments later there is a single shot. Heck waits, then pulls off the dead man's balaclava. He is Ian Sacker, brother of the gangster who stabbed him. Sacker's killer returns on a motorbike. Ag knocks him down and Heck and Rokeby secure him. Backup arrives. Victoria sees Evie enter the tower. She sends Andrew there, worried about Dan Reston. She calls the Albanians for help and is told that one of their men is nearby.

Joni has not been hit, but Morrie is down and Moonbeam wounded. Joni shoots back with Ainsworth's pistol. The gunman drives off at speed. After armed officers and an ambulance arrive, Joni talks to Heck on the phone. Then she heads for Favon Hall, convinced that the shooter is going there. Suzana cuts her captor and then knocks him out. Removing the balaclava, she is amazed to see that it is a woman (Cheryl Reston). She goes to free the man downstairs (Ollie Forrest), but recognises him from the moor and uses the prod on him. As she reaches the ground floor, she hears a man shouting outside, then meets a young woman carrying a metal pole.

Michael Etherington relieves Andrew Favon of his shotgun outside the tower. Suzana and Evie, with her crutch, come out together, the former attacking Favon when she recognises him from the brothel. At the Hall, Michael demands to know what Victoria did to Nick. She claims ignorance. ACC Dickie is shocked by the attempts on her officers' lives. She has told the Chief Constable that the Favons' property must be searched, as well as advising Heck that Joni is probably on her way to the Hall. He sets off there with Rokeby.

Joni finds Victoria, Andrew, Evie, Michael and Suzana in Victoria's bedroom. The general is pointing his rifle at Lady Favon's head, demanding she say what she



knows of Nick's death. She claims Dan Reston was responsible. The Popi assassin arrives and prepares to kill Victoria – who had been dealing with the Spahia clan – because of her unreliability. Suzana dispatches the Albanian with the shotgun but, as he falls, his bullets hit Michael. Heck and Rokeby arrive at the Hall. The former finds blood-drenched bodies in the bedroom and immediately thinks one of them is Joni.

Joni, who is unscathed, gives Suzana money and lets her go. She goes back to the Hall and is greeted by Heck with a hug. Dan Reston is found at home in a fugue state, cuddling his dead Dobermans. Gary Frizzell's head is in the fridge. Richard Lennox arrives to represent Lady Favon, as well as the Popi who attacked Heck and his family. He is sent away with a flea in his ear by Heck. ACC Dickie accuses Joni of allowing Suzana to escape, but Heck says he witnessed her try in vain to catch the girl. Michael Etherington is dead. Joni tells Rosie about her father-in-law's death and about Victoria Favon's involvement in Nick's murder – she was incensed by his rejection of her - even though the jealous, crazed Reston delivered the fatal blows. Heck and family are on the way to her sister's because their house is a crime scene. He has spoken to Joni. Ag expresses admiration for her.

The morning briefing: Joni advises that the Favons are under arrest on several charges. Suzana is still at large. Morrie Simmons is in intensive care, his career finished by his blackmailing of Lord Favon even if he survives. Dan Reston is still in a state of mental collapse. His wife Cheryl is abusive and has refused representation. ACC Dickie is on a mission to drive the Spahia clan out of the North East. DCI Young of Newcastle MCU has been arrested and is co-operating with Professional Standards. Kylie and the rest of Gary Frizzell's mates have been released. Joni and Heck agree that Morrie Simmons must have made the anonymous phone call after Nick was forced off the road – not telling all so he could blackmail the Favons.

Evie visits Joni and tells her she will have nothing more to do with her parents or the estate. She gives Joni a copy of her notes from the library, many of them detailing the suffering of slaves. That and the end of the case make Joni, now more attuned to the black side of her heritage, feel that she could be happier in the future.

Heck, Joni and Pancake go to Crown Court for the Favons' arraignment. There is a hostile crowd. As Victoria walks to the entrance, she is killed by three shots fired by Rosie Etherington, using Michael's second pistol. Evie watches dispassionately and walks away.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE QUESTION OF THEORIES

My experience suggests that fiction writers tend not to trouble themselves much with theories of literature or creative writing.<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that novelists are unaware of them; rather that they do not find them useful in planning or writing works. For example, although Saul Bellow states that writers have required a theoretical framework, he goes on to say, ‘Most often they have been their own theoreticians, have created their own ground as artists, and have provided an exegesis for their own works’ (Bellow 2007: 96). In the twenty-one-page interview, Bellow mentions fifteen novelists and no literary critics or theorists. This implies that novelists read other novelists to build their theoretical frameworks. Another example of theory-free writing is provided by the award-winning crime novelist Robert Wilson, who has an Oxford degree in English Literature: ‘I now respond to the written word in a visceral way with no reference to my education, at least not at a conscious level’ (Wilson 2013).

Despite my grounding in theory and criticism, my own reading of fiction – especially crime fiction - has undoubtedly played a greater part in my development and functioning as a novelist. However, unlike Wilson, I do make use of the literary education I received, even though it can distract me from writing. In the sections

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<sup>1</sup> I have an MA in Modern Greek Language and Literature and an MPhil in General and Comparative Literature from Oxford University, and an MSc in Applied Linguistics from Edinburgh University. I am the published author of fifteen crime novels (Johnston 1997-2013), two of which have won awards. I have also chaired over 200 events at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, including the novelists Julian Barnes, Hilary Mantel, Douglas Coupland, Kate Atkinson, Tim Parks, Sebastian Barry, Ali Smith, Michael Ondaatje and William Boyd. I questioned all about how they write, focusing on how they conceptualise the process. None ever mentioned academic literary theory or criticism.

below, I examine first literary theory and critical methods as aids to the creative writer, and then creative writing theory.

### 1a. LITERARY THEORY

For the purposes of this part of the study, approaches to literature can be reduced to three focal points: the author, the text, and the reader. I examine each in that order, although inevitably there is some overlap.

The author has been an important theoretical concept since ancient times. Plato was concerned with the difference between the metaphysical ‘real’ world of ideas and the imperfect human world which imitates such ideals, the latter being the one represented by literary writers by means of mimesis, ‘the artistic representation... of agents and events in the world’ (Nightingale 2006: 38). This distances their work yet further from metaphysical truth. Plato famously advocated that writers of lyric and epic be exiled because through them ‘pleasure and pain become your rulers instead of law and the rational principles commonly accepted as best’ (Plato 2003: 351). Philosophers were taken to be the only source of true knowledge, although some modern thinkers ‘urge that truth as such has no cognitive value’ (Lowe 1995: 882).

For Aristotle, the objects of mimesis were also ‘people doing things’ (Aristotle 2008: 52) but poets, far from being expelled, were seen as using their imagination to produce ‘the work of a genius’ (2008: 72). They achieved this by applying techniques still relevant today – peripeteia, reversal of fortune; anagnorisis, recognition; pathos, ‘an act involving destruction or pain’ (2008: 65); and the dramatic unities of action, time and space. However, Aristotle praises Homer for doing ‘as little as possible’

(2008: 83), by attributing mimesis to the characters rather than the author. This hints at the idea of the text creating its own reality, diluting the idea of mimesis that refers to the external world. Here may be the root of more hostile modern ideas regarding the writer's command of the text.

Such ideas were in part a reaction to the sometimes overblown conception of the author held by the Romantics. According to Shelley, 'A Poet, as he is the author to others of the highest wisdom, pleasure, virtue and glory, so he ought to be the happiest, the best, the wisest, and the most illustrious of men' (1995: 47).<sup>2</sup> Although there are writers who would describe themselves in such terms, few do so in public. Barthes, apparently following Plato, claimed that 'the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original' (1995: 128) and that 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' (1995: 130).<sup>3</sup> Foucault was less dismissive: 'the name of the author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and the operation of certain discourses within a society' (1995: 235), although the use of the word 'discourse' can be linked to Barthes' 'text', 'a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash' (1995: 128). The underlying point is that textual meaning rests in collocations which already exist and reflect social structures, rather than with an imaginary collocater.

What use are these conceptions to the practising writer? Theory is by nature intangible, while the act of writing fills a blank page of screen with words – as well as, until e-books rule the world, bringing about a material book. A pedant might claim that the specific collocations in her/his text have never existed before, but that would be to misunderstand Barthes and Foucault. For them, meanings (plural because every text has more than one, depending on the reader and the society s/he inhabits) exist

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<sup>2</sup> The male possessive pronoun allows no acknowledgement of female writers, despite the fact that Shelley was married to one, who wrote, among other things, poetry.

<sup>3</sup> Having killed the Author, Barthes surprisingly gives her/ him the distinction of an initial capital letter.

beyond the grasp of any language user, in a metaphysical realm with similarities to that of Plato. Returning to what the writer might view as his/ her words (that ownership legally protected by copyright), we could add that money is made from texts, which gives them a different kind of existence as a commodity or ‘good’. On the other hand, the author receives at best ten percent of the money made by her/his text, which undercuts any claim to significant ownership.<sup>4</sup>

In the final analysis, I would suggest that structuralists and their successors overstate the case. Creative writers, as opposed to theorists, do not operate solely in the world of metaphysics. They appear at literary festivals and bookshops, where they interact with readers. While it is undoubtedly salutary to be made aware of the philosophical problems associated with authorship, writers who reflect on their practice – people who rarely brim with self-confidence – are often fearful that they work in vain. But they can console themselves that, ‘Authors function, whether the state of knowledge recognizes their existence or not’ (Nesbit 1995: 256).

Text has already appeared as the focal point of Barthes’ analysis: the piece of writing that derives from linguistic and social discourse rather than the individual author. The word’s origin is in the Latin ‘*texere*’, ‘to weave’, which invests it with metaphorical weight. Who, we might ask, does the work of weaving? Is the complexity of the woven object too much for a single producer, whether author or reader? However, ‘text’ derives directly from the passive form ‘*textus*’, that which has been woven, which gives it an impersonal connotation: the object has been woven, but the weaver’s identity or identities are not specified, and are perhaps unimportant. Before the advent of modern literary theory, textual criticism was solely concerned with ‘the study and analysis of extant texts in order to determine authorship and

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<sup>4</sup> Royalty rates are substantially higher for e-books (between 25% and 50% when brought out by a publisher, and even more if books are self-published on digital platforms). Perhaps the digital form gives the author a greater claim to textual ownership after all.

authenticity' (Cuddon 1999: 907): it is notable that the critic juxtaposes the author with a form of truth. In the twentieth century, American New Criticism and the Russian Formalists, though dissimilar in other ways, had a common aim: 'Both place special emphasis on the formal elements of the literary text' (Matterson 2006: 167). The New Critics William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley claimed that the 'desire or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a literary work of art' (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954: 3), thus attributing all significance to the text rather than contextual material.

French theory went even further, suggesting that the text is produced by social and ideological practices, and is thus inherently linked to other texts: 'the concept of text as ideologeme determines the very procedure of a semiotics that, by studying the text as intertextuality, considers it as such within (the text of) society and history' (Kristeva 1980: 37). The single text is therefore only part of a constantly changing totality of texts. Barthes draws a distinction between the work and the text: 'A work is a finished object, something computable, which can occupy a physical space [...]; the text is a methodological field' (1981: 39).

Are any of these ideas helpful to the novelist? Few would take exception to the idea that their works are woven objects, with plot, characters, theme and other elements coming together so closely that no joins are visible, even if that rarely occurs. It is hard for me to judge, as I was aware of the ideas mentioned above before I started writing fiction.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, few writers would argue with the significance of the text, not least because they labour over each work for long periods of time. So, too, they are aware of intertextuality even if they are unfamiliar with the term, as they will have read, probably widely, in the genre they are drawn to write in, and will

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<sup>5</sup> Although my first novel was not published until 1997, I started writing fiction in 1989, producing three widely rejected novels in the following four years.

consciously place their novel in line with or opposition to other novels. They might also grudgingly accept that their intentions are of limited value for critics: even reviewers, deluged as they are by press releases and invitations to lunch and launches, will make judgements without referring to the author's explanations in interviews and on web-sites. On the other hand, readers are often fascinated about authors' motivations and it would seem churlish to refer them to Wimsatt and Beardsley.

More widespread opposition amongst authors is encountered to the idea that works contain ideological elements of which writers are unaware. In conversation with a bestselling crime novelist, I suggested that the genre was often conservative and even repressive in societal terms. The writer rejected that, saying 'there may well be an ideological examination of issues in there somewhere, but story comes first' (Billingham and Johnston 2012). But where does story stop and ideology begin? For the French theorists, story, along with all other components of the text, is ideologically conditioned, whatever the writer thinks. I am prepared to accept this, perhaps because many of my novels have political themes (for example, the Quint Dalrymple quintet, 1997-2001, is set in a futuristic Edinburgh ruled by a council of guardians based on Plato's philosopher kings). Weaving political ideas into plots makes the writer aware that much is going on under the surface.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps a truce can be called by acknowledging Barthes' distinction between works and texts. Most writers view the tangible product of their labours (the work) as sufficient reward, not least because it can be sold.

It will be remembered that Barthes predicated the birth of the reader on the death of the author. This would appear to be a more fruitful aspect of literary theory for writers, not least because they were readers before they started to write and remain

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<sup>6</sup> I consider the role/s of ideology in *Carnal Acts* in Chapter 7.



so throughout their careers. However, reader-response criticism does not deal with anything as tangible as the readers who attend author events and present books to be signed. The reader has been conceived in numerous, sometimes mutually exclusive forms: as Andrew Bennett summarises (1995:2), the reader is ‘a hypothetical construct with all possible knowledge and interpretive skills’ (Michael Riffaterre); an ‘individual subject’ whose ‘reading is determined by his or her “identity theme”’ (Norman N. Holland); ‘a community of readers functioning through the reading strategies employed by a particular member’ (Stanley Fish); ‘a series of moves or responses more or less predetermined by the language of the text’ (Wolfgang Iser); ‘an individual in a particular historical and social situation’ (Roger Chartier); and ‘a woman, a gay man, the member of an ethnic minority or other marginalized person whose responses involve a certain resistance produced by ethnic, sexual or social difference’ (Judith Fetterley). Clearly, some of these conceptions are mutually exclusive. Fish’s community suggests the conventions of genre; Iser’s position is text-based in the extreme; while Chartier and Fetterley take account of the historical and social location, as well as the individual psychology of readers. These four critics strike me as useful in building a composite model of the reader.

An influential model of the interaction between author and reader is: Real Author - - → Implied Author → (Narrator) → (Narratee) → Implied Reader - - → Real Reader (Chatman 1978: 151). The first and last (flesh and blood) components remain outside the main narrative transaction, replaced by hypothetical constructs that are defined by the text. This seems credible as, although real authors retain a certain consistency of character, the implied author will often change from text to text. The same applies to readers: not only may they create an author with little resemblance to the real author, but implied readers too will be different from book to book. What is

interesting for real authors and readers is the question of implication. Personal experience suggests that, at least in some cases, the reader gets an impression of the author from the text (mediated by the narrator/s).<sup>7</sup> With contemporary fiction, this will be enhanced by author photos, interviews, appearances, web-sites and so on. Such impressions will potentially expand and deepen during the reading of series, particularly those that change style, characters, themes and so on, as in the case with, for example, Reginald Hill's Dalziel and Pascoe books, and James Ellroy's L.A. Quartet. Thus, the difference between real and implied author is eroded to the extent that it no longer seems essential.

As regards the implied reader, the question is, how much does the author (real and/ or implied) take into account that construct's potential reading of the text? The issues of genre and sub-genre are significant here. An experienced reader of crime fiction knows the parameters within which the author may create her/ his text. This applies to subversive authors just as much as to more conservative ones, as the parameters have to be understood to be destabilised.<sup>8</sup> But do authors try to construct an implied reader before, during and after writing? I would have to answer 'no' if the question related only to Chatman's model. However, authors undoubtedly use narrative functions to connect with the reader and it is there that I suggest the closest application of reader-response theory to creative writing lies.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I examine narratology and its implications for *Carnal Acts* in Chapter 5.

<sup>8</sup> *The New York Trilogy* (Paul Auster, 1988) would be hard to fathom without knowledge of the crime genre. Clearly non-genre or literary fiction is more problematic in that the author can theoretically do anything in any way. Still, even experimental writers such as John Barthes, Richard Brautigan and William Burroughs at least in part react against longstanding fictional conventions.

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 4 and 5 for further discussion.

## 1b: CREATIVE WRITING THEORY

There continues to be a debate over whether creative writing can be taught. Some believe, ‘talent is inherent and essential...and that inspiration not education drives creativity’ (Swander, Leahy, and Cantrell 2007: 15). I broadly agree, particularly in the context of Ph.D. studies, where the writer is on her/ his own for much of the time, no matter how good the input from supervisors. Although I did not study creative writing at undergraduate or Master’s level, I feel that the six-year fiction writing apprenticeship I put myself through (1989-1995) and my sixteen years of experience as a published novelist have equipped me with the ‘tools of the trade’ obtained from such courses. It has been said in this respect that ‘the composition of fiction, poetry and creative nonfiction is mostly a matter of reading and practice’ (Morley 2007: 88). In this respect, the teaching of creative writing may function as an accelerant, helping students to focus more quickly.

Creative writing is a broad church, as the three modes referred to by Morley show. It follows that approaches to the subject at doctoral level will be numerous and varied. Among those I have followed are: ‘a desire by an experienced writer to explore new forms and styles’; ‘an interest in the critical and theoretical investigation of writing product and process’; and ‘applying philosophic, cultural and political ideas of various kinds to the production of fiction’ (Harper 2007: 349).<sup>10</sup> The first of these – writing a police novel, having previously concentrated on private investigators – is explored in Chapter 3.<sup>11</sup> The third has already been discussed in terms of author, text and reader, and will be further examined in subsequent chapters. I intend to focus

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<sup>10</sup> I find the terms ‘product’ and ‘production’ reductive, even in relation to work like my own that is written with the market in mind. ‘Product’ gives little idea of the role of creativity (see below).

<sup>11</sup> Although my first protagonist, Quint Dalrymple, (Johnston 1997-2001) is an ex-guardsman (policeman) who returns to the fold on an ad hoc basis, he is at heart a private eye and the novels draw on the noir tradition much more than the police novel.

here on the second, which could be more succinctly described as creative writing theory, even though the term is contentious. In recent years, there has been ‘an ongoing debate concerning whether creative writing needs to bother at all with theory’ (Hecq 2013: 177). One could add that there are separate debates to be had concerning the relevance of theory to creative writing pedagogy and to individual writers. My interest is primarily in the latter.

Writers on creative writing have widely differing views about the relevance of literary theory and criticism. At the positive end of the spectrum, ‘critical and cultural theory represents a huge creative resource just waiting to be tapped’ (Boulter 2007: 5). Paul Dawson takes up the centre ground, commending creative writing as a discipline because ‘it has cherry-picked from an eclectic range of theories’ (2008). At the negative extreme, it is denied that theory is appropriate to the discipline: ‘The primary activity of writers is writing, and therefore the writing process should be the principal object of our analyses, generalisations and research’ (Harris 2009). My references to literary and critical theories in the first part of this chapter suggest that Dawson’s is the most appropriate practical application, but cherry-picking is clearly open to charges of theoretical inadequacy and/ or contradiction. Then again, many of the theories I mentioned have provoked fierce debate and have been accused of similar weaknesses. They are also subject to change. To take one example, Barthes later adapted his celebrated death of the author: ‘The pleasure of the Text also includes a friendly return of the author’ (1974: 12), specifying that the latter is not a person but a body. While Barthes’ earlier author, a textual abstraction, could not literally die, ‘the author who returns is a mortal body and thus poignantly subject to death’ (Gallop 2011: 41). It is debatable to whom the author/ body’s ‘friendly return’ is directed – the reader, the critic, society, or her/ himself.

The words ‘practice’ and ‘process’ frequently appear in discussions of creative writing, and often overlap. After providing a list of inputs, from ‘writing practice, including exercises, first drafts, rewrites’, ‘the influence of other writers’, ‘literary theory, and ‘challenging conventions’, Kim Lasky concludes that ‘all these activities converge to constitute process and product, and the active movement between’ (2013: 21). As noted above, the term ‘product’ reduces the author’s work to an industrialised and marketable entity. However, I write in a heavily commercialised genre that prides itself on being reader-friendly, so I cannot deny the power of Pierre Macherey’s Marxist concept of ‘literary production, which suggests the essentially ordinary, accessible nature of fiction-making’ (Eagleton 1990: 46).<sup>12</sup> I have more to say about creation below.

‘The writing process, in the widest sense, is everything that happens to a work before it is “finished”’ (Harris 2009). I take the quotation marks around ‘finished’ to imply that completion requires a reader/ readers, even if the text is unpublished. While one of the things that happen may be engagement with literary or other theory, this is not subsequently mentioned by Harris. Morley identifies seven processes within the overall writing process: preparing; planning; incubation; beginning; flowing; the silence reservoir; and breakthroughs and finish lines (2007: 125-132). Every writer will have their own take on the relevance of these activities and, in any case, ‘the writing process is not unidirectional, but a total, an organic process’ (Morley 2007: 131). Here it is worth noting that, again, the theoretical side of process is not to the fore and, if so, it is in a ‘pick and mix’ way; what matters is writing and reflection about it. Lasky produces a ‘trptych of practice-led research’, in which ‘critical and theoretical inputs and outcomes’ and ‘creative work’ feed into a central

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<sup>12</sup> Macherey’s key work, *A Theory of Literary Production*, posited a new form of criticism that did not describe the work, but elaborated and explained it as a product. The primary question was, ‘What are the laws of literary production?’ (2006:13).

panel of 'poetics' (2013: 21). This may be a useful pedagogical model, but I have never heard a writer describe her/ his creative production in this way. Perhaps all these activities make up 'the strange symbiotic process involved in writing' (Lasky 2013: 19), one which many authors are reluctant to articulate on the grounds that subjecting partially subconscious functions to close examination might cause the creative well to dry up. Concentrating on surface-level practice and process rather than conceptual depths would obviate such a danger.

Do studies of creativity enhance theories of writing? Most do not fall in line with the Marxist view of literary production mentioned above, not least because the author plays a key role in creation, both traditionally and, despite the opposition of writers such as Barthes, in contemporary criticism. Sandra W. Russ refers to primary process, 'an early primitive system of thought that is drive-laden and not subject to rules of logic or oriented to reality' (2009: 250), originating in the work of Sigmund Freud. Many creative writers describe the process as being uncontrolled. Harold Pinter, for example, said, 'I had no idea what the course was going to be. I hadn't planned anything' (Lahr 2007: 67); while Jorge Luis Borges, using the passive voice, said 'something is given to me' (Beard 1983: 7). This can be seen as 'flow', 'the altered state in which you find yourself...when time seems to stop and the writing flows through you with little or no angst' (Perry 2009: 213). However, staying 'in flow' requires feedback (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), something that writers usually do not receive until they finish a book. I used to submit books to my editor using 'self-initiated feedback' (Perry 2009: 215), but more recently I provide my agent, a former editor, with sections of work in progress, not least because editors in publishing houses rarely have time to give detailed critical input anymore.

Literary creativity has been defined in many terms, ranging from inspiration

by the Muses in ancient times (Calliope being that of epic poetry, Melpomene of tragedy, and Thalia of comedy) to Macherey's anti-transcendental view. More recently, Rob Pope has set out several suggestive aspects of creativity, including intertextuality, influence, genius, gender, and genetics (2005: 91-116). Most of these draw the focus away from the imaginative ability of the individual creator, seeing her/ him as defined by social, literary and biological factors.

I would like to concentrate on a particular genetic aspect. In Pope's discussion of the role of the unconscious (2005: 75), he cites psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison's *Touched with Fire*, in which she links manic-depressive illness with creativity: 'writers and artists show a vastly disproportionate rate of manic-depressive or depressive illness' (Jamison 1995: 5). She adds, 'Manic-depressive illness is indisputably genetic' (1995: 16). It is hard to argue with her lists of literary and other artists who have suffered from the condition (diagnosed either professionally or from biographical and textual sources). Among the fiction writers are Victor Hugo, Heinrich Von Kleist, Boris Pasternak, and, particularly interesting for a crime writer, Edgar Allan Poe (Jamison 1993: 267-8).<sup>13</sup> Although the disease is often crippling (and lethal), it also conveys 'heightened imaginative powers, intensified emotional responses, and increased energy' (Jamison 1993: 3). This is of particular interest to me as I was diagnosed bipolar in January 2011 following a suicide attempt, having been mistakenly diagnosed as a severe depressive in 2004 and treated with

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<sup>13</sup> Jamison's research combines psychological, biographical and literary studies and her conclusion, that 'uncertainty, romantic imagination, and mystery tend to weave their way throughout both the scientific and artistic fields of thought and experience' (1993: 259), could be seen as less than rigorous. The majority of writers in her lists are poets. Although I am much more of a novelist than a poet, I have had one book of poetry published (Johnston 2011b).

inappropriate drugs for over six years.<sup>14</sup>

Manic-depressive illness is cyclical and ‘moods may swing erratically between euphoria and despair’ (Jamison 1993: 47). Many writers would report such extremes, particularly during and after bursts of creativity, and there is no suggestion that all creative people are bipolar. But the phenomenon has not only been noted by psychologists. Arthur Koestler, in his influential *The Act of Creation*, wrote that ‘the creative act always involves a regression to earlier, more primitive levels in the mental hierarchy, while other processes continue simultaneously on the rational surface’ (1971: 316-7). This certainly describes my own writing process, which is sustained by regular epiphanies (I hope to experience at least one a day), in which previously unconsidered ideas ‘spring’ from my subconscious. However, I suspect it also describes non-bipolar writers’ experience too. The difference lies in the potentially therapeutic aspects of creativity for manic-depressives. The reality for many is that ‘turmoil, suffering, and extremes in emotional experience are integral not only to the human condition but to their abilities as artists’ (Jamison 1993: 241). Following diagnosis, my psychiatrist and I found an optimal level of pharmaceutical therapy, enabling me both to function as a writer, with access to the more opaque aspects of my mind and personality, but also to feel the benefits of creation.

