

PROLOGUE

Right – this will have to be a very quick catch-up because I can't hang around. The police want a quick word with me. So here goes.

Smallhope, Pennyroyal and I were still at St Mary's following a series of incidents involving a log pile falling on me, an attack on Home Farm, and me being arrested three times in one afternoon. Three times! Even Markham can't beat that, although he says he's going to give it a try.

Smallhope had been stitched back together and the wrist she hadn't known she'd broken had been correctly set and flexi-gloved.

Pennyroyal had, apparently, had a record-breaking number of bullets removed from various parts of his anatomy and was healing quietly and efficiently in the men's ward.

I was stiff and sore after my adventures with an Insight hit squad and a giant pile of logs. Guess which did the most damage.

Markham was around somewhere, hopefully holding himself in readiness to effect our rescue, should that become necessary. However, since his rescues don't always go according to plan, he was probably just holding himself.

Not surprisingly, the police turned up almost immediately. All

of them. Time Police, civilian police, military police. They'd arrived in a perfect storm of black pods, black helicopters, black vans – even black bicycles for all I knew. All with one objective: to discover who had shot Commander John Treadwell.

Yes, I know what you're thinking, but it wasn't me. I had a perfect alibi – I was talking to Captain Hyssop at the time.

We still didn't know whether Treadwell was alive or dead and no one was saying.

St Mary's was grounded. And confined to barracks. No one in – no one out.

We were all under investigation.



There were two of them. Smiling, pleasant, devious, almost certainly lying through their teeth and definitely not to be taken at face value.

So that made three of us, then.

I was being interviewed in Sick Bay, which, I hoped, would confirm my credentials as a very sick person who shouldn't be bullied.

Neither of them were in uniform, and although I'm now so old that policemen are beginning to look positively embryonic, these two were around my own age, which probably meant they'd be patient, experienced and tenacious. Or perhaps they'd been brought in to reassure a nervous patient.

The nervous patient sat up straight, smoothed her covers and endeavoured to look frail and helpless but – above all – law-abiding.

'Good morning,' said the elder of the two, flashing his ID. 'Detective Inspector Ivaan Mendis, and this is Lt Den Trasker, representing the military police. I expect you can guess why we're here.'

I nodded. Leon had warned me to keep my answers short and

to the point and, most importantly, not to argue with anyone. I don't know why he thought I would.

They pulled up a chair each and sat down at my bedside. Not close enough to be intimidating but just that little bit too close. Invading my personal space but being very nice about it.

'Good morning,' said Trasker, carefully seating himself on my right. Mendis was on my left – all cleverly designed to split my attention. 'Do you mind if we call you Nicola?'

'Of course not, Den,' I said cheerfully. There was a more than slight pause and then we began again.

'Let's start with the easy stuff, shall we?' said Mendis, placing his recorder on my bedside table. 'Name?'

'Nicola Hay,' I said tremblingly. The very picture of someone who knew nothing but wanted to cooperate.

'And your occupation?'

'Library assistant.'

He'd placed his recorder so the blinking green recording light was just at the very periphery of my vision. Very irritating. And distracting.

'Where do you work?'

'Here – at St Mary's. In the Library.'

'And how long have you worked here?'

Shit. I didn't know. I hadn't thought that far ahead.

I said, 'Um . . . let me see . . .' and began to do complicated sums on my fingers, whispering, 'November . . . no, December . . .' until Peterson, who had demanded to be present at every interview to ensure any and all questions related solely to the Treadwell incident, said, 'About four years, I think.'

'Sorry,' I said. 'Still a bit hazy. You know . . .' and tailed away as if my strength was failing me.

Mendis peered at my dramatic facial injuries. My bruises were just transitioning from purple and blue to brown and yellow, which, trust me, was not an improvement. A face-full of logs can do that.

‘Yes,’ he said, with genuine curiosity. ‘What on earth happened to you?’

‘I crashed my car,’ I said piteously, letting my chin wobble. ‘Although . . . I still can’t remember . . .’

‘Last week,’ said Dr Stone, who was there to shore up my story with confusing medical details. ‘Her recollection of that event is a little foggy although you should find she’s clear enough over the events you’re interested in.’

‘Tell me what you do remember,’ said Mendis.

‘Do you mean my accident or the . . . the other thing?’

‘Where did your accident take place?’

‘In the car park.’

‘Here at St Mary’s?’

I nodded. That was my story, anyway. I was hoping the fact it had supposedly occurred on private property would muddy the issue a little.

‘Was a police report filed?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, truthfully. ‘I don’t remember. Perhaps you should ask our Legal Department.’

That would be Mrs Partridge, so good luck with that, guys.

His gaze took in my surgical skull cap and bald head and then travelled on to my bruised face and forearms. ‘It looks very painful,’ he said. ‘What exactly happened?’

