

# **Speechless**

**An Inspector Marco Thriller**

**Stephen Puleston**

## Chapter 1

Grey clouds drifted over the early-morning sky as the city stirred. Looking out over the Bay I warmed to the prospect of my first day off in a week, lunch with my parents which meant my mother's *ravioli con funghi*, enquiries about my health and complaints that I didn't visit enough.

Yesterday's unread supplements sat on the worktop behind me and two tickets for Cardiff's premiership game against Chelsea that afternoon were propped against the Gaggia coffee machine which made a comforting hissing sound. After the match I'd have dinner with Trish, tell her about lunch and roll my eyes describing my mother's comments before returning to the flat and freshly laundered sheets.

It promised to be a typical Sunday until Boyd rang.

'Boss, there's a floater in the Taff.'

'Who's the duty inspector?'

'Inspector Hobbs and he's investigating a rape in Grangetown. He told me to ask for you.'

'Is there nobody else?'

'Sorry, boss.'

I fumbled for a pen in the drawer under the worktop before tugging at a piece of paper from a notepad and writing down the details.

'The ambulance and the fire brigade are on their way,' Boyd said.

'When will they arrive?'

'Half an hour.'

I looked at my watch and knew that after the body had been fished from the Taff and the formalities concluded in the morgue I'd be at my parent's home in good time for lunch.

I was chewing on a piece of toast and watching the espresso dribbling into a cup when my mobile rang. Trish's number appeared on the screen.

'Missed you last night, John.'

'And me you,' I said. 'But I was so tired I couldn't walk straight. Your mum okay?'

'Yeah, she's fine. Are you still all right for later?'

'I'm looking forward to it. But I've just had a call about a body in the Taff.'

'I thought you were off duty?'

'So did I but I should be finished mid-morning. How about coming with me for lunch?'

'I wouldn't want to come between an Italian boy and his mother now would I?'

I rang off and swallowed the last of the cold espresso. I tidied the kitchen and checked around the flat. I chose a pair of well pressed denims, a red cotton shirt and from the bottom of the wardrobe, a pair of brogues with a deep brown shine. Before I left I picked up the remote for the television and fiddled with the controls until I'd pressed the right button to record *Top Gear*. By the mirror near the apartment door I drew a hand through my hair and pulled on a light fleece before walking down to the car park.

I found an Elvis CD in the glove compartment of my Mondeo and pushed it into the player. I turned the volume up, 'Heartbreak Hotel' filled the car, and I fired the engine into life. The traffic was quiet as I passed the tinsplate works, thin plumes of white smoke drifting from its chimneys. A patrol car— lights flashing, siren blaring shot past me, followed by a couple of taxis heading for the hotels in the Bay.

I stopped at the traffic lights by the prison, a dark Victorian relic, and watched as a couple of joggers ran in front of the car. I turned towards the centre of the city

and overtook a council refuse lorry crawling along the street collecting the Saturday night rubbish. Eventually I spotted the fire engine as it drove down into Wood Street and I followed it towards the Taff and the Millennium Stadium. The tender flashed its lights before stopping behind an ambulance and I pulled up on the pavement a little way behind it. I walked over towards two paramedics standing by the railings, peering down into the river.

Boyd walked towards me sipping from a take-away plastic cup. The wind whipped round the stadium and cut through the fleece, but the sun managed to warm my face. Empty burger boxes and chip papers blew around the concrete under my feet.

The fire tender's reversing alarm sounded and the paramedics stopped their chatter and turned to watch. I stepped up to the railings and looked down into the Taff.

The body was floating face down, caught by a piece of wood wedged against an outfall dribbling a dirty coloured liquid into the river. A heavy, fishy smell hung in the air. The tender finished its manoeuvre and parked by the railing. The fire crew and paramedics were joking and talking as though fishing a dead body out of the river was an everyday occurrence.

'There it is, boss,' Boyd said.

He leaned over the railings and pointed towards the Bay. The sound of the outboard was clear and we watched as an inflatable bobbed up and down. A diver dropped into the water from the small boat and once he'd secured the corpse, raised his hands to the crew above him.

The tender hummed into life and the cradle lifted clear of the river, a stream of dirty water cascading onto the surface. The fire crew lowered it onto the concourse,

and I stepped towards the body. I looked down and then up at the troubled faces of the paramedics.

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'I have never seen anything like it.'

Dr Paddy MacVeigh sounded as though he had something else to say so I stood and waited. The paunch that strained at Paddy's white coat suggested that late-night curries and too much lager had gone into developing the spiders of burst blood vessels on his face. He looked down at the corpse in front of him, the clothes were sodden and small pools of brown water had gathered on the mortuary slab. He lent forward and looked up at me.

