



'Matheson's
voice is exciting,
urgent... and,
now more than
ever, vital'
A.J. FINN

NO ONE CAN HEAR
YOU SCREAM...

THE
BINDING
ROOM

NADINE MATHESON

*[epigram] ... do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God,
for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*

1 John 4:1[/epigram]

prologue

A shrapnel of rib bone pierces the thin, slippery membrane of his right lung. Yellow pus, carrying the pungent stench of rotten meat, leaks from the broken and infected skin on his back. The jagged rusted spring from the mattress has embedded itself just below his shoulder blade.

Distorted voices drift in and out as though someone is messing about with the volume on a cheap radio. He screams, but there is no sound. The parched muscles of his throat have trapped the broken notes of distress.

‘You need to stop.’

‘What the fuck are you doing? I told you to stop.’

His body contorts, his toes stiffen, and the blisters burst as scalding heat spreads across the bottom of the feet. The rope tightens and cuts further into the exposed flesh on his wrists. Blue veins push and glow against the translucent skin as his blood struggles to flow freely.

Heavy footsteps make their way towards him. He painfully turns his head towards the wall.

‘What are we going to do? We can’t... what are we—’

‘Stop talking.’

Seven words are on repeat in his head. *I don’t want to die. Please stop.*

He hears a whisper as a spasm rips through his body and his head thrusts back against the blood-stained, moss-covered wall. The force creates a second fracture in his skull. He feels the warm heat of someone else’s skin on his chest. A brief respite. Hot air cloaks his ear. He hears a whisper.

‘Leave.’

Hands push hard against his chest and a third rib cracks in half and pierces his left lung, cutting off his breath.

Tears soak the cloth that covers his eyes.

‘You’re going to kill him.’

Please.

He dry-heaves and inhales the smoke of heavily perfumed incense. The cough rattles the broken bones in his chest. Rotten phlegm fills the back of his mouth and coats his tongue.

He tries to kick out. A second pair of hands pushes down on his thighs which compresses the lateral femoral cutaneous nerve against coiled and thick scar tissue and ignites a torrent of pain. He feels as though he’s being burned alive from the inside.

‘We need to go.’

‘Look at him. Laying there like a dog.’

A hand grips his jaw and squeezes.

‘I told you that he had the devil inside of him.’

chapter one

Henley stared at the calendar on the desk. It was one of those feel-good calendars. *Enjoy Every Moment* was emblazoned in gold against an abstract print in bright primary colours while the date stared back at her. Monday 17 February. There was nothing special about the date. No landmark occasions, not even a dentist appointment. It was just a day.

‘Are you OK?’

Dr Isabelle Collins stopped pouring green tea from a glass teapot as Henley placed her head between her knees.

‘I’m fine,’ Henley replied. She closed her eyes and waited for the familiar but uncomfortable moment to pass.

‘Are you sure?’

‘It doesn’t happen all the time. It doesn’t mean anything.’

‘It all means something. Would you like to tell me what it was that set you off?’

‘No,’ said Henley, straightening herself up.

‘I’ve been telling you that these sessions usually work best when you talk,’ Dr Collins replied as she continued to pour herself a cup of tea into a porcelain cup. ‘It’s 7.43 a.m.’

‘And you’re disappointed that I haven’t opened up in the past twelve minutes.’

‘A watched pot never boils, Anjelica.’

‘God, you sound like my mother.’

‘Hmm, that’s the first time that you’ve mentioned her in five months. In fact, that’s the most that you’ve said in the first fifteen minutes of a session.’

‘I thought you said that a watched pot never boils.’

‘That’s true, but the second that you take your eye off the pot, it’s bound to spill over. I told you in our very first session that I had no intention of wasting your time or mine. I would get a cat if I was looking for non-verbal company.’

‘You’re a bit snappy this morning,’ Henley said with a raised eyebrow.