I fiddled with the sheet. ‘Oh, well, so stupid . . . I left the car in gear and when I switched it on, it jumped and I hit something – I can’t always see very well – and then I tried to

back away and I hit something else. Behind me. And I think I oversteered or something. And the car didn't go where I thought it would. And then there was the chicken and I panicked and I think I stamped on the accelerator instead of the brake and there was a big bang and this giant bag hit me in the face.'

I let anxiety bleed into my voice. 'I didn't hit anyone else, I promise. I just . . . sometimes I'm not very good at going backwards. In a car, I mean. Am I in a lot of trouble? Angus . . . ?'

I suspected anxious witnesses were Mendis's favourite thing. He twisted in his seat to look at Peterson. 'Someone was hurt? Who's Angus?'

'Bashford's chicken.'

'Who's Bashford?'

I felt safe answering this one. 'One of the people whose car I hit.'

Should they require any evidence corroborating my story, Bashford's car has sustained more hits than the surface of the moon during the Late Heavy Bombardment four billion years ago. The entire vehicle is peppered with impact craters. I leaned forwards and said, 'Please tell me she's OK.'

He looked baffled. 'Bashford?'

'Angus.'

Mendis glanced at Dr Stone. For enlightenment, presumably.

'The chicken,' he said briefly.

'Angus?'

'Yes.'

'She hit his car but not his chicken?'

'And another car and the bin store and a bollard and the kerb and part of the fence,' said Dr Stone, going into completely unnecessary detail.

Lt Trasker looked at me. ‘What were you driving? A tank?’
‘I don’t own a tank,’ I said primly. And unwisely, as it turned out.

‘So what do you own?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘What sort of car do you own?’

Shit again. How should I know the make and model of the wholly fictitious car I was lying to the police about?

‘It’s blue,’ I said helpfully.

‘I expect our Admin officer will be able to supply any details you might require,’ said Peterson smoothly.

Mrs Partridge again, so, again – good luck with that, guys.

Mendis tagged his partner. ‘Regarding the events leading up to the shooting of Commander Treadwell – I believe you saw the whole thing.’

‘No.’

They exchanged looks. Mendis consulted his scratchpad. ‘It says here . . .’

‘I saw him shot. I didn’t see who did the shooting.’

‘Ah. What exactly did you see?’

‘I saw Commander Treadwell being shot.’

He gritted his teeth. ‘Where?’

‘On the South Lawn.’

‘No,’ he said patiently. ‘Where were you?’

I nodded my head towards Peterson, sitting in the window seat. ‘Over there.’

Trasker got up and went over to the window, thus reminding me to be careful because they’d check and verify every word I said.

Mendis continued. ‘What were you doing in the window?’

‘Reading a book.’ I held up David Sands’ latest bestseller.

He pretended to be surprised. ‘Really? You can’t see well enough to drive a car successfully – or even at all – but you can read a book?’

I put on my specs. The ones that make me look both intelligent and sexy – although today I suspected they’d have a bit of a struggle – and beamed at him.

Balked of his prey, he returned to the attack. ‘Were you alone?’

He would know this already. I wondered if, given that I’d incurred my injuries a day or so before Treadwell was shot, they’d written me off as a suspect and the purpose of this interview was actually to verify whatever Hyssop had told them.

‘No, Captain Hyssop, our temporary Head of Security, was here.’

‘What was she doing?’

‘Talking to me.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, I think I assumed she’d come to see how I was doing. Isn’t that usually why people visit the sick? Other than questioning them, of course.’

He put down his scratchpad and stared at me. ‘You’re very defensive, Ms Hay.’

For one nasty panicking moment I couldn’t think who he was talking to. Was the Time Police Commander here too? But no – I was Ms Hay. Concentrate, Maxwell. It was interesting that I’d chosen the surname Hay. Interesting psychologically, I mean. I thought I’d just gone with a variant of Nicola de la Haye because of our recent Lincoln adventure, but perhaps my

reason was deeper and more sinister than that. Was Commander Hay a descendent of Nicola's, perhaps? Given the relentless powerhouse that had been Nicola de la Haye and still was Marietta Hay, I could well believe that.

I blinked back to the here and now because everyone was staring at me – these two security officers, Dr Stone, and Peterson in his capacity as my official employer (he wished).

My fellow patient and roommate, Lady Amelia Smallhope – and also my actual employer and, like me, convalescing bounty hunter – had been wheeled into a nearby airing cupboard and was almost certainly, at this moment, quietly quaffing a margarita among the piles of bedding. And no, she hadn't gone willingly. Pennyroyal – fellow bounty hunter – was currently fast asleep in the female staff toilets.

But back to my interrogation.

