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LAZYBONES

PART ONE

**BIRTHS, MARRIAGES
AND DEATHS**

10 AUGUST, 1976

He inched himself towards the edge, each tightening of the sphincter muscle moving him a little further across the narrow breadth of the banister's polished surface. He twisted his wrists, wrapping the towel once more tightly around them. Not giving himself the get-out, knowing his body would look for it. Knowing he would instinctively try to free himself.

His heels bounced rhythmically against the banister spindles below him. The blue tow rope that he'd found at the back of the garage was itchy against his neck. He smiled to himself. Scratching it, even if he could, would have been stupid. Like dabbing at the skin with disinfectant before slipping in the needle to administer a lethal injection.

He closed his eyes, bowed his head, and let his weight tip him forward and over and down. It felt as if the jolt might take his head off, but it was not even enough to break a bone. There hadn't been time to do the maths, to set weight against height. Even if there had been, he wasn't sure he'd have known what the relationship between them was. He remembered reading somewhere that the proper hangmen, the Pierrepoints or whoever, could do the calculation, could figure out the necessary drop, based on nothing more than shaking the condemned man's hand.

Pleased to meet you – about twelve feet, I reckon ...

He clenched his teeth against the pain in his back. The skin had been taken off his spine by the edge of the stair rail as he'd dropped. He could feel warm blood trickling down his chin and he realised that he'd bitten through his tongue. He could smell the motor oil on the rope.

He thought about the woman, in bed, not ten feet away.

It would have been lovely to have seen her face when she found him. Her liar's mouth falling open as she reached up to stop his body swinging. That would have been perfect, but of course he would never see it. And she would never find him.

Somebody else would find both of them.

He couldn't help but wonder what the authorities would make of it all. What the newspapers would say. Their names would be spoken, would be whispered again in certain offices and living rooms. His name, the one he'd given her, would echo around a courtroom as it had done so often before, dragged through the mud and the filth that she'd spread before her like an oil slick. This time they themselves would be mercifully absent as others talked about them, about the tragedy, about the balance of their minds being disturbed. It was hard to argue with that, now, this very moment. Him waiting to die, and her upstairs, thirty minutes ahead of him, the blood already soaking deep into their mushroom-coloured bedroom carpet.

She had disturbed both their minds. She had asked for everything she'd got.

Half an hour before, her hands reaching to protect herself.

Eight months before that, her hands reaching, her legs spread, on the floor of that stockroom.

She'd asked for everything ...

He gagged, spluttering blood, sensing a shadow preparing to descend, feeling his life beginning, thankfully, to slip away. How long had it been now? Two minutes? Five? He pushed his feet down towards the floor, willing his weight to do its work quickly.

He heard a noise like a creak and then a small hum of amazement. He opened his eyes.

He was facing away from the front door, looking back at the staircase. He shifted his shoulders violently, trying to create enough momentum to make himself turn. As he spun slowly around, seconds from death, he found himself staring down, through bloodied and bulging retinas, into the flawless brown eyes of a child.

ONE

The look was slightly spoiled by the training shoes.

The man with the mullet haircut and the sweaty top lip was wearing a smart blue suit, doubtless acquired for the occasion, but he'd let himself down with the bright white Nike Airs. They squeaked on the gymnasium floor as his feet shifted nervously underneath the table.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I'm really, really, sorry.'

An elderly couple sat at the table opposite him. The man's back was ramrod straight, his milky-blue eyes never leaving those of the man in the suit. The old woman next to the old man clutched at his hand. Her eyes, unlike those of her husband, looked anywhere but at those of the young man who, the last time he'd been this close to them, had been tying them up in their own home.

The trembling was starting around the centre of Darren Ellis's meticulously shaved chin. His voice wobbled a little. 'If there was anything I could do to make it up to you, I would,' he said.

'There isn't,' the old man said.

'I can't take back what I did, but I do know how wrong it was. I know what I put you through.'

The old woman began to cry.

'How can you?' her husband said.

Darren Ellis began to cry.

On the last row of seats, his back against the gym wall-bars, sat a solid-looking man in a black leather jacket, forty or so, with dark eyes and hair that was greyer on one side than the other. He looked uncomfortable and a little confused. He turned to the man sitting next to him.

'This. Is. Bollocks,' Thorne said.

