

ONE

THE RESTLESS REPORTER

Liverpool, England, 1998: The phone had not stopped ringing all day. In fact, the phone barely stopped ringing any day. It often used to baffle Evie Rhodes just how much weird shit there was going on in the world, but that was when she was just a small-time journalist. She had since seen the commercial side of it all, broken away, and was now editor of her own hugely successful magazine.

Slumping back in her chair, she could see the turmoil out in the office through the frosted glass of her door. So many stories pouring in every day it was impossible to keep on top of them, and in the early days she had been grateful for every item, however unlikely or absurd. Now she was turning down intelligent and controversial sightings and phenomena - on a day to day basis - purely because she didn't have enough room to print it. Stories of ghosts and hauntings had come and gone, their fashion fading like their own dim light. Doomsday forecasting was still popular, but it had to be rationed because of the obvious problem of contradiction. The big magnet for her readers at the moment, however, was murder, and the sicker the bastard responsible the better.

She glanced up as a figure approached from the

other side of the frosted glass and rapped on the door. Evie called them in, and in staggered a woman still shaking the morning's downpour from her raincoat. She pulled a notepad from the inside pocket as she perched on the corner of Evie's desk, and pushing her long brown hair away from her face with her other hand, told her:

"You know I don't like doing the grizzly ones."

"I know, I know," Evie replied, "but you know you're one of my best reporters."

"I don't even like crime scenes," she continued, waving her notepad, "yet you keep putting me on them."

"It's what our readers want, Carly. Now what have you got?"

The woman sighed as she glanced down at her notepad.

"Seems this guy wanted to play doctor. Strapped his victim down, then started surgery."

"And?"

"You want the details?"

"It'd help," Evie said, smiling as she cocked her head.

"Well, I think the patient must have been conscious when it started, because the gag was still tight around his mouth, there was no gas or anything. Then I presume the murderer just started cutting him up."

Evie lifted her eyebrows, waiting for the rest.

Carly sighed and reluctantly continued, reading from her notepad.

"His organs, vital and otherwise, were found laid out on the floor around the table he was strapped to. His limbs had been removed with a saw, judging by the state of the joints, and his ribs likewise, one by one."

She snapped shut her notepad and looked up at Evie.

"Excellent," her editor said, grinning. "That might be a contender for the front page. Think of a snappy title, then type it up for me."

"I don't want to do these, Evie, you know that."

"I know, Carly, but alien stories just aren't that hot at the moment."

Carly heaved a sigh and then got up from the edge of her desk. As she turned and started towards the door, Evie called out to her.

"You're one of my best reporters, you know that, and you impressed me from the very first day you started working here a few years ago, but I need you to cover more than just aliens and lights in the sky."

"I know," Carly conceded.

Then as she turned towards the door again, Evie offered:

"Human being - breaking for spares."

There was a message scrawled on a piece of paper for her when she got back to her desk, and dumping her raincoat on the back of her chair, she sat down and glanced over it.

It was a tip-off of another murder.

Carly dropped it back on her desk and sighed heavily. Her coffee mug sat in front of her, half-full and congealing from where she had left it a few days ago. The syrup-like fluid broke the skin on its surface as she picked it up, releasing a sour stench, and she set it back down in disgust. There were a lot of people buzzing around the office and their clamour of voices was paining her head. The coffee machine was on the other side of the room with about half a dozen people

huddled around it. She needed a dose of caffeine inside her but she just couldn't be bothered to get up from her chair and queue up with the rest of them.

She ran her hands through her hair and stared at the piles of papers and reports stacked on her desk. Her word processor sat in front of her, its green power-save light flashing dimly in hope. She picked up the brief message left for her again: 'middle-aged male, shot to ribbons in his own home, target practice'. She read the address, then got to her feet as she pocketed the note. Glancing over at the coffee machine one last time as she picked up her raincoat, she saw that the crowd around it had swelled, and so she headed on through the office, down the two flights of stairs, and out into the street.

It was getting close to ten thirty and the morning's rain had at last stopped. The sun was out between the clouds, bright and warm, its reflection dazzling on the wet road and pavement. Carly put her hand up to her eyes against the glare as she walked down the road to where she had left her car. The traffic was light at the moment, the tyres of the cars splashing past her, but it would soon pick up, she knew, when the lunch hour started.

