

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.

'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.

Brass in Pocket

An Inspector Drake mystery

Stephen Puleston

Prologue

He watched them leave the police station and drive away. He inched the stolen car out of the lay-by and followed them. An hour into their shift he watched them stop and question a speeding motorist. He knew the driver would get booked, even if he were just over the speed limit.

Soon, they were on the move again.

He could set his watch by their routine. He knew where they would be heading halfway through their shift. They parked on the grass verge of a junction on a long, straight section of road, waiting. From his vantage point, he could make out the driver pointing the speed gun towards the oncoming traffic.

When they drove away, empty handed, he heard them joking with Area Control on his radio scanner. He followed them. When he got too close, he fell back. Sometimes he parked a safe distance from them, listening to the messages.

Later, they stopped for petrol. He parked in the shadows, out of sight of the CCTV cameras on the forecourt. From the car he saw them laughing and joking with a girl behind the counter. An open-topped sports car drew up and a tall woman wearing a short skirt stepped out. He watched as they eyed her filling the car. Then they pulled off the forecourt; an indicator light pulsed as they stopped at the kerb. He saw the driver scanning for traffic, before driving away.

He lingered a few moments before firing the engine into life.

After the pubs closed, they drove on, past the boarded-up buildings and fish and chip shops, full of hungry customers, before parking and waiting for drunk drivers. He parked his car as near as he dared. He sat patiently, counting down the time to his first telephone call. He could feel his pulse increasing with anticipation.

He picked up one of the mobiles sitting by the MP3 player on the passenger seat. On the scanner he heard a voice relaying a message and moments later they pulled away. It was dark now as he followed them over the long causeway and, fearful they might notice him, he slowed and watched as the taillights of their car moved away from him. To his left, through the darkness, he saw the moon's reflection on the surface of the estuary and on his right the dark shadow of the causeway wall.

After a few miles they pulled into a lay-by. When he passed them, he listened to their crackled speech on the scanner, complaining about the hoax.

He pulled into a junction and made another call.

He heard them receive the message from the Area Control Room. He drove on to the Crimea Pass through the narrow streets of the deserted town. The road out was clear. He sensed the presence of the mountains towering either side of him as he accelerated towards the top of the pass.

He parked and got out of the car, opened the boot and reached for the long coat, carefully threading his arms through the sleeves. He leant down again and moved a blanket to one side, before closing his fingers round the cold metal.

Far down the valley, he saw the lights of their vehicle approaching. Soon, very soon, they would arrive. His mouth was dry; his heart pounded.

As they approached, he knelt by the rear tyre, out of sight.

Their car slowed, the hazard lights flashed, and they parked exactly where he knew they would. He walked to the front of his car and then towards them.

Perfect.

Chapter 1

Tuesday 1st June

After the fourth ring Ian Drake hauled himself out of the warm bed and picked up the phone. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, the night air chilling his skin. It must be a domestic, he thought.

‘Drake.’

‘Inspector Drake?’ He didn’t recognise the voice.

‘Area Control Room. We’ve got two officers down on the Crimea Pass.’

‘*What ...?*’

‘Two officers have been killed. Responding to a routine call.’

He glanced at the clock on the bedside table. It was a little after two and he had slept for barely an hour. Beside him Sian was stirring.

‘When did this happen?’

‘Call just came in, sir, from the local station.’

‘Who’s the senior officer on duty?’

‘Superintendent Price. He’s on his way.’

‘What are the details?’

‘Sir, I was just asked to call you.’

‘But you must have more details ...’

The news curled a knot in his stomach, but he knew that Area Control staff just made the calls; he would have to talk to Price.

‘There’s a car on its way, sir.’

The phone went dead.

Drake scrambled about the bedroom, dragging on clothes discarded earlier. He mistimed thrusting his leg into his trousers and fell to the floor. Sian moved as he sat on the side of the bed, struggling with his shoelaces.

‘What’s wrong?’ she mumbled.

‘I can’t believe it ...’

‘What’s happened?’

‘Two officers have been killed on the Crimea Pass.’

‘Policemen?’

Drake nodded.

His wife sat up, hair dishevelled, eyes wide. ‘It can’t be true.’

Before Drake could continue, the front doorbell rang, followed by a loud banging.

‘That’ll be the car,’ Drake said, as he ran for the stairs.

The young officer standing outside the front door – head shaven, high-visibility vest – looked tense and alert, his eye contact direct. He turned and Drake followed him down the drive to the white BMW idling on the road. Opening the rear door, he mumbled an acknowledgment to the driver before closing the door behind him. He listened to the first officer radioing confirmation of their location and as the light in the cabin dimmed, Drake saw the flickering lights of the dashboard and noticed, with approval, the clean, sanitised smell. On the A55, the main trunk road that crossed North Wales, the driver accelerated hard. Drake checked his safety belt as they passed the occasional lorry and slowing car, pulling over to let them past. He fumbled through his jacket, knowing he had calls to make.

Detective Sergeant Caren Waits woke moments before the alarm clock went off and reached out to silence it before the noise disturbed Alun, sleeping by her side. He had been up three

nights running and now it was her turn. Padding downstairs, she pulled on a pair of old boots and grabbed a torch before walking out over the fields. She drew the zip of her fleece up under her chin, thrust her hands into the warmth of the pockets and saw the outline of the shed against the moonlight. Then she saw the long necks of the alpacas moving slowly in front of her. The animals had not been well but were improving, and, once she had checked them, she would be back to the comfort of her bed. She ran her hand down each alpaca's warm, woolly back, the light from her torch reflecting in their eyes, before returning to the farmhouse, pleased that Alun could sleep on undisturbed.

Her BlackBerry rang as she closed the back door. The screen said *DI Drake*.

'Morning, sir.' She made a point of sounding wide awake.

'Oh ...'

'I was awake.'

'Two officers are dead on the Crimea Pass.'

'What? Oh my God ... Who?'

'I've just left Colwyn Bay. Super Price is en route.'

