

13 MILLION COPIES SOLD

PETER JAMES

DEAD MAN'S TIME

SOME WILL WAIT A LIFETIME
TO TAKE THEIR REVENGE



1

Brooklyn, February 1922

The boy's father kissed him goodnight for the last time – although neither of them knew that.

The boy never went to sleep until he had had that kiss. Every night, late, long after he had gone to bed, he would lie waiting in the darkness, until he heard the door of his room open, and saw the light flood in from the landing. Then the shadowy figure and the sound of his father's heavy footsteps across the bare boards. 'Hey, little guy, you still awake?' he would say in his low, booming voice.

'Yep, big guy, I am! Can I see your watch?'

His father would take out the watch from his pocket, and hold it up by the chain. It was shiny, with a big, round face, and there was a winder on the top with a hoop the chain was attached to. In the top half of the face was a section that showed the phases of the moon. The sky behind the moon was dark blue and the stars were gold. Sometimes the moon was barely visible, just peeping out. Other times it was whole, an ochre disc.

Every night the boy would ask his father to tell him a story about the Man in the Moon. His father always did. Then he would tousle his hair, kiss him on the forehead and ask, 'You said your prayers?'

The boy would nod.

'You go to sleep now.'

Then his father would clump back out of the room and close the door.

That's how it was the very last time.

2

Four men lurched their way up the street towards the house of the man they had come to kill. Three of them were unsteady because they'd drunk too much; the fourth because he had drunk too much and had a wooden leg.

They had been boozing to steady their nerves, to get some Dutch courage, they had reassured each other a while earlier, over clinking glasses and slopping beer and whiskey chasers, in the packed Vinegar Hill bar. The one with a wooden leg wasn't convinced they were doing the right thing, but he went along with his mates, because that's what you did when you were part of a gang. You either went along with them or they killed you too.

It was a few minutes to midnight and the street was dark and deserted, steady rain glossing the cobblestones. Each of them had a handgun, and two of them carried baseball bats as well, concealed inside their coats. It was a cold night. Cold enough for Hell to freeze over. They all wore fingerless mittens.

'This is it,' their leader said, peering at the number on the front door of the row house. Vapour trailed from his mouth and nostrils like smoke.

Number 21, it read.

'Are we sure this is it?'

'This is it.'

'Where's Johnny?'

'He'll be here; he's just up the road now.'

Even in the darkness, the house looked shabby, like all its neighbours in this Brooklyn waterfront district. There was a curtained window to the right of the door, with no light on behind it. They tugged their balaclavas out of their pockets, and wrestled them down over their damp heads. Their leader raised his baseball bat in his hand, and stepped forward.

3

The boy lay in the darkness, snug in his pyjamas beneath the heavy bedclothes, listening to the ticking of the big, round clock in his room. Listening to the familiar sounds of the night. The drone of a passing ship on the busy, inky water of the East River close by. The clatter of a train, high overhead. The creaking of bed springs through the thin wall to his parents' bedroom; moans from his parents. His mother crying out. His father's loud grunt. The gentle patter of rain on the roof above him. The night had its own sounds. Its own music.

The tinkle of breaking glass was not part of it.

He froze. It sounded like it came from downstairs, right below him. Had the cat knocked over the whiskey bottle and glass his dad left out, empty, every night? Then he heard footsteps coming up the stairs. Not his dad's. His dad was already upstairs, in bed.

Several sets of footsteps.

He lay, motionless, his fear increasing. The door opened. A powerful torch beam struck his face, blinding him, and he shut his eyes. Heard footsteps in his room. He could sense a whole group of people, and was shaking with fear. Could smell tobacco and alcohol and wet clothing and sweat. He felt his throat was closing in, he couldn't breathe, and his heart was going crazy. He opened his eyes and all he could see was dazzling light. He closed his eyes again, shivering, quaking in terror. Heard footsteps approaching the bed.

A hand patted his head, then his right cheek, playfully, the wool itchy against his skin.

Then a voice, coarse but soft, an Irish accent, right above him. Breathing heavily. 'Just checking you out, kid.'

'You – you – you'll wake my ma and pa,' he stammered to the stranger, suddenly finding the strength to speak and then to open his eyes again. But all he could see was the glare of light.

'And where would we be finding them?'

PETER JAMES

He pointed, squinting. 'Through there.' He put a finger in front of his mouth. 'They're sleeping. Be quiet. You'll wake them, and my sister.' Maybe now he'd told them that they would go away.

The flashlight moved off his face. But still dazzled, all he could see for some moments were pink flashes of light. He heard the sound of footsteps, on tiptoe, moving away. A floorboard creaked. Then his door closed.

Maybe they had gone home. People often came into this house, at all hours of the night. Drinking, smoking, shouting, laughing, arguing. Mostly arguing, and sometimes fighting. When they fought, his dad would throw them out. He was a big man. No one argued with his dad.

