



**THE LAST
WINTER OF
DANI**

LANÇING

A NOVEL

P.D. VINER

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OF DANI LANCING

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P. D. VINER



CROWN PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK

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Published in the United States by Crown Publishers, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

www.crownpublishing.com

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Originally published in Great Britain, in different form, by Ebury Press, a division of Random House Group, Ltd., London.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Viner, P. D.

The Last Winter of Dani Lancing : a novel / P. D. Viner. — First American Edition.

p. cm.

1. Murder—Investigation—Fiction. 2. Murder victims' families—Fiction.

3. Psychological fiction. I. Title.

PS3622.I548L37 2013

813'.6—dc23

2013012086

ISBN 978-0-8041-3682-2

eISBN: 978-0-8041-3683-9

Jacket design: Oliver Munday

Jacket photograph: George Baier IV

(photograph of girl: Edward Carlile Portraits)

v3.1

For Lynne

My A-muse

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PART ONE

Saturday, December 18, 2010

“There’s no such thing as monsters,” he tells her.

The girl screws up her nose. “Look anyway. Please.”

“Okay.”

She hugs Hoppy Bunny tight as her dad slides sideways off the bed and onto the floor, pulling the duvet to one side and peering into the shadows.

“Nothing there.”

“Are you sure?”

Even at five years old she knows that grown-ups can’t be trusted with this stuff. The adults aren’t clear about what is and isn’t in the dark.

“I am absolutely, totally sure there’s nothing under your bed.”

“Check the wardrobe.”

With an exaggerated sigh, he moves across the room and pulls the doors open quickly. Dresses and coats sway violently, like zombie hordes.

“Dad!”

“It’s okay.” He grabs the clothes. “Nothing to worry about.” He pushes them aside and peers into the back of the wardrobe. “Just clothes, no lions or witches.”

Her eyes widen. “Did you think there would be?”

“No. No ... I was just being silly.” He sits back on the edge of her bed. “There’s nothing there, darling.”

“Nothing now! What if a monster slides under the door when I’m asleep?”

“Once I kiss you good night the room is sealed, nothing can come into your bedroom in the night.”

She frowns. “What about the tooth fairy?”

“Well ...”

“Santa?”

“I meant ...” He frowns too. “Nothing bad can come in, and Hoppy Bunny’s here to keep you safe.”

“How?” She looks dubiously at the small stuffed rabbit.

“Hoppy was specially trained, he only lets in good fairies or Santa.”

“Hmmm.”

“Don’t worry, Dani. Mummy and I are downstairs. Nothing bad is going to happen. I promise.” He kisses her forehead ...

... and the memory starts to fade.



Dani watches her younger self melt into the shadows of the night. Frozen in time, for a moment longer, is her father. The sight of him, so young and handsome, makes her smile—sad smile. Slowly, the black hair, smooth face, elegant clothes slip away. Left behind, lying on the bed, is the older version. His hair is salt and pepper now, his face craggy and lined. He sleeps, but it's not the sleep of the just. His nights are pained by visions. More than twenty years of night terrors—and she is the cause.

She sits in the chair by the door and watches him sleep just like she does every night, watching for the shadows to take his dreams. When they come, she will sing to him. Sometimes, when he whimpers or calls out, she aches to lean forward and kiss his forehead—but she can't. Nearly forty years have passed since he banished the monsters from her room. Now it's her job—to keep him safe in the night.

She curls her arms around herself. The room is cold, though she doesn't notice, she just likes to feel arms around her. She wishes she could call the child back, see herself again from all those years ago. How old—five? So serious and confident, when had it all disappeared? But of course she knows the answer to that. “Dani ...” he calls out in his sleep.

“Shh, sleep safe. I'm here.” And softly she sings a lullaby she remembers from all those years ago.

“Care you not and go to sleep, Over you a watch I'll keep ...”

“Not her!” He calls out in pain from the thickness of his nightmare.

“Shh, Dad.” She slides off the chair to kneel by his bed.

“Dani ...” he calls softly.

“It's okay.”

“I can't find you.”

He's sweating. His face is pinched and his legs begin to jerk like he's running.

“Dani!” he yells, his hands flail, jaws grind.

“I'm here, Dad,” she tells him, hoping her voice might worm its way down into his dream.

He twists sharply and cries in pain. “Are you safe?”

She hesitates. “Yes, Dad, I'm safe.”

He shakes, whimpering like a child. “Dani. Where are you?”

“Dad, I'm here,” she whispers. “I came back.”

His face contorts and he moans loudly.