Inevitably we are sent back to the issue of the author. Barthes’ removal of the individual human creator from the text suggests that the writer has no identity.

Conversely, the publishing industry works to build authors as brands. This does not

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<sup>14</sup> My father Ronald Johnston was a successful thriller writer (eleven novels published between 1964 and 1983), but he had no history of mental illness. The question of whether there is a ‘writing gene’ is one that I cannot answer. Ongoing DNA research may provide information about that. My siblings, though creative in different ways, are not writers. I am more inclined to attribute my gradual development as an author to growing up in a writer’s house, in combination with some inherent ability. My mother was never diagnosed with a mental illness. My psychiatrist’s opinion is that the experience of three cancers, themselves facilitated by a malfunctioning gene, exacerbated a latent bipolar condition.



undermine Barthes' anti-authorial stance because the key to success for writers is building a readership by means of their texts, the 'real' author being only one of several means to achieve this. However, an authorial or writing identity is unavoidable, both in the practical sense of feeling responsible and, occasionally, proud of one's work, and in the theoretical sense of going beyond the ego. For Hélène Cixous, 'this state of without me, a depossession of the self ... will make possible the *possession* [original italics] of the author by the characters' (1989: 13). I would argue that authors on the margins, whether because of gender, race or sexuality, can possess their characters with greater originality than others, but the model can be applied across the board: first in terms of a 'felt, bodily self', and then as an entity that 'retracts and reforms itself into the space or scene where the voices of others will be heard' (Hunt and Sampson 2006: 47). This reinstalls the author as a human being rather than the subject constructed by many theorists, even if identity itself is intangible. Writing creatively may well be a method of drawing together both external and internal forces to enable both author and reader to formulate (perhaps only provisional) identities, largely by means of characters (see Chapter 4).

A final aspect of creative writing theory that I have found useful is transcultural research. This is a development of postcolonial theory, in which 'the dominance of western culture gave way to more porous and egalitarian notions of transcultural mobility and hybridity' (Mort 2013: 202). I examine these ideas more deeply in Chapter 7, but point out here that *Carnal Acts* was very much conceived in the light of ideas that challenge 'the immediate and wider restrictions of social class, religion, sexual orientation, political systems and colonising power' (Mort 2013: 211). In terms of creative writing practice, the cultural dynamism arising from transcultural research gives the author access to material that was beyond her/ his experience; thus,

it is to be hoped, expanding the reach and effects of the work.

To conclude, I am not in a position to judge whether literary criticism and theory is directly relevant to the process and practice of creative writing, because I was aware of the former before I started writing fiction. However, the overlap between the two fields is clear enough to suggest that some knowledge of the methods used to examine and conceptualise literature in the academy will benefit the creative writer. The author, pace Barthes, will find her/ his own theoretical basis (even if it is not openly expressed) and a pick-and-mix methodology has practical merit. It seems important that writers come to understandings of concepts such as the author, the text and the reader, either by reading theory and/or by giving them consideration during the writing process.

## 2. PSEUDONYM AND TITLE

I wrote *Carnal Acts* after deciding to use a pseudonym for the first time: that is the subject of this chapter's first part. I have never been able to start a novel without a clear idea of the title, though it may subsequently be changed. In the second part, I examine *Carnal Acts* as a title.

### 2.a Pseudonym

I prefer the term 'pseudonym' to its alternates 'nom de plume' and 'pen-name'. Its etymology suggests a name that is false ('ψευδής'), raising ethical questions. Are the writer and publisher deceiving the reader? If the writer's true identity is concealed - which it often is not, at least on authors' and publishers' web-sites if not on the book itself - then the answer must be 'yes'. Whether the deception harms the reader, whose primary interest is likely to be the text, is another issue. Is the writer constructing an identity or persona that enables him (I use the male pronoun when I am discussing *Carnal Acts*) to ignore or obscure aspects of his - or the implied author's - character and writing that were displayed in novels published under his own name? Again, I would answer 'yes'. It is arguable that such 'rebranding' at least disorients the reader.

Is the use of a quasi-fraudulent identity particularly significant in the crime genre? There is a long tradition of crime writers using pseudonyms. John Creasey's

‘industrial output required him to devise at least seventeen pen names’ (Reilly 1999d: 357). Other pseudonyms in the genre are Eric Ambler’s Eliot Reed, Edith Pargeter’s Ellis Peters, and Anthony Berkeley’s Frances Iles. Some authors use different names for different publishing companies. My father Ronald Johnston did this, writing a thriller that was not brought out by his main publisher Wm. Collins as Mark Nelson (Nelson 1976). Others use pseudonyms more specifically as ‘a means of disguise’ (Reilly 1999d: 357). Columbia University professor Carolyn Gold Heilbrun wrote mysteries under the name Amanda Cross ‘to protect herself from possible charges by other academics that she was not a serious writer’ (Reilly 1999d: 357).

However, disguise often extends to gender change, as in the case of Lucy Beatrice Malleson (1899-1973), who used the male pseudonym Anthony Gilbert. This is rather surprising, given the high number of female crime writers from the 19<sup>th</sup> century on, but is probably indicative of a historical masculine bias in the publishing industry. A parallel could be drawn with Mary Anne Evans’ use of the pseudonym George Eliot to publish her literary novels. The issue of snobbery is also relevant. Academics who wrote crime novels such as Heilbrun, J. I. M. Stewart (Michael Innes) and the poet C. Day Lewis (Nicholas Blake) had to ‘contend with the knowledge that their work maybe [sic] classed in the second tier of literature because it is believed to be less profound’ (Reilly 1999d: 358). We might like to imagine that critics are less biased now, although Booker Prize-winner John Banville writes crime fiction as Benjamin Black; the fact that his real identity is no secret does not detract from the notion that his own name is retained for more ‘serious’ work. In the past, literary critics either ignored crime fiction or classed it as middlebrow. The leading American critic Edmund Wilson saw the reading of it as ‘simply a kind of vice’ (1980: 39).

My own motives for using a pseudonym were primarily commercial. Although

my earlier novels were well received by critics and in some cases sold well, like all mid-list authors I was, and continue to be, cursed by Nielsen BookScan, which collates electronic point of sale (EPOS) figures.<sup>1</sup> Publishers refer to these numbers when considering authors' new books and previous low sales reduce the likelihood of acceptance. I sometimes wish I had used a pseudonym earlier in my career as, afflicted by the snobbery mentioned above, I would prefer to have kept my own name for poetry and the more literary fiction I aspire to write. On the other hand, it would be a brave author who refused the opportunity to see his own name on his debut novel. Also, publishers want to sell the novelist as a brand. A pseudonym does not prevent this, but makes life more complicated.

A recent successful change of authorial identity and gender is that of the acclaimed British noir novelist Martyn Waites, who now writes mainstream crime novels under the name Tania Carver. After the publication of the Carver debut, *The Surrogate*, in 2009, Waites kept quiet about his Tania Carver persona, even soliciting votes for 'his friend' on Facebook when the book was shortlisted for the Theakstons Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year Award. When Waites strode to the stage, the secret was out. He admits on the author's website that 'Tania Carver doesn't actually exist' and is 'the pseudonym of husband and wife writing team Martyn and Linda Waites' (Carver 2012). The idea of the author's non-existence is even more interesting when two individuals are concerned.

As my wife has shown no inclination to participate in the writing of my books, my approach to pseudonyms is necessarily different. However, it is also revealed on the Tania Carver web-site that the 'author' came about because Waites's editor wanted a 'real high concept female thriller writer. Like a British Karin Slaughter or

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<sup>1</sup> According to John B. Thompson, 'Authors carry their sales histories around with them like a noose around their neck' (2012: 199).

Tess Gerritsen [sic]' (Carver 2012). It is an odd coincidence, given the body count in her books, that the globally bestselling Slaughter's name is her own. Mimicking it with the semantically similar 'Carver' might be taken to be a cynical marketing ploy, though I doubt many fans see it that way. In any case, I felt uncomfortable about changing gender, even onomastically. However, a degree of ambiguity attracted me.

Sam Alexander, the pseudonym I chose, has several layers of significance. I had initially settled on S. M. Alexander: my wife's and daughter's initials and my son's first name. I was also drawn by the juxtaposition of 'S' and 'M', because it suited a novel called *Carnal Acts*. In addition, Alexander is the Latin form of the Greek Alexandros, deriving from 'the elements *alexein* to defend + *anēr* man, warrior' (Hanks, Hodges, Mills and Room 1998: 696), meaning 'he who defends against warriors' – there is no shortage of violence in the novel, and a general is one of the secondary characters. In Greek mythology, Alexandros was the alternative name of Paris, prince of Troy, famed for his affair with the beautiful Helen: more shades of carnal acts. A more important though less commendable consideration was that authors whose surnames begin with 'A' are located at the beginning of bookshop crime shelves and are likely to attract more attention from browsers, whose patience may run out before the end of the alphabet.

However, I soon realised that there are several other crime writers with the initial 'S'. such as S. J. Watson, S. J. Bolton and S. J. Parris. The forename name 'Sam' preserves gender ambiguity. Metrics also come into play. Sam Alexander runs much more smoothly (dactyl-trochee) than the spondee-anapaest-single unstressed syllable of S. M. Alexander. As a surname Alexander also has the considerable advantage that it is not the surname of any major fiction writer.

But there is more to the issue of names and pseudonyms. The Latin adage

‘Nomen est omen’ not only suggests that a form of truth is to be found in a name, but also that the name is related to a future event (which, in a crime novel, is likely to be ill-starred). Although the book’s jacket may give this impression more directly than the author name, Alexander has a sufficiently bloody history (Alexander the Great, the three Scottish King Alexanders) to suit the genre.

A pseudonym is likely to have been contrived with at least one eye on the market, book buyer and borrower, and the reader in general: ‘the name may have been chosen with an eye to the particular effect’ (Genette 1997: 49), something which does not apply to an author’s real name unless by chance (as with Karin Slaughter). The real author’s name, plus photograph, web-site, blog, social media accounts and other accoutrements of modern publishing, establish a living entity who can be seen at literary festivals and whose hand can be shaken. A pseudonym, particularly one what is non-gender specific, potentially undermines this. Given the gender ambiguity, I am tempted to keep Paul Johnston’s relationship to Sam secret: no photographs, no interviews except in writing, no disclosure of personal details. I find the idea of anonymity via pseudonymity interesting. A compromise would be to provide limited author information, such as ‘Sam Alexander is the pseudonym of an award-winning and critically acclaimed author’, without mentioning crime fiction. Considering the prominence of Joni Pax in *Carnal Acts*, the reader might assume that Sam is a mixed race, female writer from another genre, or even a literary novelist with those characteristics. This issue has to be revolved with the publisher, but compounding the potential deception of the pseudonym (if my true identity remains a secret) by adding spurious biographical information, or even declining to deny readers’ assumptions, would create ethical problems for me.

It is possible to avoid ambiguity from the outset, as Ruth Rendell did when she

openly started using the name Barbara Vine. A pseudonym automatically creates an alter ego, enabling the writer to explore previously untouched subjects and styles, but also sets up an opposition between the ‘real’ writer and the doppelgänger. R. L. Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1979; first published in 1886) can be read as a warning of the dangers inherent in freeing the darker side of creativity, the doctor’s scientific methodology being applicable to writing and other pursuits that plumb the subconscious.<sup>2</sup> Mr Hyde is unquestionably evil by the standards of his or any time but, as Jenni Calder asks, ‘could it happen that the breaking of the bonds might set free the best in human nature?’ (1979: 14). That ‘best’ might include artistic creativity.

Does the ‘creation’ of Sam Alexander put Paul Johnston’s authorial identity at risk? If my use of the pseudonym is revealed, for readers of any of my previous three series, the answer must be ‘yes’. *Carnal Acts* is different from any novel I have written, both (sub)generically and stylistically. But Paul Johnston, whether real or textual, already comprises three different authorial constructs, one who wrote the Quint novels, another the Mavros novels, and yet another the Wells novels. On the other hand, a formalised alter ego can unlock a beneficial creative drive, as I experienced when writing *Carnal Acts*. I gradually became aware of the complexity of what I was doing: how much of the Quint author was present, how much of the Mavros author? The pseudonym can unite ‘a taste for masks and mirrors’ (Genette 1997: 53-4), which suggests that, by donning one of the former, the writer obtains a different reflection of her/ himself. This links with critics’ view of the writer as a construct. As we saw in Chapter 1, the implied author posits ‘the authorial figure as distinct from the historical author’ (Bennett 2005: 128). Using a pseudonym means

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen King’s *The Dark Side* (1999) features George Stark, pseudonymous author of hyper-violent pulp novels, as novelist Thad Beaumont’s violent alter ego; George Stark refuses to be ‘retired’.



that the author invents ‘a construct of a construct’ (Ciuraru 2011: xiv), and this can ‘easily provide a license to lie’ (xv). While appreciating the theoretical difficulties these characterisations imply, I find myself unmoved in terms of authorial practice. What is fiction if it does not tell lies at length? And while I wrote *Carnal Acts* with a different perspective from my previous books (because the text itself was different, in conception and during the writing process), I actually wrote all of them with narrators that had taken on my own increased experience, both of writing and of life. Even novels in the same series display an ‘amended’ implied author. My experience of writing as Sam Alexander suggests that the maxim, ‘If you can change your name, you can write’ (Genette 1997: 54) is broadly correct, at least as regards writers who are already established professionals.

On the other hand, there is perceived to be a line that cannot be crossed regarding the extent to which the pseudonym/ mask/ alter ego is allowed to function. The writer Margaret B. Jones not only used a pseudonym but constructed a fallacious life story, leading to public opprobrium and fraud charges (Ciuraru 2011: xix-xxi). Jones’s book purported to be a memoir of a black female gang member, while the author was actually middle-class and white. Many novelists maintain carefully constructed personae both in person (during bookshop events, for example) and on social media. The line between imagination/ fiction and reality has become a significant factor in daily life for billions of people on Facebook and Twitter.

To conclude, I cite the example of the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa, who worked with heteronyms - ‘Not pseudonyms: they are imaginary poets with real poems in them’ (Griffin 2000: 9). Although there were four main heteronyms, each with their own biography and technique, as many as seventy others existed; ‘not so much disguises as extensions and iterations of himself’ (Ciuraru 2011: 121). This

suggests the need to build a range of selves that resemble the characters in a novel, some more developed than others. In the final analysis, there may be little difference in terms of ontology between Paul Johnston (after he ceases to exist, even temporarily, as an author construct and, in the fullness of time, as a human being), Sam Alexander, and the numerous characters in the novels. All contain part of me, but none contain all of me. This pseudonym and any others in the future are potentially members of a large cast, manipulated (at least in part) by the creator with the most power: the living, breathing author. Readers and critics create their own meanings via the text, meanings which often will bear only passing resemblance to the author's (which itself may change as the years pass). The author with a number of pseudonyms may not be subject to the death proposed by Barthes and Foucault in the same way as single-name authors.

## 2.b Title

According to David Lodge, '[f]or a novelist, choosing a title may be an important part of the creative process, bringing into sharper focus what the novel is supposed to be about' (1992: 194). I usually fix on a title without much difficulty, even if it ends up being changed. *The Blood Tree* (Johnston 2000) was originally called *The Blood Line*, rightfully rejected as being too commonplace. I wrote and submitted *The Last Red Death* (Johnston 2003) as *The Fire Shirt*, a title deemed too obscure by Hodder and Stoughton, although I still like it.

I was surprised to find that *Carnal Acts* had not been used by other novelists. In metrical terms, the long-short-long foot of the word pair is a Cretic or amphimacer

(Greek, ‘long at both ends’ – Cuddon 1999: 32). While ‘Rare in English verse’ (32), it is reassuringly common in novel titles, e.g. *War and Peace*, *Brave New World*, *Black and Blue*. The same metrical form appears in *Maps of Hell* (Johnston 2010).

Arguably the best titles have a mnemonic element that is important in trade publishing. This may work alliteratively, as with Ian Rankin’s *Black and Blue* ; ironically, as in Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*, in which ‘the ignoble truth about ordinary, compromised human beings will not match the conventional swell of religious aspiration’ (Mullan 2006: 21); abstractly, as with Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, though note the alliteration and repetition; or thematically, for example J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. Along with phonetic effects, these elements show that ‘novelists and their publishers care very much about titles, knowing that they are the means by which a book first reaches out to its potential readers’ (Mullan 2006: 16). This may be achieved by using words taken from poems – there is no copyright in titles – such as *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Alternatively, the writer can produce her/ his own pattern for euphony: John Connolly’s *The Killing Kind* features both alliteration of ‘k’ and assonance of ‘i’; while Barbara Vine’s *Gallowglass* alliterates ‘g’ and ‘l’, alongside the assonance of ‘a’. *Carnal Acts* has assonance of ‘a’ and alliteration, both initial and internal, of ‘c’. More sinisterly, it only occurred to me after months of use that the title’s initials are the standard medical abbreviation for cancer (CA). Not only have I experienced the disease three times but, in the first draft, one of the protagonists was a recovering cancer patient. Perhaps my subconscious protected me from that realisation for as long as possible.

The fact that there are only two words in *Carnal Acts* also suits contemporary crime fiction, where short titles are common and single-word ones to the fore (for

example, Simon Kernick's *Deadline, Target and Siege*; Karin Slaughter's *Indelible* and *Faithless*). A title such as Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* would appear to be *démodé*, although Ian Rankin's 2012 novel is called *Standing in Another Man's Grave*. Bestselling authors make their own fashions.

I discuss the thematic issues raised by the title *Carnal Acts* in detail in Chapter 6 and 7. Here I note only that carnality points to the body, the central object in crime writing. 'Carnal', derived from the Latin 'caro', 'flesh', is defined as 'fleshly; sensual; unspiritual; bodily; sexual; murderous, flesh-eating (*Shakesp.*)' (Chambers 1998: 247). It suggests both sex, in the sense of carnal knowledge, and death (all flesh dies). 'Acts' points both to actions (suggesting the excitement and pace required by publishers of mass market crime fiction) and to theatricality; masks, concealment, drama and the inherent duplicity of actors speaking the words of another person are all part of the novel. Indeed, as discussed above, masks and inherent duplicity are part of using a pseudonym and creating an authorial persona. The title *Carnal Acts* was accepted without objection by my supervisor and agent, while the publishers to which it was sent made no negative comments about it.

A distinction can be drawn between the titles of non-fictional and fictional books, in that the former are 'self-referencing' - 'you usually know, ahead of time, the content' (Sutherland 2007: 90) - while many novel titles 'lead the prospective purchaser to trip over their feet' (91). I hope that, as well as the come-hither, 'here be sex and death' aspect, there is an enigmatic side to the title *Carnal Acts*. A curious reader might ask 'what exactly are these acts?', 'who performs (which of) them and why?' or even 'why am I buying a book about carnality?'

The title can be seen to be part of the text, its first words. Alternatively, it is a paratextual element that has inspired its own field of criticism, titology (see Genette

1997: 55ff). While the book remains a single item, the title is immediately available for the publisher to put in catalogues and on web-sites; the publicity department to headline in press releases; critics to use in reviews; broadcast media to announce; award judges to list and so on. In that sense, it is undoubtedly part of the paratext, the material surrounding and extending the text ‘precisely in order to *present* it...to ensure the text’s presence in the world, its “reception” and consumption (nowadays, at least) in the form of a book’ (Genette 1997:1) The jacket image, blurb and author biography are also paratextual, as, of course, is the author’s name. I will discuss ‘reception’ (it is not clear why Genette uses quotation marks) and consumption below, concentrating here on the physical manifestations of the title.

One of those is the title’s place, or rather places, although e-book editions obviously do away with the tangible side. The title ‘has four almost obligatory and fairly redundant locations’ (Genette 1997: 65). The front cover or jacket is the main and largest of these. With the author-as-brand policy of modern publishers, the book title is often printed in smaller print than the novelist’s name, for example on the omnibus edition of three of P. D. James’s novels (2008). A similar rationale is followed on the spine, while the book title features alone on the half-title page and is given greater prominence than the author name on the title page. The final location is in running heads. Many books, even mass-market American editions, have the author’s name at the top of the left and the novel title at the top of the right pages.

The effects of these repetitions of author name and book title are difficult to calculate, given the individual psychologies of readers. Jackets draw attention, as do spines when the books are shelved. The half-title and title pages are surely of minor significance. But the constant appearance of the author and title every time the reader turns a page must be deemed by publishers to have at least a subliminal effect;

otherwise they would not bother with the additional labour and expense, however minor, of typesetting and printing running heads. So, too, jackets are often adorned with admiring quotations which state the author's name and book title again.

These repetitions of author name and book title raise the questions, who is sending the message/s encoded in them and to whom. Here we come to reception and consumption. The former question is easier to answer – 'responsibility for the title is always shared by the author and the publisher' (Genette 1997: 74). That is primarily a contractual issue relating to copyright and the parties' legal obligations. If a publisher declines to use the author's title, or even imposes its own title on the book, the author's share of responsibility, at least as regards the overall effect of the work, may be diminished.

More important is the question of who receives the message sent by the title, both before and during the reading of the book. The book, foregrounded by its title, addresses itself to the potential reader, disseminator (sales person, bookshop staff, digital market operator, librarian), critics and so on. Several functions of the title have been identified: 'to identify the work'; 'to designate its subject matter'; 'to play up the work' (Genette, 1997: 76). The author name and jacket design also play parts in these functions. Additionally, they make use of genre conventions and contemporary literary fashion, and suggest the work's form as well (77). But in the context of a bookshop or library, these various effects of the title will often occur in a very short period of time: as long as it takes the potential reader/ borrower/ purchaser to reach for the book. After that, anecdotal evidence suggests that a glance at the blurb and other material on the jacket and on the header pages, and at the text (usually the first page), are what actually convinces the addressee to head for the till or electronic check-out.

The title, then, is primarily an attention-grabbing and sales device instigated by the author and publisher. On the other hand, ‘Titles always mean more to authors than to readers’ (Lodge 1992: 195-6). It is hard to disagree, considering the hours of work that sometimes have to be put in to find a title that performs all the necessary functions: sounds good, suggests the content, fits (even at the boundaries of) the genre, and has not been used by anyone else, at least recently.

However, after publication everything rests with the reader. No matter how much s/he is struck by a novel’s particular characters, style, episodes, plot twists, descriptions of landscape and so on, the title is what the reader often remembers – perhaps influenced subconsciously, after all, by those running heads.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, most readers are familiar with the difficulty of remembering individual novel titles, especially in lengthy series. The trick for the author, preferably unhindered by the publisher, is to find a title that is memorable because it sums the book up in a few words. I hope *Carnal Acts* does so, but I cannot be sure. Each reader will respond individually.

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<sup>3</sup> Many of these features – running heads, back covers, quotations supporting the book/ author, author biography – are not found in e-books, implying that the reception/s of those texts will differ from those of tangible ones.

### 3. GENRE/S

Genre as a theoretical construct has become the subject of serious inquiry in recent years and I examine this in the first part of this chapter. In the second, I discuss the crime genre and its subgenres, including the police novel, in which *Carnal Acts* is located. Finally, I look at the interface between the crime novel and the Gothic, again with reference to *Carnal Acts*.

#### 3.a Genre Theory

Like many literary terms, genre has several meanings.<sup>1</sup> Defined simply as ‘*n.* kind; a literary or artistic type or style’ (Chambers 1998: 669), genre is used in common parlance to describe types of films, for example Westerns or heist movies, and books, such as crime or mystery fiction. In this respect, it has been said that genre ‘indicates the formulaic and the conventional’ (Frow 2006: 1), and the ongoing debate between the respective values of literary and genre fiction frequently stresses the latter’s limited range.<sup>2</sup> Such quality judgements are lacking in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where the ‘genus’ (plural) of poetry - epic, tragic, comic and lyric - are defined according to

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<sup>1</sup> Genre also applies to many other media – art, music, film etc – but I confine myself to its literary usages.