He pulled the bedclothes over his head so they would not see him if they came back.

Moments later, he heard his father bellow something. Then a loud thud, followed by another. He heard his mother scream. A terrible, terrible scream. Then she cried out, 'Leave him, leave him, leave him! Please don't! Please don't. Leave him!'

Then he heard one of the strangers say loudly, 'Get dressed!'

Then his mother, her voice quavering, 'Where are you taking him! Please tell me? Where are you taking him?'

A minute went by. The boy lay frozen beneath the bedclothes, trembling.

Then his mother screamed again. 'No, you can't! You can't take him! I'll not let him go!'

Then five loud bangs, as if a door, close by, was being slammed repeatedly.

'Ma! Pa!' he screamed back, his whole body electric with fear for his parents. And now the footsteps were much louder, clumping down the stairs as if they no longer cared about being silent. He heard the click of the front door opening, then the roar of an engine and a squeal of tyres. And no sound of the door closing.

Just the echo in his mind of the terrible sound of his mother's screams.

Then the silence that followed.

It was the silence that echoed the loudest.

4

He lay, listening, under the bedclothes. All was quiet. Just a pounding roar in his ears and the puffing sound of his own breathing. Maybe it was just a bad dream? He was trembling all over.

After some moments he climbed out of bed in the darkness, in his pyjamas, into the cold, then hurried across the bare floorboards to where the door was, fumbling around until he found the handle, and stumbled out onto the landing. He could feel an icy draught, as if the front door really had been left open. There was a faint smell of exhaust fumes from a motor vehicle.

And there were unfamiliar smells. A reek of oil, and a sweeter, denser smell that he vaguely recognized from fireworks on the Fourth of July. And a coppery, metallic smell.

He felt around until he found the switch for the electric light and snapped it on. And, for an instant, wished he had not. He wished that darkness could have stayed for ever. So that he had never seen it.

The terrible sight of his mother on the floor beside the bed. Blood leaking from her shoulder; the whole front of her nightdress sodden with a spreading, dark-crimson stain. Blood everywhere, spattered across the walls, across the sheets, the pillows, the ceiling. She lay on her back, her black hair matted by blood. Part of her head was missing, exposing something wet, gnarly, a brown and grey colour. She was twitching and shaking.

Then, as if someone had reached over and pressed a switch, she fell silent.

He ran forward, crying out, 'Mama, Mama!'

She did not respond.

'Mama, wake up!' He shook her. 'Mama, where's Pop? Mama!'

She did not move.

He fell to his knees and crawled up to her and kissed her.

PETER JAMES

'Mama, wake up, Mama!' He hugged her and shook her. 'Wake up, Mama! Where's Pop? Where's Pa?'

Still she did not move.

'Mama!' He began crying, confused. 'Mama! Mama!' His arms and face felt sticky. 'Mama, wake, Mama, wake up . . .!'

'What's happening? Gavin? What's happening?' His sister's voice.

He backed away, took a step forward, then backed away again, uncertainly. Kept backing away through the door. And collided with his sister, Aileen, three years older than him, in her nightdress, chewing a pigtail as she always did when she was afraid.

'What's happening?' she asked. 'I heard noises. What's happening?'

'Where's Pop?' he asked. 'Where's Pop? Pop's gone!' Tears were streaming down his face.

'Isn't he in bed?'

He shook his head. 'He's gone with the bad men.'

'What bad men?'

'Where's Pop? He has to wake up Mama! She won't wake up.'

'What bad men?' she asked again, more urgently.

There was blood on the landing. Drops of blood on the stairs. He ran down them, screaming for his pa, and out through the open front door.

The street was deserted.

He felt the rain on his face, smelled the salty tang of the river. For some moments, the rumble high overhead of another train drowned out his cries.

5

Brighton, 28 June 2012

From a distance, the man cut a dash. He looked smarter than the usual Brighton seafront crowds in their gaudy beachwear, sandals, flip-flops and Crocs. A gent, with an aloof air, in a blue blazer with silver buttons, smartly pressed slacks, open-neck shirt and a natty cravat. It was only on closer inspection you could see the shirt collar was frayed, there were moth holes in the blazer, and his slicked-back hair was thinning and a gingery-grey colour from bad dyeing. His face looked frayed, too, with the pallor that comes from prison life and takes a long time to shake off. His expression was mean, and despite his diminutive stature – five foot three in his elevated Cuban-heeled boots – he strutted along with an air of insouciance, as if he owned the promenade.

Behind his sunglasses, Amis Smallbone, on his morning constitutional, looked around with hatred. He hated everything. The pleasant warmth of this late June morning. Cyclists who pinged their bells at him as he strayed onto the cycle lane. Stupid grockles with their fat, raw skin burning in the sun, stuffing their faces with rubbish. Young lovers, hand in hand, with their lives ahead of them.

