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HANGMAN

Written by Daniel Cole

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HANGMAN

Also by Daniel Cole

Ragdoll

HANGMAN

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TRAPEZE

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‘What *if* there is a God?

‘What *if* there is a heaven?

‘What *if* there is a hell?

‘And what *if* . . . just what *if* . . . we’re
all already there?’

PROLOGUE

Wednesday 6 January 2016

9.52 a.m.

‘There is no God. Fact.’

Detective Chief Inspector Emily Baxter watched her reflection in the interview room’s mirrored window, listening for any reaction to this unpopular truth from her eavesdropping audience.

Nothing.

She looked terrible: fifty rather than thirty-five. Thick black stitches held her top lip together, pulling taut every time she spoke, reminding her of things she would rather forget, old and new. The grazed skin on her forehead was refusing to heal, tape splinted her fractured fingers together, and a dozen other injuries were concealed out of sight beneath her damp clothing.

With a deliberately bored expression, she turned to face the two men sitting across the table from her. Neither spoke. She yawned and started playing with her long brown hair, running her few functional fingers through a dusty section, matted together by three days’ worth of dry shampoo. She couldn’t have cared less that her last answer had clearly offended Special Agent Sinclair, the imposing, bald American now scribbling onto a piece of elaborately headed notepaper.

Atkins, the Metropolitan Police liaison, was an unimpressive sight beside the smartly dressed foreigner. Baxter had spent the

majority of the previous fifty minutes attempting to work out what colour his off-beige shirt had started out life as. His tie hung loosely round his neck, as if a philanthropic hangman had tied it, the dangling end failing to conceal a recent ketchup stain.

Atkins eventually took the silence as his cue to step in:

‘That must’ve led to some pretty *interesting* conversations with Special Agent Rouche,’ he stated.

He had sweat running down the side of his closely shaven head, courtesy of the lighting above them and the heater in the corner, which was billowing out hot air and had transformed the four sets of snowy footprints into a dirty puddle on the linoleum floor.

‘Meaning?’ asked Baxter.

‘Meaning that according to his file—’

‘Screw his file!’ Sinclair interrupted. ‘I used to work alongside Rouche and know for a *fact* that he was a devout Christian.’

The American flicked through the neatly indexed folder to his left and produced a document decorated in Baxter’s own handwriting. ‘As are you, according to the application for your current role.’

He held Baxter’s gaze, relishing that the confrontational woman had contradicted herself, as if the balance of the world was restored now that he had proven she did indeed share his beliefs and had merely been attempting to provoke him. Baxter, however, looked as bored as ever.

‘I’ve come to the realisation that, in general, people are idiots,’ she started, ‘and a great many have the misguided notion that mindless gullibility and a strong moral compass are in some way linked. Basically, I wanted the pay rise.’

Sinclair shook his head in disgust, as if he could not believe his ears.

‘So you lied? Doesn’t exactly support your point about that strong moral compass, now does it?’ He smiled thinly, making more notes.

Baxter shrugged: ‘But does say a *hell* of a lot about mindless gullibility.’

Sinclair’s smile dropped.

‘Is there some reason you’re trying to convert me?’ she asked, unable to resist jabbing at her interviewer’s temper so that he jumped to his feet and leaned over her.

‘A man is dead, Chief Inspector!’ he bellowed.

Baxter didn’t flinch.

‘A lot of people are dead . . . after what happened,’ she mumbled, before turning venomous, ‘and for some reason *you* people seem intent on wasting everybody’s time worrying about the only person out there who deserves to be!’

‘We’re asking,’ interjected Atkins, trying to defuse the situation, ‘because some evidence was found close to the body . . . of a religious nature.’

‘Which could have been dropped by anyone,’ said Baxter.

The two men shared a look, which she recognised as meaning that there was more they were not sharing with her.

‘Do you have any information on Special Agent Rouche’s current whereabouts?’ Sinclair asked her.

Baxter huffed: ‘To the best of my knowledge, Agent Rouche is dead.’

‘Is that *really* how you want to play this?’

‘To the best of my knowledge, Agent Rouche is dead,’ repeated Baxter.

‘So you saw his bo—’

Dr Preston-Hall, the Metropolitan Police’s consultant psychiatrist and the fourth person sitting at the small metal table, cleared her throat loudly. Sinclair broke off, understanding the unspoken warning. He sat back in his chair and made a gesture towards the mirrored window. Atkins scribbled into his tatty notebook and slid it across to Dr Preston-Hall.

The doctor was a well-presented woman in her early sixties, whose expensive perfume had been reduced to acting as a floral air-freshener that failed to mask the overwhelming smell of damp shoes. She had an effortlessly authoritative air and had made it quite clear that she would end the interview at any point should she deem the line of questioning detrimental to her patient’s

recovery. Slowly she picked up the coffee-stained book and read through the message with the air of a schoolteacher intercepting a secret note.

She had been silent for almost an entire hour and clearly felt no need to break it now, offering Atkins only a simple shake of the head in answer to what he had written.

‘What does it say?’ asked Baxter.

The doctor ignored her.

‘What does it say?’ she asked again. She turned to Sinclair. ‘Ask your question.’

Sinclair looked torn.

‘Ask your question,’ Baxter demanded.

‘Emily!’ the doctor snapped. ‘Do not say a word, Mr Sinclair.’

‘You might as well just say it,’ challenged Baxter, her voice filling the small space. ‘The station? You want to ask me about the station?’

‘This interview is over,’ announced Dr Preston-Hall, standing up.

‘Ask me!’ Baxter shouted over her.

Sensing his last chance for answers slipping away from him, Sinclair elected to persevere and worry about the consequences later:

‘According to your statement, you believe that Special Agent Rouche was among the dead.’

Dr Preston-Hall raised her hands in exasperation.

‘That wasn’t a question,’ said Baxter.

‘Did you see his body?’

For the first time, Sinclair saw Baxter falter, but rather than enjoying her discomfort, he felt guilty. Her eyes glazed over as his question forced her back underground, trapping her momentarily in the past.

Her voice cracked when she finally whispered her answer:

‘I wouldn’t have known if I had, would I?’

There was another strained silence, in which everyone reflected on just how disturbing that simple sentence was.

‘How did he seem to you?’ Atkins blurted the half-formed question when the quiet became unbearable.

‘Who?’

‘Rouche.’

‘In what way?’ asked Baxter.

‘Emotional state.’

‘When?’

‘The last time you saw him.’

She considered her answer for a moment and then smiled genuinely:

‘Relieved.’

‘Relieved?’

Baxter nodded.

‘You sound fond of him,’ continued Atkins.

‘Not particularly. He was intelligent, a competent co-worker . . . despite his *obvious* flaws,’ she added.

Her huge brown eyes, emphasised by dark make-up, were watching Sinclair for a reaction. He bit his lip and glanced again at the mirror as if cursing someone behind the glass for such a testing assignment.

Atkins took it upon himself to finish off the interview. He now had dark sweat patches underneath his arms and had failed to notice that both women had subtly scraped their chairs back a few inches to retreat from the smell.

‘You had a team search Agent Rouche’s house,’ he said.

‘I did.’

‘You didn’t trust him, then?’

‘I didn’t.’

‘And you feel no residual loyalty towards him now?’

‘None whatsoever.’

‘Do you remember what the last thing he said to you was?’

Baxter looked restless: ‘Are we done here?’

‘Almost. Answer the question, please.’ He sat, pen poised over his notebook.

‘I’d like to go now,’ Baxter told the doctor.

‘Of course,’ Dr Preston-Hall answered sharply.

‘Is there some reason that you can’t respond to this simple question first?’ Sinclair’s words cut across the room like an accusation.

‘All right.’ Baxter looked furious. ‘I’ll respond.’ She considered her reply and then leaned across the table to meet the American’s eye.

‘There . . . is . . . no . . . God,’ she smirked.

Atkins tossed his pen across the table as Sinclair got up, sending the metal chair clattering to the floor as he stormed out of the room.

‘Nice job,’ Atkins sighed wearily. ‘Thank you for your *co-operation*, Detective Chief Inspector. Now we’re done.’

Five weeks earlier . . .

CHAPTER 1

Wednesday 2 December 2015

6.56 a.m.

