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Cut to Black

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Prelude

TUESDAY, 18 MARCH 2003, 20.13

He slowed in the darkness, the breath rasping in his lungs, trying to think of a thousand reasons not to draw the obvious conclusion. The car looked like a Vauxhall, maybe a Cavalier. The two shapes bent to the driver's door had the edgy slightness of kids. And the music through the open car window, as if this were some movie, was perfect: gangster rap with a heavy bass line that pulsed away into the night, drowning the nearby murmur of the sea.

He finally came to a halt, annoyed at losing the rhythm of his nightly run, aware of the chill kiss of the wind as it cooled the sweat on his body. Seven hard miles had drained the strength in his legs but already little knots of adrenalin were swamping his exhaustion. After the endless months of paperwork – of audit trails and expenditure profiles, of asset calculations and restraint preparations – it had come to this: the sordid little drama played out across dozens of cities, hundreds of estates, thousands of similar patches of urban wasteland. The Cavalier, he thought grimly, had replaced the ice-cream van. Stop me and buy one. Same time tomorrow night. And the night after that. And the night after that. Until your new friend in the beaten-up Vauxhall had you phoning him every four hours, pleading for your life.

He began to circle the car on the driver's blind side, still fifty metres out, moving slowly, balls of his feet, stepping lightly through the tangle of scrub and marram grass. In these situations, anyone with half a brain would be thinking risk assessment. How would he take the guy

behind the wheel? How would he contain him afterwards? What were the dangers of the kids getting hurt? These were important questions. He needed a plan, and a fallback, but there was something about this little tableau – how blatant, how fucking *insulting* – that had cut him loose. All of a sudden, he had the chance to make a difference. Not much of a difference but a difference nonetheless.

He was ahead of the car now, aware of the line of street lights half a mile away. Silhouetted against the orange glow, every move he made betrayed him. He began to backtrack, hunting for cover, meaning to close on the car from the passenger side, then he froze as the driver stirred the engine into life. The music, abruptly, had gone. In its place, the throaty bark of a dog and a yelp of laughter from one of the kids. The child was barely an adolescent. His voice had yet to break. What kind of animal sold gear to thirteen-year-olds?

He began to run, suddenly oblivious of the need for cover. Anything to get between the Cavalier and the distant street lights, between the driver and the next sale. One of the kids had seen him, yelling a warning to his mate. Two shapes melted away into the darkness as the car began to move. Abreast of it now, he drove himself forward, legs pumping hard. He reached for the passenger door and wrenched it open. There was someone else in the car, slumped back against the headrest, the seat half reclined. The thin figure jackknifed forwards. A hand lunged at him, a fist in his windpipe, a choking pain that blurred his vision. Abruptly he lost his footing, fell head first, felt cinders tearing at his face, heard a squeal of brakes and the dog again, barking fit to bust. The car was ahead of him, metres away, briefly motionless. The passenger door was still open. A face appeared, contorted by a grin. Then a voice, thick accent, Scouse.

'Run the fucker over.'

The engine was revving. Then the brake lights dimmed and for the briefest moment, as he tried to will his body

to move, he had a perfect view of the Cavalier reversing towards him and the zigzag pattern of the tyre tread, inches away. Moments later, a wheel crushed his ankle and he screamed as it happened again – another wheel, his lower leg – and for a second or two he must have lost consciousness because the next thing was a moment of surreal terror as the blaze of the headlights and the roar of the engine bore down on him. This time, somehow, he was able to reach out, trying to fend it off, flailing at the oncoming monster with his bare hands, flesh against metal, then he was aware of his body arching backwards, a gesture of defeat, before the pain thickened and the darkness returned, unfathomable, beyond comprehension.

One

WEDNESDAY, 19 MARCH 2003, 01.19

The aircraft appeared well after midnight. It approached high from the west, droning over the sprawl of suburbs around Gosport then sideslipping down in the gusty onshore wind as the black mass of Portsmouth Harbour disappeared beneath the nose.

Beyond the harbour and the gaunt shadows of the naval dockyard lay the city itself, the shape of the island necklaced with street lights. Away to the south, there was a queue of cabs for the fares spilling out of the late-night clubs by South Parade pier; further inland, the cold, blue wink of an ambulance picking its way through the maze of terraced streets.