Unlike him.

He had hated prison. Hated the other inmates even more than the officers. He might have been a player in this city once, but all that had fallen apart when he'd been sent down. He hadn't even been able to get any traction on the lucrative drugs market in the jails he had been held in.

And now he was out, on licence, he was hating his freedom, too.

Once, he'd had it all – the big house, expensive cars, a power-boat, and a villa in Marbella on Spain's Costa del Sol. Now he had

PETER JAMES

fuck all. Just a few thousand pounds, a couple of watches and some stolen antique jewellery in the one safety deposit box the police hadn't managed to find.

And one man to thank for his plight.

Detective Superintendent Roy Grace.

He crossed the busy four lanes of King's Road without waiting for the lights to change. Cars braked all around him, their drivers hooting, swearing and shaking their fists at him, but he didn't give a toss. His family used to be big players in this city's underworld. A couple of decades ago, no one would have dared, ever, hoot at a Smallbone. He ignored them all, contemptuously, now.

A little way along the pavement he entered the newsagent's, and was taken aback to see the bastard cop's rugged, serious face staring out of a copy of the *Argus* at him. Close-cropped fair hair, blue eyes, busted nose, beneath the front-page splash.

TRIAL OF BRIGHTON MONSTER RESUMES

He bought the paper and a packet of cigarettes, as he did every day, and filled out a lottery ticket, without much hope.

*

A short while later, back in his basement flat, Amis Smallbone sat in the ripped leather armchair with its busted spring, a glass of Chivas Regal on the table beside him, a smouldering cigarette in his mouth, reading with interest about the case. Venner was on trial for murder, kidnap and trading in illegal videos. Last year, one of Detective Superintendent Grace's officers had been shot and wounded during the attempt to arrest Venner. Too bad it hadn't been Grace himself. Shot dead.

How nice would that be?

But not as nice as something he had in mind. To have Detective Superintendent Grace dead was too good for him. He wanted the cop to really suffer. To be in pain for the rest of his life. Oh yes. Much better. Pain that would never ever go away!

Smallbone dragged on his cigarette, then crushed it out in the ashtray and drained his glass. He had gone to prison still a relatively young man of fifty. Now he'd come out an old man at sixty-two.

DEAD MAN'S TIME

Detective Superintendent Grace had taken everything he had. Most of all he had taken those crucial twelve years of his life.

Of course, Grace hadn't been a Detective Superintendent back then; just a jumped-up, newly promoted Inspector who had picked on him, targeted him, fitted him up, twisted the evidence, been oh so clever, so fucking smug. It was Grace's persecution that had condemned him, now, to this cruddy rented flat, with its shoddy furniture, no-smoking signs on the walls in each room, and having to report and bloody kowtow to a Probation Officer regularly.

He put the paper down, stood up a little unsteadily, and carried his glass over to the dank-smelling kitchenette, popping some ice cubes out of the fridge-freezer into his glass. It was just gone midday, and he was thinking hard. Thinking how much pleasure he was going to get from hurting Roy Grace. It was the one thing that sustained him right now. The rest of the nation had Olympic fever – the games were starting in a month's time. But he didn't give a toss about them; getting even with Roy Grace was all he cared about.

All he could really think about.

He was going to make that happen. His lips curled into a smile. He just had to find the right person. There were names he knew from before he'd gone to prison, and a few more contacts he'd made inside. But whoever it was wouldn't come cheap, and that was a big problem right now.

Then his phone rang. The display showed the number was withheld.

'Yes?' he answered, suspiciously.

'Amis Smallbone?' It was not a voice he recognized. A rough, Brighton accent.

'Who are you?' he replied, coldly.

'We met a long time back, but you won't remember me. I need some help. You have connections in the antiques world, right? Overseas? For high-value stuff?'

'What if I do?'

'I'm told you need money.'

'Didn't anyone tell you that you shouldn't be calling me on a fucking mobile phone?'

'Yeah, I know that.'

PETER JAMES

‘Then why the fuck are you calling me on mine?’

‘I’m talking a lot of money. Several million quid.’

Suddenly, Amis Smallbone was very interested indeed. ‘Tell me more.’

The line went dead.

6

They were right, thought Roy Grace, all those people who had told him that having a baby would totally change his life. He yawned, leadenly tired from endless disturbed nights with Cleo getting up every time Noah had woken needing a feed or his nappy changing. One of his colleagues, Nick Nicholl, a recent first-time father, had told him he'd taken to sleeping in a separate room so he wouldn't be disturbed by the baby. But Roy was determined never to do that. The baby was a joint commitment and he had to play his part. But, shit, he felt tired; and grungy; it was a sticky August day and, although all of the windows were open, the air was listless, warm and humid.

