

'S. R. White is the real deal'
CHRIS HAMMER

HOURS AFTER LEAVING HIS CELL . . .

PRISONER

. . . HE WAS DEAD. WHY?

S. R. WHITE

PRISONER

Also by S. R. White

Hermit

PRISONER

S. R. WHITE

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HEADLINE

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This book is dedicated to my friend Kate:
grace under pressure, and a good heart

PRISONER

Chapter I

Thursday, 1 August 2019. 0630 hrs

Willie Fitzgibbons nearly ran off the road trying to change the radio station. His hand lurched for the button and missed, catching it the second time. He cursed. Swerving back onto the tarmac, the rear of the Navara shimmied as it sought traction. One day, he told himself, you're going to kill someone doing that. Or worse, damage the ute.

The road chicaned through a copse and past the old quarry. Its limestone had created Carlton's main civic buildings, their edifices implying solidity and integrity. But even in 1900 local rivalry was such that the quarry was banned from selling any limestone to Earlvile. *Their* public finery was brick, brought by wagon and train from upstate. The quarry's closure was met with a gleeful double-spread by the *Earlvile Courier*. The two towns had fought over a scrubby hole now filled with tawny grass, triodia and bird droppings.

Content now he could hear the local news, Willie drove with two fingers, crisp morning air fluttering into the cab. No one ever came down here anyhow: he could probably drive on the wrong side and never hit anything. There were three rarely-used side tracks between the old quarry and the main road; but wide, flat splays meant he could see a car fifty metres early.

Solo time let Willie slow down. He was fast-twitch by nature. A

quick eater, walker, talker; everything in a burst. He'd been jittery at school; a whirl of tics, a scurrying rat around superior beings. People and their judgements bothered him; pissed him off, in fact. Better to minimize contact than embark on something doomed to confrontation. Doris, his wife of thirty years, got it. *Let him go off and simmer down, leave him be.* It was why they were still together and why, deep inside, he loved her so much he'd split in two if she ever left.

He visited here seven or eight times a year; four or five good spots that he rotated, fearing exposure or intercept. He never passed anyone on the road itself. The quarry shut years ago and they hadn't even bothered to flood it. Thick shrubs and wild grasses now held tenaciously to its rocky faces. Each year it part-filled with rainwater and some snow melt; enough to suck up poison from below ground and turn the sitting water a lurid green, yellow scum around the edges.

The news said last night's weather had caused some minor flooding. Didn't he know it. The forecast 'showers' had turned into three or four hours of heavy, saturating downpours. Most of the traps he'd laid had been drenched, and the rain kept too many animals hunkered down. He'd spent half the night listening to rain clatter off the tent, then to fat drips off the branches. Waking in a foul mood, he didn't get any happier traipsing around the glade recovering the traps. Two small prizes, now stuffed into a giant ice box in the rear tray. He should have stayed in the cab and got drunk.

The road climbed past several clumps of pines, the sun glinting through the branches. Willie needed to be home soon: had to make his shift at the refinery. He still had five years to go before he could afford to punch his ticket – the thought of looking for a new job made his stomach twist. Fifty-seven, antisocial, sour-faced and left school at fifteen; he simply wasn't going to get anything else.

As he reached the S-bend he saw a flash of yellow from the right-hand side. He braked, and risked a glimpse as he passed. There was

definitely something. Perhaps equipment had fallen off another pick-up: something usable, or sellable.

Not sure he'd seen or processed it right, he executed a wide U-turn, bumping over squelchy grass on each side of the road. He eased to a halt, the sun revealing streaks across the windscreen. The engine hummed, nicely warmed now, and he could hear the agitated cackle of birds. There was a brief hiss as a breeze sifted through the trees to the left.

He tried to roll a cigarette, but he was all thumbs and agitation. The paper stuck to his fingertips; he was sweating and had no spit. He threw the packet into the tray by the radio and checked his mirrors without truly knowing why. He looked around for signs that someone was watching: the glint off binoculars, the exposed hind of a badly hidden car. The breeze sighed again and nothing moved but the birds. They drew him back.