I peered at Mendis from under my skull cap. 'I don't think I have anything to be defensive about. I didn't shoot Commander Treadwell. Ask Captain Hyssop.'

He brushed that aside. 'I want to be absolutely certain of this. You and Captain Hyssop were both in this window here? Looking out?'

'Yes.'

'What did you see?'

'I saw Commander Treadwell being shot.'

'Before that.'

'Oh. Well, I saw him come out of the fire door.'

'That one down there?' said Trasker, leaning forward to peer out of the window. Peterson obligingly moved to one side.

'Yes. He came out of the door and set off across the grass.'

The lieutenant frowned. 'Where was he going?'

‘I don’t know for a fact, but he was heading towards the stables. Those buildings to your right.’

He peered again. ‘So he was heading towards the stables when he was shot?’

‘No.’

‘You just said . . .’

‘No – he’d stopped.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘He just stopped?’

‘Yes, he turned back to look up at the building.’

Mendis leaned forwards again, suddenly very interested. ‘Do you think he heard something?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, genuinely trying to help because the sooner I was cleared from this investigation the sooner I could get out of here and resume my nefarious activities. ‘The window was open and I didn’t hear anything.’

‘Did he do anything else?’

‘No, he was just looking up at the building.’

‘Why?’

‘Checking the roof, perhaps.’

‘Why?’

‘Again – I don’t know. I thought perhaps he was on his weekly inspection. You know the sort of thing – when the boss wanders around and appears just when and where you don’t want him to.’

‘But you don’t know why he paused in that particular spot?’

I shook my head. ‘It was a nice day. Perhaps he was just . . . you know . . . taking a moment to enjoy it.’

‘For how long did he stand there?’

I closed my eyes, reliving the scene. ‘About ten, twelve seconds.’

‘And then?’

‘And then I heard a popping noise. Like a car backfiring. Or a distant bird scarer, perhaps.’

‘Not like a gunshot?’

‘I don’t think I’ve heard many gunshots,’ I said. Seriously, I am never going to heaven. On the other hand, there was no point saying I’d never heard a gunshot at all because this was St Mary’s and gunshots and explosions happened all the time.

‘Could you tell where it came from?’

Sadly, yes, I could. The shot had come from inside St Mary’s. Treadwell had been shot by someone inside St Mary’s. I had no idea what Peterson or Dr Bairstow had told the officers, so I went with ignorance because that always works well for me. I shook my head.

‘Can you describe this noise?’

I frowned. ‘Not really. It wasn’t loud . . .’ Which was true. ‘I assumed it was from some distance away.’ Which wasn’t true. One of these days I really must make a list of all the people – good and bad – I’ve lied to over the years. And the centuries in which I’ve done it.

‘Are you certain?’

‘No, I’m not.’

‘You see, Ms Hay . . .’ I really wished I’d gone with a name that didn’t make me want to check behind me every time I heard it. ‘All the evidence points to the shot coming from this side of the building.’

I widened my eyes in alarm. ‘Does it?’

‘And we wondered if it came from here.’

I pulled up the covers. ‘Here? In this room?’

‘No, I mean this part of the building.’

I shook my head. ‘The shot didn’t sound . . . inside . . . if you know what I mean.’

Apparently they did because they both nodded.

I thought I’d gained their trust enough to ask a question or two myself. ‘Did you find the gun?’

Alas for this brave effort, they didn’t answer, so I guessed no, they hadn’t. I had an apparent inspiration. ‘Perhaps he or she threw it into the lake. Have you searched the lake?’

‘We are exploring all lines of enquiry,’ said DI Mendis smoothly, which was probably police speak for *we’re not going near those bloody swans until we absolutely have to*.

They refocused on me. Probably to prevent me making any more helpful suggestions.

‘What happened after the commander was shot?’

I frowned. ‘For a moment or two – nothing. Then Captain Hyssop told me to stay where I was. She ran out of the room shouting that Treadwell had been shot and for Dr Stone.’

‘And you stayed put? As you were told?’

‘Oh yes. I could barely hobble that day.’ And then, because I felt the point couldn’t be made too strongly, I looked down at myself. ‘I’m not much better now.’

‘And then?’

‘Nothing. Not for a few seconds anyway. He just lay there. And then people started running out of the building. A couple of historians, then Hyssop appeared, then the medical team and so on.’

‘And then what happened?’

I shook my head. 'I don't know. I felt rather sick and it seemed wrong to watch so I went back to bed.'

'And you didn't see anyone at all before Treadwell was shot?'

I shook my head. 'No, I'm sorry I can't help.'

Mendis looked up. 'Do you know, I find that quite hard to believe.'

Well, his instincts were spot on, weren't they?

'No,' I said tremblingly. 'I'm just a library assistant . . .' and prayed he'd have no knowledge of the extensive and improbable range of skills required for library work. Especially library work at St Mary's. 'You should talk to Captain Hyssop. She knows what's going on much better than me.'