<sup>2</sup> A way of defining literary fiction would be ‘novels and short stories that do not belong to other genres’, although there are many literary novels that contain genre elements: for example, speculative fiction in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985); and crime fiction in Martin Amis’s *Night Train* (1997). Conversely, there are crime novels and thrillers with literary leanings, such as works by John le Carré; and A. D. Miller’s *Snowdrops*, controversially shortlisted for the 2011 Booker Prize. Another characteristic of literary fiction might be transgression of linguistic and formal conventions, although what those conventions are and who defines them are complex issues.



‘technical rules or practised facility’ (Aristotle 2008: 50). This is an early step in the Western tradition towards classifying literary works by their formal features, which Aristotle goes on to distinguish in terms of media, categorised as objects - ‘people doing things’ (51); and modes - basically first person, third person single narrator and third person multiple narrators. Subsequently this was seen in scientific terms, with the taxonomic aspect of genre adopted from biology, which stipulates ‘that genres actually exist, that they have distinct borders, that they can be firmly identified, that they operate systematically’ (Altman 1999: 6). This seems unworkable when applied to such inchoate structures as the multivalent fictional texts that comprise genres, whose boundaries are often elastic. For example, Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1939) is seen as a classic hardboiled private eye novel, making use of that subgenre’s tropes: the compromised employer, the missing person, several femmes fatales, the criminal underworld and so on. By comparison, William Hjortsberg’s *Falling Angel* (1996) uses similar tropes but subverts them by bringing in elements of the Gothic, including voodoo, black magic and Lucifer himself.<sup>3</sup> The private eye unknowingly possesses the soul of the man he is seeking.

Genre clearly overlaps with the question of the author. Does s/he consciously choose genre and its conventions or do the conventions guide the author’s choices? In my case, both apply. I avoided genre and wrote three unpublished and, judging by the numerous rejection letters, unpublishable literary novels, before following the advice of my then agent and writing the fiction that I most enjoyed reading.<sup>4</sup> Having discovered Sherlock Holmes at primary school and Raymond Chandler in my mid-teens, I chose crime with alacrity, writing the first draft of *Body Politic* (Johnston 1997) in 1993. Even with little knowledge of the genre, I had no difficulty in

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<sup>3</sup> *Falling Angel* was adapted and filmed by Alan Parker as *Angel Heart* (1987).

<sup>4</sup> By that she meant non-literary texts. Although I enjoyed, and still enjoy, literary fiction, that enjoyment is tempered by the knowledge that I have not (yet) written it successfully.

identifying crime fiction's key works, not least because they had their own section in bookshops and because there were critical works about the genre, such as Julian Symons' *Bloody Murder* (1992). The former is 'classification...as an industrial matter' (Frow 2006: 12), enacted in the methods used by publishers, arts organisations, TV channels and radio stations, and reviewers across the media to publicise, sell and criticise books.

Genres have been seen as historically and socially defined entities: 'In a given society the recurrence of certain discursive properties is institutionalised, and individual texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norm constituted by that codification' (Todorov 1990: 18-19). This enables readers to place the book – by judging its title, jacket, blurb, first pages and so on – within a genre, assuming that the author has duly observed (or subverted) the relevant properties. The danger here is that genre theory is reduced to lists of identifiable traits. An opposing model sees texts manipulating genres to their own ends and existing beyond genre: 'Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging' (Derrida 1980: 230). The individual text, then, may be of greater significance than the genre/s. Authors would be gratified by that, as perhaps would readers.

We return to Aristotle's media, objects and modes. A genre is defined by the artistic methods used to present it (writing, painting, singing); its thematic content as expressed by mimesis; and the rhetorical methods used to achieve that. For the novelist, the ways of telling a story are numerous, as are the voices it can be told by. It is here that major features of genre seem to me, as a novelist, to lie. Who is speaking? What is s/he speaking about and with what effect on the characters and reader? What is the most dramatic way to present the action? Although different genres may use

different methods, each can be defined by the common features that can be identified in texts as responses to those questions. The nature of each text is important: for example, novelisations of the Trojan War differ considerably, regarding both form and content, from epic poetry. Part of that difference can be explained by historical/social conditions and by ideology. What are the philosophical bases of the writer's choice of genre (in as much as s/he has a choice, given the conventions, personal talent and the demands of the market)? What does her/ his handling of theme and voice disclose about the hidden forces that influence the creative process? In this respect, genre becomes a major theoretical concept, one 'which is the precondition for the creation and the reading of texts' (Beebee 1994: 250).

Northrop Frye constructed a system defined by archetypes, each exemplified by a literary 'myth': spring by comedy, summer by romance, autumn by tragedy, and winter by irony and satire. For him, 'genre is determined by the conditions established between the poet and his public' (Frye 1971: 247). Although the passive form 'established' does not attribute agency to the creative artist, it can be read in a way that foregrounds the writer. The important point of Frye's view of fiction is that the author and audience are separated, the latter being 'unseen' (249). Thus, the nature of genre is itself changed: 'genre is both a concept and its material articulation and exchange' (Bawarshi 2003: 22). The latter part of this definition offers more of a role to author and reader than do taxonomic and universalist ones. Indeed, Bawarshi goes as far as to suggest 'that the author-function is itself a function of literary genres, which create the ideological conditions that produce this subject we call an "author"' (22).<sup>5</sup> It does not seem likely that intangible genres, themselves the subject of intense debate, wield such power. As I discuss in section 3.b, authors create within genres,

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<sup>5</sup> The 'author-function' is Foucault's term, classing the author as textual agent rather than human subject (1995: 235).

rather than being created by them. Authors may well be conditioned, to varying extent, by genre conventions, but often revolt against the same conventions in individual ways.

For the practicing writer as well as the reader, a useful view of genres is as ‘sites of contention between stability and change. They are inherently dynamic, constantly (if gradually) changing over time in response to the sociocognitive needs of individual users’ (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1993: 481). This takes account of the social and historical dimensions of genre, at the same time as positing it as a source of power for change that can be used by authors and taken up by readers. Derrida’s empowerment of the individual text, which both participates in several genres and stands outside them, offers a useful corrective to a universalist approach to genre such as Frye’s. My own interactions with the crime fiction genre as writer and reader have benefitted from its inherent dynamics, in terms both of series and of individual novels.

I now focus on the genre of the novel. Not only does it contain a multiplicity of forms and styles, but it has many definitions. Originally ‘it was used in contradistinction to “romance”’ (Cuddon 1999: 561), which was characterised by ‘elements of fantasy, improbability, extravagance and naivety’ (758). It now appears that the difference between novel and romance is no longer firm, since many of the former can be characterised by the latter’s attributes (for example, *The Life of Pi*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the works of Michael Chabon). Indeed, Cuddon’s attempt to locate ‘the quiddity of the novel’ results in a very broad definition: ‘a form of story or prose narrative containing characters, action and incident, and perhaps, plot’ (1999: 561). Most would agree that a novel should be in prose.<sup>6</sup> So, too, most would expect

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<sup>6</sup> Though verse novels still appear, for example the Australian poet Les Murray’s *Fredy Neptune* (1998), a 252-page text that takes the protagonist through the horrors of the twentieth century. There have been crime novels in verse too, such as those by Dorothy Porter and H. R. F. Keating.

it to have a plot, but presumably Cuddon is creating space for the modernist novel, the Nouveau Roman, and postmodern adaptations of the form.

As the name suggests, the novel had its roots in novelty, primarily in events which take place in the present day. Such realism often – until the heyday of Magic Realism – distanced it further from the romance. But the inclusivity of the form was challenged even as regards its early exemplars. Northrop Frye asked, ‘Is Tristram Shandy a novel?’, answering positively despite ‘its easygoing disregard of “story values”’ (Frye 1971: 303). He went on to deny that *Gulliver’s Travels* was a novel, seeing it as satire. It is, however, clearly fiction, and this raises another generic question. Cuddon gives a brief definition of fiction, seeing it as generally applying to the novel, short story and novella, but conceding that poetry and drama ‘both are a form of fiction in that they are moulded and contrived – or feigned’ (1999: 320). Here we come to the crux of the matter: fiction, and therefore the novel too, no matter how realistic and well formed, is the telling of stories that are not necessarily intimately related to the external world. As genres are historically and socially defined, it might be the case that artistic endeavour has been undermined since writers first put reed to clay tablet: beware, warn the arbiters of society: tellers of tales have a questionable relationship with fact and truth. Then again, many modern critics have pointed out that fact and truth are creations of discourse, rather than being permanent or absolute.

M. M. Bakhtin is more constructive. Although fully aware of the ever-present nature of ideology, he stresses not only the potential richness of language in the novel, but also its power for change. Although characters in the novel may have less personal integrity than the heroes of epic, the form provides them ‘with the necessary steps to a new, complex wholeness on a higher level of human development’

(Bakhtin 1981: 38).<sup>7</sup> Thus, the novel is not just a simple story or a complex plot (though many are one or other); or a blend of E. M. Forster's flat and round characters (2005); or even 'under the right persuasion, the most independent, most elastic, most prodigious of literary forms' (James 2006: 85). The novel is often a means for writers and readers to better understand themselves and their societal environment, no matter how opaque or unfathomable those entities may seem to be.

An interesting transition from genre theory to crime fiction is provided by Tzvetan Todorov, who suggests that literary novels create their own genres. If so, this would render the term 'genre' meaningless in the collective sense, as Derrida argued above. While 'detective fiction has its norms; to "develop" them is also to disappoint them: to "improve upon" detective fiction is to write "literature", not detective fiction. The whodunit par excellence is not the one which transgresses the rules of the genre, but the one which conforms to them' (Todorov 2000: 138). This raises several issues. Why should the development of norms (that is, conventions) result in disappointment? There is no intrinsic reason for genres not to change, and many readers of crime fiction are stimulated by novels that push the boundaries. Indeed, it seems an essential part of genres that their boundaries are elastic and even porous – open to influence by other genres (as I elaborate below). It is interesting that Todorov puts 'develop' and 'improve upon' in quotation marks, as if to suggest such aspirations are out of place in genre fiction. Even more strikingly, 'literature' is also marked in that way. The argument about whether crime fiction can be literature is still tediously active, and Todorov seems to be classifying literature in a way that is hardly positive; this makes

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<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin refers to 'an individual'. I take this to refer to the fictional character, but would argue that the same potential benefits apply to author and reader.

sense in the light of his view that individual literary works create their own genre.<sup>8</sup> Although he uses the word ‘whodunit’ (the crime fiction best exemplified by Agatha Christie’s works), his point about the classic detective novel being an act of conformity rather than transgression is well made, particularly as regards the market; even now, it is very rare for a crime novel at the edges of the genre to feature in the bestseller lists. Those that do, such as the novels of Christopher Brookmyre, do not sell as well as more conventional works. Todorov is aware of this, in aesthetic rather than commercial terms, suggesting that marginal works would form a new genre, ‘not necessarily constituted by the negation of the main feature of the old, but from a complex of properties, not by necessity logically harmonious with the first form’ (Todorov 2000: 144). This is pleasingly non-prescriptive, leaving room for the expansion of crime fiction’s range, although I see its liminal manifestations as subgenres rather than completely separate ones.

### 3.b The Genre of Crime Fiction

If the terms ‘genre’ and ‘novel’ support many definitions, so does the genre of crime fiction. Some grandiose claims have been made for it. For Cuddon, ‘The commission and detection of crime, with the motives, actions, arraignment, judgement, and punishment of the criminal, is one [sic] of the great paradigms of narrative’ (1999: 192). He sees the stuff of crime fiction in early epics and Classical tragedy, as well as in *Hamlet* and Jacobean tragedy, while Dorothy L. Sayers collected examples ‘from the Jewish Apocrypha, Herodotus and the *Aeneid*’ (1946: 72). Within the blanket term

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<sup>8</sup> Comparing literary and crime fiction is frequently like looking for similarities between apples and zebras. Still, many critics and readers would agree that at least some crime novels have literary qualities, even if they are not literature in the canonical sense.

‘crime fiction’ are to be found such disparate writers as Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Dashiell Hammett, Georges Simenon, Patricia Highsmith, P. D. James, James Ellroy, Mary Wings, Walter Mosley, Barbara Wilson and Christopher Brookmyre. Could any single definition meaningfully cover all their writings?

There is an immediate lexical problem, as Americans use the term ‘mystery’ rather than ‘crime’ fiction. Mystery is a term loaded with extra-generic significance, primarily religious: ‘It would seem, then, that ‘mystery’ once meant the subject and source of humanity’s most meaningful stories of destiny’ (Reilly 1999c: 303).

Although few contemporary crime novels put religion at centre stage, it is possible that the readerly desire to uncover the mystery is similar to the desire for theological revelation, even if ‘earthly crimes were solved while divine mysteries were acknowledged as beyond human understanding’ (Merivale and Sweeney 1999: 4, on G. K. Chesterton’s stories). *Carnal Acts* contains metaphysical elements, with Joni Pax’s mother practising Wicca and Evie Favon’s discovery of the West African vodoun religion that was brought by slaves to the Caribbean, but the central mysteries relate to the human rather than the celestial realm.

Critics tend to focus on the individual qualities of crime fiction rather than offer overarching definitions. Indeed, it has been said that the term ‘crime fiction’ is employed to classify ‘an otherwise unclassifiable genre’ (Scaggs 2005: 1). More to the point, according to John G. Cawelti (an American, using ‘mystery’ rather than ‘crime’), ‘The fundamental principle of the mystery story is the investigation and discovery of hidden secrets, the discovery usually leading to some benefit for the character(s) with whom the reader identifies’ (1976: 42). This is unexceptionable as regards its acknowledgement of the reader’s role, but it could apply to drama as much as prose, as well as to many literary novels. It also fails to identify the protagonist/s,



surely the most important character/s for authors as well as readers. Finally, the issue of benefit is problematic. While some readers might identify with Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot, who usually receive at least the psychological gain of solving the crime, it is debatable whether many identify with the protagonists of James Ellroy or Derek Raymond, at least in terms of advantage – unless that is taken as increased knowledge of how low human beings can sink or of the absence of the closure usually found in the crime genre.

My own definition of the crime novel would be: ‘a long prose story featuring a determined protagonist or protagonists interesting to readers, who overcome/s obstacles to identify the wrongdoer (usually a murderer), in which the characters’ psychologies are examined and aspects of the social, economic and topographical environment illuminated in terms of ideology, either with or without the author’s knowledge’. I formulated that definition for this thesis, never having seen the fifteen novels I have published in such formal terms before.

It may be that taking the genre’s various subgenres into account is unavoidable. Most histories start with the ‘classical’ detective story, move to the hardboiled/ noir tradition (in which crime rather than detection is the focus, despite the presence of a usually professional private investigator), take account of the police procedural or police novel, and end with modern and postmodern regenerations.<sup>9</sup>

The detective novel ‘presents a focal crime as seemingly insoluble by ordinary means and, therefore requiring the techniques of inquiry honed by specialists in criminal matters’ (Reilly 1999a: 116). The most famous sleuths have no official standing – Holmes, Poirot – while the police are happy to provide the ‘Great Detectives’ with ample room to manoeuvre. The detective story was, and often still is,

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<sup>9</sup> Some of these regenerations involve literary writers such as Borges, Robbe-Grillet, Nabokov and Dürrenmatt (Rzepka 2005: 234-5).

structured as a puzzle, complete with maps, extracts from documents and codes, which presupposes the reader's input for the solution to be attained. It was set in a reasonably remote country house or equivalent; and populated by upper bourgeois and even aristocratic characters, with servants present but beyond the pale as potential suspects. Stephen Knight observes that 'detection is rational rather than active or intuitional' (2004: 78), noting a peculiarly British preference for thought, as opposed to the action of the American noir tradition.<sup>10</sup> 'The classic detectives are clever, insightful and persevering rather than flamboyantly active or coincidentally fortunate' (2004: 88); though I would argue that Sherlock Holmes, a skilled boxer and man of action when necessary, hardly conforms to this characterisation. Classic detective fiction has been examined from feminist, postmodern and postcolonial standpoints, and has been seen to be much less theoretically limited than was earlier thought. I will discuss this further in Chapters 6 and 7, pointing out here only that *Carnal Acts* contains several locked rooms (a standard of classic detective fiction, though I deliberately avoid the puzzle element); a country house and upper class residents, and, inevitably, multiple enigmas.

Hardboiled crime fiction, initially to the fore in the United States, has a curious pedigree. 'The American detective novel, paradoxically, combines its romance themes and structures with a tough, realistic surface and a highly sensational content' (Grella 1980: 104). The romance elements derive from folk tales, Gothic novels, and adventure stories, as well as more ancient forms such as pastoral and myth. It is hard to distinguish too many romance themes in Dashiell Hammett's *Red*

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<sup>10</sup> There were, of course, American writers of classic or Golden Age detective fiction, not least S. S. van Dine (1887-1939), who produced *Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories*. This was followed by the British Ronald A. Knox's ten rules in *A Detective Story Decalogue*. These are unduly restrictive and often ridiculous: for example, Van Dine's 'There must be but one detective' (1946: 190) and Knox's 'No Chinaman must figure in the story' (1946: 195). There are several detectives in *Carnal Acts*, while the 'Others' so looked down upon by Knox (even if humorously rather than racially) are Albanians.

*Harvest* (1929), in which the unnamed Continental Op uses the methods of the mob to wipe them out, showing little emotion when he finds himself next to the corpse of a woman friend. On the other hand, Raymond Chandler's private eye protagonist has the surname of an Elizabethan poet.<sup>11</sup> Philip Marlowe was famously imbued with a quasi-chivalric code: 'But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid' (Chandler 1946: 237). This mission statement is frequently undermined by the behaviour of Marlowe, who never openly admits to acting for such reasons and who is frequently afraid and dispirited, much to his benefit as a character. The troubled but basically decent investigator casts a long shadow over subsequent crime fiction. Protagonists, whether police officers or private eyes, men or women, straight or gay, Caucasian or other race, almost always have a core of goodness, or at least some redeeming quality, no doubt because authors and readers expect and desire this.<sup>12</sup>

The noir tradition, with its murky settings and its melancholic tone, concentrates on criminal/s and crime/s. Lee Horsley identifies four main elements: 'the subjective point of view'; the shifting roles of the protagonist'; 'the ill-fated relationship between the protagonist and society'; and 'the ways in which noir functions as a socio-political critique' (2009: 8). In principle, all these can and do apply to other crime fiction subgenres. The subjective point of view is common in

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<sup>11</sup> Though a complex one – spy, homosexual and murder victim Christopher Marlowe was the author of formally and thematically challenging plays such as *Doctor Faustus* (circa 1592), rather than a poet of romance like Edmund Spenser, whose surname was taken by Chandler-follower Robert B. Parker for his private eye.

<sup>12</sup> Examples of exceptions are James Ellroy's *LA Quartet* (1987-92), where what goodness the characters possess is crushed by the corrupt and coercive social environment; and Derek Raymond's Factory novels. Although the latter are unrelentingly horrific, they achieve a 'genuine purging of evil through confronting its furthest reaches' (Forshaw 2007: 164, on *I Was Dora Suarez*, 1990). Ellroy's books have sold well (in part because of film versions), but Raymond's have not. It seems there are limits to how far many crime readers will allow themselves to be dragged. Both authors use the conventions of the police novel, but manipulate them. Raymond's unnamed detective sergeant emulates Hammett's similarly nameless Continental Op by working mainly on his own, unlike standard policemen, real and fictional, who operate as part of a team.

psychological crime novels such as those by Georges Simenon (in particular, the non-Maigret *romans durs*) and Patricia Highsmith (the Ripley novels, but also standalone books such as *Those Who Walk Away*, 1967), neither of whom are usually labelled noir.<sup>13</sup> Moving the point of view from character to character is now a feature of much crime fiction (including *Carnal Acts*). Certainly the issue of ill fate is largely unique to noir (but a standard element of the Gothic genre), in particular in its links to the uncaring social environment. Social and political commentary can be found in novels by Minette Walters and Ian Rankin, neither of whom are specifically noir writers. The best fiction of this kind (for example, Rankin's 'state of Scotland' novel, *Black and Blue*), as well as presenting characters in a hostile, not to say lethal, urban setting, leads the reader to question her/ his own identity, both psychological and societal.

The dedicated police novel appeared in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>14</sup> Working policemen had featured in 19<sup>th</sup> century crime fiction, as well as during the so-called Golden Age (roughly Holmes to Poirot up until 1939), though the detectives were the focal point rather than the procedures they used. While American police fiction was dominated by Ed McBain's 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct novels (1956-2005), the British variety was humdrum until the 60s, when Ruth Rendell's Chief Inspector Wexford and P. D. James's Commander Adam Dalgliesh started their careers.<sup>15</sup> Elements of the classical detective, hardboiled (particularly the psychological depths such novels plumbed) and

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<sup>13</sup> Horsley labels Highsmith a noir crime novelist (2009: 96), but notes that the novelist herself 'tried to avoid generic categorisations' (118). She also suggests that Simenon was a noir writer, but in a note rather in the main body of her text (282), as she confines herself to British and American authors. Julian Symons classes Highsmith as a 'serious crime novelist' (1992: 205) and states that Simenon's 'hard novels', though 'often concerned with crime', 'do not seem quite to come within the canon of the crime story' (166).

<sup>14</sup> Critical opinion varies. Some see Lawrence Treat's *Vas in Victim* (1945) as the first police procedural (for example, Dove 1982: 9). Panek agrees, but gives greater weight to Hillary Waugh who 'set out to make himself a police writer' (2003: 157), and whose *Last Seen Wearing* (1952) broke the taboo about describing sex crimes.

<sup>15</sup> John Creasey wrote numerous police novels and under his own and various pseudonyms from the 50s, but they are little read now. The Commander Gideon series, written as J. J. Marric, was influential and the early books have been described as 'the best things in Creasey's large output' (Symons 1992: 243)

the police procedural subgenres were brought together to form a distinct hybrid: the police novel. I agree with Messent that the latter classification is ‘a more flexible and inclusive term to use’ (2013: 42) than the procedural. Inclusivity is important as many of the best police novels were written by authors outside the Anglo-American tradition: Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö’s ten Martin Beck books (1965-75); and Georges Simenon’s lengthy Maigret series (1931-72), which started running well before his Anglo-Saxon counterparts. Several were written by British authors but set abroad, such as Nicholas Freeling’s Amsterdam-based Commissaris van der Valk series (1962-72); and H. R. F. Keating’s Indian Inspector Ghote series (1964-2009).<sup>16</sup>

The problem with the procedural side of police novels is its tendency to repetition and tedium. Every crime (usually murder) must be investigated according to the protocols in place in the fictional police department or constabulary: ‘interviewing possible suspects; establishing alibis; examination of the crime scenes; checking police files...; interviewing the victims’ families...; working with police informants; using forensic science’ (Worthington 2011: 148). All of these except informants feature in *Carnal Acts*, along with action sequences such as chases, shootings, bludgeoning and kidnapping. Although much real life police work may now take place in front of computer screens, the police novel is compelled to include drama to maintain reader (and author) interest. The interface with another genre, that of the thriller, is relevant here. A classic example of the hybrid novel is Frederick Forsyth’s *The Day of the Jackal* (1971). It involves police work, both in the UK and France; the depiction of a professional killer (shades of the noir tradition’s criminal-as-protagonist); and the thriller.

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<sup>16</sup> Television played a major part in bringing police-based narratives into the mainstream, starting with *Dragnet* (1951-70) in the US. In the UK, *Z Cars* (1962-78) and its several spin-offs attracted millions of viewers. The Maigret and van der Valk series were also televised.

The thriller has been defined as ‘a tense, exciting, tautly plotted and sometimes sensational type of novel...in which action is swift and suspense continual’ (Cuddon 1999: 914-5), one which ‘persistently seeks to raise the stakes of the narrative’ (Glover 2003: 137). Early police novels were not particularly interested in action and suspense, although Ed McBain’s work moves in those directions. The contemporary police novel, even though it may contain elements of Golden Age detective fiction such as puzzles, must contain at least some action and suspense if it is to engage readers.

Two key texts in this respect are Thomas Harris’s *Red Dragon* (1981) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), which transformed both the police (or FBI) novel and the thriller. They also contain many Gothic features, and I would say that they are hybrid texts as regards both genre and subgenre. The thriller, although often classed as a separate genre, shares so much with the basic forms and conventions of crime fiction as to be a subgenre of the latter. Harris’s books are also hybrids in that they subvert many of those conventions, in particular *The Silence of the Lambs*. The investigating protagonist is an inexperienced and troubled young woman; the criminal protagonist, already incarcerated, helps catch another criminal (in part for his own ends); the criminal provides psychological/ psychiatric help to the investigator; and the similarities rather than differences between the two characters are brought out. Although it would be a stretch to describe Thomas Harris as a postmodern crime writer, his manipulation of the genre is substantial and its influence long reaching. His books also ask questions about power and ideology. Lecter controls Starling and the FBI as a whole from his prison cell; Buffalo Bill exerts masculine power over women while desirous of transforming himself into one; the patriarchal power of law enforcement (represented by Jack Crawford) and the state is unable to stop the deaths

of young women - that end is achieved by another young woman, the sole woman on the case, led on by the ultimate hungry anarchist.