The television was on, playing the recording of the Olympics closing ceremony from less than a couple of weeks ago. He and Cleo had both fallen asleep watching it live on the night. He could not remember ever feeling so tired in his life, and it was affecting his concentration at work. He was definitely suffering from *baby brain*.

Ray Davies, from one of his favourite bands, The Kinks, was singing 'Waterloo Sunset', and he turned up the sound slightly to listen. But Cleo did not look up from her book.

Grace had recently crossed the Rubicon to his fortieth birthday. For the past couple of years he had increasingly been dreading that milestone. But when it had finally arrived, both he and Cleo had been too tired to think about a proper celebration. They'd opened a bottle of champagne and fallen asleep before they'd even drunk half of it.

Now they had another celebration due. After a long time, the formalities for his divorce from his wife, Sandy, on the grounds of her being presumed legally dead, had this week been completed, and he was finally free to marry Cleo.

Sandy had been missing since the day of his thirtieth birthday,

PETER JAMES

ten years ago, and he still had no clue as to what had happened to her, or whether she was alive, as he still liked to believe, or long dead, as his friends and family all told him, which probably was the truth. Either way, for the first time he was feeling a sense of release, of truly being able to move on. And a further big part of that was that finally a buyer had been found for the home he and Sandy had shared.

He stared down lovingly – and hopelessly proudly – at his seven-week-old son. At the tiny, cherubic creature, with rosebud lips and chubby pink arms and fingers like a toyshop doll. Noah Jack Grace, in a sleeveless white romper suit, eyes shut, lay on his lap, cradled in his arms. Thin strands of fair hair lay, brushed forward, with his scalp visible beneath. He could see elements of both Cleo and himself in his face, and there was one slightly bemused frown Noah sometimes gave, which reminded Grace of his late father – a police officer, like himself. He would do anything for Noah. He would die for him, without a shadow of hesitation.

Cleo sat beside him on the sofa, in a sleeveless black top, her blonde hair cut shorter than usual and clipped back, engrossed in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The house was filled with a milky smell of baby powder and fresh laundry. Several soft toys lay on the play mat on the floor, including a teddy bear and a cuddly Thomas The Tank Engine. Above them dangled a mobile with brightly coloured animals and birds.

Humphrey, their young black Labrador-Border collie cross, gnawed a bone, sulkily, in his basket on the far side of the room. He had taken a couple of disdainful looks at Noah when he had first come home, then wandered off, tail between his legs, as if aware he was no longer number one in his owner's eyes, and his attitude had remained the same ever since.

Roy Grace clicked his fingers, beckoning the dog. 'Hey, Humphrey, get over it! Make friends with Noah!'

Humphrey gave his master the evil eye.

It was midday on Tuesday, and Roy Grace had sneaked home for a few hours, because he had a long meeting ahead of him this evening. It was with the prosecution counsel on the trial, at the Old Bailey, of a particularly repugnant villain, Carl Venner, the master-

DEAD MAN'S TIME

mind behind a snuff movie ring, whom Grace had arrested last year. The trial had been adjourned recently for several weeks because the defendant had claimed to be suffering chest pains. But doctors had now cleared the man to continue with his trial, which had restarted yesterday.

At this moment Roy Grace honestly believed he had never felt happier in his life. But at the same time he felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility. This tiny, frail creature he and Cleo had brought into this world. What kind of future lay ahead for Noah? What would the world be like in twenty or so years, when he became an adult? What would the world be like during the next twenty years – at the end of which Grace would be sixty years old? What could he do to change it? To make it a safer place for Noah? To protect his child from the evil out there, of which Venner, sadly, was just one of life's sewer rats?

What could he do to help his son cope with all the shit that life, inevitably, threw at you?

God, he loved him so much. He wanted to be the best father in the world, and he knew that meant committing a lot of time. Time he wanted to spend, yet, in his chosen career, he was painfully aware it was time he would not always have.

Since Noah had been born, Grace had spent much less time with his son than he'd hoped, because of the demands of work. If he got lucky, and there were no major crimes committed, he might have this weekend relatively free. He was the duty Senior Investigating Officer and his week was due to end at 6 a.m. on Monday. Normally, all SIOs hoped for a high-quality murder – one which would hit the national press, enabling them to shine, to get on the Chief Constable's radar. But right now, Roy Grace hoped for a silent telephone.

That wasn't going to happen.

7

The old lady heard the knock on the door for the third time. 'I'm coming!' she called out. 'Bejzus, I'm coming!' She lifted the saucepan of boiling water and green beans off the hob, grabbed her wheeled Zimmer frame, and began making her way across the kitchen.

Then the phone started ringing. She hesitated. Her brother rang every day at 7 p.m. on the dot, whether he was in England or France, to check she was okay. It was 7 p.m. She grabbed the phone, with its extra-large numbers for her failing vision, and shouted, over the *Emmerdale* theme tune blaring from the television, 'Hold on a minute, will you!'

