

SONGS BY DEAD GIRLS

A *HEALTH OF STRANGERS* THRILLER

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SANDSTONEPRESS
HIGHLAND | SCOTLAND

MONDAY

NAUSEA

|

It was a horrible noise, the kind of unnatural high-pitched squeal that Bernard often found punctuating his nightmares. The fact that he was currently wide awake didn't make the noise any less excruciating. It took all his self-control not to stick his fingers in his ears. Mona, the creator of the ungodly noise, pulled the remaining bits of shrink-wrap off the stab-proof vest, provoking yet more shrill squeaks.

Bernard shivered. '*Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes.*'

'What?' Despite her question, Mona's profile radiated a certain degree of indifference which made it difficult for him to work out if she did actually want to know more. He decided to venture further down the path.

'It's a quote from Henry David Thoreau. You know – the nature writer? Advocated simple living? Spent years in a forest?' The look of annoyance on his partner's face clarified that she wasn't interested in updating her knowledge of woods-based philosophers at this point in time. 'Never mind. Can I have a look at it?'

She passed the vest over to him. It was a solid torso-shaped affair, rigid, although lighter than he was expecting, with a strange rubbery feel.

'I don't know what you're complaining about.' Mona's blonde bob covered her face as she set about

unwrapping the second vest. ‘This is about keeping us safe. Remember that HET officer in Aberdeen who tried to retrieve a Health Defaulter from a crack den and got a knife in the balls for his troubles?’

‘Not exactly the body parts that will be covered by these.’

She tutted. ‘Oh, well, put in a special request for a reinforced rubber codpiece.’

A fug of depression settled around his shoulders. He’d been in the car with his partner for all of ten minutes and already she was annoyed with him. It wasn’t unusual for them to spend the best part of a working day trapped in a car together. As members of the North Edinburgh Health Enforcement Team it was their job to find people who’d missed their monthly Health Check, a front-line attempt to stop the spread of the Virus. This involved a lot of driving, knocking on doors, being lied to, sitting in wait, and eventually catching up with the Defaulter. On the days when he had inadvertently irritated Mona, eight hours of close contact with her could feel considerably longer.

He tried to avert this looming disaster with some humour. ‘Not sure it’s really an area worth protecting. It’s not like it’s in use.’

‘Spare me, please.’ She continued with her peeling, then suddenly looked up, with a slightly more conciliatory expression on her face. ‘No chance of getting back with your wife then?’

Glad as he was that Mona was no longer scowling at him, he didn’t feel inclined to enter into that particular area of discussion. ‘Not looking for one. Anyway, shall we suit up?’ He slipped his jacket off, then tried to fit his arm into the appropriate opening. The rigidity of the

vests and the limited dimensions of the car made this no easy task, and he accidentally elbowed Mona.

‘Sorry. It would be easier to put them on if we got out of the car.’

‘No. I don’t want them to notice us and do a runner.’

They were parked on a quiet side street in Morningside, one of the most affluent areas of Edinburgh. The property currently attracting their attention was a terraced sandstone building, with a large sloping garden leading up to it. The grass had not been cut for some time.

‘Not a bad residence for someone without a job,’ said Bernard.

‘I suspect the wages of sin are paying for it.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘Number one,’ Mona held up a finger. ‘This is a nice bit of town, and that’s, what, a three, maybe four-bed house. You’re looking at the best part of half a million. Who is paying the mortgage on that?’

‘Our Defaulter could have a very rich daddy? Or she could just be renting?’

‘Even the rents in this bit of town are eye-watering. And I have another point. Number two.’ She was now holding two fingers up. ‘This is a fabulously expensive house, and look at the state of the garden. Every other lawn in the street looks like the grass was trimmed into place with nail scissors, yet this place looks like waste ground. And have they washed the windows any time in the last few years?’

‘You sound like my grandmother.’

‘Grandma could probably do a very good job of knowing a wrong ’un when she sees one. And my third and most important point is, we’re here, so there must be something dodgy going on.’

