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Carolyn Walker
Excerpt
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Prologue

'Ah!' she cried and sat down on the wet grass, breathing heavily. The sudden, sharp pain had been so surprising that she couldn't imagine what had caused it. Then she saw, attached still to the back of her hand, a bee delivering its poison into her skin. Horrified, she knocked it away and watched the redness and swelling begin while the pain intensified . . .

She heard footsteps, rubber boots kicking small stones from the path so that they rolled down the hill. Looking up, she saw the face, black as thunder.

'Hey, you! Push off!'

From deep within her came a strange, bitter laugh that she couldn't control. 'I know what's going on,' she said, breathing heavily. 'I'm going to the police.'

Her fingers found the handle of something, an axe, leaning against the wall. She picked it up.

She stood up, took a few steps back on the stony path and raised the axe in front of her. She couldn't look at that face boiling with anger. She concentrated on the black boots, but these moved quickly out of view. Hands grabbed the axe. She watched with a strange interest as it swung away from her, out of her hands, and then back towards her. She noticed how this monstrous-looking face seemed hypnotised now, a robot, programmed and unable to stop what was about to happen. Her eyes closed just before she heard a distant thud, and a terrible, blinding pain exploded inside her head.

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Chapter 1 *Going south*

It was early spring and the sun was pouring through the window of a small flat on the first floor of an elegant three-storey house. Out of the window a pair of swans could be seen flying over the river which passed through the west-country market town of Pilton. A woman, Jane Honeywell, stood at the window watching the swans' flight, dressed in her night-clothes. A few days ago, from her flat in the middle of Manchester, she had seen the sun rise between the rows of smoke-blackened redbrick houses, up into the polluted city sky. Here the sunlight was dancing on the water and the air was clean.

Pilton was a small town of some 20,000 inhabitants in the south-west of England. There were a few factories which made things like clothes, shoes, chemicals and electrical parts but, more importantly, Pilton was a market town where the farmers from the surrounding areas brought their cows and sheep to sell every Thursday. However, these days there was not much money in farming, especially on the small lonely hill farms.

Fortunately for the local economy Pilton was a popular part of the world for holidays. In the summer, thousands of people would bring their money and their families to the local beaches and villages, which, with their old cottages and pretty gardens, seemed to belong to times past. Compared to the cities of the north and centre of the

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country, here it was peaceful and quiet and beautiful. The visitors would return home and dream of escaping to a rural life of changing seasons, of digging the soil, planting and harvesting.

At the moment, though, the woman was missing Alan, her ex-boyfriend, and his morning cheerfulness. What was he doing right now? She could feel his absence in the weight of the silence around her. She wondered how long it would take before her new environment would no longer feel like a foreign country. Professionally, she had done the right thing, there was no question about that. But the memory of Alan's expressionless face as she had packed her suitcases filled her with a sharp sadness.

'You're mad, Jane darling,' her mother had complained. 'Why don't you just marry him, have some kids and settle down like everyone else?'

'My cat's quite enough for me at the moment,' she had joked, curiously unable to explain to her long-suffering mother that the relationship was going nowhere, that she enjoyed her work too much to give it up for domesticity. Anyway, Alan had refused to leave his own work and go with her. So that was that.

Suddenly she became aware of a loud hissing sound and she looked round, alarmed. The milk for her coffee had boiled over and there was a steaming pool of sticky white liquid on the cooker. She swore loudly, simultaneously noticing the time. It was nearly 8.15 a.m.

'Oh, my God, I'm going to be late! Help! Julian, you useless animal, where are my tights?' Jane addressed this question to her cat, which was asleep on a chair by the window. Julian the cat was disgusted by his new home

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and had already fought with the large black cat next door.

Working fast, Jane picked up a piece of toast and held it in her teeth. She rescued what was left of the milk and poured it into a mug. She looked briefly at the burnt mess on the cooker: she would clean it up later. With one hand she drank the mud-coloured coffee and ate her toast while with the other she searched through several open suitcases on the floor, trying to find a pair of tights.

‘Julian, I must get organised,’ she told the cat, as piles of clothes fell out onto the floor. Julian took no notice.

In fifteen minutes she was ready. She locked up the flat and went rapidly down the stairs. Outside it was chilly despite the spring sun. There was a strong wind coming in off the sea from the south-west and she wished she had managed to find her winter coat.

When she finally spotted her silver-grey Mazda sports car, which she had left in a public car park round the corner, she was unpleasantly surprised to see that around the door handle there were scratch marks and the door was unlocked. Someone had clearly forced it open.

‘Oh no, I don’t believe it! The bastards!’ she groaned. Inside the car, there was a black hole near the steering wheel and some wires were hanging loose from where the radio cassette player had once been.

‘I thought I’d left this kind of thing behind. Obviously not,’ she muttered angrily, getting in and starting the engine.

It took her more than twenty minutes to drive the four kilometres to her new place of work: the town in which she had come to live apparently had serious traffic problems.

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She sat in the long queue of cars, nose to tail as they approached a roundabout, and a wave of nerves began in her stomach, made worse by the fact that she knew she would have to watch out for what her former boss had termed the ‘dinosaurs’, the people to whom a woman in a senior management position was a foreign, unwelcome creature. The dinosaurs would be watching every move she made and would lose no time in putting her to the test.

Arriving finally at her destination she glanced at her watch: it was almost 9.00. Hurriedly she parked her car and then walked as calmly as she could manage up to the main entrance to the dull grey stone building that was Pilton Police Station. She pushed her hair back out of her eyes, pulled her jacket down and opened the door.

‘Well, here goes. Good luck,’ Jane Honeywell said to herself as she stepped inside.