There was a man. More correctly, a dead body. The yellow was the rope that bound him to wooden posts, in a cross formation. *Lyin' like Jesus*, came his dead father's words, unbidden. The dark red was the blood from the man's chest, which had congealed black by his left side and along one half of his face. Crows jumped around excitedly, taking turns with the viscera and hopping towards the man's eyeballs.

He got out, primarily to scare the crows before they took the guy's face off. They fussed grudgingly to one side and regarded him with malign stares. He was close enough now to see marks on the wrists and ankles. Willie wasn't good at this: he'd seen a guy burned by gasoline fire at the refinery, and it had haunted him for months.

He ran his hands over his face; hot and clammy. He rubbed his jaw, sandpapery with a couple of days' growth. He ought to move on: let someone else deal with it, call it in. That shift at the refinery wasn't flexible, although finding a mutilated corpse might be a valid excuse for being late. Even so, he'd built his kind of life through looking away, and walking away. Willie had grown up in a neighbourhood that turned a

blind eye to just about anything, and it still marked him. Now was not the time to change that. Plus, he had illegal catch in the ice box. He shouldn't be anywhere near here; shouldn't be calling the cops.

But, even so.

He looked back to the body. The dead bloke didn't care if cops showed up now, or this afternoon. Someone else would spy it eventually. It was not his responsibility. But . . . he might be *held* responsible. Who else could the police prove had been here in the past twelve hours? Willie hadn't seen or heard anyone; he had no alibi. His tyres had just left a trail through muddy grass. The old man from the petrol station might recall him, or have him on camera.

The birds were still dancing, something triumphant about their movements. They tugged at sinews and muscle on the abdomen, even as he stared. The engine still purred, and nothing else moved. He had to tell himself to breathe.

The thought of driving off and letting the crows have the eyes did it for him. He took a deep breath, reached for his phone, and dialled.

Chapter 2

Thursday, 1 August 2019. 0725 hrs

By the time Dana Russo arrived, suited-up forensics officers were foraging beneath a white tent: disembodied wraiths moving silently. Six cars, three vans and a beaten pick-up lined the verges, diagonal to a road which essexed through an interrupted treeline and disappeared into shadow. The road was closed in both directions, which Dana guessed might inconvenience about three people all day. The nearby quarry was where firearms teams used to practise shooting with new-issue revolvers; so it was hardly busy. She turned the car and pulled up facing away from the crime scene – a running joke with Mike that she always ‘parks for a quick getaway’.

To her left a medical examiner’s hearse waited, its rear door gaping like a basking shark. The two staff sat on the bumper, one flipping through phone apps, the other puffing stoically at a vape. The ‘twins’. Lucy – her redoubtable admin officer – had investigated over the past few weeks and found that they were completely unrelated, despite being virtual doppelgangers. Their starched white collars, tightly-styled copper hair and thin black ties made them look like Mormon missionaries. The app-flipper squinted as she passed, and raised one finger to his temple in greeting. Dana gave an acknowledgement.

Detective Mike Francis was already there, directing human traffic,

eying the clouds in case they needed to protect more evidence ahead of rain, and preparing the handover documents for her arrival. This was, she reflected, the one time she welcomed joining a group of people: when they were professionals working a crime scene.

‘Hey, Mikey.’ She handed over a Macca’s long black: Mike was not a hipster. ‘Is it a coincidence that you always live closer to the murder scene than I do?’

‘*Gracias.*’ Mike stood the cup on a car bonnet and flipped back a sheet on his clipboard; he was first detective on scene but not lead detective, which was always confusing. Their boss, Bill Meeks, chose seemingly at random who would take charge of each case.

‘Ah, maybe, but perhaps not.’ He thought about making a crack about her living in a more upmarket part of town, but something deeper sparked his mind. ‘I think you choose to live as far away as possible from any drama.’

