

PROLOGUE

You think about the kids.

First and last, in this sort of situation, in this sort of *state* ; when you can't decide if it's anger or agony that's all but doubling you up, and making it hard for you to spit the words across the room. First and last, you think about them...

“Why the hell, why the *fuck* didn't you tell me this earlier?”

“It wasn't the right time. It seemed best to wait.”

“*Best?*”

She takes a step towards the man standing on the far side of her living room. He moves back instinctively until his calves are squashed against the edge of the sofa and he almost topples back on to the carefully plumped cushions. “I think you should try to calm down,” he says.

The room is spotless and smells of pot-pourri. There are lines on the carpet showing that it has recently been vacuumed and the carriage clock that can be heard ticking loudly when the shouting stops, sits on a highly polished, pine mantelpiece.

“What do you expect me to do?” she says. “I'd really be interested to know.”

“I can't tell you what to do. It's your decision...”

“You think I've got a *choice?*”

“We need to sit down and talk about the best way forward—”

“Christ Almighty, you just march in here and tell me this. Casually, like it's just something you forgot to mention. You walk in here and tell me all this...shit!” She's begun to cry again, but this time she does not lift a hand to her face. She presses her eyes tight shut and waits for the moment to pass. For the fury to return, undiluted.

“Sarah—”

“I don't know you. I don't even fucking *know* you...”

Then, for a few seconds there's just the ticking, and the distant traffic, and the noise bleeding in from a radio in the kitchen, turned down low when she'd heard the doorbell. Inside, the central heating's working overtime, but there's still plenty of sun streaming into the room through the net at the windows.

"I'm sorry."

"You're *what?*" But she's heard him well enough. She smiles and laughs. She gathers the material of her dress between her fingers as her fists clench at her sides. There's something starting to twitch in her belly now ; a spasm taking hold at the top of her leg. "I need to get to the school."

"The kids'll be fine. Honestly, love. Absolutely fine."

She repeats his last word ; and then again, as a whisper. There's no stopping the tears this time, or the scream that comes from nowhere ; or the swell and the surge that takes her fast across the room, her hands clawed and flying at the man's face.

The man raises his arms to protect himself. He takes hold of the fingers that stab at his eyes, and, once he has them, as soon as he is in control of her, he tries to keep her still ; to guide her firmly away.

"You've got to stay calm."

"You. Rotten. Fucker." She snaps back her head.

"Please listen—" The spit hits him just above the lip and starts to run. He swears at her ; a word he rarely uses.

And she's pushed...

And suddenly she's dead weight ; falling back, and opening her mouth to cry out, and smashing down through the glass of the coffee table.

A few seconds' ticking. And traffic. And the buzz from the kitchen...

The man takes a step towards her, then stops dead. He can see it straight away.

Her back hurts, and her ankle, where she's caught them on the edge of the table as she's fallen. She tries to sit up, but her head is suddenly as heavy as a wrecking ball. The moan rattles from her chest, and her shoulders grind glass into the carpet beneath her. She lies, breathless, across the ragged jewels and slivers ; recognising a song from the distant radio at the same moment that she feels the warmth and the wetness at the back of her head. Spreading at her throat, and creeping down inside the neck of her sweater.

Shard...

She thinks for a second or two about that word ; about what a stupid word it is when you say it to yourself repeatedly. About her bad luck. How bloody unlucky can you get? Must have caught a vein, or maybe two. And, though she can hear her name being spoken, though she is well aware of the desperation, of the *panic* in the voice, she is already starting to fade and to focus ; concentrating only on the faces of her children.

First and last...

As her life ebbs quickly away – running red across smoked glass – her final thought is a straightforward one. Simple and tender and vicious.

If he's touched my kids, I'll kill him.

PART ONE

THE PUNCH COMING

LUKE

“I suppose that all I’m really saying is try not to worry. OK, Mum? That you don’t have to, I mean. Even sitting here saying that, I know how pointless it is, because it’s something you’ve always done. Juliet and me reckon that if you weren’t worried about something you’d probably feel odd, or under the weather, like part of you wasn’t working properly. You’d be disconcerted. Like when you know there’s something important you’ve forgotten to do, or when you can’t remember where you’ve put your keys or your purse, you know? If you weren’t worried, we’d be worried that you weren’t!”

“It’s all right, though. I’m actually doing pretty well. Better than ‘pretty well’ in fact.”

“I’m not saying it’s five-star or anything, but the food could be a damn sight worse, and they’re being fairly nice to me. And it’s only the second most uncomfortable bed I’ve ever slept in. Remember when we stayed in that shitty guest-house in Eastbourne that time, when Juliet had her hockey tournament, and the bed felt like it had rocks in it? And I am managing to get some sleep, amazingly enough.”