'Are they Traffic?'

'No details. Get ready. We'll be through Llanrwst in fifteen minutes.'

It looked like being another long day – longer than usual: most days she slept until seven. After washing in lukewarm water, she drew a brush through her hair before waking Mike.

'I've got to go to work.'

His voice slurred underneath the bedding. 'What time is it?'

'Just after two.'

He pushed his head above the duvet, his hair a tangled mess. 'What?'

'Drake's just called.'

‘And what did Mr Personality want at this time of the morning?’

‘Two officers have been killed.’

‘What ... I mean where – who?’

She brushed her lips against his cheek, his stubble rough against her skin. ‘I’ll call you later.’

The car turned off the A55 onto the narrow, deserted roads of the Conwy valley. The driver ignored the speed restrictions. Drake shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

‘Do you lads know any details about what’s happened?’ he asked.

The officer in the passenger seat answered.

‘Nothing yet, sir. Our orders were to get you there – fast.’

Drake sat back as the driver swept the car down the valley. He glimpsed the moonlight as it caught the surface of the river, casting long curves of light into the trees and hedges that lined the riverbank. The car slowed through the narrow streets of Llanrwst, eventually pulling to the kerb to collect Caren, standing on the pavement. The officers grunted an acknowledgment when she got into the car before the driver accelerated away.

‘What are the details, sir?’

‘Two officers responding to a routine call.’

‘When did it happen?’ Caren stared at Drake intensely. ‘Who are they? Are they Traffic or from the local station?’

‘Area Control sounded shocked when they spoke to me.’

‘Who would want to kill two cops? I can’t believe it.’

Drake sat back, averting his eyes from the heads-up display as he gathered his thoughts.

The deaths of two police officers would make international news. He shuddered when he recalled the media attention the deaths of other police officers had received but two officers killed together would mean intense press activity.

Drake had driven over the Crimea Pass once before and he knew the bleakness of the windswept terrain and the landscape disfigured by generations of slate mining. It was isolated and inhospitable: not the place for a drive-by killing or opportunistic attack. The implications sent a shiver through Drake.

He knew they were making good time. He peered out at the darkened houses and empty streets of the villages as they approached the Crimea. The radio message from the marked police car parked at the bottom of the pass was clear.

‘No vehicles ahead. You’re clear. Over.’

The driver threw a switch on the gear stick and the car accelerated hard. The heads-up display said one hundred and twenty miles an hour. Drake averted his eyes. The BMW’s headlights pierced the darkness as it raced to the top of the pass. Drake leant forward and saw, in the distance, the stark, blinding lights of the generators.

Chapter 2

Tuesday 1st June

The seat belt cut into Drake's shoulder as the car braked hard, stopping a few yards from the Scientific Support Vehicle. The yellow tape marking the inner perimeter of the crime scene flickered in the artificial light. After leaving the car they passed an Armed Response Vehicle, its boot open, empty of rifles. Drake looked towards the white police Volvo, the tailgate and passenger door open, the lights blazing.

The scene was eerie, almost unreal. Beyond the open tailgate of the Volvo, traffic cones and warning triangles were set out in no apparent order. Superintendent Wyndham Price stood with Mike Foulds, the crime scene manager, who was busy fastening the buttons of a white one-piece suit as Drake and Caren joined them. Price looked at Drake, his eyes hard.

'Ian, this is a nightmare, unbelievable ...' Price said.

'Who are they?' Drake asked.

'Paul Mathews and Danny Farrell,' Price replied. 'From Traffic.'

Drake looked over at the car. 'Let's get started.'

They walked over to the patrol car and gazed in at the officer sitting in the driver's seat, head thrown back, his body twisted to one side. A dark stain had spread over the white fabric of his shirt from a jagged wound in the centre of his chest.

Caren gasped when she noticed the face of the dead officer. The left eye socket was a mass of mangled tissue and bone. Blood had saturated the head restraint, drenched the officer's shoulder and covered the rear seat. Drake guessed he had been trying to escape when he was shot.

They moved round to the passenger side. The second officer was sitting on the tarmac, his back resting against the rear door. His stab jacket was open, the plastic tie hanging loose from one side of his collar. His shirt was a sodden, blackened mass of cloth and the right eye stared out blankly – the other eye socket was unrecognisable, blood drying sticky down his cheek. Drake knelt, but he could sense the bile gathering in his throat, so he straightened up and faced Price.

‘This is worse than I could imagine,’ Price said.

‘Who found the bodies?’ Drake asked Foulds.

‘Call from a passing motorist. Then a team from the local station responded.’

‘Where are those officers?’

‘In their car, over there.’ He motioned past the yellow tape. ‘Really cut up. One of them threw up all over the tarmac.’

A mobile rang and Price dug into the pocket of his jacket for his phone. He strode away, his voice loud. Drake looked down at the body on the tarmac, and then through into the car. It seemed like the car had been sprayed a deep crimson colour. The knot of anger returned. Two of their own.

Behind them two vans from the dog section drew to a halt. The handlers jumped out and hurried to the rear of their vehicles. Drake heard the yelping of the dogs as the doors opened and the animals bounded out onto the tarmac.

‘Get everyone over here,’ he said to Caren.

She passed the generators into the semi-darkness, emerging moments later with the two armed officers. Drake saw the light dancing off their shaven heads and they hefted their rifles, grimly scanning the darkness, although Drake knew that the killer had long since left. Perhaps they had passed him on their journey up the valley. He might have been parked, waiting for them to pass, before returning to the safety of his home. Drake considered his first

move. Someone with a reason to kill two traffic officers would mean trawling through the lives of both men. The possibility of a terrorist attack couldn't be excluded, but this was a killing on an isolated mountain pass.

Soon a crowd had gathered around Drake: the armed response officers, the dog handlers, pulling at leashes, straining to keep the animals in check, and the two officers who had driven Drake and Caren to the scene. Foulds stood with the CSIs behind him – Price was still talking into his phone. Drake scanned the faces before him; there were twitching jaw muscles and tired eyes and wide-legged postures, but everyone listened intently. Drake raised his voice above the noise from the generators.