The postmodern regenerations mentioned above subject crime fiction's conventions to sustained interrogation, as does Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* (1987). The postmodern in Auster's work rejects 'what are seen as the invalid and deforming concepts of consistency and subjective identity' (Knight 2004: 195). Auster inserts himself into the narrative (working for the Auster Detective Agency), as well as taking on the supposed certainties offered by crime fiction: the private/public eye; the locked room (the title of the third part of *The New York Trilogy*); the urban space and its effects on the humans who inhabit it; the nature of knowledge and so on. Auster's book is classed by many as literary fiction because of its textual subtleties, but – as Harris's work demonstrates – it is unnecessary to look to the extremes of the genre for such subversion.

Reginald Hill's later Dalziel and Pascoe novels show an admirable disregard for Golden Age and police novel standards, though their quality is uneven. The maverick detective, in this case the 'Fat Man', DCS Andy Dalziel, bends police protocols and despises political correctness, but in this he is little different from other such protagonists, such as Ian Rankin's John Rebus and Colin Dexter's Morse. Where Hill's books differ is in their ludic approach to form. *Dialogues of the Dead* (2001) is prefaced by a lengthy dictionary extract and quotations from Heine and Beddoes, while the title refers to the ancient Greek poet Lucian's work of that name. The narrative is interspersed by seven dialogues (which are mostly monologues). Although the basic premise is the now outworn police-baiting serial killer (Hill's is called the Wordman), such complexities potentially increase the range of the mass

market crime novel.<sup>17</sup>

Julian Symons felt that Auster was ‘playing destructive games with the form of the crime story’ (1992: 331) and that *The New York Trilogy* was a ‘clever, sterile book’ (332). It is the nature of postmodern regenerations to demolish existing conventions without necessarily replacing them with anything meaningful, but I broadly agree with Symons. In the writing of *Carnal Acts*, I found Hill’s experiments more stimulating, probably because his books display human emotions. A cynic would say that I admire and emulate Hill because he was a bestseller. There is an element of truth in that, but I was also inspired by the transgressive features of the Gothic tradition, as I now discuss.

### 3.c The Gothic and Crime Fiction

The Gothic is a slippery term – indeed, the author of a major guide says, ‘this book ...is not going to answer the question “What is Gothic?”, any more than any other book has managed to provide an enduring answer to questions like “What is the novel?”’ (Punter 2000: ix). This seems excessively tentative, even if, as Punter’s book goes on to show, the tropes and styles are more important than the application of a generic term to them. Cuddon has no such reserve, seeing Gothic novels as ‘tales of mystery and horror, intended to chill the spine and curdle the blood’, containing ‘a strong element of the supernatural’ and ‘the now familiar topography, sites, props, presences and happenings’ (1999: 356).

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<sup>17</sup> Hill’s detectives Dalziel and Pascoe featured in a successful BBC TV series (1996-2007). It is difficult to gauge how much of the author’s bestselling status was due to the series, although the novels started as early as 1970 and were successful before they were televised.



I will relate these to *Carnal Acts*. The most open reference is that made to a Gothic novel, *The Seeker*, written by an 18<sup>th</sup> century Favon. Corham, with its medieval abbey on a rise about the river, has aspects of the Gothic, but the remote Favon Hall, built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with proceeds from the slave and sugar trades, is much more of a standard Gothic site, especially with its medieval tower and cells that are still in use. It also has a secret passage. The forests and moors are part of a wild landscape, while Moonbeam Pax dabbles in the supernatural, with her Wiccan spells and potions. Evie Favon, in uncovering the family's secret origins, comes across tales of torture and abuse, while her parents are tyrannical towards her: did Lord Favon deliberately drive into her? There is Gothic sensuality too, in Victoria Favon's carnal activities (mirrored by her husband's visits to the Albanian brothel) and in Evie's sexual awakening. Her discovery of the West African and Caribbean vodoun religion make her realise that her ancestors unleashed powers beyond European understanding. The Favon family is seen to be doomed because of the lack of a son, reflecting the Gothic trope of the nobility's decline and fall. Even the arch-rationalist Joni Pax begins to wonder if she has inherited some of the metaphysical powers her mother thinks she possesses. Finally, the Albanian Suzana, condemned to a life of enforced rape, is a counterpart to Evie: she is the other, the abject, the doppelganger who has been subjected to perverted sexual acts, but she is also an empowered damsel in distress. (I discuss these terms in Chapters 6 and 7.)

The Gothic was present in crime fiction from its modern origins in the tales of Edgar Allan Poe. His follower Arthur Conan Doyle included Gothic elements in many of his tales, notably in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902): terrifying legend, monstrous animal, family in danger of dying out, remote locations and so on.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Although Doyle subverts the Gothic with Holmes's rationalist approach to the hound.

Doyle's interest in spiritualism does not appear openly in the Holmes canon, but his use of gothic tropes is suggestive. So, too, is the Golden Age fashion for chilling titles (for example, Agatha Christie's *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*, Dorothy L. Sayers' *Have His Carcase*, Margery Allingham's *The Fashion in Shrouds*). Ruth Rendell uses Gothic elements, not only in her titles (for example, *To Fear a Painted Devil*, *A Demon in My View*), but in her narratives, especially the non-Wexford psychological novels. The portrait of the serial killer in *A Demon in My View* (Rendell 1976) is at least partially Gothic, with the protagonist hiding the fetishised mannequin he periodically strangles in a dingy cellar. The inhuman figure of the woman complements the damaged protagonist, to the extent that when it is destroyed he goes back to killing real women.

Such aspects of the Gothic both fit the crime genre, concerned as it usually is with violent death and bodily dissolution, and serve to undermine it. The police novel, in particular, is predicated on the idea that the criminal/s will be caught and order restored by the application of rational thought, science and knowledge. On the other hand, 'sensational, critical or philosophical, melodramatic, nostalgic or ironical, the supernatural plays a central role in postmodern crime fiction' (Ascari 2007: 13). It also features in mainstream crime novels, as in John Connolly's Charlie Parker series. The Gothic suggests that rationality floats on the surface of the human consciousness, while unconscious urges are more powerful and even dangerous. How do the body and the mind interact? Why do humans kill their fellow beings? Is it mainly for profit and material well-being, or do darker drives such as revenge take precedence over rational behaviour? Why do men abuse women? Why do parents treat their children harshly? Does education alone provide an understanding of criminality? Are murderers by nature monsters, or have they been conditioned by their environment?

Do belief systems like Wicca and vodoun, with their Gothic qualities and their close ties to the natural world, have increased relevance at a time when pollution and the squandering of resources are destroying that world?

All these questions have Gothic resonances and are addressed in *Carnal Acts*.

#### 4. CHARACTER

The novelist works hard to integrate all the necessary elements of her/his text and the reader is, in general, content to interact with it as an organic whole. Character and plot, in particular, feature in critical studies of the novel form and in self-help books, but separating them can be an unsatisfactory exercise because there is so much overlap between the characters, however they are defined, and the actions they take or are subjected to. In this chapter I examine statements about character from literary and critical theory, creative writing theory and crime fiction criticism, and relate them to the writing of *Carnal Acts*, as well as to other crime novels.

Aristotle's view of character is conditioned by mimesis: the artistically created character is a representation from life. The ancient philosopher gave priority to plot, but commented on characters in tragedy: they 'should be morally good'; 'suitable' (so, a woman should not be seen to be brave); 'life-like'; and 'consistent' (Aristotle 2008: 69). At first glance, the first requirement seems extremely constricting and only applicable to ancient tragedy, in which characters have a moral code which is undone by fate or by a mistake: 'hamartia' (66). But if we consider mass market crime fiction, it is actually rare for protagonists to behave immorally. Commander Dalgliesh and DCS Wexford have strong moral codes, as do mavericks such as Morse and John Rebus. They may be conflicted, but good will always be to the fore.<sup>1</sup> Being life-like and consistent are unexceptionable, related as they are to mimesis, unless one wants

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<sup>1</sup> Hardboiled and noir characters have much less steady moral compasses, as do the corrupt police officers in, for example, the novels of Raymond Chandler and James Ellroy.

to take issue with the concept of reality or define it in terms of discourse. The concept of suitability is more contentious. Many crime writers have deliberately played against expectations in this regard. Female PIs and cops are often seen as braver than their male counterparts (for example, Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski), while the meaning of 'suitable' in the *romans durs* of Georges Simenon and Patricia Highsmith's novels is open to debate. The former's Kees Poppinga (Simenon 1964) is a clerk who breaks away from his confined life, which does not suit him. He becomes a killer without meaning to, and then discovers that life without rules is untenable. So, too, it is hard to see how suitability would apply to Highsmith's Tom Ripley. He murders Dickie Greenleaf and assumes his identity without remorse, suggesting that his earlier life was unsuitable, while his subsequent one, if suitable to him as an individual, is clearly immoral (Highsmith 1955).

Aristotle accepted that characters 'must necessarily be either good or bad, this being, generally speaking, the only line of divergence between characters', adding that they should either be 'better than are found in the world or worse or just the same' (2008: 52). Although this seems to contradict his definitions above, it provides for the role of 'hamartia', when the character, who may be good, makes a mistake that need not be caused by a personal flaw (for example, Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother without knowing what he is doing). It is also important as it allows the author full range across people and society. However, one of the effects of these conceptualisations was the creation of a typology of characters. In *The Characters*, attributed to Aristotle's student Theophrastus, thirty types of men (not women) are distinguished, ranging from the Flatterer to the Fault Finder to the Show Off (Theophrastus 2008). These proved highly influential in the Renaissance and beyond. However, the sketches also contributed to minimally developed stock characters, such

as those critics find in the works of Golden Age crime writers such as Agatha Christie.<sup>2</sup> Stereotypes have more to them than might be imagined, being ideologically conditioned: ‘Stereotypes do not only, in concert with social types, map out the boundaries of acceptable and legitimate behaviour, but they also insist on boundaries exactly at those points where in reality there are none’ (Dyer 1999: 5). This seems particularly apposite to Golden Age crime fiction, with its often conservative agenda. This is most apparent when such stereotypes are subverted, as in the case of the seemingly trustworthy village doctor and narrator, James Sheppard, in Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), who turns out to be the murderer.

A distinction has been drawn between representation (mimesis) and illustration, which ‘does not seek to reproduce actuality but to present selected aspects of the actual, essences referable for their meaning not to historical, psychological, or sociological truth but to ethical and metaphysical truth’ (Scholes, Phelan and Kellogg 2006: 88). By this definition, illustration has an intangible, Platonic aspect that is hard to apply to fictional characters, even in the simulacra of the real world that fiction presents. The writers seem to be aware of this, noting that interesting literary characterisation comes when authors try ‘to make their characters at once representative and illustrative’ (89). I will test this using Joni Pax, the female protagonist of *Carnal Acts*. In mimetic terms, she represents a mixed race, female detective inspector. The fact that there are few of those in contemporary Britain, particularly in northeast England, puts her at the boundaries of realism, a deliberate move on my part to make her stand out from the crowd, both within the novel itself and more generally across the police novel subgenre. As regards illustration, I hope she at least hints at some ethical and metaphysical truths, but she is also conditioned

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<sup>2</sup> Although Gill Plain states that ‘Christie’s living bodies are as complexly coded as her dead ones’ (Plain 2001: 43). Of course, ‘living bodies’ need not equate to well constructed characters.

by history, psychology and sociology. Of course, the word ‘truth’ raises more questions than it answers.

E. M. Forster wrote, ‘We may divide characters into flat and round’ (Forster 2005: 73). The former he sees as types or caricatures, which would link them to the Theophrastian tradition: ‘they are constructed round a single idea or quality’ (73). It is hard to see this as applicable to major characters, though he suggests that almost all of Charles Dickens’ and H. G. Wells’ characters are flat, not necessarily to their detriment, as they are ‘easily recognized’ and ‘easily remembered’ (74). By contrast, round characters ‘are more highly organized’ and able to ‘function all round’ (79) – Jane Austen’s characters are seen in this light. Is this distinction valid or, indeed, useful to the practicing novelist? That some characters have single qualities is undeniable. In *Carnal Acts*, the Albanian gangsters serve their master savagely and do little else (though they function within the institution of contemporary slavery). However, they are minor characters. Those who appear with reasonable frequency represent more than one idea. Morrie Simmons is a detective, but also the lover of Moonbeam Pax, roles that are related but not unified; Ag Rutherford is a loyal wife, but also a primary school head teacher. As for the protagonists, Joni Pax is constructed from contradictory elements: she is mixed race, but ignores black culture; she is an Oxford-educated rationalist, but is seduced in part by the paranormal aspects of the case; she is a high achiever, but she sees herself as a failure. I would accept that Heck Rutherford is less multilayered, partly because I originally saw Joni as the sole protagonist, before succumbing to fears about my ability as a Caucasian male to build the character sufficiently well to hold the reader’s attention. Also, having had mavericks as protagonists in my previous three series, I wanted Heck to go against the genre grain. Instead of being a melancholic drinker like Rebus or Morse, he is an

ex-rugby player, like Andy Dalziel. He also loves his wife and kids (unlike Dalziel, but like his partner Pascoe). He differs from my earlier protagonists not only because one of the three was married, but in terms of his home-loving nature. I originally had him walking Hadrian's Wall dressed in a Roman legionary's uniform, but that seemed to make him too incongruous. Are Joni and Heck flat or round? Only the reader can judge, and the reader will add her/ his own depth – or roundness – to the characters, following (or not) the markers I have left in the text; or that have been left in the text by the author-function, in Foucauldian terms.

Because of their interest in text and discourse and opposition to individual identity, theorists such as Foucault and Barthes paid little attention to character. That subsequently changed, with scholars such as Mieke Bal and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan developing narratology or narrative theory, the study of narrative and narration. Much work in the field concerns story and plot (see Chapter 5), but here I focus on narratological treatments of character.

A fundamental issue is 'the subordination of character to action or its relative independence of it' (Rimmon-Kenan 1994: 34); in other words, are characters simply performers of the plot (as Aristotle believed) or do they have some other form or forms of existence? The most helpful answer for the author would be both, and some critics appear to support this. Rimmon-Kenan adduces Henry James's famous dictum, 'What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the determination of character?' (James 1963: 80). Virginia Woolf's view of character was intratextual. She saw the great novelists, such as Laurence Sterne and Jane Austen, as being interested 'in character in itself', (Woolf 1966: 327). The modernist conception was that the characters' perceptions provide plot and everything else in a novel, in opposition to Edwardian writers such as Arnold Bennett, who sought



unsuccessfully to link their characters to the external world.

With *Carnal Acts*, I started with a title, an idea (the multifaceted nature of slavery), and a protagonist, Joni Pax. I worked for weeks on Joni before I wrote a word of the book, producing lengthy lists of character traits and experiences. A poststructuralist would say that those texts brought the character into existence, and it is certainly true that putting my thoughts down in print ‘produced’ Joni. So who created her? She existed in my mind before I wrote any notes, but my mind is subject to discourse and ideology too. What can be said regarding narrative theory is that in no way was Joni Pax created in the writing of the story’s text. She existed as an independent entity before the plot grew. What the writing process did do was recreate her, not once but numerous times as she interacted with other characters, and developed in relation to events and how she perceived them.

In narratology a distinction is made between actors and characters. Actor is a ‘general, abstract term’ that need not be a human being, while ‘more often than not a character resembles a human being’ (Bal 1997: 114). This points to a major issue that literary theory struggles to come to terms with. How is it that certain fictional characters, for example, Sherlock Holmes, come to life to the extent that people - readers, but also film and TV viewers - find them as human, if not more so, than living people? Clearly Holmes is attributed by author and reader with many human characteristics; too many, it could be argued.<sup>3</sup> Is it this excess of qualities that has fixed him in the public mind?<sup>4</sup> Are some literary characters larger than life? They may be, but it is not hard to produce examples of human beings whose characteristics and

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<sup>3</sup> Not many ‘real’ people master the violin, take cocaine, box, perform advanced chemical experiments, and lord it over the police.

<sup>4</sup> While Ulrich, the protagonist of Robert Musil’s modernist masterpiece *The Man without Qualities* (1997), has minimal status in the collective memory. This may well be because, as the title suggests, Ulrich doubts that he possesses an innate human character. He does have a highly detailed textual one, but the modernist techniques used to develop it may blur the lines.

actions would be deemed too extreme to be credible in a novel, for example, Alexander the Great or Ernest Shackleton. From the epics of antiquity to the novels of today, protagonists are often seen as heroes; and heroines, though the male gender holds sway even in societies where paternalism has been confronted by feminism. In *Carnal Acts* I deliberately spread heroic qualities around, giving them to Joni, Suzana, Ag and Evie as well as to male characters such as Heck and Pancake.

For narrative theory as well as traditional criticism, actors are inseparable from plot or, as the narratologist puts it, ‘actors will be regarded in their relations to the sequences of events which...they cause or undergo’ (Bal 1997: 195). Actors, whether subjects or objects, have functions within the story. This serves to give them an abstract status, removed from the potential complications of individual or group psychology. This is a useful way of taking stories to pieces in order to understand how they work, but I would argue that it casts little light on the process of creation. When I built up the character of Joni Pax using lists of her qualities and faults, and then wrote her into the ongoing story, what mattered were not her functions, but her interactions with other characters. For a narrative theorist, these interactions equate to functions, but it seems to me that this formulation does not take sufficient account of the emotional content of human relations. Can emotions be seen in terms of narrative function? In some cases, certainly. The Favons’ coldness to Evie impacts on how she behaves in the narrative. But it is less easy to attribute all emotions to function. For instance, Joni is sympathetic to Suzana from early on for reasons she cannot fully fathom. This affects the plot only latterly, when she allows the Albanian to escape, but it is an important aspect of Joni’s character throughout the novel. Suzana’s own actions may be seen functionally: everything she does contributes to her drive to stay alive; but she is also compelled by her desire for revenge, an emotional need that does

not directly impact the plot, but casts unfavourable light on one of the men who abused her. It is only by chance that he captures her. Critics may view such a coincidence as provocative. For my part, it was a deliberate attempt to suggest that characters do not control their own destiny, similar to the evil fate that overtakes the characters in Greek tragedy.

Other theoretical approaches have been brought to bear on the concept of character, either directly or indirectly. Some, such as Barthes's hermeneutic code and narratology's focalization, apply equally to plot and I examine them in Chapter 5; body, gender, post-colonial and ideological issues are treated in Chapters 6 and 7. Some schools of thought I have found inapplicable to *Carnal Acts*. One of those is psychoanalysis, despite its influence in the criticism of fiction. That the unconscious comes into being through language is a tenable position; in any case, it is part of the general theoretical movement that prioritises discourse. Jacques Lacan's identification of the triangles of characters affected by Poe's purloined letter is a spectacular piece of criticism (1983), but it offers little help to the practicing writer except to stress the complexities that underpin fiction, many of them unfathomable to the author. Explaining the attraction of detective stories to readers in terms of the primal scene does not strike me as convincing (Pederson-Krag 1983). The problem is that psychoanalysis of every writer and reader – even if that were possible - would produce different results, questioning the validity of generalisations.

By contrast, M. M. Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia is suggestive when applied to characters. Formed from the Greek words meaning 'different' and 'language', heteroglossia locates the power of the novel in its multiplicity of voices, whether those of characters, narrator/s or even the author her/ himself. 'The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even a diversity of

languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized' (Bakhtin 1981: 262). In planning *Carnal Acts*, I gave little thought to the issue of point of view or narrative voice, despite their significance to literary critics. Having written one series (Johnston 1997-2001) in the first person, another (Johnston 2002-2013) in the third person with different centres of consciousness, to use the Jamesian term, and one (Johnston 2007-2011a) in first and third persons, I had perhaps become blasé about the concept. I decided to write *Carnal Acts* in the third person with multiple points of view, as I do in the Mavros series, without reflection. I would hazard that this decision was defined by the conception I had of the characters, in particular the dual protagonists. Also, genre and subgenre played their parts: in modern crime fiction multiple centres of consciousness are common, while the police novel, with its competing bands of police personnel and antagonists, almost demands that the reader be given access to numerous characters' minds.

When writing *Carnal Acts* I quickly realised the benefits of heteroglossia on different levels. First, Joni Pax, despite growing up as a mixed race child on a housing estate in East London, is problematised by the lack of connections she has to her roots. She speaks standard English and eschews black argot along with black culture in general: the implication is that she reinvented herself at Oxford, potentially making her a traitor to her (admittedly mixed) race as well as one to her class.<sup>5</sup> She also chose to study French and Italian. The latter has a plot function as it enables her to communicate with Suzana and to research the Albanian mafia in Italian criminology journals, but it was also important to me that she chose a subject that further differentiated her, both from the people she knew before Oxford and from the British in general, hinting towards her status as an outsider/ other. This is further accentuated

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<sup>5</sup> Which is in any case a complex one: Moonbeam is a white teacher who has chosen to live in a poor area, initially from hippy ideals of equality and fairness, but later because she devotes herself to the minority interest of Wicca and that cuts her off from the mainstream community.

by Joni's difficulties with the northeastern accent and dialect words, some of which she misunderstands. In fact, the local language was a problem for me too. Although I have spent a lot of time in the Scottish Borders and have friends in the Tyne Valley, I am not particularly familiar with local linguistic niceties.

Heteroglossia also features in scenes with the Albanians. Sometimes I have them speaking broken English and others, when they are supposedly speaking Albanian, I modulate the English version of their words to make them sound slightly strange. This makes them outsiders to the inhabitants in their adopted country, as does their patriarchal clan system. Alterity is also to the fore when Suzana, a more persecuted other, tries to speak English, being mocked by the youths who then attack her.

Another heteroglot language is that used by the police, one marked by black humour as well as by a curious mixture of respect (to senior officers and, sometimes, to members of the public) and mockery. So, too, Evie Favon's researches lead her to documents that reveal the family's unsavoury past. Although couched in modern language, Evie's retelling of Jaffray's tale is important because she has internalised the old style; rewriting can be assumed to have brought her closer to him. When she discovers her ancestor's Gothic novel, *The Seeker*, the narrative voice changes to the second person to emphasise her attempt to consume the text, both in terms of becoming an author and in terms of the similarities between her situation at the Hall and that of the novel's heroine.

The short scenes involving Gaz's friends were intended to focus on the dialogue. This was partly to avoid having to describe more minor characters, but also to imply that the group is composed of talkers rather than thinkers. When they get

involved in fights with the Albanians, the reliance on dialogue makes it hard for the reader to follow the action, mimicking the chaos that reigns in such incidents.

There are other examples that I only mention here, including the aristocratic voices of the Favons, the military inflections of General Etherington, the bourgeois tones of Alice Liphook, and the more working class language used by Goat Skin Shackleton. They add to the heteroglossia of *Carnal Acts* and, I hope, serve ‘to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way’ (Bakhtin 1981: 324).<sup>6</sup>

As is clear from the discussion above, I had intentions when planning and writing *Carnal Acts*, and I view describing them as a valid way of focusing on the creative process. Whatever the critical consensus (or lack of one), creative writing requires either a modified or a completely separate theoretical underpinning. I have found literary and critical theory to be more fruitful in reflecting on, and perhaps unconsciously structuring, my writing.

A recent guide to writing fiction has sections on characters as subjects, as fractured subjectivities, and as empty vessels (Boulter 2007: 139-147). Bakhtin’s work on characters as autonomous subjects that develop in unexpected ways is mentioned (140) and writers are urged to ask characters indirect questions to understand them better (141). Fractured subjectivities emerge from references to Milan Kundera, Bakhtin, Sigmund and Anna Freud, and other characters are seen as being ‘born out of a struggle’ (143), and subject to denial, repression and displacement: in creative writing, these are to be seen as motivations for characters. Finally, empty characters ‘simply reflected society back to itself’ (145), that is, they are fictions that do not exist beyond the pages. ‘Our perception of character will affect not only the subjects within our fiction but the style of our writing, and especially our

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<sup>6</sup> One wonders what Wimsatt and Beardsley, let alone Barthes, would make of this reference to authorial intentions.

use of voice and point of view' (147).

All this is useful, though it is striking how much is taken from literary and psychoanalytic theory. Perhaps creative writing theory will become a hybrid that is less important to practitioners than study and experience of the writing process itself (see Chapter 1). In *Carnal Acts*, Joni Pax is, I hope, a developing character ('round' in Forster's terms), as well as one who has grown up in struggle; indeed, her birth and its aftermath could be seen as struggle as her father leaves immediately. I never 'asked her questions' in the planning or writing processes, though I came upon the relevant answers by compiling lists and describing her interactions with other characters; in fact, I asked myself questions about her, which may mean I failed to achieve sufficient objectivity. As for Joni as a mirror reflecting society, she is more active and constructive (whether in her own right or under my 'command'): she leaves home to study, reinvents herself first at Oxford, and then joins the police. Her first months in the new force at Corham constitute another reinvention. Boulter goes on to discuss voice and point of view in a separate chapter, while I prefer to see them as developed through the characters by the author and, of course, the reader.

