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Written by Mark Billingham

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MARK

BILLINGHAM

THE BONES BENEATH



Little, Brown

LITTLE BROWN

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For the little girl who grew up
seeing a lighthouse winking at her across
Cardigan Bay, and never forgot it.

PROLOGUE

WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

He'd thought they were burglars.

Reasonable enough assumption, all things considered. His eyes snapping open at the terrible melody of breaking glass, the creeping downstairs in his dressing gown, the two dark figures so out of place in his tiny white kitchen.

Something about the stillness of them not quite right though, thinking back. The absence of anything even close to panic and the hands thrust deep into pockets, like nobody was in any rush. The way they seemed to be waiting for him.

All so bloody obvious, in hindsight.

He'd thought he could tell what they were looking for. He'd glimpsed something in their flat, wide eyes and guessed that maybe they knew how he earned his living, that they thought there might be stuff lying around the place.

'If it's drugs you're after, you're being stupid,' he'd shouted. 'I don't keep anything like that at *home*.' He'd taken a step towards them, moved into the dim, greenish light to make sure they got a good look at him.

The digital clock on the pristine chrome cooker said 02:37.

'Come on, just piss off and I'll go back to bed and we'll pretend this never happened, fair enough?'

He'd seen the hint of a smile then, the pale face of the taller one framed by the dark hood. Caught the glance and the nod from the shorter of the two and been shocked to see the tight, sharp features of a girl. A slash of cheekbone and full lips and something glinting on the side of her nose.

They were just a couple of junkies, for Christ's sake.

Chancers.

He'd decided he could take them, could give it a damn good go at any rate, so he'd yelled and rushed, trying to take them by surprise, to get one or both of them off balance. His pricey Japanese knives in their smooth wooden block were too far away, so, lunging, he reached for the wine bottle he'd emptied only a few hours before. A hand fastened hard around his wrist. The boy leaned forward and pulled him close, training shoes squeaking against the floor tiles as weight was adjusted and purchase gained. There was warm breath on his face and he struggled to turn his head, just in time to see the girl's hand emerging from the pocket of her hoodie; small white fingers wrapped around a handle.

Chipped, black fingernails.

Not a knife, something else . . .

Her arm stretched – arcing almost lazily towards him – and he braced himself for the punch, the slap, the scratch. Instead he felt the crack of voltage and the kick of it that dropped him hard on to the floor. Above the sound of his own screaming he heard one of them say, 'Behave yourself and we're not going to hurt you.'

His muscles were still cramping from the shock as the hand pressed the damp rag hard across his face and there was no choice but to suck in the darkness.

And what was that, twenty-four hours ago? Thirty-six?

There's no way to keep an accurate track of time in a room without any windows. He's slept, but he's been given sedatives of some kind, so it's impossible to say how long for. It's no better than guesswork really, based on how often they bring food or the rise and fall in pitch of distant traffic hum. How many times one of them brandishes the Taser while the other unlocks the handcuffs so he can piss into a plastic bucket.

It's a basement room of some kind, he's pretty sure about that.

There's a damp smell rising up from the grubby carpet and the walls are grey painted brick. There are a couple of ratty chairs and a chest of drawers in one corner but most of the space is taken up by the single bed he's spreadeagled on top of; Flexi-cuffs fastening wrists and ankles to the metal rails at either end.

He's been on his own most of the time. He's not even sure that there's a lock of any kind on the door. Not that it matters, because it's not like he's going anywhere and one or other of them sticks a head into the room every so often. He's not quite sure what they're checking on, but he's grateful for it all the same.

It seems important to them that he's not actually dead or anything.

There was gaffer tape across his mouth to begin with, but the boy took it off and now whenever they bring in the fish and chips or the tea and toast or whatever it is, he tries talking to them.

What am I doing here?

Listen, you've got the wrong bloke, I swear.

Who the hell do you think I am . . . ?

Neither of them says anything, except once when the boy shook his head like he was getting sick of it and told him to shut up. Actually, *asked* him to shut up and didn't put the tape back either, which he certainly could have done.

They've never been less than polite.

It's usually one or other that pops in, except when there are trays or buckets to carry, so he can tell that something's up when they come waltzing in together and sit side by side in the ratty chairs for a while.

'What's going on?' he asks.

The boy's fingers are drumming against his knees. He stares at the girl, but even though she's very much aware she's being stared at, it takes a while before she looks back at him. The boy

widens his eyes, nods and eventually the girl takes her hand from the pocket of her hoodie.

He raises his head from the bed, straining to see, and this time there's no mistaking what she's holding in her small white fingers.

He knows perfectly well what a scalpel looks like.

The girl stands up and swallows. She takes a breath. It's as though she's trying *really* hard to look serious. To be taken seriously.

'*Now*,' she says. 'Now, we're going to hurt you . . . '

THE FIRST DAY

WITH A WORD, WITH A LOOK

ONE

You want the good news or the bad news?

That's what Detective Chief Inspector Russell Brigstocke had said to him back then. Eating his biscuits and trying his patience. Sitting cheerfully on the edge of his bed in that hospital as though they were just old mates chewing the fat. Like Thorne hadn't almost bled to death a few days earlier, like what he laughably called his career wasn't hanging in the balance.

