

Prologue

Wearing nothing more than a towel around his waist and a world weary expression on his face, the fat man descended the stairs. Passing a large, gilt-framed mirror in the hallway, he paused, taking a perverse pleasure in glancing at his bloated body. He chuckled to himself at some private joke or other as he swung open the double doors to the front entrance. A fleeting smile of delight was drawn from him as his eyes settled on the Sunday papers piled neatly inside the porch.

The Sunday papers meant exactly that. Every tabloid, broadsheet, and magazine that had arrived at the newsagent earlier that morning was delivered to the front door without fail, every Sunday, as they had been for the last five years. They made a neat, somewhat mountainous, pile built upwards from a Sunday Times base, followed by the other broadsheets and then finally the red tops.

The fat man liked this sense of order because it made the pile much easier to carry back to his dining room in two trips. This system suited him admirably as the broadsheets finished up on his dining room table right back where they had started at the bottom of the pile. The broadsheets seldom provided him with the sort of information he was looking for, and so, they were only an occasional hunting ground.

Returning up the stairs with his favourite papers even more slowly than he had descended, the fat man carefully placed his favourite papers on a large side table and sat down to read. His Sunday mornings were a time of precious seclusion and none of his staff were allowed in the house before three in the afternoon. This regime had originally evolved so that if he was entertaining a 'house guest' it gave him ample time to ensure that the young man or woman was well gone from the prying eyes and ears of his employees. With a sigh, the fat man realised that there had been very few 'house guests' of late, and it had been a very long time since there had been a 'house guest' whose memory did not make him wince with guilt.

The fat man would be perfectly happy just to see his name or his photograph in print. Fifteen minutes went by quite comfortably before he irritably pushed the remaining pile to one side and pulled out the colour supplement from the Mail on Sunday. The article that had caught his attention was spread over six pages, including five glossy photographs and two thousand words of inconsequential drivel. The item on Paige Freeman added nothing to readers' general knowledge of her, but, like millions of other people, he was drawn to studying the contours of her exquisite face and reading the trivia that she allowed the public to access.

He immersed himself in reading the article, concentrating deeply and scanning diligently for a positive mention of his name. For the rest of his life, he would wonder why he had been reading the article so carefully – so much so that the unexpected opening of the door in the empty house startled him beyond reason.

Within a split second, no doubt many useless questions scattered through the man's brain: 'Who's this? The front door was locked! Why now? Why me? Where? No!'

Without saying a word, the visitor fired five bullets that ripped the obese body to shreds. While the fat man lay in a crumpled mess on the bathroom floor, the visitor ignored the stench, walked over, and fired one last bullet into Maurice Lawrence-Parker's right ear.

'Bye, bye, Mo.'

Placing the gun into his jacket pocket and granting himself a grunt of approval for a job well done, the visitor carefully walked down the corridor and opened the second door on the left, which led to the master bedroom, so large it could well have been two rooms knocked into one. Central to the space was a bed that was big enough to land a helicopter. The visitor peeled off his first pair of rubber gloves and replaced them with a second pair before walking over to a large painting over the bed and easing it back on its hinges to expose a wall safe. He lifted up the bed mattress, felt around, and produced a long key. He shook his head in disbelief and opened the safe door. The visitor took out the various items and placed them carefully in his rucksack, at first leaving two watches – a Rolex and a Cartier – before changing his mind and stuffing them inside the rucksack.

The visitor checked his watch. He had at least an hour to spare, but he wanted to be gone, so he quickly set about ripping the wall safe picture of its hinges and going around the room and taking the remaining four pictures off the wall and throwing them on the floor. He then changed his mind again and replaced two of the pictures back on their hooks. He had received no instructions on checking the bedside cabinets, but, with time to spare, he decided it could not hurt. One was empty; the other contained a few sex toys. He cleared his throat to spit on the bed and then stopped himself in time, remembering his DNA was on record. Five minutes gone already.

The visitor descended to the ground floor and entered a room next to the house's main entrance, which obviously functioned as an office. On the desk stood his main reason for being here, so he grabbed the laptop and its power lead and stuffed them into the bulging rucksack. Job done. The visitor walked the few steps to the front door, opened it, then closed it behind him, and took off his rubber gloves, which fitted nicely in to the rucksack. The visitor looked up at the security camera and smiled; this had been a team job. He would never know who disabled the security system, but he said a silent thank you anyway. Within thirty minutes, he was lost within the growing number of tourists and shoppers wandering around the city.