'Let's get the dogs onto this first.' Drake pointed over at the car.

'We'll need the torches from the vans,' one of the officers said.

Drake glanced at his watch. 'My guess is that daybreak will be in an hour.'

Caren fiddled with her mobile and stared down at the dim light on the screen.

'Quarter to five this time of the year, sir,' Caren said, raising her head and sounding pleased with herself.

Drake muttered an acknowledgment and continued. 'We need to secure the scene fully before the press can get anywhere near.' He turned to Foulds. 'How long until you get the tent finished?'

'Twenty minutes.'

'And the pathologist?'

'Due any time.'

Caren twisted the top off a bottle of water and drank a mouthful, before offering it to Drake. He put the plastic bottle to his lips and drank half of it without stopping. He heard a vehicle pulling up beyond the perimeter tape and recognised the duty pathologist leaving the

patrol car. Dr Lee Kings, a small, thickset man with large glasses, marched over towards Drake.

‘Inspector Drake,’ he said formally. ‘Terrible business.’

‘I know, Lee. We need to get the results as soon as.’

‘Of course.’

They walked over towards the car and watched as the CSIs hauled a tarpaulin over the frame covering the vehicle. The pathologist knelt by the driver’s side as Caren and Drake looked on. They could still hear Price’s voice booming into his phone as he approached.

‘Could be terrorists, sir,’ Caren said, making sure no one else could hear her.

Drake grimaced. This was worse than the worst-case scenarios they were taught at management training sessions. He knew the standard operating procedures for a terrorist incident would mean Special Branch and the Secret Intelligence Services getting involved. There would be reports to write, liaison officers to keep informed, and everything would be dragged into paperwork ten feet thick.

Drake felt the chill of the night air on his face and a cold apprehension – almost fear – filled his mind, as the realisation that the Wales Police Service had lost two of its own hit him again.

‘Let’s get the forensics finished before we jump to any conclusions.’

The pathologist worked silently, moving his hands over the body until he exposed the narrow wound, drilled into pink flesh speckled with grey hairs. He straightened up and moved away from the car, pushing the glasses back up his nose.

‘Well, Lee?’ asked Drake.

Price suddenly materialised at Drake’s side. ‘We need to know how this maniac shot these officers. Was it a pistol?’

‘I ...’ Lee Kings paused.

‘Come on, we don’t have time to waste,’ Price pressed him.

‘I’m not certain—’

‘Of what?’ Price said, a note of incredulity in his voice.

‘Time of death?’ Drake suggested.

The pathologist drew breath and stood up. ‘No. Two hours maximum. And it wasn’t a gun.’

‘What do you mean?’ Drake this time.

‘It looks like a bolt of some sort ...’

Drake saw the intense expression on Kings’s face.

‘You must have some idea?’ Price asked.

‘Small piece of metal, like a dart. Never seen anything like it,’ Kings said. ‘The post mortem will give us a better idea.’

With the pathologist finished, the serious work could begin. Drake glanced at his watch. If Caren was right about the time of sunrise, then soon it would be first light and the generators could be turned off. The CSIs would have to search the car until every inch had been examined. He knew the painstaking fingertip search of the road would take hours. The first glimmer of morning sunshine climbed over the mountains as the silhouettes of the steep cliffs formed. A photographer adjusted the settings on his camera which was screwed down to the top of a tripod. Price finished his final call and came up to stand next to Drake and Caren.

‘This is the most serious crime I have ever dealt with,’ Price said, his voice matching the hard, cold surface of the tarmac. ‘We’ll commit everything we have,’ he continued. ‘Killing police officers is, well ...’ He struggled for the right words.

And he looked Drake straight in the eye.

‘It’s an attack on society itself.’

Drake nodded. Caren stood quite still hands thrust deep into her pockets listening to Price

They walked round the car, stepping over the kerb, avoiding getting too close.

‘This is a desolate place. Why here?’ Drake said, squinting into the darkness, noticing the tips of the mountains streaked orange.

Drake passed the CSI team photographing the vehicle from every angle, and he walked towards the cones and warning triangles set out for several metres behind the Volvo. The camber of the road banked from the centre and some of the cones had fallen over onto the tarmac.

The image of the dead officers wouldn’t leave his mind. The bodies appeared staged. His mind tried to process the thought as it developed. He walked past the cones, down the hill before turning to look back at the car. Something was out of place, he knew it. He motioned to Caren.

‘Who put these cones out?’

Caren looked blank.

He shouted to Foulds, who broke into a jog and joined Drake and Caren.

‘Get a photographer here. Now.’

‘The Traffic lads wouldn’t have done this,’ Caren said.

‘That’s what I’m thinking.’

Caren upended all the overturned cones as Drake directed the photographer. After a few seconds she stood back and called over to Drake.

‘Something you ought to see,’ she said, pointing at the surface of the tarmac.

Once all the cones and warning triangles were upright, the shape they formed was unmistakable.

The outline of the number four was clear.

Worse than Dead

An Inspector Drake mystery

Stephen Puleston

Chapter One

Frank Rosen hesitated outside his cabin door and ran a finger along the aluminium name plate that said 'Chief Engineer'.

After closing the door he stood looking at the bed, the wardrobe and the cupboard space; twice the size of his previous cabin. He allowed himself a brief smile. Only the captain had more accommodation. Rosen had a desk where the laptop had pride of place and the luxury of a comfortable chair at the foot of the bed. The room was bare of personal possessions, no family photographs, no personal mementos.

Rosen stripped off the one-piece white suit and hung it on a metal hanger in the wardrobe. He had a couple of hours to kill before the ferry turned around and headed back across the Irish Sea. The crossing to Dublin had been uneventful. Nothing had gone wrong but things rarely did. The ferry was almost full when it left Holyhead which meant targets had been met, money in the bank for the ferry company and a contented port manager.

