

The Poison Pen

Chapter One

Detective Chief Inspector Richard Hayward was a very happy man, walking through the garden with an arm around his wife's waist—well, where her waist was before pregnancy began to hide it. He wouldn't have changed places with anyone. They'd just returned from a short holiday in Paris, a second honeymoon he'd called it, with a sentimentality which only his darling Kate and his mother occasionally ever saw.

Mrs. Hayward senior, with her little Yorkie, Fuzz, trotting along importantly beside her, pointed out the glory of the roses in their garden. Ella Hayward, who lived fifteen miles away, had kept an eye on the house while they were abroad and was justifiably proud of her horticultural activities on their behalf. They'd only been in possession of the charming cottage a couple of months and wisely left the garden to see what the previous owners had planted.

"Only hope I can do as well as they did," Kate said almost every day when some new delight bloomed. She was enchanted with everything, and Richard was enchanted with her. After two years of marriage he could still hardly believe his own incredible luck in winning his darling New Zealander.

"We'll be able to put up a swing on that apple tree," she said. "Both a boy and a girl would adore that, and the pram will be nicely shaded where I can keep an eye on it from the kitchen window."

"I'm buying the pram," Ella said, "and the cot, the high chair, and—"

"Steady on, Mother!" Richard laughed. "Leave something for me! You've already knitted enough to kit out triplets."

"You've done your bit," his mother retorted. "And about time, too! I want to be around to see my great-grandchildren as well, and you're the only ones who can make it possible."

Richard's smile left his face temporarily. What a world to bring children into. And he knew more than most what an evil world it could be.

Kate read his mind, as she always could. "Don't worry, darling. There are still some decent people left, you know, and we'll do our darndest to see that our children learn what's right."

"Doesn't always work out that way," Richard answered. "But it won't be for lack of trying on our part. I may not be able to stop a nuclear bomb, but I know when to administer a good wallop if required."

“Bully.” Kate gave him one of her loving smiles and placed one hand atop her belly. “The poor little thing moved quite violently when you said that.”

Richard gave her an anxious look. “Do you feel all right, my darling? Perhaps we’d better go indoors, and you can put your feet up.”

Both women laughed. “Thank goodness you’re going back to work soon,” Kate said. “The minute you’re out of the house, I’m going to do a few cartwheels.” His forlorn expression must have changed her mind for she relented and said again, “Don’t worry so much, my love. I’ll take great care of our baby, I promise. And Mum will be over every day, if I know anything about it, to see that I do.”

Richard resumed his walkabout with Kate in his closely held arm. “Wonder what’s been happening while we’ve been away.” He was rewarded by the laughs which escaped from Kate and Ella. Looking at them both suspiciously, he got his answer from Ella.

“We were wondering how soon you’d start fidgeting about your wretched station,” she said. “Do you imagine the crime rates doubled just because you’ve not been there?”

“Not very complimentary to me, Richard,” Kate accused him. “Did you begrudge the time spent in Paris?” She winked at Ella as she spoke.

Richard had a strong feeling he was being set up for something; no doubt he’d find out eventually.

Kate let him lead her indoors and settle her on a settee, and he sat down beside her. She twiddled his thick mop of hair busily. “Richard?”

“Yes?” he answered with a smile. “What do you want this time? Top brick of the chimney? The moon? I’ll get it for you!”

“Nothing so trivial, but could you possibly pinch an extra day’s holiday? I would so love it if you were here when Lucy arrives.”

For an instant Richard’s mind went blank, but a nudge from his wife had him remembering. “Oh! Your young sister’s coming, isn’t she? I hadn’t forgotten, darling, honestly. It’s just that I’ve lost track of the days. That’s what being with you does to me.”

“Lying hound!” she teased. “You had forgotten! Well, what about it? All the way from New Zealand and her brother-in-law isn’t here to greet her.”

He was saved by the bell—literally. The telephone, thank goodness, but his mother answered it before he could get there.

“Oh, hello, Jim,” she said and, with a resigned look at Kate, handed it over to Richard.

Detective Sergeant Jim Findon on the other end sounded in a state of high excitement. “Is that you, sir?” was his idiotic question.

“If it isn’t, I’m a very healthy ghost,” Richard replied dryly. “And, yes, we did have a nice holiday, thanks.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but we’re in a bit of a flap at the moment.”