‘Wow, thanks, Sigmund.’ She smiled. ‘You might be right, though.’

She swept a three-sixty: fifteen people working, aware of what needed doing and how to do it. They didn’t need managing, as such – that would insult their professionalism. It was more a question of making sure things were done in sequence, and done once. Plus, any little extras she noticed or needed on the way round.

The scene itself was soggy open ground with occasional clumps of conifers, away from prying eyes. The quarry was fifteen kilometres from Earlville: the whole district was isolated and mainly fetid marsh – swamps dominated between here and the golf course to the south. The last building she’d noticed on her way in had been a disused barn about two kilometres away, half-hearted graffiti on one wall. Now she spotted chimney smoke in the distance, apparently the nearest habitation. Any murderer would, she suspected, have used this road both in and out. Forensics ought to be well contained, well preserved, and significant.

‘We have a single victim?’

‘Absolutely. Walk with me.’ Mike picked up the coffee and nodded to a tech as they passed the ute; she was taking tyre impressions from the verge. ‘Forensics have swept the immediate area, so we’re good here. No footprints, tyre tracks or drag marks close to the body, so we’ve currently no line on how it got here. Chucked it down last night, though, so plenty got washed away. Search team is –’ he checked his watch – ‘about fifteen minutes away. They’ll grid a further four hundred metres.’

They stopped outside the tent. Mike squinted at the emerging sunlight and, instead of leading the way inside, turned towards an older man sitting on a log some yards away.

‘This genius –’ he tipped his cup at a small, wiry man in dungarees, who scowled back – ‘found the body exactly as is, around 6.30 a.m. Willie Fitzgibbons.’ Mike dropped his voice. ‘I’ve known him vaguely for a few years. I’ll do the intros later, but it’s hard to pick him doing this kind of stuff.’ Fitzgibbons bristled at the attention, then carried on scratching at dried soil on his braces.

‘He swears he didn’t touch it,’ continued Mike, ‘but we’ve taken DNA and fingerprints for comparison. We’re doing his tyres now, for elimination. He saw it from the ute: got near enough to check the guy was dead, and shoo the crows from the eyeballs.’

Dana pulled a face. Mike wasn’t the kind to hype up the grisly factor. If he said it was putrid, it was. ‘Nice,’ she replied. ‘I won’t be having the mixed grill for lunch, then.’

‘Yup. Might want to lay off olives for a week or two, as well.’

Dana was generally immune to viewing gore: twelve months seconded to the medical examiner early in her career. She could swallow it down if there were interesting forensics, but generally wasn’t fussed about seeing too much. Although, given the error she’d made on her last murder, she reminded herself to pay more attention this time.

‘Dead body’s a white male?’

They eased back towards the tent and Mike lifted a flap. Forensics

and Pathology were still moving carefully around the corpse: two more people would have complicated that. Dana took in what she could from the periphery.

The ground looked hardened by frost, with a slightly melted surface. She recalled heavy rain off and on all night, but a run of dry, cold days before that. The restraints looked to be standard mountaineering rope. Dana looked closer at the bindings. Sometimes a giveaway knot told of fishermen, or truckies, or S&M devotees. There could be a lot of information in a knot.

The posts standing proud of the soil seemed to be treated pine; possibly fence posts from any hardware place in the country. The wooden surfaces looked old, but it was open country out here and they might weather quickly. All she could see at the base was mud. They'd presumably been driven in with plenty of force, given the hardened ground – so possibly men; or women with specialist equipment. There was no apparent need for the posts to be here, other than to stage a corpse. Dana was already thinking more than one perpetrator, purely because of the logistics. Pile drivers, rain, darkness, maybe a dead weight: tricky for any one person to negotiate. It was hard to say how long the posts had been there, though. She was about to request when she saw a tech lean down and take a detailed photo of how the uprights met the soil.

'Not dressed for a cold, wet night, was he?' she asked.

