

Chapter 1 *A body on the beach*

Noise. Headache. Dry mouth.

Half asleep, Helen Shepherd turned over in bed, but the noise didn't stop. A moment later she woke up.

The noise. It was her phone. She took it off the table next to her bed.

'Yes?' she said. Her dry mouth made it difficult to talk. And her head hurt quite badly. Too much wine last night!

'Is that Detective Inspector Shepherd?' asked a voice.

'Yes,' said Shepherd.

'I'm sorry to wake you,' said the voice. The voice waited for Shepherd to say something, but she didn't. She looked at the clock. It was six thirty.

'Er, well, my name's Webb,' said the voice. 'Brian Webb. I'm your new sergeant. I start working for you today. Well, this morning, actually. Erm ... I'm sorry to wake you up, but ...'

'Sergeant,' said Shepherd. 'People call me at all times of the day and night. Forget the "sorry". Just tell me what the problem is.'

'There's a body on the beach,' said Webb. 'In Hythe. About two hundred metres from the Grand Hotel. I'm there now.'

'I'll be twenty minutes,' replied Shepherd and put her phone back down on the table.

Shepherd stood under the shower for five minutes. The hot water got the blood moving around her tired body.

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She drank half a litre of water and took three aspirins. Five minutes later she was in her car.

The drive from her house in Folkestone to Hythe took Shepherd less than ten minutes. It was the start of autumn and small seaside towns like Hythe were becoming quiet again after the busy summer. The school holidays were over, the beaches were almost empty, and this early in the morning there were few cars on the roads.

As she came into Hythe, Shepherd passed the Seaview Café on her right. It was just opening for breakfast. Two hundred metres down the road, also on the right, she could see a large building – the Grand Hotel. On her left was the sea wall. And on the other side of the wall were the beach and the sea. There were a number of cars by the side of the road. Shepherd stopped behind them.

She looked quickly at herself in the car mirror: grey-blond hair tied back, intelligent eyes, small nose, thin mouth. ‘I don’t look too bad,’ she thought. But she felt tired and old, and her head still hurt.

She got out of her car and looked over the wall. A cold wind was coming off the sea. The sun was only just up. About fifty metres along the beach some people were standing around and looking down at something. The body.

One of them, a young man in a blue suit, looked round and saw Shepherd.

‘That must be Webb,’ thought Shepherd. ‘He looks about sixteen.’

It was true what people said: as you get older, police officers look younger.

Webb came to meet Shepherd as she walked over.

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'I'm Brian Webb, madam,' he said. 'Your new sergeant.'

'I know,' said Shepherd.

'You know?' asked Webb.

'Yes, Sergeant,' replied Shepherd. She waved a hand at the others. 'You're the only person here I don't know, so you must be my new sergeant. I'm a detective, remember.'

'Oh!' said Webb, looking down and then up again.

Shepherd looked him in the eye.

'And don't call me madam,' she said. 'It's Shep. That's what everyone calls me.'

'Right, madam – Shep,' said Webb.

'OK,' said Shepherd. 'Let's go and see what we've got.'

They walked over to the other people. On the beach was the body of a young woman wearing a dark blue skirt, a white blouse and a short red jacket. She had a pretty face and short blonde hair. The back of her head was dark with blood.

A man in white clothes was down on one knee looking at the body. He heard Shepherd arrive and looked up.

'Morning, Shep,' he said.

'Dr Atkinson,' replied Shep.

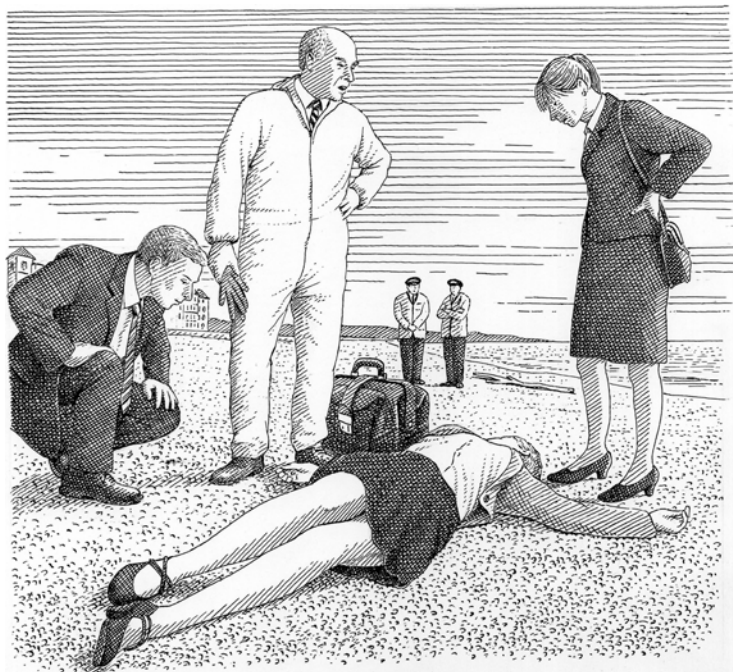
Atkinson stood up and took the plastic gloves off his hands.

