

Based on a somewhat true story

*Carthago delenda est*

# VINE STREET

2002

# I

Birds pick at the dead hedgehog Billie has been meaning to see to for a few days.

‘Magpies are back. Eating that hedgehog.’

‘Save you dealing with it.’

Voice catching like sandpaper. His breath worsening.

‘Don’t suppose they’ll eat the bones. Maybe they’ll bury them.’ She turns to him. ‘For later. They do that, don’t they?’

He shrugs with the corners of his lips, unable to raise his shoulders. Billie opens the bedroom window. One of them looks up from its feast, seeing her framed there with its black crow eyes.

‘I think they know us.’

It goes back to what remains of the hedgehog, and she returns to her chair beside his bed and reaches for his hand, a discarded glove beside him. He has no grip.

‘I’m going to tell them you’re not up for it.’

He stirs, head inching round towards her.

‘You’re not well enough. I can talk to them, tell them some things. I’ll explain about how I was there too, from the beginning.’

Wheezing, he builds up to speak. ‘You don’t trust me. What I might say.’

‘Do you?’

‘Seventy years, maybe it’ll finally come to an end.’ His eyes close. Breath tearing like old pages. ‘What does it matter? What can they do to me now?’

## 2

When the doorbell rings she has made a start on the ironing. There isn't much as there is a girl who comes, but Billie likes to keep her hand in. Stooping to turn off the iron at the wall, she shuffles out to the front door.

'Mrs Cassar?'

Two of them, a man and a woman. She's bad with gauging these things now; at her age it feels as if everyone is at least sixty years younger than her. He looks like he probably has a couple of children, but she is unimaginably young. Billie thinks back to what that was like, the feeling of immortality.

'Yes?'

'Detective Sergeant Rathbone. This is DC Duffy. We spoke on the phone.'

'Of course. Come in, come in.'

She reins back and ushers them into the front room, big floral armchairs and sofas. They take the three-seater and she sits across from them in the two, glad one of them hasn't taken her husband's armchair. The darkened antimacassar frightens people off.

She fights to her feet again as soon as she sits.

'Will you have tea?'

'We had coffee at the station, thanks,' Rathbone says.

Billie lowers herself into the chair once more, sitting back with her knees pressed together, hands in her lap.

‘I was doing the ironing.’

‘We’re sorry for the interruption, Mrs Cassar.’

She waves him away. ‘Nobody ever minded ironing being interrupted.’

‘We were hoping we might have a word with Mr Cassar?’

Billie wonders if he always speaks in the plural.

‘As I explained on the phone, my husband is extremely unwell. They have let him come home, but he is confined to his bed upstairs at the moment.’

‘I see,’ says Rathbone, his use of the singular somewhat mitigated by a conspiratorial glance at Duffy.

‘It’s very hard to make plans,’ Billie goes on. ‘He didn’t have a good night, I’m afraid, and he’s sleeping at the moment. I have to let him get his rest whenever he can.’

‘Of course, of course.’ Rathbone nods. ‘We’re very sorry to hear he’s not well.’

‘Not serious, I hope,’ Duffy says.

Billie smiles. ‘He’s fond of saying that at our age everything is serious and nothing is serious. He’s ninety-one years old, and we’ve been married for sixty-four of those.’

‘Good Lord, congratulations,’ Duffy says.

Billie spots the slightly maniacal glint in her eyes; the insistence of youth accompanied by a dreadful fear of those things that have endured.

‘Is it possible that I might be of any help?’ Billie offers. ‘What exactly was it you wished to talk with my husband about?’

Rathbone touches the knot in his tie. ‘It’s a matter regarding his work, Mrs Cassar.’

‘With Kent County Constabulary?’

‘We don’t think so, no. We believe this goes back to his time in the Met.’

‘Oh, perhaps I *can* be of some help, then.’

‘I don’t—’

‘I was a constable with the Met too.’

‘Really?’

‘That was how we met. I was with A4, that’s what they called the women’s branch back then. We’d had the volunteer patrols for some years, but they began to realise the value of having us on the force to handle women and children. I was A4, but I was attached to C Division in Vine Street, which was brilliant because even back in the thirties Soho was lousy with bars and clubs and prostitutes.’

Duffy chokes on a laugh.

