

PETER MAY

A SILENT DEATH

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riverrun

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PROLOGUE

He has not the least idea as he turns off the lights, that what he is about to do will lead to the spilling of blood on this warm May evening. And, ultimately, to death. Innocence is so often the precursor to calamity.

It is the moon that first catches his eye. A gibbous moon, lifting from the black of the Mediterranean to cast its reflection on a surface like smoked glass. He could not have said whether it was waning or waxing. The weather in the last week has been uncharacteristically overcast, and it seems like an age since he last stood on his terrace gazing up at a firmament fighting to make itself evident beyond the light pollution of this congested Andalusian coastline. But those clouds have dropped their tears on arid soil and moved on, green shoots of renewal rising almost immediately in their wake.

The heat has resumed. With the promise of a return to the daily ritual of endless sun. Why else would they call it the Costa del Sol? It is a prospect that stretches off towards summer, and the distant autumn, unpunctuated for the most part by rainfall. A fierce angry heat reaching its crescendo as

the tourists arrive en masse to spoil the beaches, turning white skin red, then brown, whilst locals move among the shadows cast by tall buildings in narrow streets, sleeping in the heat of the day, eating in the cool of the evening.

It is fresh now in this midnight hour, the faintest of sea breezes rattling palm leaves in the garden beyond the pool, the *chirr* of cicadas pervading the night air. And it isn't until he flicks a switch to extinguish underwater lighting that he notices a glow beyond the wall, where he expects the neighbouring villa to simmer in darkness. Light spills across the terrace from sliding glass doors casting the long shadows of pool loungers across terracotta tiles.

He tenses as a silhouette moves in the open-plan living space beyond the glass and momentarily passes through the light. His heart rate increases. A pulsing in his head as his blood pressure soars, and he imagines his doctor's disapproval. Has he not been taking the diuretics prescribed? A man of his age must be careful.

His mouth is dry. He recalls the handful of occasions he has sat with Ian on the terrace opposite sipping Harris gin, large chunks of ice jostling for space in his glass with the grapefruit. A nice young man. Scottish. But an educated accent, a pleasant lilt. And not so young, perhaps. But then, when you have reached your seventh decade everyone else seems young. He has never really thought about what age Ian might be. Forty? It is so hard to tell these days. But there is little grey in his hair. His body is lean and fit and evenly tanned. How

he wishes he were Ian's age again. Even though he knows he never looked quite that good when he was.

He recalls the cheery wave of his neighbour only that morning, calling across the wall that separates their gardens. He and Angela would be gone for a few days. A spring holiday. Barcelona. And a night or two in Sitges.

Really? A holiday? When you live in a place like this who needs holidays? And he thinks back briefly to the years he spent working in the City. The daily commute through the dark of cold English mornings, to sit in a steamy office, eyes fixed on scrolling screens, watching the rise and fall of financial charts like the swell of an ocean after the storm. It's the one thing he and Ian have in common. Their single topic of conversation before they run out of it and lift drinks to lips to fill the silence with the rattle of ice against glass.

Now there is someone in Ian's house, and there shouldn't be. He thinks about walking down through the garden in order to get a better look. But what if the intruder sees him? If only he knew Ian's mobile number he would call and ask him what to do. But they have never swapped numbers. Why would they?

For a frozen moment he stands on his terrace and wonders why the alarm has not gone off. Then once again a shadow passes through the light. Quite brazenly. And he turns quickly and heads inside to find his phone.

There are three officers on duty in the squad room when the call is picked up by the duty officer at the desk. He thinks

that Cristina has been watching him through the glass before averting her eyes when he looks up. He has always thought that women find him attractive. Even though he is long past his sell-by, and a succession of relationships have invariably broken down when the women have got to know him.