DCI Russell Brigstocke glared at him. There was a *shush* from a red-haired squaddie type a couple of rows in front. One of Ellis's supporters, by the look of him.

'Bollocks,' Thorne repeated.

The gymnasium at the Peel Centre would normally be full of eager recruits at this unearthly time on a Monday morning. It was, however, the largest space available for this 'Restorative Justice Conference', so the raw young constables were doing their press-ups and star jumps elsewhere. The floor of the gym had been covered with a green tarpaulin and fifty or so seats had been laid out. They were filled with supporters of both offender and victims, together with invited officers who, it was thought, would appreciate the opportunity to be brought up to speed with this latest initiative.

Becke House, where Thorne and Brigstocke were based, was part of the same complex. Half an hour earlier, on the five-minute walk across to the gym, Thorne had moaned without drawing breath.

'If it's an invitation, how come I'm not allowed to turn it down?'

'Shut up,' Brigstocke said. They were late and he was walking quickly, trying not to spill hot coffee from a polystyrene cup that was all but melting. Thorne lagged a step or two behind.

'Shit, I've forgotten the bit of paper, maybe they won't let me in.'

Brigstocke scowled, unamused.

'What if I'm not smart enough? There might be a dress code ...'

'I'm not listening, Tom ...'

Thorne shook his head, flicked out his foot at a stone like a sulky schoolboy. 'I'm just trying to get it straight. This piece of pondlife ties an old couple up with electrical flex, gives the old man a kick or two for good measure, breaking ... how many ribs?'

'Three ...'

'Three. Thanks. He pisses on their carpet, fucks off with their life savings, and now we're rushing across to see how sorry he is?'

'It's just a trial. They've been using RJC's in Australia and the results have been pretty bloody good. Re-offending rates have gone right down ...'

'So, basically, they sit everybody down pre-sentence, and if they all agree that the guilty party is really *feeling* guilty, he gets to do a bit less time. That it?'

Brigstocke took a last, scalding slurp and dumped the half-full cup in a bin. 'It's not quite that simple.'

A week and a bit into a steaming June, but the day was still too new to have warmed up yet. Thorne shoved his hands deeper into the pockets of his leather jacket.

'No, but whoever thought it up is.'

In the gym, the audience watched as Darren Ellis moved balled-up fists from in front of his face to reveal moist, red eyes. Thorne looked around at those watching. Some looked sad and shook their heads. One or two were taking notes. On the front row, members of Ellis's legal team passed pieces of paper between them.

'If I said that *I* felt like a victim, would you laugh?' Darren asked.

The old man looked calmly at him for fifteen seconds or more before answering flatly. 'I'd want to knock your teeth out.'

'Things aren't always that clear-cut,' Darren said.

The old man leaned across the table. The skin was tight around his mouth. 'I'll tell you what's clear-cut.' His eyes flicked towards his wife as he spoke. 'She hasn't slept since the night you came into our house. She wets the bed most of the time.' His voice dropped to a whisper. 'She's got so bloody thin ...'

Something between a gulp and a gasp echoed around the gymnasium as Darren dropped his head into his hands and gave full vent to his emotions. A lawyer got to his feet. A senior detective stood up and started walking towards the table. It was time to take a break.

Thorne leaned across and whispered loudly to Brigstocke. 'He's very good. Where did he train? RADA?' This time, several of the faces that turned to look daggers at him belonged to senior officers ...

Ten minutes later, and everybody was mingling in the foyer outside. There was a lot of nodding and hushed conversation. There was mineral water and biscuits.

'I'm supposed to write a report on this,' Brigstocke mumbled.

Thorne waved across the foyer to a couple of lads he knew from Team 6. 'Rather you than me.'

'I'm trying to decide the right word to use, to describe the attitude of certain attending officers on my team. Obstructive? Insolent? You got any thoughts ...?'

'*I think* that was one of the stupidest things I've ever seen. I can't believe people sat there and took it seriously and I don't care *what* the results were in sodding Australia. Actually, no, *not* stupid. It was obscene. All those silly bastards studying every expression on that little prick's face. How many tears? How big were

they? How much shame?’ Thorne took a swig of water, held it in his mouth for a few seconds, swallowed. ‘Did you see *her* face? Did you look at the old woman’s face?’

Brigstocke’s mobile rang. He answered it quickly, but Thorne kept on talking anyway. ‘Restorative Justice? For who? For that old man and his skeletal wife?’