But it wasn't her brother's voice. It was a younger man with a silky purr. 'I only need a moment of your time.'

'There's someone at the door!' she shouted back, fumbling with the TV remote to turn the sound down. Then she clamped her arthritic hand over the mouthpiece. Despite her years, she still had a strong voice. About the only thing left of her that was still strong, she rued. 'You'll have to wait. I'm on the phone,' she hollered at the front door. Then she lifted her hand. 'I'm back with you, but you'll have to be quick,' she said with her Irish lilt.

'A good friend of yours told me to call you,' the man said.

'And who would that be?'

'Gerard Scott.'

'Gerard Scott?'

'He said to say hello!'

'I don't know any Gerard Scott, for sure.'

'We're saving him two thousand five hundred pounds a year off his heating bill.'

'And how would you be doing that?' she asked, a tad impatiently as she stared at the door, worrying about her beans staying too long in the hot water.

DEAD MAN'S TIME

'We have a representative working in your area next week. Perhaps I could make an appointment at a time convenient for you?'

'A representative for what, exactly?'

'Loft insulation.'

'Loft insulation? Why would I be needing loft insulation?'

'We are England's leading specialists. The insulation we put in is so effective it will have fully paid for itself in just nine years from savings on your fuel bills.'

'Nine years, you say?'

'That's right, madam.'

'Well now, I'm ninety-eight years old. That would be a high-class problem, I'd say, for me to think I'm going to be worrying about my heating bills when I'm a hundred and seven. But thank you kindly.'

She hung up, then carried on towards the front door. 'I'm coming! I'm on my way!'

Her brother had been trying to convince her for a long time to sell the house and move into sheltered accommodation, but why the hell should she? This had been her home for over fifty years. Here she had lived happily with her husband, Gordon, who had passed away fifteen years ago, had raised her four children, who had all predeceased her, and had created the once beautiful garden, which she still continued to work in. All her memories were in this house, as well as all the fine paintings and antiques she and her husband had collected during their lives – guided by her brother's discerning eye. She'd been uprooted once in her life, and it was not going to happen again. She was adamant that when she left this place she loved so much, it would be feet first.

Her only concessions to her brother's concerns were the panic button that hung from a cord around her neck, and the housekeeper who came twice a week.

She peered through the spyhole in the front door. In the light of the summer evening she saw two middle-aged men in brown uniforms, with identity tags hung from chains around their necks.

She removed the safety chain and opened the door.

They smiled politely. 'Sorry to disturb you, madam,' the one on

PETER JAMES

the right said. 'We're from the Water Board.' He held up his identity card for her to read.

She did not have her glasses on, but she liked his Irish accent. The face on the card was a little blurred, but it looked like the face of the shaven-headed man in front of her. *Richard Carroll*, she thought his name read, but she couldn't be sure.

'How can I help you, gentlemen?'

'We're investigating a water leak. Have you noticed a drop in water pressure during the past twenty-four hours?'

'No,' she said. 'No, I can't say that I have.' But, she knew, there was a lot of stuff she did not notice these days. Much though it angered her, she was increasingly becoming dependent on others. Although she still kept a tight grip on everything she could.

'Do you mind if we come in and check your water pressure? We'd hate you to be charged for water you're not using.'

'Well, I wouldn't be wanting that either,' she said with a twinkle in her eye, in her soft Dublin accent. All these bastard utilities were trying to rob you blind all the time and she wasn't one to be having any of it. She scrutinized the phone bills, the electricity bills, the gas and the water. 'I've been thinking the water charges are high of late.'

'All the more indication of a problem,' Richard Carroll said, apologetically.

'You'd better be coming in.'

Holding the Zimmer with one hand, she stepped aside to let the men enter, then closed the door behind them.

Almost immediately she did not like the way their eyes began roaming. At the fine oil paintings hanging on the walls, and then at the Louis XIV table in the hallway. The Georgian tallboy. The Georgian chest. The two Chippendale chairs. Bargains, once, all of them, pointed out by her brother, who knew a thing or two about antiques of all descriptions.

'Where would you like to start your investigations, gentlemen?'

She saw the blur of the man's fist only a fraction of a second before it struck her stomach, punching all the wind out of her. She doubled up, her frail hand clutching at the panic button.

But it was ripped off her neck long before she could press it.

8

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife, PC Susi Holiday thought. A sturdily built woman of twenty-eight, with brown curly hair and a constantly cheerful face. That line had been running through her head repeatedly ever since she had woken up this morning. She'd had a day off yesterday, and much to her husband James's incredulity had spent much of it watching all six episodes of the BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice*, binge-eating junk food, and smoking an entire packet of fags. She was like that. One week all healthy, working out at the gym, not smoking, then the next being a total slob.

