

PART ONE

THE CARE HOME

1. MONDAY 12 NOVEMBER, EARLY MORNING

Newly qualified Detective Constable Georgia Carrie walked slowly up the steps of the temporary portacabin office to the side of the main police station building, balancing two full mugs of tea, one in each hand. She stopped to read the sign, 'DI Gayther, Cold Cases' and the handwritten scrawl above it, 'LGBTQ+'. She put the mugs down on the top step to open the door and then paused for a moment, thinking what she might say.

"Sorry to hear about your wife, sir"? No, not even that cursory sentence of sympathy would be welcomed. His wife's alcoholism was an open secret at the station, but he had never talked of it. "I'm looking forward to working with you again" sounded suitably keen. But she was sure he viewed his sideways move – "a washed-up old has-been shuffling through dead files," as he'd probably put it – without much enthusiasm.

She opened the door. Picked up the mugs. Stepped inside. The older man, in his battered grey suit and brown loafers, looked up as the young woman put the mugs of tea on the desk. One on his side, the other on hers. He smiled briefly and nodded his thanks. She went to say her opening words, "Good to see you again, sir", but as she did so, he turned the papers he was reading round so they were facing her on the desk. Old man in a hurry, she thought.

"Read this, Carrie," he said abruptly, pushing two sheets of A4 paper across towards her.

She took the sheets and sat down at the desk and began reading the first one. He picked up his mug of tea and swung round on his chair, his back to her, looking out of the window towards the back of the main building and what looked like a building site. The police station was being renovated. Ladders, pots and paints and stacked-up scaffolding seemed to fill the whole space. It was

a mess. He hated mess.

“*Still At Large*,” she read the front page headline of the local newspaper out loud, “*The Scribbler*.”

“When was this...?”

“Two years ago. Thirtieth anniversary of the first killing,” he replied. He gestured towards the two sheets and she carried on reading without speaking.

“Police are still searching for The Scribbler, the serial killer who murdered six people in Norfolk between 1988 and 1990.

“He is described as white British and would now be in his fifties.

“The Scribbler met his victims in bars and clubs in and around Norwich and later stabbed them to death.

“He carved a cartoon likeness of each victim onto their torso.

“The first victim was Donald Worthington, a 53-year-old abattoir supervisor.

“The second victim was 42-year-old office clerk Andrew Marven.

“The other four victims, middle-aged men from the Norwich area, were found dead in the summer and autumn of 1990.

“Police believe The Scribbler may have killed twelve men in total.”

She stopped, cocked her head at an angle, and looked across the desk at Gayther. “If he drew a cartoon likeness of each victim, should he not be known as ‘The Caricaturist’ rather than ‘The Scribbler?’”

He turned and looked at her. “‘The Scribbler’ is snappier. And more accurate, although the press, the media, don’t know it. He used to criss-cross the body with cuts after he drew the likeness ... as if he were scribbling it out in a rage. Read the other page, Carrie. I’ve started a summary.”

She nodded and continued reading. She worked her way down the half-page of bullet-pointed, handwritten notes in his small, neat hand.

The Scribbler. White Male. Early twenties/Now mid-fifties. Slim build. No distinguishing features.

She looked up. "Do we have a likeness ... of this Scribbler?"

He dug into the briefcase by his feet and pulled out one more sheet, which he handed to her. "It's probably the worst I've ever seen in thirty or so years. Mr Potato Head. Your little boy could have done a better job with his crayons." He stopped and thought and then added, "How is ... your little boy?"

"Noah's well. Started school in September ... just round the corner from my mum's. We've moved in with Mum for now. She's helping out, taking him and collecting him from school when I can't."

"Is ... your partner—"

"No," she said, interrupting and shaking her head. "He's gone for good this time. I had enough of it. I'm just trying to sort out the legal stuff. Solicitors are involved. He doesn't make things easy. Do we have an aged version of this?" She changed the subject, holding up the picture of The Scribbler.

"I've just asked for one, for what it's worth. It's in the system, but Christ knows how long that will be. It's certainly not a priority." He leaned forward suddenly, took a fountain pen out of his inside jacket pocket and drew three lines across the forehead of the image and lines between and to either side of the nose and mouth. He stopped and added stray hairs from the nostrils and ears. "There, that's what he looks like now. Old Mr Potato Head."

"Eyes?"

"Blue. Or Blue-grey. Or brown, according to one witness."

Gayther drew a pair of glasses on the image. "He might have glasses these days, unless he's like me and pretends he doesn't need them."

"Height?"

"Five eight, nine. Slight build. Lean. Stringy. Everyone seems to

agree on that.”