“I can't see through the snow. Dani, I can't—” His body is suddenly rigid. His jaw grinds and darkness knits his brow. His back arcs—like he is having a seizure.

“Sleep, Daddy. I'm here.”

He makes a low moan and, like a sudden storm, the danger passes as tension slips away from his body and he slides deep into the undertow of sleep. She watches him, listens as his breath softens until it's barely audible. He's still. He's safe. The monsters have left him alone—for tonight. He should sleep until morning.

She stretches in the chair. Her back aches and the pain in her hip cuts through her. She can't sit any longer, so lies on the floor beside him. She rocks from side to side, trying to get comfortable. It was such a long time ago, surely it shouldn't still feel like this. Phantom pains. On the ceiling, the faintest movements of shadow—grays and blacks—skirmish above her head. Slowly, the pain recedes and she sinks into the floor. She lies still, missing her night-light, wants something to eat the darkness away. She longs for dawn, for her dad.

wake. She wants to talk, go for a walk, maybe see a movie? What time is it now—2 a.m.
Tiredness sweeps across her. He'll sleep—she wishes she could.



She lies still for a long time, listening to his breath rise and fall. Finally she rolls over onto a
four—stretches like a cat—and leaves. Outside his door, she pauses for a few moments
continuing to listen to his breath. One day it will end. Will she be there at that moment?
Hear the body draw its final inhalation, the lungs expand and then just stop so that the a
seeps away and there is nothing. Nothing. The thought scares her. The loneliness terrifies her.

She turns to her own room. Inside is her single child's bed, the same bed her father kneeled
under to check for monsters all those years ago. She feels a tiny shudder run through her.

“Someone walked over your grave.” That's what her gran would have said.

The room is too dark, only a little moonlight spills in from the hallway. She isn't sure she
can stay there. The shadows are alive sometimes.

“Be brave, Dani,” she tells herself. But the old fears are strong. What would Dad do?

She bends down and looks underneath the bed. Cobwebs. No monsters—unless you're a fly.
She smiles a fake smile, even though there's nobody there to see it, and she feels braver.

“Go on, Dan,” she whispers, and stretches out her fingers to the wardrobe door. It swings
open with a little haunted-house creak. The dresses and coats are long gone. It is total
empty. Of course it is. Real monsters don't hide in wardrobes.

Saturday, December 18, 2010

She cuts him.

His body twists. She tightens her grip on his hand as the pain draws him back from the oblivion of sedation. Eyes flicker. For a second they open: confusion, pain, fear. His palm pools with blood.

“Shh,” she whispers, as if to calm a baby, squeezing his fingers tight.

He struggles one final time, but the tape she’s wrapped around his body holds him secure. He drops back into the darkness.

With an unsteady hand she fumbles in her pocket for the sterile swab.

“Damn,” she spits, frustrated by the delicate touch needed. With a bloodied finger she pokes her glasses, holding them in place so she can peer through the oval at the bottom. Her blurred hand sharpens into focus.

She dips the bud into his palm; the cotton bloats, gorges itself. She lets his hand drop—arcs to the floor and swings, splattering red like a child’s painting, and then comes to rest weeping onto the carpet. She’s cut far deeper than was needed; bone shows through the deep trench of flesh. She doesn’t care, just runs the swab across the slide, leaving a bloody smear. Done. She feels giddy. Finally she’s done it. Patricia Lancing has her man. She leans forward, her mouth brushing his ear to whisper, “You are a monster.”

“He needs a plaster,” a small voice says.

Patty looks across at Dani, who with a shy smile holds up the toy she’s squirted with ketchup.

“Hoppy Bunny needs a plaster. He’s poorly.”

“Oh dear, let’s get him one. Maybe Doctor Duck should take a look.”

“Oh yes, Mum. I’ll go get him.” Her daughter pads away, the memory fading.

“Danielle,” Patty calls to her five-year-old daughter, but she is gone. Long gone.

She looks back to the man tied to the chair. “Why Danielle?”

The question hangs in the air between them as it has done for over twenty years, poisoning and all consuming.

“Why my daughter?”

There is no sound from him. She looks at her watch. 3:42 a.m.

She takes the slide with his blossom of blood, puts it back in its box and seals it. With reverence she walks it over to the cooler and places it inside. All is done. She hears her husband’s voice slide back to her through the years: “Now what, Patty? Now what will you do?” Jim asks, but she doesn’t know what to say to him, her mind too full of shadows.