Mike had already logged the clothing and they'd taken casts from the soles of muddied training shoes. The dead man wore cheap-looking jeans and a rucked-up, blood-encrusted track top: he was unlikely to be an alumnus of UCLA. Low-priced clothes, from a street market or dollar-value store: easy to acquire, little thought. Generic, almost: as though the victim had no personality. Dana noticed a long scar along the victim's abdomen: he had no shirt underneath the track top and the scar had faded into a hard line of knotted skin.

'Victim's name is Curtis Mason Monroe. Had his wallet still on

him, with cash in it. All of forty-one bucks. Driver's licence, Medicare, but no bank cards.' Mike flipped pages back and forth. 'Twenty-seven; local, from near Earlville. Released yesterday from prison. Fifteen-year sentence for rape; he's paroled after nine, because he's such a wonderful human being. Parole office is waiting for us to visit. When we woke up the designated liaison, they called Monroe "no great loss".'

Dana guessed the scar was possibly a prison shank, then, though it looked even older than that. 'Everyone's a charmer these days.'

She moved closer and reminded herself to ignore the victim's past. That would come later: it wasn't a dead rapist, it was a dead human being. Officers would go the extra mile without blinking for a child; but her team should avoid believing this victim was less dignified, innocent or needing justice than any other. She included herself in that admonishment.

She caught another glimpse as the techs moved around. Monroe had clearly pulled against restraints at some point. Though not necessarily these restraints, at this scene. The rope marks didn't look as fresh as she'd expect, although they'd been compromised in places by the crows. His injuries were mainly to his left abdomen; a major gouge that she would guess as an axe, or some other heavy implement with a large blade. A scythe would do equally well. She couldn't see a blood trail: presumably the heavy damage was done *in situ*.

'Any idea how long he's been here?'

The pathologist – a locum she didn't know – shook his head and returned to the body. She felt like she'd shouted in a library. Mike glared at him.

'My guess, as a dumb detective with no scientific qualifications –' he raised his voice for the pathologist, who visibly flinched without turning – 'is three to nine hours. He's wet from rain; the crows would have started around dawn; no other animals seem to have eaten; no bugs I could see; and rigor looks pretty early.'

Dana chewed her lip. She reckoned Mike was just about on the money. The timescale almost certainly meant no witnesses, and narrowed the range of suspects: a dark wet night on a road to nowhere.

‘So between 10 p.m. and five this morning, say?’

‘Tis the killing time.’

They both regarded the body. Murder was a monstrous, heinous act: something huge had to well up in a human mind to do such a thing. Unless they were a psychopath. But psychopaths rarely indulged in scene-setting; it didn’t fit their sense of themselves as the centre of the world.

‘No defensive wounds,’ chipped in Mike. There was no evidence yet that Monroe had fought his attacker, or attackers. He might have known, or trusted, his assailants. Dana would need toxicology to tell if he’d been sedated.

They stepped back and leaned against a marked Commodore to allow extra lighting equipment to come in: large arc lamps to remove any shadows and get the strongest images.

‘All yours, Dana.’

Mike juggled hands to preserve the coffee and handed her the clipboard, watching as she signed to take official control as lead detective. She felt a flutter of anxiety, instantly quelled by the comfort of familiarity. Structure, context and certainty always soothed: it was the ad-libbing that drained her.

‘Thank you, Mikey. Thoughts?’ she asked.

‘Deliberate, targeted. Not necessarily brutal; almost quick and merciful. Someone who knows him; maybe pretty well. Probably more than one someone – he’s a heavy guy, especially when he’s dead, and those posts aren’t there by accident. Killed here: moving him during a rainstorm would have been a pain. But possibly rendered immobile elsewhere and moved here for theatrics, which must hold meaning. There’s easier ways to kill, and for sure better ways to avoid detection.’

‘There *are* easier ways,’ she corrected. ‘Not “there is”.’

‘*Tak*, Saga.’

They smiled and Mike continued.