Unlocking the door of her old silver Ford, she leaned across and rifled through the glove compartment. Pulling out her sunglasses, she put them on as she started the engine.

The glare of the sun on the wet road was almost blinding as she drove, forcing her to keep her speed down. It was an erratic journey, accelerating where the tall buildings shadowed the road, slowing where they didn't. It took her nearly an hour to reach Birkenhead, by which time she had a nagging ache in her belly. She noticed a burger bar as she was staring out the window

looking for street names, and turning round at the next junction, headed back.

It was only a small restaurant, yet it was already full of people who had slipped away from the office for an early lunch. She was in the queue at least ten minutes before she was served, and after ordering a couple of cheeseburgers to take away, she asked the girl behind the counter if she could tell her where Henrikson Street was.

"Three or four turnings up on the right," she told her, through chewings of gum.

"Have you heard of anything strange going on at all?" Carly asked.

"Lady, in this place I hear strange shit all the time. Four fifty."

Carly handed her a five, and watched as the girl lethargically slipped it into the till, before handing her both her change and her small parcel of food, the slap of her jaws on her gum constant throughout. Carly smiled her thanks to her as she turned away, but the girl's glazed eyes were already turned to the three men in ties behind her.

Carly sat in her car and looked out at the pavement bustling with people as she unwrapped one of the cheeseburgers. Any one of these men and women could be hiding a horrific secret life behind a peaceable facade, she thought to herself, as she took a big bite. The grey meat inside was tasteless despite the ketchup that was coating it, but she was more concerned with the pedestrians, trying to see past their eyes to see if there was a murderer lying dormant behind them. Man was a predator after all, she thought, and considering the shit she was eating as she took another bite, she could suddenly understand his need for real fresh meat.

She pushed the last of the burger into her mouth, its touch already taking the edge off her hunger, before starting the engine. Once she'd pulled back out onto the road, she picked up the second burger, unwrapping it as she studied the street names that she passed. After driving past the fourth turning on her right and still not coming across Henrikson Street, she began to doubt the girls directions, but as she followed the road round to her left she came upon another junction, and there was the road she wanted just past the corner.

Even as she looked for the house number on the sheet of paper in front of her, she saw the police tape stretched out across one of the terraced house doors. There were two cars parked in the street outside and she pulled up several yards behind them. Carly took off her sunglasses and set them down on the dashboard as she looked up at the house. The door was open but she could see no movement through it or through any of the windows. Getting out of her car, she crossed the pavement and then up the steps to the front door, before cautiously ducking under the tape and stepping inside.

The house was silent as she put her head through a couple of doors. Nothing seemed out of place or disturbed. There were no chairs knocked over or pictures smashed, no glass broken or bloodstains on the carpet.

From one of the rooms upstairs she suddenly heard the sound of voices and she hurried back down the hallway to the bottom of the staircase. She strained to hear what was being said but their words were too muffled and quiet to pick anything out.

Slowly she began to climb, taking her notepad from her raincoat as she went.

At the top of the stairs, she followed the sound of

the voices to a room at the back of the house. She stepped through the doorway and came upon three men. Two of them were in police uniform, and they looked up at her suddenly as she entered.

They were both down on their haunches and wearing white gloves as they picked over debris on the floor, but the third was already moving towards her, his hands in the pockets of his long overcoat.

"Who are you?" he was demanding to know, even as he was ushering her back out of the room.

"I... I live here," Carly murmured, the first words in her head.

"You're his wife?"

She nodded, leaning to one side to try and see past him.

The detective looked her up and down suspiciously, then conceded:

"It's not a pretty sight. I'm sorry."

"Can I see?" she asked him quietly, hoping the expression of anguish she now wore would carry her back over the threshold.

He made to resist her, but then turned to one side and let her past. Carly suddenly remembered she still had her notepad in her hand and quickly slipped it back into her pocket, in time to stand agog in front of her new-found husband. Two bolts had been driven into the wall, his wrists bound with wire to each of them so that he hung from his arms like the Messiah. His torso and parts of his skull were open and blackened with blood where bullets had shattered them, yet more bullet holes finding his limbs and groin. At this closer proximity the stench coming from his raw wounds was sickening.

"What happened?" she asked in a timid voice, when at last she turned from the scene in front of her.