She turns back to the man she has abducted. With a finger, she reaches out and tips his head. His skin is waxy, lips flecked with the drool of insensibility. She takes his eyelid and peels it back; there is nothing but a poached-egg smear. He sickens her. She raises the knife.

and presses it into his soft throat. It would be easy ... so ... she closes her eyes.



She opens them. The hotel room has gone. She coughs and the shop assistant looks up from what he's reading.

"Yeah?" He looks fourteen, all spots and surly resentment.

She points behind his head, to the serious hunting knives in the locked cabinet. He grunts then takes a stubby key from his pocket and slides the glass away. He points to one and she nods. It's vicious, designed to slice through flesh and muscle, hack through bone. One edge a razor, the other a saw. She's come all the way across London to this little shop in Wimbledon somewhere nobody knows her, to buy a specialist hunting knife. She carries no ID, just cash—a cover story all worked out: her husband will be hunting for the first time, big promotion up for grabs and he needs to impress. So she will have to gut, slice and cook whatever he manages to shoot. She's pleased with her invention and has topped it off with a disguised waxed jacket and riding boots she bought from Oxfam yesterday. She's also wearing lots of make-up. Mutton dressed as mutton. She spent all morning in front of a mirror perfecting her cut-glass home-counties accent, reborn as Hilary Clifton-Hastings. Nobody can refuse to sell a hunting knife to a Clifton-Hastings.

"That will do nicely" she says and hands it back. The shop assistant peels the price sticker from the back with a fingernail that is almost pure soil.

"Thirty-five fifty."

Hilary Clifton-Hastings slides the cash across the counter; he scoops it up and scatters it into the till. No questions, barely a glance from him. She does not need her alter ego. He sizes her up in a microsecond; small, thin, gray woman in her sixties: harmless.

Harmless!

That was two days ago.



She opens her eyes. She's cold. That afternoon's snow falls on her once again. The water sun's dipped below the horizon and the light has died. She stands, a statue, alone in the long stay car park alongside the metal carcasses that poke from the growing carpet of snow. If anyone were watching her, they'd think she was a crazy woman. But nobody is watching, not even on CCTV. Broken yesterday and not repaired, tut-tut.

She hasn't dressed for the weather. The ferocity of the cold has surprised her: Siberia in southeast England. She knows she should go and sit in her car but everything looks so beautiful in its white coat. All around the ground is pure, unmarked, as if no living thing exists to disturb the peace. It would be terrible if she destroyed it. So she stands still and waits.

She sticks out her tongue and counts ... one elephant, two elephants ... a swirling snowflake lands and dissolves, wet and slightly metallic. Others fall on her eyelids and trick away as mock tears, some alight on her skin and nuzzle into her silver hair. Each flake perfect—an intricate and exquisite ice world—unique. Some see the hand of God in this. No

her.



Fewer and fewer planes have been landing over the last few hours as the snow has gotten heavier. If she had her phone she could check the weather report, check the plane schedule, but she doesn't have it. She carries nothing that could identify her if ... if things don't go according to plan.

"Shall I just stand here and wait?" she thinks. "But for how long? He's already hours late and may not come at all." Does she wait until she freezes?

She watches the snow and listens for the first mutterings of an engine. She feels as if she has been placed in a magician's cabinet, waiting to be sawn in half.

Then, in the darkness some way off, she hears the chug of a motor. She shakes a little, though not her sickness shakes. She doesn't need her medication—this is first-night nerves.



All is dark. Jim flicks the light on. He stands in the doorway, holding a tea towel where the door should be. "Ladies and gentleman. I now present for your delectation and delight the master of the art of prestidigitation ..."

"Dad!" Dani shouts from the hallway. "I'm doing magic."

"Sorry. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Magic of Madame Danielle Lancing."

The tea towel is pulled away with a flourish and a six-year-old Dani enters, wearing a black top hat made from an old porridge container and a paper plate. She sports a black cape that was once a towel and waves a cardboard wand that came free in a Rice Krispies packet and has been sat on quite a few times.

"I am Mystical Dani and you will be amazed," she says in as low a voice as a six-year-old can manage.

She whips the wand into the air.

"Abracadabra!" She pulls off her hat and Hoppy Bunny is on her head, dressed in a tutu.

Jim claps wildly. Dani grins, showing her missing front teeth. She waves her dad over, and once again they whisper.

Patty watches them with pleasure, and perhaps a twinge of jealousy. They're thick thieves those two. Always have been, always ...

"Now my beautiful assistant will help me," Dani shouts as if she were in a real theater, and Jim bows and blows kisses to the crowd, "with the Many Knives of Doom illuj-ion." She waves a plastic knife in the air.

