

A man in a dark coat is walking away from the camera through a grand, classical building with large white columns. The scene is captured from a low angle, emphasizing the scale of the architecture. The man is centered in the lower half of the frame, walking on a stone-paved floor. The background is filled with tall, fluted columns and arches, creating a sense of depth and grandeur. The lighting is soft, highlighting the textures of the stone and the man's coat.

John Fairfax

SUMMARY JUSTICE

'An all-action court drama'
SUNDAY TIMES

Summary Justice

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Prologue

Friday, 23 July 1999. Court 1,
the Old Bailey, London.

'William Benson, stand up.'

His Honour Judge Rigby stared across the court as if no one else was present, as if the prosecutor hadn't turned to smile at the girl from the CPS; as if Helen Camberley QC, Benson's defence counsel, hadn't momentarily covered her face; as if Benson's mother wasn't crying; as if Paul Harbeton's father hadn't been removed from the court after another outburst of swearing. Judge Rigby had seen it all before. Justice, played out, was always a dreadful business. But even he was saddened by this latest episode. It was his task to put fresh words on another banal tragedy.

'You have been found guilty of murder. You took a man's life. In so doing you have shattered the lives of those who were close to him. You have devastated your own, and of those who are close to you.'

He seemed to appraise the dead body of Paul Harbeton as if it were laid out on the exhibits table between the bench and the dock. During the trial, unsmiling and remote, he'd leafed through the pathologist's photographs, squinting occasionally at the close-ups while the expert serenely described every contusion and scratch. The butchery that had followed showed how seriously the courts took killing: every other possible cause of death had been excluded. Every internal anomaly had been explained. Every organ had been examined and weighed. The cause of death had been nailed down. And then Paul Harbeton had been stitched back together. Benson could almost see him now, lying on that gleaming aluminium table, horribly clean.

'It should have been an ordinary Saturday evening in November. You went to the Bricklayers Arms in central London with your then girlfriend, Jessica Buchanan. She described you as a thoughtful, considerate young man, though she'd been

drawn to a certain melancholy. Like you, she was a second-year student of philosophy; like you, she had a particular interest in ethics; like this court, and like everyone who knows you, she thought you incapable of shocking violence. The irony of your circumstances – a young man, aged twenty-one, fascinated by the structure of moral principles – is painful to observe.'

Judge Rigby paused, as if to turn a page. But his hand did not move. His eyes didn't shift from the ghost of a body between them.

'On that same evening, Paul Harbeton went to the same public house. He was a hospital porter at Charing Cross Hospital in Hammersmith. He was also an unpaid volunteer at Leadgate House, a day centre for people with Alzheimer's disease. By all accounts he'd had a hard day. He'd done a night shift at the hospital, slept a couple of hours, and then gone to the day centre. I imagine he was tired when he went to the Bricklayers Arms. He might have been short-tempered. That would explain why he shoved you brusquely when he came to the bar, where you were standing. It would explain why he spoke to you abruptly.

Part One

Two days before trial

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'Another murderer?'

'Yep.'

'Who?'

'Have a guess.'

'I've no idea.'

'You have. He's all over last week's papers.'

'What . . . no . . . get off . . . the guy operating from an old fish and chip shop?'

'None other. But it was a fishmonger's. There were no chips.'

Until that moment Tess de Vere had only been half listening. It was a dreary Monday. She was having lunch with Gordon Hayward at the Ming Palace in Hatton

Garden, a short walk from where they worked at Coker & Dale, Solicitors, 56 Ely Place, London. Gordon was head of the criminal law department. He was also thirty-nine, single and interested in Tess. Possibly obsessed. Had been since her arrival at the firm four months ago. His latest tactic was to suggest business lunches. On this occasion he'd proposed divine dim sum, a celestial Languedoc and a discussion about a pending judgment from the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The application was about covert surveillance of legal consultations in a police station. It had some bearing – though tenuous – on a hopeless case of Gordon's. For light relief, Tess had tuned in to a not-so-hushed conversation coming from the table behind. So far it had gone like this:

'The dim-wit sacked me.'

'No.'

'Bloody right. Four days to trial and she pulls the plug.'

'Get off.'

'Picks up the damned phone on Friday night and says she wants out. Doesn't trust me. Says I don't believe her.'

'Do you?'

'No, but that's not the point, is it? You weigh up the evidence. You give your advice. And if you have to, you lean on 'em.'

'Absolutely. Help them see sense.'

'Get the best result.' The speaker had evidently filled his mouth; he spoke while chewing. 'And it wasn't just me. Counsel had a go too.'

'Urged her to plead?'

'Informed persuasion, nothing more. And what do you get for your trouble?'

'A slab of legal aid.'

'Yes, but only for the preparation. I've lost the trial fee.'

'There's other fish in the sea.'

The case papers prepared by Trevor Hamsey, the solicitor sacked by Sarah Collingstone, contained a brief client biography, later supplemented by notes from Diane Wendling, the barrister she'd sacked the same day. It made sad reading. Tess had drawn up her own chronology:

05.10.1981 Born in Braimpton, Cumbria.

05.1993 Parents (Ralph and Janet) separate. Sarah (aged 11) lives with mother.

07.1997 GCSEs (9 fails). Mother dies of cancer. Sarah (15) lives with father.

15.12.1997 Fatal car accident.

Driver: Anthony Greene (18).

Passengers: Sarah (16) and Paula Ryan (17)

Greene and Ryan killed.

Greene at fault. Jumped lights. Collision.

Sarah hospitalised. Two months pregnant.

12.05.1998 Birth of Daniel 5 weeks premature. ?Because of accident?

25.05.1998 Daniel admitted to hospital. Brain damage.

08.1998 Ralph and Sarah move to London. Ralph teaches at Eva Moore School of Drama. Richmond.

**26.06.2014 Sarah (32) meets Andrew Bealing
Entrepreneur:
Hopton Transport Ltd
Hopton Imports Ltd
Hopton Residential Holdings Ltd**

Tess had the document in front of her. Benson had nothing. He began with the birth of Daniel.

Dear Will,

I'm told you've been instructed in the Hopton Yard killing. Remember what I told you in pupillage: murder is usually a domestic argument gone wrong. It's often very simple. Sift the evidence. Assume nothing. Test everything.

This case is a golden opportunity to establish a name for yourself, different from the one that fate and folly has imposed upon you. All great careers begin with such a stroke of fortune. Seize the day.

I am very proud of you.

As ever,

Helen.

Benson placed the letter in his pocket and made his way through the trees. Once on board, he banged yesterday's leftovers into the microwave and gave Papillon his monthly sardine. He polished his shoes and sharpened his pencils. He placed his blue bag in a cupboard, out of sight. The brief itself had been safely locked in chambers. He was ready for the fight. Leaving the stern door ajar, he went to bed with a