'Have you seen his mouth?' he asked.

I shook my head and looked down at the bloated features of the face.

'The tongue's been cut out,' he said.

'Are you sure?'

He gave me an exasperated stare.

'Of course I'm sure. We found the tongue in his pocket.'

'What!'

'It was cut out somehow. I'll show you,' he said, turning to a trolley by his side.

I held up a hand. 'Thanks, Paddy, but you keep it.'

I felt a tacky sensation in my mouth. I drew my tongue over my lips and realised that without my tongue, I couldn't eat, or speak, or wet my lips, or ...

'Can you tell if it was cut out before he was killed?' I said.

'Should be able to, once we've finished the tests,' he said without any emotion. Then he reached over, picked up the dish with the tongue, and looked at it as though it were a rare orchid on the verge of extinction.

'The tongue is really fascinating,' he said, tilting his head to one side. He opened his mouth to continue.

'I need a smoke,' I said, making my way towards the door.

'But we're not finished.'

I pulled the door open and as it closed behind me I heard him say that I had to stay as the Senior Investigating Officer and that I should know better. I found the small office at the end of the corridor, opened a window, and let the fresh air fill the room. From my rear pocket I took out a crumbled packet of cigarettes and placed the first of my five-a-day between my lips. I sparked my Zippo into life, just as Paddy came through the door.

'You know it's illegal to smoke in here.'

'So call the police,' I said.

'Very funny,' he said sitting in the chair by the desk. 'I've never seen that sort of injury. Must be some sort of ritual.'

The mortuary assistant came in clutching a tray of belongings that he dropped onto the table before turning his back and walking out.

'Michal Dąbek,' Paddy said.

'Is that his name?'

'Polish identity card and drivers licence in the pocket with the tongue.'

I felt relieved that someone else had found the identification. The Poles had moved to Cardiff by the thousand once the regulations allowed. The hotels and bars

were full of them and the factories paying minimum wage couldn't survive without them. I looked down at the tray and wondered if there was anything else to his life.

I started picking at the contents of the tray. There was a leather wallet, a Polish identity card and drivers' licence and some loose change. The mobile was an old Nokia, its sides scratched. A red handkerchief was a sodden mess.

'Any chance of forensics from the body?' I asked, still pushing at the contents of the tray with a biro.

Paddy shrugged. 'Difficult to tell. Depends how long he's been in the water.'

'Cause of death?'

'You're joking,' he said. 'Strangulation would be a wild guess.'

'OK, OK ... You know how it is.'

I drew on the last of the cigarette and tossed the butt-end out of the window. I pulled on a pair of latex gloves, opened the leather wallet, and emptied the contents. A wedding band and a cross on a chain fell out. Tucked under a flap in a small pouch was a brass key. There was a member's card for the Rhymney library, a season ticket to the sports centre, also in Rhymney, an old cinema ticket and then a family photograph taken by a bench in a forest. I could make out two men and a woman all in their thirties drinking from tall bottles of beer, broad smiles on their faces.

'Is this him?' I asked.

Paddy mumbled a reply.

I turned the image round in my fingers. I tried to guess who the people might be, but the rear didn't help – no date, or name. The clothes looked modern so I guessed the younger man was Dąbek.

From the inside compartment of the wallet I pulled out a slip of paper but as I unfolded it the damp material tore. I cursed under my breath and laid out the remainder on the office table. The words were faded and all I could make out were figures in various columns.

Paddy finished on the computer and stood up.

‘You coming to watch?’

‘Give me a minute – I’ve got an urgent call.’

He buttoned up his jacket and headed back to the mortuary. I found the mobile in my back pocket, tucked against the tickets for the game. I pressed the speed dial button and my mother answered.

‘Really sorry,’ I said. ‘I won’t be able to see you for lunch. Something urgent came up. A body in the Taff.’

‘But you said—’

‘There was nobody else.’

She paused and I could hear my father in the background asking her what was wrong. She shouted at him not to interrupt her.

‘Look after yourself, John, and make sure you get enough to eat. You’re working too hard.’

My mother always thought I worked too hard.

As I walked over to the mortuary I could hear classical music and when I pushed open the double doors, the sound of an orchestra thundered through loudspeakers.

‘Wagner,’ Paddy shouted. ‘I can’t work without it.’

‘I prefer Elvis myself.’



Paddy gave me a brief smile and got straight back to work. Once he was finished he heaved a sigh and looked up at me with a satisfied look in his eyes, from a man contented with his lot in life.