In truth, Cristina had been looking at her own reflection, and might have been surprised had she jumped focus to see him watching her with appraisal. For she has just been thinking how old and frayed she looks. Now in her thirtieth year, middle age is only a decade away, and already there are shadows beneath her eyes, crow's feet at their outer extremities. With her hair pulled back severely in its habitual pony tail, black roots are showing and she regrets ever having opted to dye it blond. Too much maintenance. And soon, she supposes, those roots will start to grey. At least she still has her figure, even after childbirth. She remains slight, petite. Her male colleagues tower over her – even the smallest of them. She looks away just as the duty officer speaks.

‘Suspected break-in. Out at La Paloma.’

Diego's eyes flicker up from his card game. From the cant of his head and the appeal in the faintest arching of his eyebrows, she knows that he wants her to go with Matías in his stead. Just thirty minutes until the end of his shift, a wife at home with a new and fractious baby awaiting his return, exhausted from giving birth only days before, and desperate for sleep.

Cristina sighs. She knows very well that her job here in this men's club simply pays lip service to the requirement for

quotas. And to the need for a policewoman to conduct the body searches of female suspects. She will never, by choice of her superiors, be entrusted with much more than traffic duty. Although she has graduated with distinction from the police academy at Àvila. Even though she is consistently the best shot at target practice in Estepona. But if Diego goes out with Matías he likely won't be home for hours. Even if it's a false alarm the paperwork will take forever.

'Okay,' she says, unaware in this counter-serendipitous moment that her act of generosity will ruin her life.

The streets of Marviña are deserted as the white Nissan four-by-four with its rack of blue and white and orange lights on the roof pulls out from the underground car park beneath the offices of the Policía Local. Matías is at the wheel, guiding them towards the roundabout at the top of the hill, through the pools of darkness that lie between the feeble lights of street lamps. From here, moonlight washes across the acres of vineyards, newly in leaf, that fall away across undulating fields towards the distant shimmer of the sea. Ugly urbanizations cluster darkly on once virgin hillsides, some abandoned, completed but uninhabited, victims of the financial crash that brought an end to the building boom that once swept this coastline. Above them the Sierra Bermeja mountains cut sharp shadows against a starry night sky. Below, the lights of Santa Ana de las Vides twinkle around the curve of the bay.

Matías drives at speed around the perilous bends of the road

that descends to the sea, past the gathering of brick-red apartments that sit above the father-and-son fruit and veg store on the hairpin, and the jumble of white houses that nestle among the folds of the hill away to their left. It takes less than fifteen minutes heading west on the A7 to reach the roundabout from which the road climbs steeply into La Paloma, where wealthy northern Europeans, and more recently Russians, have built multi-million-euro villas with spectacular sea views.

The villa at the address on the call sheet is registered as belonging to the British expat Ian Templeton. It sits proud above a sheer rock face that drops 17 metres to the road below, and has an unbroken view across the Mediterranean to where the mountains of North Africa are darkly visible on clear winter mornings. To the south, the Rock of Gibraltar dominates the skyline, rising into the moonlight, its silvered face tracing a towering outline against the stars.

A light burns in the neighbouring property. The villa belonging to the caller who reported the break-in. But Matías and Cristina are pre-empted from making him their first port of call by the fact that the gates of Templeton's villa stand half-open. Tall black-painted wrought-iron gates. A Mercedes A-Class saloon car sits pulled up half on to the pavement outside. If asked, Cristina could not have said what it was about the gates that struck a discordant note. But when they pull up to take a look, Matías jumps out of the SUV and finds that they have been forced.

He slashes a finger from left to right across his throat and

she reaches over to turn the key in the ignition and kill the motor. The silence that follows is quickly invaded by the creak of cicadas. She slips out of the vehicle to join him at the gate. A glance through the window of the parked Mercedes reveals a wheel brace lying on the passenger seat. Neither stops to consider the obvious: that few burglars drive Mercedes A-Class sedans.

Matías unclips his holster to draw his standard-issue 9mm SIG-Sauer SIG Pro pistol. Cristina's mouth is dry as she follows suit. The gun feels familiar in her hand, but somehow heavier than during target practice. Fear lends it weight. She has never fired it in anger. Has never expected to.