Dr Collins shrugged. ‘As I said. It’s been five months. I want to be in a position to satisfactorily send you on your way, knowing that you’ve done the work, reached a place where you’re able to accept what happened to you and live your life without the fear that you’re going to implode. You need to talk honestly about what’s happened to you, and that includes the loss of your mother.’

‘Just because I mentioned my mum’s name doesn’t mean that there’s suddenly going to be an outpouring of grief,’ Henley said. She ran her finger round the collar of her polo neck and pulled it away from her skin.

‘I’m not asking for the wailing and gnashing of teeth, but perhaps some recognition of the fact that it will be a year since your mother passed?’

‘I’m aware of that.’

‘And it doesn’t concern you? That sense of cold detachment.’

‘It’s not detachment. I can’t detach myself from my mother like she’s an investigation that I’m working on, but I can compartmentalise so that it doesn’t keep me up at night.’

‘“It”? The fact that it’s not keeping you up at night or that you’re not thinking about her during the day, right now, in this moment. You’re dismissing her.’

Henley stared back at Dr Collins. She had lost count of these moments. The challenges that she couldn’t defend herself from. Dr Isabelle Collins didn’t subscribe to the touchy-feely practice which Henley’s previous therapist, Dr Afzal, had used. Henley had

suffered through three sessions with Dr Afzal before she threw in the towel. Dr Collins stabbed, provoked and then sat back and watched. Henley still hadn't worked out if this was how Dr Collins treated all her patients or if Henley's mere presence wound her up every second Monday morning. Henley shuffled in her chair and resisted the urge to take off her jacket, even though Dr Collins had made sure that the temperature of her office was near tropical.

'It concerns me that you're still not willing to talk about your mother or your old boss, DCS Rhimes,' said Dr Collins.

'I don't need to talk about Rhimes, and my mum is not the reason why I'm sitting in this chair,' said Henley. 'I know where she is. She's in an oak casket, six feet underground at Brockley cemetery. Plot number 19R5QA.'

'But you don't know where Olivier is?'

Henley stiffened at the sound of his name. She'd done her best to forget about the man who'd intended to add her to his long list of murdered victims, not once but twice. Henley had spent too much energy trying to convince herself that Peter Olivier was dead and that he couldn't touch her, but there were days when she swore that she could feel his breath on her neck.

'I know that we've been through this, but we're five months in. Logically, what does your brain tell you? Imagine yourself talking to a victim's family.'

The knots in Henley's shoulders tightened. She breathed in and thought back to what Pellacia, her boss and ex-lover, had told her from his hospital bed.

'I would tell them that no one could survive that water,' said Henley. 'He'd already been injured before I even... before he attacked me.'

'But you're still doubtful that he's dead?'

'I'm not doubtful.'

'You told your husband that Olivier was dead.'

'It's what he needed to hear. How would that have helped us if he believed that Olivier was still out there?'

'But how is that helping *you*?'

'What do you mean?'

'You still haven't let go, Anjelica. There won't be any room for anything else in your life, the longer that you hold on to the notion that Olivier is still alive.'

'Maybe it would be easier for me to let go if I'd seen Olivier cut into bloody pieces, with his intestines all over the carpet like his copycat, Dominic Pine, but that didn't happen.'

Unfazed, Dr Collins picked up the hardback notebook which she'd tucked down the side of her chair and opened the pages. 'I prescribed you a lower dosage of Zopiclone last month. Is that not helping?' she asked.

'Oh, it helps all right,' said Henley. 'It knocks me right out, but I can't function when I wake up. I feel like I'm moving about in a fog.'

'So, what you're telling me is that you've stopped taking them?'

'I need to do my job.'

'Which job is that? Wife, mother, or detective?'

Henley felt a flush of anger wash over her. 'Is that a criticism? Are you suggesting that I put my job over my... my duties at home?'

'I can't answer that for you. You can make that your homework? Be honest with yourself about what you want.'