He promised to send me the report and warned me I'd have to wait for the results of the forensic tests. I trundled outside pleased to escape the suffocating atmosphere of the mortuary. The sun was warmer, the wind had died down and the day was beginning to take shape. I had Michal's possessions in a plastic pocket in my left hand, and the car keys in my right when my mobile rang. I reached the car, put the plastic pocket on the roof and picked up the call.

'Marco.'

'Boss, where are you?'

'By the car.'

'What you are doing now?'

'Get to the point, Boyd.'

'Is the floater called Michal Dąbek?'

I stopped to take a breath.

'How the fu—'

'I've got his boyfriend in the office now.'

## Chapter 2

Queen Street police station was long past its demolition-by-date but it had a homely feel like an old jacket you couldn't face giving to the charity shop. I punched in the security code and let myself in. On the third floor I pushed open the door to the CID office and met Boyd who was fidgeting with the water dispenser.

'Dąbek's boyfriend came in first thing,' Boyd said. 'He got suspicious when Michal didn't return this morning.'

'Why didn't he report it last night?'

Boyd shrugged.

'What's his name?'

'Kamil Holter.'

'How did he take it when you told him we'd found the body?'

'He went to pieces. He started sobbing and crying.'

I walked over to my office, put the bag of exhibits on the table and slumped down on the chair by the desk. Stale air hung in the room so I got up and opened the window, hoping the smell of chip fat and curry spices from the restaurants in Queen Street hadn't lingered all night. Working night shift in the summer was the worse, when the stink could drill its way right up to the highest reaches of my nostrils.

Boyd had followed me, notebook in one hand, and water beaker in the other. I knew that Boyd's every instinct was to wear a suit and tie so it must have been difficult getting accustomed to my shabby-chic-casual look. That morning he had a pair of navy denims and a white button down shirt, the sort Marks and Spencer sell by the million, and a tie. A dark blue version with red spots.

Normally the first thing we had to do was to secure the crime scene and preserve the evidence but not knowing where Michal Dąbek died made that difficult. All we could do was wait for the forensics results. In the meantime we had a bag of exhibits and a tongue in the lab.

‘Is that all of the exhibits?’ Boyd asked, pointing at the plastic exhibit wallet.

‘And his tongue. It was cut out.’

He crumpled his face.

‘So what’s the story from the boyfriend?’ I asked.

At five foot eleven Boyd was a couple of inches taller than I was, and several inches more round the waist and chest. Boyd’s straight hair was combed neatly back off his face and it reminded me of how I’d always wanted a fancy haircut to attract the girls, instead of the unruly wavy mass brushing my collar.

‘Dąbek’s tried Michal’s mobile last night but it didn’t answer. Then he called at Michal’s bedsit first thing this morning. They don’t live together, at least that’s what he said, boss.’

Now we had the basics about his life, where he lived, who his lover was but the photograph in the exhibits wallet and the key to some cupboard or cabinet might tell us more. I glanced at my watch; I still had plenty of time before the game.

‘Where is he?’ I asked.

‘He’s in interview room three.’

‘Has he eaten anything?’

‘The uniformed lads got him some chips earlier, but he left most of them. He said he wasn’t hungry.’

I drew a hand over my mouth and thought about the ravioli my mother would be making now. The smell of the mushrooms and herbs would linger in the house

and I could imagine her shaping the pasta with a lightness that years of practice had perfected.

I guessed lunch would be another bag of chips or a pasty from the chippy down the road. But there was always the burger van by the gate to the City of Cardiff Stadium before the game and I was having dinner with Trish so maybe I should skip the chips.

It was a short walk down the corridor to interview room three. I heaved open the door and looked down at the frightened face of Kamil Holter chewing his lip.

He wore a thin, white, v-neck sleeveless top that opened half way down his chest. From the bottom of the V small specks of grey hairs protruded. His hair was trimmed neatly, his face so pale and his cheeks so hollow it looked like something had sucked all the goodness from his body.

After a flaccid, lifeless hand shake he carried on chewing his lip.

'Detective Inspector Marco,' I began.

He blinked hard and nodded an acknowledgement.

'I understand you knew Michal Dąbek.'

Another nod.

'What was your relationship?'

He flashed me a frightened look, ran his tongue over his lips, and sipped on a beaker of water.

'We were friends ... good friends. He was my ...'

'Boyfriend?' I said.

After half an hour Kamil stopped and drew breath, relieved at telling someone what had happened. He had been with Michal for three months but their relationship had been a secret, even from their closest friends. They both worked in an electrical

components factory on one of the industrial estates on the outskirts of the city. It was minimum wage but they still managed to send money home to their families in Poland.

