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The Murder Road

Written by Stephen Booth

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STEPHEN BOOTH

THE MURDER ROAD

sphere

SPHERE

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For Lesley, as always

1

Eight years ago

The road was wet that night, as it always was when the worst things happened. Rain had turned the tarmac into a slick, dark ribbon as black as any nightmare. A wave of spray splattered his windscreen from the tyres of a Tesco Scania as it ploughed through the downpour fifty yards ahead.

By now the steering wheel felt slippery in his hands and the rumble of the diesel engine had become a monotonous drone inside his head. The nose of his massive Iveco Stralis veered towards the white line as his concentration faltered for a second. He screwed up his eyes against the dazzle of headlights from cars on the northbound carriageway as they glared and flickered through a smear of water beneath his wipers.

He had the heater in his cab turned up full, the fans blasting air to clear the condensation. But the miles he'd already covered today had coated the lorry with dirt. There were still fragments of straw from a farm trailer stuck in a greasy film that his wiper blades couldn't shift. It was like driving blind through a storm of sludge.

There were no lights on this stretch of road, just the flick of a cat's eye, the dark shadow of a tree, the wet

reflection from the crash barrier in the central reservation. He was listening to Planet Rock on his DAB radio. It was the only kind of music that made sure the adrenalin was still pumping and kept him awake enough to drive the Iveco through the night, even after a daytime shift. He laughed to himself as a Stones track came on. 'Driving Too Fast'. Except he wasn't, of course. He knew better than to try in a rig like this, even without the speed limiter. He couldn't afford the points if a camera caught him. If he lost his licence, he'd lose his job.

'You're close to the edge. Don't push it one more inch.'

That was what people kept telling him. His boss, his wife, everyone who wanted to stick their interfering oars into his life.

Half a mile past the Macclesfield turn-off, his attention was distracted by a splash of white in the darkness overhead. It was just a car, parked on a bridge over the road. But its colour made it appear to float in mid-air, a ghostly apparition in the rain.

As his truck passed beneath the bridge, he glimpsed two people leaning over the rail. Just a pair of dark outlines, the pale ovals of their faces shrouded in hoods against the rain. It wasn't a night to be out watching traffic, surely. They'd be far better at home in front of the telly, or sitting in the pub with a pint. But some people had nothing better to do and nowhere else to go. He'd given up trying to understand what went on in other people's minds. It was too difficult to figure out, even when it was someone you'd known for years.

His phone buzzed and he glanced at the screen. A text message from his wife. Right on cue.

Where r u? We need 2 talk. Urgent.

She was going on about the same old subject, of course. She would never let it alone. She had never learned that the more she nagged him to do something, the more he felt like doing the opposite. She'd been banging on and on about the same old thing, over and over. He'd tried to fob her off, to say exactly what she wanted to hear. But it still wasn't enough for her. She was really starting to annoy him now.

What hv u done wth all th cash?

He sighed deeply. Today it was the amount of money they'd got saved up in the bank. She wanted a new three-piece suite and there ought to be enough cash to buy it by now. But some of the money had gone from the account. She had no doubt who was to blame. It was always *his* fault.

A red BMW coasted by in the outside lane, overtaking his truck and the Scania with ease, accelerating away until its tail lights vanished into the darkness. Grasping the steering wheel with one hand, he picked up his phone. He began to tap out a reply, awkwardly fumbling at the buttons, his words driven by a burst of anger and exhausted frustration.

The juddering took him by surprise. The vibration under his wheels was the only warning he had that his vehicle was straying off the carriageway. He fumbled at the steering, confused by the phone in his hand, not knowing what to do with it and failing to get a proper grip on the wheel, turning the Iveco further to the left instead of back into lane. Trees loomed dangerously close to the cab as he strayed over the white line and towards the verge. For that heart-stopping moment, his truck was out of control.

And then the lay-by appeared ahead and for a second he thought he was safe.

'Oh, damnation. That was close,' he said.