Patty feels the weight of the hunting knife in her own hand, its edge bloody. Her husband and daughter dissolve—smoke and mirrors. They were not real, a thirty-five-year-old memory that rose to the surface; the heft of the blade in her hand is real though. What she must do with it is real. She grips it tight.



Headlights arrive, arresting the freezing flakes in mid-air. It's too big to be a car, it must be the shuttle. The excitement thaws her toes and fingers; she moves slowly toward the line of cars that will hide her from view. Finally the shuttle reaches the entrance to the car park and turns in. She feels her heart slow as the bus crawls toward her.

"Let him be on it," she speaks aloud, though the wind rips her words to shreds the moment they emerge from her mouth. The bus skids a little as the driver applies the brakes. Inside it's dark. There is no movement. She ages and dies many times before the door finally cracks open and the interior is illuminated. The driver hops down the stairs quickly, keen to get the job done and get back to the warmth of the terminal. He opens one of the luggage stores under the bus and pulls out a set of golf clubs.

"How funny," she thinks as she watches him struggle with them. Shivering, the driver holds them out, as a single passenger alights. The metal whale then pulls away with a little slide of the wheels, heading back to civilization.

She watches the passenger wrestle with the golf clubs and a little pull-along suitcase. She cannot see clearly; he's too far away and in the shadows. She holds her breath while he inches toward her. From somewhere she hears:

"Mum." A voice from the dark.

"I'm nearly there, Dani. So close."

"Patty." Jim's deep voice rattles in her rib cage.

"Please don't ask me to stop, Jim."

Patty digs her gnawed fingernails into the skin of her arm—as hard and deep as she can—and the passenger stumbles closer. Face still hidden, snow billowing around him. There is a yellow pool of light and he is almost there ... he steps into it, like an actor moving into a spotlight: Duncan Coburn.

He's not tall but he's stocky. He looks like a rugby player who's stopped exercising but still enjoys his food and beer. Mostly bald, just a clipped halo above his ears, black flecked with gray. His face is fleshy and pink—a mix of blood pressure and sun. He has a few days' growth of beard, which is mostly white. He's dressed in linen, a stylish white suit that might have looked great in Lisbon but is going to get ruined in the snow. He looks frozen already.

"Good," she thinks. "That will make my job easier."

The clubs are on his shoulder and swing heavily as he walks. He has to stop every few feet to clear away the little snowmen his case keeps building. As he approaches she slowly draws back into the shadows and slides toward her car.



She opens her eyes. She's back in the hotel room with Duncan Coburn—a sedated and bleeding Duncan Coburn. The room is stifling. She misses the clean sterile cold of the afternoon. No snowflakes fall here; instead motes of dust dance. She remembers how Dani, when she was about five, believed they were sugarplum fairies dancing in the moonlight. The imagination of a child ... It's just dirt and decay. This room is filthy. The walls are beige but speckled with greasy spots and chocolate-colored scabs. The ceiling was probably white once but is now nicotine beige, and the floor ... Christ knows what bodily secretions have seeped into it. There's a stain, just by the foot of the bed, that she thinks is the spitting image of

Gandhi. Now, what would he have done? Forgiven Duncan Cobhurn? She is not Gandhi. She cuts him.

THREE

Saturday, December 18, 2010

“Wha—?” Jim Lancing wakes with a start. No idea where, frozen—panic.

“Dad.” Dani is beside him in an instant.

“I’m okay, darling. Go back to your room, I’m fine. It was just a nightmare, just another nightmare.”

“I should stay.”

“No, no really. Please, Dani. I’m okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“Please.”

She nods, a little reluctantly, and leaves him.

He lies back down and concentrates on slowing his heart, pulling himself back from wherever his dream had taken him. He pictures a lake in his mind, mountains surrounding—a calm place. Slowly the fear recedes and he is himself again. He rubs his hand, it hurts. He looks across at his bedside table. Glowing numbers read 3:42.

“Damn.”

He really needs more sleep than this, but he knows that won’t happen. He lies there in the dark. On his tongue there’s the faintest taste, and in the air there seems to be something tangible and smoky, but he can sense it rather than smell it. He feels sweaty from his nightmare and already the prickles of sweat are turning cold; he realizes what the taste in his mouth is: blood.