The frozen river creaked and snapped as if shifting in its sleep beneath the sparkling metropolis. Various vessels, ice-trapped and forgotten, drowned gradually in the snow as the mainland was temporarily reunited with the island city.

As sunrise crept over the cluttered horizon, and the bridge basked in the orange light, it cast a stark shadow across the ice below: between the imposing archway, a framework of wires crisscrossed in the powder, a web of threads that had caught something overnight.

Tangled up and bent out of shape where it hung, like a fly that had torn itself apart in its desperation to break free, William Fawkes's broken body eclipsed the sun.

CHAPTER 2

Tuesday 8 December 2015

6.39 p.m.

Night pressed against the windows of New Scotland Yard, the lights of the city smudged behind a layer of condensation.

With the exception of two brief toilet breaks and a visit to the stationery drawer, Baxter had not left her cupboard-sized office in Homicide and Serious Crime Command since arriving that morning. She stared at the tower of paperwork on the edge of her desk, balancing precariously over the waste-paper bin, and had to fight all of her natural instincts not to give it a gentle prod in the right direction.

At thirty-four, she had become one of the youngest female chief inspectors ever appointed within the Metropolitan Police, though this rapid ascent up the ladder had been neither expected nor particularly welcomed. Both the supervisory vacancy and her subsequent over-promotion into it could be attributed solely to the Ragdoll case and her apprehension of the infamous serial killer the previous summer.

The last chief inspector, Terrence Simmons, had been forced to retire due to ill health, which everybody suspected had been exacerbated by the commissioner's threat to fire him should he refuse to leave voluntarily, the customary reflex gesture for a disillusioned public, like sacrificing an innocent to appease the ever-wrathful gods.

Baxter shared the sentiment held by the rest of her colleagues: disgusted to see her predecessor being used as a scapegoat but, ultimately, relieved that it wasn't her. She had not even considered putting in an application for the newly vacated position until the commissioner had told her that the job was hers should she want it.

She looked around her chipboard cell, with its dirty carpet and dented filing cabinet (who knew what important documents were entombed within that bottom drawer she had never been able to open?), and wondered what the hell she had been thinking.

A cheer rose up out in the main office, but the sound didn't even register with Baxter, who had returned to a letter of complaint about a detective named Saunders. He had been accused of using a profanity to describe the complainant's son. Baxter's only doubt regarding the claim was the relative tameness of the word used. She started to type an official reply, lost the will to live halfway through, screwed up the complaint and threw it in the general direction of the bin.

There was a timid knock at the door before a mousy officer scuttled in. She collected up Baxter's near- (and not-so-near-) misses and dropped them into the bin before flaunting her world-class Jenga skills by placing another document on top of the unsteady tower of paperwork.

'I'm very sorry to disturb you,' said the woman, 'but Detective Shaw is about to make his speech. I thought you might want to be there.'

Baxter swore loudly and rested her head on the desk:

'Present!' she groaned, reminding herself too late.

The nervy young lady waited awkwardly for further instructions. After a couple of moments, and unsure whether Baxter was even still awake, she quietly left the room.

Dragging herself to her feet, Baxter walked out into the main office, where a crowd had gathered round Detective Sergeant Finlay Shaw's desk. A twenty-year-old banner, which Finlay had actually purchased himself for a long-forgotten colleague, had been Blu-tacked to the wall:

SORRY YOU'RE LEAVING!

An array of stale supermarket doughnuts sat on the desk beside him, various ‘reduced’ stickers documenting the contents’ three-day journey from unappetising to inedible.

Polite laughter accompanied the rasping Scottish detective’s exaggerated threat to give Saunders one final punch in the face before he retired. They were all laughing about it now, but the last incident had resulted in one reconstructed nose, two disciplinary hearings and hours’ worth of form-filling for Baxter.

She hated these things: so awkward, so false, such an anti-climactic send-off after decades of service with so many close calls and so many horrific memories for him to take home as souvenirs. She stood at the back, smiling along in support of her friend, watching Finlay fondly. He was the last proper ally she had in this place, the one remaining friendly face, and now he was leaving. She hadn’t even bought him a card.

Her office phone started to ring.

She ignored it, watching Finlay fail miserably to pretend that the bottle of whisky they had clubbed together to buy him was his favourite.

His favourite was Jameson – same as Wolf.

Her mind wandered. She remembered buying Finlay a drink the last time they had met up socially. Almost a year had passed since then. He had told her that he never regretted his own lack of ambition. He had warned her that the DCI role wasn’t right for her, that she would be bored, frustrated. She hadn’t listened, because what Finlay couldn’t understand was that she wasn’t looking so much for a promotion as she was a distraction, a change, an escape.

The phone in her office started to ring again and she glared back at her desk. Finlay was reading through the variations of ‘Sorry to see you go’ that had been scrawled across a *Minions* card, of which somebody had mistakenly believed him to be a fan.

She checked her watch. She really needed to finish at a decent time for once.

Setting the card aside with a chuckle, Finlay began his heartfelt goodbye. He planned to keep it as short as possible, having never much enjoyed public speaking.

‘. . . Seriously, though, thank you. I’ve been knocking about this place since it was Brand-Spanking-New Scotland Yard . . .’ He left a pause, hoping that at least one person might laugh. His delivery had been terrible, and he had just blown his best joke. But he continued regardless, knowing that it was only downhill from here.

‘This place and the people in it have become more than just a job and colleagues – you’ve become a second family to me.’

A woman standing in the front row fanned her tearful eyes. Finlay attempted to smile at her in a way that conveyed both that the feeling was mutual and that he had some idea of who she was. He looked up into his audience, searching for the one person for whom his parting message was actually intended.

‘I’ve had the pleasure of watching a few of you grow up around me, transforming from cocky little trainees into’ – he felt his own eyes prickling now – ‘strong, independent, beautiful and brave young women . . . and men,’ he added, concerned that he may have just ‘outed’ himself. ‘I want to say what a pleasure it has been to work alongside you and how *truly* proud I am of you. Thank you.’

He cleared his throat and smiled at his applauding colleagues, finally spotting Baxter. She was stood beside the desk in her office with the door closed, gesticulating wildly as she spoke to someone on the phone. He smiled again, sadly this time, while the crowd dispersed, leaving him alone to collect his things and vacate the premises one final time.

Memories slowed his progress as he took down the photographs that had inhabited his workspace for years, one image in particular, creased and discoloured with age, hijacking his thoughts: an office Christmas party. A crêpe-paper crown covered Finlay’s balding head, much to the amusement of his friend Benjamin Chambers, arm around Baxter, in what must be the only photograph in existence of her actually smiling. And there on the end, failing miserably to win the bet that he could lift Finlay off the ground,

was Will . . . Wolf. Carefully tucking the picture into his jacket pocket, he finished packing the remainder of his things.

On his way out of the office, Finlay hesitated. He didn't feel as though the forgotten letter he had discovered right at the back of his desk drawer belonged to him. He considered leaving it behind, considered tearing it up, but in the end he dropped it to the bottom of his box of crap and made his way over to the lifts.

He supposed it was just one more secret he would have to keep.

At 7.49 p.m., Baxter was still sat at her desk. She had sent out text messages every twenty minutes apologising for running late and promising to get out as soon as she possibly could. Her commander had not only caused her to completely miss Finlay's retirement speech but was now sabotaging her first social arrangement in months. She had demanded that Baxter remain where she was until her arrival.

There was no love lost between the two women. Vanita, the media-savvy face of the Metropolitan Police, had quite openly opposed Baxter's promotion. Having worked with her on the Ragdoll murders, Vanita had advised the commissioner that Baxter was argumentative, opinionated and had a total lack of respect for authority, not to mention that she still considered her responsible for the death of one of the victims. Baxter regarded Vanita as a PR-bowing snake who had not thought twice about throwing Simmons under the bus at the very first sign of trouble.

To make matters worse, Baxter had just opened an automated email from their records department, reminding her, for the umpteenth time, that Wolf still had several outstanding files to return. She scanned the extensive list, recognising a couple of the cases . . .

Bennett, Sarah: the woman who had drowned her husband in their swimming pool. Baxter was reasonably confident that she'd lost that one down the back of a radiator in the meeting room.

