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DOROTHY SIMPSON

Winner of the
Silver Dagger Award
and author of
WAKE THE DEAD



no LAUGHING MATTER

AN INSPECTOR LUKE THANET NOVEL



Dorothy Simpson

NO LAUGHING
MATTER

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NO LAUGHING MATTER

ALSO BY DOROTHY SIMPSON

The Night She Died

Six Feet Under

Puppet for a Corpse

Close Her Eyes

Last Seen Alive

Dead on Arrival

Element of Doubt

Suspicious Death

Dead by Morning

Doomed to Die

Wake the Dead

To Keith and Olwyn

I wish to express my gratitude to Stephen Skelton for allowing me to visit the award-winning vineyard at Tenterden, Kent, where he is winemaker, and especially to his assistant Chris Nicholas, who was so generous with his time and expertise at the busiest period of the year.

ONE

Thanet drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, scowling at the stationary line of tail-lights which curved away ahead of him. He glanced at the dashboard clock. Twenty to eight already. Bridget's train was due in ten minutes and he wanted to be there, waiting on the platform, when she arrived. He thought he had allowed plenty of time – at this hour of the evening the streets of Sturrenden were usually relatively deserted. There must have been an accident.

The approaching wail of an ambulance siren confirmed his guess. And yes, ahead of him, rhythmic pulses of blue light irradiated the sky, reflecting off the windows of the houses on the other side of the street, on the bend. Perhaps he should do a U-turn, make his way to the station by another route? Come *on*, he breathed. Move!

Miraculously, almost at once the furthest tail-lights disappeared around the curve in the road as the line of cars began to crawl past the scene of the accident. There was no time for Thanet to catch more than a glimpse of the Ford Cortina slewed across the road, the motorcycle half under its front wheels, the dazed figure sitting head on hands on the kerb and the stretcher already being loaded into the ambulance. Ben ought to be seeing this,

thought Thanet grimly. Perhaps he'd stop nagging us to allow him a moped.

He arrived on the platform with a minute to spare, his mind now entirely focused on Bridget again. What was wrong? For the hundredth time their brief telephone conversation ran through his mind.

'Dad? Look, is it all right if I come home for a few days?'

'Yes, of course. But . . . Are you all right? Is anything wrong?'

'I'll be down on Friday evening, then.'

'What time? I'll meet you.'

'Lovely. I'll catch the 6.15. Thanks, Dad. See you then.'

And the phone had gone down, cutting off further inquiries.

It must be something to do with Alexander, thought Thanet. This was Bridget's wealthy, successful ex-public school boyfriend. She had been going out with him for over a year now and Thanet's initial misgivings over the difference in their backgrounds had gradually given way to acceptance. But he still had reservations. It was evident that Bridget was head over heels in love with Alexander but Thanet wasn't so sure of Alexander's feelings for her. He was fond of her, yes, but sufficiently fond to make a commitment? Thanet doubted it, and in one respect this was a good thing. At twenty Bridget was still very young. But if Alexander had broken it off . . . Thanet couldn't bear the thought of the heartache she would suffer. It was all very well to say that once your children were grown up they were no longer your responsibility and had to fend for themselves. They were still a part of you, always would be, and their joys and sorrows would always be yours, to a greater or lesser degree. And in

Bridget's case . . . Ah, here came the train. Thanet steeled himself. Yes, there she was. He walked briskly up the platform to meet her. She looked pinched and pale, he thought, diminished somehow, and in his opinion inadequately clad for a raw October evening in cotton trousers, T-shirt and thin cardigan.

She attempted a smile, kissed his cheek and handed over her psychedelic green and orange squashy bag.

'All right?' he said, trying to avoid too searching a scrutiny of her face.

Her eyes met his, briefly, then slid away as she nodded.

Well, he had no intention of pressing her. She could confide in them – if she chose to confide in them at all – in her own good time. They drove home in silence.

Joan heard the car and opened the front door to greet them. In response to the question in her eyes Thanet shook his head. *Nothing, yet.*

Joan gave Bridget a quick hug. 'Have you eaten?'

'I had a sandwich at Victoria.'

'Coffee, then?'

'Yes, lovely.'

They spent the next couple of hours watching television, trying to pretend that nothing was wrong, the air full of unspoken questions. When the ten o'clock news came on Bridget stretched and stood up. 'I think I'll go up, if you don't mind. It's been a pretty hectic week.'

Bridget, going to bed at ten p.m.? Unheard of! They concealed their dismay behind understanding nods and smiles.

'I think I'll burst if we don't find out soon,' said Joan as they listened to their daughter climb the stairs, her dragging footsteps a painful betrayal of her state of mind.

'The last thing she'll want is to be bombarded with questions.'

‘Really, Luke, I meant no such thing. But a little parental concern . . .’

‘She knows we’re concerned! Give her time. She just needs a breathing space, that’s all.’

The phone rang. Joan pulled a face. ‘Must be for you, at this time of night. I’ll make some tea.’

Thanet went to answer it reluctantly. He felt sluggish, depressed about Bridget, disinclined to do anything but have a hot, soothing drink and fall into bed.

