

Tracing the Evidence

“I shouldn’t be late,” Michael reassured her, “Unless something crops up.”

Clare leaned forwards and lifted her face to his kiss. “Good-bye,” she said. She wasn’t too optimistic; there often seemed to be an accident or an emergency right at the end of his shift these days, and, as a paramedic, he could hardly walk away if he was needed.

It was Saturday, and apart from a few batches of marking, Clare had no work to keep her mind from her worries. She waved Michael off and tidied up the breakfast things, but she didn’t fancy either getting on with the housework or trying to decipher the homework and essays she was due to hand back on Monday.

She found herself staring out of the window, wondering how she had ever expected to keep a catch like Michael. She was nothing special to look at, and she was a dull geography teacher, while he was a charismatic hunk who saved people’s lives. Nevertheless, he had chosen to marry her, and she thought they had been happy, these last four years. It was a double blow, that she now feared she was losing him to her own cousin.

Actually, she told herself, that’s exactly what she should have expected. Her mother and her aunt had been close, so when they were children Clare and Nerissa had spent a great deal of time in each other’s company. Although Nerissa was a year younger, she was cuter, more charming, and more sociable than awkward, plain Clare, so Clare had watched her cousin melting the hearts of all the adults they met.

As Nerissa grew, her acquisitive nature became more obvious: what Nerissa wanted, Nerissa got, and generally speaking, she wanted whatever Clare had. Favourite toys, rides in the front of an uncle’s car, captaincy of the school netball team, and eventually boyfriends; Clare had watched helplessly as Nerissa appropriated them one by one. Why was she now

surprised, that Nerissa had decided she wanted Michael, and how was any man to resist her charms?

With a muttered exclamation, Clare grabbed her car keys from the table in the hall and dashed out of the house. She would confront Nerissa; she couldn't give up her husband without a fight!

As she drove towards Nerissa's house in the estate to the south of town, she reviewed what she would say. Nerissa would be sure to deny having an affair with Michael, but Clare had several times smelled Nerissa's perfume on his clothes when he returned late from work, claiming a car accident or an old lady falling downstairs had delayed him. He had also been a little secretive recently, and his thoughts often seemed to be elsewhere, though that hardly indicated who he was interested in. But only on Wednesday, they had bumped into Nerissa at a mutual friend's house, and Clare had seen how her cousin's face assumed a suddenly blank expression when her eyes met Michael's, and it had been clear that she, too, had something to hide.

As Clare approached Nerissa's house, she was horrified to see Michael's car outside. In spite of having convinced herself that the two of them were having an affair, this sudden proof shocked Clare; she must, somehow, have been hoping she was wrong. She drove slowly past the house, then parked the car in a side road out of sight.

After locking it, she walked slowly back, stopping on a corner where she could see Michael's car, but where she would be able to duck into an unruly shrubbery if he drove this way. She could see the number-plate; there was not the slightest doubt that it was his car.

Although the driver's door was not visible, after a while she saw the car start to move, approaching her slowly. She hid among the plants, but peeped through the leaves and watched her husband's profile pass by.

As she waited for him to be safely round the corner, anger overtook her. How dare her cousin do this? Coveting Clare's cuddly toy dog, sliding Clare's pretty new notebook out of her shopping bag, kissing Toby from the sports club when Clare had told her she was seeing him; all that had been unkind, unfriendly even, but seducing her husband really was the height of disloyalty. Clare marched towards Nerissa's house, determined to have it out with her.

Nerissa's neighbour had a silly Japanese water feature right on the edge of his garden, by the pavement, and somehow Clare found herself picking up one of the smooth, flat stones over which the water tumbled. As she entered Nerissa's drive, she saw her cousin emptying a wastepaper basket into the recycling bin.

"How dare you!" she exclaimed, striding over to join her.

"Hello, Clare," came the mild reply. "What have you got your knickers in a twist about now?"

"I know what you're up to! Keep away from Michael, you hear me? He's my husband, and you're to leave him alone."

Nerissa's eyes narrowed. "Oh, really, Clare! You're welcome to him. He's not my type at all."

"Don't you lie to me! I know what's going on, and I won't have it, do you hear?"