Dubois, Léo: the straightforward stabbing that had gradually escalated into one of the most complicated multi-agency cases

in years, involving drug smuggling, black-market weaponry and human trafficking.

She and Wolf had had a great time on that one.

She spotted Vanita entering the office with two other people in tow, which did not bode well for her hopes of getting out by 8 p.m. She didn't bother to get up as Vanita sauntered in, greeting her with such practised pleasantness that she could almost have believed it.

'DCI Emily Baxter, Special Agent Elliot Curtis with the FBI,' Vanita announced, flicking back her dark hair.

'It's an honour, ma'am,' said the tall, black woman, holding out her hand to Baxter. She was wearing a masculine-looking suit, had tied back her hair so tight that it looked shaved and was wearing minimal make-up. Although she looked to be in her early thirties, Baxter suspected that she was younger.

She shook Curtis's hand without getting out of her seat while Vanita introduced her other guest, who seemed more interested in the destroyed filing cabinet than he was the introductions.

'And this is Special Agent—'

'How *special* can they be, I wonder,' Baxter interrupted, playing up, 'when we've got two just in my pitiful excuse of an office?'

Vanita ignored her:

'As I was saying, this is Special Agent Damien Rouche with the CIA.'

'Rooze?' asked Baxter.

'Rouch?' tried Vanita, now doubting her own pronunciation.

'I believe it's Rouche, like "whoosh",' added Curtis helpfully, turning to Rouche for advice.

Baxter looked puzzled as the distracted man smiled politely, gave her a fleeting fist bump, and helped himself to a seat without saying a word. She placed him in his very late thirties. He was clean-shaven with pasty skin and salt-and-pepper hair styled into a slightly overgrown quiff at the front. He looked at the snaking tower of paperwork between them, then down at the bin waiting

expectantly beneath and grinned. He wore a white shirt with the top two buttons undone and a navy suit that looked tired but well fitted.

Baxter turned to Vanita and waited.

‘Agents Curtis and Rouche just got in this evening from America,’ said Vanita.

‘That would make sense,’ replied Baxter more patiently than she had intended. ‘I’m in a bit of a rush tonight, so . . .’

‘If I may, Commander?’ Curtis asked Vanita politely, before turning to Baxter. ‘Chief Inspector, you heard, of course, about the body that was discovered nearly a week ago. Well—’

Baxter looked blank and shrugged, stopping Curtis before she had even started.

‘New York? Brooklyn Bridge?’ asked Curtis, astounded. ‘Strung up? Worldwide news?’

Baxter had to stifle a yawn.

Rouche rummaged around in his coat pocket. Curtis waited for him to produce something useful but instead he removed a family-sized packet of Jelly Babies and ripped it open. On noticing her angry expression, he offered her one.

Ignoring him, Curtis opened her bag and produced a file. She found a series of enlarged photographs and put them down on the desk in front of Baxter.

Suddenly it dawned on her why these people had come all this way to see her. The first photo was taken from street level looking up. Silhouetted against the glow radiating off the city was a body, hanging between cables a hundred feet above. The extremities had been contorted into an unnatural pose.

‘We’ve not made this public yet, but the victim’s name was William Fawkes.’

For a moment Baxter stopped breathing. She had already been feeling faint from lack of food, but now she felt as though she might actually pass out. Her hand trembled as she touched the distorted shape framed by the iconic bridge. She could feel their eyes on her, watching her, perhaps resurrecting the doubts they’d

had about her vague version of events surrounding the dramatic conclusion to the Ragdoll murders.

With a curious expression, Curtis continued:

‘Not *that* one,’ she said slowly, reaching over to slide the top photograph off the pile to reveal a close-up of the naked, overweight, and unfamiliar victim.

Baxter held her hand to her mouth, still too shaken to respond.

‘He worked for P. J. Henderson’s, the investment bank. Wife, two kids . . . But someone’s clearly sending us a message.’

Baxter had regained enough composure to flick through the remaining photographs, which depicted the cadaver from various angles. One complete body, no stitches. A man in his fifties, stripped naked. His left arm hung loose, the word ‘Bait’ carved deeply into his chest. She flicked through the other photographs and then handed them back to Curtis.

‘Bait?’ she asked, looking between the two agents.

‘Perhaps now you can see why we thought you should be aware,’ said Curtis.

‘Not really,’ replied Baxter, who was rapidly returning to her normal self.

Curtis looked stunned and turned to Vanita:

‘I had expected your department, over any other, to want to—’

‘Do you know how many Ragdoll copycat crimes there have been in the UK in the past year?’ Baxter interrupted. ‘Seven that I know about, and I actively try to *avoid* knowing about them.’

‘And that doesn’t concern you at all?’ asked Curtis.

Baxter didn’t see why she should spare this particular horror any more time than the five that had landed on her desk that morning:

She shrugged: ‘Freaks be freakin’.

Rouche almost choked on an orange Jelly Baby.

‘Look, Lethaniel Masse was a highly intelligent, resourceful and prolific serial killer. These others are no more than sickos defacing the dead before their local plod picks them up.’

Baxter shut down her computer and packed her bag in preparation to leave:

‘Six weeks ago, I handed a packet of Smarties to a three-foot version of the Ragdoll trick-or-treating on my doorstep. Some beret-wearing ponce decided to stitch a bunch of dead animal bits together. That mess is now the newest addition to the Tate Modern and being enjoyed by record numbers of equally poncy and equally beret-wearing, beret-wearing ponces.’

Rouche laughed.

‘Some sick bastard is even making a TV show about it. The Ragdoll is out there now, everywhere, and we’re all just going to have to learn to live with it,’ she finished.

She turned to Rouche, who was staring into his bag of Jelly Babies.

‘Does he not talk?’ she asked Curtis.

‘He prefers to listen,’ Curtis said bitterly, sounding as though she had grown tired of her eccentric colleague after just one week of working together.

Baxter looked back at Rouche.

‘Have they changed these?’ he finally mumbled through a technicoloured mouthful when he realised that all three women were waiting for him to input to the meeting.

Baxter was surprised to find that the CIA agent spoke with an impeccable English accent.

‘Changed what?’ she asked, listening carefully in case he was putting it on to wind her up.

‘Jelly Babies,’ he said, picking his teeth. ‘They don’t taste like they used to.’

Curtis was rubbing her forehead in embarrassment and frustration. Baxter raised her hands and looked to Vanita impatiently.

‘I’ve got somewhere to be,’ she said bluntly.

‘We have reason to believe that this isn’t just another meaningless copycat, Chief Inspector,’ insisted Curtis, gesturing to the photographs in an attempt to steer the meeting back on track.

‘You’re right,’ said Baxter. ‘It’s not *even* that. Nothing’s been stitched together.’

‘There’s been a second murder,’ snapped Curtis loudly, before reverting to her professional tone. ‘Two days ago. The location was . . . *favourable* in the sense that we were able to quell the media leakage, at least temporarily. But realistically we don’t expect to be able to keep an incident of this’ – she looked to Rouche for assistance. None came – ‘*nature* from the world for more than another day or so.’

‘. . . the *world*?’ asked Baxter sceptically.

‘We have a small request of you,’ said Curtis.

‘And a big one,’ added Rouche, even better spoken now that he had finished his mouthful.

Baxter frowned at Rouche, Curtis did the same, and then Vanita glared at Baxter before she had time to protest. Rouche glared at Vanita just to keep things even as Curtis turned back to address Baxter:

‘We’d like to interview Lethaniel Masse.’

‘So that’s why both the FBI and CIA are involved,’ said Baxter. ‘Stateside murder, Blighty suspect. Well, knock yourself out,’ she shrugged.

‘With you present, of course.’

‘Absolutely not. There’s no reason you could *possibly* need me there. You can read questions off a card by yourselves. I believe in you.’

Rouche smiled at the sarcastic aside.

‘Of course we will be delighted to assist you in any way that we can, won’t we, Chief Inspector?’ said Vanita, eyes wide with anger. ‘Our friendships with the FBI and CIA are both important relationships that we—’

‘Christ!’ blurted Baxter. ‘Fine. I’ll come and hold your hands. So what’s the small request?’