Delivering the verdict.

Good news. Bad news . . .

Now, six weeks on, Tom Thorne glanced at his rear-view mirror and saw the huge metal doors sliding shut behind him as he drove into the prison's vehicle compound. Pulling into the parking space that had been reserved for them, he glanced across at Dave Holland in the passenger seat. He saw the apprehension on the sergeant's face. He knew it was etched there on his own too, because he could feel it twisting in his gut, sharper suddenly than the lingering pain from the gunshot wound, which had all but faded into the background.

Like a scream rising above a long, low moan.

Wasn't it usually some kind of a joke? That whole good news/bad news routine?

The good news: You're going to be famous!

The bad news: They're naming a disease after you.

Whichever way round, it was *normally* a joke . . .

The bad news: They found your blood all over the crime scene!

The good news: Your cholesterol's down.

Thorne killed the engine of the seven-seat Ford Galaxy and looked up at the prison. Walls and wire and a sky the colour of wet pavement. This place was certainly nothing to laugh about at stupid o'clock on a Monday morning in the first week of November. There was nothing even remotely funny about the reason they were here.

'He wants you to take him,' Brigstocke had said.

Back in that hospital room, six weeks earlier. The pain a damn sight fresher then. A hot blade in Thorne's side when he'd sat up straight in his wheelchair.

'Me?'

'Yeah, it has to be you. That's one of his conditions.'

'He's got conditions?'

Brigstocke had jammed what was left of a biscuit into his mouth, spat crumbs on to the blanket when he'd answered. 'It's . . . complicated.'

A few minutes before that, Brigstocke had announced that, despite conduct during an investigation that could easily have seen Thorne removed from the Job altogether, if not facing prosecution, he was being recalled to the Murder Squad. Miraculously, his demotion to uniform was being overturned and, after four miserable months working in south London, he would be heading back to God's side of the river again. He would remain an inspector, but once again it would be preceded

by the one-word job description he had been struggling to live without.

Detective.

'I'm *guessing* that's the good news,' Thorne said.

A nod from Brigstocke and a nice long pause and the DCI could not quite maintain eye contact as he began to outline the reason for this unexpectedly positive outcome. As soon as the man's name was mentioned, Thorne tried to interrupt, but Brigstocke held up a hand. He raised his voice and insisted that Thorne allow him to get at least a sentence or two out before voicing his understandable objections.

'It's a game,' Thorne said, the moment Brigstocke had paused for breath. 'Same as it always is with him.'

'It checks out. The timings, the location.'

'I don't care what checks out, he's up to something.' Wishing more than anything that he was still wired up to the morphine pump, Thorne wheeled his chair a few feet forward, then back again. 'Come on, Russell, you know what he's like. What the hell are you all thinking?'

'We're thinking that he's got us over a barrel,' Brigstocke said.

Thorne listened as Brigstocke continued to explain how the man they were talking about – a convicted murderer currently serving multiple life sentences with no possibility of parole – had established contact six months earlier with the mother of a fifteen-year-old boy who had gone missing twenty-five years before. He claimed that he had once known the boy, that they had both been residents at an experimental retreat for troubled teenagers. After several months of communication, he confessed to the woman in a letter that he had in fact murdered her son and buried the boy's body.

'That much I can believe,' Thorne said. 'So far, that's the only bit that makes any sense.'

Brigstocke ignored him and ploughed on. He described the

series of desperate visits and phone calls during which the woman had begged the murderer to reveal the whereabouts of her son's grave. How she had contacted the press and written to her local MP, urging him to get involved, until eventually, after a concerted campaign, the prisoner had agreed to co-operate. He would, he had promised, show the police where the teenager had been buried.

Then, Brigstocke had made eye contact, but only for a moment. 'And he wants you to escort him . . . '

It had gone back and forth between them for a while after that: Brigstocke urging Thorne to shut up and listen; Thorne doing a lot more shouting than listening; Brigstocke telling him that he'd burst his stitches if he didn't calm down.

'So, what the hell are we supposed to do?' Brigstocke had finished the biscuits. He screwed up the empty packet and attempted to toss it into the metal wastepaper basket in the corner of the room. 'You tell me, Tom. The chief constable's got this MP on her case. The papers are all over it. This woman needs to know about her son, to get . . . closure or whatever and as far as I can see there's no good reason we shouldn't be doing this.'

'*Him*,' Thorne said. 'He's the reason why not.'

'Like I said, we've checked dates and records and it looks like he's telling the truth.' Brigstocke walked to the corner, picked up the packet and dropped it into the bin. 'He was definitely there when he says he was and that was the last time anybody saw this missing boy.'

Thorne pushed himself back towards the bed. 'He never does a single thing that he doesn't want to do. That he doesn't have a very good reason to do.' He eased himself gingerly out of the chair and on to the bed, waving away Brigstocke's offer of help and staring at him, hard.

'*Never* . . . '

★

'So, what do you reckon?' Holland asked now. He unfastened his seat-belt, turned and reached into the row of seats behind for his overcoat and gloves. 'A couple of days?'