‘Whoever did this could have buried the body a hundred metres off the road, and no one would ever have found it. Area’s got nothing but swamps, especially to the north. Drop him in one of those and he’s never seen again. Maybe they want him found, for some reason: send a message, perhaps? Anyway, killed for who he was or what he was, or maybe what he knew. No robbery, nothing random about it; and not a dire case of bad luck. Hard to see past revenge for what he did, I’d say.’

She looked around again. This place had been chosen for a reason, she sensed. ‘One day released from Du Pont prison – why come here?’

‘Ah, well, here’s where it gets freaky.’ He took a swig of bad coffee as though it was the nectar of the gods. ‘I wasn’t here when Monroe’s original case happened: none of us were. I was going to look it up when Ali gave me a shout.’

Mike beckoned to a swarm of four people, and Constable Ali McMahan peeled away from them and approached. Tall, willowy, with the perfectly refined balance of an international-standard archer, she lifted a handful of papers to her face to shield herself from the sun, which was gaining the upper hand now the mist was dissipating. Her voice had a beguiling rough edge to it.

‘Hey. So, I heard the ID of the body on the police radio and it rang bells. You remember I stuffed myself up doing that triathlon?’ Dana didn’t; it was the sort of personal detail that slid its frictionless way through her brain. She nodded anyway.

‘I couldn’t work Family Safety while my Achilles recovered, so I was prison liaison for a few months: all office, all the time. Monroe was one of the cases approaching parole. He was convicted of raping a trainee teacher over there. About, oh, a kilometre tops. So he had a connection to this area from that.’

The thick band of trees Ali identified followed a ragged line as it descended towards a brook, which eventually fed into the quarry. In early August it all looked stark and inert, and every inch the place where life was snuffed out. Dana never liked offenders returning to the scene of the crime. Gloating, re-living; or fuelling someone's anger, frustration and need to lash out. No good ever came of it.

'But here's the kicker.' Ali had a fresh-scrubbed, good-at-all-sports vitality. 'Monroe had no family here – they disowned him entirely and moved across country – so the parole board were nervous because he had no place to go. I just checked the prisoner release records for this month. Turns out he found some assistance. See the run of pines over there? Beyond that, there's a cottage owned by two sisters: Suzanne and Marika Doyle. He was due to stay there.'

Ali pointed to a dead-straight line of conifers perpendicular to the road. Dana hadn't noticed a driveway back there. Now she saw again the top of a chimney, yielding a hint of smoke.

'Renting it? From them?'

Ali glanced nervously at Mike before replying.

'Nuh-uh. *With* them. At their request. They've been writing to him for the past two years.' Ali puffed her cheeks in disbelief. 'The Doyle sisters were good friends with a rapist.'

Chapter 3

Thursday, 1 August 2019. 0740 hrs

Dana stood as Ali wandered off, organizing all the relevant prisoner material to be sent through. Lucy would collate it for a briefing. Seeing Monroe's parole officer was less urgent now, Dana decided; he'd be backfilling gaps in the data they'd already uncovered.

'Weird, right?' Mike's voice slid through her reverie.

'Unusual, for certain.'

Dana collected herself. It was tempting to go at this revelation in a rush, or make judgements about the two women. 'So are these sisters some kind of benevolent agency, or habitual campaigners, or something? Any overt reason they'd be working with ex-offenders at all, let alone this one?'

Mike spread his arms. 'Dunno, never heard of them before.'

Dana knew Mike wanted to do something. *She* thought the best thing to do right now was nothing. Let the information come to her at this stage; process it, piece it together. It was surely wasted effort to take action from fragmented impressions. But she was now leading a team that generally did it a different way: Mike was getting fidgety.

'Let's sort out this Willie guy, then, Mikey.'

They walked towards Willie, who sat cleaning one fingernail with another. He was shivering noticeably, and it occurred to Dana that he was in shock.

‘Good morning, Mr Fitzgibbons. I’m Detective Dana Russo, I’m in charge of this investigation.’ She offered a hand, but it hung in mid-air. Willie grunted and wouldn’t look at her.