Rouche and Curtis glanced at one another, and even Vanita shuffled uncomfortably before anyone dared speak.

‘*That* . . . was the small request,’ said Curtis softly.

Baxter looked about to blow.

‘We would like you to look over the crime scene with us,’ Curtis continued.

‘Photographs?’ asked Baxter in a strained whisper.

Rouche stuck out his bottom lip and shook his head.

‘I have already agreed the temporary secondment to New York with the commissioner and will be stepping into your shoes while you’re away,’ Vanita informed her.

‘They’re big shoes to fill,’ replied Baxter snippily.

‘I’ll cope . . . *somehow*,’ said Vanita, her professional façade slipping for a rare moment.

‘This is ridiculous! What the *hell* do you people think I could possibly contribute to a completely unrelated case on the other side of the world?’

‘Nothing at all,’ Rouche answered honestly, disarming Baxter.

‘It is a *complete* waste of all our time . . . Times? Time?’

Curtis took over the conversation:

‘I think what my colleague is *trying* to say is that the American public won’t see this case as we do. They’ll see Ragdoll murders here, Ragdoll-esque murders there and they’ll want to see the person who captured the Ragdoll Killer hunting these new monsters.’

‘Monsters?’ asked Baxter.

It was Rouche’s turn to roll his eyes at his colleague. She had clearly said more than she had meant to at this early stage; however, the resulting silence told Baxter that the woman had raised her guard once more.

‘So this is all just a PR exercise, then?’ asked Baxter.

‘And yet,’ said Rouche with a smile, ‘isn’t everything we do, *Chief Inspector*?’

CHAPTER 3

Tuesday 8 December 2015

8.53 p.m.

‘Hello? Sorry I’m so late,’ called Baxter from the hallway as she kicked off her boots and entered the living room. A variety of delicious smells drifted in on the cold breeze coming from the kitchen doorway, and the inoffensive sound of whichever singer-songwriter Starbucks had been promoting that week crooned out of the iPod speaker in the corner.

Four places had been set at the table, the flickering tea lights lending the room an orangey glow that emphasised Alex Edmunds’s flyaway ginger hair. Her gangly ex-colleague loitered awkwardly, empty beer bottle in hand.

Although tall herself, Baxter had to stand on tiptoes to embrace him.

‘Where’s Tia?’ she asked her friend.

‘On the phone to the babysitter . . . again,’ he replied.

‘Em? That you?’ called a well-spoken voice from the kitchen.

Baxter remained quiet. She was far too exhausted to get dragged into helping with dinner.

‘I’ve got wine in here!’ the voice added playfully.

That tempted her into the showroom-perfect kitchen, where several top-of-the-range pans were bubbling away under the muted light. A man wearing a smart shirt beneath a long apron presided

over them, giving them an occasional stir or burst of heat. She walked over and planted a quick kiss on his lips.

‘I missed you,’ said Thomas.

‘You mentioned something about wine?’ she reminded him.

He laughed and poured her a glass from an open bottle.

‘Thanks. I need this,’ said Baxter.

‘Don’t thank me. Courtesy of Alex and Tia.’

They both raised their glasses to Edmunds, standing in the doorway, and then Baxter jumped up onto the work surface to watch Thomas cook.

They had met at rush hour, eight months earlier, during one of London’s recurrent, but unfailingly crippling, Tube strikes. Thomas had intervened when an enraged Baxter had unreasonably attempted to arrest one of the workers picketing for better pay and safer working conditions. He had pointed out that by restraining the hi-vis-clad gentleman and following through on her threat to force him, against his will, to walk the six miles back to Wimbledon with her, she would technically be guilty of kidnap. At which point she had arrested Thomas instead.

Thomas was a gentle and honest man. He was handsome in a manner as generic as his taste in music and was over ten years her senior. He was secure. He knew who he was and what he wanted: a tidy, reassuringly quiet, comfortable life. He was also a lawyer. It made her smile to think of just how much Wolf would have hated him. She often wondered whether that was what had attracted her to him in the first place.

The smart townhouse serving as the venue for the dinner party belonged to Thomas. He had asked Baxter several times over the previous couple of months to move in with him. Although she had slowly started to keep some of her possessions there, and they had even redecorated the master bedroom together, she had point-blank refused to give up her flat over Wimbledon High Street and had kept her cat, Echo, there as a constant excuse to return home.

The four friends sat down to enjoy dinner together, exchanging stories that had grown less accurate but more amusing with age

and expressing intense interest in the answers to the most mundane questions regarding work, the correct way to cook salmon, and parenthood. With Tia's hand in his, Edmunds had spoken animatedly about his promotion at Fraud and reiterated several times how much more time he could now spend with his growing family. When asked about work, Baxter neglected to mention the visit from her overseas colleagues and the unenviable task that awaited her in the morning.

By 10.17 p.m. Tia had fallen asleep on the sofa, and Thomas had left Baxter and Edmunds to talk while he cleared up in the kitchen. Edmunds had swapped to wine and topped up their glasses as they chatted over the dying flickers of the tea lights.

'So how are things at Fraud?' she asked quietly, glancing back over to the sofa to ensure that Tia was definitely asleep.

'I told you . . . great,' said Edmunds.

Baxter waited patiently.

'What? Things are good,' he said, crossing his arms defensively.

Baxter remained silent.

'They're OK. What do you want me to say?'

When she still refused to accept his answer, he finally smiled. She knew him far too well.

'I am so bored. It's not that . . . I don't regret leaving Homicide.'

'It sounds like you do,' suggested Baxter. She attempted to talk him into coming back every time they saw one another.

'I get to have a life now. I *actually* get to see my daughter.'

'It's a waste, that's all,' said Baxter, and she meant it. Officially, she had been the one to bring in the notorious Ragdoll Killer. Unofficially, it had been Edmunds who had broken the case. He alone had been able to see through the cloud of lies and deception that had blinded her and the rest of their team.

'I'll tell you what – you give me a nine-to-five detective job and I'll sign the paperwork tonight,' smiled Edmunds, knowing that the conversation was over.

Baxter backed down and sipped her wine, while Thomas crashed about in the kitchen.

‘I’ve got to visit Masse tomorrow,’ she blurted, as if it were an everyday occurrence to go calling on serial killers.

‘What?’ Edmunds spluttered up a mouthful of his half-price Sauvignon Blanc. ‘Why?’

He had been the only person she had trusted with the truth of what had happened the day she captured Lethaniel Masse. Neither of them could be sure how much Masse remembered. He had been subjected to a vicious beating and close to death, but she had always feared how much he had been aware of, how easily he could ruin her should his psychotic brain so decide.

Baxter told him about her conversation with Vanita and the two ‘special’ agents, explaining how she had been seconded to accompany them to attend the crime scene in New York.

Edmunds listened silently, his expression becoming increasingly uneasy as she continued.

‘I thought this was over,’ he said when she had finished.

‘It is. This is just another copycat like the others.’

He didn’t look so sure.

‘What?’ asked Baxter.

‘You said the victim had the word “Bait” carved into his chest.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Bait for who? I wonder.’

‘You think that was meant for me?’ asked Baxter with a snort, reading Edmunds’s tone.

‘The guy has Wolf’s name and now, lo and behold, you’re being dragged into it.’

Baxter smiled affectionately at her friend.

‘It’s just another copycat. You don’t need to worry about me.’

‘I always do.’

‘Coffee?’ asked Thomas, surprising them both. He was standing in the doorway drying his hands on a tea towel.

‘Black, please,’ said Edmunds.

Baxter declined, and Thomas disappeared back into the kitchen.

‘Have you got something for me?’ she whispered.

Edmunds looked uncomfortable. Glancing towards the open kitchen doorway, he reluctantly produced a white envelope from the pocket of his jacket, draped over the chair behind him.

He kept it on his side of the table as he tried, for the umpteenth time, to convince her not to take it from him.

‘You don’t need this.’

Baxter reached for it and he pulled it away from her.

She huffed.

‘Thomas is a good man,’ he said quietly. ‘You can trust him.’

‘*You’re* the only person I trust.’

‘You’re never going to have anything real with him if you carry on like this.’