"Looks like he was used for target practice. I'm sorry," he said again.

Carly remembered the small camera in her pocket, and realised the mistake of claiming to be the grieving widow. She glanced down at the two uniformed officers still busy picking bits of debris from the carpet and putting them into plastic bags, and wondered how long they would stay there. Asking to be left alone with her husband, she decided, would be too much for any of them to swallow. Her thoughts were racing.

"Do you have any idea who killed him?" she asked.

"No," he said, shaking his head solemnly. "But we think we can link this to other recent murders."

"A serial killer? How can you be sure?"

The detective narrowed his eyes at her, then came to her side. Pointing to the crucified man's left hand, he said:

"His third finger has been cut off. It seems to be a connection to other murders. And, of course, his wedding ring is missing."

Carly looked round at him. He was studying her intently.

"Perhaps you could tell us his name," he said to her, his eyes sharp. "We appear to be missing any identification."

Carly turned from him and took a few steps away, her hand finding the camera in one of her raincoat's deep pockets.

"Cameron," she told him, turning to try and read any doubt in the man's eyes as she struggled to think up a convincing name. "Stanley Cameron."

The detective looked hard at her, his face expressionless.

"What's this I've just found in my pocket?" he said,

pulling a wallet from his overcoat. "It seems we did have some identification all along."

Carly's heart began to pound as he opened the victim's wallet. In that moment, she took her chance and pulled the camera from her pocket. She managed to get off a couple of shots of the crucifixion, before darting for the doorway. The detective had anticipated her escape and reached it at the same point, grabbing her coat with both hands. She struggled beneath his grip, even trying to wriggle free from her coat, but he already had hold of her arm, and was hauling her back into the room.

"Just who the hell are you?" he wanted to know, gripping her firmly by the shoulders now.

Carly stared at him, her lips tight.

He reached down for the camera still in her hand but she kept it from his grasp.

"Tell me," he demanded.

"My name's Carly Maddison," she conceded, "and I'm a reporter for Prodigy magazine."

"You goddamn southerners," the detective snorted in disgust, cursing under his breath. "You make me sick."

"I only want the facts, same as you," she told him.

He looked up at her, glaring, his teeth clenched.

"I want that film destroyed," he said to her, reaching for her camera again.

"No," she retorted, taking it from his grasp again.

"This is a crime scene. Do you understand that?"

"Of course I understand that," she told him. "Just give me a statement and I'm out of here."

"Oh, you're out of here, alright," he said, hauling her out through the door onto the landing towards the stairs. "You're under arrest."

TWO

CARLY MEETS THE LAW FROM THE OTHER SIDE

Carly got to her feet, stuck her hands on hips, and glared at the tough female officer as she unlocked the metal door to her tiny whitewashed cell.

"I want my phone call," Carly demanded, taking a step towards her.

"That won't be necessary," the officer said to her, as she clipped the ring of keys back onto her belt. "You're free to go."

Carly eyed her suspiciously as she walked past her and out through the door into the hall, grateful to at least have the sickening stench of disinfectant out of her nostrils.

"But the detective would like to see you before you go," she added after her.

The female officer led her down the corridor, its length lined with huge cell doors. Their footsteps echoed around them off the stone floor as they walked, the corridor leading to a flight of steps at the end that they climbed to the second floor. She was led through a set of double doors into a large bustling office filled with desks and ringing phones. She saw the detective who had arrested her get up from his desk when they approached, and only retook his seat when he had

offered her one herself. He handed her a clear plastic bag with the things he had confiscated from her before she had been taken down to the cells. Carly tore it open immediately, refilling the pockets of her raincoat with them.

"It's all there," the detective told her.

Carly gave him an icy stare as she glanced briefly through her wallet.

He then reached down and pulled open one of his desk drawers, taking something out and setting it down in front of her. It was her camera. She looked at him as she picked it up, and then studying it, found the film had gone.

"I'm not going to press any charges," he told her, leaning back in his chair.

"That's very gallant of you," she retorted bitterly.

"Now listen to me," he said, pointing his finger at her. "You were in a lot of shit back there; crossing a police line, entering a crime scene, misleading an officer. Do I need to go on?"

Carly huffed but said nothing.

"Now, I'm letting you go because I've got enough shit to deal with already, without worrying about some reporter."