'Not necessarily.'

'Ha! In all the months we've been doing this, how many people have defaulted on their Health Check for reasons that were not to do with overconsumption of drink or drugs, or who were not in some way participating in illegal activity?'

He thought for a second. 'Occasionally they turn out to be dead?'

'Usually due to the overconsumption of drink or drugs. Anyway, turn round, Bernard, and I'll get the straps.'

He obediently presented his back to her. 'What do we know about today's Defaulter?'

'Alessandra Barr, twenty-five, missed her Health Check three days ago. And I don't want to be judgemental or anything, but take a look at her picture.'

She held up their Defaulter List, and Bernard stared at a slightly blurred photograph of a gaunt young woman. She had badly dyed blonde hair, which sat awkwardly with her dark colouring.

'Has she got two black eyes?' Bernard ran his finger across the photograph.

'Yep. The day she turned up to get her Green Card photo taken, she had a face full of bruises. I'm going to go out on a limb and say she's not a soccer mom.' She opened her door. 'Shall we?'

Bernard tried to ignore the knot of fear in his stomach. Unlike Mona, he didn't have the confidence that police college and years of law enforcement experience instilled. He'd previously worked in health promotion, where the day-to-day work of encouraging breastfeeding and smoking cessation had left him woefully underprepared for the realities of working at the HET. Most of the Defaulters they chased were less than delighted to see

them, and he had spent many work hours being sworn at, spat at, and occasionally punched. He wondered if he'd ever get through the day without this ever-present feeling of doom.

‘Mona!’

She stopped with her hand on the garden gate. ‘What?’
‘What’s our plan here?’

‘We knock on the door, ask whoever answers if we can see Alessandra. If they say no we insist that we come in, using the powers bestowed on us by the Health Defaulters Act, blah, blah, blah. The usual.’

‘But what if she makes a run for it?’

‘Then you stop her.’

‘What with?’

Mona raised her hands in the air and wiggled them. ‘These.’ She started walking again. ‘Because rightly or wrongly, they’re the only weapons that the HET have seen fit to supply us with.’

She pressed the bell, which made no sound.

‘Try knocking.’

‘Thanks, I wouldn’t have thought of that.’ Mona hammered on the wood. The sound echoed through the house, but didn’t appear to rouse any occupants.

Bernard left the path and peered through the crack in the curtains. ‘I don’t see anyone, though it’s not that easy without the lights on.’

Mona knocked for a second time, and again was met with silence. She turned the handle, and the door opened. ‘Result! Come on.’

Bernard stepped over the threshold, both aware and annoyed that his heart was beating ridiculously fast. Amongst his many secret fears was that on one of these jaunts he was actually going to have a cardiac arrest. His

only hope was that the heart failure would be instantly fatal, and wouldn't involve him having to face the ridicule of the HET team from a hospital bed. He tried to calm his nerves by focusing on the surroundings. The hallway was dark, with the only light coming from the open door behind them. It was uncarpeted, but not in a trendy, stripped-back wood kind of way, more in the mode of 'we haven't been living here long enough to cover the floor'. Or maybe, as in Mona's theory, the overconsumption of illegal substances had made investing in carpet a low priority. There were a number of doorways leading off the hall, and, from what he could see in the gloom, a rather magnificent staircase straight ahead of them.

Mona turned to her right and shoved open a door. He made to follow her.

'What are you doing?' she hissed.

'Coming with you?'

She pointed at him, then at the door opposite, indicating he should check that room. He mouthed an irritable 'OK', and turned his back on her before she could see the look of fear on his face. He much preferred being two steps behind her. Bernard would have taken a blow to the head or a knife in the vest quite happily just so long as Mona was making all the decisions. Backup he could do. Pole position was a different matter.

He reached for the handle and tried to remember what he'd been taught in his month-long induction to the HET. He seemed to recall that there had been a whole day about 'Encountering Hostility and How to Respond'. He paused with the door slightly open, and tried to remember the key phrases.