They both glanced at the doorway as they heard the rattle of ceramic against ceramic from the kitchen. Baxter got to her feet, snatched the envelope out of his hand and sat back down just as Thomas entered the room with the coffees.

Tia was unrelentingly apologetic when Edmunds gently shook her awake just after 11 p.m. On the doorstep, while Thomas wished Tia good night, Edmunds embraced Baxter.

‘Do yourself a favour – don’t open it,’ he whispered in her ear.

She gave him a squeeze but didn’t respond.

Once they had gone, Baxter finished off her wine and pulled on her coat.

‘You’re not leaving?’ asked Thomas. ‘We’ve hardly seen each other.’

‘Echo’ll be hungry,’ she said, sliding her boots back on.

‘I can’t run you. I’ve had too much to drink.’

‘I’ll get a taxi.’

‘Stay.’

She leaned as far towards him as she could, keeping her damp boots planted firmly on the doormat. Thomas gave her a kiss and a disappointed smile.

‘Good night.’

A little before midnight, Baxter opened the door to her flat. Not feeling the remotest bit tired, she slumped onto the sofa with a bottle of red. She switched on the television, flicked aimlessly through the planner when there was nothing on and scrolled through the selection of Christmas movies she had been stockpiling.

She finally decided on *Home Alone 2* as she didn't really care if she fell asleep during it or not. The first movie was, secretly, one of her all-time favourites, but she found the second an uninspiring imitation, falling into the age-old trap of believing that by relocating the same story to New York City, they would create a bigger and better sequel.

She poured the remainder of the bottle into her glass as she half watched Macaulay Culkin perform his light-hearted acts of attempted murder. Remembering the envelope stuffed in her coat pocket, she removed the folded paper, Edmunds's plea for her not to open it replaying in her head.

For eight months he had been jeopardising his career by abusing his power at Fraud. Every week or so he had provided Baxter with a detailed report of Thomas's finances, subjecting his assorted accounts to the standard checks for suspicious and fraudulent activity.

She knew that she was asking too much of him. She knew that he considered Thomas a friend and that he was betraying his trust. But she also knew why Edmunds did and would continue to do this for her: he wanted her to be happy. She had been so debilitatingly crippled by trust issues ever since she had allowed Wolf to walk out of her life that he knew she would abandon a settled future with Thomas if he did not constantly assess her new boyfriend's trustworthiness.

She put the unopened envelope down on the coffee table beside her feet and tried to concentrate as one of the Wet Bandits had his head set ablaze by a blowtorch. She could smell the scorched flesh. She remembered how quickly the tissue could char and die, the screams of pain as the nerve endings burned away . . .

The man on the television removed his sore head from the toilet before carrying on as if nothing had happened.

It was all a lie; you really couldn't trust anyone.

She finished off her glass in three large gulps and tore open the envelope.

CHAPTER 4

Wednesday 9 December 2015

8.19 a.m.

London had frozen overnight.

The weak winter sun felt distant and remote, a non-committal cold light that had failed to thaw the frosty morning. Baxter's fingers grew numb as she waited for her lift out on Wimbledon High Street. She checked the time: twenty minutes late, time that could have been spent in the company of a hot coffee inside her cosy apartment.

She jiggled about on the spot to keep warm as the cold air bit her face. She had even been reduced to wearing the ridiculous woolly bobble hat and matching gloves that Thomas had bought for her at Camden Lock Market.

The dreary pavement had been upgraded to a sparkling silver on which people tottered about, suspicious that the ground had its own agenda to break their legs if given half the chance. She watched two men shout to one another across the busy street, the mist from their breath rising above their heads like speech bubbles.

When a double-decker bus stopped at the traffic lights, she caught her reflection in its steamed-up windows. In embarrassment, she pulled the bright orange hat off her head and shoved it into her pocket. Above her own disgruntled image, a familiar advertisement was wrapped round the outside of the vehicle:

Andrea Hall, *The Ventriloquist Act: Messages From a Killer*

Apparently not content with the fame and fortune acquired through the misery of others while acting as the official news personality of the Ragdoll murders, Wolf's ex-wife was *actually* arrogant enough to have released an autobiographical account of her experiences.

As the bus pulled away, the enormous photograph of Andrea that dominated the rear panels smiled down at Baxter. She looked younger and more attractive than ever and had cut her striking red hair into a trendsetting short style that Baxter would never have dared risk. Before her smug visage could travel too far out of range, Baxter opened her bag, took out her lunchbox and removed the key ingredient to her tomato sandwich, which exploded satisfyingly across the giant stupid woman's giant stupid face.

'Chief Inspector?'

Baxter winced.

She had failed to notice the enormous black minivan pulling up at the bus stop behind her. She dropped her lunchbox back into her bag and turned round to find the special agent watching her with a concerned expression.

'Whatcha up to?' asked Curtis cautiously.

'Oh, I was just . . .' Baxter trailed off, hoping that the immaculate and professional young woman would consider that ample explanation for her unusual behaviour.

'Throwing food at buses?' Curtis offered.

' . . . Yes.'

As Baxter approached the vehicle, Curtis slid the side door open, revealing the spacious interior that the tinted windows obscured.

'*Americans*,' she whispered in disdain under her breath.

'How are we this morning?' asked Curtis politely.

'Well, I don't know about *we*, but *I'm* bloody cold.'

'Yes, I apologise for the delay in getting to you. We hadn't expected the traffic to be quite so bad.'

'It's London,' said Baxter matter-of-factly.

‘Jump in.’

‘Sure there’s room?’ Baxter asked sarcastically as she crawled ungracefully into the vehicle. The cream leather squeaked as she settled into one of the seats. She wondered whether she should make it clear that the noise had originated from the leather and not from her, but reasoned that it must happen to every passenger as they sat down.

She smiled across at Curtis.

‘Excuse you,’ said the American, who pulled the door closed before shouting through to the driver that they were ready to go.

‘No Rouche today?’ asked Baxter.

‘We’re picking him up en route.’

Shivering as the van’s heater began to thaw her out, Baxter wondered briefly why the agents had not thought to book themselves into the same hotel.

‘You’re going to have to get used to that, I’m afraid. New York’s under two feet of snow.’ Curtis rooted through her satchel and produced a smart black beanie hat similar to the one she was wearing. ‘Here.’

She passed it to Baxter, who looked momentarily hopeful, until she realised that it had the letters ‘F’, ‘B’ and ‘I’ printed in bold yellow across the front – a sniper-friendly target if ever she saw one.

She tossed it back to Curtis.

‘Ta, but I’ve got my own,’ she said, taking the orange eyesore out of her pocket and pulling it down over her head.

Curtis shrugged and watched the city roll past for a moment.

‘Have you seen him since?’ she eventually asked. ‘Masse?’

‘Only in court,’ replied Baxter, trying to work out where they were heading.

‘I’m a little nervous,’ Curtis smiled.

Baxter was momentarily mesmerised by the young agent’s perfect movie-star smile. She then noticed her flawless dark complexion and was unable to tell whether she was even wearing make-up to achieve the effect. Feeling a little self-conscious, she fiddled with her hair and stared out of the window.

‘I mean, Masse is an *actual* living legend,’ Curtis continued. ‘I heard that they’re already studying him in the academy. I’m sure one day his name will be mentioned in the same breath as Bundy and John Wayne Gacy. It’s . . . it’s an honour really, isn’t it? For want of a better word.’

Baxter turned her huge, angry eyes on the other woman.

‘I *suggest* you find a better word,’ she snapped. ‘That sick sack of shit murdered and mutilated one of my friends. You think this is fun? You think you’re gonna get an autograph?’

‘I didn’t mean any offen—’

‘You’re wasting your time. You’re wasting *my* time. You’re even wasting *this* bloke’s time,’ said Baxter, gesturing to the man in the driver’s seat. ‘Masse can’t even speak. Last I heard, his jaw was still hanging off.’

Curtis cleared her throat and sat up straight. ‘I would like to apologise for my—’

‘You can apologise by being quiet,’ said Baxter, ending the conversation.

The two women sat in silence for the remainder of the journey. Baxter watched Curtis’s reflection in the window. She didn’t look angry or indignant, only frustrated with herself for the careless comment. Baxter could see her lips moving silently as she rehearsed her apology or vetted the topic of their next unavoidable interaction.

