

'Spectacular! Tense and human, fast and authentic.'

LEE CHILD

TONY PARSONS

the Slaughtert Man

By the No. 1
Bestselling Author of
**THE MURDER
BAG**

WHO DO YOU WANT DEAD?

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About the Book

On New Year's Day, a wealthy family is found slaughtered inside their exclusive gated community in north London, their youngest child stolen away.

The murder weapon – a gun for stunning cattle before they are butchered – leads Detective Max Wolfe to a dusty corner of Scotland Yard's Black Museum devoted to a killer who thirty years ago was known as the Slaughter Man.

But the Slaughter Man has done his time, and is now old and dying. Can he really be back in the game?

And was the murder of a happy family a mindless killing spree, a grotesque homage by a copycat killer – or a contract hit designed to frame a dying man?

All Max knows is that he needs to find the missing child and stop the killer before he destroys another innocent family – or finds his way to his own front door ...

About the Author

Tony Parsons left school at sixteen and was working on the night shift at Gordon's Gin Distillery in Islington when he was offered his first job in journalism on the *New Musical Express*.

Since then he has become an award-winning journalist and bestselling novelist whose books have been translated into more than forty languages, most recently Vietnamese. His semi-autobiographical novel *Man and Boy* won the Book of the Year prize.

Also by Tony Parsons

The Murder Bag

The Slaughter Man

Tony Parsons



For Yuriko

Crimes reverberate through years and through lives. It is a rare homicide that destroys only one person.

Joyce Carol Oates, 'After Black Rock'

Most gypsies fear the dead.

*Raymond Buckland, Buckland's
Book of Gypsy Magic - Travellers'
Stories, Spells & Healings*

PROLOGUE

New Year's Eve

The boy awoke to his father's scream.

Somewhere in the darkness down the hall, behind his parents' bedroom door, his father cried out as if his world was suddenly undone.

There was terror and rage and pain in that scream and, before the boy was fully awake, he was out of bed and opening his door just a crack, just enough to stare down the dark landing to the closed bedroom door where now there was only silence.

'Dad?'

He stood, staring into the darkness, the only sounds his ragged breathing and the drunken voices that drifted up from the city streets, celebrating the death of another year.

A bell tolled at the back of the house, moved by the wind, the deep resonant sound of the temple bell in his mother's garden, tolling as if to mark the end of all things.

And from behind the bedroom door at the end of the hall, his mother began to scream.

And when at last she stopped, his father began to sob as though his heart had been broken.

Terror and shock choked in the boy's throat.

His kind, calm father, with his slow easy smile and his air of amusement, a father who never raised his voice, let alone his hand, sobbing as if everything he loved was being taken away.

Then he heard a voice that he did not know.

Insistent.

Inhuman.

Tight with fury.

'I'll not tell you again,' the voice commanded. 'I want you to watch.'

And then sounds that made no sense.

A sound like wood being chopped. *Chunk ... chunk ... chunk ...* And accompanying the low moans of misery from the bedroom down the hall came the drunken cheers of the revellers in the other world.

None of it seemed real.

The boy slumped against the door, his breath coming in shallow gasps, suddenly aware of the tears streaming down his face.

Somewhere in their home the dog began to bark, and the familiar noise, that unexpected reminder of a world he understood, made him move.

He slipped out of his bedroom, his heart hammering and his legs heavy and a slick film of terrified sweat covering his body.

He moved quickly away from the terrible sounds, down the landing to his sister's bedroom.

He went inside and found her sitting on her bed, fully dressed in her party clothes, dry-eyed, her face white with shock as she fumbled for her phone and punched 9 once.

They both looked up at the sudden eruption of violence coming from the bedroom down the hall. Unknown, unknowable sounds. A struggle of terrible ferocity, flesh and bone colliding with walls and floor. Dull thuds and muffled groans.

The sound of something fighting for its life.

He saw his sister punch another 9.

He closed his eyes, dizzy with sickness.

This would end. He would wake up and the nightmare would be over. But he opened his eyes and it was more real than anything he had ever known.

His sister's hands were shaking as she punched the third and final 9.