As he picked up the phone Ben came in, slamming the front door behind him. At sixteen, already an inch taller than his father and with a physique to match, he seemed incapable of doing anything quietly.

‘Sis home?’

Thanet pointed up the stairs and flapped his hand for silence, pressing the phone closer to his ear. ‘Sorry, what did you say?’

‘It’s Pater, sir.’

Despite his lethargy of a moment ago, Thanet’s scalp pricked. The Station Officer wouldn’t bother him off duty unless it was important.

‘Yes? Oh, hold on a moment, will you?’ Thanet covered the receiver, exasperated. ‘How d’you expect me to have a telephone conversation with all this noise going on?’

Joan had emerged from the kitchen. Ben was already halfway up the stairs and she was calling after him. ‘She’s tired. She’s gone to bed.’

Ben looked astounded. ‘At this hour? Anyway, I’m only going to say hi.’ He took the rest of the stairs two at a time and they heard him knock on Bridget’s door, the murmur of voices.

Joan shrugged and went back into the kitchen.

‘Sorry, Pater,’ said Thanet. ‘Go on.’

'Patrol car responding to a 999 call has just radioed in for assistance. Suspicious death, sir. Could be murder.'

'Where?' Already the adrenalin was starting to flow.

'Sturrenden Vineyard. It's out on the —'

'I know where it is. Any more details?'

'Not yet, sir.'

'Right, I'm on my way. SOCOs notified?'

'Yes, sir. And Doc Mallard.'

'DS Lineham?'

'I'll ring him next, sir. And the rest of the team.'

Thanet put the phone down, went to the kitchen door.

Joan was screwing the top on to the Thermos flask. 'All right, I heard.' She handed him the flask. 'I wonder how many times I've done this.'

Thanet grinned and kissed her. 'I shouldn't start counting, it'll only depress you.'

Sturrenden Vineyard lay four miles west of the town, on the Maidstone road. As Thanet drove through the quiet streets he tried to recall what he knew about it. Very little, he realised, except that it was there and had become an increasingly thriving business. The Thanets drank very little and had never actually bought any wine there, nor had either of them gone on any of the vineyard walks or guided tours. Just as well, perhaps? He would be approaching the place with a completely open mind . . . No, not true, he realised. There was something he'd heard about the owner, what was his name? An odd name, but he couldn't recall it. Anyway, it was something unsavoury, he was sure . . . He frowned into the darkness. No, it was no good, the memory eluded him.

Ten minutes later the first notice appeared. 'STURREN-DEN VINEYARD 100 YDS ON R.' and shortly afterwards the illuminated sign came into view, a curved arch spanning the entrance. Thanet paused to look at it.

STURRENDEN VINEYARD
AWARD-WINNING ENGLISH WINES. FREE TASTINGS.
VINEYARD TOURS.

Details of opening times were given below in print too small to be legible at night. Bunches of grapes linked by vine leaves decorated each end of the board.

A car was approaching from behind as Thanet swung across the road and through the wide entrance gates. The car flashed its lights and followed suit. Lineham's Escort, Thanet realised. In the car park they pulled up side by side next to Mallard's old Rover. There were a number of other cars in the extensive parking area – a couple of police cars and several which presumably belonged to the vineyard.

'Nice white Mercedes over there,' said Lineham wistfully. 'This place is doing all right, by the look of it.' He and Thanet had worked together for so long that by now greetings were superfluous.

Thanet nodded. Lineham was right. The Mercedes aside, even by night all the signs of substantial reinvestment were there: fresh tarmac, new fencing and a general air of order and prosperity. Over to the right, set well back behind a tall, dense yew hedge, was a sizeable period farmhouse, lights blazing out their message of crisis from every window. Ahead, their roofs a looming darkness against the night sky, was a substantial cluster of farm buildings. Between two of the nearest barns there was a lorry-width gap in which stood a uniformed constable, clearly visible in the light streaming from the buildings on either side. As they drew closer Thanet could see that the one to the left had been converted into the vineyard shop, the one to the right the office.

'Evening, Tenby,' he said. 'Which way?'

The man half turned to the left and pointed. 'In that big building there, sir. The bottling plant. He's in the laboratory.' He paused, swallowed. 'It's a bit of a mess, sir.'

Thanet's heart sank. He always dreaded the first sight of the corpse. There was something so poignant about the newly dead, separated by so short a span of time from those who still lived and breathed. Although he had succeeded remarkably well in concealing this weakness from his colleagues Thanet always had consciously to armour himself against that first, awe-full moment. And if the death had been really violent, if there was a lot of blood and 'mess', as Tenby put it, the ordeal was ten times worse, Thanet's over-active imagination visualising those last agonising minutes before the victim was released to merciful unconsciousness. But forewarned was, to some extent, forearmed. 'In what way?' he said calmly.

'Looks as though the victim fell through a window, cutting his throat in the process. There's a lot of blood about. And glass everywhere.'

Bad, but it sounds as though I've seen far worse, thought Thanet. 'Do we know who he is yet?'