Starting to feel a little guilty about the outburst, Baxter remembered her own unchecked excitement, just a year and a half earlier, on first laying eyes on the Ragdoll, realising that she had stumbled into the middle of something enormous, fantasising about the knock-on effects it could have on her career. She was about to say something when the vehicle turned a corner and parked up outside a large semi-detached house in a leafy residential suburb. She had no idea where they were.

She stared out in confusion at the mock-Tudor property, which somehow managed to look simultaneously homey and neglected. Impressive weeds erupted through deep cracks in the steep driveway. The muted colours of disconnected Christmas lights clung desperately

to the peeling paint of the tired windowpanes, while smoke drifted lazily out from the bird's-nest-covered chimney.

'Funny-looking hotel,' she commented.

'Rouche's family still live over here,' explained Curtis. 'I think they come out to see him occasionally, and he gets back when he can. He told me he just lives out of hotels in the US. Then again, that's the nature of the job, I suppose. Never being able to settle in one place for long.'

Rouche emerged from the house eating a piece of toast. He seemed to blend into the frosty morning: his white shirt and blue suit mimicked the scattered clouds drifting across the sky above, the silver streaks in his hair glistening like the icy concrete.

Curtis climbed out to greet him as he skidded down the driveway, colliding toast-first into her.

'Christ, Rouche!' she complained.

'Couldn't you have got anything bigger?' Baxter heard him ask sarcastically before they both climbed in.

He took the window seat opposite Baxter and offered her a bite of his breakfast, grinning as he looked at the woolly orange mess atop her head.

The driver pulled out and they were on their way again. Curtis busied herself with some paperwork, while Baxter and Rouche watched the buildings flicker past, blurring into a single indecipherable shape with the whirl of the engine.

'God, I *hate* this city,' blurted Rouche as they crossed the river, his eyes glued to the impressive vista. 'The traffic, the noise, the litter, the crowds swelling through its narrow arteries like a heart attack waiting to happen, graffiti decorating anything unfortunate enough to find itself within arm's reach.'

Curtis smiled apologetically at Baxter as Rouche continued:

'It kind of reminds me of school: *that* party at the rich kid's house, you know? The parents are away and in their absence all of the artistic and architectural brilliance is trampled, defaced and ignored to accommodate the trivial lives of those who never fail to underappreciate it.'

They sat in strained silence as the van crawled towards a junction.

‘Well, I *love* where you live,’ said Curtis enthusiastically. ‘There’s so much history everywhere.’

‘*Actually*, I’m with Rouche on this one,’ said Baxter. ‘Like you said, there’s history everywhere. *You* see Trafalgar Square; *I* see the alleyway opposite where we fished a prostitute’s body out of the bins. *You* see the Houses of Parliament; *I* see the boat chase down the river that made me miss . . . something that I shouldn’t have missed. It is what it is, but it’s home.’

For the first time since setting off, Rouche turned his attention away from the window to take a long, studying look at Baxter.

‘So when did you leave London, Rouche?’ asked Curtis, who evidently did not find the peaceful silence as comfortable as the others did.

‘In 2005,’ he replied.

‘It must be hard being so far away from your family all the time.’

Rouche appeared in no mood to talk about it but reluctantly answered:

‘It is. But as long as I hear their voices every day, we’re never really that far apart.’

Baxter shifted uncomfortably in her seat, a little embarrassed by the heartfelt sentiment, made worse when Curtis made an unnecessary and insincere ‘Awwww!’

They were dropped off in the visitors’ car park at Belmarsh Prison and made their way to the main entrance. The two agents surrendered their weapons as they were fingerprinted, ushered through the airlock doors, X-ray machine, metal detector and manual searches before being told to wait for the prison governor.

Rouche looked tense as he took in his surroundings, while Curtis excused herself to visit the ‘restroom’. After a few moments, Baxter could no longer ignore the fact that he was singing ‘Hollaback Girl’ by Gwen Stefani under his breath:

‘You OK?’ she asked.

‘Sorry.’

Baxter watched him suspiciously for a moment.

‘I sing when I’m nervous,’ he explained.

‘Nervous?’

‘I don’t like confined spaces.’

‘Well, who does?’ said Baxter. ‘That’s like not enjoying being poked in the eye: it’s obvious. It’s pointless even voicing out loud because no one wants to be trapped somewhere.’

‘Thank you for your concern,’ he smiled. ‘While we’re on the subject of looking nervous, are *you* all right?’

She was surprised that he had picked up on her apprehension.

‘After all, Masse did have a *pretty* good punt at . . .’

‘Killing me?’ Baxter helped him. ‘Yeah, I remember. It’s nothing to do with Masse. I’m just hoping Governor Davies isn’t still working here. He doesn’t like me much.’

‘*You?*’ asked Rouche, in what he hoped had (but had not) come across as dismayed aghast.

‘Yeah, *me*,’ said Baxter, a little offended.

It was a lie, of course. Baxter’s trepidation was indeed rooted in coming face to face with Masse again, not because of what he was but because of what he might know and what he might tell.

Only four people knew the truth concerning what had occurred inside that Old Bailey courtroom. She had expected Masse to contradict her hastily formulated version of events; however, no opposition was ever made to her statement. And as time wore on, she began to let herself hope that he had lost consciousness, too injured during his altercation with Wolf to be aware of her shameful secret. Every day she had wondered whether the past would catch up with her, and now she felt as though she was flaunting her good fortune by sitting down with the one person who could ruin her in an instant.

At that moment Governor Davies came round the corner. His face dropped when he recognised Baxter.

‘I’ll get Curtis,’ she whispered to Rouche.

She paused at the door to the toilets on hearing Curtis’s voice coming from inside. This struck Baxter as bizarre, as they had given up their mobile phones back at security. She gently leaned

against the heavy door until she could make out the young American agent talking to herself in the mirror:

‘. . . No more *stupid* comments. *Think* before you speak. You *can’t* make a mistake like that in front of Masse. “Confidence in oneself demands confidence from others.”’

Baxter knocked loudly and swung the door open, making Curtis jump.

‘Governor’s ready for us,’ she announced.

‘I’ll just be a moment.’

Baxter nodded and went to re-join Rouche.

The governor escorted the group in the direction of the high-security unit.

‘As I’m sure you’re well aware, Lethaniel Masse sustained some lasting injuries prior to his apprehension by Detective Baxter here,’ he said, making an effort to be pleasant.

‘Detective Chief Inspector now,’ she corrected him, ruining it.

‘He has undergone numerous reconstructive surgeries on his jaw but will never have full use of it again.’

‘Will he be able to answer our questions?’ Curtis asked.

‘Not coherently, no. Which is why I’ve arranged for an interpreter to sit in on your interview.’

‘Who specialises in . . . mumbling?’ asked Baxter, unable to help herself.

‘Sign language,’ said the governor. ‘Masse learned it within weeks of arriving here.’

The group were led outside through another security door, where the recreation areas stood eerily empty as a coded message was announced over the tannoy system.

‘How is Masse as a detainee?’ asked Curtis, the interest evident in her voice.

‘Exemplary,’ answered the governor. ‘If only they were all so well behaved. Rosenthal!’ he called to a young man at the far end of the five-a-side football pitch, who almost slipped on the ice as he jogged over to them. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Another fight in House Block 3, sir,’ panted the young man. One of his shoelaces was undone and trailed along the floor behind him.

The governor sighed. ‘I’m afraid you’ll have to excuse me,’ he said to the group. ‘We had an influx of new inmates this week and there are always teething problems while they size each other up and adjust the pecking order. Rosenthal here will take you to see Masse.’

‘Masse, sir?’ The young man looked less than enthused by the order. ‘Of course.’

The governor hurried away as Rosenthal led them towards the prison within a prison, surrounded by its own walls and fences. When they reached the first security gate, he patted his pockets frantically and started retracing his steps.

Rouche tapped him on the shoulder and handed him an ID card. ‘You dropped this back there,’ he said kindly.

‘Thank you. The boss would *literally* kill me if I lost that . . . again.’

‘Not if one of the escaped mass murderers you’re in charge of got to you first,’ Baxter pointed out, making the young man go bright red with embarrassment.