'Yeah,' Thorne said. A couple of days until they found the body or it became clear they were being taken for idiots. He reached back for his own coat, for the case containing all the paperwork. 'With a bit of luck.'

'Nice to get out of London,' Holland said.

'I suppose.'

'I mean, obviously I wish we were doing something a bit less . . . you know.'

You want the good news or the bad news?

In Brigstocke's office at Becke House, the day after Thorne had been discharged from hospital. The arrangements already being made, the permissions and protocols put in place.

The argument continuing.

'Let's go over these "conditions" again, shall we?' Thorne had thrown his leather jacket across a chair and sat leaning back against the wall. 'Just to make sure I'm totally clear on all this. You know, why *he's* the one making the rules.'

Brigstocke stood, walked around his desk. 'How many times?'

'I know,' Thorne said. 'The MP, the grieving mother, the barrel he's got us across.' He shook his head. 'Anything else he wants? A particular make and model of car? Something special on his sandwiches?'

'Nothing's changed.'

'So, come on then. The stipulations . . . '

'Well, *you*, obviously.'

'Yeah. Me.' Thorne puffed out his cheeks. 'You got any thoughts on that?' He looked up at Brigstocke, wide-eyed and mock-curious. 'I'm just wondering.'

'You're the one who caught him,' Brigstocke said. 'He's got some weird kind of respect for you or something. Maybe he trusts you.'

'He wants to mess with me,' Thorne said. 'It's what he does.'

'You're taking him out there, you're finding this body then you're bringing him back.' Brigstocke leaned against the desk. 'That's all this is.'

Thorne studied the carpet and fingered the straight scar beneath his chin for a few seconds. He said, 'What's his problem with the press?'

'He doesn't want any around, simple as that.'

'Never seemed to bother him before,' Thorne said. 'Happy enough with the books and the bloody documentaries. Got a nice collection of his press cuttings pasted up in his cell by all accounts.'

Brigstocke shrugged. 'Look, he knows they've been on to this ever since the boy's mother went to the papers. He doesn't fancy helicopters everywhere, that's all, like when they took Brady back to the moors.'

Thorne grunted.

'We've let the press know it's on, which should keep them off our backs, but obviously they don't know exactly when or where.' Brigstocke began to work carefully at a torn fingernail with his teeth. 'Shouldn't be a problem as long as some friendly press officer gives them everything they want once it's done and dusted.'

'Tell me about his friend.'

Brigstocke spat out the sliver of nail. 'Well, he's *saying* he'll feel a lot safer if he can bring another prisoner with him. That he's less likely to have any sort of "accident". Reckons there are too many of us who won't have forgotten Sarah McEvoy.'

'That's bollocks.'

'That's what he's saying.'

Thorne had certainly not forgotten the police officer who had been killed during the arrest of the man whose demands they were now discussing. He remembered blood spreading across asphalt. He remembered the look of elation on the man's face, just before Thorne had forcibly wiped it off. 'So, what, then? This bloke his boyfriend, maybe?'

'Possible,' Brigstocke said.

'Well, whatever the reason is for bringing him along, I'll want everything we can find on him.'

'Obviously—' Brigstocke's phone chirruped in his pocket. He took the handset out, dropped the call then replaced it. Either the conversation could wait, or it was one he did not want Thorne to overhear. 'Look, Tom, nothing about this is run of the mill, I know that. Normal procedures will be going out of the window to a large extent. This stupid place you'll be taking him back to, for a kick-off. It's already throwing up certain . . . logistical nightmares, so I'm just saying you might have to do a fair amount of thinking on your feet.'

Thorne nodded slowly and reached around for his jacket. 'I've got a few conditions of my own,' he said.

Brigstocke waited.

'I get to pick the rest of the team,' Thorne said, standing up. 'Not you and not the chief superintendent. And the *moment* me or anybody else starts to think that there's no body to be found and that he's just getting off on taking us all for mugs, I'll have him and his boyfriend banged up again before his feet have touched the ground. Fair enough?' Brigstocke opened his mouth, but Thorne hadn't finished. He was already on his way to the door. 'And I don't want to hear about how much grief the chief constable's getting from the *Sun* or the *Daily Mail*. I don't care about MPs, I don't even care about grieving mothers and I really couldn't give a toss about that sodding barrel . . . '

⋆

'Jesus, it's cold,' Holland said, now. He slapped his gloved hands together as he trudged around to the front of the car. He hunched his shoulders and nodded towards the prison entrance. 'I hope somebody's got the kettle on in there.'

Thorne hummed agreement. He might even have said something about hoping so too, but in truth he could think of little beyond the reason he had risen so early after a sleepless night and watched the sun come up driving a hundred miles to Long Lartin prison. Little beyond the man who had brought him here.

They walked towards the first of many gates, footsteps ringing against the tarmac and breath pluming from mouths and noses.

The man who would be patiently waiting on the other side of that wall.

They reached for warrant cards simultaneously.

The man who put that twist in Thorne's gut.

'Here we go then,' Holland said.

Stuart Nicklin was the bad news.