

***FEBRUARY***

**THE PRICE OF BEING HUMAN**

Later, Carol Chamberlain would convince herself that she had actually been dreaming about Jessica Clarke when she got the first call. That the noise of the phone ringing had dragged her awake from it ; from the sound and the smell of it. The fuzzy picture of a girl running, the colours climbing up her back, exploding and flying at her neck like scarves of gold and crimson.

Whether the dream was imagined or not, she'd begun to see it all again the moment she'd put the phone down. Sitting on the edge of the bed, shivering. Jack who had stirred only momentarily, dead to the world behind her.

She saw it all.

The colours were as bright, and the sound as clear and crisp as it had been that morning twenty years before. She was certain of it. Though Carol had not been there, had not seen any of it with her own eyes, she had spoken to everyone, *everyone* that had. Now she believed that when she ran over it in her mind, when she imagined it, she was seeing it all exactly as it had happened...

*The sound - of the man's feet on the grass as he climbed the slope, of his tuneless humming - was drowned out by the noise from the playground. Beneath the high-pitched peaks of shouts and screams was a low throb of chatter and gossip, a wave of conversation that rolled across the playground and away down the hillside towards the main road.*

*The man listened to it as he got nearer, unable to make out anything clearly. It would be talk about boys and music almost certainly. Who was in and who was out. He could hear another sound, too. The buzz of a lawn mower from the far side of the school*

*where the team of gardeners was working. They wore green boiler suits, and so did he. His was only missing the embroidered council logo.*

*Hands in his pockets, cap pulled down low on his head, he walked around the perimeter of the playground to where the girl and a bunch of her friends were gathered. A few of them were leaning back on the metal, cross-hatched fence, bouncing gently against it, relaxed.*

*The man removed the pair of secateurs from his belt and squatted, inches away from the girls on the other side of the fence. With one hand he began snipping at the weeds that sprouted around the base of a concrete fence post. With the other, he reached into his pocket for the can of lighter fluid.*

*It had always been the smell, if anything, that had worried him. He'd made sure the can was full and there was not the faintest hiss or gurgle as he squeezed, as the jet of fluid shot from the plastic nozzle through the gap in the fence. His concern was that some hint of it, a whiff as it soaked into the material of the blue, knee-length skirt, might drift up on the breeze and alert the girl or one of her friends.*

*He needn't have worried. By the time he laid the can down onto the grass and reached for the lighter, he'd used half the fuel at least, and the girls had been too busy chattering to notice anything. It surprised him that for fifteen seconds or more the girl's skirt smouldered quietly before finally catching. He was also surprised by the fact that she wasn't the one who screamed first...*

*Jessica only had one ear on Ali's story about the party she'd been to and Manda's version of the latest falling-out with her boyfriend. She was still thinking about the stupid row with her mum that had*

*gone on the whole weekend, and the talking-to she'd been given by her father before he'd left for work that morning. When Ali pulled a face and the others laughed, Jessica joined in without really appreciating the joke.*

*It felt like a small tug at first, and then a tickle, and she leaned forward to smooth down the back of her skirt. She saw Manda's face change then, watched her mouth widen, but she never heard the sound that came out of it. Jessica was already feeling the agony lick at the tops of her legs as she lurched away from the fence and started to run...*

Long distant from it now, Carol Chamberlain imagined the panic and the pain. As shocked as she always was at the unbearable events unfolding in her mind's eye.

Horribly quickly. Dreadfully slowly...

An hour away from dawn it was dark inside the bedroom, but the searing light of something unnatural wheeled behind her eyes. With hindsight, with *knowledge*, she was everywhere, able to see and hear it all.

She saw girls' mouths gape like those of old women. Their eyes big and glassy as their feet carried them away from the flames. Away from their friend.

She saw Jessica carve a ragged path across the playground, her arms flailing. She heard the screams, the thump of shoes against asphalt, the sizzle as the hair caught. She watched what she knew to be a child move like a thrown firework, skittering across a pavement. Slowing down, fizzing....