Criticism of crime fiction often links character to action, seeing the latter as taking precedence in the way outlined by Aristotle. Dorothy L. Sayers paraphrases the philosopher, saying 'The first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of the detective story, is the plot, and the characters come second' (Sayers 1980: 27). Note that she refers specifically to the detective story. The rise of the hardboiled tradition brought more focus on characters, while the psychological crime novels of Georges Simenon, Patricia Highsmith, Dorothy Hughes, Margaret Millar and Ruth Rendell clearly delve deeply into the characters' inner lives. But, as has been noticed, crime fiction has a particular requirement of at least one of its characters: 'Apt but spare characterization

has a particular significance in those detective novels that depend on keeping the identity of the murderer secret until the end of the story' (Aird 1999: 61). Here again we come upon the 'gap' – the missing knowledge – seen in Barthes's hermeneutic code, which concerns the enigma and how it is presented and resolved, or not. I reserve full discussion of the code until the next chapter, but would like to examine the concept of the gap with reference to the characters of *Carnal Acts*.

Crime fiction can be seen as answering a single question: who knows what? Other formulations such as the 'whodunit', the 'whydunit', and the 'howdunit' all revolve around the same question. At the beginning of *Carnal Acts*, nobody knows anything about anything, as is the case in most crime novels: before the text is read, it is a *tabula rasa* for the reader, who needs to learn about the characters and the initial set up.<sup>7</sup> Everything is a gap, a lacuna. Then the situation becomes even more complex. A crime is committed. Witnesses see different or contradictory things, as happens outside the brothel when Suzana escapes. I played with the genre conventions: there is never any doubt, in the reader's or any of the characters' minds, that Suzana killed one of the Albanians and injured the other two. Nor is there any doubt about why she committed those crimes. But, by disappearing, she herself becomes a gap, as far as the police and the Albanians are concerned. She flits in and out of the action, sometimes seen by other characters and others only by the reader. For Joni, in particular, she is a painful gap, one that she is desperate to fill because of the sympathy she feels for the Albanian girl.

Other gaps regarding characters concern the identity of Moonbeam Pax's lover; the reason for Lady Favon's sexual behaviour; the precise nature of General Etherington's involvement in the plot; and the identity of Nick Etherington's killer or

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<sup>7</sup> Unless, as frequently happens, too much has been given away by the blurb or in reviews.



killers. However, the most important unknowns are those in the psyches of the two protagonists. In this respect, the action leads to the rehabilitation of Joni and Heck as fully functioning detectives. Joni has lost self-confidence after the calamitous raid in London, while Heck's wounding has made him doubt his abilities. So, for the author and - I hope - the reader, Joni's uncovering of Nick's murderer in dangerous circumstances is less important than her development as a character; while Heck's involvement in violent action re-establishes him not only as a detective but as the protector of his family, aided in no small way by Ag.

Character has been defined in many ways by theorists and practising writers. Contrary to Aristotle (and Dorothy L. Sayers), I prioritise it over plot. *Carnal Acts* is a study of characters acting and developing in sometimes extreme situations, rather than a race to a solution. In this respect it is as much a crime novel as a police novel. According to Tony Hilfer, 'The central and defining feature of the crime novel is that in it self and world, guilt and innocence are problematic' (1990: 2). Both Joni and Suzana live in such a world, the latter a victim as much as a murderer. Joni's key action is to break the codes of the police and of the traditional police novel, and let the killer go free. Readers will decide whether this is acceptable, regarding both morality and their re/creation of the characters from the text.

## 5. PLOT

For Aristotle, plot was the soul of tragedy. I open my discussion with an investigation of that and other statements he made, then move on to more modern concepts such as those developed by the Russian Formalists, Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette and other narratologists, and by Stephen Kern, an analyst of causality. I also consider how critics of crime fiction view plot. As before, I apply the theoretical and critical concepts to *Carnal Acts*.

### 5.a Aristotle

The ambiguity of Aristotle's terms is interesting. First, the ancient Greek 'mythos' is a word that has its roots in 'myth', as well as meaning 'talk' and 'story'. Aristotle's focus on 'mythos' as plot is linked to his ideas about actions: 'a tragedy is a mimesis not of people but of their actions and life' (Aristotle 2008: 59); thus, 'The plot is therefore the principle, or one might say the principle of life, while the mimesis of character comes second in importance' (59). In this translation 'psyche', literally 'soul', is presented as 'principle', a more abstract term. It is striking that Aristotle expands plot from a series of actions to 'the principle of life' in tragedy. This principle is subsequently seen to require order, amplitude, unity, probable and necessary connection, and surprise (especially the desired effect on the audience of pity and fear) (60-63). Order implies beginning, middle and end, but with appropriate

‘consequents’: well-ordered plots ‘will not begin or end just anywhere’ (61). The elements of plot are defined as ‘peripeteia’, reversal, ‘when the course of events takes a turn to the opposite’ (64); ‘anagnorisis’, recognition, ‘a change from ignorance to knowledge, tending either to affection or enmity’ (64); and ‘pathos’, ‘an act involving destruction and or pain, for example deaths on stage and physical woundings and so on’ (65).<sup>1</sup>

As we have seen, Dorothy L. Sayers made a not wholly serious attempt to apply Aristotle’s stipulations to detective fiction.<sup>2</sup> As discussed above, I regard characters as having priority over plot in my own writing process, but I find much of Aristotle’s thinking helpful, even as a road map from which to deviate. First, can the plot of *Carnal Acts* be said to contain the book’s soul or principle of life? I would say that the thematic aspects of the novel (see Chapters 6 and 7) are more visible in the characters’ dialogue and thoughts than in their actions, but there is no question that what the characters do is important. Suzana’s break for freedom and Joni’s attempts to find and protect her are major plot engines, as is the attack on Nick Etherington, with the rationale for that remaining opaque until near the end. As regards order, amplitude, unity, probable and necessary connection, and surprise, all are present. The famous beginning, middle and end are clearly present in *Carnal Acts*, as in all fiction, though not always in the way Aristotle intended. The ‘appropriate consequents’ are deliberately obscured, as is standard in crime fiction. For example, Gaz’s early death might seem to end that subplot, an impression fostered by his friends’ ham-fisted attempts to find him; but their efforts do eventually feed into the police investigation.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle’s remarks on plot are confined to tragedy, but it has been common practice to apply them to other fictional forms, especially the novel. For example, E. M. Forster starts his discussion of plot with Aristotle, even though he disagrees with him over its primacy (2005: 85-6)

<sup>2</sup> In distinguishing the detective story from ‘the kind of modern novel which, beginning at the end, rambles backwards and forwards without particular direction and ends on an indeterminate note’ (Sayers 1980: 27), she fuelled the literary versus genre fiction debate.

Nick's death, coming in the middle of the novel, adds to the existing brothel case since he was a witness to Suzana's escape, but it never becomes a consequent: the reader is led to believe that he was killed because of his presence at the crime scene, but that turns out to be irrelevant.

Amplitude in the sense of plot aspects being appropriate in scale to the complete work is something that the author hopes to handle appropriately and that the reader participates in producing, but the personal nature of the latter's input makes generalisation difficult. Aristotelian unity requires a plot to be a mimesis of one action, and that a whole one. Here I flouted the tenets of the ancient philosopher as well as the crime fiction genre, in particular the police novel. I did not want all the attention to be on Joni's actions, or on the investigation in its every phase. That is why I raised Suzana to near protagonist level, challenging the reader to accept a murderer as a kind of heroine.<sup>3</sup> *Carnal Acts* contains an interlinked plot, in which the connections are not always probable and necessary – this reflects my view both of life and of police investigations, fictional or not. I did not set out to write a mimetic novel in the realistic sense (whence the invented police force and town of Corham), so connections are often unexpected, though I hope not improbable.

That takes us to the last of Aristotle's plot characteristics, surprise, which he specifically links to pity and fear. The police novel does not always rely on surprising the reader. Traditional procedurals featured meticulous police work and the criminal's identity was not always of major significance: a robber or even a killer would not be deeply characterised or appear much in the action. On the other hand, the Golden Age

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<sup>3</sup> There are many precedents for protagonists as murderers in the genre (even Hercule Poirot in Agatha Christie's *Curtain*, 1975), but I was advised by my editor at Hodder and Stoughton in 1996 to avoid making my first protagonist, Quint Dalrymple, a killer. Although I ignored that, I still feel uneasy about writing protagonist-murderers, even when, as in Suzana's case, self-defence would be a valid plea. As the case of Poirot shows, he only resorted to murder as a last resort, dying soon after. While fictional police officers and PIs, especially in the US, may have to kill, members of the public have less justification.

whodunit is structured around the identity of the criminal, who is one of a small group made familiar to the reader. In *Carnal Acts* I played with both conventions. First, Suzana is shown to be guilty of murder and grievous bodily harm. Second, Nick's murderer turns out not to be one of the main suspects, but a character who rarely appears – and some of his crimes were committed by his wife, both using the same balaclava to conceal themselves. As to why I did this, I cannot be sure. Aristotle's concept of surprise is definitely part of the reason; convincing surprises are hard to pull off and I admire authors who succeed.<sup>4</sup>

Aristotle's peripeteia, anagnorisis and pathos seem particularly appropriate to crime fiction. Sayers translates them as 'reversal of fortune, discovery, and suffering' (1980: 29). Events take a turn for the opposite frequently in *Carnal Acts*, particularly during the investigation into General Etherington. Is he gay? Does he have connections with the Kosovan Albanians? Was he responsible for his grandson's murder? The answers to all these questions are negative, but the construction of doubt and uncertainty was deliberate on my part. Changes from ignorance to knowledge are also common in *Carnal Acts* though, again, I would argue that these are more important for their impact on characters than on how they affect the plot. Evie Favon comes to understand her parents' selfishness and sexual incontinence, as well as her family's ignoble history; Joni is shocked that Morrie Simmons is her mother's lover; Joni and Heck are both driven to extreme acts to protect themselves and their family members from the assassins, with the result that they enhance their understanding of themselves by the end of the plot. So, too, there are plenty of acts involving destruction and pain: extreme violence is a standard feature of modern crime fiction

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<sup>4</sup> One of the most effective crime fiction surprises is in James Ellroy's *The Big Nowhere* (1988), in which the protagonist, police officer Danny Upshaw, commits suicide 100 pages before the end of the novel. In Aristotelian plot terms, this certainly provokes pity. It also shows how much a reader can be affected by the death of a lead character, perhaps by a version of what the Russian Formalists called defamiliarisation: how can the plot of a crime novel continue without the lead investigator?

and, perhaps because of my experience of surgery, I have become even more committed to depicting the damage wrought on the human body. The final and, I hope, most shocking act, is the shooting of Victoria Favon in front of Evie who is not overtly affected by the death of her mother.

Aristotle's work on plot is groundbreaking and still relevant, and has undoubtedly influenced my writing. More recent critics have widened and deepened my understanding of plot.

### 5.b Russian Formalism to Roland Barthes

In this section I consider some theorists and critics working in the formalist and structuralist/ poststructuralist traditions. The examination of plot was part of the Russian Formalists' attempts to produce a 'scientific' study of literature (that is, one concerned with the formal characteristics of texts rather than psychological or historical inferences drawn from them). The essential distinction was between 'fabula' and 'sjuzet', the former 'referring to the chronological sequence of events which make up the raw materials of a story', while the latter is 'the way the story is organized' (Cobley 2001: 15). The terms have been translated into English in various ways ('story' and 'discourse', 'story' and 'narrative'). One of the best known Russian Formalists wrote, 'The story is, in fact, only material for plot formulation' (Shklovsky 2006: 52). Story's importance lies in its inclusion of all relevant events. In *Carnal Acts*, Joni's desertion by her father, childhood in Hackney, studies at Oxford, and service in the Metropolitan Police form part of the chronological story. Indeed, when I conceived her backstory and made notes, it was broadly in chronological order. In the

text of the novel, these elements appear in numerous different locations, some only accessible to Joni and the reader, and others accessible to other characters via dialogue. On reflection, I would say that story in this particular sense is a useful tool in creating fiction as it gives a linear dimension to material that may subsequently be presented out of chronological order.

Plot in the formalist sense consists of story elements arranged in different orders: I use the plural because most novels consist of several such orders, whether subplots or characters' view of events. *Carnal Acts* is primarily driven by orders of actions in the present time: Gaz's (brief) life and his friends' search for him; Suzana's breakout and continuing escape; the police's handling of the crimes at and involving the brothel; Nick Etherington's affair with Evie Favon; Nick's death and the investigation of it, and so on. Interspersed with this ongoing narrative is a much less coherent chain of information that hardly justifies the name of plot: the backstories of Joni and other characters, provided to the reader in incomplete nuggets; the motivations that are only comprehensible with narrative hindsight; and the thematic material, again distributed throughout the text. In traditional detective fiction, the narrative would involve red herrings, deliberate attempts to mislead. I am as guilty of these as any contemporary crime writer, but I tend to challenge the reader with multiple possibilities rather than 'white lies'. Here, I find the formalist distinction between story and plot inadequate. Narratology provides a more complex framework in this respect (see section 5.c).

The other major contribution to narrative by the Russian Formalists is Vladimir Propp's work on folk tales. He identified over thirty basic functions, such as departure, victory and solution, which are described in terms of actions. What is most interesting, however, is the weight he attributes to characters: study of the tale is

possible ‘according to the functions of its *dramatis personae*’ (Propp 2006: 55). However, Propp limits characters to ‘stable, constant elements in a tale’ (56), which considerably reduces their interest for writers; they tend towards the stock or the flat. These functions can be adapted to the novel form, but I have not found them helpful in the writing process, even when amending them for crime fiction (for example, body found – investigation begins – witnesses questioned, and so on). In any case, Propp severely restricts their use: ‘The sequence of functions is always identical’ (56). A looser application of narrative elements, even one as simplistic as Dorothy L. Sayers’s updating of Aristotle, is of more practical value.

French theorists rooted their studies in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. His distinction between ‘*langue*’ - diachronic, homogeneous and systematic language – and ‘*parole*’ - synchronic, heterogeneous speech (later taken to refer to written texts too) – enabled thinkers to consider the underlying system of language separately from its individual uses. For Saussure, a language is both ‘a social institution’ and ‘a system of signs expressing ideas’ (Saussure 2000: 8). Also of major importance was Saussure’s distinction between the ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified’, in effect ‘form’ and ‘concept or object’. The essential point is that the relationship between the two ‘is arbitrary or conventional’ (Culler 1975: 16): for example, there is no causal connection between the sign/ word ‘sheep’ and the animal it denotes. The real-world animal, called the ‘referent’, was beyond Saussure’s area of interest.

Saussure’s ideas were widely influential and Roland Barthes’s work on plot makes use of several. The latter wrote, ‘Faced with an infinite number of narratives and the many standpoints from which they can be considered..., the analyst is roughly in the same situation as Saussure’ (1975a: 238). Is there a principle of classification that could be applied to narrative fiction? Referring to the Russian Formalists and



Propp, Barthes says that narrative is ‘either a random assemblage of events’ (238) or ‘it shares with other narratives a common structure’ (238). It seems clear from a consideration of *Carnal Acts*, within both the general tradition of the novel and the genre of crime fiction, that it shares aspects of a common structure: crimes are committed, criminals are sought and caught. I would debate whether that rules out ‘the narrator’s (or author’s) art, talent, or genius’ (238), seen as only applicable to the random assemblage above. Barthes’ method of narrative structuration involves codes, each of which is ‘a perspective of quotations, a mirage of structures’ (1974: 20): this suggests that they are hard to discern and not subject to unitary control, something unhelpful to authors. As seen in Chapter 1, Barthes prioritises the role of the reader. He breaks up the text into what he calls *lexias*, ‘units of reading’ (13); each ‘displays certain codes passing through the text, so that at any and every given point one can see the codes in their various intersections’ (Cohan and Shires 1988: 119). There are five such codes, of which two are particularly relevant to plot: the hermeneutic, which ‘will be to distinguish the different formal terms through which an enigma is isolated, posed, formulated, delayed and formally resolved’ (Barthes 1974: 26); and the *proairetic*, the sequences of actions within spatial and temporal dimensions – their logic ‘that of the probable, of the organized world, of the already-done or already-written’ (Barthes 1974: 209).<sup>5</sup>

These are complex terms which are perhaps best seen in action. In *Carnal Acts*, as in much fiction, the reader applies a hermeneutic or interpretive methodology either knowingly or subconsciously. Barthes stresses the importance of enigma, so the code is particularly appropriate to crime fiction. The enigmas in *Carnal Acts*, which vary in intensity at different stages of the narrative, include the secrets relating to the

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<sup>5</sup> Barthes’ other codes are the *semic* (relating to connotations of people or objects); the *symbolic* (according to which symbols increase the plurality of textual meanings); and the *referential* (covering sources of knowledge already commonly known outside the text).

brothel and its users; the activities in the medieval tower; the historical and contemporary activities at Favon Hall; the secret affair between Nick Etherington and Victoria Favon; the actions of the assassins, two of whose identities are concealed for some time; and the major enigma – who killed Nick and why? As noted above, gaps are implicit in the hermeneutic code. In *Carnal Acts* the gaps are often withheld information, as itemised above. They also relate to actions that take place beyond the flow of the narrative: for instance, General Etherington's experiences in Kosovo; Joni's childhood and adolescence; and Heck's day-to-day life before he was on sick leave. I deliberately did not 'show' those as scenes, rather 'telling' them either in dialogue or as character's thoughts mediated by the narrator. Indeed, the biggest gap in *Carnal Acts* is the narrator. While not omniscient – or at least not openly presented as such – that entity stands at a distance from the action, at the same time as displaying detailed knowledge of characters' inner lives. This has become such a standard feature of fiction, including the police novel, that readers generally accept it without question. As the author, I distanced myself from certain aspects of the story, in part because I was unsure if I was able to deal with them satisfactorily. This applies particularly to Joni and other female characters.

The reader's desire to uncover textual secrets 'acts as a structuring force' (Culler 1975: 210), as does the urge to fill in gaps in the narrative. This sets up a relationship between the reader and the narrator/ author. It is understood that certain information will be provided in due course, but that the reader must examine the text carefully to achieve full disclosure. In *Carnal Acts*, the ongoing challenge I set the reader is to construct a coherent overarching meaning from the complexities of the plot. This is a standard feature of the crime genre, which I pushed to the limit.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 8 for aspects of the first draft which went beyond limits acceptable to editors.

To understand the way that subplots come together in a multifaceted plot, the reader manipulates the proairetic code, concentrating on the sequence and content of lexias. This has particular relevance to *Carnal Acts*, as one of the decisions I took between first and second drafts was to cut the number of scenes in each chapter. The result was that the current draft has 156 chapters (including prologue), as compared with the first draft's 39 (with prologue). I did not have Barthes' lexias in mind when I did this, but it is at least possible that my knowledge of them influenced the recasting. In any case, the focus on individual events was an attempt to ease the reader's passage through the complexities of the subplots and ultimately gain an understanding of the plot as a whole. While the lexias proceed in an irreversible fashion (what the reader has learned, while it can be adapted or even proved false, cannot be completely unlearned), they also allow for flash back (analepsis) and, in theory, flash forward (prolepsis), though I do not use the latter. Thus, the reader learns about the back stories of Joni, Suzana, Heck and other protagonists within the flow of the ongoing, linear action. However, the lexias concerning the antagonists (the Favons, the Albanians) are shorter and less frequent (and, in the case of Dan and Cheryl Reston, very infrequent), requiring the reader to apply the hermeneutic code even more assiduously. So, the two major codes interact to bring about the creation of meaning by the reader via the text.

### 5.c Gérard Genette and Narratology; Causality

The influential work of Gérard Genette on narrative has much to say about the different roles of time, particularly in terms of order, duration and frequency. He adapted the Russian Formalists' opposition of 'fabula' and 'sjuzet' (all the resources of story/ the specific plot) to 'histoire' and 'récit', usually rendered into English as 'story' and 'narrative'. He also added a third term, 'narrating', 'the real or fictive act that produces the discourse' (Genette 1988: 13): this can apply both to narrators within the text and to the author, implied or otherwise. But it is with story and narrative (that is, plot) that I am most concerned here. The first term is used 'for the signified or narrative content', and the second 'for the signifier, statement or narrative text itself' (Genette 1980: 27). What is the relation between the narrative of *Carnal Acts* and the complete story it provokes the reader to construct?

In Genette's terms, the story begins with the medieval tower beside Favon Hall as it is chronologically the first manifestation of Favon family power. It is also the setting for the prologue of the novel, the beginning of the narrative or plot. The story then jumps to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the Favons' activities as plantation and slave owners in the Caribbean, including the torture of Jaffray. The story then takes in the townscape of Corham, the buildings still visible during the contemporary plot, as is Favon Hall. The oldest character in the narrative is David Rutherford, Heck's father. He is also linked to the location as a former low-level manager at the now closed steel works. Other events that take place before the narrative starts include Joni's pre-Corham life; Heck's pre-Pofnee career; Suzana's childhood in Albania and trafficking to the UK; General Etherington's service in Kosovo; and Nick's affair with Victoria. In the plot, these anachronies are woven into the ongoing series of events, anachronies

being ‘the various types of discordance between the two orderings of story and narrative’ (Genette 1980: 36). Although I did not plan the novel to start from the medieval tower in a chronological sense, the notes that I made when preparing did take account of material that would ultimately refer to time periods outside the narrative. So story, as a summation of everything that happens and happened within the text of *Carnal Acts*, was an important concept. It is also bound up with the themes and ideologies discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

Although observant readers will take in these anachronistic story elements during construction of the narrative/ plot, they will probably not see them in terms of a sequential schematic: that is a conception more useful for the author. However, the situation becomes more complicated once the novel has been read, as each reader will create a personal version of the story, one which will probably not equate in every detail to either story or narrative as they can be reconstituted from the text.<sup>7</sup> This stresses how individual the act of reading is, as well as indicating that narratological models may not fully explain the interlinked creative processes of writing and reading. Partial reconstructions or misunderstandings are common, as readers often find when they reread texts. Many acts of writing and reading demonstrate both authors’ and readers’ fallibility: the former may make mistakes ranging from insufficiently clear plotting to inconsistency, while the latter may miss clues and nuances. An example of authorial vagueness is Raymond Chandler’s inability to say who murdered the chauffeur in *The Big Sleep* (Hiney and MacShane 2001: 105); and of reader’s lack of attention, the inability of reviewers to get to the heart of texts, as in Augustin Filon’s description of Émile Zola’s masterly study of the criminal mind,

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<sup>7</sup> One of the earliest reading experiences that has stayed with me is the E. V. Rieu translation Homer’s *Odyssey* (1946), when I was seven. Although I subsequently studied it at school and university in the original Greek, that first reading (unsophisticated though it undoubtedly was) still influences how I think of the story and narrative.

*La Bête Humaine* (1890), as ‘Too many trains, and too many crimes’ (Pearson 1999: vii).

Causality is an important element of narrative/ plot and ‘can either be implied by chronology or gain an explicit status in its own right’ (Rimmon-Kenan 1994: 17). In *Carnal Acts* as in much crime fiction, especially police novels, the commission of a crime implies its subsequent investigation and solution in narrative time. Thus, Gaz’s death, though in part an accident, is investigated as murder after his headless corpse is found, as is Nick’s death at a later point in the narrative. The culprits are later revealed, but it is debatable how much chronology applies to causality itself. In crime fiction, causality is linked to motive. When explained, the motives behind Nick’s murder remain opaque, even though they are not complex and are linked to elements of plot that need not have been lethal. If Nick had not brushed off Victoria, would he have been killed? If Victoria had driven after him herself rather than going with Dan Reston would Nick have been run off the road, let alone viciously murdered? The complexity is in the deliberately under-determined characters of Dan and Cheryl Reston. They are gaps in the narrative, the depths of their depravity left to the reader to imagine.

Rimmon-Kenan is aware of the problematical nature of causality, referring to two different senses of the term. We could explain Nick’s murder ‘according to the logic of verisimilitude’ (1994: 17): that is, as posited in *Carnal Acts*, Reston was both insane and jealous. At the same time, causality conforms ‘to the structural needs of the plot’ (18): thus, at the basic level of narrative, Nick dies in order to provide Joni and Heck with an investigation to replace their failed attempts to locate Suzana. Yet the structural needs of fiction operate in more complex ways. Nick had an affair with Victoria Favon, is in love with her daughter, and serves as both a symbolic link

between the Favons and the outside world (he is enslaved by love rather than money or power) and as a structural link between General Etherington and the Favons.

Causality's importance was remarked upon before narratology existed. E. M. Forster argued that a plot is 'a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality' (2005: 87). He also pointed out that the plot 'is the novel in its logical intellectual aspect; it requires mystery, but the mysteries are solved later on' (95). Causality's links with crime writing have also been investigated in scientific and philosophical terms. Stephen Kern sees murder as having close ties with plot: 'it is exceptionally vivid and important and in most cases sharply focused in time and space' (2004: 2). It is also 'strongly intentional, highly motivated, full of meaning, the result of a desire or a "trying", directed at a clear goal, and usually "done for a reason"' (2). This is highly suggestive, both in terms of the author's activities and those of the reader. One of the strengths of police fiction is that crimes – especially murders – are given specific chronological and topographical status. The bureaucracy of investigation protocols focuses on causality in the sense that evidence gathering leads to the uncovering of the criminal's motive. The author must at least acknowledge this reality, both in terms of real-life homicide investigations and the generic conventions of police novels. The reader, primed by the experience of previous texts, is also locked into a mindset at least in part defined by causality.