‘I know what I want. I want to be able to wake up and not have the feeling that someone is crushing my chest. I want to not end the day in an emotional mess.’

‘That’s not going to happen until you finally decide what it is that you really need to come to terms with. Olivier is a trigger but you and I both know that you’re holding on to a lot more than that.’

The snow began to fall. Henley zipped her coat as far as it could go and pulled her hat firmly onto her head, stepping out of the converted warehouse on Shad Thames, where Dr Isabelle Collins lived and worked, and onto a cobbled street slick with black ice. Icicles hung dangerously from the iron gantries that connected the buildings on both sides of the street. Henley chastised herself as she walked towards her car. She’d been the one to ask for help. She’d handed Dr Collins’s creased business card to Rob and begged him to make an appointment for her. An appointment that Henley had cancelled twice. She had promised herself that she would bare her soul, convinced that it would be easier to talk to someone who had no attachment to her. The minute she had sat down on the pale green sofa she had clammed up, spilling the steaming hot coffee from her overfilled cup onto the scarred skin of her right hand. Henley felt like a fraud.

‘Oi. Step away,’ Henley shouted out, spotting a traffic warden approaching her car. She tried to run but stopped and grabbed the lamp-post when she lost her footing on the icy pavement.

‘This is residents only,’ the traffic warden said as he took out his hand-held computer.

‘Not on this side of street. Mate, do not start with me,’ said Henley. She reached her car and pulled her car keys out of her pocket. ‘Controlled parking doesn’t start until 8.30 a.m. and it’s only...’ she checked the time on her phone, ‘8.29 a.m. Step back.’

Henley resisted the urge to flash her warrant card in the traffic warden’s face as he reluctantly stepped back, and she opened the car door. She turned on the engine and waited for the car to warm up as the snow fell onto the windscreen and the pavements began to fill with people begrudgingly making their way towards their jobs in the city, and she made her way back to the Serial Crime Unit.

chapter two

Uliana Piontek held on tightly to the handrail as the double-decker bus suddenly hit the brakes at the bus stop opposite Deptford DLR station. She craned her neck to check the time – 13:32 flashed on the digital display. Road diversions and an accident on Blackheath Road meant that the 53 bus, and Uliana, was late.

Uliana pressed the stop button and uttered ‘excuse me’s as she forced her way through the large cluster of passengers standing unnaturally close to each other. Trapped, she leaned over the head of an overweight woman in a puffa coat, pushed the red emergency button and jumped off the bus, leaving the cursing driver behind her.

Neon blue flashing lights reflected off the shopfront windows and the sharp sound of sirens pierced the cold air. Uliana didn’t bother to stop. She kept her head, burying her face in her oversized purple scarf as she made her way towards the art deco building that was once a cinema, bank, a Vietnamese restaurant and was now Deptford’s first megachurch, the Church of Annan the Prophet.

The agreement was that she would clean the church at 8 p.m. on Saturday evening and at 1 p.m. every Monday and Wednesday. Ninety pounds. Cash in hand. The pastor had said that she would be richly rewarded in heaven, and then he had put his hand on her knee when he had agreed to the arrangement. Whatever the pastor may have been thinking, the only thing that Uliana was initially prepared to do on her knees was pray or plug in the vacuum cleaner, but that had been before he had offered her another hundred quid. She turned up the volume on her phone, hoping that the enhanced bass would force out the mental image of the pastor grabbing her hair and forcing her to her knees.

Uliana ignored the catcalls from her eastern European compatriots who were working on the building site on the other side of the street. She waved at one of the employees of the graphic design agency that occupied a small unit next door to the church as he stood outside smoking.

‘Shit,’ said Uliana as she spotted the pastor’s car, a brand-new silver Range Rover Discovery, in the makeshift car park. The winter sun bounced off a tarnished gold crucifix that was hanging from the rear-view mirror. Uliana inserted the key into the lock, but only had to turn it once before she felt the door give way. Something wasn’t right. She stepped into the darkened foyer and blinked twice as her eyes adjusted. A thin stream of subdued light crept through the office door to her right.