Brigstocke shook his head angrily, turned away.

Thorne put his glass down on a window sill. He moved suddenly, pushing past several people as he walked quickly towards where he’d seen a group emerging from a door on the other side of the foyer.

Darren Ellis had taken his jacket and tie off. He was handcuffed, a detective on either side of him, their hands on his shoulders.

‘Good show, Darren,’ Thorne said. He raised his hands and started to clap.

Ellis stared, his mouth opening and closing, an uneasy expression that had definitely *not* been rehearsed. He looked for help to the officers on either side of him.

Thorne smiled. ‘What do you do for an encore? Always best to finish on a song, I reckon ...’

The officer to Ellis’s left, a stick-thin article with dandruff on his brown polyester jacket, tried his best to look casually intimidating. ‘Piss off, Thorne.’

Before Thorne had a chance to respond, his attention was caught by the figure of Russell Brigstocke marching purposefully across the room towards him. Thorne was hardly aware of the two detectives leading Ellis away in the other direction. The look on the DCI’s face caused something to clench in his stomach.

‘You want to restore some justice?’ Brigstocke said. ‘Now’s your chance.’ He pointed at Thorne with his mobile phone. ‘This sounds like a good one ...’

It was called an hotel. They also called MPs ‘right’, ‘honourable’ and ‘gentlemen’ ...

The sign outside *said* ‘Hotel’, but Thorne knew full well that certain signs, in less salubrious parts of London, were not to be taken too literally. If they all meant exactly what they said, there would be a lot of frustrated businessmen sitting in saunas, waiting for hand-jobs they were never going to get.

The sign outside should have read ‘Shithole’.

It was as basic as they came. The maroon carpet, once the finest offcut the warehouse had to offer, was now worn through in a number of places. The green of the rotting rubber underlay beneath matched the mould which snaked up the off-white Anaglypta below the window. A long-dead spider plant stood on the window ledge, caked in dust. Thorne pushed aside the grubby orange curtains, leaned against the ledge, and took in the breathtaking view of the traffic inching slowly past Paddington Station towards the Marylebone Road. Nearly eleven o’clock and still solid.

Thorne turned round and sucked in a breath. Opposite him in the doorway, DC Dave Holland stood chatting to a uniform – waiting, like Thorne, for the signal to step in and start. To sink both feet deep into the mire.

In different parts of the room, three Scene Of Crime Officers crouched and crawled – bagging and tagging and searching for the fibre, the grain that might convict. The life sentence hidden in a dustball. The truth lurking in detritus.

The pathologist, Phil Hendricks, leaned against a wall, muttering into the new, digital voice recorder he was so proud of. He glanced up at Thorne. A look that asked the usual questions. Are we up and running

again? When is this going to get any easier? Why don't the two of us chuck in this shit and sit in a doorway for the rest of our lives drinking aftershave? Thorne, unable to provide any answers, looked away. In the corner nearest him, a fourth SOCO, whose bald head and bodysuit gave him the look of a giant baby, dusted the taps of the brown plastic sink with fingerprint powder.

It was, at least, a shithole with en suite facilities.

Altogether, seven of them in the room. Eight, if you counted the corpse.

Thorne's gaze was dragged reluctantly across to the chalk-white figure of the man on the bed. The body was nude and lay on the bare mattress, the spots of blood joining stains of less obvious origin on the threadbare and faded ticking. The hands were tied with a brown leather belt and pushed out in front of him as he lay, prostrate, his knees pulled up beneath him, his backside in the air. His head, which was covered in a black hood, was pressed down into the sagging mattress.

Thorne watched as Phil Hendricks moved along the bed, lifted the head and turned it. He slowly removed the hood. From behind, Thorne saw his friend's shoulders stiffen for an instant, heard the small, sharp intake of breath before he laid the head back down. As a SOCO moved across to take the hood and drop it into an exhibits bag, Thorne took a step forward so that he could see the face of the dead man clearly.

His eyes were closed, his nose small and slightly upturned. The side of the face was dotted with pinprick-size bloodspots. The mouth was a mask of dried gore, the lips ragged, the whole hideous mess criss-crossed with spittle strings. The stained, uneven teeth were bared and had gnawed through the bottom lip as the ligature had tightened around the neck.

Thorne guessed that the man was somewhere in his late thirties. It was just a guess.