He sat on the edge of the bed and dragged his feet onto the duvet. A Louis L'Amour novel sat on a ledge by the side of the bed. There was a dull hum in the room that disturbed Rosen's sleep on the first night of his seven day watch. It was the same pattern for a week. The ferry would plough back and forth across the Irish Sea. Before each crossing a manifest would be delivered telling the engine room staff how many articulated lorries were expected. There were always more before the weekend when fresh produce headed to the markets in Dublin and then paperwork to be completed for each crossing. He would get his meals in the crew galley, sitting with the captain mostly. Since the promotion he'd stopped sitting with the junior officers at meal times – wanted to make his mark. He'd call his wife, without much enthusiasm, every day, at a convenient time. He'd fill out his reports and answer emails to the port manager. Occasionally, a junior officer might want some help with a technical problem.

And there was Mary.

His mobile rang and he pressed the answer button before the ring tone had barely started – an annoying slurping sound he'd promised himself to change.

'When can I see you?' the voice was quiet.

Rosen could feel oil under his finger nails, and knew he'd have to shower before she came. He glanced at his watch.

'Give me ten minutes.'

The rest of the crew had cabins two decks below the officers that were smaller, the beds narrower and the furniture functional. The noise from adjacent cabins permeated through the bulkheads and down the corridors. Dirty linen was piled on the corridor waiting for housekeeping – everyone had tasks, after all.

He lay on the bed listening to his iPod, headshaking while he drew on a roll-your-own-cigarette that needed to be relit frequently. The air in the cabin was filled with the damp smell of sweat, unwashed clothes, stale cigarettes and cheap food. A carton from the galley that'd carried fish and chips had been stuffed into a metal bin and cans of cider and special strength lager were piled into one corner.

He knew he needed to clean. But why should he bother? Nobody every came into the cabin. And he could give it a quick wipe with a duster when his watch ended. He reached down beside the bed and picked up the can of cider on the floor and took a deep slug. The ship was alongside and he guessed that he had another half-an-hour.

It would be messy, but if he was careful everything would be just fine.

He drew a hand over his stubble. It had been three days since he last drew a razor over his chin. That morning the Load Master had given him a sullen glare when he walked over the car deck and he guessed that a reprimand would follow. But he never saw passengers. Never saw the drivers of the articulated lorries. He barely mixed with the crew, come to that.

A text bleeped his mobile into life – his only contact with the real world.

He flicked through the menu to the message section and read the text. He pressed the reply button and punched the words into the handset before throwing it to the bottom of the bed.

They were worried. They needn't be. He'd told them that.

He would see to it. It would be clean.

Late one evening the previous week they'd arrived at his home. He'd left the rear gate off the latch and was waiting in the kitchen when they pushed the door open. He motioned to the chairs by the table but they stood.

'Not going to be long,' one of them said.

He nodded.

'We've got a problem.'

It sounded like they couldn't answer a crossword puzzle.

They were right – they weren't long. The instructions were clear and then they left.

That night he sat alone in the darkness, sipping on a litre bottle of cider.

He was sitting alone again now drinking more cider. He picked up the can by the side of his bed, shook it around before realizing it was almost empty, then jumped off the bed and cracked another open. He had time enough. There were voices in the corridor as some of the crew came off watch and wandered down towards the showers.

He turned up the volume on his iPod and let the music crash around his ears.

Once he'd finished the can he stood up and belched loudly. He looked at himself in the mirror and drew his hand over his face and rubbed his head. There was a small basin which he filled with hot water before dowsing his face – a shower could wait until tomorrow.

He glanced at his watch. Almost time.

Frank Rosen leant over and kissed her on the forehead. Then on her cheek and then he curled his tongue round her ear. She murmured and drew her hand over the hairs on his chest until she found the puckered fold of skin under his shoulder. Her fragrance was soft and sweet and he moved his face down away from hers and kissed the fall of her breast. He took her nipple between his lips and she let out a faint whisper before pushing him away.

‘We need to be careful,’ she said moving away from him.

‘I know,’ he said moving towards her.

‘No, Frank. I’m serious.’

He tried kissing her neck but she threw back the duvet and left the bed.

‘One of the girls gave me a funny look this morning and stopped talking when I walked into the room. It’s never happened before and I’m sure I heard them mention her name.’

‘You’re imagining things,’ he said.

‘No. Frank,’ she sounded hurt.

Rosen watched as she dressed and gave her a smile as she swung her hips at him when she saw his face. Once out of bed he dressed quickly and then inched open the door before peering out, checking the empty corridor.

She kissed him on the cheek and slipped out of the cabin. He caught a glimpse of her thigh under her tight fighting skirt as she walked down the corridor.

Rosen slipped into his overall before gathering his paperwork and leaving the cabin. The last of the cleaning crew were finished buffing the floor as he crossed the deserted passenger concourse. There were ten flights of stairs to the engine room and once at the bottom he entered the main control area and cast his eye round the clear white surfaces and gleaming dials.

‘Chief,’ the second engineer said.

Rosen nodded, the title sounded good. They exchanged mundane small talk. Rosen glanced at his watch. He was early. It was important for him to set an example.

He watched the activity in the engine room below him. There was order and neatness and two of the young crew walked in, voices raised, until they saw Rosen and they stopped.

‘Chief,’ they both said in unison.

Behind them came an Able Seaman, his blue overall smeared with grime and an attitude to match. Rosen had little time for the AB’s – they were all Scousers who lived for the football teams of their native Liverpool and their week off.

‘Chief,’ he began. ‘The Load Master wants to see you. Urgent, like.’