‘Sorry,’ he said, before buzzing them through, only to confront them with another series of security checks and searches.

He explained how the high-security unit was divided into ‘spurs’ of twelve individual cells and how warders were only allowed to work a three-year stretch before being transferred back into the main prison.

Inside, beige walls and doors surrounded the terracotta-coloured floors and the framework of rust-red railings, gates and staircases. Above their heads, large nets stretched between the walkways, sagging in the centre where rubbish and other, more aerodynamic objects had accumulated.

The building was surprisingly quiet, as the prisoners were still confined to their cells. Another guard showed them to a room on the ground floor, where a dowdy, middle-aged woman was waiting

for them. She was introduced as their sign-language expert, and then the guard took them through the painfully obvious rules before finally unlocking the door.

‘Remember, if you need anything, I’ll be right outside,’ he emphasised twice, then pushed open the door to reveal the imposing figure sat with his back to them.

Baxter could sense the guards’ uneasiness around their most notorious inmate. A long chain linked Masse’s handcuffs to the top of the metal table, running down the length of his dark blue boiler suit to attach the shackles that bound his feet to the concrete floor.

Although he did not look round, keeping the deep scars that were cut into his scalp facing them as they filtered into the room, he tilted his head back and sniffed the air enquiringly, breathing them in.

The two women looked at one another, instantly unnerved, while Rouche sat down, selflessly choosing the seat nearest to their suspect.

Despite the chains binding him to the room he could not leave, it was Baxter who felt trapped as the heavy door closed behind them and she slowly took her seat opposite the man who, despite his incarceration, still posed such a threat to her.

As Masse watched her glancing around the room, looking anywhere to avoid meeting his eye, a lopsided grin formed on his ruined face.

CHAPTER 5

Wednesday 9 December 2015

11.22 a.m.

‘Well, that was a complete waste of time,’ sighed Baxter as they stepped back out into the spur’s main atrium.

Masse had not even attempted to answer a single question during Curtis’s half-hour monologue. It had been like visiting a caged animal at the zoo, Masse present in name only – a subdued and defeated shadow of the sadistic monster that still kept her up at night, feeding off the fumes of a reputation that he could no longer live up to.

Wolf had utterly broken him, body and soul.

She could not know for certain whether his attention had kept returning to her because he knew what she had done or simply because she had been the one famously credited with his arrest. Either way, she was glad that it was over.

Rosenthal had been waiting for them in ‘the Bubble’, the secure staff area at the far end of the spur, and was already making his way over.

‘We’ll need to conduct a thorough search of Masse’s cell,’ Curtis advised him.

The inexperienced guard looked uncertain.

‘I . . . er . . . Does the governor know?’

‘You’re not serious?’ Baxter asked Curtis in exasperation.

‘I’ve got to agree with Baxter,’ said Rouche, ‘but in a politer way, of course. Masse isn’t involved. This isn’t the best use of our resources.’

‘On what we’ve seen so far, I’m inclined to agree,’ started Curtis diplomatically, ‘but we have a strict protocol to follow, and I cannot leave the premises until such time as we rule out, without a shadow of a doubt, any possibility of Masse’s involvement.’

She turned back to Rosenthal:

‘Masse’s cell . . . please.’

Dominic Burrell, or ‘the Bouncer’, as he was better known to inmates and staff alike, had been imprisoned for beating a complete stranger to death simply because the man had made the mistake of looking at him ‘funny’. He had spent the majority of his incarceration in House Block 1 but had recently been transferred to the high-security unit following two similarly unprovoked attacks on warders. He was generally avoided where possible, given his reputation and obsession with bodybuilding, despite his unimpressive stature of five feet six inches.

He watched from his cell as the group on the ground floor were escorted up to Masse’s empty room, which stood directly opposite his own. As they began their cramped search of the six-by-ten-foot room, he lost interest and continued tearing the fabric of his mattress into long strips, assisted by the razor-sharp wedge of plastic fashioned out of melted food packaging.

When he heard the guards unlocking the first cell door in order to line the inmates up for lunch, he flipped the mattress back over and wrapped the long piece of material round his waist to conceal it beneath his clothing. He was ushered out onto the walkway and noted that Masse was only two people ahead of him in the queue. Once the prison guard had moved on, he shoved past the man between them, who was evidently aware of his reputation and backed away without argument.

Standing on his tiptoes, he whispered into Masse’s ear: ‘Lethaniel Masse?’

Masse nodded, disguising their conversation by keeping his eyes forward.

‘I’m here to deliver a message.’

‘Wha’ mes-sage?’ Masse slurred painfully.

Leaning round to check on the warder’s location, he placed a firm hand on Masse’s shoulder and gently pulled him closer until his lips were grazing the fine hairs of his ear:

‘You . . .’

As Masse turned his head, the Bouncer locked his enormous arm round his throat and dragged him backwards into the empty cell beside them. As per prison rules, the men in front and behind reassumed their places in line, neither interfering nor alerting the guards to the fight.

Through the open door, Masse made eye contact with one of the men in line, who just stood there watching him suffocate impassively. He tried to call out, but the few incoherent mumbles that he managed through his mangled jaw failed to attract the attention of anybody who could help him.

Masse wondered for a moment whether the burly man intended to rape him when he ripped his top open, but then he felt the sting of the blade tearing into his chest and realised that he was going to die.

He had only felt it once before – the unfamiliar sensation of fear, tainted with a twisted fascination as he finally appreciated what each of his countless victims had experienced in their final moments, the helplessness they had felt at his hands.

Curtis, Baxter and Rouche had been advised to finish up their fruitless search of Masse’s cell and leave before the lunchtime prisoner movements. While the doors on the first floor were opened up, Rosenthal had escorted them down to ground level and across the atrium. They had almost reached the red iron gate when the first whistle blows pierced the calm above them.

It was difficult to make out what was happening as three warders struggled to reach whatever the jeering prisoners were blocking.

More whistles joined the panicked calls for assistance as the shouts grew more excitable, echoing deafeningly around the empty metal building as the prisoners occupying the cells on the ground floor joined the cacophony.

‘Let’s get you out of here,’ said Rosenthal as bravely as he could muster. He spun back round and inserted his ID card into the reader on the wall; a red light blinked in response. He tried again. ‘Shit!’

‘Problem?’ asked Baxter, keeping one eye on the events developing above.

‘We’re in lockdown,’ he explained. He was clearly beginning to panic.

‘All right. So what do we have to do in a lockdown situation?’ Rouche asked the young man calmly.

‘I-I don’t . . .’ he stuttered.

The whistle calls above were growing more desperate, while the shouting somehow grew even louder.

‘The Bubble, perhaps?’ Baxter suggested.

Rosenthal looked at her wide-eyed and nodded.

The noise above rose to a crescendo as someone was lifted over the walkway railings and dropped into the empty void at the core of the atrium. The half-naked body ripped the netting from the wall on one side and landed face down just a few metres away from the group.

Curtis screamed, attracting the attention of the men above.

‘We need to go. Right now!’ said Baxter, but she froze when the dead body made a sudden and unnatural movement towards them.

It took her a moment to realise that the length of knotted material trailing down the destroyed netting had been wrapped round the bloody victim’s neck. Just then the makeshift rope pulled taut, dragging the corpse up into the air as a second, more muscular body, dropped alongside it.

‘He’s still alive!’ gasped Rosenthal in horror as the counterweight thrashed about desperately while the frayed noose took its time to choke him.

‘Go! Go! Go!’ ordered Baxter, shoving Curtis and Rosenthal after Rouche, who had almost reached the door to the Bubble.

‘Open the door!’ he yelled.

The whistles went silent one by one as the riot escalated. There was a chilling cry from somewhere above and then a burning mattress dropped into the middle of the atrium, the chaos fuelling the inmates’ excitement like fresh blood to shark-infested waters.

The first of the prisoners had clambered down the broken netting as the group reached Rouche at the Bubble’s secure door.

‘Open up!’ shouted Rouche, hammering frantically on the metal.

‘Where’s your card?’ Baxter asked Rosenthal.

‘It won’t work. They need to open it from inside,’ he panted.