Causality is not necessarily linked to the legal system, let alone to timeless values of morality. In *Carnal Acts*, Jaffray's murder, sanctioned by the law of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, can be seen as a case of an owner exercising his power over a slave to set an example to others and maintain his position. It is undoubtedly morally deficient, but it is not subject to punishment. In a similar fashion, Suzana's killing of one of the brothel operators, is partially conditioned by a traditional culture that sanctions the

vendetta. These murders are easy to fathom within the outdated social conditions relevant to the perpetrators. On the other hand, Nick's death is more opaque. This squares with Kern's thesis, that the causal understanding of murder (and therefore its depictions in crime fiction) has 'moved in the direction of increasing specificity, multiplicity, complexity, probability, and uncertainty' (6). Clearly, not all these apply to Nick's murder, but the ambivalence in the text encourages the reader to consider multiple conclusions. At the end, however, the causality expounded by Joni and Heck is a probability, not a certainty. This reflects my view that not everything in life or in fiction is subject to rational explanation.

#### 5.d Crime Writing Criticism and Plot

Traditional crime criticism takes little account of theoretical developments in the study of plot: 'In most classic crime and mystery fiction, plot is both chronological and linear' (Kotker 1999: 331). This is a very narrow definition. Even a short story such as Conan Doyle's 'The Adventure of the Dancing Men' (1903) presents several clusters of story events that occur out of linear order, concerning the American past of Sherlock Holmes's client's wife. These *lexias* operate in a suggestive but unresolved way that only become comprehensible to the reader when the entire plot is constructed from the text. The story is notable as one of Holmes's failures, in that he cannot prevent the death of his client, even though the killer is caught.

Other critics are more rigorous than Kotker. The detective's drive is to reestablish sequence and causality, presupposing that earlier parts of the narrative are disordered and opaque as regards motivation: such fiction 'is preoccupied with the



closing of the logico-temporal gap that separates the present of the discovery of crime from the past that prepared it' (Porter 1983: 329). I find this a useful perspective and would amend it only by putting 'gap' into the plural. In *Carnal Acts* there are numerous logico-temporal gaps - it could be said there is a different one for each character – though some are more important than others. In particular, the semantic and metaphorical gap between the past and present of Favon Hall and its occupiers only becomes apparent to the reader when 18<sup>th</sup> century slavery is linked to its modern counterpart. What would be seen in Barthes's terminology as hermeneutic gaps during the murder investigations are also to be closed by the reader.

Porter sees suspense as being created by impediments to the forward movement of the plot. Indeed, 'a detective novel is composed of two contradictory impulses', these being either progressive or diversive (330). Aristotelian peripeteia, reversal, slows down movement towards solution. In *Carnal Acts*, the hunt for Suzana is interrupted by the discovery of Gaz's body and then by Nick's murder. If the narrative in the text has been constructed effectively, the reader will be aware that the subplots will come together at the stage of final anagnorisis (understanding); extratextual knowledge of genre will also play a part. Porter sees it as a paradox that in dramatic and narrative literature, including detective fiction, 'pleasure results to a large degree from the repeated postponement of a desired end' (331). Rather than a paradox, this strikes me as entirely natural. While such narratives may not only be read to find out how they end, that is surely a major part of the attraction. On the other hand, the so-called inverted detective story, in which 'the reader is informed fully about the crime at the beginning through scenes identifying the killer and showing him [sic] at work' (Reilly 1999b: 238), is a popular alternative: examples include Francis Iles' *Malice Aforethought* (1931), many of Simenon's *romans durs*, and the

French writers of the Nouveau Roman such as Alain Robbe-Grillet. While *Carnal Acts* maintains the traditional forward-moving plot, Porter's contradictory impulses are in evidence. The text is deliberately structured to keep the reader's mind as open as possible as regards solutions. So, too, the shock in the final chapter (Victoria's shooting) is both an illustration of the closure common in the genre, frequently in an at least temporary form of happy ending, and a subversion of it: Evie Favon, the most unspoilt of the narrative's characters, despite her physical pain and her empathy with the historical victims of her family, has been unable to avoid becoming an unfeeling Favon.

There is an interesting cross-generic aspect to plot and causality, linking crime fiction and the Gothic, that concerns secret information: 'Knowledge of this secret, in both genres, is the key to understanding the seemingly irrational and inexplicable events in the present' (Scaggs 2005: 16). In *Carnal Acts* the cruel past of the Favons continues to harm family members and many who come close to them, but the extent of this is not made fully clear until the last page. This past stays alive in the documents and volumes kept in the library at Favon Hall. It is when Evie starts researching there and creating her own texts from her ancestors' histories and the Gothic novel, *The Seeker*, that the past really impacts on the present. Her relationship with Nick is tainted by the Favons' past, even though neither of them realise it in time. When Evie does, she passes her texts on to Joni in the belief – potentially mistaken, after her mother is shot – that by leaving the Hall, she will achieve freedom.

This relationship between writer, both 'actual' author and author-function within the text, and narrative has been a feature of postmodern crime fiction and criticism. Much of this is centred around plot. By means of aspects of the narrative that pull backwards and forwards, the author, characters and reader try to make sense

of the contradictions and chaos of the material. It has been suggested that the detective ‘imposes form and causality on events, and makes the meaningless significant’ (Skenazy 1995: 121). This is not entirely the case in *Carnal Acts*, as the careful reader will realise. Joni and Heck, the main detectives, manage to explain much of what has happened, but there are parts of the narrative that they can only guess. The reader knows more because s/he has been shown scenes in which neither of the protagonists participates. The same goes for Evie: she writes down the results of her investigation, though not in the bureaucratic form that Joni and Heck will use after the investigations are over.

What about the author? Are there really ‘important parallels between detection and the act of writing’, as Scaggs suggests (2005: 73)? If so, I see them in terms of plot or narrative. With *Carnal Acts* I knew I was going to have an early scene in an Albanian-run brothel, but I had no conception of Suzana as a character. She was a result of the plot’s requirement for a trafficked slave woman and became the character she is now with no forethought on my part: a striking example of how narrative is created at the level of the functional as well as the subconscious, or perhaps even unconscious. It was only subsequently that she developed into a deeper character. Does that mean I work in a similar way to a fictional detective?<sup>8</sup> To an extent, I think it does. Not only are Joni and Heck trying to find out who is behind the murders, but so was I, and so is the reader. Who are the killers? (Though there is no mystery in the case of Suzana). What were their motives? How were they killed? Where were they killed? (It is soon clear to the police that Gaz was not killed in the river.) Finally, until Gaz is identified, there is the question of who he is.

Many crime fiction critics acknowledge the role of the reader, which has been

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<sup>8</sup> I would be very surprised to find I worked in similar ways to a real police detective, not least because the unrelenting bureaucracy, involving both paperwork and the inputting of digital data, can be imparted fictionally in a few words.

conceptualised in different ways, including the suggestion that the reader is also a detective too. ‘What the reader of detection desires at each step of the reading process is not the end, but its immediate continuation’ (Rzepka 2005: 27), in this way mirroring the activity of an investigator: each clue changes the structure of the text, as well as bringing it closer to its end. The reader may differ from the detective in that the former may wish to keep the tension and plot alive rather than wish that the case comes to an end. Rzepka also argues that a plot based on analeptic, backward glances ‘expresses a desire to create arrays’ (28). The terms ‘desire’ and ‘arrays’ are both suggestive. The latter appear to be versions of plot, anticipating ‘the completed narration of a master array at the end of the tale’ (28). I find this formulation a useful alternative to the more common ‘subplots’, which overemphasise the purely narrative elements. An array would more properly include other significant elements such as characters, settings and themes.

Desire has been defined as ‘an earnest longing or wish; a prayer or request; the object desired; lust’ (Chambers 1998: 438). There can be seen to be an almost carnal or corporeal aspect to the reading process and, by extension, to that of writing. This is related to Barthes’ idea that ‘The text is an object of pleasure’ (1976: 7). He specifically ties such pleasure not to his subjectivity but to “‘my individual”, the given which makes my body separate from other bodies and appropriates suffering or pleasure to it: it is my enjoying body I encounter’ (1975b:17). Barthes divides texts into ‘readerly’ ones that do not challenge the reader, providing ‘euphoria, fulfillment, comfort’ (1975b: 19); and ‘writerly’ ones that stretch the reader by providing ‘ecstasy’, ‘that imposes a state of loss, that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions’ (14). Desire and pleasure, even at the level of the body (the heart that

beats quicker as a plot speeds up, the sweat that breaks out when the tension is increased), seem to me to be salient features of both writing and reading. In crime fiction they have been customarily related more to plot than other elements of text. Most crime novels are readerly texts, but I tried to make *Carnal Acts* more writerly, at least in the first draft (see Chapter 8). Indeed, the novel could be seen as a carnal act both for author and reader, one which incites desire and pleasure, euphoria and fulfilment (though I hope not too much comfort), and ecstasy in the form of cultural challenges. The latter emanate primarily from the thematic issues I discuss in the following two chapters.

Plot has been defined and viewed in many different ways over the centuries. Such critical approaches have given insights into the nature of *Carnal Acts* as both story and narrative, or plot. I still believe that characters have greater significance, not least because plot flows from them more than from other sources. The pleasure/s derived from writing and reading, particularly the plots of crime fiction, are initially corporeal, but subsequently operate at levels of consciousness not easily plumbed and specific to each reader. Some readers will applaud a plot and others decry it.<sup>9</sup> The events in the narrative of *Carnal Acts* are structured to provide both comfort and disturbance, both pleasure and ecstasy. The extent to which they succeed can only be determined by each reader.

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<sup>9</sup> A good example of such disagreement is the ending of Thomas Harris's *Hannibal* (1999), in which Clarice Starling and Dr Lecter go off together as a couple. Many readers found that unconvincing. It seemed inconsistent with Starling's commitment to justice, despite the injustices she had suffered during the narrative. In the film version (Ridley Scott, 2001), she severs Lecter's hand and he escapes alone.

## 6. POWER: THE BODY AND GENDER

This chapter and the following one look at the themes of *Carnal Acts*. I have used the word ‘power’ as a general heading because it covers a wide range of meanings. A primary definition is ‘the skill, physical ability, opportunity or authority to do something’ (Chambers 1998: 1286).<sup>1</sup> Skill and physical ability can be related to the body, while authority suggests hierarchies based on various kinds of power. Another part of the definition is, ‘an individual faculty or skill’. This can be seen in the characters in a work of fiction as well as in external reality; indeed, characters are partially differentiated by their different faculties or skills. ‘Capacity for producing an effect’ can be related to the text, and in particular to what the reader creates from it. But what really gets to the heart of the matter is ‘Control or influence exercised over others’. As discussed below, *Carnal Acts* is predicated on the idea that the manipulation of power is everywhere in society. The questions are whether such control or influence is exercised knowingly or unknowingly, and to what political and ideological ends.

### 6.a The Body/ Bodies

The human body in the sense of the ‘corpse’ has been a major feature of crime

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations in this paragraph are from the same page of Chambers.

fiction since the stories of the genre's founder, Edgar Allan Poe, but the majority of the genre's textual bodies are alive, that status being linked to their roles in the text. As soon as I started planning my first crime novel, *Body Politic* (1997), I realised that bodies in as many senses as possible would be the main focus. Not only is the narrative punctuated by the violent murders of Edinburgh citizens male and female, but the metaphor of the body as the state is always to the fore as a propaganda device by the regime:

The ordinary citizens were the body of the city-state, while the guardians [the leaders] were its heart and brain and the auxiliaries [the civil servants, including the police] its eyes and ears. But what if the heart was growing weary and the mind was no longer reliable? What if the eyes no longer provided 20-20 vision and the ears heard only what they wanted to hear? (Johnston 1997: 23)

I was not aware of body and gender criticism of crime fiction at the time (the first draft was written in 1993), although research into true crime provided details of female murderers. So I created a female killer, appropriately enough in a state where gender equality is constitutionally guaranteed. The murderer is a member of the City Guard (police), but her gender is ultimately less significant than her well-trained, lethal body – something more commonly seen in male fictional killers - and vengeful mindset caused by childhood sexual abuse.

Living bodies in crime fiction can be coded in many ways. The bodies of most characters in *Carnal Acts* are relatively unblemished, except by the ageing process. Others, however, are examples of the 'grotesque body' identified by M. M. Bakhtin: 'a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished and never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body' (1984: 317). The

grotesque is to be seen in the hyperbolic, satirical and caricatural aspects of the body, such as the costume-wearing, tattooed Corham locals at the May Sunday carnival, as well as those with bloated stomachs and so on. But for Bakhtin, such a body is also ‘the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception’ (318), each body forming a link in the chain of creation; ‘the life of one body is born from the death of the preceding, older one’ (318). This continuity between life, death and rebirth is particularly relevant to *Carnal Acts*, given the roles that fertility and murder play. In some cases, the levels of grotesquerie are limited: Heck bears the broken nose from his rugby playing as well as his wounds, but he is the father of two healthy children. On the other hand Nick Etherington, whose body has also been scarred by rugby, is killed before he impregnates anyone, despite Victoria Favon’s efforts.

Bakhtin also includes dismembered parts of the body in his formulation of the grotesque: Gaz’s decapitated and handless corpse can be seen in this light, although his escape and death mean that he does not make Victoria pregnant, thus subverting the fertility implicit in the grotesque. For Bakhtin, ‘[b]irth and death are the gaping jaws of the earth and the mother’s open womb’ (329). Victoria’s sexual activities do not lead to the desired fertility; death is the result. The victim is Nick, despite his youth. He becomes fully grotesque, his face crushed beyond recognition and turned into ‘the gaping mouth, the *gueule d’enfer*’ (396), which leads to Satan’s realm. That hole is also seen as erotic by Bakhtin (329), corresponding to the kisses Nick exchanged with Victoria; and those with Evie, which could have led to fertility if his life had not been prematurely terminated. *Carnal Acts* revolves around the characters’ sexual activities and their broken link with fertility: in this, they are denied the cosmic fecundity that Bakhtin sees in the grotesque.



Bakhtin saw the ‘lower body stratum’, primarily the genitalia and bowels, as always linked to ‘the underworld’ (311). But the grotesque body, for all its need for debasement, is also connected to the external world; indeed, it is ‘cosmic and universal’ (318), relating to the elements, the sun and the stars. Death was not to be feared as it led to the continuation of life. In *Carnal Acts*, this can be linked to the vodoun religion studied by Evie, and also to the Wiccan conception of the natural world’s unity as observed by Moonbeam. But the Favons and the Albanian criminals are cut off from this cycle of rebirth. The former are infertile despite their desire for a son; their mistreatment of Evie is evidence of their perversity. As for the Albanians, the women they have enslaved are restricted to carnality without fertility; but Skender Spahia, despite the cruelty of his clan’s activities, watches his small daughter Roza playing in his London garden (Chapter 120). Thus, the link between death – the clan’s operating procedure – and fertility in Bakhtin’s vision is confirmed.

The positive ‘act of becoming’ (317) via the grotesque body that is central to Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque can be seen in characters who are not on the surface grotesque. That quality exists in all organs, including the brain. For all the debasement Suzana undergoes in the brothel, her body is not grotesque, except as regards her abused and unfeeling genitalia. She retains an unconquered and thus fertile spirit, even hiding the (phallic) knife that enables her to escape in her vagina. The corpses in the novel are grotesque not only in the Bakhtinian sense, but to emphasise the horror of violent crime. They also acknowledge the extreme levels of violence that have become widely accepted – and perhaps expected - in crime fiction since Thomas Harris’s *Red Dragon* (1981), if not earlier.

Bakhtin’s grotesque body also has ‘a social, utopian, and historic theme’ (325). While the body has a complex corporeal form, it is also the product of social

forces. This ties in with the setting of Corham, the better life that Joni seeks there, and the historical dimensions both of the town and of the Favon family. Because of the undercurrent of social power that I see in manifestations of the body in crime, and other, fiction, I have found sociological approaches useful.

Bryan Turner has proposed the idea of the ‘somatic society’, a state of being ‘within which our major political and moral problems are expressed through the conduit of the human body’ (Turner 1996: 6). Turner also posits that ‘the body is the location of anti-social desire...not a physiological fact but a cultural construct which has significant political implications’ (65). This anti-social drive can be seen in the town of Corham in *Carnal Acts*, where the locals are first seen at the traditionally anti-authoritarian May Sunday carnival. Despite the law-abiding ancient and medieval centre and the bourgeois prosperity in Corham’s suburbs north of the river, many of the inhabitants live around the post-industrial wasteland (Ironflatts). Not only are the bodies of the underprivileged (skinny or obese) set against the well fed bourgeoisie, but the ‘body’ of the town reflects versions of human corporality, with its golden abbey and reconditioned factories at one end of the spectrum, and the flattened steel plant and two-up two-down workers’ houses in Ironflatts at the other. For Turner, four issues organise a sociology of the body: ‘the reproduction of and regulation of populations in time and space, and the restraint and regulation of the body as a vehicle of the self’ (68). As noted above, Corham’s historical physical structure – built by those in power – ensured that the inhabitants had work and the necessities of life, enabling them to produce new generations of labour. The carnivalesque May Sunday was the only opportunity the working classes had to express themselves, the rest of the year being devoted to exhausting shifts that left them little energy to develop individual senses of self.

In *Carnal Acts*, Suzana illustrates several theoretical positions about the body. She has only a basic education and grew up in a remote and patriarchal Albanian mountain village, where bodies, including that of her murdered grandfather, were repositories of pain; this was also a result of her being sexually abused by her other grandfather. She has become an object rather than a subject even before she is taken to London. She quickly has to understand both how to use her body as a commercial object within a specific social location (the brothel) but also as a means of escape to another, more open environment. The physical pain she repeatedly experiences during imposed carnal acts drives her to resist, break out and seek revenge. She is hampered in this by her lack of knowledge of the English language. She cannot use her body – specifically, Bakhtin’s essential organ, the mouth - to communicate effectively. In this respect, ‘physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it’ (Scarry 1985: 4). She has become estranged from her own language because she only speaks it to the pimps, while the little English she knows has been stigmatised for her because of its links to commercialised sex. It is only through the more neutral language of Italian that she can communicate with Joni, and this helps her orientate herself in the foreign rural location, even though she stays on the run.

M. M. Bakhtin’s approach to the carnival is also useful as regards the body and social dis/order. May Sunday at the beginning of *Carnal Acts* marks ‘liberation from all that is utilitarian, practical. It means a temporary transfer to the utopian world’ (Bakhtin 1984: 276): the irony being that for several of the characters in the novel, death or serious injury rather than liberation result. Even Suzana, who does free herself, hardly finds herself in a utopia. May Sunday is traditionally celebrated by people dressing up (cross-dressing being a particular feature) and engaging in drunken mockery and misbehaviour. The festival follows hard on Beltane, the pagan ceremony

marking the beginning of summer and, thus, fertility. The phallic protrusion of Nick Etherington's traffic light costume is part of disordered creativity. The theme of excess continues at the brothel, where several characters, including Lord Favon, are disguised and/ or masked. Suzana's violent escape results in her running on to the street wearing only a leather jacket. This could be seen as another form of costume, but is as much a sign of her exclusion from the carnival and the body politic, proof of her alterity. More generally in *Carnal Acts*, May Sunday marks the beginning of the upheaval of social hierarchy that continues until Lord and Lady Favon are cast from their position of power.

The social roles of the body are unavoidably political: 'the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold on it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs' (Foucault 2005: 100). Individual bodies are acted upon by an ideology that originates in the prison, with everyone being watched, used as a source of labour, controlled and manipulated. The police are trained to uphold the law, while criminals do the opposite, although both police and the Spahia clan have their own disciplinary economies, as do all component parts of society. It is the interaction between these structures of authority that powers the narrative.

The family is one of the primary power structures, as seen in Evie's fights with her parents; Suzana's outrage at having been sold into slavery by her father, although he had little choice; Joni's problems with her mother. So, too, Nick, who has also lost his father, is looked after by his mother and grandfather, the general. Only Heck's family lives by love rather than authority, although Ag exerts a form of the latter and, in any case, the members observe social norms. Heck and Ag must defend the family unit, including his father, against the power of assassins. They are attacked

by a more extreme form of clan power, that of the Spahias. For Foucault, ‘discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, “docile” bodies’ (2005: 104). Much of *Carnal Acts* is concerned with the discipline of bodies: the brothel; the Abbey School; the army; Suzana’s fights to dominate male antagonists; and the Favons’ prisoners in the tower. Ultimately, though, it is indiscipline that triumphs. Joni lets Suzana go; Dan Reston kills Nick out of jealousy rather than on Lady Favon’s command; Lord Favon cannot resist attending the brothel; General Etherington takes the law into his own hands against the Albanians; and Rosie shoots Victoria. While Foucault’s view of bodies as subject to external power is compelling, *Carnal Acts* displays human beings as at least equally susceptible to their internal impulses.

In recent years, criticism of crime fiction has become interested in the body/ bodies, and not just in the sense of the corpse around which Golden Age novels revolve. A later stage of the death of the author can be discerned in ‘the fragmentation of the subject’ identified by Fredric Jameson (1984: 63), and this has also been taken to apply to the body – violations of which ‘can also imply a larger challenge to traditional ordering structures and values’ (Messent 2013: 80). This can be taken as an extension of Turner’s idea of regulation and restraint in the somatic society. When individual bodies are violated, society itself is under threat. Theory provides a connection with illegality as well. According to Julia Kristeva, ‘[a]ny crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility’ (1982: 4). Suzana’s attacks on the pimps were premeditated but, as well as potentially damaging the social fabric, they enable her to escape to what she hopes will be a better society. The abject body becomes the corpse, ‘a contradictory site within criminal fictions: the end point of a life that simultaneously signifies the

beginning of a narrative' (Plain 2001: 12).<sup>2</sup> This can be read as a version of Bakhtin's death and fertility links: the crime novel – the 'new' thing created – only comes about because of a dead body, one that sparks the other characters into life. However, as my earlier comments about subverting Bakhtin's scheme of the grotesque body suggested, the conventions can be adapted. In *Carnal Acts*, Gaz's death doesn't set any investigation in motion as his body is not discovered until later. The killing that begins the narrative is that of the Albanian pimp by Suzana, but his dead body is of minimal significance compared with her living one.

There are intratextual and extratextual aspects to the dead body in crime fiction. The 'corpse-as-text' (Plain: 12) is read both by the characters, particularly the investigators, and by the reader. At the same time, the modern reader exists in a world, at least in the West, in which 'physical wounding and psychological trauma have been chief among our cultural preoccupations' (Horsley and Horsley 2006: 5).<sup>3</sup> Thus, the violation of bodies is a metaphor for a more general 'breaking down of borders (of the body, the law, social ordering)' (Horsley 2005: 118). This corresponds with my adaptation both of Bakhtin's grotesque and of sociological theories. Society is composed of many people, a faceless mass, but as soon as one person is murdered, the attention of all turns to her/ him. The rupture of a single body, its metamorphosis into a grotesque object, serves to recast both individual and group conceptions of society as a whole. In *Carnal Acts*, Suzana's act of murder in self-defence causes Joni to question the police's role in chasing her.

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<sup>2</sup> There are links to the Gothic genre here. In *Carnal Acts* this is openly referenced by means of *The Seeker*, the Gothic novel written by an 18<sup>th</sup> century Favon.

<sup>3</sup> The often graphic depictions of real bodies and body parts in the media, both print and visual, is likely to have contributed to such a wound culture (for example, reporting of the Iraq War). Much crime fiction uses gruesome imagery, but not all readers accept it. Those who prefer Golden Age and 'cozy' crime novels still comprise a significant percentage of readers.

I deliberately confined the murder victims to the male gender in *Carnal Acts* until the last page, as well as attributing agency to Suzana as a female killer. Much of the violence in the novel, as in much crime fiction, is committed by men on women, though Victoria is killed by another female and mother, Rosie Etherington.

### 6.b Gender

The term ‘gender’ was traditionally used to distinguish between forms of nouns and adjectives in inflected languages. In contemporary thought, ‘*gender* designates the aspects of masculinity and femininity that are socioculturally determined, in contrast to *sex*, which is biologically determined’ (Mautner 2005: 244). There has been much study of the subject in recent years. Although ‘speaking of gender does not mean speaking only of women’ (Jehlen 1995: 265), the historical domination of men in almost every area of society has tended to render masculinity invisible, ‘passing itself off as normal and universal’ (Easthope 1990: 1). However, the basis of male power in social and corporeal terms has been placed under the spotlight by critics such as Hélène Cixous: ‘Phallogentrism is. History has never produced, recorded anything but that...Phallogentrism is the enemy. Of *everyone*. Men stand to lose by it, differently but as seriously as women’ (2001: 234). For feminism and post-feminism one of the major questions concerns, ‘where the issue of gender difference falls away to the deconstruction of gender itself’ (Tolan 2006: 338). Norms prescribing gender roles, responsibilities, sexualities and social statuses need to be interrogated, it being ‘unacceptable to insist that relations of sexual subordination determine gender position’ (Butler 2001: 249). I now consider *Carnal Acts* in the light of these

theoretical positions, paying greater attention to the female characters and the effects of male power on them.