‘They used to send us in to the underground parties all dressed up. Just to observe. Take notes. Never get involved or make arrests. There were worse jobs.’

Rathbone shifts to the edge of his seat, leaning in. ‘Mrs Cassar, did you know your husband’s partner, Leon Geats?’

‘Oh yes. I knew Leon very well. Worked with him before I ever met Mark. All three of us were on a case together in . . . goodness, when must it have been? 1935? 1936? Scarcely seems believable, does it?’

‘Have you seen much of him over the years?’

‘Leon? Heavens, no. He left the force before the war. I saw him briefly afterwards. He had just been demobbed and looked us up.’ She frowns. ‘He dropped out of sight after that.’

‘Demobbed? We didn’t find any record of him serving during the war, which is strange, because he was of the right age.’

Billie shrugs. ‘I can only go by what he told me, which, to be frank, was very little. Leon always held his cards close to his chest.’

‘There’s no trace of him after his time in the Met, you see,’ Rathbone says.

‘You should check the *Gazette*.’

‘*Gazette*?’

‘He was mentioned in dispatches several times. But, you see, my

husband and I left the city after the war. Leon never contacted us again. I really don't understand, Detective Sergeant – these things you talk about happened so long ago, what is it about Leon that you wish to know? And how is my husband involved?’

‘Mrs Cassar, we're Warwickshire Police. A body was found in a field in the north Cotswolds. Two bodies, in fact. We have reason to believe one of them might be Leon Geats.’

Billie's hand went to her mouth. ‘Oh God. In a *field*? So he was . . .’

‘We're treating the deaths as suspicious. It appears the bodies have been there for a long time. Decades, at least thirty or forty years, possibly longer.’

‘Oh no. Poor Leon.’

‘We're not completely certain, and making a positive identification is proving tricky. Did Leon have any family?’

‘His mother. She passed away just before the war. I believe his father died in the first war. There's nobody alive that I know of.’

‘Yes, we have a record of his mother's death, but nothing about her burial.’

‘I'm afraid I couldn't help you with that.’

‘Would you know if Leon had ever been hurt? Injured in some way that might help us with the remains?’

‘No, I don't—oh, yes! Yes, now you say that, that last time I saw him, he did tell me he had been wounded during the war. He broke his leg.’

Rathbone and Duffy share a look.

‘We joked about that, because my husband had broken his badly too, which was why he couldn't join the army.’ Billie looks to Duffy. ‘He was a policeman throughout the war, you understand. Right through the Blitz, we never left London. At that time, the cities were the worst places to be.’

Rathbone claps his hands on his knees and battles to his feet.

‘Thank you, Mrs Cassar. You've been very helpful.’

‘I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you more about Leon.’

‘I understand it isn’t easy, but I think your husband may still be of some help to us.’

Billie nods. ‘It’s just so hard making plans with him. I really don’t like to disturb him when he’s resting. What I can do, I can talk to him about it. I’ll have to be careful telling him, though. They were quite close back then and I’m not sure how he’ll take it.’

‘Of course.’

‘I used to be good at taking witness statements, so I’ll hold a little interrogation, see if he remembers anything that might be of use.’

‘Well, you let us know, Mrs Cassar. And we’ll be in touch if we need anything.’

She opens the door, pausing with it just ajar. ‘You said two bodies. Have you identified the second?’

‘We have, but I’m afraid we couldn’t—’

‘Oh, no. Of course, what am I thinking? Just so horrible to think of Leon in an unmarked grave with another body.’

‘I never said they were in a grave.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry. When you said field, I assumed . . .’

‘Again, apologies for intruding, Mrs Cassar. Give your husband our best wishes.’

‘Oh, all right then. Yes, thank you.’

Billie holds the door open and watches them out to their car, waving them off.

Back in the bedroom, he is waiting for her, eyes alert.

‘They found him?’

‘Yes.’

‘They won’t get anything.’

‘No.’

‘And even if they did . . .’

‘Yes.’

Easing herself into the armchair, she stretches her legs out. Noticing him notice, she tugs the hem of her skirt up a little.

‘Still got those Joan Crawford legs.’

He chuckles.

From the bedside table she picks up a book, *The Heart in Exile*.

‘Now, where were we?’

Behind her, bird’s feet clack along the sill outside the window. Billie doesn’t turn to see if the magpie is watching them again.