Be confident. Breathe. Show respect. Moderate your tone. Keep your distance. Know your exits.

He wiped the sweat from his hand, and threw the door wide. There was no response, so he flicked the light switch. To his relief the room was empty, although there was a lingering smell of cannabis in the air suggesting that it had been in use not so very long ago. In common with the hallway, the room did not benefit from any floor covering. Furniture was sparse, with the large and gracious room hosting only a dilapidated sofa, a coffee table, and a TV of a size and depth that predated the birth of the flat screen. The absence of furnishing meant a limit to places where someone could hide, although there was a door in the corner of the room, potentially a cupboard. He walked swiftly across the room and pulled it open to find it led on to another room. He caught his breath as he saw a figure coming toward him.

‘Hey.’

Mona.

She reached past him and turned on the light, illuminating the kitchen. Once upon a time, the fittings were probably state of the art, but it was difficult to tell from the layer of grime which covered the work surfaces. Unwashed dishes were stacked on every unit.

‘If your grandmother didn’t like dirty windows, Bernard, she’d have a fit looking at this place.’

He pulled a face. ‘How can anyone live like this?’

‘Beats me. Puts the state of the Guv’s office into perspective, though. Anyway, there’s no one here; let’s try the upper floor.’

At the top of the stairs they separated again, Bernard to the left and Mona to the right. He opened the first door he came to, which as he expected was a bedroom. The curtains were drawn, but enough sunshine was sneaking through the cracks to allow him to see that

the room was actually somewhat better furnished than downstairs. There was a rug on the floor, for starters, two ancient double wardrobes, and an incongruously ornate dressing table. There was also a double bed, upon which, he realised with a start, there was a large, person-shaped lump. A lump that was lying extremely still. Whether he was looking at a live body or a dead one was not clear, and a sudden hope it was a corpse flitted through his mind, to be followed immediately by a chaser of remorse. However unpleasant some of the Defaulters were, they were still his fellow human beings, and he didn't wish any of them dead.

He did, however, wish that he wasn't on his own. He looked round but Mona had vanished into another room. He could go after her, explain what he'd found, and confirm to her – if it was ever in doubt – that he really couldn't hack it. Or he could stay here and try to pretend that he wasn't in imminent need of a defibrillator. He took a deep breath and turned back toward the divan.

‘Hello.’

His voice was high-pitched and squeaky, rather like shrink-wrap peeled off plastic. *Be confident. Breathe.*

With a conscious effort he lowered his voice. ‘Excuse me.’ *Show respect.*

The lump in the bed didn't move. He took a step toward it, and could see a mass of long brown hair spread across the pillow. He felt a certain amount of relief that this was a woman. In his experience, women weren't any less likely to throw a punch at you, but for the most part they tended to do less damage. It didn't appear to be Alessandra, however, unless she'd radically changed her look since her photograph was taken.

‘Excuse me.’ His voice was getting louder, and snippier. He caught himself. *Moderate your tone.*

His tone of voice, inappropriate or otherwise, wasn’t provoking a response. After a careful consideration of the duvet he was pretty sure that it was going up and down, blowing his corpse theory out of the water. This was a warm body, who might not take well to being woken by a strange man in her house. He shot a glance over his shoulder. Perhaps under the circumstances Mona would be less threatening than him? Tempting as this was, it was a cop-out. With a sigh and a quick check how many steps it was back to the door – *know your exits* – he walked over to the bed and shook the woman gently by the shoulder.

The body rolled toward him, revealing broad shoulders, a hairy chest and three days of stubble. ‘Who the fuck are you?’ The man sat up, and grabbed his arm.

Bernard tried to wriggle free. ‘We’re from the Health Enforcement Team. If you let go of me I can show you some ID. We’re looking for Alessandra Barr …’

The man was looking at him with a strange expression on his face. His grip on Bernard’s arm slackened.

‘Are you OK?’

The man responded by opening his mouth and vomiting profusely down Bernard’s front.