He rolls over onto his side and then out of bed and onto the floor. The first few steps are a little more than a hobble until his creaking joints and muscles warm up. He walks down the hallway to the loo. This is the biggest show of how age has crept up on him: that he can’t get through the night without the need to pee. And then, once he’s there, he stands longer than ever before. Sometimes he even sits, like a girl. Tonight he sits immediately, knowing he will be in there a long time. After a couple of minutes he takes a newspaper that’s folded under the sink. He looks at the Sudoku.

“I haven’t got a pen,” he calls out.

“Isn’t there one in the medicine cabinet?”

He looks and finds a stubby pencil in with his razor.

“Got it. Thanks,” he shouts to his daughter.

“Okay,” she calls back. “I’ll be downstairs. Waiting for you.”



He finishes the Sudoku and Killer Sudoku while he’s there, then cleans his teeth, trying to remove the taste of blood. He looks at himself in the mirror and isn’t unhappy with the

reflection. He's got pretty terrible bed-head and his eyes look saggier than usual, but generally he's not too bad for a man of sixty-four, especially at this time of night. Not gone to seed, like many others he could name—he's pretty lean. He can bend over and touch his toes without too much huffing and puffing. He would be the first to admit that his stomach isn't as flat like it once was; there's a slight paunch but it's not bad, just a little loss of muscle tone to show how gravity hates the old. He rinses his mouth and then runs his wet fingers through his hair. It's still a pretty good crop, even if it has gone stone gray at the temples and the rest, once raven black, is now dusted with gray. He has always thought his features a little too pronounced, his nose too big and his mouth too wide, but he seems to have grown into them over the years.

He shivers, the chill of the morning creeping into his bones. He runs a shower, nice and hot, and steps into it. The pressure is strong—it pounds and buffets him, releasing knots.

"Jim," a voice breathes from inside the cascade of water.

"Patty?" He strains to hear—can her voice be in the water?

"Help."

He feels something deep in his heart—a tug that says something's wrong with her, his wife. A wife he has barely seen in twelve years. In the churn of the water his nightmare comes back to him.



"Are you coming down yet?" she calls up the stairs.

"Just coming," he replies, feeling guilty for not going down before now. He knows how much she longs to talk after a sleepless night, how lonely she gets during the long stretch of darkness. But right now he's too rattled by the images in his head to talk to her. He tries to push them back inside the box and paste a smile on his face.

"You need to get down here," Dani shouts.

The smile wastes away on his face. He heads downstairs. "Where are you?"

"Hide and seek" is her reply.

He finds her curled up in the big leather armchair in the room they laughingly call his den. When she was a child it had been the family dining room. But he couldn't remember the last time the house had any actual dining in it. Instead the room had become a sort of den-slash-library-slash-watching-the-world-slide-by room. It's pretty Spartan: two chairs, a small table, and an old fish tank. Once, a long time ago, the tank had been home to Dani's tropical friend, but now has some very creepy-looking cacti in among multicolored stones. It's the only room in the house that's allowed to be a little untidy. Newspapers are on the floor; he only buys the *Saturday Guardian* and *Sunday Observer* each week but they certainly mount up. Books and correspondence are piled on a small coffee table. Every couple of months he forces himself to sit down and catch up with the world; he should probably do that pretty soon, he thinks.

She turns in the big chair to look up at him. Her long dark hair curling over her shoulder, pale skin flawless and her large brown eyes glittering with excitement. It shocks him a little—probably the aftermath of his nightmare—that she still looks so young. He forgets that sometimes ... after all that has happened to her.

“You okay?” she asks with a half smile.

He nods a yes.

“Then sit down and buckle up—you are in for a treat.”

She swings back in the chair to face the doors that lead to the garden. Jim sits in the other, less comfortable chair and angles it to match Dani’s view. Outside it’s black but he can just see something—a light snaps on in the garden next door, bleeding across their lawn, revealing an amazing vista. Huge flakes of snow drift on the wind, buffeted and brawling like bumper cars at the fair.

“Oh my God.” He’s amazed by the sight.

The two of them sit watching the snow until the sensor light turns off.

“It’ll go back on soon.”

They sit in the dark, waiting. Jim suddenly thinks of the animals out there: Willow, Scruffy, George and others—guinea pigs, hamsters, cats and two dogs buried over the years in solemn services. He has never seen their ghosts, which he’s glad about. If Scruffy came back to be stroked, like some zombie Disney cartoon, that would scare the life out of him. But he wonders where they are now. Is there an animal afterlife? Do they have souls like he does, like Dani does?

The light flips back on—catching a squirrel in mid-scurry—and Jim is once more in awe of the scene before him. The snow swirls like the Milky Way, so close he could reach out and touch it.