Matías steps through the gate on to a driveway of crazy paving that wends its way through tall palms and a profusion of flowering shrubs. Cristina moves carefully in his wake, the barrel of her pistol pointed toward the night sky, her elbow drawn in at her side. She breathes in a heady fragrance that lingers in the warm air, and identifies it as jasmine. Off to their left a double garage is attached to the house, and a path leads around it towards the front garden where hectares of paved terrace overlook a shimmering infinity pool. Ahead, steps lead up to a porticoed porch, and a large studded front door lies ajar. The faint glow of yellow light suffuses the stillness beyond. Matías waves Cristina around the far side of the house, off to their right, while he heads in the other direction towards the pool. He hopes to catch a glimpse of the intruders through the glass doors that open on to the terrace. Better to

establish what or who they are dealing with before entering the property.

Cristina reaches the far side of the terrace. Slabs of light fall across the paving stones towards the pool. She moves cautiously around its perimeter to steal a look inside. A sprawling split-level room is illuminated by lighting concealed around the ceiling. There are large, soft armchairs and a settee, an enormous, luxuriant white rug spread across a marble floor. An eclectic display of modern artwork breaks the monotony of shadowed white walls. But the room is empty, with the hallway beyond it mired in gloom.

Her eye catches a movement on the far side of the terrace and she sees Matías lurching forward as he stumbles on something unseen in the darkness. There is a resounding clatter, and then the sound of his SIG-Sauer skidding away across the paving stones. Cristina's heart fills her throat and pushes up into her mouth.

Inside, the man who calls himself Ian Templeton is emerging from a bedroom converted to a home office when the clatter from the terrace outside brings him to a dead stop. He has several folders in his hand. He stands completely still, heart pounding, as if someone inside were trying to punch their way out. Turning back into the office he crosses to the desk and extinguishes the desk lamp. He lays his folders on its polished surface and quickly opens a drawer to remove a Glock 17 semi-automatic pistol. A window on one side gives on to

the garden and he moves towards it, pressing himself against the wall before daring to turn and peer out into the darkness.

By the light that spills across the terrace from the living room he sees a figure moving among the shadows, heading towards a copse of dark palms. A strange, loping run. He spins away again from the window. His face stretched taut with tension, and he presses himself once more into the wall. He has always known this might happen. That one day they could find him. That someday they would come for him. And he has always known that he would not go down without a fight. That he would rather die than let them take him.

But still, he is very nearly overcome by regret. Just a few short years ago he had lived his life without fear. When death means nothing, fear has no traction. But now . . . Now he has everything to live for, everything to lose. Undreamed-of happiness. How could he ever have known that such a thing was possible?

He wonders if he should alert her. She went to the bedroom. But he decides it will be safer for her if she does not know. She will hear the shots, of course. But by then it will all be over. And they have no reason to hurt her. She is the one innocent in all this.

He can feel sweat moistening his palm as it grips his gun more tightly. And he slips quietly into the hall, past the master bedroom, to switch off the lights in the living room. The house and garden are plunged into darkness, and beyond the shimmer of moonlight on the surface of the pool he sees silver

coruscations on the black lacquered surface of the Med. He starts cautiously back along the hall towards the open front door where a narrow shaft of light from the street falls across the tiles.

Outside, Cristina is retracing her footsteps to the back of the villa where they entered from the street. She expects to encounter Matías circling around to meet her. No reason for stealth any more. Whoever is inside knows they are there. But there is no sign of him. She runs her tongue lightly across dry lips and climbs the steps one by one to the portico. The door still lies ajar, and she sees her shadow from the streetlights stretching into the hallway beyond, announcing her presence to whoever might be waiting there. Where in God's name is Matías?