The dog was barking furiously.

And then there were heavy footsteps coming down the hall, no attempt at stealth.

Coming for them now.

'The door!' his sister hissed and the boy reached it and locked it in one desperate motion.

Then he stepped back, staring at the locked door.

Somebody was knocking.

A gentle, almost playful tap with the knuckle of the index finger.

He looked at his sister.

The door seemed to press against its frame as if it was being tested by a powerful shoulder. Then the wood shattered and splintered and cracked as the kicking began.

'Emergency services - how may I direct your call?'

'Please,' the girl said. 'We need help.'

Then the boy was at the window, opening it, freezing air rushing in and with it the sound of distant music, parties, laughter drifting across the final few minutes of the year's last day.

He looked back as the door caved in and a dark figure loomed in the hallway, reaching through the shattered wood for the key he had left in the lock.

It did not look like a man.

The figure in the doorway seemed like some deeper darkness and as it came into the bedroom, the boy could smell him, the sickening scent of sweat and blood and sex and the kind of industrial stink that reeked of old cars and dead engines and puddles of grease.

There was a voice in the room coming from his sister's phone.

'Hello? How may I direct your call? Hello?'

Then he was suddenly falling, dropping through the cold air and almost immediately hitting the driveway below with

a grunt of pain.

He looked up at the first-floor window.

His sister had one leg out of the window and one leg still in the room.

The dark figure must have got her by the neck, because she was clearly choking, yes, the boy saw it now, thick fingers were wrapped around the chain on her necklace, twisting it in his fist, the way you twist the collar of a dangerous dog.

The black figure was trying to strangle her.

Then the necklace must have snapped because she was falling through the air sideways for what felt like a long second and he stepped quickly back as the ground rushed up to hit her hard.

Then he was helping his sister to her feet and she was struggling to walk, something wrong with one of her knees as they went out into the street.

They lived in a gated community at the highest point of the city, six large houses behind a tall iron gate and high brick walls that were topped with discreet razor wire.

All of London fell away beneath them.

It felt like the top of the world.

He left his sister in the middle of the street, rubbing her bloody knees, and ran across the road to the nearest house, leaning on their doorbell, screaming for help, shouting about murder.

But the house was in darkness.

And he saw that most of the other houses in that exclusive community were in darkness too. There was only one house at the very end of the road that was ablaze with light and noise. The boy ran towards it and banged on the door.

But the music was too loud and they were getting ready for midnight.

And he heard happy drunken voices in a babble of languages.

Polish. Tagalog. Spanish. Italian. Punjabi. And broken English.

The owners were away and the help were having a party. And the help didn't hear him.

Then his sister was coming towards him, hobbling badly, only putting her full weight on one foot.

They both looked up as a firework exploded in the sky. In the distance, people cheered, suddenly much drunker and much happier. They both stared back at their home.

And from somewhere deep inside that house, a small child began to cry.

The boy cursed.

'We can't leave him,' his sister said. 'Can you smell it?'

There was a smell of burning, of smoke and gunpowder and the flames to come.

'It's fireworks,' he said.

She shook her head.

'He's burning our home.'

He saw it now.

Black smoke drifted from a ground-floor window.

'You go,' she said. 'Get help. I'll get the little one.'

He wiped his face and choked down a thick knot of bile as his sister began to stumble back to the burning house. The smoke was already thicker, the voices of the party people were suddenly raised, and he found he could not move.

'TEN!'

His sister turned to look at him just once, her face white in the moonlight.

'NINE!'

He watched her hobble up the drive, limping round the side of the house. And he knew with total certainty that he would never see her again.

'EIGHT!'

He shivered with cold and fear. And tried to think.

'SEVEN!'

He could still hear the celebrations at the house with all the lights and noise and laughter, but they seemed very far away now, removed from anything he understood, from anything that made any kind of sense.

'SIX!'

He screamed, panic and frustration overwhelming him.

'FIVE!'

Nobody heard. Nobody cared. He was completely alone.

'FOUR!'

From the highest hill in London he saw bursts of colour and sound start to blaze and pop and explode across the city sky. It was beautiful, like a jewel box being emptied across the heavens by some careless god.