'It's murder,' he said. 'Someone hit her on the back of the head. It killed her.'

'Hit her with what?' asked Shepherd.

'I don't know at the moment,' answered Atkinson. He looked up and down the beach. 'But it could still be here on the beach. Not a stone, I don't think. Something longer. A piece of wood, maybe.'

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Shepherd looked up and down the beach. There were lots of bits of wood, brought in by the sea.

‘What time did she die?’ asked Shepherd.

‘Late last night or early this morning,’ replied Atkinson. ‘Say between eleven and two. I can probably tell you more later.’

‘OK, thanks,’ said Shepherd.

She said nothing for a moment and just looked out to sea. Her head was feeling better already. Three aspirins and a dead body – a quick way to make a headache go away. Not funny really – not for the poor woman dead on the beach.

‘Excuse me, ma—, I mean Shep,’ said Webb.

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Shepherd looked at him. Webb moved uncomfortably from one foot to the other. He was a bit like a young dog, wanting to please her all the time.

‘The man who found her ... er, the body,’ began Webb. ‘He’s a waiter at the Grand Hotel and he thinks she was staying there. Well, actually, he’s quite sure she was staying there.’

‘And where is he now?’ asked Shepherd.

‘Erm ... he’s at the hotel,’ replied Webb. ‘He had to go to work.’

‘What?’ said Shepherd, giving Webb an angry look.

‘Well ... erm ... he was late already,’ replied Webb.

‘And what if I want to speak to him?’ asked Shepherd. ‘Now?’

‘Well ...’ Webb looked more uncomfortable. ‘I can always ...’

‘No,’ said Shepherd. ‘Later. First, I want you to get as many officers as you can down here on the beach. They’re looking for the piece of wood or some other thing that killed this woman.’

‘Right, Shep,’ replied Webb.

Shepherd turned to Dr Atkinson.

‘Let the photographer finish his work, then you can take the body away,’ she said.

‘OK, Shep,’ replied Atkinson.

Shepherd walked back up the beach and sat on the top of the sea wall, enjoying the smell of the sea air. She looked in her bag for some cigarettes, then remembered she didn’t smoke any more. Three weeks without a cigarette – not bad.

She watched Webb finish his call. ‘He must be one of these university police officers,’ she thought. ‘They leave

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university, become a police officer, then a sergeant by the age of twenty-five, and know little about real police work.'

Webb walked up the beach to Shepherd.

'Have you worked on many murders before, Sergeant?' asked Shepherd.

'No, Shep,' he replied. 'Not many. Well, not any really.'

'So,' thought Shepherd, 'this could be a difficult job for Webb – his first murder.'

'The first twenty-four hours are the most important,' said Shepherd. 'Don't forget that.'

'Yes. I mean no. I won't,' replied Webb.

'I want the person who did this,' said Shepherd. 'And I want him or her by this time tomorrow. After that our job starts to get more difficult.'

'Right, Shep,' said Webb.

'Now,' said Shepherd. 'You go to the Grand Hotel. Talk to the waiter who found the body. Find out who the dead woman is and what she was doing here. And get us a room where we can talk to people.'

'OK, Shep,' said Webb.

'I'm going over the road for some breakfast,' said Shepherd, looking at the Seaview Café. 'I'll see you at the hotel in half an hour.'

Webb watched Shepherd walk over to the café.

'She wants the job done quickly,' he thought to himself, 'but first she wants breakfast. This could be a long and difficult day.'