She hesitates by the door, paralysed by her own fear, becoming acutely aware of a presence just beyond her line of sight. Nothing in her training or years of service has prepared her for this. She glances towards the garage, willing Matías to appear, but still there is no sign of him. Then she hears the sound of soft footfalls on marble from within, and knows that she must take the initiative.

'Police!' she calls out, and her voice sounds both feeble and inordinately loud at the same time. The echo of it propels her forward. Swinging her pistol level with her shoulder in a two-handed shooting stance. She pivots through the open door to point her weapon straight into the dark.

He sees her in silhouette. An easy target, even if he were not a crack shot. His finger caresses the trigger as light floods the hall behind him, and he realises he has been blindsided. The danger has come from another direction altogether. He spins around to see a figure caught in the light from an open door, and he fires. One, two, three times.

He hears her gasp of surprise. Then shock. And the long sigh as she falls to the floor, a final breath before her skull strikes the marble with the sickening force of a dead weight. A crack like a rifle shot. And he cannot prevent the cry of anguish that tears itself from his throat.

His hand falls to his side, fingers losing their grasp of the Glock. It too hits the floor like a gunshot. Barely aware of the pungent stink of nitroglycerine that suffuses all the air around him, he covers the ground towards her in three paces and drops to his knees, immediately aware of her blood soaking through his trousers. It seems almost black as it pools on the marble. Red lost in darkness. Though there is light enough for him to see her face, eyes open, disbelief in their sightless gaze.

He draws her into his arms, exhorting her not to leave. This woman who carries his child and all his hopes for the future. But his words fall on dead ears, and in a sudden flood of light he sees the vivid red of her blood as it spreads across the cold tiles. He inclines his head to look back over his shoulder. A young policewoman, arms extended, points her pistol directly at him. He sees how pale she is, all colour drained from a face

like a ghost. He sees how her hands tremble as they struggle to hold her gun steady.

‘Don’t move!’ she shouts at him and he thinks, how absurd! Move? Where would he go? And why? What point would there be now? In anything. Angela is dead. And a sudden anger fills all the empty spaces inside him.

‘You killed her!’ He hears his own voice as if it belongs to someone else. Words shouted in English. In torment. Is it really him? Surely to God none of this is actually happening. Then a second wave of fury consumes him and he screams again at this scrap of a woman who points her gun at him. ‘You fucking killed her!’

Cristina trembles from head to foot, fighting to keep control. She shakes her head in denial. ‘You did it!’ Words in Spanish. ‘You shot her.’ And just like the man on his knees at her feet, she feels as though someone else has spoken.

Her focus is momentarily distracted by Matías hobbling into the hall behind her, pistol pointed unsteadily towards them. An eternity too late.

Now the man is speaking in Spanish, his voice filled no longer simply with pain and anger, but with hatred. ‘You *made* me do it. *You* killed her. *You!*’

CHAPTER ONE

Mackenzie felt the pressure of being late. He hated being late. He built his life around never being late. To the extent that he would set all of his clocks, even his watch, five minutes fast. Despite knowing that his world was five minutes ahead of time, it placed a psychological pressure on him. To go faster. To ensure punctuality.

Although it pained him to admit it, the habit was borrowed – or, perhaps, inherited – from his uncle, who also set every timepiece five minutes in advance of real time, and would punish lateness with a stick. Actually, a cane. An old-fashioned walking cane with a curved onyx handle and knuckles on its shaft at six-inch intervals. *Mr Kane*, he had called it, emphasizing the *K*. His idea of a joke, a play on words. It hurt like hell.

Today Mackenzie had been delayed by Thursday traffic. Roadworks on the A4020. Circumstances beyond his control, and although his watch told him he was twenty minutes late, for once he was relieved to know it was just fifteen.

An overactive imagination conjured a picture of Alex waiting at the school gate, a few stragglers pushing past him

on to Oaklands Road. Long gone the parental SUVs and people carriers and four-by-fours which ten minutes ago would have choked this narrow street.