‘Cold and damp if you’re not moving, isn’t it?’ she said. ‘Could you please tell me what you were doing up here this morning?’

Willie spluttered and wiped his mouth. ‘Out for a drive.’

Mike snorted, and his shadow loomed over Willie. ‘Do you want me to take a look inside the big eskie there, Willie? C’mon, don’t waste our time. This is a murder investigation. We aren’t interested in your lower-league hobbies.’

Mike did looming better than Dana; they both knew it. Willie let out a long sigh and gave in.

‘Been out all night. I tent up on the other side of the quarry; there’s a space in the trees there. Didn’t hear nothing but rain all night. No noises, nothing funny. Driving back through here at six, saw what you’re seeing now. Didn’t touch him. Just kept the birds off the . . . you know.’

‘Yes, I saw,’ replied Dana. ‘Thank you for doing that. Are you up here regularly, Mr Fitzgibbons?’

‘Nope.’ Willie looked up at a glowering Mike, and relented. ‘Well. Not . . . no. Every couple of months.’

‘Have you ever seen anything odd, unusual? Especially here, or over there where the pines run out?’

‘Unusual?’

‘People hanging around, any farm equipment, signs of movement; parked cars?’

‘Nope.’

‘What about the posts there? Were they in place the last time you occasionally visited?’

‘Maybe. Don’t remember.’

He avoided eye contact and his answers were minimal. Yet she got no

vibe from him. Sometimes, she had to go with her instinct. They had an initial statement that uniform had taken. Mike clearly knew what had brought Willie up here and didn't link it to this death. She had wondered if the dead man had disturbed Willie doing whatever, but the scenario didn't fit. Willie did know what was out of place or unusual, even if he was currently holding back: they might want to follow up.

'Okay, Mr Fitzgibbons, that's all for now, thank you. We might need to get back to you. Where do you work?'

'Refinery. Maintenance crew.'

'Well, whether you feel it or not, you've had a shock today. I'd like you to stay at home, or near it. And keep your phone handy. We'll call your boss and explain.'

Willie wiped his hands on his front. 'I can't. Wait, I shouldn't . . . they won't like it.'

'Don't worry,' replied Dana, thinking of Lucy. 'The person who's ringing them will make sure they understand. She's extremely good at that sort of thing. Thank you for your time.'

Dana and Mike turned away. 'Mikey, I want you to go to the parole office, please, get what you can from the caring genius who looked after Monroe. We're getting the basic bio fed through to Luce, so what I want from Parole is the intangible stuff, especially anything that indicates motive. Thank you.'

She checked through the paperwork again, to make sure she hadn't missed anything. She could hear Mike speak to Fitzgibbons as he passed him.

'Willie, you and I get along fine when you don't annoy me. I know what's in those eskies. And who buys them. I do not accept that behaviour: it isn't "traditional hunting law" if you're not indigenous – and you're not. You've got cousins interstate: practise your bloody hobby there. Now get lost.'

Mike set off for the parole office to interview Monroe's assigned officer and Dana prowled a ten-metre stretch of verge, head bowed in thought and finger and thumb tapping together. Her kneecap was fizzing – she'd rushed here this morning and hadn't had time to do her daily physio. Clusters of officers worked away but watched her, wondering why she didn't chat until the search team arrived. After receiving crucial information she liked to take a minute to evaluate what assumptions she was making, and whether they'd send her in a bad direction.

Monroe's past was unavoidably linked to his present state. Now she'd stepped away and was in investigation mode, she could concede that he was not a person who was dead, nor a man who'd been killed. He was a convicted rapist: one day out of prison, he'd been murdered. The assumption that he was murdered because of his crime was not, she concluded, unreasonable. It was the likeliest – but not the only – option. She'd need the search team to focus on the original crime scene from nine years ago, and any pathway to the dead body. If there'd been any re-enactment, any homage, or any sense of forcing him to confront his previous crime, there ought to be a trail between the two points.