And she saw the face of a man, of *Rooker*, as he turned and jogged away down the slope. His legs moving faster and faster. Almost, but not quite falling as he careered down the hill towards his car.

Carol Chamberlain turned and stared at the phone. She thought about the anonymous call she had received twenty minutes earlier. The simple message from a man who could not possibly have been Gordon Rooker.

“I burned her...”

## ONE.

The train was stationary, somewhere between Golders Green and Hampstead, when the woman stepped into the carriage.

Just gone seven, on a Monday night. The passengers a pretty fair cross-section of Londoners heading home late, or into the West End to make a night of it. Suits and *Evening Standards*. The office two-piece and a dog-eared thriller. All human life, in replica football kit and Oxfam chic and Ciro Citterio casuals. Heads bouncing against windows and lolling in sleep, or nodding in time to Coldplay or Craig David or DJ Shadow.

For no good reason other than it was on the Northern Line, the train lurched forward suddenly, then stopped again a few seconds later. People looked at the feet of those opposite, or read the adverts above their heads. The silence, save for the tinny basslines bleeding from headphones, exaggerated the lack of connection.

At one end of the carriage, two black boys sat together. One looked fifteen or sixteen but was probably younger. He wore a red bandanna, an oversized American football shirt and baggy jeans. He

was laden with rings and necklaces. Next to him was a much smaller boy, his younger brother perhaps, and he was dressed almost identically.

To the man sitting opposite them, the clothes, the jewellery, the *attitude* - seemed ridiculous on a child whose expensive trainers didn't even reach the floor. The man was stocky, in his early forties, and wore a battered, brown leather jacket. He looked away when the bigger boy caught him staring, and ran a hand through hair that was greyer on one side than the other. It looked, to Tom Thorne, as if the two boys had blown their pocket money in a shop called "Mr Tiny Gangsta".

Within a second or two of the woman coming through the door, the atmosphere in the carriage had changed. From buttoned-up to fully locked-down. English, in extremis...

Thorne looked at her just long enough to take in the headscarf and the thick, dark brows and the baby cradled beneath one arm. Then he looked away. He didn't quite duck behind a newspaper like many of those around him, but he was ashamed to admit to himself that this was only because he didn't have one.

Thorne stared at his shoes but was aware of the hand that was thrust out as the woman moved and stood over him. He could see the polystyrene cup, the top of it picked, or perhaps chewed away. He could hear the woman speak softly in a language he didn't understand and didn't need to.

She shook the cup in front of his face and Thorne heard nothing rattle.

Then it became a routine. The cup held out, the question asked, the plea ignored and on to the next. Thorne looked up as she moved away down the carriage, feeling an ache building in his gut as he stared at the curve of her back beneath a dark cardigan, the stillness of the arm that supported her baby.

He turned away as the ache sharpened into a stab of sorrow for her, and for himself.

He turned in time to watch the older boy lean across to his brother. Sucking his teeth before he spoke. A hiss, like cats in a bag.

“I really hate them people...”

Thorne was still depressed twenty minutes later when he walked out of the tube station on to Kentish Town Road. He wasn't feeling much better by the time he kicked the door of his flat shut behind him. His mood would not stay black for long.

From the living room, a voice was suddenly raised, sullen and wounded, above the noise of the television. “What bloody time d’you call this?”

Thorne dropped his bag, took four steps down the hall and turned to see Phil Hendricks stretched out on the sofa. The pathologist was taller, skinnier, and at thirty-three, ten years younger than Thorne. He wore black as always, jeans and a V-neck sweater, with the usual assortment of rings, spikes and studs through most of the available space on and around his face. There were other piercings elsewhere, but Thorne wanted to know as little about those as possible.

Hendricks pointed the remote and flicked off the television. “Dinner will be utterly ruined.” He was normally about as camp as an

armoured car, so the jokey attempt at being queeny in his flat, Mancunian accent made Thorne smile all the more.

“Right,” Thorne said. “Like you can even boil an egg.”

“Well, it *would* have been ruined...”

“What are we having anyway?”

Hendricks swung his legs down on to the floor and rubbed a hand back and forth across his closely-shaved skull. “Menu’s next to the phone.” He waved a hand towards the small table in the corner of the room. “I’m having the usual, plus an extra mushroom bhaji.”