Turning off Boston Road, beyond the Hanwell Royal Mail delivery office, he accelerated past rows of terraced houses with mean little front gardens. Already he could see the forlorn figure of his son standing outside the gates of the red-and-yellow-brick Edwardian-era primary school. His blazer was too big for him. Susan's idea of economy. If it was too big for him this year, it would fit him next. And if he didn't suddenly sprout, they might also get away with it the year after. Had it been warmer Alex might have taken it off and draped it through the strap of his sports bag. But there was a cool wind from the north-east, and he stood hunched against it, drowned by his blazer. To his already distressed father it made him seem all the more pathetic.

Mackenzie had been wrong about the stragglers. The street was deserted. Amazing how quickly an entire school could empty itself. Motors idling at the kerbside, pulling away each in turn, a well-practised daily choreography. In his day, Mackenzie had been made to walk to school, regardless of weather. Wet wellies chafing at red calves, shorts clinging to stinging thighs, coats draped over radiators to fill classrooms with steamy damp air on wet winter mornings.

Alex would be distressed, he knew, and late for his team's five-a-side game with the club from Hayes. Although it was just a ten-minute walk to the sports centre, he had been

drilled always to wait for one parent or the other. But today his unhappiness went deeper than simply being late for a game of football. Mackenzie saw it the moment he drew up at the gate. Head down, Alex opened the door, threw his sports bag into the back, and slipped into the passenger seat without a word.

Mackenzie stared at him. 'What's wrong, son?'

'Nothing.'

'I'm sorry, I'm late.'

The boy shrugged and his father frowned.

'What's wrong?'

'I told you. Can we go, please? Like you said, you're late. So I'm late.' Eyes still turned down towards the footwell.

Mackenzie cupped his hand around the boy's jaw and turned his face towards him. The salty tracks of dried tears were clearly visible on pale cheeks, eyes red-rimmed. 'We're not going until you tell me.'

The boy pulled his head away, but his lips remained pressed tightly together.

'I'm serious. If you want to play football today . . .' Just nine years old, and already showing great talent with both feet.

Alex drew a deep breath and released it in a long, tremulous exhalation. He opened his satchel and pulled out a sheaf of three crumpled sheets and thrust it towards his father without looking at him. Mackenzie could see that the pages were filled on both sides with his son's characteristic scrawl. The top page bore the title of the piece. *What I Did In The Holidays*. Big red

numerals at the head of the page read 0/25, and beneath them in a tight hand, *Hand-writing too big and untidy!!!*

‘She didn’t even read it,’ Alex said.

Mackenzie’s anger was already manifesting itself in a trembling of the papers in his hand. He snatched the key from the ignition and opened his door. ‘Come on.’

Alex looked at him, startled. ‘What are you doing?’

Mackenzie waved the essay at his son. ‘We’re going to see about this.’ He strode around the car and opened the passenger door.

‘No, Dad, please. Just forget it.’

‘I will not.’ He took Alex by the arm, and pulled the reluctant boy from his seat. He had met his son’s teacher once at a parent–teacher’s meeting. A young woman. A girl, really. Miss Willow. Couldn’t have been any more than twenty-five, and he had thought at the time that she was far too preoccupied with her appearance. He grabbed Alex’s hand and pulled him in his wake as he strode through the gates and into the school through the side entrance.

It had the same institutional smell that he remembered from his own schooldays. Perhaps it was the detergent they used to wash the floors.

Alex’s classroom was at the end of a corridor on the second floor. The door stood open, and Miss Willow was still at her desk, wading her way through a pile of children’s essays. She looked up in surprise as Mackenzie dragged his son into the room behind him. Her surprise turned to alarm as he strode

up to her desk and banged Alex's essay down on top of the others.

'What's this piece of shit?'

'I'm sorry?'

'You should be. Alex tells me you didn't read it.'

'I...'

'Zero out of twenty-five because his handwriting was too big? Are you serious?'