The *like* came out as *lich* and Rosen nodded. He drew his sleeve back and saw the time. The Load Master better have a good reason for this. He had to be back in the engine room at least twenty minutes before they sailed. The car deck was up five flights of stairs and Rosen felt his chest tightening and his breathing getting heavy as he finished the last flight. In front of him was a pneumatic door and behind it he could hear shouting and the roar of engines. The hinge let out a hiss and then it thudded backwards as two lorry drivers, stepped through. They walked past Rosen continuing their conversation in Lithuanian or Polish – Rosen couldn’t tell them apart.

He stepped over the high threshold and smelled the exhaust fumes and diesel oil that filled the car deck. An articulated lorry with Irish plates negotiated the ramp down into the car deck, a couple of the ABs and the Load Master shouting instructions. The brakes hissed and the lorry jerked to a standstill.

‘Rosen.’

He heard his name and looked around for the Load Master.

He took two more steps into the car deck. There was a carrier with a dozen high-end BMWs stacked at crazy angles and nearby a refrigeration unit hummed. He looked around but saw nobody. He turned to his left and saw two trucks parked up against the side of the vessel.

The sound of a spanner crashing on the deck echoed to his left.

‘Rosen.’

Another faceless shout.

He walked down the side of the first lorry, certain he knew where the voice came from. The lorry had the name of a haulage contractor on the tarpaulin stretched over one side. He passed the rear of the first lorry and walked down alongside a second truck, a smaller, lighter version.

By the rear axle he saw a spanner on the metal deck in front of him. He could feel the warmth of the engine unit and smelled the rubber. The sodium lights glistened against the black paint of the cab and as he stepped into the gap he saw him.

‘What are you doing here?’ Rosen said.

The man stood legs astride and stared. He said nothing.

‘Where’s the Load Master?’

Rosen noticed the man was right handed as he stepped towards him, light catching on the blade of the knife. Rosen watched as the hand came up and the blade plunged into his chest. He looked down blankly and grabbed the arm attached to the knife until he felt his strength ebbing. In one swift movement the man removed the knife and plunged it deep into Rosen’s chest a second time.

Chapter Two

Ian Drake bowed his head and stifled a yawn. Then he tried to focus again on the inspector from Southern Division who had the unenviable task of making data protection sound interesting. He was a tall, thin man who wore a cheap suit and a battered white shirt with a tie that had an enormous stain – tea or tandoori, Drake couldn't tell. He glanced over at Caren Waits who was alternating between keen, intense stares at the speaker and scribbling notes.

Drake had often found himself sent on courses to Cardiff or Swansea after the police forces of Wales had been unified into one service. Today it had been the turn of officers from Southern Division to make the journey up north and over lunch Drake had become more and more annoyed as he'd listened to jokes about *sheepshaggers* from voices trying to mimic the North Wales accent.

Drake drank some water – maybe he was dehydrated and that was the reason for his lapse of concentration. He could ill afford to waste a day on this course. He had the appraisal of a junior officer to undertake, a pile of reports to read and a missing persons file to review. He felt the irritation building in his mind.

A piece of pastry from the lunchtime sausage rolls dislodged itself from between two teeth and roll around in his mouth. His father liked sausage rolls; he remembered that from his childhood – perhaps that's why he had scooped one onto his plate with the sandwiches and crisps at lunchtime.

'Data protection is central to our policing policy,' the inspector droned on.

Drake swallowed the pastry and could feel another yawn starting. He pulled the edge of the newspaper out from underneath the course materials and cast an eye over one of the difficult squares in the morning's sudoku.

'There are organised gangs in Nigeria, eastern Europe and China – all targeting our economy.'

Caren was still scribbling.

Drake watched another slide of the presentation that was full of text and bullet points. The inspector had a sing-song voice that made it difficult to concentrate. Nobody laughed at his jokes. He looked again at the sudoku and when he filled in one of the squares he felt pleased with himself.

Drake heard a noise from the rear of the room and a uniformed officer strode down towards the front and handed the inspector a slip of paper.

'I'm sorry for the interruption,' the inspector said before scanning the room. 'Urgent request for D.I. Drake to call headquarters.'

Drake got up and gave the inspector a look of feigned regret. Caren began sorting her papers, stuffing them into a black folder. Drake inched his way along the row of seats, mouthing the occasional apology to the others present.

The uniformed officer stood at the end of the row, he had a wide stance and broad shoulders, the sort of officer assigned to a late shift in Rhyl on a summers' night when temperatures ran high and tempers frayed.

'What's up?' Drake asked.

'Super Price wants to talk to you, sir.'

He led Drake and Caren out of the conference room and down a corridor to reception. He pointed into a small ante room and Drake found the telephone lying on the table.

'Drake.'

'I tried your mobile,' Superintendent Wyndham Price's voice sounded edgy.

'I ...ah. Must be in my coat.'

‘Inspector. I know you’re in an important seminar but there’s an emergency.’

‘Sir?’ Drake could feel his body relaxing at the prospect of leaving the presentation and the statistics about data protection crime. It wasn’t the same as proper criminals. There were victims of course, every crime had a victim, but these gangs seemed to operate in the ether, in cyber space.

‘I wouldn’t have called you out of the seminar but you’re the nearest senior officer.’

Drake gave Caren a knowing informed look.

The super continued. ‘On the one day when we’ve got all of the DI’s committed, a body turns up.’

‘Sir?’

‘D.I. Rogers is in court before that idiot of a judge in Mold and Geoff Parry is on a train to London for a conference in Scotland Yard,’ Price continued. ‘You’ll have to take the case.’

Drake hesitated. ‘Nobody else, sir?’

‘You’ve got an hour,’

His mind focused, the scene needed to be preserved and evidence secured. The Crime Scene Investigators would have to be in place.

‘There’s a ferry arriving in Holyhead in an hour. One the super ferries – full of lorries. They found a body.’

‘Isn’t it the jurisdiction of the Transport Police?’

‘Who? The BTP. You must be joking. Beyond their pay grade. They don’t do murder, Ian.’

‘They’re not going to be too pleased.’

‘I’ll sort it.’