From somewhere above them, Thorne became aware of a rumble suddenly dying – a boiler switching itself off. Stifling a yawn, he looked up, watched cobwebs dancing gracefully around the plaster ceiling rose. He wondered if the other residents would care too much about their morning hot water when they found out what had happened in Room Six.

Thorne took a pace towards the bed. Hendricks spoke without looking round.

'Bar the fact that he's dead, I know bugger all, so don't even ask. All right?'

'I'm fine. Thanks for asking, Phil, and how are you?'

'Right, I see. Like you only came over here for a fucking chinwag ...?'

'You are *such* a miserable sod. What's wrong with exchanging a few pleasantries? Trying to make all this a bit easier?'

Hendricks said nothing.

Thorne leaned over to scratch at his ankle through the bodysuit. 'Phil ...'

'I told you, I don't know. Look for yourself. It seems pretty obvious how he died, but it's not that simple. There's ... other stuff gone on.'

'Right. Thanks ...'

Hendricks moved back a little and nodded towards one of the SOCOs, who moved quickly towards the bed, picking up a small toolbox as he went. The officer knelt down and opened the box, revealing a display of dainty, shining instruments. He took out a small scalpel and leaned across, reaching towards the victim's neck.

Thorne watched as the SOCO pushed a plastic-covered finger down between the ligature and the neck, struggling to get any purchase. From where Thorne was standing, it looked like washing line, the sort of stuff you can get in any hardware shop. Smooth, blue plastic. He could see just how tightly it was biting into the dead man's neck. The officer took his scalpel and carefully cut away the line in such a way as to preserve the knot that was gathered at the back of the neck. This was, of course, basic procedure. Sensible and chilling.

They'd need it to compare with any others they might find.

Thorne glanced across at Dave Holland who raised his eyebrows and turned up his palms. *What's happening? How long?* Thorne shrugged. He'd been there more than an hour already. He and Holland had been over the room, taking notes, bagging a few things up, getting a feel of the scene. Now it was the technicians' turn and Thorne hated the wait. It might have made him feel better, were he able to put his impatience down to a desire to get stuck in. He wished he could say, honestly, that he was itching to begin doing his job, to kick off the process that might one day bring this man's killer to justice. As it was, he just wanted to do what had to be done quickly, and get out of that room.

He wanted to strip off the plastic suit, get in his car and drive away.

Actually, if he were being *really* honest with himself, he would have had to admit that only *part* of him wanted that. The other part was buzzing. The part that knew the difference between some murder scenes and others; that was able to *measure* these things. Thorne had seen the victims of enraged spouses and jealous lovers. He had stared at the bodies of business rivals and gangland grasses. He knew when he was looking at something out of the ordinary.

This was a significant murder scene. This was the work of a killer driven by something special, something spectacular.

The room stank of hatred and of rage. It also stank of pride.

Hendricks, as if reading Thorne's mind, turned to him, half smiling. 'Just another five minutes, OK? I'm not going to get anything else here ...'

Thorne nodded. He looked at the dead man on the bed – the position of him, as if he were paying homage. Had it not been for the belt, for the livid red furrow that circled his neck, for the thin lines of blood that ran down the backs of his pale thighs, he might have been praying.

Thorne guessed that at the end, he probably had been.

The room was hot. Thorne raised an arm to rub a sore eye and felt the tickle as a drop of sweat slid down his ribs then took a sudden, sharp turn across his belly.

Down below, a frustrated driver leaned on his horn ...

Thorne was not even aware that he'd closed his eyes and when he heard a phone ring, he snapped them open, convinced for a few wonderful moments that he'd woken suddenly from a bad dream.

He turned, a little disorientated, and saw Holland standing next to the bedside table. The phone was an off-white seventies model, the dial cracked, the grimy handset visibly jumping in its cradle. Thorne was now fully alert but he was still somewhat confused. Was this a call for them? Was it police business? Or was it possible that whoever was down at what passed for a reception desk had not been told what was happening and had put a caller through from the outside? Having met one or two of the staff, Thorne could well believe that even knowing exactly what had happened, they might still be dim enough to put a call through to the occupant of Room Six. If that was the case, it would certainly be a stroke of luck ...

Thorne moved towards the ringing phone. The rest of the team stood frozen, watching him.