He sucked in air to breathe a sigh of relief and reached over to put his phone down on the passenger seat.

So he hadn't even begun to brake when the front of his truck hit the car. The impact threw him forward onto the wheel and his phone dropped to the floor as the lorry ploughed onwards, driving the mangled car in front of it. Shards of metal bounced off the road, glass shattered to glittering fragments in the rain, a broken bumper cartwheeled past his windscreen and disappeared into the night.

Then the rear of another truck appeared in his headlights and he finally jammed on the brakes. Too late, of course. Far too late. His wheels locked and his tyres screamed as he skidded on the slick surface. The rear of the parked truck lifted into the air and crashed back onto the road as the car was crushed into a shattered concertina between them.

His air bag deployed as his cab smashed into the other truck. He felt as though gravity had been suspended as the weight of the Iveco's trailer swung it round behind him in a violent jack-knife and swept it into the traffic. Its impetus twisted the cab on its axis and bounced it away from the wreckage, until the tail end of the trailer crashed into the central barrier and shuddered to a halt.

Dazed, he tried to sit upright and push the limp remains of his air bag aside. A shocking pain ran up his leg as he moved, making him cry out loud and clench his fists. The stink of petrol leaked into the cab through a shattered window.

Slowly, he opened his eyes. He found himself staring into the undergrowth at the side of the road, his lights illuminating the trees and the fields beyond, steam billowing from his radiator like fog on the set of a horror film, awaiting the arrival of a monster. His engine was still ticking over, his radio was still playing the Stones. Yet somewhere he could hear the sound of an appalling silence.

2

Monday 9 February

Detective Inspector Ben Cooper paused before he stepped through the open door. He took a few deep breaths, inhaling the smell and the taste of the air. You could tell so much about a house by the way it smelled. Dust and old carpets, damp and broken plaster. A picture was already forming in his head, a strong hint of neglect and hidden corners of dereliction.

Then he detected an underlying odour, a faintly medicinal tang that reminded him of hospital wards. It was something powerful, an embrocation or liniment. Eucalyptus oil or wintergreen, menthol and camphor. Even before he entered the hallway, he would have known it was an old person's house.

'Hello?' he called. 'Hello?'

There was no reply. He pushed the door wider and took a couple of steps into the narrow hall. The old floorboards groaned under his feet. Their creaks echoed in the empty passage, as if the house was responding to his presence.

Two doorways stood to his left and another at the furthest end of the passage. To his right a flight of stairs ran up to the first floor. On some of the steps the carpet

had got bunched up and pulled loose from the stair rods, exposing the felt underlay. It was old and worn, and the pattern was barely visible in places. But he could see that something heavy had been dragged down the stairs recently, leaving indentations in the carpet and a long scrape in the wallpaper.

There seemed to be no one here, though the door had been standing open, as if waiting for him to arrive.

'Hello?' he called again.

He headed down the passage, stepping cautiously over a broken section of floorboard, through which he glimpsed a dark void. He pulled out a small LED torch from his pocket and shone it into the gap. Ancient wiring snaked along the floor joists to a junction box that was surely made of bakelite. When was that installed? Probably in the 1950s. It would be considered a death trap now.

He pushed the first door open. This room looked out onto the street. Light filtered in through lace curtains on the window. A few remnants of furniture stood against the walls.

The room was strangely familiar, despite its emptiness. He'd been here before, in a different time, a different stage of his existence. A lot of things had happened since then. Death had come into his life, the way it had to this house.

He stood for a few moments in the centre of the room, gazing at the window, watching the shadows of people passing outside. They were like a distant dream, a glimpse of a world he could never be part of again.

Though the house was silent, the bare walls seemed to whisper and murmur. The room had a life of its own, isolated but contained, like a prison cell. All the things

that had gone on in here still whirled around in the dust, a memory of the people who'd lived here continuing to stir the air. A starling whistled in the chimney, a car sounded its horn outside. But they failed to penetrate Cooper's reverie.