Thorne shrugged off his jacket and carried it back out into the hall. He came back in, bent to turn down the radiator, carried a dirty mug through to the kitchen. He picked up Hendricks’ biker boots from in front of the sofa and carried *them* out into the hall.

Then he picked up the phone and called The Bengal Lancer...

Hendricks had been sleeping on Thorne’s sofa-bed since just after Christmas, when the collection of mushrooms growing in his own place had reached monstrous proportions. The builders and damp-proofers were supposed to be there for less than a week, but like all such estimates the reality was somewhat different. Thorne was still unsure as to exactly why Hendricks hadn’t just moved in with his current boyfriend, Brendan. He still spent a couple of nights a week there as it was. Thorne’s best guess was that with a relationship as on and off as those two had, even a temporary move might have been somewhat risky.

He and Hendricks were a little cramped in Thorne’s small flat, but Thorne had to admit that he enjoyed the company. They discussed, fully and frankly, the relative merits of Spurs and Arsenal. They

argued about Thorne's consuming love of country music. They bickered about Thorne's sudden and uncharacteristic passion for tidiness.

While they were waiting for the curry to arrive, Thorne put on a Lucinda Williams album. He and Hendricks argued about it for a while, and then they began to talk about other things...

"Mickey Clayton died as a result of gunshot wounds to the head," Hendricks said.

Thorne peered across at him over the top of his beer can. "I'm guessing that wasn't one of your trickier ones. What with *most* of his head plastered all over the walls when we found him."

Hendricks pulled a face. "The full report should be on your desk tomorrow afternoon."

"Thanks, Phil." He enjoyed taking the piss, but aside from being about as close a friend as he had in the world, Hendricks was also the best pathologist Thorne had ever worked with. Contrary to appearances, despite the sarcasm and the off-colour jokes, there was no-one better at understanding the dead. Hendricks listened as they whispered their secrets, translating them from the mysterious language of the slab.

"Did you get the bullet?" Thorne asked. The killer used a nine millimetre weapon ; what was left of the bullets had been found near the previous victims, or still inside what was left of their the skulls...

"You won't need a match to tell you it's the same killer."

"The X?" It had been obvious when the body had been discovered the previous morning. The nylon shirt hoiked up to the back of the

neck, the blood-trails running from the two deep, diagonal cuts - left shoulder to right hip and vice versa.

“Still not sure about the blade though. I thought it might be a Stanley knife but I reckon it could be a machete, something like that.”

Thorne nodded. A machete was the weapon of choice with a number of gangland enforcers. “Yardies or Yakuza maybe...”

“Well, whoever’s paying him he’s enjoying the work. He shoots them pretty quickly afterwards, so I can’t be a hundred percent sure, but I think he does his bit of creative carving while they’re still alive...”

The man responsible for the death of Mickey Clayton, and three men before him in the previous six weeks, was like no contract killer Thorne had ever come across or heard about. To these shadowy figures - men who were willing to kill for anything upwards of a few thousand pounds - anonymity was everything. This one was different. This one liked to leave his mark. “X marks the spot,” Thorne said.

“Or X as in ‘crossed out’.” Hendricks drained his can “So, what about you? Good day at the office, dear?”

Thorne grunted as he stood up. He took Hendricks’ empty can and went through to the kitchen to get them both fresh ones. Staring aimlessly into the fridge, Thorne tried in vain to remember his *last* good day at the office...

Thorne’s team - of which Hendricks was the civilian member - at the Serious Crime Group (West), had been seconded to help out the Projects Team at SO7 - the Serious and Organised crime unit. It had quickly become clear that *organised* was the one thing this particular operation was not. The resources of SO7 were stretched paper thin - or at least that was the story. There was a major turf war between two

old family firms south of the river, and an escalation in a series of ongoing disputes among Triad gangs that had seen three shootings in one week and a pitched battle on Gerrard Street. All the same, Thorne couldn't help but suspect that he and his team were basically there to cover other people's arses.