He snatched his arm back. ‘For goodness’ sake!’

Mona appeared in the doorway, and surveyed the scene.

‘Oh, Bernard.’ She stared at his ruined vest. ‘This is the reason we keep our distance.’

‘I wonder if I could have a quick word with you about your neighbours?’ Mona held up her HET ID to the

crack in the door. It opened further and a middle-aged woman appeared, squinting into the July sunshine.

‘Are you from the police? Is this about my complaint?’ The accent was plummy, redolent of Edinburgh public school and a career in financial services.

‘No. We’re the Health Enforcement Team – we look for people who’ve missed their monthly Health Check.’

A brief look of disappointment crossed her face, but she quickly recovered. ‘Well, if they are in trouble about that as well it doesn’t surprise me.’ The door opened yet further, and Mona had a flash of a much grander hallway than the one she’d seen next door. ‘They’re up to all sorts over there. If you want to hear about it, you’d better come in.’

She looked over at the HET car. Bernard, minus his vest, was standing guard. The young man they’d encountered, although singularly unapologetic for his recent retching, had not given them any trouble. He’d dressed, accompanied them outside, and allowed himself to be safely locked in the back seat of their car. Surely her partner couldn’t get into any trouble if she left him for a few minutes? But then Bernard had confounded her expectations before. ‘Any chance we could just run through it quickly here?’

Ten minutes later she hurried back down the path to her partner. ‘Did you turn up anything?’

‘His name’s Stephen McNiven, and he’s got a fully up-to-date Green Card ...’ He lifted it up to show her.

‘McNiven? That name rings a bell.’ Had she arrested him before? ‘Sorry, I interrupted you. Go on.’

‘I was just going to say I ran a database check and he’s not a Health Check Defaulter, and he’s not wanted by

Police Scotland. Did you find out anything useful from next door?’

‘I’m not sure how useful it was, but I can say definitively that he won’t be winning any good neighbour awards. Not if the lady in number 29 is telling the truth, anyway. Lots of people coming and going, she said. She seemed to be particularly offended by the female visitors in, as she put it, “high heels and skirts that barely cover their backsides”. Occasional screaming and shouting late at night, in response to which she always calls the police, who invariably “do nothing”. She really wasn’t a fan of Mr McNiven.’

‘I kind of see where she’s coming from,’ said Bernard, pointing at his sodden vest, which was airing well away from the car.

She tried not to smile. ‘Shall we see if he wants to chat?’

McNiven did not look up as they climbed in. Mona turned on the intercom.

‘Are you all right back there? Not feeling nauseous anymore?’

He ignored them and turned his attention from staring at the floor to staring out of the window. Mona took the opportunity to give him the once-over. Mid-twenties, she’d say. The clothes he’d scrambled to put on earlier were clearly expensive designer gear, although the look was undermined by the few remaining bits of vomit in his hair. Designer gear, disreputable visitors day and night – the scenario screamed out dealer.

And yet ... this was an unusual area of Edinburgh for a dealer to set himself up in. A ground-floor seller would struggle to pay the rent on this size of place, and from the look of Mr McNiven he was no kingpin. And, as his

next-door neighbour had just proved, people round here were on the phone to the police at the first sign of anti-social behaviour. McNiven could just as easily be some spoiled trust-fund kid, living it large with no thought for the neighbours. She decided to tread carefully, in case he turned out to be the son of a high court judge, or someone else with the wherewithal to sue the HET.

‘So, do you go by Stephen or Stevie? I’m going to guess you are a Stevie.’

He sighed, theatrically. ‘Are you going to arrest me, or what?’

‘We’re not the police. We don’t arrest people. We can, however, detain them while they assist us with our investigations into the whereabouts of people who have missed their Health Checks. The two processes are not dissimilar, and your chance of experiencing either one depends entirely on how helpful you are intending to be.’

He stared at her blankly, and she tried to work out if he was bluffing, or really didn’t know why they were here.

‘Alessandra Barr.’

He shook his head. ‘Don’t know her.’