"The public have a right to know -"

"The public get told the facts when we know just what the hell's going on. Not before."

Carly huffed again.

"Can I go now..." she glanced at the nameplate on his desk, "Detective O'Brien?"

He nodded and she got up from her chair. As she turned to leave, he said to her:

"I don't want to see you at another one of my investigations. Is that clear?"

Carly couldn't think of anything flippant to say to

enrage him, so she simply smiled at him.

It had the desired effect.

She just saw his jaw muscles clench as she turned to leave him, grinning to herself as she strolled back through the busy office and out through the double doors.

Her flat was cold when she got back after ten o'clock that night. She turned on the heating, and leaving her raincoat on, went through into the kitchen to boil the kettle and find something to put in her stomach. She hadn't been given any food at the police station, and the last thing her digestive system had seen were the two stale burgers with their grey meat earlier that morning. She opened the refrigerator door, the light inside illuminating its mostly empty shelves, and took out the near-finished loaf of bread and a dish containing what was left of some sliced ham. The butter had gone and the last of the milk would soon be going in her coffee. She closed the door and set about making herself a sandwich when the phone began to ring in the other room. She hastily folded a slice of bread around some of the ham and hurried through to pick it up.

"Thank God you're there," came the voice on the other end of the phone. "I've been trying to contact you all afternoon. Where on earth have you been?"

"Evie?"

"Of course, Evie. Where have you been?"

Carly slumped on her sofa and took a bite of her sandwich.

"I got arrested," she said simply.

"You got what?"

"Those grizzly murder scenes you like sending me

to, the police were still investigating and didn't take too well to a reporter watching them work."

"Carly, I'm so sorry. I -"

"It's okay, Evie. They've dropped all the charges."

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

"There's something I have to ask you," Evie eventually said to her.

"Yes?" Carly asked, taking another bite of her sandwich.

"The murder you went to cover today... it seems to be part of..."

"Part of what?"

"Part of a serial killing."

Evie let the phrase hang between them, waiting for Carly to pick up its meaning.

"You don't mean..."

"Yes, Carly. I've had word that there's been another murder. Only streets away from the last. And I want you to follow it up."

"No, no, no," Carly said, sitting upright suddenly. "I nearly got in deep shit today. I could have been charged with anything."

Then she remembered the look on Detective O'Brien's face when he had scolded her like a child, and how she had wanted to get her own back for the way he had treated her. She felt that same smile creep into the sides of her mouth, and now she sat back on her sofa.

"Okay," she said at last. "But I want you to tell me you've got a great lawyer standing by."

THREE

MIDNIGHT MEETING

The clock in her old Ford said ten past eleven when she finally headed out into the night. The streets were virtually desolate, only a few walkers and drivers braving the crisp November chill, eager for the warmth of a lover's arms or a welcoming home. Carly suddenly felt a pang of loneliness as she passed them by, watching them hurry to their loved ones. It had been far too long since she had hurried for the warmth and security of either, her fiancé Lucas never returning to her side since the night they had shared in Battersea Park.

That had happened over four years ago now.

Carly reached down and turned on the radio to try and halt the memories flooding back into her mind, but when they came again, as they so often did, she could do nothing to stop them.

Lucas's face was no longer clear in her head, and she had left most of her belongings behind her when she had moved up north to Liverpool, including his love-letters and photographs of them both. Sometimes it seemed like a mistake not to have them with her, but at other times she knew that she had to leave him behind her. She suddenly felt cold and reached down to turn on the heater, its warmth no substitute for his

embrace she could only now imagine.

There had been no others in her life since that time. Did she somehow hope - perhaps hope was too obscene a word - that he might one day come back to her? If she knew where he had gone, perhaps it might be possible for her to follow him; but he had simply disappeared without trace, and she had to tell herself again, like always, that their lives had parted and that she just had to accept it. However much it pained her chest.

As she pulled up at a junction, she saw two people on the corner, heads bowed in a kiss. Carly swallowed the weight in her throat and pulled out into the road, desperately trying to ignore the midnight lovers.

The rumble in her belly returned as she neared the address Evie had given her, and was glad of its distraction. She kept an eye open for any garages or shops still open at such an hour as she drove through the now silent streets, the cold wash of the streetlamps overhead monotonous as she headed beneath them.