And he knew that he could do this thing. He would go beyond the iron gates that were there to keep out the wicked and the poor and he would run down the hill and find help. That is what he would do. And the nightmare would end.

'THREE!'

Their dog was barking again and the smoke was thicker still. He could not see his sister. His family were relying on him now.

'TWO!'

He began to run towards the iron gates.

'ONE!'

As the New Year dawned and the sky exploded high above him, the car smashed into him, hitting him low on the back of the legs.

'HAPPY NEW YEAR!'

The car was going very fast and knocked him backwards across the hood then immediately threw him forward, the rear wheels passing over his legs and reducing them to a bloody mush of crushed flesh and pulped bone.

Somewhere people were cheering.

Then he was lying on his back and staring up at a midnight sky that was brighter than daylight, the colours

everywhere all at once, yellows and reds and whites and greens erupting among the stars and then drifting to earth, and it was very peaceful lying there watching the sky until the pain came to claim him, the kind of pain that makes you empty your stomach, and the boy felt the reality of his ruined legs, and the agony was more than he could stand.

He watched the fireworks set the night ablaze without seeing them because now he could think of nothing but the pain. He heaved up a thick wad of blood as a dark figure bent above him.

‘Please,’ the boy said. ‘Help me.’

The dark figure lifted him up.

With strong hands. Kind hands.

The boy wasn’t sure if that was the right thing to do. He wasn’t sure if he should be moved. Perhaps that wasn’t the best thing. But he felt weak with gratitude.

Until he smelled that same stinking cocktail of stale sweat and used grease, both mechanical and human.

Until he saw that the hands and arms that held him as if he weighed nothing were drenched in the lifeblood of his family.

The fireworks above London were a riot of colour now.

But as he was carried back to what remained of his family, the boy surrendered gladly to the blackness, and he did not see them explode with light, and he did not see them die.

JANUARY

GhoSt homes of LoNdon

1

NEW YEAR'S DAY was big and blue and freezing cold. The single shot from the block of flats ripped the day apart.

I threw myself down behind the nearest car, hitting the ground hard, my palms studding with gravel, my face slick with sweat that had nothing to do with the weather.

Every gunshot is fired in anger. This one was full of murder. It cracked open the cloudless sky and left no space inside me for anything but raw terror. For long moments I lay very still, trying to get my breath back. Then I got up off my knees, pressing my back hard against the bright blue and yellow of an Armed Response Vehicle. My heart was hammering but my breathing was coming back.

I looked around.

SCO19 were already on their feet, staring up at the flats in their PASGT combat helmets, black leather gloves hefting Heckler & Koch assault rifles. Among them there were uniformed officers and plain-clothes detectives like me. All of us keeping our bodies tucked behind the ARVs and the green-and-yellow Rapid Response Vehicles. Glock 9mm pistols were slipped from thigh holsters.

Close by, I heard a woman curse. She was small, blonde, somewhere in her late thirties. Young but not a kid. DCI Pat Whitestone. My boss. She was wearing a sweater with a reindeer on it. A Christmas present. Nobody chooses to own a reindeer jumper. Her son, I thought. The kid's idea of a joke. She pushed her spectacles further up her nose.

'Officer down!' she shouted. 'Gut wound!'

I looked out from behind the car and I saw the uniformed officer lying on her back in the middle of the street, calling

for help. Clutching her belly. Crying out to the perfect blue sky.

‘Please God ... please Jesus ...’

How long since the shot? Thirty seconds? That’s a long time with a bullet in your gut. That’s a lifetime.

There is a reason why most gut-shot wounds are fatal but most gut-stab wounds are not. A blade inflicts its damage to one confined area, but a bullet rattles around, destroying everything that gets in its way. If a knife misses an artery and the bowel, and they can get you to an anaesthesiologist and a surgeon fast enough, and if you can avoid infection – even though most villains are not considerate enough to sterilise their knives before they stab you – then you have a good chance of surviving.