Now, irreverently, she decided that another truth universally acknowledged is that no one looks their best sitting on a toilet seat with their trousers round their ankles.

Especially not if they are dead.

Memo to self. Please, please, please don't die on the loo.

The need to go to the lavatory was a frequent precursor to a heart attack. All too many did die that way.

Like the plump old man in front of them, in the dingy, narrow little toilet in the squalid Housing Association flat with its bare pale-blue walls and unwashed underwear, socks and shirts lying all over the floor in every room. It smelled rank: a mixture of a rancid, cheesy reek and, the worst smell in the world, a decaying human. Its tenant was named Ralph Meeks, and this was whom she presumed, with revulsion tinged with sadness, she was now staring at. Like all G5s who had been dead for more than a couple of days, he looked more like a waxwork than a real human being. She always found the total stillness of a cadaver both eerie and fascinating.

His bulky frame was wedged between the walls. There were liver spots on his hands, the crimson and green blotches of advanced decomposition on his face and visible parts of his body. An insistent

PETER JAMES

swarm of blowflies crawled over his face and neck and hands, and buzzed around him.

Folds of flesh hung from the man's midriff, forming a canopy over his private parts. His dome was bald with little tufts of hair on either side, he had a hearing aid in his right ear, and his mouth was frozen open in an expression of surprise, one that was mirrored in his startled, lifeless eyes. As if dying had not, she thought, irreverently, been on his list of *things to do* that day, and certainly not in this undignified way.

A television was on in the sparsely furnished living room, a daytime chat show on which, ironically, there was a discussion about the plight of the elderly.

She glanced around looking for signs of anything personal. But there were no photographs, no pictures on any of the walls. She saw an ashtray full of butts, with a lighter and a packet of cigarettes beside it, and a beer can with a half-empty glass tumbler. A small, untidy stack of old gardening magazines lay on the floor, next to a pile of *Daily Mirror* newspapers.

Ralph Meeks had clearly been dead for a while, in here all alone. It was a sad but common story in cities. They were on the second floor of a low-rise apartment block. But Ralph Meeks had no friends, no neighbours bothering to check he was okay, no one who had thought it odd that the post was getting more and more jammed in the letter box every day. Not until he had started to decompose, and neighbours had begun to notice the smell out in the corridor, had anyone been bothered to check on Meeks.

The stench in the corridor was nothing compared with that inside the flat. It was a hundred times worse in here. The stench and the buzzing of flies. It was making her gag, and her colleague, PC Dave Roberts, was keeping his gloved hand over his nose.

The two immediate tasks were to call in their Sergeant to help them assess whether this was a natural death, or whether there were any suspicious circumstances, in which case they would involve CID and seal the flat as a crime scene. Their second was to call a paramedic to have the man's death confirmed. Fairly unnecessary in this case, but a legal formality. The next duty would be to ask a Coroner's Officer to attend. And finally, if it was decided

DEAD MAN'S TIME

no forensic examination of the body was required in situ, a call would be made to Brighton and Hove Mortuary to recover the body.

Sudden deaths – or G5s, as the form for them was called – were the least favourite shouts for most Response officers. But Susi Holiday actually liked them, and found them interesting. This was the fifteenth she had attended since joining the Response Team three years ago.

Turning to her colleague, eighteen years her senior, she said, 'Anything bothering you about this?'

He shook his head, feeling queasy. 'Nope.' He shrugged. 'Except – just the thought that could be me one day.'

Susi grinned. 'Best thing is to try to avoid growing old. Growing old kills you, eventually.'

'Yep, guess I'd prefer to die young, with my trousers on.'

She gave him a mischievous grin. 'Wouldn't that depend who you were with?'

9

Whenever Roy Grace left his front door he was always on guard. After over twenty years as a cop, looking around for anything unusual or out of place had long become second nature. It used to irritate his former wife, Sandy. One time, during his early days as a Detective Constable, he'd spotted a man slipping a handbag off the back of a chair in a crowded pub, and chased him a mile on foot, through Brighton, before rugby-tackling and arresting him. It had been the end of their evening, as he'd had to spend the next four hours booking the thief into custody and filling out forms.

Often when he and Sandy were out for a meal, she would notice his eyes roving and kick him sharply under the restaurant table, hissing, '*Stoppit, Grace!*'

But he couldn't help it. In any public place, he couldn't relax unless he knew he was somewhere there were no obvious villains, and no immediate signs of anything about to kick off. Sandy used to joke that while other women had to be wary of their men ogling other women, she had to put up with him ogling Brighton's pond life.

But there was one thing he never told her, because he didn't want to worry her: he knew, like all police officers, there was always the danger of retribution by an aggrieved villain. Most *crims* accepted getting arrested – some saw it as part of the game; some shrugged at the inevitability; some just gave up the ghost from the moment the handcuffs were snapped in place. But there were a few who harboured grudges.