'Captain Hyssop has already been interrogated,' said Trasker, and I didn't care much for the way he said that. Hyssop and I were each other's alibi, but suppose they decided we were in it together? I certainly couldn't afford any sort of investigation. It wouldn't take them long to discover that Ms N. Hay and Dr L. Maxwell were one and the same person. And that Dr Maxwell was responsible for liberating Dr Bairstow from a spot of illegal internment. And I was prepared to bet that Martin Gaunt – the unpleasant individual from whom Dr Bairstow had been liberated – would be attempting to make all our lives utter hell as soon as he was able. Especially me.

Or – an even worse possibility – suppose Hyssop had lied? She didn't love me. Suppose she told them I'd done it. Her word against mine. Yes, the sooner I was out of here the better. Remembering I was seriously injured, I yawned heavily and let my eyelids droop.

'That's enough,' said Dr Stone, and about time too.

Mendis was silent for so long I thought that the interview was concluded. I should have known things wouldn't be that easy.

Right out of nowhere, he looked up from his scratchpad and said, 'Do you know a Dr Maxwell?'

My surprise must have looked very genuine. Because it was. 'Yes. Well, I used to. Dr Maxwell used to work here.'

'Where is she now?'

'She's not here any longer, that's all I know.'

'Why not?'

'Well, she . . . um . . . she . . .'

'She what?'

It suddenly dawned on me that shifting suspicion on to that criminal mastermind Maxwell might be a good idea. They'd waste a lot of time pursuing that particular red herring, thus freeing me up to return to my life of . . . as Lady Amelia would describe it . . . apprehending miscreants. Or, as Pennyroyal would prefer to describe it – *profitably* apprehending miscreants.

But back to my current crisette. The one where I was completely innocent. Of shooting Treadwell, anyway.

I let myself gabble. 'Dr Maxwell had a row with Commander Treadwell. Well, several rows, actually. And in public, too. Which is how I know about them. But everyone knows about them. They really didn't like each other.'

'He sacked her, didn't he?'

'He did, but I don't think . . .'

'Where is she now?'

I took good care to look startled. 'I've no idea. I didn't know her that well so I don't know where she might have . . .'

'Did you like her?'

‘Oh yes,’ I said unblushingly. ‘She was lovely.’ Behind the two officers, Dr Stone grinned and made gagging mimes.

‘What about Mr Markham?’

‘Our Mr Markham? He’s on paternity leave, isn’t he?’

I peered around Mendis to Peterson, who had gone back to the window seat.

He nodded. ‘That’s right. Due back . . . in about a month, I think. Mrs Partridge will know.’

‘Do you have an address?’

‘I don’t, but Mrs Partridge will. Why do you ask? You don’t think either of them . . . ?’

‘As I said, we are pursuing all lines of enquiry,’ he said smoothly.

‘Of course,’ said Peterson, equally smoothly.

‘Who do you think shot Commander Treadwell, Ms Hay?’

Any right-thinking human being who happened to have a gun in their hand at the time, was the obvious answer to that one.

‘I don’t know,’ I said, beginning to feel it was time to wrap this up. ‘He only ever spoke to me once and that was just to ask where Dr Dowson was. Perhaps someone was up in the woods – shooting – and they were careless . . . I really don’t know.’

Dr Stone stood up and fortunately, so did they.

Trasker looked down at me. ‘We’ll be back.’

I was unimpressed. Seriously? I’ve been threatened by experts.

‘Now,’ said Dr Stone, intervening before I could tell them this, ‘who would you like to see next?’

The door closed behind them.

Peterson lingered for a moment. He looked worried. I didn’t blame him. All my breezy insouciance aside, St Mary’s was an

organisation with a lot of secrets. We knew where the bodies were buried because we'd buried most of them ourselves.

Future troubles were piling up thick and fast. Not just Treadwell; we were also hiding Smallhope and Pennyroyal following their recent punch-up with Insight at Home Farm. And that bastard Gaunt would never give up on his relentless quest for me and Markham after we broke Dr Bairstow out of his – Gaunt's – supposedly high-security establishment. I myself was here under very false pretences and God only knew where Markham was.

I sighed heavily and looked at Tim, whose face pretty much mirrored my own thoughts.

'These people you're trying to take down,' he said, 'Insight – are they likely to come after you here?'

I shook my head. 'There is absolutely nothing to link Maxine Forrest to St Mary's. We've been really careful, Tim.'

'I hope so. Anyone who can inflict that amount of damage on Smallhope and Pennyroyal . . .' He tailed away and then sighed again. 'Could things get any worse?'

'Oh,' I said comfortingly. 'I think we both know the answer to that one.'