‘Caleb,’ Uliana called out as she turned on the foyer light and made her way towards the office. The room was empty save for Caleb’s coat on the armchair. The only sound came from the filter in the small aquarium in the corner. She went up the stairs for the vacuum cleaner and dragged it back down, silently cursing why no one had the good sense to put the cleaning equipment in the cupboard on the ground floor. She plugged in the vacuum, turned up her music and began to clean, pushing the Hoover through the double doors that led into the church.

Uliana Piontek smelt Pastor Caleb Annan before she saw him, and she recognised the scent of blood that had been spilled by force.

chapter three

‘We all lost,’ said DS Paul Stanford as he held out a Quality Street tin in front of Henley.

‘What on earth are you talking about?’ Henley asked as she took off her coat and flung it onto a spare desk. ‘Are there any toffee pennies in there?’

‘You might want to keep your coat on. The heating’s on the blink again. Either that or they’ve forgotten all about us and haven’t paid the bill. There’s a hundred and forty pounds in the pot and no toffee pennies.’

‘Why is there a hundred and forty quid in there?’

Stanford rolled his eyes in mock exasperation. ‘Remember our bet?’ he said. ‘On him. Our illustrious fully fledged Detective Constable Ramouter.’

‘What have I done?’ Ramouter asked from his position in the kitchen where he’d been eyeing the bottom of a mug with disgust.

‘This is ridiculous,’ Henley said. Her ears picked up the whirr coming from the electric fan heaters and the ice-fuelled wind whistling outside and rattling the glass.

‘You lasted, Ramouter; that’s what you did,’ said Stanford. ‘We had a bet on how long you would last in the SCU.’

‘And you didn’t think that I would last six months?’ asked Ramouter as he picked up another mug.

‘Mate, I didn’t think you would last six days. I’ll have a coffee if you’re making.’

‘You shouldn’t be so mean to him,’ said Henley as she took off her scarf and pushed it against the rotting frame of the window to block the icy draught that was sweeping across her desk.

‘How am I being mean? I’m paying him a bloody compliment. After everything that happened, no one would have blamed him if he’d bolted for the door.’

‘Well, he didn’t. He’s stuck with it. So, what are you going to do with the money?’

‘I could give Ramouter the money. He could spend it on a train ticket to Bradford or something.’

‘Now who’s getting soft,’ Henley said. The phone on her desk started to ring.

‘Or I could book a table at the curry house down the road. It will be teambuilding.’

‘Or a normal Friday night out with you falling asleep in your chilli chicken.’

‘Cheek of it,’ Stanford replied as Henley picked up the phone and Ramouter appeared by his side with a mug of steaming coffee for him.

‘Right. I see,’ said Henley, reaching for the pad of blue Post-it notes on her desk and a biro with a chewed cap. ‘I didn’t realise that we were still on duty. Can you send me the CAD details? No, I can’t get it myself because the system has crashed again. Thank you. Who found the body? Right.’

Henley pulled off the Post-it note and stuck it to the side of Ramouter’s mug. He peeled it off and looked at quizzically. ‘Depending on traffic, we should be there in fifteen minutes.’

‘You’re not going to have time to finish that,’ said Henley, putting the phone down and grabbing her scarf.

‘There’s a body in a church?’ Ramouter said as he read the note. ‘Seriously?’

‘That’s what it says.’

‘Why are we dealing with this?’

‘We’re dealing with it because the borough commander decided that the Serial Crime Unit should be helping out Homicide and Serious Crime with their caseload,’ Henley replied wearily.

‘Anyone would think that we were just sitting here watching Netflix all day,’ Ramouter moaned. ‘Is it even a murder?’

‘We won’t know until we get there, will we.’

‘Can I say it?’ asked Stanford, a grin spreading across his face.

