

PERFECT REVENGE

'WE GOT away with it. The perfect murder.'

'Yes, we did.'

The white Sierra sped eastwards along the M4 towards Heathrow. In the passenger seat was Kathy Clarke, thirty-seven year old wife of recently deceased Maurice Clarke, who had been senior project manager with OnMessage Advertising before his untimely death.

At the wheel sat Ken Fleet, ten years junior to his companion. Ken told casual acquaintances that he was a sales executive with a major building contractor, but the truth was that his working life, if you could call it that, was wheeling and dealing, anything to make a few quid without having to expend too much effort. Not even Kathy knew of the shadier episodes of his past. And she never would know.

In the boot of the Sierra were their two suitcases. Soon Ken and Kathy and the cases would be climbing into the clear blue sky on board a 747 winging its way to Los Angeles. This time tomorrow they would be touching down at Oahu, Honolulu.

Kathy's life had been on the slide for many years before she met Ken, almost an exact mirror image of Maurice's ascendancy. And as her husband had grown in wealth and status so he had diminished in love and generosity. He also held the purse strings very tightly. 'If I give you more money, dear, you'll only fritter it away on expensive trashy clothes.'

There were no children. Kathy had gone through a broody phase soon after they were married but Maurice had always put her off. 'Let's get ourselves established first. Build up some capital. There'll be plenty of time for kids later on.'

But as the years slipped by Maurice seemed to become more concerned with his work and less with his wife. His proven ability pushed him steadily up the executive ladder at OnMessage Advertising. And he seemed to have the Midas touch in his stock market investments. Just about the time he was passing his first million the last flickers of love died out and Kathy was left with a hollow sham of a marriage. How could there ever be children when they hadn't shared a bed for ages?

And then came the heart attack. 'You've been overdoing it, Maurice. Too much stress at work, too little exercise, poor eating habits,' the doctor had warned. For a while his temporary setback brought them closer together. 'He actually needs me,' thought Kathy as she nursed him through convalescence and dared to dream again of how things might be.

Not a chance! As soon as Maurice was back on his feet he pushed her out of his life again. He was so wrapped up in himself and his work that he didn't even realise how much his wife had come to detest him. He only spoke to her to tell how his latest campaign was going. As if she was remotely interested. What did she care if Interbrew had just signed up with OnMessage Advertising? 'I dreamed up the slogan myself, dear. "I'm a man and I drink Power". Brilliant, eh?'

Kathy had sunk to a particularly low ebb when she first met Ken at the Bartley tennis club. He came over as a personable fellow and the club gossips soon informed her that he was unattached and solvent. Some of the more enterprising female members took it upon themselves to achieve more intimate acquaintance. Without, of course, the knowledge of their husbands.

Ken hadn't seemed to show any special interest in Kathy until the day she found herself playing as his partner in a doubles match. Afterwards they'd had a drink in the club bar and Kathy was suddenly chatting away to him nineteen to the dozen, more animated than she'd been for a long time. She told him about her life, about Maurice (mentioning his weak heart but not his heartlessness) and about her house.

'A swimming pool? I envy you,' said Ken. 'I'd love a place with a pool.' At which point he'd looked her directly in the eye and said. 'You could always invite me round for a swim.'

Flattered, and only mildly shocked, Kathy had deflected the first pass, and the second soon after. She gave in at the third.

And that was how the whole thing started. For Kathy it was a delicious uninhibited clandestine adventure. She could hardly believe it when Ken had made his first protestations of love.

'Don't be ridiculous. I'm nearly old enough to be your mother.'

'I mean it. I want to marry you.'

When she confessed her infidelity to Maurice he didn't seem too concerned that he'd been cuckolded. 'Typical,' thought Kathy. 'He doesn't give a damn.' And yet he

refused to divorce her. 'It would cost me too much, Kath. We're stuck with each other, I'm afraid.'

'How I loathe him,' admitted Kathy to Ken as they lay in bed one afternoon. 'The only thing he loves is money. He must be worth five million by now. And what do I get? Nothing. Barely enough to live on.'

'Suppose he died?' Ken had said after a pause.

Kathy didn't get the message at first. Picking his way cautiously, Ken elaborated.

'He's got a weak heart. Didn't you say the doctor told him that a sudden shock could finish him off?'

Kathy was surprised how quickly she came round to Ken's way of thinking. It just proved how much she hated her husband. And he deserved it. Deserved to be hated and deserved to be murdered.

The plan was simple. Kathy was going out for the evening to see a friend. Under cover of darkness, Ken unlocked the back door with the key Kathy had given him and slipped upstairs to wait in a bedroom for Maurice to return home from work. Maurice went to the desk in his study, as Kathy had told her lover that he always did. Ken crept up on his victim and thrust a polythene bag over his head, holding Maurice's arms as he desperately tried to claw the bag away. Soon the struggle was over. Maurice's heart gave out even before he suffocated. Ken removed the bag and himself, locking the back door behind him on his way out.

There was only one tricky moment at the inquest. The coroner found that Maurice's blood showed lower levels of oxygenation than he would have expected. 'The only explanation I can think of is that perhaps Mr Clarke had a choking fit of some sort and that this induced the fatal heart attack.' The finding was that death was due to natural causes.

The grieving widow inherited the entire estate. Maurice's accountant put the total net value at just under eight million.

'Only five miles to go,' said Kathy.

'Yeah.' Ken was only half listening. He was secretly congratulating himself. Everything had worked out just as he'd planned it. He'd realised some years previously that the only way to get big money without having to work for it or stray outside the law was to marry it. He'd bided his time with Kathy. The gossips at the tennis club had told him that her husband was loaded and that she hated him. Ken had pretended not to be interested at first. Mustn't let her suspect. Then when the time was right he'd made his play. And she went for it. It was a pity they'd had to murder her husband to get him out of

the way, but even that little upset was a blessing in disguise. A divorce settlement wouldn't have been anywhere near so lucrative.

Next phase. Stick with Kathy for a while. Satisfy her physical needs while working out how to cheat her out of her money. Then whoosh. Away. Off round the world pursuing the pleasures of the flesh. Great.

'What's great, lover?'

Ken realised he must have spoken out loud.

'The thought of two weeks in Hawaii with you, Kathy.' You pathetic, wrinkled middle-aged old bag.

'I love you.'

I love me too. And I love your money.

The minibus in the westbound outside lane was doing eighty, but so was most of the other traffic. And like most of the other drivers, Lennie was far too close to the car in front. He had also worked his way through four cans of beer and was about to start the fifth. He lifted the can to his lips and his eyes caught the brand name on the can. Power. The TV jingle floated into his mind. He turned to face his mate in the passenger seat.

'Hey, I'm a man and I drink Power.'

It was unfortunate that that was the moment that the car in front braked suddenly. His passenger screamed out a warning but Lennie's alcohol-befuddled brain was slow to react. Then in panic he stamped on his brakes and whipped the wheel round to the left. The minibus hit the side of a forty ton artic and bounced back with such force that it careered right over the crash barrier onto the opposite carriageway, rolling over and over. Lennie vaguely saw an upside down white car, impossibly close, and through its windscreen two faces agape with horror and then . . . nothing.

'It's a bit messy sarge. A minibus went over the central barrier upside down and hit a car coming the other way. Three fatalities. The minibus driver and the two in the car. White Ford Sierra. They didn't stand a chance . . .'