By deciding to have Joni Pax as one of the two protagonists, I made a clear gender-based statement.<sup>4</sup> The text suggests that a female detective can cope at least as well as a male one, despite the traditionally phallogentric environment of policing. Although Joni is an unusual cop, mixed race and with a first-class Oxford degree in European languages, she is also subject to the standard pressures that women must live with: despite her build, she is assumed by men to be physically and emotionally vulnerable; her heart/ emotions are taken to rule her head/ rationality, rendering her suspect in high-risk situations; she is supposedly sexually available to any male who makes a pass; and her sexuality is seen as both a threat and an explanation for her success, the assumption being that she slept her way to her rank. However, Joni is not the only female under pressure in the novel. Her boss, ACC Ruth Dickie, is a strict disciplinarian who has conformed to male prejudice to get close to the summit of her profession: she takes no risks with her clothes and is stricter than most males in her position would be, showing no favour to Joni or to female suspects.

Joni, younger, a freer spirit and lower on the promotion scale than Ruth Dickie, is less prepared to conform. She feels different from everyone in the force, male and female, and has little in common with local people (except Nick, who is doing the same A-levels as she did). The one person she is drawn to is Suzana, an 'other' like herself. Suzana is foreign, speaks very little English, has been sexually abused, is a prisoner and, at the outset, is utterly debased. Her determination to escape and take revenge could be rooted in the traditions of her home village in Albania, or it

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<sup>4</sup> Despite my use of a non-gender specific pseudonym. As mentioned above, Joni was originally to have been the main protagonist – and perhaps still is for some readers.



could be the product of her own character. Like Joni after London, she has to relocate and rediscover herself in a new environment following her escape.

Evie Favon is a character I did not originally plan. She is, at least in part, defined by her relationship to another woman, her mother Victoria. But while Evie may have gone along with the prevailing circumstances when she was younger, she has been in conflict with Victoria since her temporary crippling by her father. She sets her lover Nick's death in train, unaware that he had previously been with her mother. Victoria's sexual incontinence is caused by her need to produce a son to keep the Hall and estate in the close family. For all the power she exercises over men, including what the law might classify as the rape of Gaz and Oliver, she is still subject to the patriarchal system of aristocratic inheritance; indeed, she is complicit with it, happy to take the benefits it provides. For Evie, at the last, her mother deserves to die, if not for that complicity then for her involvement in Nick's death.

Joni's mother Moonbeam taps into a form of power that was traditionally restricted to women, the witchcraft that is now called Wicca. Like Victoria, she exerts power over the men she takes as lovers, setting them up as customers for the drugs she peddles, specialising in short relationships, and eventually compromising Joni by snaring Morrie Simmons. A former hippy, she subverts phallogocentric power structures, although she is still subject to sexual desire. Her vision of the land and sky's essential unity conforms to the fertility/ continuity theme in Bakhtin's system, her Wiccan potions and objection to the despoliation of the countryside giving priority to the natural world.

Two other female characters play what are, on the surface, much more conservative roles. Heck's loving wife Ag is a primary school headmistress, the

mother of two children, carer of her father-in-law, and competent home maker.<sup>5</sup> But she is also a fighter, one capable of taking on a professional assassin. Generalisations about women's functions within phallogocentric society can be less satisfactory than focusing on their individual qualities. Ag may be a traditional caring wife, but she can tap into atavistic reserves of resistance that predate contemporary social mores: the stereotypical mother fighting to protect her young. Rosie Etherington, who lost her husband before the narrative began, then has to deal with the deaths of both her only son and her father-in-law. She fulfils the housewife role, not having a job, and has less agency than Ag, who spots Suzanna and reports her to Heck. In the end, Roise turns into an avenging murderer, striking down not a male representative of the patriarchal society she has been subject to throughout her life, but a fellow woman, though Victoria is complicit with phallogocentric structures of power. This suggests that 'female' does not imply homogeneity, any more than 'male' does: Heck has very little in common with either Lord Favon or Dan Reston.

Does crime fiction criticism offer more specific ways of explicating gender? The common view held that men were rational and women emotional. A Sherlock Holmes story such as *The Sign of Four* (1890) clearly shows the great detective as inductive thinker, explicator, hunter and, with Dr Watson, fighter. By contrast, Mary Morstan is a frightened young woman, rewarded for her subservience with marriage to Watson.<sup>6</sup> 'Clearly these roles are cultural constructs rather than realities, but the ideological constraints, particularly on women, meant that any deviance from the perceived norms of gender was condemned by society' (Worthington 2011: 42): this applies even when women act as detectives, as they did from early in the development of the genre. No matter how successful a Victorian 'lady detective' such as W. S.

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<sup>5</sup> As Ag has a job, the American term seems more appropriate than 'housewife'.

<sup>6</sup> And, beyond the story, she was rewarded with death to allow Holmes and her widower to continue their 'partnership' uninterrupted.

Hayward's Mrs Paschal or the unnamed protagonist of Andrew Forester (Forrester in some sources) might be, their creations did not represent 'a serious expression of feminism; the stories that featured these two women were firmly escapist' (Craig and Cadogan 1986: 15).<sup>7</sup>

Crime fiction has provided various roles for women in its texts. They may be private investigators, such as Agatha Christie's elderly but incisive Miss Marple; they may be victims – the tradition of woman as ravaged corpse starts as early as Poe's stories; they may be suspects (*passim*); they may be *femmes fatales*; and they may be police officers. As *Carnal Acts* contains both a version of the femme fatale and a female detective inspector, I will concentrate on those functions.

The *femme fatale*, defined as 'an irresistibly attractive woman who brings difficulties or disaster on men' (Chambers 1998: 593), relates to corporeal and carnal femininity: 'The troublesome body of the woman is a generic constant of the interwar period' (Plain 2001: 30), both in hardboiled and Golden Age fiction. This aspect of female characters in crime fiction has changed in recent years, but it has not disappeared. In the stories of Raymond Chandler and his contemporaries, women are frequently presented as sexually incontinent, scheming and potentially lethal. So, too, there are deadly women in the works of Christie and her contemporaries. But the classic *femme fatale* is to be found in mid 20<sup>th</sup> century hardboiled fiction, a memorable example being Phyllis Nirdlinger in James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity* (1943), who killed her husband's previous wife and several patients when she worked as a nurse before asking her lover, Walter Huff, to help her murder her husband in an insurance scam.<sup>8</sup> As Lee Horsley has pointed out, the novel's melodrama is

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<sup>7</sup> Both authors were male. One wonders what their motivation was to create female protagonists in the mid-Victorian social environment.

<sup>8</sup> In Billy Wilder's film *Double Indemnity* (1944), script by Wilder and Raymond Chandler, Phyllis's surname became Dietrichson, perhaps a more obviously German name with the US fighting the Axis.

simplified, ‘making the femme fatale even more culpable, scheming, manipulative, not excused by madness’ (2009: 76). Opinions vary about the significance of the *femme fatale* in crime fiction. It has been seen as ‘probably the genre’s most famous stereotype’ (Plain 2001: 8), an arguable point in modern times, when the drunken, divorced, music-loving, haunted male cop has proliferated. Many contemporary writers abjure the *femme fatale* completely, preferring competent and self-aware investigators (for example, Val McDermid’s Carol Jordan, first seen in *The Mermaids Singing* 1995) and socially and/ or psychologically damaged killers (for example, Barbara Vine’s Vera Hillyard in *A Dark-Adapted Eye*, 1986 – set, suggestively, during the 1940s, at the zenith of noir fiction). And indeed, it may be that certain elements of the *femme fatale* – intelligence, cunning, quick-thinking, physical dexterity, a propensity for violence when required - informed the creation of some female investigators.

In *Carnal Acts* I tried to avoid stereotypical aspects of the *femme fatale*. Victoria Favon is indubitably a siren, not only highly attractive to men but also fully aware of her effect on them. She is sexually active with male partners of different ages and classes, with a predilection for initiating young men such as Nick. But she herself is a victim, in part because of her own body. Although she gave birth to her daughter Evie, she has been unable to produce the son who would keep the Hall and estate in the immediate family. Her relationship with her husband functions only on the surface, he having his own sexual preferences, and she does not get on well with Evie. While her rebarbative character is partially responsible for the family’s failings, she attempts to do her duty as perceived by her husband and class by continuing to try for a son. On the other hand, she is reckless enough to carry on business dealings with the Spahia clan. It is unclear how much she knows about the Albanians’ criminal

activities; with her intelligence it is likely she at least has suspicions. In fact, recklessness is a major character flaw: if she had controlled her jealousy and not gone chasing after Nick with Dan Reston, the former might not have been killed. And while she claimed she knew nothing about the murder, she probably had a good idea from Reston's rage. Perhaps Plain's reference to the *femme fatale* as the genre's great stereotype is still applicable. I tried to avoid conventional characteristics, but ultimately could not resist them. The plot ends in her death by shooting, as with so many previous such women on page and screen, and some readers will take that as the punishment traditionally meted out to transgressive women in the genre. The irony is that she was killed by Rosie Etherington, the opposite of a siren.

Moonbeam Pax is a *femme fatale* of sorts, but in her case I deliberately played with the stereotype. She is in her fifties, still sexually active but hardly conventionally attractive, and in a different world: that of Wicca. But she too is a victim of sorts, abandoned by Joni's father and kept at arm's length by her daughter for decades. She is still concerned about Joni and worked hard to get her to the North East. She may be a largely unsuccessful mother, like Victoria Favon, but at least she sticks to her task.

Suzana is the opposite of the *femme fatale* in *Carnal Acts*, despite her lethal qualities: she kills one man and injures several others. As a prostitute, she is forced to use her body to satisfy the needs of men. Suzana can be seen as the 'final girl' (Clover 1992: 44) of teen slasher movies, the one who successfully fights for survival by demonstrating supposedly masculine qualities of aggression and endurance. The fork, knives and stones with which she kills and wounds her attackers have phallic or testicular characteristics. Readers must decide whether trafficking and enslavement in the brothel entitle her to act as she does. The fact that Joni allows her to escape is a

pointer towards forgiveness. I suggested earlier that Suzana is raised almost to the level of protagonist. Her escape enables her to re-establish a healthy relationship with her body: she breathes fresh air, explores, tends to her wounds, eats (admittedly in one case after exercising extreme violence on a sheep), and learns some English. All this moves her away from victimhood and the abject. She is also that unusual figure, a 'good' or at least justified female murderer, an example of alterity that problematises readers and suggests that conventional norms of behaviour and legality do not serve women adequately.

There has been much study of female investigators, though mostly directed towards private eyes rather than police detectives. It has been claimed that 'women detectives are not at the forefront of social emancipation or fictional innovation' (Klein 1995: 151), though that position is qualified by the assertion that '[f]eminist thought has provided novelists and readers not merely affirmative-action opportunities for new detectives (gay, female, lesbian, black, Asian, native American, etc.) but the challenges, disruptions, demands, and encouragement that assure the future of the genre' (241).<sup>9</sup> A more optimistic view, bolstered by the groundbreaking works of authors such as Val McDermid, Stella Duffy, Katharine V. Forrest and Barbara Wilson, is that 'chipping-away at ground level at the gender assumptions of the past helps to further that social revolution in which we are all engaged' (Messent 2013: 95). *Carnal Acts* is a contribution to that revolution.

Thomas Harris's Clarice Starling (*The Silence of the Lambs*, *Hannibal*) is a modern archetype of the female detective. She is largely defined by her opposition to and eventual partnership with the male Dr Lecter. An FBI trainee in the first book, she is an experienced but disillusioned special agent in the second. Much is made of her

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<sup>9</sup> The first quotation was written in 1988, the second in the afterword to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of Klein's book in 1995.

underprivileged background, which she uses to encourage herself when she is up against it, as well as to gain empathy with people, especially women. She gained scholarships to study at university, driven by the urge to better herself and, later, to excel in her career. This all comes to naught in *Hannibal*, where she falls foul of her superiors and is driven to consort with the ultimate example of both alterity and illegality, the monster Lecter. It would be fair to say that the archetypal aspects of Starling are restricted to the period of her learning and success in *The Silence of the Lambs*, rather than her dereliction of duty at the end of *Hannibal*. The male author seems to be hinting that Starling's refusal to accept the patriarchal/ phallogocentric system that let her down is both logical and valid.

Although there are female police investigators in crime fiction – former New York City Transit Police detective Dorothy Uhnak's Christie Opara was one of the first (in *Policewoman*, 1964) – they are not numerous. Examples include Katharine V. Forrest's Kate Delafield in the US and Val McDermid's Carol Jordan, mentioned above. Delafield is a lesbian, increasing her alterity. She is both 'supercop, upright holder of procedural conformity' and 'maverick, transgressor of just about every rule in the book concerning sex with witnesses' (Plain 2001: 185). The Delafield novels 'begin a long-overdue feminist revision of the police procedural' (Reddy 2003b: 200). This revision has not proceeded very far. The most prominent British female police novelists have male detectives: P. D. James's Commander Adam Dalgliesh and Ruth Rendell's DCI Wexford (both admittedly started before women detectives were more common in crime fiction); Mo Hayder's DI Caffrey; Elizabeth George's DI Lynley. These men are supported by female secondary characters, such as James's DI Kate Miskin and George's DS Barbara Havers, but 'few fully-empowered British police heroines have so far emerged in print' (Priestman 2003: 187). Given the high number

of high-quality female writers, I am at a loss to explain why this is the case. There are other kinds of female law enforcement officials in print (for example, Patricia Cornwell's medical examiner Kay Scarpetta) and there are female detectives on TV (notably Lynda LaPlante's Jane Tennison) and film (for example, US Marshal Karen Sisco in Steven Soderbergh's *Out of Sight*, 1998, based on the Elmore Leonard novel of that name, 1996).<sup>10</sup>

I was aware of this gap in the market when I created Joni Pax. More significant, however, was the challenge to construct a convincing and non-stereotypical female detective. So Joni is mixed race, has an under-privileged background, was a scholarship student, and is driven to succeed in sometimes hostile male environment: all like Clarice Starling. I set her up to be strikingly attractive, whence her likeness to Pam Grier as Jackie Brown in Quentin Tarantino's film *Jackie Brown* (1997).<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Joni is celibate throughout *Carnal Acts*, having been cheated on by her last lover and despite being an object of sexual attraction to her male colleagues. Like Starling in *Hannibal*, she is in command of a botched raid, though I did not have this intertextual link in mind, at least consciously. Joni's move from the Met and her uneasy relationship with her former colleague Cathie Rendell results from the crippling of Roland Malpas in the raid she commanded. In the phallographic world of the police, failure costs female officers more than their male counterparts. Joni decided to leave before she was pushed, directly or indirectly. Her establishment of a working relationship with Heck, himself trying to come to terms

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<sup>10</sup> The phenomenon, or lack of one, is even more surprising when one considers that many women read crime fiction and that publishing is one of the few industries in which women prosper at the most senior level: examples are Dame Gail Rebeck, CEO of Random House UK, and Ursula Mackenzie, CEO of Little, Brown UK.

<sup>11</sup> Based on the Elmore Leonard novel *Rum Punch* (1992), in which the female protagonist is white and has the surname Burke. The director's change of the character's race shows he was interested in having an African American female protagonist, though Brown is an unsubtle choice of surname.



with Ruth Dickie's leadership, is a major part in the development of her – and his - character.

To what extent are Joni's capabilities as a detective specifically female? She runs and works out in order to give herself a chance of matching the male officers in action, though Heck is not fully fit and Morrie Simmons hardly a model of robustness. She has undoubted empathy, particularly with the Albanian prostitute-victims, and is able to communicate with them in Italian; the latter, of course, is not a purely feminine talent. She possesses an innate warning system, as when she follows the young people towards the brothel (*Carnal Acts*, Chapter 8). In the first draft I wanted to link this to her mother's paranormal activities and to the vodoun that she learns about later in the narrative, but this was subsequently diluted.

Like many fictional cops, Joni is one of a kind, not least because she is one of the few black people in Corham and in the local force. She shares the stereotype of loneliness when she is not working, as laid down by Clarice Starling. She explores the countryside and occasionally visits her mother, but spends much of her free time reading criminology journals in Italian. This points to her dedication to the job, but she is not inspired by a desire for promotion, perhaps because she sees what high office has done to Ruth Dickie (or vice versa). Rather, she wants to solve her cases because of her commitment to the victims, which distinguishes her from her male colleagues, even Heck; until the end, when he covers for her. The victims include the Albanian prostitutes and Nick but, more importantly, the murderer Suzana. Joni's decision to let her go demonstrates that she has a personal system of ethics that takes precedence over the law she has sworn to uphold. Finally, she finds herself open to the material that Evie gives her, mainly for racial reasons but also because the voodoo gods test her rationality. Her realisation that slavery continues to be a scourge of

civilised societies leads her back to the black side of her heritage.

Body and gender, closely related as they are, cannot be separated from other aspects of power, as the next chapter will demonstrate.

## 7. POWER: RACE AND CLASS

As we have seen, gendered structures of power are evident both in the individual body and in the formations of family and society. Ideological underpinnings also exist in terms of race and class, both of which play important parts in *Carnal Acts*. In each case, I describe theoretical and critical approaches to the concepts, both in general and as regards crime fiction, and then apply them to the novel.

### 7.a Race

Race, a term historically freighted with conflicting definitions, is rooted in ideas of difference between people of one culture and another/ others. Such doctrines ‘have often placed a central emphasis on physical appearance in defining the “Other,” and on common ancestry’ (Appiah 1995: 274): note the reference to the other, which has been a feature of my earlier discussions of body and gender. According to Terry Eagleton, ‘[t]he “other” is no longer merely a theoretical concept but groups and peoples written out of history, subjected to slavery, insult, mystification, genocide’ (2008: 205). This has the potential to generate racism and feeds into exclusionary discourses of nationalism, which posit an exclusive common ancestry. Physical appearance is not the only criterion in defining the racial other. Appiah observes that members of each race were assumed to share ‘certain fundamental, biologically heritable, moral and intellectual characteristics with each other that they did not share

with members of any other race' that formed 'the *essence* of that race' (1995: 276). This 'essence', constructed from eighteenth century scientific assumptions, would, as Ania Loomba has noted, come to underpin 'the modern discourse of "race"' (2005: 57) and form the foundation of a range of racialist hierarchies and supremacist doctrines. Even now, '[t]o be black and British is to be unnamed in official discourse. The construction of a national British identity is built upon a notion of a racial belonging, upon a hegemonic white ethnicity that never speaks its presence' (Mirza 1997: 3).<sup>1</sup> As a Scot, I would suggest that British national identity has always been a complex and fluid concept, but there is no doubt that non-whites in the UK, especially non-white women, often find themselves on the margins of society.

Many approaches to race have been subsumed into postcolonial theory and criticism, which unpick national histories. European imperialism spread across the globe from the fifteenth century and established the countries of origin as great powers. Defenders of empire-building cite the benefits conferred by trade both on home nations and conquered ones, with the inhabitants of the latter leading improved lives because of imposed religions and other social values. On the other hand, Edward Said draws attention to the cost of such grandiose imperial projects: 'Dismissed or forgotten were the ravaged colonial peoples who for centuries endured summary justice, unending economic oppression, distorting of their social and intimate lives, and a recourseless submission that was the function of unchanging European superiority' (1994: 24). Slavery, one of the key economic engines of imperialism, has been seen as 'nothing but one form of capitalism, where the slave functions like capital, or like property' (Loomba 2005: 112), although it may be a non-capitalist practice that 'coexists with, feeds into, and aids the development of capitalism' (113).

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<sup>1</sup> As the rise of UKIP in the May 2013 elections shows, issues of race and immigration are still very much on the political agenda, in England if not in other parts of the UK.

Whatever the case, discussions of race, imperialism and postcolonialism can hardly avoid slavery, not least because it involved mental and psychological repression as well as physical bondage .

Two key texts that bring together race, plantation slavery, gender and the body are Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (2000; first published 1966). In the former, Rochester, who eventually marries Jane, keeps his Creole wife Bertha hidden in Thornfield Hall. The prototypical madwoman in the attic, Bertha burns down the house, killing herself and blinding her husband. In Rhys's take on the story, Antoinette (Bertha) recounts her life before and during her marriage, referring to native customs and languages, as well as to Obeah, the Jamaican form of vodoun. As well as her mixed race, these make marriage to an Englishman unbearable, as the first-person narrative makes clear. Regarding *Jane Eyre*, it has been argued that 'the active ideology of imperialism' (Spivak 2006: 678) provides the novel's discursive field. Rochester's experiences as a plantation owner in the Caribbean affect him and send him back to England, though he brings his wife with him secretly. This racially and gendered other provides an ironic and destructive link to the slavery-tainted riches that Rochester initially enjoys at the aptly named Thornfield Hall. Rhys suggests that Antoinette's very identity has been determined by imperialism, to the extent that she 'sees her *self* as her Other, Brontë's Bertha' (Spivak 2006: 680). Rochester mistakenly or even deliberately sees her as mad to justify his actions. Thus, imperialism is an ideology that lies deep in the being of everyone involved with it, no matter which race they belong to.

For crime fiction critics, race has provoked much recent debate. According to Peter Messent, 'race has greater weight than gender in determining social and political position and power (or rather, its lack)' (2013: 96). Overt racism in modern crime

fiction is uncommon, but ‘there is perhaps a subtle, lingering racism in the continuing allocation of major roles in crime fiction to white, Western characters’ (Worthington 2011: 82). This was one of the reasons that I created a mixed race protagonist in Joni Pax. I am not aware of any British police novels with black or mixed race detectives to the fore, either male or female. Even in the US, the majority of black investigators (for example, those of Walter Mosley, Barbara Neely, Charlotte Carter, and Gary Phillips) are PIs, while the most notorious police detectives, Chester Himes’ Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, are male. I discuss Paula Woods’ police fiction below. American and British TV series have recently presented black and other race detectives in lead roles (for example, *The Wire*, *Southland* and *Luther*), with non-white female characters usually appearing as members of ensemble casts.

W. E. B. Du Bois’ concept of the black American’s double-consciousness has long provided a nuanced perspective: the world ‘only lets him [the Negro] see himself [sic] through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others’ (2007: 8). Thus, black Americans - though the idea can be applied to minority blacks in other countries, with allowances made for different circumstances – ‘are forced to see themselves as second-class citizens by reason of their African ancestry, both biological and cultural. Then and only then are they allowed the privilege of seeing themselves as American citizens’ (Soitos 1996: 33). This double-consciousness can be seen to underlie much black crime fiction, which ‘is not primarily about the process of detection, and that does not centre on the reassuring restitution of order’ (Horsley 2005: 197).<sup>2</sup> Thus, conceptualising the world in different ways from the norm (for example, in terms of race, gender, class) challenges the standard genre conventions and discomforts the

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<sup>2</sup> This judgement was made on the work of Chester Himes, but I believe it can be applied to much black crime fiction, and even to *Carnal Acts* (see below).

reader on the way to making her/ him more aware of societal and interpersonal inequalities.

Finally, it has been said that ‘the color line is both a social construct *and* an essential, natural fact’ (Maureen T. Reddy 2003a: 87), a combination she agrees is arguably contradictory. This makes race an even more intangible idea, one which may be open to manipulation not only by oppressors but by the oppressed as well. In her discussion of Walter Mosley’s *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), Reddy sees the author as reversing the meaning of race: rather than blackness, ‘whiteness represents confusion, terror, sickness, and death’ (2003a: 97). Daphne Monet, the *femme fatale*, is thought to be white, but is actually a black woman passing as white. So, like Jean Rhys’s Antoinette/ Bertha, Daphne is both black and white, the societal norm and the other. Although her gender is not in dispute, her racially defined body is. There can be no certainties and even the evidence of the characters’ own eyes – and the reader’s creative mind – is deceptive.