‘Do you know where Michal went last night?’

He brushed away a tear. ‘He work hard. It is not fair.’

‘Where did he go last night?’

‘I not know for sure. He not tell me.’

‘Where did you think he was going?’

He tossed his head to one side and looked away. ‘Michal not tell me everything.’

‘You must have some idea.’

He avoided my stare. ‘I come for better life.’

I decided to try another approach. I opened the exhibits bag and picked out the photograph, pushing it over the table.

‘Is this Michal's family?’

He squinted, then gave out a small whimper.

‘His mother and father.’

‘Do you know where it was taken?’

He shrugged and pulled out a pouch of roll-your-own tobacco.

‘No smoking,’ Boyd said.

‘It looks like a forest somewhere. Where is it?’ I asked.

‘I not know.’

I asked about Michal’s parents and although Kamil had never met them it sounded like he knew them from the intimacies Michal had shared with him. Kamil could probably have told us their dates of birth and their favourite meals.

I pushed over the small key. He raised his eyebrows and a flicker of recognition passed over his eyes. He moved his hand towards the key and then drew it away.

'Do you know what this is for?' I asked, half-believing he knew the answer.

'It is key.'

'Don't be clever.'

Kamil gave me a hurt look. 'Like I say Michal not tell me everything. I not know what it is.'

'Well, has he got a cabinet in his flat?'

He shook his head.

'Does he have a cupboard where he works?'

Another shake of the head, this time slower. I looked at my watch, trying to justify not visiting Michal's flat and thinking that Boyd could do it on his own or that we could leave it until the morning. And thinking that I really didn't want to miss the game and that today was supposed to be my day off. But there was something about Kamil, something that wasn't right that made me realise I had to be present.

He threw his hands in the hair, 'It could be anything.'

'So where did Michal go last night?'

'He was working.'

'What at the factory?'

Kamil looked away again.

'Sometimes he work part-time, in club in town.'

I moved my chair closer to the desk.

'Which club is that?'

'*Four Seasons.*'

Boyd whistled under his breath.

*Four Seasons* belonged to Frankie Prince.

And that meant trouble.

### Chapter 3

'How's it going?'

Dave Hobbs could make the most innocuous question sound mysterious. He sat on a chair in the main office, his feet propped on the desk and as he stared at me his eyes bulged.

'I hear it's a murder enquiry,' he said.

He rolled his 'r's' and softened every vowel and I longed to imitate his North Walian accent back to his face but I'd probably find myself at the wrong end of a bullying complaint.

'Early days, Dave.'

'It should be my case. I was the duty DI.'

'The post mortem's been done and we've just finished interviewing the next of kin.'

Calling Kamil the next of kin stretched it but I wasn't going to let Hobbs think there was any scope for interference.

'It's all under control, Dave. How was the Grangetown rapist?'

His lips twitched – the best attempt he could make at a smile.

'Waste of time. The WPC is with the girl now. Saturday night date that went wrong.'

'We'll have the floater cracked in no time.'

I glanced at Boyd and he nodded confirmation. Hobbs narrowed his eyes and I knew he didn't believe me but there was nothing he could do. I could see his mind working, cursing himself for having passed up on a murder investigation for a rape that was going nowhere. It would be back to burglaries and thefts for him next week.



But he was thinking of every angle to get the case reassigned. I'd seen the look before and decided that I had to talk to the superintendent. Hobbs adjusted his tie, moving it back and forth before returning it to its original position and then he pushed out his chin.

'Going to the game, Dave?'

'Reports to write,' he said, lifting his feet off the desk before standing up and turning on his heels.

I walked over into my office and sat down on the chair. I could hear the activity from the takeaway restaurants preparing for another day drifting up from across the street. I glanced at my watch and realised I had to get moving with the search of Michal's bedsit. But first I had to see Superintendent Cornock.

It was a short walk through the corridors to his office and once I'd knocked I heard a muffled shout. Cornock was leaning over a tank of goldfish when I entered, not the sort you buy in a bag at a funfair but large multi-coloured ones that looked well fed.

Spencer Cornock had a short back and sides in the old fashioned way and his shirt was white and the tie a solid blue colour. In fact his shirt was always white and he always wore a dark blue suit and it was difficult to tell if it was the same one each day.

'Good morning, John.'

'Morning, sir.'

'Fish are very soothing you know.'

I nodded.

'That's why they have them in doctors' waiting rooms.'