But a bullet to the gut is catastrophic for the body. Bullets clatter around in that microsecond, annihilating multiple organs. The small intestine, the lower intestine, the liver, the spleen and, worst of all, the aorta, the main artery, from which all the other arteries flow. Rip the aorta and you bleed out fast.

Take a knife wound to the gut and, unless you are very unlucky, you will go home to your family. Take a bullet in the gut and you will probably never see them again, no matter what the rest of your luck is like.

A knife wound to the gut and you call for help.

A bullet in the gut and you call for God.

I heard another muttered curse and then Whitestone was up and running towards the officer in the road, a small woman in a reindeer jumper, bent almost double, the tip of an index finger pressed against the bridge of her glasses.

I took in a breath and I went after her, my head down, every muscle in my body steeled for the second shot.

We crouched beside the fallen officer, Whitestone applying direct pressure to the wound, her hands on the officer’s stomach, trying to stem the blood.

My mind scrambled to remember the five critical factors for treating a bullet wound. A, B, C, D, E, they tell you in training. Check Airways, Breathing, Circulation, Disability – meaning damage to the spinal cord or neck – and Exposure – meaning look for the exit wound, and check to see if there are other wounds. But we were already beyond all of that. The blood flowed and stained the officer's jacket a darker blue. I saw the stain grow black.

'Stay with us, darling,' Whitestone said, her voice soft and gentle, like a mother to a child, her hands pressing down hard, already covered with blood.

The officer was very young. One of those idealistic young kids who join the Met to make the world a better place.

Her face was drained white by shock.

Shock from the loss of blood, shock from the trauma of the gunshot. I noticed a small engagement ring on the third finger of her left hand.

She died with an audible gasp and a bubble of blood. I saw Whitestone's eyes shine with tears and her mouth set in a line of pure fury.

We looked up at the balcony.

And the man was there.

The man who had decided at some point on New Year's Day that he was going to kill his entire family. That's what the call to 999 had said. That was his plan. That's what the neighbour heard him screaming through the wall before the neighbour gathered up his own family and ran for his life.

The man on the balcony was holding his rifle. Some kind of black hunting rifle. There was a laser light on it, a sharp green light for sighting that was the same bright fuzzy colour as Luke Skywalker's light sabre. It looked like a toy. But it wasn't a toy. I saw the green light trace across the ground – the grass in front of the flats, the tarmac of the road – and stop when it reached us.

We were not moving. Everything had stopped. The light settled on me, and then on Whitestone. As if it could not

decide between us.

'She's gone, Pat,' I said.

'I know,' Whitestone said.

She looked back at the vehicles with their bright markings, the blocks of blue and yellow of the ARVs and the green and yellow of the RRVs. Between them I could see the dull metallic sheen on Glocks and Heckler & Kochs, the medieval curve of the combat helmets, the faces drawn tight with adrenaline.

Whitestone was shouting something at them. The green laser sight on the black hunting rifle played across the reindeer on her sweater and settled there.

'Put him down!' she said.

Then I heard their voices.

'I have the trigger!' somebody said.

But there was no shot.

And I thought of the palaver that came with every discharged firearm. The automatic suspension and then every shot endlessly analysed, pored over, suspected. The prospect of jail and the dole queue. No wonder they were scared to shoot.

But this was not the reason for holding fire.

When I looked back at the balcony I saw that the man was no longer alone. A woman was with him. She was wearing some kind of headscarf, although from this distance I could not tell if it was faith or fashion.

He was calling her names. He was calling her all the names that kind of man always call women. Then he seemed to shove her back and pick up something from the ground. Holding it by the scruff of the neck. Shaking it.

A child. A toddler of two or less. From where we were kneeling with the dead officer I could see the chubby look that they all get at that age. The kid squirmed like a tortured animal as the man held it over the edge of the balcony.

Four floors up.

Nothing but concrete below.

The man was shouting something. The woman was weeping by his side and without looking at her he struck her in the face with the butt of the black hunting rifle. She stumbled backwards.

Then the child was suddenly falling.

The woman screamed.

'Take the shot!' someone shouted.