“No distinguishing features at all?”

“None that were recalled by anyone. One witness said he had ‘staring eyes’ and another ‘mad eyes’, but someone always says that ... especially when the person has just tried to murder them. That’s about it.”

She stopped and paused. “And who gave us the descriptions?”

“Three of his victims escaped. We also had statements and descriptions from a barmaid at the time. And an old boy who got into a conversation with him ... read on, though. My summary. I’ve not finished it yet. You were here earlier than I expected.”

Six victims – forties, fifties, family men, closet gays.

Three got away – teacher, bank manager, vicar. Now aged 65 to 80+.

Three prime suspects: Challis (plumber), Halom (drag act), Burgess (sales rep). All released without charge.

She wasn’t sure who to ask about first, but this was one of an endless stream of cold cases they’d be looking at over the coming days, so she decided to come straight to the point.

“And so ... ” she said, “why are we looking at this case again now? First of all?”

“Because he’s back, Carrie. The Scribbler is back.”

* * *

DI Gayther eased his old silver Ford Focus out of the police station car park and headed across towards the A12, to go north up the Suffolk coast.

“So where are we off to, guv? A stroll on Southwold Pier? Fish and chips at Aldeburgh? A boat on Thorpeness Mere? I like a nice boat ride, me,” Carrie asked cheerfully.

“You’ll be lucky,” he replied, then paused and added, “You might get a bag of chips on the way back ... for now, we’re heading just

beyond the power station at Sizewell. Near Dunwich ... I'll tell you why in a minute. Let me bring you up to speed on the case first, though. I've been working on it all weekend."

He turned to the young policewoman in the seat beside him. "I was about to add, at the bottom of my summary, 'Believed to be responsible for twelve deaths.'"

"So, the six murders? And ..."

"Worthington, Marven, Rudd, MacGowan, Fotherby and Davies were the six men who were murdered. White, respectable, middle-aged men, married or divorced, but secretly homosexual ... or at least bisexual. White-collar workers, as they used to be called. It was another world back then, of course. There was still a stigma attached to homosexuality.

"The Scribbler picked up his victims in busy city-centre bars in Norwich. Went with them in their cars to secluded places, mostly woodlands, a few miles out. Stabbed them and dumped them in ditches across Norfolk and Suffolk. Drove their cars back to where they started or as close as he could. Went home and disappeared for another few months."

"Always their cars?" she queried. "That's odd."

He nodded his reply. "There were suggestions he may have driven a car or a van that would stand out, be remembered, if it were seen in a layby late at night. An ice cream van, maybe. Imagine that, trying to outpace a police car in an ice cream van."

Carrie smiled, pleased that they were already at ease together.

"Or he may not have had a car. Or not been allowed to drive ... because he hadn't passed a test ... or on medical grounds. He may have had epilepsy. These were all lines of enquiry that led nowhere. Fact is, we just don't know. It's an odd one, though."

"But ... if he drove their cars ... he must have left something behind. A muddy footprint? Hair? Fingerprints? Surely? Very,

very risky. Why not torch them?”

He shrugged. “Always dangerous that and, on a more mundane level, maybe he didn’t want to walk three miles or whatever back into town. As for traces, nothing. We think he was incredibly thorough. And it was the 1980s,” he added, “different days. If it were today, the advances in DNA collection would probably give us a trace however careful he thought he’d been ...”

He went on, “Deposition sites weren’t protected the way they are now. I remember one, late 80s, where I was standing guard by a corpse, a young woman had been raped and murdered. I found a cigarette stub close by and we all thought we had a good forensic lead. Turned out Hoskins, an old-timer who dated back to Eynsham Hall days, had had a crafty fag before I took over.”

“Was there sexual activity?” she asked, taking her mobile phone out of her pocket to open Google Maps.

“Non-consummation, for want of a better expression. They’d be in the early stages of having sex, him supposedly active, the victim passive, often on all fours or laying on their front, legs apart. He stabbed them. Killed them when they were at their most vulnerable.”

“And the six other deaths?” she said, resting her phone on her thigh. “No reception,” she added.

He nodded. “We don’t need it. I know how to get there. I Googled it last night ... Hope, Tanner ... Bulgin ... Hardy, March and one more ... Gerry Rhodes. Six more middle-aged men – similar profile to the known victims. All went missing from Norfolk and Suffolk between the first and last murders ... no, one, Rhodes, was just after, a few weeks. None of them has been heard of since.”

“So, they’ve never been found,” she stated. “Their remains are out there somewhere rotted away in ditches?”