“Are you out there, Patty?” he thinks. “Somewhere in the snow?”

FOUR

Saturday, December 18, 2010

Tom stops to get his bearings. Peering into the dark, he can see the mouth of the bridge stretching over the Thames but by halfway across, it fades to nothing. A wall of blackness with snow rippled through it. The streets are empty but for a second he thinks he sees someone walking toward him across the bridge. It looks like ... but then there's no one. Just snow whipped up by the wind. Who? Something scratches at his thoughts, tugging at strands of memories that just refuse to come. For a second, he knows ... but it just fades from his mind.

He looks at his watch, it's 3:42 a.m. Everybody's asleep, except him.

He turns back to the path and kicks at the snow. For days he's been dragging a heavy head along in a sack but now there's snow. How can anyone feel depressed when faced with this? He feels like a kid who's bunked off school to see the circus come to town, "oohing" and "ahhing" as the tufts of candyfloss parachute toward him.

"I love snow," he tells the world.

He looks over the sluggish water to the park; it could be anywhere, anywhen. The snow is already quite thick, deadening all sound, building banks and drifts. The moon's fat, nearly full, but half-hidden behind skyscrapers of cloud. He stands for a long time, a solitary figure in a snow globe, then finally turns toward the ark of glass that juts out over the river and trudges toward home.

He's left his car outside her house. He's already thinking he'll send a constable to collect it in a day or two, in case she's watching out her window.

"What a mistake," he tells the snow.

He'd known she was divorced, had two children—and that could have been fine, he's good with kids. The problem was that he'd not seen how needy she was. They'd had dinner a week ago—she'd drunk a little too much and been a little loud by the end of the evening, but he thought that was nerves. She was at least ten years younger than him, thirty, with long, deep brown hair and tall, long-limbed. That was what had attracted him to her profile. And in her picture she smiled quite beautifully—genuine, unconcerned. Just like *her* smile had been.

"And?" he asks himself. "The truth?"

Truth? He thinks. It has nothing to do with truth, or admitting anything. He knows why he'd been drawn to this woman. He knows why some women draw his eye and not others. Why he'd turned down at least two women who could have made him happy, who could have loved him. The truth was because he was in love. Still in love after all these years.

And that photo on the website had been so like her. So like Dani. He had made the date wanting to see her smile again. Except in real life he didn't see Dani's smile. Instead there was a thin half smile, darting across her lips like an apology, and she dipped her head to hide how tall she was. Her voice had grated on him from the start too—rough sloppy diction—yo

know, you know like. But dinner had been fine. At the end they had walked to the Tube and she'd leaned into him and kissed him. He felt her small breasts push into his chest and a flick of her tongue brush his lips. She called him the next day and they had agreed to meet again. She invited him to dinner at her place. Stupid. Her place—it was obvious where that was heading. Stupid to go to bed with her. Out of her clothes she was so unlike Dani. She had tattoos, which he hated. From the start she apologized for everything. Sorry for her M&M knickers, the sheets, the children down the hall, her inexperience, how cold her hands were. "Next time it will be perfect," she whispered in his ear as he pushed himself into her.

Afterward she went to the toilet. He imagined her in there, crying for her lost life and the desperate compromises she'd been forced to make. He had to get out of the house. When she returned with minty breath, he told her he had to leave, still had a test to prepare for Year Four. He saw her flinch as he lied to her—clearly she was a woman who'd heard a lot of lies and had good radar for them—but he couldn't bear to snuggle up with her and talk about the future. It actually made it worse that she looked like Dani. Only skin-deep though. He smiled at the thought of Dani and his cheeks tighten and ache. His eyes have little frozen lakes in the corners.

It wasn't his first lie to this woman either. His profile on the dating site says he's a teacher of history at an under-performing comprehensive. He never tells anyone he's a policeman. Even those few people close enough to him to know he works for the police don't know exactly what he does. Only a few other high-ranking officers know he heads a special unit and that he looks into the eyes of dead girls and promises them he will try to find the man responsible. And he tries. He tries. Detective Superintendent Thomas Bevans. The Sad Man.

He walks, feeling the snow give way under his feet.

"I should've put a bet on a white Christmas—the odds will be useless now," he tells the trees.

He loves the silence. Of course, at almost 4 a.m. on a Saturday morning, it is going to be pretty quiet—but the deadening effect of the snow and the low cloud has removed all trace of the world. No music of the spheres. He stops and closes his eyes. He's a boy again, remembering the first time the silence descended, a truly white Christmas. 1976.