“Okay, Jim, but I’ve still got a few hours of leave. Couldn’t it have waited until the morning?”

“The thing is, sir, we’ve had a murder!”

“Well, don’t sound so disgustingly pleased about it.” Richard reproved him. For a fleeting moment he recalled a conversation he’d had with a Scotland Yard friend of his a few months previously. They’d just solved a murder case in Burshill—the first for many years in the town—and Richard had said life would seem very tame to his young sergeant.

Geoffrey Breed had commented that wherever Richard was trouble followed. It looked as if the chap was right. Richard himself was a comparative newcomer to the town which was expanding at an incredible rate, but apart from the one murder, the crime rate wasn’t too alarmingly high. It seemed that was changing.

“All right,” he said. “Who and where?”

“Mr. John Berwick, sir. He’s the manager of Wall’s Department Store.”

“Crikey! What’s he been doing? Short-changing the customers? Where did it happen? Is the cause of death known?”

“In his own office in the store, and it looks like poison. Happened around lunchtime.”

Richard frowned. “Well, if you had to bother me, why didn’t you do it earlier? It’s just gone five-thirty.”

“Yes, sir, but I didn’t know you were back until a constable said he’d seen you. I thought you were returning this evening. We’ve got everything under control, of course, but,” he lowered his voice, “Inspector Coleman took charge, and I’m afraid he’s getting up the noses of the people here. I’m phoning from the store, by the way. Inspector Coleman told the staff none of them could leave, and they—well, I’m afraid, sir, they’re just ignoring him. Putting on their things and walking out.”

Richard sighed but recognized the unconscious appeal in Jim’s voice. “Let them go,” he instructed. “We don’t want any undignified tussles between irate shop assistants and the police. I’ll be there in about half an hour.” He turned and met the accusing gaze of his wife. “Sorry, love.”

“Didn’t say a word.”

“I shouldn’t be too long. The body was discovered at lunchtime so all the donkey-work will have been done. I’ll just poke my nose in to show I’m willing to help and then leave them to get on with it.”

“Whose body?” the women asked as one.

“Chap called Berwick. He’s the manager of Wall’s Department Store. Do either of you know him? I expect you’ve been in the shop at some time or another.”

Ella shook her head, but Kate said she didn’t know the manager but had been in the shop. “It’s not what I’d call a real department store. Nowhere near as big as the Oxford Street ones, but it’s large enough to be a surprise in a town like Burshill. If it had been built recently I could understand it, but according to their adverts it’s been there about a hundred years. Goodness knows who their customers were in the beginning.”

“Probably from the farms and big houses outside,” Ella contributed. “What used to be known as the carriage trade.”

“Anyway,” Kate resumed, “I went in there the week before we went to Paris. It’s terribly old-fashioned—the clothing department has mostly twin sets and tweed skirts, that sort of thing. By the look of the sales staff, I imagine they were dug in with the foundations! But quite sweet, really—at least I got some attention and smiles from them, which isn’t always the case these days, you know.”

Richard laughed. “Well, if it’s that ancient, it’s appropriate the manager should have been poisoned—a sort of arsenic and old lace situation.”

Ella reprimanded him at once. “Richard! I’ve told you before you shouldn’t be flippant about death. It’s not funny.”

“Nervous reaction,” he assured her. “I don’t like deaths, especially violent ones. They bring out the worst in me.”

“And the best, darling,” Kate said loyally. “It’s because you hate it so much that you work so hard to get it cleared up.” She sighed once then kissed him goodbye. “And don’t think you’ve got to rush back here, either. We’re all set for tomorrow anyway. I was only teasing about taking another day off. Your mum’s going to stop here while Jane Clayton drives me to Heathrow to pick up Lucy.”

Jane Clayton, with her husband Alex, had become firm friends with the Haywards after Richard cleared up the messy business of Mrs. Clayton senior’s murder. Such an unpromising start had turned into a good relationship between the two families.

Richard wasn't altogether happy at this airport arrangement. He freely admitted to being prejudiced regarding women's driving. The fact that both his wife and mother were excellent drivers made no difference.

"We'll see," he said. "If I can possibly manage it, I'll take you myself. This may turn out to be suicide or an open and shut case. I can always hope."