He was still standing in his trance-like state when the front door slammed. He jumped guiltily, not certain for a moment where he was or why he was standing in someone else's house. He reached automatically for his ASP, his extendable baton, which he carried deep in a pocket of his jacket, hidden from sight but always accessible.

But his hand fell back. There was no threat. There was a good reason why he was in this house. In fact, he was expected.

'Ah, Ben,' said a voice. 'There you are. So what do you think?'

A balding man in his early fifties was standing in the doorway watching him. Guy Thomson. A flushed complexion and ingratiating smile. Cooper had never liked him, but this was the man he was obliged to deal with.

'How much are you asking for it again?' asked Cooper.

'A hundred and fifty thousand.'

'It's a bit on the high side, given its condition.'

'But there's the garden, of course.'

'True.'

They walked through the rest of the downstairs rooms before returning to the hallway and the worn stairs.

'As you can see, we got all the furniture out,' said Thomson. 'Though some of that heavy Victorian stuff upstairs was tricky. There was an enormous mahogany

wardrobe. I thought for a while we were going to have to smash it up. But we got it downstairs in the end, with a bit of manoeuvring.'

'I think I heard you,' said Cooper.

'What, even through these solid walls?'

Thomson laughed as he thumped the adjoining wall, disturbing a thin trickle of plaster from one of the cracks.

'Is that a new car outside, by the way?' he said. 'I don't recognise it. Got rid of the old one, have you?'

'Yes, I've just bought it,' said Cooper.

'Toyota RAV4, isn't it? Nice.'

'Thank you.'

Thomson threw him a shrewd sidelong glance.

'You must have come into a bit of money, then?'

'I got a promotion.'

'Ah. Shall we have a look upstairs?'

Cooper had never been upstairs at number six Welbeck Street before. In fact, he'd hardly ever gone up to the first floor of number eight next door, even though he lived there. He'd always met the various tenants in the first-floor flat, but there had been quite a number of them over the years. They'd come and gone pretty quickly, and he'd never got to know any of them properly. He'd been told that was just the way it was in rented accommodation. Now he was beginning to feel like an oddity for having stayed so long.

He wondered if the neighbours in Welbeck Street regarded him as strange, a single man who lived on his own and kept himself to himself. Perhaps they'd all forgotten by now that he'd almost reached the altar, that he'd been ready to walk up the aisle and start a perfectly normal married life.

But nothing was normal now. Not any more. He might have begun to look a little odd and solitary to his neighbours – but they'd begun to look strange to him too. He no longer felt he understood some of these people, the ones living in comfortable domesticity on the side streets of Edendale, with their curtains closed against the world. Somehow his curtains didn't keep the world out, the way theirs did.

It was ridiculous, he knew – but he was starting to feel that he was too far into his thirties to start all over again. He'd convinced himself that he'd be a father by now, settled down with a home of his own. It felt too late to think about planning a family with someone else.

Cooper followed Guy Thomson up the narrow stairs to the first-floor landing, listening to him rattling off the patter as if he was a born estate agent.

'Well, I'm sure I don't need to tell you about how convenient the location is,' Thomson was saying. 'Since you've already lived here for a few years.'

'No.'

'How many years is it exactly?'

'I can't really remember,' said Cooper, though he knew to the day how long he'd lived in Welbeck Street. Moving into the flat had been a major event in his life, a step into freedom from his upbringing at Bridge End Farm.

'It's quite a while, though,' said Thomson. 'I remember my aunt talking about it – how she'd just let the flat to a nice policeman. She was thrilled.'

'She was very nice to me.'

'Good old Aunt Dorothy.'

Guy was the oldest of his former landlady's nephews and nieces. Since Dorothy Shelley's death, the distribu-

tion of her estate had been complicated by the absence of a will and no doubt a certain amount of the usual in-fighting between potential beneficiaries. Cooper couldn't imagine that she had much to leave, apart from these two adjoining terraced houses. But it meant both houses had to be sold to enable the proceeds to be shared.