He obviously went to a different surgery to the one I used. All I could bring to mind was a waiting room with stacks of out-of-date magazines and the sound of babies crying and the coughs and splutters from chronically sick people. Cornock lived in Cyncoed, where houses were detached and trees lined the roads, where the doctors had more time for their patients and presumably their waiting rooms had tanks with tropical fish.

'I took a call this morning about a body in the Taff. Down by the Millennium Stadium.'

He stepped back towards his desk and sat down before giving me a quizzical look. 'I thought you were off duty.'

'Dave Hobbs was the duty DI but he didn't want to take the call. He went to Grangetown for a domestic.'

He pinched his lips and his eyebrows almost met above the top of his nose. I continued, rather pleased with the reaction. 'I've done the post-mortem and collected the exhibits. And we've interviewed the next-of-kin, well sort of.'

'Sort of?'

'The dead man's boyfriend. He was really cut up.'

'Can he do the identification?'

'He should do. But there was a Polish identity card on the body.'

'Ah,' he said. 'The realities of modern Europe, John. Keep me informed.'

I got up to leave and as I did so I told him about Frankie Prince.

He gave me a wintry gaze. 'Be careful, John.'

I mumbled a reply and left Cornock, who picked up an expensive looking pen and looked down at the mass of paperwork on his desk. It was the best I could have achieved in the circumstances as procedure made it clear that once a senior officer

had been allocated to a case it wasn't normally reassigned. I smiled as I thought what Cornock might make of Hobbs turning down a murder investigation for a domestic.

Passing an open window I saw dirty coloured clouds drifting over the sky and hoped that any rain would keep away until after the game. Boyd was turning a set of car keys in his hand when I walked up to his desk.

He looked bored. 'Ready, boss?'

We collected Kamil on the way to the car park and after Boyd bleeped the unmarked police car we climbed in. Kamil looked pleased to be leaving the station. We threaded our way through the city centre towards Newport Road and then took a right towards Splott. Kamil sat in the back, dead quiet.

Along the streets delivery vans were disgorging boxes of clothes and trinkets for the pound shops. Children on small bikes toured the pavements surrounding the terraced houses. I knew that most of the East Europeans in Cardiff had found their way to the cheap bed-sits owned by landlords who crammed two into a bedroom.

After twenty minutes Boyd pulled over and parked.

'Is this the place?' I turned to Kamil who was leaning forward.

'Yes.'

I pushed the palm of my hand towards him. 'Let's have the key then.'

He put two Yale latch keys into my hand.

'The one with green tape is for front door,' he said.

I pushed a small rusty gate to one side, and choosing the right key opened the front door. Two old bicycles were propped up against the bottom of the staircase, the air smelled stale and vinegary.

'What's that smell?' Boyd asked.

'Red cabbage and sausage,' Kamil said. 'Polish delicacy. My favourite.'

The smell lingered in my nostrils and my mouth took on a strange salty sensation.

'Where's Michal's room?' I said.

Kamil pointed upstairs. 'Second floor.'

A threadbare carpet covered the stairs and the handrail rattled against the spindles. The smell subsided as we reached the second floor.

'It's through here,' Kamil said, leading the way.

A plastic number seven hung at an angle in the middle of the door. I fumbled for the key.

I took two steps into the room, Kamil immediately behind me. Covering the bed were the contents of several flimsy wooden drawers thrown in a pile by the window. At the far end of the room the doors of the makeshift kitchen units hung limply from their carcasses, bottles and sprays spewing out over the floor.

When Kamil saw the destruction he put his hand to his mouth and said something in Polish – it sounded hard, I didn't need a translation to understand what he meant. Boyd pushed his way past Kamil and he let out a low whistle.

'Better call the CSIs,' I said to Boyd.

Kamil walked round the bed, piled high with ripped clothes and the remains of cushions and pillows.

'Don't touch anything,' I told him as he lent down and fingered a piece of clothing. He looked me in the eye and stood up. 'This is a crime scene,' I said, raising my voice.

Boyd stepped back into the room. 'On their way, boss.'

I walked over to the wardrobe, a decrepit wooden variety, good enough for firewood, and pulled open the doors. Some old T-shirts, with Polish designs, were draped on hangers, all cut to ribbons.

Kamil bent down and picked up a box with a fancy purple-speckled cover. He fidgeted with the green ribbon on the top of the box.

I looked over at him and said, 'I thought I told you ...'

And then he screamed.

The box shook in his hand as he gulped for air. I stepped over the discarded piles of clothes and took the box from his hand. I looked down and for the second time that day I saw a dismembered tongue.