'Owner of the vineyard, sir. Chap called Randish.'

Of course! Randish, that was the name. And Thanet remembered now where he'd heard it. He wondered if Lineham would.

The sergeant had, of course. 'Randish,' repeated Lineham as they walked through the wide passageway into a big yard some sixty feet square, surrounded by buildings. 'That's the bloke I told you about, remember? A couple of years ago? Louise was worried about one of the mothers in Mandy's playgroup, she'd noticed bruises, usually in places where they weren't easily spotted, and she suspected the husband was knocking her about. She'd

tried to get the woman to open up, but she wouldn't and Louise wanted to know if there was any way we could help her.'

'Yes, I remember. And we said no, there wasn't. If the wife chose not to lay a complaint against her husband, there was absolutely nothing we could do about it.'

'So. Interesting,' said Lineham. 'Incidentally, what did Tenby mean "laboratory", sir? What do you need a laboratory for, on a vineyard?'

Thanet shrugged. 'No idea.' He had come to a halt and was looking around, trying to absorb the geography of the place. There was a lot to take in.

The whole of the right-hand side of the yard was taken up by the building PC Tenby had pointed out, the bottling plant. This was a relatively new construction, presumably purpose-built. Huge sliding doors stood open, spilling light into the yard. Thanet caught glimpses of tall stainless-steel vats, complicated machinery and, to the right, some of his men moving around near an open door to an inner room, the laboratory, presumably.

Straight ahead on the far side of the yard was an open-sided building. Harsh strip-lighting shone down upon a cylindrical stainless-steel structure some twelve feet long – a press, perhaps? – standing to one side, opposite a couple of trailers. A tractor, with a third trailer still attached, stood in between. Obviously the grapes were driven straight into this area from the vineyard beyond. Of course, at this time of the year they must be in the middle of the grape harvest, their busiest period. The floor glistened wet, as if newly hosed down.

Thanet became aware that Lineham was shifting from one foot to the other, trying to contain his impatience to get on and into the heart of the activity behind them. He was aware, too, that although he genuinely felt it impor-

tant to take time to absorb his initial impressions of a place, part of the reason for this delay was his reluctance to proceed to the next stage. But it couldn't be put off for ever; he might as well get it over with. With a quick, comprehensive glance at the other buildings, at whose use he couldn't even begin to guess, he sighed and turned. 'All right, then, Mike. Come on.'

Lineham set off with alacrity, Thanet trailing behind.

Inside, the huge space was divided lengthwise by a plate glass wall, on the far side of which was the bottling plant, its tiled floor and walls spotless, the machinery of the plant itself gleaming hygienically. To the left of the double doors stood the row of vats which Thanet had glimpsed earlier, and two shorter rows of huge oak barrels supported by stout, crossed stretchers. The open door to the laboratory was in an inner wall to the right of the double doors and Thanet's stomach gave an uneasy heave as he noticed a pool of vomit nearby. A couple of SOCOs were talking to two patrolmen. As Thanet and Lineham approached a flash went off inside the laboratory.

'Bit tricky in there at the moment, sir,' said one of the SOCOs to Thanet. 'Never seen so much broken glass in my life. We took all the shots we needed of the body and then thought we'd finish taking the floor first so we could sweep up a bit.' He handed Thanet and Lineham some heavy-duty plastic overshoes.

They put them on.

'We'll be careful,' said Thanet. 'Just take a quick look.' He turned to the patrolmen. 'Who discovered the body?'

'Chap called Vintage. He's the assistant winemaker here.'

'Appropriate name,' said Lineham, with a grin.

Thanet shot him a quelling glance. *This is no laughing matter.* At once, he regretted it. He was being unreasonable.

Amongst policemen an apparently inappropriate levity was often a safety mechanism against the sordid reality of much of their work. He was too tense. The sooner the next few minutes were over, the better. 'Where is Vintage?'

'Down at the house, sir, with the victim's wife.'

'Right. Doc Mallard's still here, I gather?'

'Should be nearly finished by now.'

'Good.' He couldn't put it off any longer. Thanet took a deep breath and stepped inside, glass crunching beneath his feet. His brain photographed the scene, fixing it indelibly in his memory: an oblong room with high wall-benches swept virtually bare; and broken glass, everywhere, in chunks, shards and splinters, mostly colourless but with here and there a glint of green.

And blood.

Blood spattered on the floor, blood glistening on pieces of glass, blood smeared on the wall beneath the window, blood saturating the shirt-front of the man who lay in a half-seated position slumped against that wall, head at an awkward angle. Above him yawned a huge, jagged hole in the window. Despite the fresh air streaming in there was a slightly acrid underlying smell of fermenting grapes. The atmosphere seemed still to reverberate with echoes of the violent scene which had played itself out in this white, clinical room so short a time ago.

Behind him, Lineham whistled softly. 'Someone lost his temper here, all right.'

Lineham was right. Only a furious, ungovernable rage could have created this kind of wholesale destruction.

Mallard, crouched near the body, looked up. 'Bit of a mess, eh, Luke?'

Thanet nodded, bracing himself for a closer look, and