There was a single crack that sounded very close to the back of my head and immediately a spurt of blood came from a hole in the neck of the man on the balcony. He did not fall. He staggered backwards and smashed through the glass window behind the balcony, and as he disappeared from view I thought how fragile we all are, how very easy to break, how always so close to ruin.

And then I was running, my shoes slipping on grass slick with ice, the call for God's help coming unbidden from my lips, holding out my arms for the falling child.

But the distance between us was too great, and there was never enough time, and the child was always falling.

2

THE MEAT MARKET of Smithfield was silent.

I walked under the market's great arch, shivering in the early death of New Year's Day, past the line of old red telephone boxes and the plaque marking the spot where they killed William Wallace. Not yet four in the afternoon, and the sun was already going down behind the dome of St Paul's Cathedral.

There was a strip of shops on the far side of the square. They were all closed for the holiday but in the flat above one of them, music was playing. Fiddles and flutes and drums played at a mad pace. A song about a girl called Sally MacLennane. Irish music. Happy music. Probably The Pogues, I thought. On the front of the darkened store the painted words were worn by time.

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I went round the back of the shop and up a flight of stairs to the flats. A few of the residents had already thrown out their Christmas tree, but they were still celebrating at the Murphys. It took them a while to hear me ringing the bell, what with Shane MacGowan singing about his Sally MacLennane and the shouts of the adults and children inside.

My daughter Scout answered the door. Five years old and breathless. Rosy cheeked. Having the time of her life. There was a little red-haired girl with her, Shavon, maybe a year

younger, and the girl's kid brother, Damon, plus a ruby-coloured Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, panting with excitement. Our dog Stan, who had a bandy-legged black mongrel pup I hadn't seen before shyly sniffing behind him.

'We don't have to go yet, do we?' Scout said by way of a greeting.

'And who's this?' I said, looking at the mongrel, by way of a response.

'This is Biscuit,' said Shavon.

'You'll have a sausage roll,' Mrs Murphy predicated, appearing behind her.

Scout dashed off with her friend, trailing kid brother and dogs behind them. Mrs Murphy took me inside where I was greeted enthusiastically by her husband, Big Mikey – a thin, dapper man with silver hair and a neat moustache, not very big at all – and their son, Little Mikey – a black-haired giant of a lad around thirty, nothing little about him. Little Mikey's wife Siobhan was nursing a new baby boy in blue. Baby Mikey.

The Christmas tree twinkled and shone. Kirsty MacColl and Shane MacGowan were telling their fairytale of New York. I was given a plate of sausage rolls and a beer. I stared at the bottle of beer as if I had never seen one before.

'Too late in the day for coffee,' Mrs Murphy said. 'You'll need your sleep.'

I nodded and mumbled my thanks to the Murphys for looking after Scout and as one they raised their voices in protest, telling me that she was no trouble, she was a joy and company for the kids. They were the kindest people I had ever met.

I suppose they were a small family. Defying all the Irish Catholic stereotypes, Little Mikey was an only child. But the three generations of Mikeys seemed like a mighty tribe compared to me, Scout and Stan.

The Murphys were a family of self-employed plumbers and I saw that, even today, they weren't really on holiday. Big

Mikey was consulting his iPad to see when they could fit in a woman from Barnet with a burst pipe, while Little Mikey talked to a man in Camden with a broken boiler. And when my phone began to vibrate I knew that my own working day was not yet over.

I looked at the message and it was bad. A muscle by my left eye began to pulse. I placed my hand over it to hide it from the Murphys.

Big Mikey and Little Mikey were looking at me with sympathy.

‘The holidays,’ Mrs Murphy said. ‘Busy time.’

The big house stood in a gated community in Highgate.

The Garden, it said on the gate.

This was London’s highest point, the far north of London’s money belt, and up here the air was fresh and clean and sweet. I stood outside the electronic gates with my warrant card in my hand and inhaled a draught of air that was almost Alpine.

A uniformed officer signed me in on the perimeter pad. The electronic gates began to open. DC Edie Wren was walking towards me on high heels. Her red hair was up, and she looked like she had been on her way to a dinner date when she got the call.