Drake barely concealed the smile on his face as he left the room and then made for the exit without a second thought to the intricacies of data protection. Outside in the car park, Drake strode over to the Alfa Romeo GT and pointed the remote. The car beeped and the lights flashed. Overhead, dark clouds scudded across the sky and over the mountains to the east he saw dark columns of rain.

Within minutes they'd turned onto the dual carriageway and Drake fired the car westwards over Anglesey towards a darkening sky. Soon it was raining heavily and water hammered against the windscreen. He feathered the brake and the cruise disconnected. The car slowed and he peered through the blades as they swept back and forth.

After half an hour they crossed the embankment to Holy Island and the cooling tower of the closed smelter loomed out of the shadows. Drake followed the signs down to the port area. Two men were standing at the entrance, their heads lowered against the rain, wearing high visibility jackets, their hands stuck deep into pockets. Drake pulled up beside them and flashed his warrant card. There was a flurry of arms and then one of the men spoke into a radio. Soon a small van with flashing lights and the livery of the ferry company, painted over the side, parked in front of Drake.

'Follow that van, please, sir,' he pointed. Drake closed the window and drove off.

The van threaded its way over the concourse. The rain was still sheeting down and Drake caught a glimpse of the surface of the harbour teeming from the rain and tide mixing with a film of commercial diesel fuel. He saw the town to his left with its dilapidated buildings, the driving rain made it look depressing. It was a town

at the end of the line and the long wall along the boundary of the port seemed to shut it out from the activity in the harbour.

The van passed a large grey building on the harbour side and then turned towards a long flat section of concourse lined with articulated lorries. The flashing lights came on again and the van slowed as it neared a modern building. At the far end of the concourse a ferry was unloading. Another ferry was reversing slowly into a berth.

Drake parked alongside a police van from the port police and then left the car. Drake dragged on the Barbour lying on the back seat. He pulled the collar close up to his cheeks, ran over to the building, the rain soaking his face. Inside three phones were ringing and there were shouts from an office for somebody to answer the calls. Two uniformed officers acknowledged Drake. Moments later the door opened, Gareth Winder, and Rhys Jones entered, rain dripped off their jackets.

‘Got here as soon as we could,’ Winder said.

Drake nodded. ‘We’ve only just arrived.’

A man with a large chest and a swarthy beard, his whole upper body covered in an oversized high-visibility jacket emerged from the rear of the building – the phones continued to ring. Drake held out a hand, ‘DI Drake,’ he said before turning to Caren and introducing her. He began to take off the Barbour.

‘There’s no time for that now. She almost alongside,’ the man said.

‘What ...?’ Drake asked.

‘Need to get you down near the ramp and on first.’

They were outside again and Drake was certain the rain had intensified. It seemed to blot out the town and squinting into the distance he saw the shape of the ferry company’s offices towering over the harbour.

'Into the van,' the man said.

The man barely squeezed into the driver's seat, the jacket rustling against the chair. He struggled with the belt, before firing the engine into life. He drove in first gear down to the ramp. The ferry was finishing her manoeuvre, a siren sounded, more lights flashed, and the ramp descended into the stern of the vessel. They left the car and walked over to the top of the ramp.

Three members of the crew stood on the car deck as Drake strode down into the vessel. Despite the rain he could see their dark, intense stares.

A man with a wide jaw and a shaved head stepped forward

'Captain Marshall,' he said thrusting out his hand towards Drake.

'DI Drake. Where's the body?'

'Follow me,' Marshall said stepping towards the lorries parked on the deck.

'How many passengers are there?' Drake said.

'Not many. We were light this morning. All of the passengers are in the lounges on the top deck. What do we do with them?'

Drake turned to Caren. 'Sergeant Waits will take care of that.'

Marshall raised his hand and waved at another man in a high visibility jacket.

'Dave. Take Sergeant Waits up top.'

Drake heard the gears crunching on the Scientific Support Vehicle as it thudded into the ramp and began a slow descent into the bowels of the vessel. There was a deep grinding noise as the bow doors opened. It was the standard operating procedure, clearing the vessel of fumes, the captain explained.

They twisted past articulated lorries and trucks parked closely together and stepped over cables fastened round tyres. There was a heavy smell of diesel oil and

petrol fumes hanging in the air and the sound of the engines throbbed under the metal deck.

Drake thought of his father, probably because he loved visiting Ireland. Drake was still coming to terms with his father's cancer. It was only a matter of time before it would take him from them.

Marshall stopped below the cabin of a large articulated lorry.

'He's over there,' he said, nodding.

'What's the dead man's name?'

'Rosen. Frank Rosen. He was the chief engineer.'

'Who found the body?'

'One of the AB's – Able Seaman.'

Drake nodded. He walked over and knelt down, his shoes almost touching Rosen's feet. His head was tucked into his chin and lay on his chest. There was a large red stain on the one piece suit and the handle of a knife protruding from his chest had dark blotches along its length.

Behind him Drake heard the familiar sound of Mike Foulds's voice, turned his head, and saw the crime scene manager looking down at him.

'Mick,' Drake said.

'Has anyone interfered with the scene since the body was found?'

Foulds sounded edgy.

'No. We stopped anyone getting onto the deck once we knew.'

Foulds nodded and moved away, looking around, assessing the task in hand. Drake had been on cases with him before and knew Foulds always made sure everyone knew that he was in charge of the crime scene.

'All yours, Mike,' Drake said as he stepped back.

Drake could hear the bustle of the crime scene investigators behind the tyres of the trucks.

‘This could take hours,’ Foulds said.

Drake followed Marshall past the trucks back onto the car deck. It struck Drake that it was the first case ever when he knew who the killer was. Or at least where he was. The killer was on the vessel. They had all the suspects in one place. It was a matter of establishing the motive and opportunity. He could keep everyone on board until he had a confession. Simple.

Marshall was saying something that interrupted Drake’s thinking.

‘Inspector Drake. The Port Manager is on his way.’

‘What?’

‘The manager.’

Another tall man with a high-visibility strode down the ramp.

