

DEAD END

As the gates of Barlow Prison snapped shut, Phillip Jordan raised his arms and shouted, 'Freedom at last after five long years!'

Two weeks later he entered the office of Milton's Estate Agents to make arrangements to view number ten, Arcadia Avenue which over the years had been rented out to various tenants but was now vacant and up for sale. The agent, a nice bright-looking girl dressed in a dark-blue uniform, turned the key in the lock, pushed the door open and said, 'It's all yours Mr. Jordan. Take your time and have a good look round. I'll wait for you in the car.'

The floorboards creaked as he walked along the hallway and a faint odour of cat assailed his nostrils. Opening the door of the sitting room, Phillip saw a bay window overlooking a small garden and the morning sunlight dappling the bare boards. Within the ornate surround of the fireplace was an empty grate which made him feel cold. It certainly brought memories flooding back to him. He saw again the two of them relaxing on the fireside rug, the love-making and the passion reaching its peak. Then he heard again that name falling from her lips. It was not his? But whose? Again he could hear the recriminations, the angry words too awful to take back. He recalled the horrible blurred moment when he had choked the life out of her. He saw her nude figure lying there and himself cowering by the fire - one life extinguished, the other ruined for ever. Shaking himself free from the horror, he recaptured the room in his mind's eye; the wall-to-wall red Axminster carpet, the warm glow of the brown leather three-piece-suite, the deep velvet curtains and the clock on the wall ticking their lives away. It was a room where they had felt happy and at peace with the world. Then she had had to spoil it with that name.

Giving the room a last glance, he turned and made his way out of the house, locking the door behind him. The girl smiled at him as he returned the keys and said, 'Can I drop you off anywhere, Mr. Jordan?'

'No. It's alright,' he replied. 'I'll walk back to the Hotel, thank you.'

Back in his room in the hotel, he sat on the bed and thought about his visit to Arcadia Avenue. He had not mentioned to the Estate Agent that he had once lived there. There had been no point. He poured himself a stiff whisky from the bottle he had bought at the Off Licence, hoping it would erase the haunting memory of the room. As he drained the glass, he saw her face at the bottom, mouth wide open with terror at the moment when he choked the life out of her. He dropped the glass in panic on the floor. Yes, he had paid his dues for the crime - ten years in prison and now out on parole. Yet in one unguarded moment it had all come back to haunt him. He would never be rid of the nightmare.

He lay on the bed and slept, the empty sleeping-tablet bottle clasped in his dying hand.

Bob Mather