She turned off the main road into a terraced street, before taking a right out towards the Mersey. This wasn't a route she often took but she knew it well enough to find her way back to Birkenhead. The rumble in her stomach had grown, and as she reached down and turned off the radio, its late-night chat suddenly banal, she caught sight of a burger van parked at the side of the road.

As she pulled up and got out of the car, a figure emerged from the other side, his hands deep in the pockets of his long dark overcoat. She stumbled in her tracks as she saw his face, and watched his expression change from surprise to irritation, his jaw muscles clenching in exasperation. They stood looking at each other in silence for a few moments, and then Carly

approached the van and casually surveyed the menu painted in big red letters on its side.

"I suppose you're going to tell me it's just a coincidence you being here?" he said, joining her.

"I don't know what you mean, Detective O'Brien," she replied innocently, keeping her attention on the menu. "A girl can get hungry at night as well, you know."

"Are you telling me you don't know there's a murder scene a couple of minutes from here?"

"Is there?" she said, turning to look at him.

The officer stared at her, his jaw muscles clenching again in agitation. She couldn't help it, but she gave him the same defiant smile she had given him at the station. This time he wasn't baited and he simply turned to study the menu.

She watched him for a while until he eventually ordered a double cheeseburger and fries.

"Same again," she piped, as he took out his wallet. He gave her a sideways glance, then handed over a ten.

As they waited for their food to be cooked, Carly began to pace up and down, huddling her arms around herself to keep warm now that she was away from her car's heater. Her breath came out in small white clouds, and she puffed wads of them into the air in front of her. She glanced over at O'Brien who was leaning against the van, his hands in his pockets. He was studying her intently.

"You're not going to arrest me again, are you?" she asked him, lightly.

He shook his head.

"What are you thinking, then?" she enquired, coming to join him.

"I'm just wondering why a southerner like you would be out here on your own, in the middle of the night, in the freezing cold, wanting to see a brutal

murder."

"When I should be doing what?"

O'Brien shrugged.

"Isn't someone going to be worried about where you are?"

Carly turned and began to pace up and down again, puffing out more short clouds.

The burgers and fries at last appeared in two small paper bags in front of them, and O'Brien took them both, holding one out for Carly to take. She looked at him but kept her arms folded.

"Why don't we both eat in your car?" she said to him.

He studied her as he narrowed his eyes. Then he said:

"Why not?"

His car was a new saloon, its upholstery clean and comfortable. He turned the key in the ignition when they got inside so that the engine idled, before switching on the heater to blow hot air at them. He passed one of the bags to Carly before unwrapping his own, wrestling his burger from the paper and taking a large bite out of it.

"Should've got coffee," he murmured, gulping down the hot food.

Carly nodded her agreement as she started on her fries.

"So tell me," O'Brien began, taking another bite, "just why do you want to see all these grizzly murders?"

"It's a long story," Carly told him.

"I've got time."

Carly pushed some more fries into her mouth, staring out at the lamp-lit street. The warmth coming out of the car's heater was tingling her skin as the chill went from it. She glanced across at the detective who

was still looking at her.

She shrugged.

"I don't," she said at last.

"Don't what?"

"I don't want to see all these grizzly murders. It's just a job."

O'Brien stared at her, his face unmoving apart from his jaws working on his cheeseburger.

"I know there're better jobs," she continued, "but some assignments are better than others. I've been looking for..." she trailed off, staring out at the desolate street again. "Hell, I've been doing this so long I don't know what I'm doing it for any longer. I thought I could find..."

"Thought you could find what?"

Carly sighed heavily.

"Nothing," she said at last.

O'Brien left his fries and crumpled the bag up in his hands as he pressed the last of his cheeseburger into his mouth. The sudden rustle tore her from her thoughts and it was then that she realised she had hardly touched her food, despite the ache still in her belly. O'Brien put the car into gear, and said to her:

"I shouldn't do this, but why don't we both go together. At least that way I can keep an eye on you."

"Not this time," she said, looking at him as she opened the car door. "There are better jobs than this. Thanks for dinner."

As Carly stepped out of the car and went to close the door, O'Brien called out to her.

"How about you buying me dinner next time?"

Carly smiled at him.

"Sure," she said. "Why not?"

"What's your number? I'll call you."

"Find it yourself," she told him, grinning. "You're the detective."