He was eight and pretty sure he'd never seen snow before—not real snow that settles on the ground. But he remembers the rush of excitement that morning, like man had landed on Mars or something. The road outside their flat was amazing. Nothing had driven through it, not even a bike. Pure. Virgin. White. He ran out. His mum was still asleep and he ran and ran through the snow, then turned to see his tracks—the only human being on earth. Until he got to the park. And there she was. He remembers thinking, "What the bloody hell is she wearing?" She was in a white nightdress, flimsy and sheer. He could see the curves of her body beneath it—but is that just wishful remembering? No, she was fully clothed underneath with a big sailor's jumper. She wore the nightdress over the top. She was lying in the snow, waving her arms. He saw her and hid in some bushes, watching. She lay there for a while and then got up and walked away—her dark hair streaked with snow. He waited until she was out of sight and walked over to where she'd lain. There was an angel in the snow.

Christ, even at eight years old, she had done something to him. Danielle Lancing, the girl he loved. Loves.

As memories of her flit through his mind he feels a shiver run through him as if somebody

dancing on his grave. But it's just the vibration of his mobile on silent. He pulls it out and reads the short message, a missing person report. Normally he wouldn't be notified unless it was a high-profile victim. This isn't, just a Durham businessman who'd been reported missing by his wife. But the name is one that he'd recently added to a high-security alert list: Duncan Coburn. And the memory slots into place—the woman he thought he saw in the swirling snow on the bridge, Patricia Lancing. Dani's mother. He feels lost.

“Christ.”

He turns to head back the way he's come. He begins to run.

Saturday, December 18, 2010

Patty sits in the dark. She had to turn the lights out so she could no longer see him—she wants to cut his throat. She needs to get calm so she can go and check the blood, to make—

Light snaps on outside the room, headlights from a car skidding into the car park behind the hotel. The glare spills around the edges of the curtains. The blood pooled at his feet glows. Her heart somersaults. Panic. She hadn't considered the curtains; they're a cheap fabric and don't fit very well. There must be no chance someone can see inside. She grabs the gaffer tape and begins to run it across the gaps, sealing the two of them in a cube. It takes a few minutes to remove all vestiges of light seeping in from the outside world and plunge the room into pitch-black.



Dani is standing on a chair; she's eight and looking intently at the problem before her. Jim has sunk a little so that she can reach around his neck. He's wearing a rented tuxedo that's a little snug in places. Dani has the two ends of a bowtie in her hands and a slip of paper with instructions on how to tie it.

"I think ..." Jim starts.

"Shh!" Dani holds her finger to her lips and then frowns back at the paper.

"If you ..." he tries.

"Shh. If you want this tied properly you need to keep quiet." She reads, "Fold the left over the right ..." She proceeds to follow the directions carefully, concentrating on the diagrams.

"Eureka!" She jumps up and down doing her happy dance. It's a little loose, but recognizable bowtie. Dani beams broadly, proud of herself. From the door there is a woof and a whistle. Jim turns to see Patty. He gives her a twirl.

"I could rent you out as a gigolo," she says huskily.

"Sorry, I'm a one-woman man. You look fantastic."

She rolls her eyes; compliments are not something she likes to hear.

"Cab will be here in five minutes."

"Will Jenny be here soon?" asks Dani.

"Any minute. She'll give you some supper, then into jammies, stories and bed. Got that?"

"Yes," says the eight-year-old with a little roll of her own eyes, as if to say: *I'm eight. I can understand simple instructions and I don't really need a babysitter anymore anyway.*

"If you win will you wake me up and show me your prize when you get home?" she asks.

"No." "Yes." Patty and Jim answer simultaneously.

"I won't win—it's just stupid." Patty shakes her head.

"Daddy says you fight for truth and justice."

“Oh does he? I just write stories in a newspaper.”

“I’m going to be a superhero when I grow up,” says Dani as she jumps off the chair and lands with a slam at her parents’ feet.

“And what superpowers will you have?” Patty asks her. Dani thinks for a moment.

“To make people be nice.”



Patty snaps the light back on in the room. She checks the tape again. His mouth’s total covered, but just to make sure, she pulls his head back to rest on the chair and wraps layer after layer of tape around and around. He can’t possibly move now. There is no dignity. He wet himself; it drips down the chair and onto the floor, joining his blood. The smell is rank. He looks as if he’s melting, like the Wicked Witch of the West.