‘No, you can’t,’ Henley replied. She picked up her bag and headed towards the door, with Ramouter in tow. She knew Stanford well enough to know exactly what he was going to say.

‘I bet you a tenner that it was the Reverend Green with a candlestick in the library,’ Stanford shouted out as Henley slammed the door shut behind her.

‘I’m not telling you again. Step away from the tape.’

‘What’s going on?’

‘If I knew I was going to spend the afternoon standing out in the freezing cold I would have stayed in bed this morning.’

‘I bet that they’ve found a body or something.’

‘Look, those CSI lot have turned up.’

‘I only popped out for a coffee and now the old bill are saying that I can’t go back into my own office.’

‘Sod this. I’m going home.’

‘I’m telling you that they’ve found a body.’

‘Wouldn’t be the first time.’

‘I don’t understand these kids. Too busy stabbing each other up. No value for life.’

‘You can dress it up as much as you like. It’s Deptford innit.’

The murmurings of the curious and disgruntled crowd met Henley and Ramouter as they walked towards the scene of the crime.

‘This is a church?’ Ramouter asked as he looked up at the cream-coloured façade of the brickwork. ‘I was expecting something a bit more... I don’t know, church-like. Maybe a steeple. This looks like a bank.’

‘It used to be a NatWest when I was seventeen. The space was once cheap to rent. Not so sure now,’ Henley replied.

‘I did a quick Google search—’

‘Of course you did.’

‘And there’s another seven churches on the Broadway.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ said Henley. ‘Betting shops, churches and chicken shops on literally every London high street.’

Henley and Ramouter held up their warrant cards to the officer behind the police tape. Henley scoped the gathering crowd. Nothing about them raised any alarms, but she knew from experience that some murderers were voyeuristic by nature.

‘Look likes Dr Choi is here,’ Ramouter said, pointing out the car of Henley’s friend and the Serial Crime Unit’s favourite pathologist, parked between a police motorbike and small white transit van that had ‘Forensic Services Crime Scene Investigation’ marked in black font on the side.

Henley stopped and looked around the small car park. There were no security cameras. She felt a sense of calm as she walked closer to the crime scene. It was a welcome emotion and a respite from the anxiety that was usually coursing through her veins, which she could keep at bay if she bothered to take her prescription to the chemist. She spotted the police officer that she was looking for leaning against the side of a police car, flipping through the pages of his notebook with a pen in his mouth.

‘PC Tanaka? DI Henley from the SCU.’

PC Tanaka looked up and then stood to attention a little bit too quickly as Henley walked towards to him.

‘Ma’am,’ said PC Tanaka.

‘This is my colleague, DC Ramouter.’

‘Shit,’ said PC Tanaka when he dropped his notebook. ‘Sorry.’ He brushed off slush from the cover. ‘It’s bloody freezing.’

‘You were first on scene?’ Henley asked.

Tanaka nodded. Henley could tell that he wanted to get it right. Giving a senior officer information about a murder scene was a lot different to dealing with burglaries, domestics and breaking up a fight between a couple of crackheads at the bottom of the high street.

‘We, that’s the sarge, Sergeant Rivers, and I were driving back to the station. We’re based around the corner at Deptford station. We had just finished our shifts and was coming back from the McDonald’s up the road...’

PC Tanaka paused and took a breath.

Henley felt sorry for him as nerves or possibly shock overtook him. She saw a look of sympathy on Ramouter’s face as they both waited for PC Tanaka to continue.

‘Sorry, guv, I mean ma’am,’ said PC Tanaka straightening himself again and lowering the volume on his crackling police radio. ‘As I said, we were heading back to the station and one of the guys who works in the design agency practically threw himself onto the bonnet of the car. He was screaming about a body. We found the cleaner in hysterics in the staffroom of the agency. She refused to leave and take us to the church. I left her with the sarge and I went into the church and yeah, I won’t forget what I saw.’