“Maybe,” he answered, accelerating the car up to 70mph on a

long, straight stretch of the A12. “That was how the others were left. Dumped in ditches. There was no attempt to bury the bodies. Maybe he found a better place to put them later on.”

“What about the ones who got away?”

“There were three of them. That we know of anyway. Alan Wade. Thirty-five at the time, a teacher at a private school in Suffolk. An all-boys school. He went with The Scribbler to a field outside Swainsthorpe, crouched down on all fours and The Scribbler went to stab him with a screwdriver. Somehow, he managed to fight him off and made his way to the main road where he hid by a layby all night, scared out of his wits, and then stopped a passing police car in the morning.”

“What do we have from him?”

“Not a lot. He gave a statement. It’s in the file. Read it later. And a description. Vague. The Scribbler wore some sort of peaked cap, maybe a baseball cap, throughout. He used the words ‘lean’ and ‘baby-faced’ and ‘soft-featured’. Said he – The Scribbler – had a bit of a Suffolk accent. Sloightly on th’ huh, but not fully. But a local. Maybe second generation.”

“And the next one?”

“Much the same. Wilkerson. Bank manager from Diss, forty-two. Picked up in another busy city-centre bar, the other side of the city. Taken to a field on the way to Drayton. The Scribbler stabbed him two or three times before they were about to ... supposedly ... have sex. He was interrupted by a dog walker. He ran off. Left Wilkerson for dead. It was touch and go, but he pulled through.”

“His statement and description?”

“He was the most reluctant to talk. Bank manager. Married man. Two children. All very middle class, respectable. He didn’t want it coming out. Marriage. Career. All of that would have ended back then, especially in a bank. Issues of trust and blackmail. We have

a statement and a description; similar to Wade's. You could swap them around and not know whose was whose. Identical modus operandi. Only difference was that he said The Scribbler smelt of a farmyard. A farmer's boy? That was followed up without success."

"And the third?"

"The third one who got away – that we know of – was a vicar. Edwin Lodge, fifty-one, from Ipswich. From his statement, The Scribbler made him put on a condom ... and then attacked him ... stabbed at his genitals with a screwdriver but cut the vicar's thigh instead. The vicar was the stronger man and fought him off, and The Scribbler ended up running away."

"And what did he have to say, the vicar?"

"He came forward some time later. Just after the fourth victim – fourth known victim anyway – was murdered. Wracked with guilt. Clutching the cross of Jesus and all of that. Much the same story as before ... That's where we're off to now."

"What, to go over his statement with him again ... after all this time?"

"We're off to a care home on the road to Dunwich. Edwin Lodge, eighty-something, lived there these past two and a half years. Completely alone. No family. No visitors, at least not lately. Abandoned by his flock."

"Lived? Past tense. So where is he now?"

"He was the vicar of ... one of these old rural churches in the middle of nowhere. Then lived quietly near Dunwich in his retirement. Went into this care home to be looked after, became increasingly demented ... sorry, not the PC phrase I know ... he suffered from dementia and it got gradually worse."

"Okay, so are we going to get much sense out of him?"

"He suddenly started rambling about The Scribbler and what happened. The staff couldn't make much sense of it, most of them

are either too young to remember what happened or are from overseas ... Eastern Europe, the Philippines ... and don't always understand the language too well. Especially the biblical stuff, the lord shall smite thee ... all of that. One of them managed to understand some of what he was saying ... that The Scribbler had come back and was going to kill him."

"So, okay if he's experiencing dementia – and the related hallucinations and paranoia that can go with it – are we going to get any more out of him now than they did thirty-odd years ago?"

"We're not going to get anything out of him, we're going to meet the doctor who's there this morning. Edwin Lodge died six or seven weeks ago. The coroner ruled death by misadventure. It seems Edwin, when alone in his room, and in the later stages of dementia, got himself out of bed unaided, used a frame to walk across to the window, undid the locks and bolts and then climbed up and onto the ledge and threw himself head-first onto the concrete path below. As you do..."

"So you think ..."

"I'd think it an unlikely scenario. But what came out from the coroner's report – and what Ray Wilson, one of our ex-DCs working as a civilian investigator, picked up on and passed to cold cases – was that, before he died ... or possibly after ... a face was etched into his stomach and then scratched out."

Gayther paused for a second, gathering his thoughts, before going on. "No one seemed to give it a second thought. It's not unknown for dementia patients to self-harm apparently, but ... the talk of The Scribbler ... and the serial killer's motif on the deceased's body in the same location as the other victims ... well, two plus two makes four in my book..."