Part of the reason judges traditionally wore wigs was to disguise themselves, so they would not be recognized later by those they had sent down. The police had never had such protection. But even if they had, to someone who was determined enough, there were plenty of other ways to track them down.

*

DEAD MAN'S TIME

Such a man, right now, was sitting in his car, in front of an antiques shop that specialized in fireplaces, opposite the gates of a smart town-house development in the centre of Brighton.

He had a grudge against one particular Sussex Police officer, Detective Superintendent Roy Grace.

The cop's baby was in there, in the third house on the left. He'd obtained plans of the house from the Planning Office where they were filed in the original building application, fifteen years ago, to turn the old warehouse into a courtyard development of seven town houses.

The baby would sleep in the tiny room opposite, with the window overlooking the courtyard.

But what interested him most of all right now was an estate agent's sign, fixed to the wall to the right of the wrought-iron gates to the courtyard, advertising, TOWN HOUSE TO RENT.

What fun to be Roy Grace's neighbour. And how convenient?

He'd be able to watch every movement. And bide his time.

Happy days again!

10

Two hours after first entering Ralph Meeks' flat, Susi Holiday and Dave Roberts were back out on the streets of Brighton in their patrol car. Susi drove. She loved her job. Hunting was what she liked to call it, all the time they weren't actually on a *shout* – as calls to incidents were known colloquially.

Dave, at forty-six, was one of the oldest PCs on the unit. Response was considered a young person's game, and it could at times be extremely physical – intervening in violent domestic fights, pub brawls and chasing after robbers and burglars. But he'd been on this unit for twenty years and had no interest in promotion and the desk work that would involve, or in any other area of policing.

If anyone were to ask him what he most loved about his job, he would have replied that it was never knowing what was going to happen in five minutes' time. That, and ripping through the city on blues and twos, which almost every police officer with a Pursuit Driving ticket he had ever talked to admitted was one of the greatest kicks of the job.

They were driving up North Street towards the Clock Tower, one of the city's most prominent landmarks. Watching the faces of people meandering along the pavements on both sides of the road, recognizing the occasional villain among the crowds. And all the time monitoring their radios, clipped below their shoulders. Waiting for the next shout from the Control Room.

It was coming up to midday, on a fine late August Thursday morning. They'd started their shift at 7 a.m. and would be on until 4 p.m. So far they'd attended a call to a potential firearms incident up at Brighton Racecourse, which had turned out to be a man shooting rabbits. That had been followed by a rip across the city to attend a collision between a motor scooter and a bin lorry, which had, fortunately, been less serious than it had sounded. Then another shout to attend a report of a woman screaming for help.

DEAD MAN'S TIME

Which had turned out to be an infant having a tantrum. Then the Ralph Meeks G5.

For the past thirty minutes all had been quiet. They were thinking about returning to John Street police station to eat their packed lunches, have a comfort break and fill in the paperwork on Meeks.

'What are your plans for the weekend?' Dave Roberts asked Susi. They crewed together regularly and got on well.

'Going to the Albion with James,' she said. 'You?'

'It's Maxim's fifteenth birthday on Saturday,' he replied. 'Marilyn and I are taking him and some of his friends for fish and chips on the pier – to the Palm Court. Best fish and chips in Brighton!'

'Tiffany going, too?'

Tiffany was his teenage daughter.

As he was about to reply, their radios crackled into life.

'Charlie Romeo Zero Three?'

'Yes, yes, Charlie Romeo Zero Three,' Dave answered.

'Charlie Romeo Zero Three, we've a call from a concerned individual. A man who normally speaks to his elderly sister every day. Says he's not been able to reach her for two days. He's out of the country, otherwise he would have gone round to check on her himself. Her name is Aileen McWhirter. The address is 146 Withdean Road, Brighton. Please check this out, Grade Two.'

All Control Room calls were graded One to Four. *Grade One* was immediate response, with a target time of within fifteen minutes. *Grade Two* was prompt response, with a target time of within one hour. *Grade Three* was a planned response, by appointment, which could be made several days later. *Grade Four* was no attendance by police, but dealt with over the phone.

'Charlie Romeo Zero Three, we're on our way.' Then, doing a quick calculation, Dave Roberts said, 'We'll be there in about fifteen minutes.'

Both officers looked at each other. They'd not had a G5 in several weeks, until this morning. One of their colleagues had joked they were like buses. You had none for ages then two came along together.

11

Sarah Courteney lay back nervously on the blue reclining couch in the doctor's clinic. It wasn't the needle or the pain that scared her; it was a whole bunch of other stuff. Some of it was to do with her hitting forty in two weeks' time, and all the unwelcome shit that went with that particular milestone. Such as the wrinkles that were becoming increasingly persistent; the grey hairs that were starting to appear. Her career as a local TV news presenter was constantly under threat from younger, fresher faces.