‘OK. Let’s start with what you do know. Who else lives in the house with you?’

‘I don’t live there. I just met some bird last night and went home with her.’

Mona loved it when their cover stories were this idiotic. She filed it away in her memory to tell to the others when they got back. ‘And she got up early to go to work and just left you there, a complete stranger, alone in her house?’

He shrugged.

‘Well, no offence, Stevie, but that strikes me as pretty

implausible. And you know what else makes me think you are lying?’

‘Nope.’

‘Your next-door neighbour. Did you not just watch me talk to her for the past ten minutes?’

He shrugged.

‘The lady who lives in the house next to yours, sorry, I mean the house that you found yourself in this morning, well, she was very vocal about a man with long brown hair that lives at this address. Apparently she’s had several run-ins over loud music, visitors at all times of the night, and the numerous undesirable types staying here. Think if I went back in to get her she’d be able to identify you?’

He snorted. ‘Yeah, the old bat would love that. All right, I live here. Don’t know any Alexandra whatsit though.’

‘Take a look at this picture.’ Mona held it up to the Perspex window between the front and back seats. ‘Do you recognise her?’

He glanced at it, and quickly looked away. ‘Nope.’

‘Take a proper look.’

He made a show of leaning forward on his seat and staring at the photograph. ‘I don’t know her.’ He spoke the words slowly and aggressively. ‘And judging by the state of her, I’m glad I don’t. Can I go now?’

Mona turned to Bernard, to see if he had anything to add to the discussion. He returned her look with one of slight panic, which she took as a no.

‘Just one last question – what do you do for a living?’

‘This and that.’

Mona pressed the button to unlock the rear doors. Their passenger jumped at the noise, and looked at them

uncertainly, as if they might be setting some kind of trap for him.

‘You can get out. You’re free to go.’

Mona stepped out of the car, and waited for Stevie McNiven to emerge. She passed him a HET business card. ‘But if you do remember seeing anyone looking like Alessandra Barr, do be sure to give us a ring.’

‘Course I will.’ He took the card and shoved it in the back pocket of his jeans, which appeared to be Armani. Whatever the ‘this and that’ profession was, it was obviously profitable. With a final smirk, he sauntered off, looking back at them as he strolled up the path to his house. His neighbour was still standing on her front step, her body language radiating disapproval. Mona wondered if her annoyance was with McNiven, or more likely, with the HET for letting him back out of the car. McNiven ground to a halt, and gave the long-suffering homeowner next door a mock salute. She disappeared back into the house, shaking her head.

‘Do you reckon he knows Alessandra Barr then?’ asked Bernard.

‘Of course he did.’ She started the car. ‘He looked away far too quickly. Let’s get back to the office and try and find out some more about Mr McNiven.’

2

‘What is that smell?’

Maitland’s head appeared round the side of his computer, nostrils twitching as he made a show of sniffing the air. Bernard braced himself for an onslaught of abuse. Maitland got to his feet, pulling his lanky 6’3” to its full height, and stood towering over him. ‘Bernard, are you responsible for stinking out the office?’

‘My stab-proof vest had a nasty accident.’ He held the offending article aloft.

Maitland moved hurriedly backwards. ‘Oh, that’s what they’re for! Catching Bernard’s vomit when he gets so scared he pukes!’

‘Maitland!’ said Carole, the fourth member of their team. ‘Be nice.’

Mona appeared with a handful of plastic bags which she spread out on the floor next to Bernard’s desk.

‘Thank God.’ He dropped the vest, delighted to offload it. ‘I was puked *upon*, actually.’

‘By your Defaulter?’ asked Carole.

‘No. Some guy that was at the house when we went looking for her.’

‘Did you bring him in?’

‘No.’ Maitland looked sceptical, and Bernard felt immediately defensive. ‘We had no grounds to. He denied all knowledge of knowing any Alessandra Barr.

His Green Card checked out OK, and Police Scotland weren't looking for him for anything.'