“You don’t have a mobile phone do you, guvnor? You could put it on the dashboard if you did. Use it as a sat-nav.”

“Not a fan, Carrie, although I have one here.” He gestured towards the side door. “But it needs charging. I forget sometimes ... old age ... creeping senility, I’m afraid.”

“You can get a lead these days to plug into the cigarette lighter. Charges it for you from the battery. Clever, eh?”

He smiled. “Something to think about, Carrie, but it’s all a bit hit and miss out here anyway. Reception. In the sticks.”

They drove along in companionable silence.

Carrie took out her phone and fiddled with it.

Gayther ignored her and carried on driving.

“I’ve got reception,” Carrie said suddenly. “What’s the postcode?”

“No idea,” Gayther answered. “Google ‘Kings Court Care Home, Dunwich’ and see what that brings up. It’s about two miles off the A12, we turn right at the pub in Westleton.”

“You were saying, guv ... there were three suspects. How far did they get?” she asked, tapping away at her phone. “Go on,” she added, “I’m still listening.”

“Good of you ... Three suspects were questioned. Ray Challis was a plumber who frequented at least three of the city-centre pubs where The Scribbler met his victims. He was named several times by viewers calling in after a TV appeal. He had alibis for three or four of the murders. Forensics on his van and at his home didn’t turn up anything.”

“Did we have DNA in those days? Before my time,” she said, looking up from her phone. “Sorry.”

“Early days and The Scribbler was very, very careful. He wore a cap at all times, either as a disguise or to make sure his hair didn’t get onto the victims’ clothes. There’s some speculation he may have been bald, which would have been unusual in a man of that

age. They did one or two appeals with different images but without success. Or possibly he was having chemo – that was another line of enquiry that was followed up without success.”

She nodded.

“And each of the victims ... the ones who escaped ... said he wore gloves. Ladies’ cotton gloves. Supposedly for eczema, according to Wade, although Wilkerson said they were rubber gloves, which would be odd. The latex might have been an issue if he had eczema, so it’s likely that The Scribbler was just being careful. I imagine he’d have burned those and his clothes later on.”

She asked, “Blood, what about blood? He’d have been covered, wouldn’t he?”

“Some,” he replied. “From them. Onto him. He stabbed them repeatedly from behind so there would have been something, but if he took off his outer layers of clothes ... who knows ... he may have been painstakingly careful or just very lucky ... or both ... either way, it was thirty-odd years ago and things were more hit and miss then.”

“Turn up here, for Kings Court. Here ...”

“Yes, thank you, Carrie, I do know.” DI Gayther signalled and then swung the car across the A12 on to the side road towards the coast.

“And the others. The drag act and the sales rep. What about them?”

“The drag act ... Peter Halom ... turned himself in and confessed to the murders. That was the biggest waste of time and manpower ever. Seems he had done his act in some of the pubs and clubs The Scribbler had been to. This fellow said he had been suffering from blackouts and had convinced himself he’d committed the murders in some sort of trance-like state. We had psychiatrists and all sorts in to persuade him he didn’t. Then he went to the press, who had a field day. Front page of the old *News of the World* newspaper. Nightmare.”

She nodded, "It's about a mile down here, on the right ... and the sales rep?"

"Simon Burgess ... a freelance agent for baby and childrens-wear from Sussex. He bought stuff cheap from Indian wholesalers in East London on Sundays and then sold it at twice the price to small independent shops in East Anglia, up as far as Cromer and Hunstanton on weekdays. Not much of a living even then. His ex-girlfriend wrote in, bizarrely, a long and rambling letter saying it was him and how he used to make her dress up as a schoolboy and then beat her and rape her 'from behind', as she put it."

"Wild goose chase?" she replied, and then added, "About half a mile now, guv."

"He was in the area at the time of each murder – and no alibis, or at least nobody recalled him. He stayed overnight when he was in Norwich or higher up on the coast. The old boy who'd got talking to The Scribbler saw Burgess drive by a week or two later and made a note of the number plate. He then ballsed it all up by picking someone else out of a line-up. The ex, his by-now-pregnant ex, then retracted her statement and said he was with her on two of the occasions. Looking at the files, I'd say Challis and Burgess are worth another close look ... if we had then what we have now – CCTV, DNA, all of that – we'd have put one of them away."

"You have arrived at your destination."

"This is it, we're here."

"Thank you, Constable Carrie. Where would I be without you?"

"Driving off Southwold Pier, guv?"

They smiled at each other.

Both thinking that they'd liked each other when they'd worked together before.

And then, that they'd make a good team moving forward.