"Oh, come on, darling! You don't honestly think I'd want anyone who'd settled for you, do you?" Her cool gaze ran up and down over Clare's houseworking clothes and clean but unadorned face, and Clare in return registered that Nerissa was impeccably dressed and made up, as always. "I expect my men to have better taste."

Clare could think of no satisfactory answer to this, and found her arm swinging around to slap Nerissa. Unfortunately, it was the hand that was holding the stone she had picked up, and it made a sickening crunching noise as it connected with Nerissa's temple.

Nerissa's eyes widened, and then she fell heavily to the ground. Her stare became glassy, and her features slackened. Clare tried to find a pulse, without success. Remembering something seen on a television drama, she took her make-up mirror from her bag and held it to Nerissa's face. No mist of breath disturbed it; Clare had killed her cousin.

What to do? She could call the police, or an ambulance, but how to explain that she had not intended to hurt Nerissa, merely to slap her? She couldn't even understand why she had picked up the stone; how could she explain it satisfactorily to a suspicious authority?

Making up her mind quickly, she took out the plastic carrier bag that she kept in her handbag in case of an impromptu purchase, dropped the stone into it, and wrapped it up. Placing it back in her handbag, she walked briskly from the garden and along the street, keeping her head lowered. When she got into her car, she had to wait a few minutes before driving home; her trembling hand would not obey her command to put the key in the ignition.

She had the presence of mind to stop by the bridge over the river on her way, to tip the stone out so it would sink to join a number of other smooth, water-washed fellows, and to screw up the carrier bag and place it in a dog-bag bin. Once home, she sat unseeing at the kitchen table for a while before pulling herself together, having a shower, and putting all the clothes she had been wearing, clean though they looked, in the washing machine.

She wondered what she should do next. Having not called the police, she supposed she had decided to try to avoid being found out. In that case, it would be better to act as normally as possible. But what was normal? How did someone who had not just killed their cousin behave? She shook her head, impatient with such unhelpful thoughts; Michael would be

home around five, unless a late call-out delayed him, and on a Saturday she would usually have spent the morning on housework and the afternoon preparing for school. Although it was nearly noon already, she decided she had better blitz through the cleaning; after all, Michael might notice if the hoovering hadn't been done or the bathroom taps weren't shiny, but he would have no way of knowing how much or how little marking she had done.

When she heard his key in the front door she was ready; ready to pretend, to show mild interest in his day, and to detail the minutiae of hers. As long as he behaved as he always did, she thought she could pretend to be normal, too.

However, instead of going upstairs, to wash and change before greeting her, he came straight into the kitchen, where she was chopping vegetables. Instead of a quick smile and an immediate launch into the petty frustrations of working alongside an ambulance driver with a very different outlook on life, he came over to her, a serious expression on his face, and hugged her.

Holding her at arms' length, he then gazed into her eyes. "Put down the knife, Clare," he said quietly, "And sit down. I've something to say to you."

She did as she was told, mystified, and not a little frightened; how was she to pretend she wasn't a killer if he wasn't giving her the right cues? Was he going to tell her he was leaving her? Had she acted too late?

He took a chair close to hers, and held her hand. "I know I haven't been a very good husband lately. The job's been getting on top of me, especially since I've been partnered with Paul. And because I haven't wanted to come home in a foul mood, I've been driving around or going for a walk after work, so I've been late home rather a lot. Even when I'm here, I realise I haven't been very present sometimes. I can't promise I'm going to change; I still hate working with Paul, and I still get irritated, and I've never really been the lovey-dovey

attentive sort anyway. But I did want you to know that I do love you, very much, and that it's nothing to do with you, the way I've been recently."

"Yes, I'd noticed that you've been rather off-hand." Clare's thoughts were racing. Did this mean he hadn't been having an affair after all? No, she told herself; she was sure that none of his colleagues wore Nerissa's very expensive perfume to work, and anyway, she had seen him that morning with her own eyes, at Nerissa's house when he was supposed to be in his ambulance. Still, it was handsome of him to tell her he loved her, and to take the blame for what was wrong between them, even if it was a bit of a charade. She decided not to challenge him. "Thank you for explaining, Mike." She got up, and went to resume her preparations for dinner.

"Wait, there's more!" he exclaimed. "I got you a present, to show you how much I love you." He popped out into the hall, and returned almost immediately with a large, flat, cardboard box. He placed it on the table in front of her.