I took another look at the gated community. ‘Are these houses all lock-up-and-leave-thems?’

Now that London had more billionaires than any city in the world, we were seeing a lot of high-end property that was bought and then left empty, as its value increased by millions.

The rich always had somewhere else to go.

‘Some of them are lock-up-and-leaves, but not our one,’ Wren said. ‘It’s a family, Max.’ She hesitated for a moment, as if she could not quite believe it. ‘Parents. Two teenage children. It’s very slick. Looks like they’ve been executed.’

The gates closed behind us.

There were six large houses in the complex. Our tape was up outside one of them and beyond it the SOCOs were pulling on their white protective suits and uniformed officers stamped their feet for warmth. The winter darkness was really closing in now and the blue lights of our cars pierced the gloom.

Beyond the high walls of the gated community I could see what appeared to be a wild green forest stretching off into the distance. But among the trees and the mad tangle of undergrowth there were huge crosses and stone angels and glimpses of ancient vaults. It was a graveyard that had been claimed by nature.

Highgate Cemetery.

Uniformed officers were knocking on the doors of the other houses where Christmas lights twinkled in the windows. In the middle of a road clogged by our cars a private security guard was being interviewed by a young black detective: DI Curtis Gane. He saw me and nodded and placed a hand on the guard's shoulder. The man was slack-jawed with shock. He was wearing no shoes.

'The guard called it in,' Wren said. 'He was doing his rounds when he saw the front door was open and he went inside.'

'And walked all the way through the house,' I said.

'Nothing we can do about that,' she said. 'Forensics have got his size tens and it's easy enough to eliminate.' She indicated the electronic gates. 'He reckons nobody comes in without him knowing.'

'Then they came from the back,' I said. 'On the far side of the wall is Highgate West Cemetery.'

'Where Karl Marx is, right?'

'Marx is in the Highgate East Cemetery. The other side of Swain's Lane, the part that's open to the public. The far side of this wall is the West Cemetery and it's closed to the public. They only open it up for the odd guided tour and funerals.'

Wren looked doubtfully at the graveyard in a forest. In the twilight all you could see were the stone angels bowing their heads in the darkness.

‘They’re still burying people in there?’

I nodded. ‘That’s the way I would come,’ I said, snapping on a pair of protective gloves.

We showed our warrant cards at the tape and I signed in again. It was very early in our initial response and the SOCOs had not yet gone inside. They were ready to work, white-coated and blue-gloved in their bunny suits, but they had to wait for the Senior Investigating Officer to view the scene and for the Crime Scene Photographer to record it – untouched, pristine, as horribly messed up as we first found it. Because once we all went inside, it would never look that way again.

There was the blurred electronic chatter of the digital radios, and in the distance the sound of more Rapid Response Vehicles rushing to the scene, their sirens splitting the air and their spinners turning the night blue. They would all have to wait for DCI Pat Whitestone to take that crucial first look.

Just before we reached the open front door where two uniformed officers were waiting, Wren stopped.

‘Look,’ she said.

A wooden pole had been shoved deep into some bushes. It was maybe ten feet long, made out of bamboo with an S-shaped piece of silver metal at one end. A butcher’s hook. It resembled a primitive fishing rod. And that’s what we called this popular form of breaking and entering.

‘Fishing,’ Wren said. ‘Must be how he gained access.’ She turned to call to one of the SOCOs. ‘Can we get this grabbed and bagged, please?’

The bamboo pole must have been slipped through the letterbox and the butcher’s hook had helped itself to a set of front-door keys that had been casually tossed by the door.

‘Everybody thinks they’re safe,’ I said, shaking my head.

Inside, the smell of petrol was overwhelming.

White spotlights lit a long white hallway leading to a massive, two-storey atrium, a great open space with a wall of glass at the back. Someone had tried to set it on fire. Two senior fire officers were inspecting a blackened patch that totally covered one high wall and half the floor of a kitchen and dining area. There was a dinner table with places for twelve people. Beyond the glass wall there was only blackness.

DCI Whitestone was standing above a half-naked body. The corpse was a teenage boy with a single entry wound in the centre of his forehead. His legs splayed at awkward angles and his eyes were still open.