'Dad, please!' Alex pulled his hand free of his father's, his face pink with humiliation.

But Mackenzie was oblivious. 'Would you dismiss Einstein's theory of relativity because you didn't like his handwriting? And it wasn't too big, you know, it was too small. Notoriously mean. Oh, and, by the way, handwriting is *not* hyphenated. I can't believe someone who doesn't know this is teaching my son English. I take it you do have a degree?'

'Of course.' Miss Willow was recovering from the initial assault and gathering her defences.

'In what?'

'English and drama.'

'Oh, drama?' he said dramatically. 'That must be where you discovered the propensity for overuse of the exclamation mark.' He picked up Alex's essay and waved it at her. 'Not one exclamation mark, not two. But *three*. Oh, yes, very dramatic. Alright in social media, perhaps, but not in my son's classroom. Oh, and another footnote. Exclamation marks were originally called the *note of admiration*. Perhaps if you had taken

the trouble to read this you might have been awarding him many notes of admiration. He took the trouble to write it, the least you could have done is read it.' And he slammed it back on top of the pile.

Colour had risen high on Miss Willow's cheeks, her lower lip trembling as she fought not to spill her tears. Mackenzie turned to take Alex once again by the hand, and march him back out into the corridor. It wasn't until they reached the gate, and his anger had subsided a little, that he saw the tears streaming down his son's face.

'What? What's wrong?' He was genuinely mystified.

'I hate you,' the boy spat at him. 'I really hate you. I'm glad you've left. Mum'll have to find me another school now.' He thrust his jaw in the direction of the building behind him. 'I can't ever go back there.'

Mackenzie was filled with sudden regret. He had only been standing up for the boy, as any dad would. He glanced back at the school and saw Miss Willow standing at her classroom window and knew that she was crying too. He opened the car door. 'Come on,' he said. 'We're going to be late for the football.'

The boy threw himself into the seat and folded his arms across his chest, pouting through his tears. 'I might just be in time for the final whistle.'

He was almost at the turn-off to Westlea Road when he saw the blue light flashing in his rearview mirror. It was the lull

between the end of school and the start of rush hour. And Boston Road had been almost empty. A wide road lined by plane trees in spring leaf, mock Tudor semis set back behind redbrick walls. He saw the officer behind the wheel indicating that he should pull over.

Mackenzie sighed. The speedometer had crept above thirty without him realizing. He had been replaying his confrontation with Miss Willow. Again and again. And each time had failed to see how he might have handled it differently, although he knew by now that there must have been some other way. Alex was a black hole in the passenger seat, radiating hatred, draining his father of all his energy.

He wound down the window as the uniformed officer leaned in.

‘Driver’s licence and registration document.’

Mackenzie fished them out from an inside pocket and sat silently while the officer examined them.

‘Are you aware, sir, that you were doing forty in a thirty zone?’

Mackenzie was contrite. ‘I wasn’t. But I realized it as soon as I saw your light in my mirror. I am truly sorry.’

‘You would be if you’d hit a child at that speed.’ The officer glanced across at the sullen boy in the passenger seat and took out an official pad and a pen. ‘Occupation?’

‘Police officer.’

The uniform’s head snapped up in surprise. ‘A cop?’

‘Fifteen years with the Met. Starting with the National Crime Agency next week.’

The officer slipped the pad back into his breast pocket. 'You should have told me straight away, sir.'

'Why?'

'Because I wouldn't have booked you, sir.'

Mackenzie frowned. 'I don't know why not. I'm not above the law just because I'm a cop.' He paused. 'Are you telling me you would have let me off?'

The policeman threw him an odd look, as if he were not entirely sure if Mackenzie was being serious. 'It had crossed my mind,' he said, evenly.

'In that case, I'm going to have to report you.' Mackenzie reached across Alex to open the glove compartment and retrieve a black notebook and pen. 'I'll need your name and number . . .'