“I don’t really know what else to say. What else I’m supposed to say...”

“Except... If you want to video the comedy shows I like, that’d be cool. And don’t rent my room out straight away, and please tell everyone at school not to be too devastated. See? Well-fed, sleeping OK, and I’ve still got a sense of humour. So, really, nothing to get yourself worked up about, all right, Mum? I’m fine. Tell you what - when this is all finally sorted out, how about that PS2 game I’ve been going on about? Can’t blame a lad for trying, can you?”

“Look, there’s loads of other things, but I’d better not go on too long and you know the stuff I mean. Mum? You know what I’m trying to say, yeah?”

“Right. That’s it...”

The boy’s eyes slide away from the camera, and a man carrying a syringe steps quickly towards him. He sits up, tenses as the man reaches across, driving the bag down over the boy’s head in the few seconds before the picture disappears.

TUESDAY

ONE

There *was* humour, of course there was ; off colour usually, and downright black when the occasion demanded it. Still, the jokes had not exactly been flying thick and fast of late, and none had flown in Tom Thorne's direction.

But this was as good a laugh as he'd had in a while.

"Jesmond asked for *me*?" he said.

Russell Brigstocke leaned back in his chair, enjoying the surprise that his shock announcement had certainly merited. It was an uncertain world. The Metropolitan Police Service was in a permanent state of flux, and, where precious little could be relied upon, the less than harmonious relationship between DI Tom Thorne and the Chief Superintendent of the Area West Murder Squad was a reassuring constant. "He was very insistent."

"The pressure must be getting to him," Thorne said. "He's losing the plot."

Now it was Brigstocke who saw the funny side. "Why am I suddenly thinking about pots and kettles?"

"I've no idea. Maybe you've got a thing about kitchenware."

"You've been going on about wanting something to get stuck into. So—"

"With bloody good reason."

Brigstocke sighed. Nudged at the frames of his thick, black glasses.

It was warm in the office, with Spring kicking in and the radiators still chucking out heat at December levels. Thorne stood and slipped off his brown leather jacket. "Come on, Russell, you know damn well that I haven't been given anything worth talking about for near enough six months."

Six months since he'd worked undercover on the streets of London ; trying to catch the man responsible for kicking three of the city's homeless to death. Six months spent writing up domestics, and protecting the integrity of evidence

chains, and double checking pre-trial paperwork. Six months kept out of harm's way...

"This is something that *needs* getting stuck into," Brigstocke said. "Quickly."

Thorne sat back down and waited for the DCI to elaborate.

"It's a kidnapping—" Brigstocke held up a hand as soon as Thorne began to shake his head ; ploughed on over the groaning from the other side of his desk. "A sixteen year old boy, taken from outside a school in north London three days ago."

The shake of the head became a knowing nod. "Jesmond doesn't want *me* on this at all, does he? It's sod all to do with what I can do, or what I might be good at. He's just been asked to lend the Kidnap Unit a few bodies, right? So, he does what he's told and he gets me out of the way at the same time. Two birds with one stone."

A spider plant stood on one corner of Brigstocke's desk, its dead leaves drooping across a photograph of his kids. He snapped off a handful of the browned and brittle stalks and began crushing them between his hands. "Look, I know you've been pissed off and I know you've had good reason to be..."

"*Bloody* good reason," Thorne said. "I'm feeling much better than I was, you know that. I'm...up for it"

"Right. And until the decision gets taken to give you a more active role on the team here, I thought you might appreciate the chance to get yourself 'out of the way'. And it wouldn't just be you either. Holland's been assigned to this as well..."

Thorne dropped his head back and looked out of the window ; stared out across the grounds of the Peel Centre towards Hendon and the grey ribbon of the North Circular beyond. He'd seen prettier views, but not for some time.

"Sixteen?"

“His name’s Luke Mullen.”

“So the kid was taken...Friday, right? What’s been happening for the last three days?”

“You’ll get fully briefed at the Yard.” Brigstocke glanced down at a sheet of paper on the desktop. “Your contact on the Kidnap Unit is DI Louise Porter.”

Thorne knew that Brigstocke was on his side ; that he was caught between a loyalty to his team and a responsibility to the brass above him. These days, anyone of his rank was one part copper to nine parts politician. Many at Thorne’s own level worked in much the same way and Thorne would fight tooth and nail to avoid going down the same dreary route...

“Tom?”