'Max,' Whitestone said quietly, taking off her glasses and rubbing her eyes. It had been a hard day and I saw the strain of it in her face. But she sounded calm, professional, ready to go to work. 'What do you think did that?' she asked me. 'Nine millimetre?'

The boy looked as though he had been shot at point-blank range.

'Looks like it,' I said. The floor was polished hard wood and I was expecting to see a telltale gold cylinder of a cartridge casing.

'I don't see any casings,' I said.

'There are no casings,' Whitestone said, and she was silent as we thought about that.

Taking the time to collect the casings was impressive.

'What happened to his legs?' Gane said. 'Looks like somebody hit him with a sledgehammer.'

'Or a car,' said Edie Wren, peering closer at the boy. 'I think he could have been outside. Looks like gravel on his arms and hands.'

There was a dog basket in one corner. It was for a big dog and on the back of it was stitched, MY NAME IS BUDDY.

'What happened to the dog?' I said.

Gane erupted.

‘The dog?’ he said. ‘You’re worried about the dog? Up to our knees in a Charles Manson bloodbath and you’re worried about *the dog*?’

I couldn’t explain it to Gane. The dog was part of this family too.

‘Anybody check on the goldfish?’ Gane said. ‘How’s the hamster doing? Get Hammy’s pulse, will you, Wolfe? And somebody check the budgie.’

‘All right,’ Whitestone said, silencing him. ‘Let’s go upstairs and see the rest of it.’

The giant glass wall suddenly burst into light.

The SOCOs had turned on their arc lights out the back.

Outside was a stone garden, swirls of pebbles around rocks, like a lake made of gravel. A Japanese garden. There was a temple bell in the centre of it all, a green bell stained with the weather of centuries, and it tolled as it moved with the breeze.

I did not move for a moment, stilled by the presence of all that unexpected beauty. There was a dog, a Golden Retriever, in one corner of the garden. He looked as though he was sleeping. But I knew he wasn’t.

When I turned away Whitestone, Gane and Wren had already gone upstairs.

As I followed them I saw that there were photographs all over the wall of the staircase. Tasteful black-and-white photos mounted inside slim black frames. They were photographs of the family that had lived in this beautiful house.

And I saw that they had been the perfect family.

I felt I could tell their story from the photographs. The mother and father looked as though they had married young and been fit and happy and in love for all their lives.

The man was big, athletic, with a look of mild amusement. A youthful mid-forties. The woman, perhaps ten years younger, was stunning, and vaguely familiar. She looked like

Grace Kelly – she had exactly the kind of beauty that looks like a freak of nature.

If they had problems, then they were beyond my imagination. They had health, money and each other. And they had two children, a boy and a girl, and I watched them grow as I ascended the staircase.

They were good-looking, sporty kids. There was a shot of the girl on a hockey field aged maybe twelve, her gumshield showing orange in her serious face. And the boy, her brother, joyously holding up a cup with his football team. It was hard to equate that smiling child with the corpse downstairs.

Near the top of the stairs the boy and the girl were in their middle teens, almost a young man and a young woman, and I saw that the boy was slightly older than the girl but not by much more than a year. There was a photograph of the family together under a Christmas tree. Another photograph at a restaurant on a beach. In the later pictures there was a Golden Retriever who looked like he was laughing at his good fortune to find himself with this perfect family. The dog who now lay in the Japanese garden. And in the final photograph the woman who looked like Grace Kelly was holding a child.

A boy. About four. I guessed that his arrival had been unexpected. Their lives were full. The photograph wall was full. You could imagine that they did not think they would have any more children. Then the boy had come along and put a seal on all their happiness. Yes, he looked about four.

A year younger than Scout, I thought.

The Crime Scene Photographer came down the stairs.

I touched his arm.

‘You absolutely sure there’s nobody left alive?’ I said.

‘The Divisional Surgeon hasn’t arrived yet so death hasn’t been officially pronounced. But I’ve been up there. And all we’ve got in here is bodies, sir. Sorry.’

Something rose inside me and I choked it back down.