The victim's clothes – it had to be presumed they *were* the victim's – lay strewn about the floor nearby. Trousers – minus their belt – and underpants were next to the chair. Shirt, crumpled into a ball. One shoe under the bed, up near the headboard. The brown corduroy jacket, slung across the back of a chair next to the bed, had contained no personal items. No wallet, no bus tickets, no crinkled photographs. Nothing that might help identify the dead man ...

Thorne did not know if the phone had already been dusted for fingerprints, and he had no time to check. He reached out to grab a plastic evidence bag from the fat, babyish SOCO and wrapped it around his hand. He held the hand up, wanting silence. He didn't need to ask.

He took a breath and picked up the receiver. 'Hello ...?'

'Oh ... hi.' A woman's voice.

Thorne locked eyes with Holland. 'Who did you want to speak to?' He was holding the phone an inch or so away from his ear and didn't hear the answer properly. 'Sorry, it's not a very good line, could you shout up?'

'Is that any good?'

'That's great.' Thorne tried to sound casual. 'Who do you want to speak to?'

'Oh ... I'm not really sure, actually ...'

Thorne looked at Holland again and shook his head. *Fuck*. It wasn't going to be that easy. 'Who am I talking to?'

'Sorry?'

'Who are you?'

There was a short pause before she spoke. The voice was suddenly a little tighter. Confident though, and refined. 'Listen, I don't want to sound rude, but it was somebody there who called *me*. I don't particularly want to give out ...'

'This is Detective Inspector Thorne from the Serious Crime Group ...'

A pause. Then: 'I thought I was calling a hotel ...'

'You *have* called a hotel. Could you please give me your name?' He looked across at Holland, puffed out his cheeks. Holland was poised, notebook in hand, looking utterly confused.

'You could be anybody,' the woman said.

'Listen, if it makes you happier, I can call you back. Better still, let me give you a number to call so you can check. Ask for DCI Russell Brigstocke. And I'll give you my mobile number ...'

'Why do I need your mobile number if you're calling me back?'

The conversation was starting to get faintly ridiculous. Thorne thought he could detect a note of amusement, perhaps even flirtation, creeping into this woman's voice. Pleasing as this was on an otherwise grim morning, he wasn't really in the mood.

'Madam, the phone I'm speaking on, the phone you've called, is located at a crime scene and I need to know why you're calling.'

He got the message across. The woman, though suddenly sounding a little panicky, did as she was asked.

'It was on my answering machine. I got here, I got into work this morning, and checked my messages. This one was the first. The man who called left the name of the hotel and the room number for delivery ...'

The man who called. Was that the man on the bed, or ...?

‘What was the message?’

‘He was placing an order. Bloody funny time to be doing it, though. That was why I was a bit ... cautious about calling. I thought it might be a joke, you know, kids messing about, but kids wouldn’t give you the right address, would they?’

‘Did he leave a name?’

‘No, which is one of the reasons I’m calling. And to get a credit card number. I don’t do cash on delivery ...’

‘What do you mean, *bloody funny time*?’

‘The message was left at ten past three this morning. I bought one of those flashy machines that tells you the time, you know?’

Thorne pressed the mouthpiece to his chest, looked across at Hendricks. ‘I know the time of death. A tenner says you don’t get within half an hour either side ...’

‘Hello?’

Thorne put the phone back to his ear. ‘Sorry, I was conferring with a colleague. Can I ask you to keep the tape from the machine, Miss ...?’

‘Eve Bloom.’

‘You said something about placing an order?’

‘Oh sorry, didn’t I say? I’m a florist. He was ordering some flowers. That’s why I was slightly freaked out, I suppose ...’

‘I don’t understand. Freaked ...?’

‘Well, to be ordering what he was ordering in the middle of the night ...’

‘What exactly did the message say?’

‘Hang on a minute ...’

‘No, just ...’

She’d already gone. After a few seconds, Thorne heard the click of the button being hit and the noise of the tape rewinding. There was a pause and then a bang as she put the receiver down next to the machine.

‘It’s coming up,’ she shouted.

Then a hiss as the tape began to play.

There was no discernible accent, no real emotion of any sort, in the voice. To Thorne, it sounded as if someone was trying hard to *sound* characterless, but there was a hint of something like amusement in the voice somewhere. In the voice of the man Thorne had to assume was responsible for the bound and bloodied corpse not three feet away from him.

The message began simply enough.

‘ I ’ d l i k e t o o r d e r a wreath...’