'Where's the Guv?' asked Mona.

'In his office.' In one corner of the main room an MDF structure created an internal office for their team leader, John Paterson. This gave their boss a private, although not very soundproofed space, particularly as Paterson was seldom given to communicating in anything less than a bark.

'In his office *with the door shut?*'

'I know!' said Carole. 'It's not like him at all.' Their team leader valued the two-way communication afforded to him by an open door. He could yell at his staff without having to get up, and could eavesdrop on their conversations with minimal effort.

Maitland took up the story. 'He was fine first thing, then about nine thirty he shut the door and we've not seen him since. We didn't hear him taking any phone calls, so we reckon it must have been an e-mail that's upset him.'

'Trouble, do you think?' Mona looked thoughtful. 'I wonder if we should tell him that we're back?'

'Tell him about Bernard puking on himself.' Maitland chuckled. 'That'll cheer him up.'

'I did not puke. It was ...' he tailed off as Paterson flung open the door to his office.

'Maitland, I need you in here.'

'Just me?' asked Maitland, surprised.

'Yup.' Paterson wasn't catching anyone's eye. There was a slight shiftiness about his manner. In anyone else Bernard would have said he detected an air of embarrassment, but he couldn't conceive of an issue that would provoke that kind of emotion in his rhino-hided boss.

Maitland's usual smugness had been replaced by an expression of mild alarm. 'Just me? Am I in trouble?'

'It's, well, it's a ... sensitive issue.'

'So, he *is* in trouble?' asked Bernard, hopefully.

Paterson sighed. 'I might as well tell you all as I'll need to speak to you as part of the investigation.'

'Investigation?' Maitland imbued the word with all the horror he could muster. Bernard suspected that the tone was justified. Investigations ended careers, halting promotion prospects in their tracks. Even if they got the all-clear, chances were some mud stuck. Investigations were bad news, and Bernard couldn't be happier that Maitland was in the middle of one, although he was racking his brains to work out what his colleague could have done.

'There's been a complaint about Maitland's behaviour on the Weber and Greenwood cases a couple of months back.'

Maitland's jaw dropped. 'But it was Bernard and Mona that arsed that up.'

'I don't disagree.'

Bernard glanced at Mona. There was a tiny flicker of hurt on her face which quickly disappeared. She turned back to her computer, he suspected to avoid catching his eye.

He was inclined to agree with Maitland, himself. Colette Greenwood, a divinity student, and Heidi Weber, the daughter of a German MP, had both been Defaulters. They'd been young, pretty and totally in thrall to a religious cult with a dangerous interest in prophylactic drugs. Mona and Bernard had messed the case up, and Heidi had been found dead. It was only the desire of the German government not to have any further light shone

on the case that had let them keep their jobs. Bernard was pretty sure that Paterson had been engaged on some wheeling-dealing on their behalf, but whatever had gone on behind the scenes, the end result seemed to have caused irreparable damage to the Guv and Mona's relationship. He couldn't honestly remember a civil word passing between the two of them in the past couple of months.

'Anyway, Maitland, as I said it's sensitive so in my office, now.'

He still didn't move. 'If this is an investigation, am I not entitled to have someone with me?'

Paterson considered this. From the look of indecision on his face Bernard deduced his boss was not as familiar as he should be with the staffing information that all the HET team members had been given as part of their Induction Guide. He, on the other hand, had taken the precaution of memorising several essential nuggets, in case he was ever subject to a grievance, disciplinary or any other deeply unpleasant HR procedure. He swithered for a second, then opened his mouth.

'Under Section 73 of the staff handbook you're entitled to be accompanied by a union rep ...'

Maitland's expression remained in panic mode. 'I'm not in the union.'

'Or another member of staff.'

Carole laughed. 'Oh, Maitland. If only you knew a staff member with an encyclopaedic knowledge of rules and regulations who could help you out.'

He turned to him. 'Bernard ...?'

'Right,' said Paterson, turning on his heel. 'Can you and Perry Mason there finally get in here?'