The traffic cop's look might have turned him to stone. He said dryly, 'Perhaps, sir, if you had spent any time on traffic duty you would know that whether I book you or warn you is entirely discretionary. In this case, I am warning you.' And there was something almost dangerous in the way he said it. He turned abruptly and walked back towards his car.

Mackenzie turned his head to find Alex looking at him with something like contempt in his eyes. 'I'll be lucky if I even make next week's match now.'

Hanwell had changed during the years that Mackenzie and Susan had lived there. An influx of Polish immigrants leading to the opening of Polish shops in a High Street which had

seen better days. Everywhere you went now you heard Polish spoken. There was even a Polish school in the suburb. Ealing had always been that bit more upmarket than its less well-heeled neighbour. But as Susan had been keen to point out when Mackenzie suggested moving, everything would change when the Crossrail project was completed. Hanwell would have its own station, and direct access to central London in just twenty minutes. Property prices would skyrocket. Something from which she would doubtless benefit if she succeeded in having the house put into her name.

As usual, he was unable to find a parking place outside the house, and Alex refused to take his hand on the 50-metre walk along the terrace to number 23, marching two paces ahead of his father, half a step away from a run.

Alex had arrived too late at the sports centre to be picked for the starting eleven, spending almost the entire game sitting on the bench before coming on as a substitute for the last five minutes.

Now he couldn't get home fast enough. As soon as Susan opened the door, he pushed past her and ran straight upstairs. Susan folded her arms, standing full square on the doorstep, making it clear that Mackenzie was forbidden entry to his own house. Or her house, as she now saw it. The house whose mortgage Mackenzie had paid for more than ten years.

'What the hell did you think you were doing?'

He looked at her, surprised by her tone.

‘I got held up in traffic. We were only twenty-five minutes late in the end.’

She tutted theatrically. ‘I’m talking about threatening Alex’s teacher.’

He frowned. ‘Threatening? I didn’t threaten anyone. Certainly not Miss Willow.’

‘That’s not what she says. I’ve just had the headmaster on the phone. He was livid! She went to him in tears, apparently, after your visit.’

Mackenzie sighed. ‘Oh, for heaven’s sake. The woman refused to read the boy’s essay. Gave him a big fat zero because she said his handwriting – hyphenated – was too big. Exclamation mark, exclamation mark, exclamation mark.’

Susan just shook her head. ‘You never change, do you? And you just don’t get it. You can’t speak to people that way, John. How many friends have you lost? How many bosses have you pissed off? Maybe you do have a brain the size of a fucking football, but you’re a bigger idiot.’

She raised a hand to pre-empt his protestations.

‘I know, I know. Sometimes they’ve got it coming. But Jesus, John, you have to employ a bit of common sense. A little tact. Filter your worst excesses.’ She sighed. ‘Not you, though. Not our John. He’s always right, even when he’s wrong, and damned if he’s not going to tell everyone so.’ She paused only to draw breath. ‘You’re a bloody misfit, that’s what you are. And what’s the point of all those stupid degrees when you don’t have the first idea how to be civil to folk, not a Scooby

when it comes to what's socially acceptable.' She nodded her head towards the stairs inside. 'And in front of Alex, too. How humiliating was that for the boy?'

'He was in tears at the school gate,' Mackenzie said. 'What was I supposed to do?'

'Leave it to me. In fact, leave everything to me. Don't bother picking the kids up from school anymore. I'll do it myself. I don't want you going anywhere near them.'

She started to close the door on him, but he thrust a foot across the threshold to stop it. 'I want to see Sophia.'

'She doesn't want to see you.'

Which took him aback. He recovered. 'Let her tell me that.'

'She's busy. She says she's fed up with you.'

He gasped his exasperation. 'She's seven years old for Christ's sake. Seven-year-olds don't say they're fed up with their dads unless their mums plant the thought in their heads.'

Susan sidestepped the issue. 'I'm going for full custody with limited access. And if I had my way, it would be none at all. Now move your bloody foot.' And she kicked him on the shin.