'It's the condition of the property that concerns me mostly,' he said.

'Oh, they were built to last, these houses. Not like the modern stuff.'

'They need a lot of maintenance, though. Modernisation. This place would need some money spending on it to get it up to scratch.'

Thomson was still looking at him curiously, his face creased in effort as if he was trying to remember something.

'You knew Lawrence, didn't you?' he said eventually.

'Yes, that's how I came to hear about the flat in the first place.'

'That was very sad about Lawrence.'

'He was your cousin, of course,' said Cooper.

'Yes. It's a long time ago now. But still . . .'

Mrs Shelley had never mentioned Lawrence Daley to him, at least not after the funeral had taken place and Cooper had moved into the flat at number eight. She'd probably kept quiet out of a sense of propriety, a feeling that it wouldn't be quite nice to talk about such a tragedy. Or perhaps she'd been considerate of Cooper's feelings, given his own involvement in what had happened to Lawrence.

He remembered Mrs Shelley now, as she'd stood waiting in the hallway of number eight that first day to look

him over. He could even recall the cashmere cardigan she'd been wearing, with another slung over her shoulders. The cardigans looked a bit frayed round the edges, giving her an air of decayed gentility. She took to him straight away, perhaps because he was the right sort of person and met her requirements for a tenant. *Reliable and trustworthy professional people only.* Or perhaps it was because he was willing to take on the lazy cat that came with the flat. Yes, that was probably the clincher for Mrs Shelley.

'My Uncle Gerald had plans to knock these two places together,' said Thomson. 'Unfortunately, he never got round to it.'

'I remember Lawrence telling me that. But there were only ever the two of them living here, weren't there? Your aunt and uncle, I mean? No children?'

Thomson eyed him suspiciously, as if Cooper had just cast doubt on his right to inherit the property as a mere nephew.

'No, there were no children,' he said. 'None.'

'Shame. She must have been quite lonely in her later years.'

Cooper felt a sudden wave of guilt at his own words. The old girl had been very good to him, but he hadn't been paying much attention to her when she became seriously ill. She'd treated him pretty much as a grandson and he was sure his rent ought to have gone up substantially in the past few years, but for her indulgence. He should have returned the consideration by keeping a closer eye on her as she got increasingly frail and confused.

He certainly ought to have been there the night she needed him. She could have just banged on the wall

and he would have gone straight round. But Mrs Shelley's stroke had been a serious one. She'd looked more than just frail as she lay in her bed in the intensive care unit. She looked so thin that her fragile bones protruded from the sunken skin on her shoulders. One stroke was followed by another and the last one was fatal.

It was shocking how much that had changed things. Even when she was living next door, he'd hardly been aware of Dorothy Shelley's presence most of the time. But when she was dead, it made all the difference. From that moment, living at number eight no longer seemed the same. Death had crept a little bit too close to his walls, reminding him once again that there was no escape.

Thomson had moved into one of the bedrooms and was waiting for him with an impatient cough, while Cooper made a pretence of studying the walls, tapping the plaster with his knuckles. He'd never liked this man. He'd never had any interest in his aunt until she was dying. The prospect of inheriting her two properties in Welbeck Street had brought him to her hospital bed. If Cooper didn't buy one of these houses himself, he had no doubt they would be sold off to the first property developer who came along.

He could afford the house now – or at least, he could afford the monthly mortgage repayments. What he hadn't decided was whether he wanted to stay in Edendale. On the one hand, it was a great place to live and work. But did he really want to continue living in Welbeck Street, with all the memories and living in these walls? It was a question he kept asking himself. And he still didn't know the answer.

Cooper took a surreptitious glance at his watch as Guy

Thomson continued his sales pitch. He had plans for this evening. And tomorrow was Tuesday, the start of a new working week after his rest day.

He wondered what would be waiting for him in his office at Edendale CID. Whatever it was, it would involve blood. There would always be blood. It was one of the facts of his life.