Brigstocke had certainly said the right things. The boy’s age in itself was enough to spark Thorne’s interest. The victims of those that preyed on children for sexual purposes were usually far younger. It wasn’t that older children were not targeted of course, but such abuse was often institutionalised, or, most tragically of all, took place within the home itself. For a sixteen-year old to be taken off the street was unusual.

“Trevor Jesmond getting involved means there’s pressure to get a result,” Thorne said. If a shrug and a half-smile could be signs of enthusiasm, then he looked mustard-keen. “I reckon I could do with a bit of pressure at the minute.”

“You haven’t heard all of it yet...”

“I’m listening.”

So Brigstocke told him, and when it was finished and Thorne got up to leave, he looked out of the window one last time. The buildings sat opposite, brown and black and dirty-white ; office blocks and warehouses, with pools of dark water gathered on their flat roofs. Thorne thought they looked like the teeth in an old man’s mouth.

Before the car had reached the gates on its way out of the car-park, Thorne had slotted a Bobby Bare CD into the player, taken one look at Holland's face and swiftly ejected it again. "I should make sure there's always a Simply Red album in the car," Thorne said. "So as not to offend your sensibilities..."

"I don't like Simply Red."

"Whoever."

Holland gestured towards the CD panel on the dash. "I don't mind *some* of your stuff. It's just all that twangy guitar shit..."

Thorne turned the car on to Aerodrome Road and accelerated towards Colindale tube. Once they hit the A5 it would be a straight run through Cricklewood, Kilburn and south into town.

Having criticised Thorne's choice of music, Holland proceeded to score two out of two by turning his sarcastic attentions to the car itself. The yellow BMW – a 1971 three litre CS – gave Thorne a good deal of pride and pleasure, but to DS Dave Holland it was little more than the source for an endless series of 'old banger' jokes.

For once, Thorne did not rise to the bait. There was little anyone could have done to make his mood much worse.

"The boy's old man is an ex-copper," Thorne said. He jabbed at the horn as a scooter swerved in front of him, spoke as if he were describing something extremely distasteful. "*Ex-Detective Chief Superintendent Anthony Mullen...*"

Holland's dirty-blond hair was longer than it had been for a while. He pushed it back from his forehead. "So?"

"So, it's a bloody secret handshake job, isn't it? He's calling in favours from his old mates. Next thing you know, we're getting shunted across to another unit."

“It’s not like there was anything better to do though, is it?” Holland said.

The look from Thorne was momentary, but it made its point firmly enough.

“For *either* of us, I mean. Not a lot of bodies on the books at the moment.”

“Right. ‘*At the moment*’. You never know when something major’s going to come in though.”

“Sounds almost like you’re hoping.”

“Sorry?”

“Like you don’t want to miss out...”

Thorne said nothing. His eyes drifted to the wing-mirror, stayed there as he flicked up the indicator and waited to pull out.

Neither spoke again for several minutes. Rain had begun to streak the windows, through which Kilburn was giving way to the rather more gentrified environment of Maida Vale.

“Did you get any more from the DCI?” Holland asked.

Thorne shook his head. “He knows as much as we do. We find out the rest when we get there.”

“You had much to do with SO7 before?”

Like many officers, Holland had not yet got used to the fact that *SO* units had officially been re-named *SCD* units, now that they were part of what had become known as the *Specialist Crime Directorate*. Most people still used the old acronyms, knowing full well that the Brass would change the name again anyway, next time they were short of something to do. *SO/SCD7* was the Specialist Operations department whose component Command Units dealt with everything from contract killings to serious drug crime. Aside from the Kidnap Unit, these OCUs included the Flying Squad, the Hostage and Extortion Team, and the Projects Team, with whom Thorne had worked on the joint gangland operation that had ended so badly the previous year.

“Not the Kidnap Unit, mercifully. They’re high-fliers, they don’t like to mingle with the likes of us. They like to stay a bit ‘mysterious’.”

“Well I suppose there has to be an element of secrecy, bearing in mind the nature of what they do. They have to be a bit more discreet than the rest of us.”

Thorne looked unconvinced. “They fancy themselves...” He leaned across and turned on the radio ; tuned it in to *Talk Sport*.

“So this bloke Mullen knows Jesmond, does he?”

“Known him for years.”

“Same sort of age, then?”

“I think Mullen’s a few years older,” Thorne said. “They worked together on an old AMIP unit south of the river somewhere. The DCI reckons Mullen was the one responsible for bringing Jesmond on. Pulled our Trevor up through the ranks.”

“Right...”

“Remind me to punch the fucker, would you?”