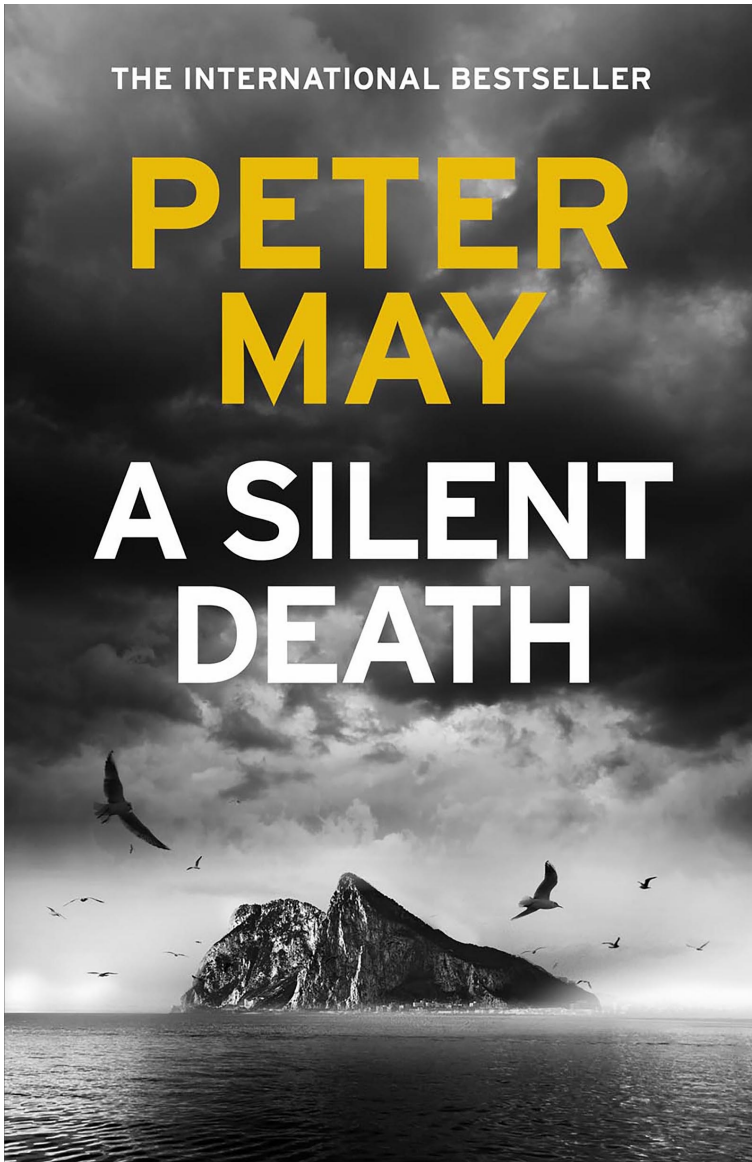
As he pulled back his leg she slammed the door in his face.

For several long moments he stood smarting on the doorstep, his leg throbbing where she had kicked him. He thought about hammering on the door with the big wrought-iron knocker. Shouting, making a fuss, bringing the neighbours to doors and windows. But even he realized he would only humiliate himself.

With clenched fists he retired to the pavement and glanced

up. The house was pre-war, roughcast brick, white paintwork streaked brown and in need of a fresh coat after a long winter. It had cost him a small fortune to have it double-glazed. He and Susan shared the large double bedroom at the front, Alex had the room at the back, and Sophia occupied the box room that looked down on to the front garden, such as it was. Net curtains at her window twitched, and a tiny sad face appeared behind the glass, almost obscured by reflections. Mackenzie gazed up at his daughter, consumed by hurt and frustration. Of all the people in the world, it was with this little girl that he had the strongest bond. He tried to smile and raised a hand to wave. After a moment her hand came level with her face and waved tentatively back. And then she was gone.

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