‘Who’s in charge?’

The accent was estuary English and a decibel too loud.

Drake held out his hand. ‘DI Drake.’

The man looked at Drake’s hand for a moment and then shook it.

‘How long will you be?’

‘As long as it takes.’

‘That’s no good.’

Drake stared at the man before replying. ‘Sorry?’

‘I’ve got a schedule to keep. Look at all these lorries. Perishable goods mostly. Massive claim against us if we can’t offload the ship.’

His tone suggested that arguing wasn’t an option.

Drake straightened a little. ‘What was your name?’

'Mortlake.'

Drake raised his voice above the humming of the engine noise. 'Mr Mortlake. This is a crime scene. I've got team of crime scene investigators beginning their work. There's a murderer on this boat.'

'It's a ship,' Mortlake said through gritted teeth.

'What?' Drake said.

The mobile rang in Drake's pocket; he reached in feeling the damp seams. He noticed the rain getting into his shoes and he worried that the bottom of his trousers would be sodden by the time they finished. He wasn't dressed for this – he should have been in a seminar this afternoon, not on the deck of a ship lined with engine oil having to debate who was in charge. It was a good suit and oil and grease would ruin the material.

'Can you come up here, sir?' It was Caren's voice.

Drake turned to the two uniformed officers standing on the ramp.

'Nobody goes off this ship, without my authority. Understood.'

They nodded and Drake gave Mortlake a defiant stare.

The stairwell to the top deck was wide and clean. Caren was waiting for him in front of two wooden framed doors, a sign above said *Irish Bar*.

'There's a couple of smart-arse passengers in there,' she tipped her head.

'Really?'

'Demanding they have to leave.'

Drake was in no mood for any further dissent and pushed the door open, clenching his jaw. Two hundred eyes turned towards him and he stood in front of the bar and cleared his throat before raising his voice.

'I'm Detective Inspector Drake. There's been a murder on this vessel earlier and until we've completed our investigation then nobody is leaving.'

He was about to continue when the door burst open and Winder crashed in.

'Something you need to see, sir. Now.'

Chapter Three

Clothes were lying in piles on the floor, the bed linen torn, pillows ripped to shreds.

Winder stood by the door as Drake stepped into the cabin. He walked to the bottom of the bed. He noticed the empty jewel cases and an Elton John Greatest Hits CD thrown into a corner. He snapped on a pair of latex gloves and picked through some polo shirts and boxer shorts. He fingered the front cover of a cowboy novel detached from the rest of the pages. Somebody wanted to find something badly enough to tear a paperback novel to shreds – desperate or angry or both.

Drake said to Winder standing by the door. 'Better get Mike Foulds up here.'

Winder nodded and left.

Drake knelt by the bed and flicked over more of the clothes with a pencil he'd found in his jacket. There was nothing to identify the occupant of the cabin, no photograph of a wife or girlfriend or children. Not even a newspaper. He stepped over to the small bathroom behind him. There was a heavy smell, the narrow shower door wet from recent use. He noticed the basin, mirror and fittings for an electric razor but no wash bag or bar of soap or shower gel. The bathroom had been stripped of personal belongings. They were probably under the clothes on the bed waiting for the CSIs.

It was quiet in the cabin as Drake waited for Foulds. They probably didn't have enough investigators to deal with everything. He walked carefully over to the window and peered out into the harbour, watching a small fishing boat churning its

way through the rain into the fish quay. He looked back over the discarded possessions just as Foulds stood by the door and groaned.

‘Somebody’s been busy,’ Foulds said.

‘How are you getting on?’

Foulds took a step into the room and reached for a pair of gloves.

‘Slowly. It could take hours.’

Drake nodded. Time is what they did not have. But he’d never had a case where he was so close to the murderer. He could easily touch him, speak to him, look him in the eye. Or maybe it was a woman. All he had to do was get all the passengers and crew into one area on the ship and demand a confession. It only happened that way on the television for *Poirot* or *Miss Marple*.

A crime scene investigator appeared at the door of the cabin and Foulds turned to him.

‘Andy, get to work here,’ he said before turning to Drake.

‘We need space on the car deck, Ian. Some of the lorries will have to disembark.’

‘I’ll come down with you.’

It took them a couple of minutes to descend to the car deck. Drake noticed the small office in the corner of the car deck. Mortlake stood near the cab of an articulated lorry and when he saw Drake he mouthed something to a crew member who immediately picked up a radio unit.

Drake strode over to the crime scene. Foulds looked worried and he pointed under the lorries behind him. ‘We need to move these wagons.’

Drake didn’t want to let anyone off the ship. He worried how he could manage the investigation with potential suspects leaving. He dreaded to think how many

foreign nationals might be on the ship. Could he confiscate their passports? Keep them in the UK until he was satisfied they had nothing to do with the murder?

'It's important Ian,' Foulds continued.

'Yes, of course. Get it done,' Drake replied thinking about the murderer sitting somewhere in the vessel.

Caren appeared on the car deck and started explaining to Drake what she, Winder, and DC Rhys Jones had been doing. They'd gathered names and addresses of all the passengers cross-referencing them with car registration plates and passports. Some of the passengers were getting restless and an old man with a cut-glass accent and halitosis complained that he had to get to catch a train to London for an urgent meeting. Drake could barely hear Caren once the first tractor unit had fired its engine into life.

Drake fished the mobile out of his pocket as he felt it vibrate.

'Drake,' he said.

He heard the voice of Wyndham Price. 'I've had the Port Manager on the phone.'

Drake glanced over at the office. Mortlake was standing in the doorway now, feet wide apart, a smirk on his face. Price continued as Drake muffled a hand over one ear hoping he'd hear everything Price was saying.

'He's complaining about the cargo on the ferry. I know this guy from a local business forum. He can make a lot of noise and his head is so far up his arse ... well you know the sort.'

Drake glanced over at Mortlake again – arms folded now. 'I know the sort, sir.'