When she’s finished with the tape, she turns her attention to the room. A double bed dominates. She has lain on it; it’s lumpy. She didn’t pull back the sheets, sure they wouldn’t be clean and not wishing to leave any evidence. She wears gloves, has done each time she entered the room. She also wears a shower cap and plastic pinafore, as if she works in a meat-pie factory. There’s a bedside table with alarm and telephone, a chair by the window, a wardrobe that contains a mini-safe and an ironing board. She looks down. The blood will be difficult to get out of the carpet.

“Maybe when I’m finally done with this room I’ll leave a pile of money for the pool cleaner who finds all of this ... If all goes well,” she thinks.

According to the plan, she should return in less than eight hours to find nothing disturbed and her prisoner still unconscious. If not ... then she must leave no trace. She checks all the drawers, they’re empty; not even the Gideons see any point in coming here.

She moves to the bathroom: cracked white tile and a faint smell of bleach over damp and mustiness. The shower curtain has mildew along the bottom. She brought no toiletries with her, has not touched the two small plastic beakers, nor the two small bottles of shampoo and body wash. There’s a hand towel. She wonders if she used it and decides to take it with her just in case. She stuffs it into her bag.

“Better safe than prison,” she thinks.

She turns to leave and catches sight of herself in the mirror. Blood is smeared on her glasses and arcs over her cheek, sweeping across her right eye. She draws back from her reflection, horrified for a second and then ... exhilarated. Fiery eyes blaze through a red cover of his blood. She smiles at her bloody twin. She likes it, would like to keep it forever, a red badge of courage. Nemesis—the Red Revenger. But she’s no superhero. She wipes the blood away with a wet-wipe she pockets after. In the mirror is a crone once more. She gives the bathroom one final look and heads back to the bedroom. Everything is clean. She looks at her watch: 5:30 a.m. Time to go. She checks she has the room key and then switches the light off and plunges the room once more into darkness.

From somewhere far-off she hears Jim ask her: “Patty, what would your superpower be?”

She whispers into the dark. “To bring back the dead.”

Saturday, December 18, 2010

Tom sits at his desk. He should get moving—he doesn't have much time—but he can't move. For the last ten minutes he has read from a small purple book. The same page over and over. On the cover, written in bold black letters: PRIVATE—DO NOT OPEN. He takes the diary and slides it back into the safe in his desk. Inside there are two other diaries and a small photo album, full of pictures of Dani. He locks the safe and slides the desk drawer closed, then locks that too. No one knows he has a small safe in his desk; he fitted it himself one weekend.

Tom goes through his checklist one last time. He'd signed in twenty minutes ago, chatting to old Charlie on the desk for a while, asking about his daughter just as he always did. Then he took the lift up to his office on the third floor. He'd unlocked it and turned his computer on, logging in at 5:22 a.m. and started an e-mail. Now it is 5:36 a.m. Time to go. He heads into the corridor and takes the stairs down to the first floor, the main ops room for Operations Ares.

It's a large room with floor-to-ceiling glass composing one wall. Almost every other inch of wall space is taken up with whiteboards covered with lists of names, photos of victims, schedules of surveillance, reports and statements. Seen from eye level it's a mess, a Rorschach test in three dimensions. Yet from above it resembles a hive city with maze-like avenues created from dozens and dozens of dividers forming little rooms or corridors where desks can congregate. Everywhere, everywhere is paper. Great, towering skyscrapers of paper. In some places they are still intact, in others smashed down or mashed into other towers as if Godzilla has rampaged through central Tokyo. Some of the paper skyscrapers spill onto the floor like a river that's burst its banks. In other spots, reams and reams are crumpled into balls and lie under desks or scattered around empty bins. A sorry testament to the lack of basketball skills in Britain.

At this time of the morning, before natural light begins to spill through the glass, it feels oppressive. A city of paper, dark and shadowy. Except for one desk that blazes in the very center of the web. This is where the graveyard shift works, or more likely dozes, while they wait for information on breaking crime. Mostly they file reports for later attention by the day shift, but sometimes they need some poor bugger woken up and dispatched to some draft wasteland to look at a body. Tonight they had just passed on a run-of-the-mill missing person's report ... but that had made Tom head directly there, not passing go and not collecting £200.

Tom looks at his watch: 5:38. In under an hour the graveyard shift will be over and the morning staff will start to arrive—he has to move. He can feel his stomach spasm; he's the boss, he should be beyond reproach. What he's about to do is misconduct at best. He vowed to himself, twenty years ago, that he would be straight, that his conduct would be whiter than white, that he would never do anything that he knew was wrong. Not again. No

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