More inmates had made the perilous descent onto their level, while the first man benevolently unlocked cells at random with a blood-smeared security pass.

Rouche rushed round to the front, where he could see a warder inside through the protective glass.

‘We’re police officers!’ he yelled through the impenetrable window. ‘Open the door!’

The terrified man shook his head and mouthed the words ‘I can’t. I’m so sorry,’ gesturing to the approaching ensemble of the country’s most dangerous men.

‘Open the door!’ shouted Rouche.

Baxter joined him at the window.

‘What now?’ she asked as calmly as she could.

There was nowhere for them to go.

An enormous inmate climbed down from above. He was wearing a prison officer’s uniform that looked absurdly small for him. The trousers were cropped halfway up his shin, and his stomach was on show beneath the hem of the shirt. The ensemble would have looked almost comical had it not been for the fresh scratch marks torn across his face.

Curtis was pounding on the door, pleading desperately.

‘He isn’t going to open it,’ said Rosenthal, slumping down onto the floor. ‘He can’t risk them getting through.’

The rioters were rushing towards them, eyeing Rouche and Rosenthal with burning hatred and the women with hunger. Rouche grabbed Baxter by the arm and shoved her into the corner behind him.

‘Hey!’ she shouted, trying to fight him off.

‘Stay behind us!’ he shouted to the women.

Rosenthal seemed confused by the word ‘us’ until Rouche dragged him back up onto his feet.

‘Go for their eyes,’ Rouche shouted to the petrified young man seconds before the pack engulfed them.

Baxter kicked out wildly. There were hands and sneering faces everywhere. A strong fist grabbed a clump of her hair and dragged her a couple of feet, but she was released when a fight broke out between two of her attackers.

She scrambled back against the wall, looking for Curtis, but the powerful arm returned for her. From nowhere Rosenthal appeared, leaping onto the man’s back, sinking his fingers deep into one of the tattooed inmate’s eyes.

Suddenly, the lights went out.

Only the eerie illumination of the crackling fire in the centre of the atrium remained, two silhouettes hanging above the dying flames like the aftermath of a witch hunt.

There was a loud bang. The space filled with smoke. Then another.

Men in full riot gear and protective masks entered through the iron gate on the far side of the hall as the inmates covered their faces and ran for cover, dispersing in all directions like hyenas chased off a kill.

Baxter spotted Curtis lying unconscious a few metres away and crawled over to her.

She wrapped the FBI agent’s ripped shirt back round her. A large bump protruded from her head, but she appeared otherwise unharmed.

Baxter felt her nose and mouth burning and could taste the CS gas as it diffused into her section of the room. Through her

failing vision, she watched the spectral shapes fan out into the haze surrounding the fire, welcoming the searing pain in her airways because it meant that she was still alive.

After forty minutes of eyebaths in the medical centre, Baxter was finally permitted to join Rouche and Governor Davies. Having recovered more quickly than the other two, Rouche had kept her updated with the latest news while she ungraciously received her treatment.

They had learned that one of the dead prisoners had been a man named Dominic Burrell. More troublingly, however, the other had been Masse. From the CCTV footage, they had confirmed that it was Burrell who had murdered Masse prior to taking his own life.

Curtis was awake but still shaken by the ordeal, and Rosenthal had a broken collarbone but was in high spirits.

Now that Baxter could see, she suspected that Rouche was more injured than he was letting on. He was limping and appeared to be taking intentionally shallow breaths. She noticed him holding his chest painfully when he thought nobody was watching.

The governor had ensured that once all the inmates were returned to their cells, the scene had been left untouched. He then explained, as politely as possible, that there was nowhere else for the prisoners to go and, as such, the high-security unit was operating as usual, only with two dead bodies hanging from the rafters. So the sooner they did whatever they needed to do, the better.

‘I’m ready when you are,’ said Baxter, who looked a tad crazed now that her eyes were bloodshot and inflamed. ‘Should we wait for Curtis?’

‘She said to go on without her.’

She was a little surprised that the FBI agent would volunteer to miss out on her own crime scene but decided not to push the matter:

‘Then let’s.’

Baxter and Rouche stared up at the two bodies dangling six feet apart above their heads. She noticed that he was holding his chest again. They had managed to persuade the lead detective to give them five minutes alone with the scene before he and his team took over.

Entirely protected from the elements by the numerous security doors and quite sensible lack of opening windows, the bodies hung surreally still, suspended from opposite ends of the same piece of knotted material, which had been looped round the railings on the first floor.

Baxter was too disturbed by the macabre scene to feel the weight lift off her shoulders: whatever Masse had or had not known was irrelevant now.

She was safe.

‘So when we both told Curtis that your case and my case were in no way related, it actually turns out that they really, really are,’ said Baxter flippantly. “‘Bait,’” she read aloud. The scruffily scrawled letters on Masse’s chest now looked black with congealed blood. ‘Just like the other one.’

She moved position to look up at Dominic Burrell’s muscular body, also stripped to the waist, also sporting a mutilated message across his chest.

“Puppet,” she read. ‘That’s new, right?’

Rouche shrugged non-committally.

‘*Right?*’ Baxter asked again.

‘I think we’d better talk to Curtis.’

Baxter and Rouche returned to the medical centre to find that Curtis was feeling much better. In fact, she was in the middle of conducting an interview with a handsome man in his late thirties, dressed in civilian clothes, and whose mid-length, dark brown hair flopped down loosely in a style that looked a little young for him.

Not wanting to interrupt, Rouche went to make them another coffee. Not hesitating to interrupt, Baxter didn’t:

‘You good?’ she asked Curtis, who looked a touch annoyed at having to pause mid-sentence.

‘Yes. Thank you,’ she replied, dismissing Baxter as politely as possible.

Making an enquiring gesture towards the attractive man, Baxter felt as though she were caught between two supermodels – the three-metre gap between them and the doorway hadn’t done him justice.

‘This is . . .’ Curtis started reluctantly.

‘Alexei Green,’ smiled the man. He got to his feet and shook her hand firmly. ‘And you, of course, are the famous Emily Baxter. It’s an honour.’

‘Mutually,’ Baxter replied nonsensically, his stupid cheekbones putting her off.

Going red, she quickly excused herself and hurried off after Rouche.

Five minutes later, Curtis was still engrossed in the interview. In fact, unless Baxter was mistaken, the strait-laced agent appeared to be flirting.

‘Do you know what?’ said Rouche. ‘Screw it. We need to bring you up to speed, especially now. Let’s talk outside.’

They stepped out into the crisp but sunny afternoon. Baxter pulled her bobble hat back over her head.

‘Where to start?’ he started somewhat unsurely. ‘The banker William Fawkes, who was strung up on the Brooklyn Bridge—’

‘Mind if we just call him “the Banker” from now on?’ asked Baxter.

‘Sure . . . We believe he had one arm hanging loose because his killer didn’t finish. This is backed up by eyewitness reports describing someone or something falling from the bridge into the East River.’

‘Is it possible they survived the fall?’ Baxter asked, pulling her hat down to cover even more of her frozen face.

‘No,’ replied Rouche decisively. ‘One, it’s roughly a hundred-and-fifty-foot drop. Two, New York was knocking minus nine degrees that night: the river was frozen solid. Three, and most significantly, the body washed up the next morning. And you’ll never guess what he had scarred across his chest . . .’

“Puppet,” they chimed together.

‘So we’ve got two dead victims with the same word carved into them, two dead killers with a *different* word carved into *them*, taking place on opposite sides of the Atlantic?’ summarised Baxter.

‘No,’ said Rouche, tucking his cold hands under his armpits. ‘You’re forgetting about the one Curtis mentioned yesterday that we’ve kept under wraps so far, the one we brought you in to help us investigate.’

‘Making this victim and killer number three.’

‘All murder-suicides, just like today,’ Rouche added.

Baxter looked surprised:

‘Any theories yet?’

‘Only that things are likely to get a *hell* of a lot worse before they get any better. After all, we’re chasing ghosts, aren’t we?’

Rouche poured the rest of his tasteless coffee onto the ground. It sizzled and steamed like acid. He closed his eyes and tilted his head up into the sun before pondering out loud:

‘How do you catch a killer who’s already dead?’