Holland smiled, but looked uncomfortable.

“What?”

“Someone’s kidnapped his son...” Holland said.

On the final stretch of the Edgware Road, approaching Marble Arch, the traffic began to snarl up. Thorne sat, growing increasingly frustrated, thinking that if the congestion charge *had* made a difference, it was only to people’s wallets. On the radio, they were talking about the game Spurs were due to play the following evening. The studio expert said that they were favourites to take three points off Fulham, after three wins on the bounce.

“That’s the kiss of bloody death,” Thorne said.

Holland was clearly still thinking about what had been said a few minutes earlier. “I think you just see these things differently,” he said. “Once you’ve got kids, you know?”

Thorne grunted.

“If something happens to somebody else’s...”

“You think I was being insensitive?” Thorne asked. “What I said.”

“Just a bit.”

“If I was *really* being insensitive, I’d say it was divine retribution.” Thorne glanced across and raised an eyebrow. This time, the smile he got in return was genuine, but it still seemed to sit less easily on Holland’s face than Thorne might once have expected.

Holland had never been *quite* as fresh-faced, as green around the gills, as Thorne remembered ; but when he’d been drafted on to Thorne’s team six years before as a twenty-five year old DC, there had certainly been a little more enthusiasm. And there had been a belief. Of course, he and his girlfriend had been through domestic upheavals since then : there’d been the affair with a fellow officer who’d later been murdered on duty ; the birth of his daughter, who would be two years old later in the year.

And there’d been a good many bodies.

Bloated and bludgeoned ; paper-pale, or fresher and slick with scarlet. An ever-expanding gallery of those you only ever got to know once their lives had been taken from them. People whose darkest intimacies might be revealed to you, but whose voices you would never hear, whose thoughts you could never be privy to. An exhibition of the dead, and of the ones who had made it all possible, whose voices and thoughts were only too real in the memory ; the killers, whose faces vied for pride of place with those of the left-behind, the pickers-up of lives.

Thorne and Holland, and others who came into contact with such things were not *defined* by violence and grief. They did not walk and wake with it, but neither were they immune. It changed everything, eventually.

The belief got blunted...

“How’s everything at home, Dave?”

For a second or two, Holland looked surprised, then pleased, before he closed up just a little. “It’s good...”

“Chloe must be getting big.”

Holland nodded, relaxing. “She’s changing every five minutes. Discovering stuff, you know? Doing something different every time I get home. She’s really into music at the moment, singing along with whatever’s on.”

“Nothing with twangy guitars, I presume.”

“I keep thinking I’m missing it all. Doing this...”

Thorne guessed there was little point in asking about Holland’s girlfriend. Sophie was not exactly Thorne’s greatest fan. He knew very well that his name was far more likely to be shouted than spoken in the small flat Holland and Sophie shared in Elephant & Castle ; that he might well have caused a fair number of the arguments in the first place.

The BMW finally hit thirty again on Park Lane. From here, they would continue down to Victoria and then cut across to St James’s and the Yard. Holland turned to Thorne as they slowed at Hyde Park Corner.

“Oh, by the way, Sophie told me to say ‘hello’,” he said.

Thorne nodded, and pushed the car out fast into the stream of traffic that was rushing around the roundabout.

This was not his favourite place...

It was here that he'd spent a miserable few weeks the year before ; perhaps the most miserable he'd ever endured. Back then, when he'd been taken off the team, and given what was euphemistically called 'gardening leave', Thorne knew very well that he wasn't himself, that he hadn't been coping since the death of his father. But hearing it from the likes of Trevor Jesmond had been something else ; being told he was 'dead wood' and casually wafted away like a bad smell. It was the undercover job that had thankfully provided a means of escape, and the subsequent weeks spent sleeping on the street had been infinitely preferable to those he'd spent stewing in a windowless cupboard at New Scotland Yard.

As they walked towards the entrance, Thorne scowled at a group of tourists taking photographs of each other in front of the famous revolving sign.

"What did you *do* when you were here?" Holland asked.

Thorne took out his warrant card ; showed it to one of the officers on duty at the door. "I tried to work out how many bottles would constitute a fatal dose of Tippex..."

Kidnapping and Specialist Investigations was one of a number of SO units based in Central 3000 - a huge, open-plan office that took up half of the fifth floor. Each unit's area was colour-coded, their territory marked out by a rectangular flag suspended from the low ceiling : the Tactical Firearms Unit was black ; the Surveillance Unit was green ; the Kidnap Unit was red. Elsewhere, other colours indicated the presence of the Technical Support and Intelligence Units, either of which could make use of an enormous bank of TV monitors, each one able to tap into any CCTV camera in the metropolitan area or feed live pictures directly from any Met helicopter.