But what scared her most of all was her husband, Lucas. More and more every day. He was losing the plot and blaming everything on her, from his increasing gambling debts, his bouts of impotence – not entirely unrelated to his heavy drinking – and his rages. One constant target of his rages was her inability, after eight years of constant trying – including four of IVF hell – to go to term with a baby. She had a son by her previous marriage, but his relationship with his stepfather was disastrous – and not much better with her. There was constant friction in the house.

Royce Revson stood in his small, sterile clinic, studying a monitor displaying an array of turquoise symbols, amid a bank of technical apparatus. Nudging fifty-six, he could have passed for someone in his mid-forties. A stocky, energetic man with short, jet-black hair, who exuded charm, he was wearing a purple short-sleeved shirt, collegiate tie, black trousers, blue surgical gloves, and had an infra-red goggle headset clipped to his forehead. He turned from the machine and beamed down at his patient, his winning, boyish smile filled with all the genuine enthusiasm and confidence of a man on a mission.

And he was indeed on a mission: to help women – and frequently men, too – ward off the cruelties of ageing with a little help from cosmetic chemicals. Such as the woman who lay back at this moment on his blue reclining couch. A raven-haired beauty, wear-

DEAD MAN'S TIME

ing a black tunic dress over black leggings and black suede sandals with large buckles.

Her husband, she had confided in Revson, the way many of his patients did, was a bully who often hit her. One of the city's prominent antiques dealers, he had a constantly roving eye and a vile temper, which had got progressively worse as the antiques trade had diminished – partly due to the financial climate, but more because of the change in fashion. People wanted a modern look in their homes these days.

Why Sarah did not leave the brute was a mystery that, in Royce Revson's long experience, was repeated by women many times over. He hoped to keep her looking young and attractive enough so when the day finally came that her marriage was over, she'd be able to attract someone new and hopefully kinder. Maybe even himself? But he pushed that thought away almost before it had even entered his head. Fancying his patients was not an option. However tempting. And Sarah Courteney was very tempting indeed.

Unlike some of his clientele, which numbered a high percentage of the city's richest, spoilt bitches, Sarah was a genuinely nice and kind person. For the past two years since she'd become a patient, he'd done a good job of keeping her looking youthful, through Botox, collagen and the lasering away of the occasional unwelcome vein that popped on her cheeks.

To inspire client confidence, it helped, of course, that he'd had a fair amount of non-surgical intervention himself. And a bit of actual surgery that he omitted to talk about – reducing the wrinkles on his neck, and raising his drooping eyelids. He loathed what he called 'the tyranny of ageing', and had devoted much of his life to, if not halting or reversing it, at least cheating it of some of its worst ravages.

'You're looking very tanned, Sarah,' he said.

'I've just got back from Dubai.'

'Holiday?'

She nodded.

'With your husband?'

'No, with a girlfriend – we go every year. I love it there. I do my annual clothes shopping there.'

PETER JAMES

Revson was relieved that she got some time away from the monster. He noticed the shiny Cartier Tank watch on her wrist. 'Is that new?'

She smiled. 'Yes, got that there. I found a little jewellery place a few years ago that makes really good-quality copies – not like most of the rubbish. He's a proper craftsman, can get anything you want copied in just a few days.'

'My wife wants one of those Cartier bracelets,' he said, then frowned. 'A *Tennis* bracelet, is it? They cost a fortune.'

'He'd be able to make one for you – she'd never know the difference.'

'Is it legal?'

She shrugged. 'I can give you his email address. You can send him a photo of what you want and he'll send you a quote.'

'Hmm, thanks, I might well do that.' Pulling his goggles down over his eyes, he accepted the hypodermic needle from one of his two assistants dressed in identical navy tunics, and stepped forward across the grey and white speckled floor. 'Okay, ready?'

Sarah nodded. It would hurt, she knew. But the pain was a small price to pay for the difference she felt it would make to her lips. 'No gain without pain' was one of her favourite sayings. She said it now.

Royce slid the slender needle through her upper lip.

She winced.

'Okay?' he asked.

She nodded with her eyes. *No gain without pain . . . No gain without pain . . . No gain without pain.* She repeated the mantra continuously, silently.

Steadily, he worked his way along her upper, then lower lips.

'It'll look like an allergic reaction for a couple of days,' he said. 'Before they settle down.'

'I'm not on television again until Tuesday,' she said.

'You'll be fine by then.'

'You think so?'

'Aren't you usually?'

'Yep.'

He smiled. Sure, it was clients like this that had helped make

DEAD MAN'S TIME

him a wealthy man, but money had never motivated him. Every time a beautiful woman like Sarah Courteney slipped off his couch with a smile on her face, he wanted to punch his fist in the air and give two fingers to whatever sadist that cruel god of ageing was.