That being so, she would need to know about the original crime. Dana put in a call to Lucy, who should have arrived at work by now: she was punctual beyond belief.

'Hey, Dana. You'll want to know about Curtis Monroe, yeah?'

Lucy's voice made Dana smile; she turned away from the crime scene, as if she weren't allowed to enjoy anything near it.

'You're too spooky, Luce. Yes, please. Ali's sending you some links and trails to follow; she used to be prisoner liaison. I've got Mikey visiting the parole office. I'd like a bio for an 0900 briefing, please. Scan all the transcripts from the trial: we'll probably need them. Uh,

any newspaper coverage about the reactions to the trial and the sentence – who thought it wasn't enough, who vowed vengeance, that sort of thing. Also, what Monroe might have said: contrition, arrogance, anything that might stick in the craw or fuel the flames. Thank you.'

The background information would build a picture. Now she needed paperwork in case they found anything useful nearby.

'Please pre-prepare several applications for Close Proximity: I think we'll be using that new legislation. And a search warrant: I'll need one for –' she double-checked an online map on her iPad – 'Weaver's Cottage, about a kilometre from this location. Please include the surrounding area beyond the cottage. Thanks, Luce.'

Lucy's fingers clattered at speed across the keyboard, sounding like bats emerging from a cave. 'Prison visitor lists, too?'

'You are so far ahead of me all I can see is a distant figure on the horizon.'

'Waving, not drowning, chick. I'm all over it.'

At the crime scene the hearse glided to a halt as the corpse was brought from the tent and placed on the sliders. It was slick: the body bag exposed for two seconds. They'd recently had a seminar about the danger of civilian drones filming crime scenes; Dana scanned the skies but couldn't see anything.

As the hearse did a three-pointer, Dana caught Ali's eye.

'Ali, are you able to stay and direct the search team for me, please?'

'Sure.'

Dana never quite knew how to take Ali. She was bright and perky and Dana was sure she was popular. But she seemed to Dana over-literal and devoid of any angles. Dana preferred people with sarcasm, or impatience, or irony; anything to knock off the smooth edges and serve up a little imperfection.

‘Thank you. We’ve already covered the crime scene and surrounding area. I want the search team to split in half so they can focus on two areas, and the pathways between those two areas and here.’ Dana turned them both to the east. ‘Firstly, the old crime scene from nine years ago. If you can’t recall the exact location, ring Lucy – she’ll find the precise co-ordinates from the trial paperwork. Then, the main ways of getting from there to here. It was dark and wet, so path of least resistance: any reasonably clear line of access needs covering. I’m looking for signs of disturbance or recent activity. Also, evidence of a shrine to the original victim; anything that might have kicked things off.’

For some reason, it annoyed Dana that Ali wasn’t taking notes. Although the instructions weren’t complicated, so maybe writing it down would be more to show Dana she was taking it seriously. Which would mean this was Dana’s issue, not Ali’s.

‘Also, we’ll be doing a full assessment of the cottage belonging to these Doyle sisters. Please get the search team to that part of the road, and tell Stu to wait until I arrive. I’ll have a warrant by the time he gets there. It’s the most recent place Monroe might have been. So, again, cover the ground between the cottage and here. Any indication that anyone’s travelled between the two points in the past twenty-four hours. Thank you.’

Ali turned away to dial the search coordinator. Dana decided to walk to the cottage – it gave her a viable excuse to be alone for a few minutes, and she always took those.

The case seemed to have a number of advantages already, and Dana was always wary when that happened. They knew who the victim was, and where he’d been for every minute of nine years: bar the last twenty-four hours. No problems with identification or tracing, then. The location had, effectively, one way in or out, so the forensics ought to be strong. And the killing was clearly deliberate and, on some level,

pre-meditated. That meant no confusion about possible ‘accidents’ or ‘things getting out of control’. They were looking for a cold-blooded killer, or killers. Finally, the body was displayed – overt, deliberate and sending a message.

So perhaps the question was, who would want to send that message? And why pick Curtis Monroe to send it?