

PROLOGUE

The young woman had been standing outside the cinema for at least twenty minutes before she finally decided to go in. She had arrived shortly after 6.30pm and had spent part of the time staring up at the art deco turret of the ABC cinema with its pierced panels and stone spread-eagle wings. She was dressed in a plain, black skirt, a grubby brown coat and a cheap white t-shirt. Her hair was also plain, cut to the shoulders in a severe Mary Quant style and her plump young face, peppered with acne, was distorted by harsh black eye liner, so inexpertly applied.

For some while she paced up and down on the opposite side of Whiteladies Road, swinging her white plastic handbag nervously, watching the crowd as they filtered in to the cinema. It was the usual mixture for a Friday evening: a handful of impoverished looking students from Bristol University, a few young, well heeled nouveaux riche types from Clifton, one or two hippies and a smattering of aged pensioners.

She watched each one climb the steps and enter the foyer as the traffic rumbled past her in the direction of the Downs. She seemed ill at ease and at one stage appeared to be holding a long, anguished conversation with herself.

At one point a group of youths emerged from the public house just down from the cinema. One of them sent a loud wolf whistle in her direction, but she did not seem to acknowledge or even hear the raucous challenge. Her dark eyes were fixed on one of the later arrivals: a tall, elegantly dressed woman. She wore a long, white, belted mac with a black beret. Her hair was sleek and well cut, accentuating her smooth, sallow skin and high cheek bones and her striking appearance had already attracted the attention of several men as she made her way down towards the cinema. Climbing the steps she stopped and brought out a packet of Gauloise cigarettes and lit one. For a moment she glanced across at the girl on the other side of the road as if she might have recognised her, then threw the cigarette into the road and entered the foyer.

As soon as she had disappeared from view, the girl crossed the road, looking agitatedly from left to right. Before she entered the foyer, she glanced up at the hoarding which bore the legend: "Yeux sans visage: X cert." A grainy, black and white poster showed a young woman peering up at a bespectacled, bearded man who hovered over her, his left hand holding a surgeon's scalpel.

She hurried inside, afraid she would lose sight of her. Close up she was surprised to see how much the woman resembled her own mother. She was about the same height and had the same poise and elegance of the dancer. As the woman collected her ticket, the girl was sure she heard a French accent. She slipped into the dark auditorium, keeping close behind her, following the flickering torchlight to the balcony where, squeezing herself in between two courting couples, she sat down. The woman was directly in front of her now.

The commercials began but the girl was oblivious to them. The woman had removed her beret and her dark hair glistened in the light. She was wearing a subtle perfume, Christian Dior maybe. The girl resisted the temptation to reach forward and touch the thin silk blouse. She was envious of her beauty and style.

It wasn't long before that familiar panic began to set in. She hated confined spaces and the feelings of claustrophobia almost overcame her. Normally she would avoid crowds and coming to the cinema was a test of her courage and resolve. Strictly speaking she shouldn't be here. She would never normally allow herself to take this risk. But this was different. It was one of her quests. If she had not happened to see the woman she would be at home, looking at her collection. It was no coincidence that the woman had appeared when she did. It was not the first time it had happened. Six months ago, the woman on the bus had presented similar difficulties. She had tracked her right out to the edge of Leigh Woods. She had lived in one of those large mansions on the edge of dense woodland. She had followed her right up to the driveway and been seen by several passers by who might have been able to identify her. The woman had even turned round at one point and had looked straight at her. She had caught up with her in the end, about fifty yards from the house. She had decided she would do it right there and had already reached into her bag for the knife when the front door opened and a man had appeared in the porch. He'd looked straight past the woman and shouted a challenge. The girl had fled, frustrated.

The film lasted for about an hour and a half. She hadn't paid much attention to it. From what she could make out, it concerned a young woman who'd gone to a clinic to have cosmetic surgery but soon discovered that the surgeon was experimenting on women to transplant their faces. Maybe that was the gist of it, she couldn't be sure.

When the film finally ended, the French woman stood and beat a brisk retreat towards the exit. She followed immediately, trying to match her pace, determined not to lose her. Outside the woman found a gap in the traffic and crossed to the other side, with swift athletic steps. When she reached the Clifton Down railway station, she turned right down Imperial Road, then was momentarily lost from sight behind tall beech trees. The girl was breathing fast now, fearful of losing her quarry. She was about fifty yards behind her and the woman had still not noticed she was being followed, she was sure of that.

They were heading for the tall Victorian villas of Redland. Ahead of them was a small area of parkland, adjacent to a church. The girl quickened her pace, she knew now this might be her only chance. As the woman entered the park she came to the entrance of a narrow alleyway. It had to be here, this was the spot. It was perfect. She glanced round, the park was deserted. She closed on the figure ahead of her and called out. Turning in surprise, the woman smiled and waited for her. The girl asked for the time, her hand gripping the handle of the knife in her pocket. As the woman glanced down at her watch, the girl stepped closer, plunging the knife into the side of the woman's throat. The woman recoiled, staggered, then sank to her knees. The girl scrambled for the duck tape in her pocket, glancing fearfully around in case she should be discovered. The tearing sound of the tape seemed to echo in the silent park and she wound it tightly round the woman's mouth brutally. The woman's terrified eyes were all she could see. She stabbed her again, once in the chest and then in the back and began dragging her by the legs into the alleyway.

The body was heavier than she thought but the adrenaline gave her the strength she needed. She was out of sight now, level with a delapidated garden gate. She kicked it open, pulling the body through the gap. She was standing in the grounds of a large mansion. It was large and overgrown, the house being hidden from sight by tall oak trees. On her right stood a squat,

brick built structure. She pushed her way through long grass and came level with the entrance. It was an ice house. She had seen one before . The gate was secured by a rusty chain but when she examined it she found the padlock was broken. She wrenched at the chain and within seconds had pulled back the rusty gate.

She stepped into the dark, cool interior, welcoming the safety of the dark, feeling the air on her face. She stood in the silence, her heart slowing, remembering what it had been like as a child when she had been locked in the dark, how she had screamed in fear, beating her fists against the door, calling her mother's name. No one had come. No one had answered her screams. And so in the dark she had learned to love the silence.

She was pulling the legs with all her might. The long grass resisted, snagging at the woman's mac and her underclothes, making her appear like some dishevelled scarecrow. The girl seemed to possess supernatural strength. With a final heave the body slid onto the brick floor. She stood up, brushed the grass from her clothes, then stood staring at the lifeless shape in the gloom. She felt empowered now. She was no longer the ugly, acned child. The child that no one ever noticed except for a drunken yob shouting from the street. How the roles were reversed. Stepping closer, she reached into the pocket of the woman's mac and pulled out a small brown wallet, which she slipped into her bag. Then, delivering one last vicious kick, she closed the gate behind her, and walked through the garden and back into the alleyway.

She glanced down at her coat where a series of crimson splashes bore testimony to her grim butchery. It was always the way with the jugular vein. Spotting a builder's skip at the corner of Trelawney Road, she removed the coat and pushed it out of sight between a set of broken chairs and a stained mattress. She looked round but the street was deserted save for a down at heel old man who looked as if he had been at the bottle all day. Smiling, she walked rapidly, past the gates of the Grammar School, her mind still immersed in the cool darkness of the ice house, thinking of its pale resident, newly acquired. She felt an enormous sense of satisfaction and pride.

She glanced up at the darkening sky. It had been a perfect day. Tonight she would treat herself to some fish and chips and a bottle of cider, and no one would be the wiser.