She took off the lid, revealing a layer of tissue paper, which she removed carefully. It was a dress, an evening gown, in just the perfect shade of aquamarine to bring out the unusual colour of her eyes, her best feature. She held it up and examined it; it looked expensive, and she rather thought it would fit her perfectly. She looked up at Michael wordlessly, conflicting emotions racing through her mind. "That's not all," he prompted her.

Under more tissue paper, there was a soft bag containing a pair of evening shoes, in the same colour as the dress, and in a style and size that would, she was sure, suit her admirably. Beside this, she found a matching clutch bag.

"It's lovely," she said at length. "It's all lovely. Perfect, in fact." A thought occurred to her, and a slight frown creased her brow. "But, Mike; how did you know? You're a lovely

man, but – well, how did you manage to choose such a beautiful, suitable outfit? In the right colour, and the right size?”

“Ah, well, I have to admit that’s not down to me. I went to see Nerissa, about a month ago, to ask for her help. She said she could guess your size, and she’s good at choosing clothes – even I can see that! Besides, she’s known you all her life; I thought she’d have a good idea of the sort of thing you like. She got several dresses on spec, and I went and chose one, and then she got a few pairs of shoes and some bags for me to look at. Once we’d fixed on an outfit, she took the rest back, and I went to pick these up from her this morning on my way to work.”

He looked very pleased with himself, but Clare was horrified. That explained Nerissa’s perfume lingering on his clothes, and his car being outside her house. “I must go upstairs,” she managed to say, rather abruptly.

“Sure! You’ll want to try it all on straight away. Come down in the dress; I’d like to see how it looks on you. I’ll finish that.” He picked up the paring knife, and continued where she had left off.

She bundled it all back into the box, and hurried up to their room. Poor Nerissa! It was true that she hadn’t been a very nice person, but she certainly hadn’t deserved to die, simply because she had a caustic tongue and an acquisitive nature. How was Clare to keep up the pretence now? It was one thing to justify to herself lashing out in anger at a woman who had betrayed her; if Nerissa was merely being her usual somewhat unpleasant self, and had moreover helped Michael choose an outfit for her, perhaps Clare ought to admit what she had done and take the consequences.

After some minutes, her thoughts jumbling ever more chaotically in her head, she took herself in hand. If she went on sitting here on the bed, Michael would realise something was

odd, and she might have no choices left. She should at least keep up the pretence until she was sure she wanted to come clean. She shrugged off her jeans and top and, without bothering with stockings or a suitable bra for the dress, she quickly put on the new outfit, shoes and all. As she clattered down the stairs, she heard voices in the sitting-room.

Puzzled, she opened the door. Michael barely glanced up at her. “Good evening, Mrs Williams,” one of the two strangers sitting on the sofa began. “We’re police officers. Would you come and sit down, please?” They weren’t wearing uniform; Clare assumed they must be detectives. “I’m sorry to have to inform you that we were called to the house of your cousin, Nerissa Carter, this morning. I’m afraid she was dead.”

Earlier, she had imagined how she needed to react upon hearing the news, but her emotions overtook her rehearsals; poor Nerissa, killed for nothing, heartlessly murdered for daring to help Michael choose a present for her! Her hand flew up to her mouth, and real tears sprang from her eyes. “Oh no! Poor Nerissa! But she’s younger than me!”

“Yes; I’m afraid it wasn’t a natural death,” the policeman went on. “And I’m sorry to say that we have more bad news for you. We’ve just cautioned your husband; we’re arresting him for killing her.”

“Oh, but that can’t be right. Michael wouldn’t ... no, it wasn’t him ...”

She was about to confess, but the detective interrupted her. “His car was outside her house this morning, at about the time she was killed. And a neighbour has identified him from his ambulance service photo, as the man that almost bumped into her this morning, carrying a large box.”

“Yes; he was collecting this dress. It’s a present, and Nerissa helped him choose it. There wasn’t anything wrong with him being there earlier, I do assure you; he wasn’t there to murder her!”

“Maybe not. I’m not saying it was premeditated. But he certainly wasn’t there just to collect your dress. I hadn’t wanted to say this, not when you’ve just had such a shock. But we’re pretty sure we’ve got the right person. You see, we found your husband’s fresh DNA on Nerissa’s sheets.”