'Go through the motions and leave him to me. Make certain you get the names of everybody on that ship.'

‘Of course, sir.’

Drake didn’t need the Superintendent to tell him how to do his job. He would get things done and done properly. Drake stood for a moment after switching off the BlackBerry. He knew that keeping everyone on the vessel was impractical and that he would have to let the passengers and lorries disembark. At least he would have the name, address and personal details of the killer. It would only then be a matter of time.

The noise from the engines was deafening and the car deck filled with the exhaust fumes. Drake and Caren stood by the office as the first of the tractor units lurched forwards pulling a container. It crawled over the deck towards the ramp and then upwards onto the harbour concourse. A second followed and soon the car deck was emptying of lorries. Each driver’s identification and home addresses was checked and double-checked – there were five Hungarians, four French men and ten Polish drivers amongst the fifty long distance lorry drivers. The smile on Mortlake’s face grew wider. Drake wanted to check and recheck everything until they had meticulous records were made of every human being that left the ship – Drake even insisted on photographs being taken of every face.

Drake left Caren with the officers on the ramp and walked back over to Foulds and the crime scene investigators working near the body. The car deck near the body was clear and the CSI team had been able to establish a proper inner perimeter for the scene. Foulds appeared more contented when Drake approached him.

‘Anything?’ Drake asked.

‘Oil and grease and diesel. But sod all else.’

‘Doc been?’

'No. Been delayed.'

'When you going to move the body?'

Before Foulds could answer his mobile hummed into life and he read the text.

'Andy's finished in the cabin.'

Drake said nothing but nodded at Caren and they left the car deck heading back up to Rosen's cabin.

Captain Marshall was standing outside Rosen's cabin when they arrived. There was pale colour to his skin and an apprehensive look in his eyes. The CSI was packing his equipment away and Drake peered into the cabin, seeing a resemblance of order.

'What was Rosen like?' Drake said to Marshall.

Marshall hesitated.

'Kept himself to himself.'

'Did you know him well?'

'Not really.'

The CSI hauled a box of equipment into the corridor.

'Did you get on with him?'

'Yes. I suppose so.'

'Don't the senior officers all work together?'

'Of course.'

'Why was he on the car deck?'

'Don't know.'

'Is that his normal place of work?'

'No. Of course not.'

'Any ideas then?'

Marshall looked at Drake.

'Look I have no idea why he was on the car deck. He should have been in the engine room. I took a hell of a risk leaving Dublin without the Chief in the engine room. Against all the regulations. It could mean disciplinary action. An inquiry, even.'

'But there wasn't a problem was there?'

'That's not the point.'

'Did he have any friends on the crew?'

Marshall looked puzzled by the question.

'I ... don't know.'

A junior officer walking down the corridor towards them caught Marshall's attention. 'And what do you want, Berkley?'

'I might be able to help.'

Marshall let his mouth fall open.

'How did you know Rosen?' Drake said now turning to look right at Berkely.

'He helped me with my studies.'

'How often?'

'Depends,' the man shrugged a little. He was barely twenty, his face still covered in pimples.

They stepped into Rosen's cabin.

The CSI and Marshall stood outside. Inside, order had been restored. The contents had been tidied and bagged. The chair was against the wall and the bed and mattress reunited.

Drake said to the CSI.

'Any personal possessions?'

The investigator gave him a sullen look. 'Not much to talk about. CDs ,wash bag. Usual stuff – toothbrush shaver etc ,etc.'

'Have you found his iPhone?' Berkley asked.

Drake and Caren looked at the investigator.

'And what about his laptop?'

Drake almost fell headlong at the bottom of the last flight of stairs in his haste to reach the car deck. Eventually he heaved open the door and stepped into the deafening sound of engines, air choked with diesel fumes, crew members gesticulating wildly raising arms with high visibility jackets, pointing and directing drivers towards the exit. He hurried over to the uniformed officers standing at the bottom of the ramp, heads turned away against the driving rain. He shouted instructions and they nodded confirmation, pulling the zips of their jackets tightly under their chins before turning into the wind and rain.

He walked over to the office at the far end of the car deck with Caren and stood for a moment watching the flickering images from the various CCTV cameras, suppressing his anger that he had not been shown the monitors before. Both screens were divided into four segments, each image tagged with the date and time. He stared at the two screens as though they had some hypnotic quality and it struck him that there might be a record of Rosen's last seconds of life. He heard voices behind him.

'Where do these record?' Drake said directly to the white suited crew member standing at the door.

'All over the car deck.'

'Anywhere else? And why the hell weren't we told about them before?'

Before the man could answer Captain Marshall appeared in the office doorway.

'Why have you stopped the disembarkation?'

The captain's jaw was sticking out more prominently and there was a faint dusting of white stubble. Drake raised his head and stared at him.

'I wasn't told about the CCTV images,' Drake said pointing at the screen. 'The record from the cameras could be crucial. We are talking about a man's life.'

'All the images are stored digitally,' Marshall began. 'I want to know about the disembarkation.'

'Where are they stored?'

'What?'

Drake squinted. 'The images from the cameras. I want copies of everything. I don't want anyone to have access to these computers without my authority.'

Captain Marshall gave Drake a tired look and nodded his acquiescence. Outside on the car deck the noise was diminishing, the fumes less intoxicating and the chatter more audible.

'Inspector Drake, I want to know why you've stopped the disembarkation.'

Drake straightened his posture, drew his shoulders back and stared at Marshall.

'This ferry is a crime scene.'

'And it's full of containers, mostly with perishable goods.'

'And whilst it's a crime scene captain, I can stop the disembarkation.'

'But...'

'Rosen's laptop is missing...'

'That could be anywhere...'

'And his mobile. So we'll need to search every lorry and car leaving the ship.'

'You can't be serious.'

Drake was clenching his jaw again.

'I've got special branch officers coming over to assist.'

'This could take hours.'

Drake glanced over at Caren.

'Caren. Close it down. No-one leaves.'