'I didn't say I'd do it,' said Bernard to his boss's retreating back.

‘Come on, don’t be a dick.’ Maitland bounded over to Bernard’s desk, nearly tripping over the desecrated vest in his haste.

‘No, sorry.’ He pressed his computer’s on button. ‘Not doing anything for that kind of attitude.’

‘OK, I apologise.’ He crouched down and lowered his voice. ‘Please help me out here, mate.’

‘Going to have to be considerably more begging than that.’

‘OK.’ He stood back up, and sighed. ‘If you do this, I’ll owe you one.’

‘A favour to be redeemed from Maitland?’ He considered the offer for a moment. ‘That’s worth having. OK, I’m in.’

They trooped into Paterson’s office. He didn’t look up, seemingly entranced by the documents spread in front of him.

‘So, a complaint has been made that you, Maitland, were, ehm ...’ there was some rearranging of the papers on Paterson’s desk, ‘...em, having sexual relations with one of the witnesses on the Greenwood case.’

Maitland’s face contorted. ‘This is bloody Emma, isn’t it? My ex?’

‘All complainants are given anonymity during the investigation.’

‘It is her though, isn’t it?’

Paterson shrugged, which Maitland took as a yes. ‘Not bad enough that she dumps me, she also has to make trouble.’

‘Speaking as a divorcé, making trouble for the errant male does seem to feature pretty highly on a scorned woman’s to-do list. I could have been sacked three times over if people had believed everything my first wife said

about me when I left her, so I'm not unsympathetic.'

'Ehm, anonymity, Mr Paterson?' said Bernard.

'Not that I'm confirming it was your ex. Anyway, so, you *weren't* sleeping with,' he checked the name, 'Kate Wilson during the investigation?'

Bernard laughed, incurring glares from both Maitland and Paterson. Usually his team leader's wrath would be enough to swiftly rid him of any feelings of happiness, but this was just too good. He doubled over and chortled.

'Something funny?'

'Well, firstly, Mr Paterson,' he fought to get his breathing under control, 'Kate is a Christian of the variety that doesn't believe in sex before marriage, and secondly, she's a good-looking woman with more sense than to look at Maitland.'

His colleague glowered at him, before his features morphed into an expression closer to coyness. 'Actually ...'

Silence filled the office.

'Actually, what?' asked Paterson.

'We're dating.'

Paterson slumped back in his chair. 'There are boundaries, Maitland ...'

'But it started after the investigation ended!'

'OK.' He thought for a second. 'That's a very relevant point. And you're not ...' Paterson made a vague gesture with his hand. Bernard could contain himself no longer and started to giggle again.

Maitland elbowed him in the ribs. 'No.'

'So, just to clarify, Bernard, did you notice any inappropriate behaviour of a sexual nature by Maitland toward anyone involved in the Greenwood case?'

'Just his usual level of inappropriate sexual innuendo.'

And some misplaced homophobia in my direction.'

'I'll put that as a no, then. Mona! Carole!' They appeared suspiciously quickly at the door. 'Did you notice any inappropriate behaviour of a sexual nature by Maitland toward anyone involved in the Greenwood case?'

'Like what, Mr Paterson?' asked Carole.

'If you have to ask, Carole, I'm going to take that as a "no".'

'Mona?'

She grinned. 'No, Guv.'

Paterson continued scribbling on his notes. 'OK, as far as I'm concerned that's the investigation concluded, bar submitting the paperwork.' He pointed at the door. 'Now, out of my office.'

'I expect you want to know what all that was about?' asked Bernard, pulling the door shut behind him.

'No. We could hear pretty much every word,' said Mona, grinning. 'I particularly liked the bit about Maitland having a new girlfriend but not getting laid.'

'Same as Bernard, then, except for the girlfriend bit.' The colour was returning to Maitland's cheeks. 'Anyway, doesn't anyone have work to do, people to find, etc., etc.?"

'Not sure we're quite finished taking the piss, but it'll keep.'