What light do these ideas cast on *Carnal Acts*? Inevitably this part of the discussion will be centred on Joni Pax, as she is the only major character of colour. Her interactions with the white characters impact on how she views herself. Joni’s attitudes to her skin colour and cultural background are defined by the decisions she has taken throughout her life. Although she grew up in impoverished East London where there were plenty of black and mixed race people, from an early age she felt uncomfortable, at least in part because she was raised by her white mother after her black father, whom she has never met, abandoned them. Self-reliant, intelligent and committed to her schoolwork, Joni turned her back on a working-class black culture she perceived as excluded and disenfranchised. By doing so, she was not consciously trying to become white like Daphne Monet. On the other hand, it could be argued that,

by concentrating on her studies, especially European languages, in her determination to get into Oxford University, she was acting like a bourgeois white adolescent, though without parental support. On the other hand, she has a strong physique, winning an athletics blue as a javelin thrower. Subconscious stereotypes can be hard to avoid.<sup>3</sup>

I am aware that I am discussing a textual character, function or agent as if she were a real human being. I did not deliberately apply these aspects to her character and had not read the books I have referred to in this section at the time. However, I was aware of the general political situation in London, having lived in the East End during the Eighties.<sup>4</sup>

Slavery was part of black history that Joni kept at a distance, although, given her age and London upbringing, she would probably have learned about it in history lessons. It is only at the end of *Carnal Acts*, when Evie Favon gives her the notes and texts she has composed from the family library, that Joni decides to educate herself further. By that time, she has seen contemporary slavery at close range in several forms and is more open to black history, as well as to the religious elements that she had no interest in before. This signifies the beginning of her path to accepting herself as the other, something she has previously been unable to do. Although Joni is not Brontë's Bertha, who has inherited insanity or, as Jean Rhys suggests, has been driven mad by the constraints of social and cultural imperialism, she is finally aware that there is much about her culture and her genetic make up that she needs to understand.

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<sup>3</sup> The two best known British female javelin throwers of recent times are Tessa Sanderson, who is black, and Fatima Whitbread, who is half Turkish Cypriot and half Greek Cypriot.

<sup>4</sup> I have spent much of the last twenty-five years in Greece, where there were few non-Caucasians until the end of the twentieth century. The colour of immigrants' skin (that of both legal and illegal immigrants) has become a highly politicised issue in recent years, culminating in the election of parliament of eighteen extreme right party members in 2012.



This is Du Bois's double-consciousness, which Joni earlier managed to suppress. Growing up in East London, she was more driven to escape by the poverty of her surroundings, but her decision to eschew all aspects of black culture was rooted in the realisation that British multiculturalism in the 1980s and 90s was not inclusive enough for her to feel comfortable. As Evie's ability to handle the exploitative history of her family suggests, society has changed for the better. Joni went to Oxford in 1990s, when things were still relatively patriarchal, and then on to the institutionally racist Metropolitan Police in the years after the Stephen Lawrence murder (1993).<sup>5</sup> While Joni's conscientiousness and willingness to make sacrifices for her career mean that she pays little attention when she is called 'Pam' or 'Jackie' (the references are to the 1997 Tarantino film mentioned above), she is aware of her alterity, particularly in north east England, where there are fewer black and mixed race people than in London. But double-consciousness is something that, for all its disadvantages, she must either become accustomed to or get beyond.

The issue of black-skinned people passing as white (in Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress*, as well as in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, 2000) is not one that applies directly to Joni Pax; she does nothing to change her colour or disguise it. However, she does recognise that she is 'a choc ice' (Chapter 154), as one Premier League footballer described another: that is, a black person with white sensibilities.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, she is half-white so the binary model of black:white is not directly relevant to her. It is here that the idea of hybridity is relevant to black crime fiction, as pointed out by Lee Horsley (2005: 232-3). Stuart Hall sees race as a construct, and being black as an 'unstable identity' (1987: 136). This instability is exacerbated in the case of a mixed-race character, and Joni's sense of self is further complicated by her

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<sup>5</sup> According to the National Black Police Association, the Met is still institutionally racist (*The Independent*, April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2013).

<sup>6</sup> The equivalent racial slur in the US is 'OREO', after the black biscuit with white filling.

father's American nationality. His permanent absence means she experienced no nurture from him and he represents another estranging factor, increasing her difference from the wider community. In the author's and readers' varied constructions of Joni from the text, different factors will be given greater significance. The underlying reality for Joni is that she is a hybrid, a Creole, a person of mixed race. How she handles that important element in her consciousness and life is a complex process, as is how the reader recreates it.

Black British writers of crime fiction, notably Mike Phillips and Victor Headley, have tried to overcome stereotypes and point to the confusions and potential illusions of identity. The former uses a private investigator as protagonist and the latter Yardie gang members. Probably because police officers in the 1990s were seen as racist authority figures, they have not featured as major characters. As yet, there has been no British equivalent of Paula L. Woods' LAPD homicide detective Charlotte Justice, who appears in four novels that are much concerned with issues of race as well as sexual harassment.<sup>7</sup> In the novel *Strange Bedfellows* (2006), Justice, whose husband and daughter were killed in a drive-by shooting over a decade earlier, is witness to the ways race affects both black and white people, but also has to deal with corruption in her work-place. She is fully aware of the nature of her colleagues, saying to her lover, "It's just that most cops are so..." "Racist?" "No, *paranoid* that something as flashy as a Mercedes would attract the wrong kind of attention." (Woods 2006: 7). This ambivalent exchange demonstrates that racial prejudice is not the only crisis defining contemporary American life.

To what extent is Joni's life defined by racial factors? As noted above, readers will draw different conclusions. For some, the fact that she is of mixed race will be

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<sup>7</sup> There are other American writers with black women police detectives, such as Eleanor Taylor Bland and Judith Smith-Levin.

paramount. Others will see her as a woman in a phallogocentric world, with her corporeal/ carnal existence - and the ways her colleagues respond to her physical appearance - being most significant. And others will see her as Heck's subordinate, the junior partner in a generically defined working relationship. The ideal reader will take account of all these characteristics, as well as more drawn from the text - not least of which is class. As Joni has a hippy teacher for a mother and a missing American for a father, as well as a problematic childhood in East London followed by further education at Oxford University, it is clear that her class position will be complex and ambivalent.

### 7.b Class

Here I use class to refer to the structural levels of society, but also as a means of focusing on the distribution and use/ abuse of power within and across those levels. Class as a theoretical term occurs 'as part of an *explanation* [original italics] of systematic inequalities', while in Marxist thought it is 'associated with a theory of ownership and control' (Scruton 1982: 67): that is, the individual is defined by her/ his relation to the means of production. Thus, class is linked to economic factors, as it involves labour, trade, the professions, and the ownership of land and property.

Three levels of social life have been identified: the economic structure, in which relations 'are independent of and external to individuals' wills'; 'the intersubjective or meaningful level of social consciousness...that comprises how individuals see themselves and one another'; and 'the level of action, both individual and collective in various spheres of life' (Lukes 1991: 78). It is striking how

applicable these levels are to novels. Characters envisage themselves and others within an often alienating economic structure, and act both individually and/ or in alliance with others against a perceived enemy. Of course, the extent to which social consciousness is something that characters are aware of and to which action is taken rather than controlled by unseen factors within the narrative text are open to question. In any case, within these levels there is room for many kinds of false consciousness, distorted views of the world brought about by ideology. Here we reach the most intangible and potentially harmful aspect of power: ideology is defined as ‘any comprehensive and mutually consistent set of ideas by which a social group makes sense of the world’ (Jones 2009: 255). Marxists have seen ideology as ‘the world-view of the dominant’ (255), while others see it in less political terms, as ‘a prescriptive scheme which operates so as to destroy the possibility of rational argument’ (Kettler 1991: 235). Institutions involved in social control such as the police are particularly vulnerable to such unseen influences. Orders from their political masters may be acted upon in a relatively transparent way, but the ideological nature of the police itself is much harder to detect. This applies to the institutional racism mentioned above, but also to prejudices against women and university graduates within the ranks, as well as to the tendency towards corruption of some officers and hatred of the internal investigators who work to uncover it. Crime novelists such as James Ellroy, Joseph Wambaugh and Michael Dibdin have unpicked the nature of the police and individual officers much more critically than Golden Age authors such as Michael Innes. The post-Golden Age generation of police novelists such as P. D. James and Ruth Rendell also tends not to criticise the police as an institution.

Literary theorists have brought ideas about class and power into their own field, often to attack each other. Eagleton writes, 'Even in the act of fleeing modern ideologies, however, literary theory reveals its often unconscious complicity with them' (2008: 171): the word 'unconscious' underlines why I described ideology as harmful above. People are influenced and controlled by forces of which they have no understanding; indeed they may not even know that such forces exist. This applies to classes or groups complicit with the dominant ideology too. An additional point is that classes and their ideologies are time-dependent, and that new ones are always arriving on the scene: 'a more general level of ever-emergent collective agents also acting to freely chose from a contingent range of possible courses that they are forced to confront by specific historical developments, among which not least in importance are the consequences of past actions' (O'Hara 1995: 417). While the nature of ideology undermines the concept of free choice, historical context is one of the many factors contributing to the formation of characters in fiction. The issue of history and its consequences is central to *Carnal Acts*. Although Lord Favon is only dimly aware of what his ancestors did to make the family fortune, he acts to maintain it, as does his wife, even more strenuously.

Crime fiction critics are well aware of class: 'criminality is itself socially and politically as well as legally constructed and the discourses surrounding crime intersect with many others' (Worthington 2011: 165). Thus, criminal behaviour in every novel can be seen as the intersection of themes. For *Carnal Acts*, these are primarily the body, gender, race and class, but the genre has confronted such questions from early in its existence. Arthur Conan Doyle, although a conservative, has been praised for bringing potentially disruptive subjects such as racism,

imperialism and class conflict 'into the immediate, personal orbit of everyday late-Victorian men and women' (Rzepka 2005: 120). Peter Messent recommends thinking about the genre of crime fiction as regards 'its relationship to the dominant social system' (2013: 11). A useful checklist of socio-political issues prominent in crime writing from the late 1920s is 'class prejudice and exploitation, commercial greed and the plundering of the environment, consumerism and the politics of economic self-interest' (Horsley 2005: 159). Much has been written about the aristocratic and upper middle class elements of Golden Age crime fiction. Raymond Chandler identified its essentially bourgeois nature: 'The only reality the English detection writers knew was the conventional accent of Surbiton and Bognor Regis' (1946: 234). Indeed, many classic hardboiled works are politically engaged. This is unsurprising as such novels feature the 'marginal professional', whose life 'is a form of rebellion, a rejection of the ordinary concepts of success and respectability' (Cawelti 1976: 144). This can be taken to extreme, nihilistic ends. With reference to Dashiell Hammett's *The Glass Key* (1931), Jon Thompson has said that 'society itself is essentially unknowable' and that 'everyone and everything is tainted in some way; every institution is compromised' (1993: 147). Texts like these can be seen as precursors of post-World War Two existentialism, whose proponents were 'suspicious of or hostile to the submersion of the individual in larger public groups or forces' (Mautner 2005: 207). Thus, the individual must break free of class and other ideological structures, no matter how difficult that may be. But for Albert Camus, 'the world does not give meaning to individuals' (Mautner 2005: 209). His novel *The Outsider* (*L'Étranger*, 1942) revolves around a senseless murder and points to the arbitrary nature of justice. Power, of which class is a major manifestation, is seen to be incomprehensible and inimical to human beings.

A suggestive way of approaching these positions in relation to *Carnal Acts* is in relation to the built environment. This can be seen in terms of class. Corham is primarily bourgeois, a market town serving the surrounding countryside. The Roman remains and the abbey link it to times in the past when power structures – the Roman Empire, the Church - impinged heavily on the populace. The private Abbey School is another institution that is both traditional and socially divisive. There was industry in Corham itself, the distillery and sugar factory requiring workers to produce goods that profited the Favon family and the town's elite. The steel plant in Ironflatts, south of the river but part of Corham, was an even larger industrial facility, requiring a large number of workers, who were housed in two-up two-down houses or glass tower blocks. As Joni sees when she visits the area with Morrie Simmons, after the steel plant was demolished the area became an urban wasteland, its inhabitants underprivileged and forgotten.

Joni struggles to come to terms with the rural environment because she has never had contact with it before. Another reason for her unease is that the cases she investigates make her aware of the systems of class power that operate, often beneath the surface. These centre on Favon Hall, where the riches garnered from the family's colonial past, including the large estate, are now under threat from new economic factors. From being a source of wealth in a glorious setting, at least in the eyes of the occupants of the Hall, Northumberland has become a tainted Eden.<sup>8</sup> The estate's fields are worked by foreign labourers, brutalised by the British ganger Wayne Garston but under the control of the Albanian Spahia clan. The Spahias are also moving in on other sources of wealth generation, some of them above board. The Favons, in particular the more intelligent Victoria, have been cultivating them as

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<sup>8</sup> Without the potential redemption that W. H. Auden saw in the detective novel. He saw the 'detective story addict' as 'being restored to the Garden of Eden, to a state of innocence' (1980: 24). Modern crime fiction opens many other possibilities to readers.

business partners. The reader is made aware of the family's historical greed by the research Evie does; that, among other reasons, turns her against her parents. The West African vodoun religion, with its close ties to earth, air and water, is a liberating force, both for Evie and, later, for Joni, because of its historical role as the banned cult of Caribbean slaves.<sup>9</sup> The most visible signs of the modern world's technological wealth-making are the wind turbines, which the British state rewards property owners like Lord Favon to erect on their land: even contemporary technology benefits the landed gentry.

Another theoretical approach, ecocriticism, is 'an avowedly political mode of analysis', with its exponents seeking 'a synthesis of environmental and social concerns' (Garrard 2004: 3), among the latter the ownership of the land. It is rooted in studies of the earth, linking them to literary representations: pollution and other damaging results of human activity, climate change, the effects of agriculture and industry on animal life and so on. If the Favons are the negative factor in the 'eco-equation', the unlikely positive factor is Joni's mother Moonbeam. Through her Wiccan pursuits, she is in greater contact with the land and sky than most people, harvesting plants and herbs to put in her concoctions. She insists that the animals she uses are already dead when she acquires them, turning her cottage into a shrine, decorated by birds and other animals.

The rural environment in *Carnal Acts*, although beautiful, is also harsh and unforgiving, as befits land owned by a rapacious ruling class that does not get its hands dirty. Suzana, a country girl by upbringing in a secluded part of upland Albania, is able to respond to the challenges, using her learned field craft to escape her pursuers – she hides in forest and on moor, butchering a sheep for food. But even

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<sup>9</sup> 'Voodoo is a religion of creation and life. It is the worship of the sun, the water and other natural forces,' asserts Zora Neale Hurston (2009: 113).



she is unable to fend off the attentions of men, in particular Oliver Forrest and then Dan Reston, whose links with the earth have not been beneficial to their psychological states. While Suzana kills out of necessity, Reston (or his wife Cheryl, the issue of personal agency being left undecided) decapitates Gaz and dumps him in the river to conceal what happened to him and where, while keeping the head as a trophy. As the Favons' trusted servants, they maintain the class system by violence. This is in contrast to the Wicca that Moonbeam practices, as well as to vodoun, during the rites of which chickens and roosters rather than humans are sacrificed (Hurstun 2009: 119; 128).

The Favons traditionally controlled both industrial and agricultural means of production and profit, largely by exploitation of the working classes (including slaves in the Caribbean). They are still involved in a form of slavery with the immigrant workers on the estate, as well as the Albanian clan's other illegal activities. These economic activities are not understood by the workers, whether the now unemployed steel plant work force or the enslaved women in the Burwell St brothel. Inasmuch as there is a widely held social consciousness, it is to be seen in the May Sunday parade, but that is only a brief carnival that, according to Bakhtin's analysis above should do little to upset the long-standing social balance. However, in the novel, the beginning of the narrative that sees the Favons humbled and the Albanians at least temporarily defeated, takes place on May Sunday, at a location of contemporary slavery, the brothel. Individual and collective actions are seen to be decisive throughout the novel: Suzana's escape; Joni's pursuit of her; Heck's fight against himself and the assassins; Evie's excavation of her family's questionable past, its consequences still being felt in the sexual incontinence of her father; and the officers of the Major Crime Units working together to solve the cases. These all lead to an overturning of the class

structure in my imagined Northumbria with the fall of the Favons. By the end of *Carnal Acts*, the county's leading aristocratic family is left with reduced prospects, given that Evie wants nothing more to do with the Hall.

Crime fiction criticism points to 'compromised institutions' (see above) as an instrument of the class system that can go wrong. One of the challenges of writing *Carnal Acts* was to create a fictional police force as well as the fictional town of Corham. Inventing locations and police forces is relatively common in the police novel, which is surprising if one considers the drive for realism by many writers in the subgenre. Examples are Val McDermid's Bradfield in the Hill/ Jordan series; Ed McBain's Isola; and Reginald Hill's Mid-Yorkshire Police, which operates in unnamed regional cities. Traditionally the police represent the establishment: in much Golden Age fiction they are ridiculed by the private investigator, but their role as guardians of order is not questioned, even if they are seen as coming from the lower classes. In hardboiled fiction there is often little distance between the police and criminals, as in the corrupt Bay City cops in Raymond Chandler's *Farewell My Lovely* (1940). In the contemporary police novel, while there are bent cops, as in Ian Rankin's *Resurrection Men* (2002), the focus tends to be on damaged but dogged detectives who may occasionally act illegally but in general uphold the law.

In *Carnal Acts*, the newly established Police Force of North East England, or Pofnee as its staff soon call it, is an amalgamation of the real-life Northumbria and Durham Constabularies. I did this for several reasons. One was to cast the novel at a distance from real police forces and real policing. Another was that I needed to justify locating police headquarters in an invented town (composed loosely from Corbridge, Hexham and Consett), but also to provide a crime unit that kept Joni and Heck out of

the main cities, such as Newcastle and Sunderland.<sup>10</sup> Pofnee may be a new force, its crime division run by the stern and competent ACC Ruth Dickie, but it also has dirty cops on its books. This is stressed early on, when Heck recalls his time in the unpopular Professional Standards unit, catching rotten apples. For all the ACC's high standards, DCI Lee Young is found to have been suborned by the Albanians. Ruth Dickie knows Lord Favon, as does her Chief Constable, and is reluctant to regard him as a criminal until concrete evidence is uncovered. Thus, the class at the top of the power structure – the aristocracy – is seen to have unhealthy links with the state organ that maintains order. Corham Council is also under suspicion for having turned a blind eye to the brothel operating in Burwell St. So, too, the army, as represented by General Etherington and his band of ex-servicemen, is not seen in the best of lights. Although the general tries to do good by hounding the Albanians, his conspiracy shows no respect for the law. Neither do Gaz's friends at the opposite end of the social spectrum, who attack Albanians at the clan-run night-club in Newcastle, but they too have good intentions, as they are trying to find their friend.

Among other things, *Carnal Acts* is a novel that charts contemporary changes in the British class system. The landed gentry are not flexible enough to deal with the new economic reality, despite Victoria Favon's efforts to work with the Albanians. The family is almost bankrupt and Evie has no interest in maintaining the estate. The Favons' failure to comprehend the dangers of keeping the Restons in their employ and their underestimation of the Spahia clan's ruthlessness leads to their downfall, but economic collapse was already close. By the end of the novel the dominant power structures no longer exist. The relationship between the workers and the bourgeoisie

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<sup>10</sup> The former has several fictional crime series set in it, including those by Martyn Waites, Mari Hannah and Howard Lynskey, while Sunderland is the beat of Sheila Quigley's detectives – the senior of whom is a white female and the junior a black male. Ann Cleeves' series featuring DI Vera Stanhope is set in Northumbria, while Danielle Ramsay has a male detective in Whitley Bay.

has changed over the later historical period covered by the story (as opposed to the narrative), and not necessarily for the worse. Both Heck and Ag had working class grandparents, while Joni grew up in an underprivileged environment: all are now firmly middle class. The Albanians, involved in both legal and illegal economic activities, are representatives of the new globalised capitalism, one that uses slavery as one of its modes of wealth-production: that clearly is for the worse. The traditional class system may have been eroded, but distinctions based on economic power to the detriment of the underprivileged will always exist.

I have argued that both race and class play important parts in *Carnal Acts*. Analysis of power structures, including the body/ bodies and gender, has shown that fictional characters, like the human beings who write and read about them, operate in ideologically conditioned locations. Power resides in an economic and social structure shaped like a pyramid, with the few people at the top exercising undue influence over the multitudes below.

As regards gender, race and class, the researching and writing of *Carnal Acts* allowed me to explore issues that did not feature in my previous novels. All three of my series have male protagonists, although the Mavros and Wells books do have some third-person sections written from the point of view of women. The abuse of political power was the main theme of the Quint series, but *Carnal Acts* approaches ideological matters in a more abstruse way, providing multiple perspectives, many from female characters, and some contradictory, that require careful creation/ recreation by the reader. The textual presentation of themes points to underlying historical, social and ideological factors, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions.

## 8. Conclusion: The Path to Publication

The first draft of *Carnal Acts* - henceforth CA1 - was written and revised between October 2011 and January 2012. It consisted of 126,700 words and 38 chapters of average length 3,334 words. The second draft (CA2), part of which comprises the opening section of this thesis, contains 135,200 words and 155 chapters of average length 872 words. While the chapters in CA2 contain single sections - apart from Chapter 34, when an episode of back story is separated by a line break - CA1's chapters were split into sections, on average four. CA1 differs in several ways from CA2.

First, Joni Pax was more of a single protagonist, with Heck appearing as her superior rather than her partner. Rather than being responsible for the crippling of Roland Malpas in the failed Met operation, Joni herself sustained stab wounds to the abdomen and a serious head injury. She miscarried the twelve-week-old fetus she was carrying, and left the Met more psychologically damaged than she is in CA2. She was concerned about her personal fertility: it was not clear whether she could bear another child.

In CA1 Heck Rutherford suffered cancer of the urinary tract rather than being stabbed. He was a more unusual character, taken to dressing up as a Roman legionary and patrolling Hadrian's Wall at weekends, a self-devised therapy to combat post-chemotherapy depression.

Instead of Evie Favon, CA1 had a much more Gothic character: a deformed,

mixed race, seventeen-year-old dwarf. Victoria gave birth to her after an affair with a black jazz musician. There were eight short sections narrated in the second person by this character, who called herself You (it transpired that her name is Eunice). She had been locked in the tower from early childhood by her ashamed parents and was looked after by the Restons. She carried out the family research that Evie does in CA2 and had more symbolic depth.

In terms of the narrative, the following are the main differences in CA1. Gaz and his friends did not appear. Instead of Morrie Simons being Moonbeam's lover, he was suborned by the Albanians into becoming the assassin who attempted to kill Heck and his family. The role of Moonbeam's lover was taken by Joni's father Greg, an African-American who had become a voodoo *houngan* (priest). He returned, hoping to bring Joni into the religion. He witnessed Nick's murder and blackmailed the Favons, then was seriously wounded in the assassin's attack on Moonbeam's cottage. Joni was conflicted by his presence and angered that he misled the police about the car he saw force Nick off the road. She wondered if she had inherited paranormal powers.

At the end of CA1, You and Suzana broke out of the tower and Lord Favon accidentally shot himself, while Dan Reston was immobilised. In Victoria's bedroom, the Popi killed her because of her perceived unreliability. The draft ended with You in care and Joni arguing with Moonbeam and Greg, though she later accepted that the return of her father was not entirely a bad thing. CA2's penultimate chapter (154) was CA1's last.

CA1 was sent to ten publishers in early March 2012. Seven responses were received, all rejections. The editors were enthusiastic about Joni and Heck, and the setting, but thought the plot was overcomplicated and the start slow. Some also found

the Favons stereotypical. I instructed my agent, Broo Doherty, to withdraw the novel from the remaining publishers. I then spent two months rewriting the text, concentrating on the plot, after valuable input from Professor Plain, my supervisor, my fellow author J. Wallis Martin, and my agent. The action in CA2 starts immediately, with Gaz in the tower. I also built Lord and Lady Favon up; Evie's interaction with them was a way of doing that. Her involvement with Nick also helped to relate the Favons to the Etheringtons in terms of the sub-plots involving both. Cutting Joni's father removed one subplot.

In December 2012, CA2 was sent to some publishers who had seen CA1 and others who had not. The responses were similar to those prompted by CA1. Curiously, no editor openly recognised Joni's originality in terms of race. There are two ways of explaining this. First, editors perceived no marketing advantage for such a protagonist, despite the UK's burgeoning multiculturalism; or they did not want one, though political correctness would prevent them from saying so. This is not to suggest that British publishing is institutionally racist, but it is the case that there are few black, other race, or mixed race crime writers, and no non-white lead police detectives.<sup>1</sup>

However, the tale does have a happy ending. Gary Pulsifer, publisher at the independent company Arcadia, read CA2 in one sitting. Terms have been agreed and *Carnal Acts* will be published in spring 2014. Arcadia has a highly regarded imprint, EuroCrime. The company is now taking on British writers. It may be that experience of the more diverse European crime writing scene meant that Arcadia was more open to the elements of alterity in *Carnal Acts*: Joni as a mixed race protagonist; Suzana;

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<sup>1</sup> The first well known black British crime writer was Mike Phillips, whose protagonist, black journalist Sam Dean, featured in four 1990s novels. Currently Dreda Say Mitchell is prominent, but she has not yet published novels with black police protagonists. The white author Reginald Hill wrote five novels featuring black PI Joe Sixsmith between 1993 and 2008.

the Spahia clan, and so on. Arcadia is also keen to reinstate Joni's abdominal injury, thus increasing her fears for her fertility, and Heck's cancer; the latter is another unusual attribute for a detective protagonist. Whether the novel will be a critical and/ or commercial success remains to be seen.



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Other cities/ towns are in the UK.]

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