There was nothing in it. If arrests were ever made the credit would go elsewhere and there was precious little satisfaction in chasing down those responsible for getting rid of pondlife like Mickey Clayton.

The series of fatal shootings - of which Clayton's was the fourth - was a major assault on the operations of one of north London's biggest gangland families, but the simple fact was that the Projects Team hadn't the first idea who was doing the assaulting. The obvious rivals had been approached and discounted, the usual underground sources paid and pumped for information, none of which had proved useful. It became clear only that a major new operation had established itself and was keen to make a splash. Thorne and his team were on board to find out who they were ; who was paying a contract killer, quickly dubbed the X-Man, to hurt the Ryan family.

"He's making life hard for himself, though, isn't he?" Thorne started talking from the kitchen and carried on as he brought the beers back through. "This X thing, this signature or whatever it is. It limits what he can do, where he can do it. He can't just ride up on a motorbike or wait for them outside a pub. He needs a bit of time and space..."

Hendricks took a can. "He obviously puts a lot of effort into his work. Plans it. I bet he's bloody expensive."

Thorne guessed that Hendricks was probably right. "It's still cheap though isn't it, when you think about it? To top someone I mean.

Twenty, twenty-five grand's about top whack. That's a damn sight less than the people putting the contracts out pay for their Jeeps and top of the range Mercs."

"What d'you reckon I can get for a couple of hundred quid?" Hendricks asked. "There's this mortuary assistant at Westminster who's getting on my tits."

Thorne thought about it for a second. "Chinese burn?"

The laugh was the first decent one that Thorne could remember sharing with anyone for a few days...

"How can it be the Yardies?" Hendricks said when he'd stopped giggling. "Or Yakuza? We know our hitman's not black or Japanese..."

A witness claimed to have seen the killer leaving the scene of the third murder and had given a vague description of a white male in his thirties. The witness, a man called Marcus Moloney, was an 'associate' of the Ryan family and not exactly an upright citizen, but he seemed pretty sure about what he'd seen.

"It's not that simple," Thorne said. "It might have been, ten years ago when people stuck to their own, but now they don't care so much and the freelancers just go where the work is. The Triads use Yardies. Yardies work with the Russians. They nicked a gang of Yakuza last year for recruiting outside schools. They were as good as giving out registration forms ; signing up Greek lads, Asians, Turks, whoever."

Hendricks smiled. "It's nice to see that they're all equal opportunities employers..."

Thorne grunted, and the two of them settled back into saying nothing for a few minutes. Thorne closed his eyes and picked at the goatee he'd grown towards the end of the previous year. The beard created the illusion of a jawline and covered up the scar from a knife wound.

The puckered line that ran diagonally across Thorne's chin was the only visible reminder of a night six months before, when he'd both begged for his life and prayed for death to come quickly. There were other scars, just as easy to disguise but far more troublesome. Thorne would reach into his gut in the darkness, and finger them until they opened again into wounds. He could imagine the scab forming then, blood-black across the tender flesh. The crust that would itch and crumble beneath his fingernails, exquisite and agonising for him to poke and pick at...

Lucinda Williams sang softly about an all-consuming lust, her voice sweet and saw-toothed at the same time, rising like smoke above a single acoustic guitar.

Thorne and Hendricks both started slightly when the phone rang. "Tom?" A woman's voice.

Thorne sank back into his armchair with the phone. He shouted across to Hendricks loud enough for the caller to hear. "Oh Christ, it's that mad old woman who keeps ringing me up..."

Hendricks grinned and shouted back. "Tell her I can smell the cat food from here!"

"Come on then, Carol," Thorne said. "Tell me what's been happening in glamorous Worthing? Any 'cat stuck up tree' incidents, or Zimmer Frame pile-ups I should know about?"

The woman on the other end of the phone sounded in no mood for the usual banter. “I need to talk to you, Tom. I need you to listen...”

So, Thorne listened. The curry arrived and went cold, but he didn’t even think about it. He could tell as soon as she started to talk that something was very wrong.

In all the time he’d known Carol Chamberlain, Thorne had never heard her cry before.