Thorne and Holland took it all in. "And we were wondering why we couldn't afford a new kettle at our place." Holland said.

A short, dark-haired woman stood up from a desk in the red area and introduced herself as DI Louise Porter. Holland ran the kettle line past her during the minute or two of small talk. He looked pleased that she seemed to find it funny. Thorne was impressed with the effort she put in to pretending.

Porter quickly ran through the set-up of the team – one of three on the unit. It was more or less a standard structure. She was one of two DI's heading things up, with a dozen or so other officers all working to a Detective Chief Inspector. "DCI Hignett told me to apologise for not being here to meet you himself," Porter said, "but he'll catch up with you later. And it's *three* DI's now of course." She nodded towards Thorne. "Thanks for mucking in."

"No problem," Thorne said.

"Not that you had any choice though, right?"

"None at all."

"Sorry about that, but we can always do with the help." She glanced down. "Are you OK?"

Thorne stopped moving from foot to foot, realised that he was grimacing. "Dodgy back," he said. "Must have twisted something." The truth was that he'd been suffering badly for some time ; the pain down his left leg far worse after any period spent sitting in a car or, God forbid, at a desk. At first he'd put it down to something muscular ; a hangover from the nights spent sleeping outdoors perhaps, but now he suspected that there was a more deep-seated problem. It would sort itself out, but in the meantime he was getting through a lot of painkillers.

Porter introduced Thorne and Holland to those members of the team that were around. Most of them seemed friendly enough. They all looked busy.

"Obviously a lot of the lads are out and about," Porter said. "Chasing up what we laughably call leads."

Holland leaned back against an empty desk. "At least you've got some."

"Just the one, really. We've got a couple of witnesses who saw Luke Mullen get into a car on the afternoon he disappeared."

"Number plate?" Thorne asked.

"Only bits of it. Blue or black and it *might* be a Passat. These were other kids at the school ; all just finished for the day, too busy talking about music or skateboards or whatever the hell they all do."

Holland grinned. "Not got any yourself, then?"

"*Get* into a car," Thorne said. "So it didn't look like he was being forced?"

"He got into the car with a woman. Older than he was. Attractive. I think the other boys were too busy looking at her to pay much attention to the car."

"Maybe Luke had a new girlfriend," Holland said.

"That's what some of the boys think, certainly. They'd seen him with her before."

"So, isn't it possible?" Thorne asked. "He's a sixteen year old boy. Maybe he's just bugged off to a hotel somewhere with a glamorous older woman..."

"It's possible." Porter began to gather a few things from her desk. Grabbed a handbag from the back of a chair. "But this was last Friday. Why hasn't he been in touch?"

"He's probably got better things to do."

Porter cocked her head, acknowledging a theory that she was clearly having no truck with. "Who goes away for a dirty weekend with nothing but a school blazer and a sweaty games kit?" She let it sink in, then walked past Thorne and Holland towards the door, leaving them in little doubt that they were expected to follow.

Holland waited until she was out of earshot. "Well, she doesn't seem to fancy herself *too* much..."

Outside, in the lobby, another member of the team stepped out of the lift. Porter introduced the woman to Thorne and Holland before the three of them took her place. Porter exchanged a few quick words with her colleague then punched a button and glanced round at Thorne as the doors closed. “She’s one of two family liaison officers who’ve been at the house on rotation since we were brought in. You’ll meet the other one when we get there.”

“Right.” Porter’s eyes were fixed on the display of illuminated numbers above the doors. Thorne wondered if she always seemed this anxious ; in this much of a hurry.

“I want to get a good couple of hours with the Mullens today if I can. These first few conversations with the family are the important ones, obviously.”

It took a second or two to sink in. “*‘First few’?*” Thorne said.

Porter turned to look at him.

“I’m not clear about—”

“We only got brought into this yesterday afternoon,” she said. “The kidnap wasn’t reported straight away.”

Thorne caught a look from Holland who was obviously every bit as confused as *he* was. “Was there some kind of threat?” he asked. “Were the family told not to involve the police?”

“Whoever took Luke has made no contact with the Mullens whatsoever.”

The lift reached the ground floor, and the doors opened, but Thorne made no move to go anywhere.

“At the moment, your guess is as good as mine,” Porter said.

“And what would that be?”

“What’s the point in guessing? The simple fact is that Luke Mullen was kidnapped on Friday afternoon, but for reasons best known to themselves, his parents decided to wait a couple of days before telling anybody.”