At 1000 feet, the aircraft levelled off then dipped a wing and began to fly in wide, lazy circles, taking its time, each new circuit overlapping invisibly with the last. Households in its path stirred, dreams broken by the steady, pulsing beat of the engines overhead. Even half asleep, groping towards consciousness, this was a noise you'd recognise at once, familiar city-wide. Boxer One. Pride of the Hantspol ASU. The Air Support Unit's all-seeing eye in the sky.

The aircraft remained over the city for the best part of an hour. After a while, the circuits tightened and on two occasions the pilot took it low enough for startled insomniacs in Fratton to report the rush of air over the wings. Then, abruptly, the beat of the engines changed pitch, and the aircraft lifted and climbed away towards the west, returning the city to silence.

Awake in the stillness of the Bargemaster's House, Faraday had heard it too. And began to wonder.

It fell to DC Paul Winter to put the obvious into words.

'There's sod all here. We blew it.'

'The Stanley blades? That bit of clothes line? Blood on the lino down in the corner there? More blood on the sofa? Is it your age, Paul? Doesn't violence excite you any more?'

'I thought this was supposed to be a drugs bust?'

'It was. Is. And a tenner says we'll get a good hit on the DNA.'

'Taking us where? Some scroat they tied up and put in a Tarantino movie? What's he going to tell us we didn't know already? These blokes are off their heads, Cath, but we can't do them for that.'

Winter's use of her Christian name drew a cautionary look from DI Cathy Lamb. The rest of the squad – three DCs and a dog handler – were still out of earshot, banging around in the chaos of the bedrooms upstairs, but even so Lamb was wary about letting Winter too close. The proactive CID team – the Portsmouth Crime Squad – was barely a week old. The last thing she needed just now were the kind of liberties detectives like Winter were only too happy to exploit.

'We were unlucky,' she said flatly. 'We took every reasonable precaution but sometimes . . . it just doesn't work out.'

'Is that for my benefit, boss? Or are you rehearsing for tomorrow?'

'Tomorrow?'

'The post-mortem. Secretan's going to love this. All that overtime. All that hype. And we come away with a couple of Stanley blades and a million pizza boxes.' He poked at the litter of greasy cardboard with the toe of his shoe. 'What is it with kids these days? Don't they know about real food?'

There was a thump overhead as someone tripped but

Lamb ignored it. She was looking again at the detailed target analysis supplied by the Air Support Unit, the result of a casual fly-by the previous weekend. The colour still, in perfect focus, showed a mid-terrace house in Pennington Road, one of the maze of streets in the heart of Fratton. Every relevant feature was helpfully labelled – the boarded-up first-floor windows, the TV aerial adrift from the chimney stack, the abandoned fridge in the tiny back yard. There was no rear access and only one front door. In theory, as she'd been reckless enough to claim at this evening's pre-bust briefing, it should have been a breeze.

Yet somehow the two bodies they'd come to nick had both legged it. An area car was still quartering the nearby streets but the ASU's Islander – Boxer One – had thrown in the towel and flown home. The two white blobs on the thermal camera had split up as soon as the aircraft secured a fix. The ASU guys had tracked one of them as he scaled garden wall after garden wall before emerging at the end of the terrace. Sprinting the length of the neighbouring street, he'd ducked into the shelter of a garage. After that, in the dry commentary of Boxer One's observer, no further contact.

The area car had checked out the garage. A rusting Ford Escort with two flat tyres, half a lifetime's collection of paint tins, and a plastic dustbin full of fishing gear. No sign of an eighteen-year-old drug dealer with a taste for extreme violence.

The youngest of the DCs came limping down the stairs. His name was Jimmy Suttle. His suit was filthy and his face was smudged with dirt but his obvious glee brought the faintest smile to Lamb's face. More hope than expectation.

'Well?'

'Cracked it, boss.' He sounded out of breath. 'There's a hatch into the roof space. Little bastards had knocked through to next door. And then through again. Must have gone out via their back garden. I'm thinking number

34. That's the empty one down the street.' He paused, confused by Lamb's reaction. 'Boss?'

'You're telling me they had time for all that? We were in here in seconds. You know we were.'

Winter nodded. The front door had surrendered to the House Entry Team without a fight. No way could the targets have legged it into the roof ahead of the cavalry.

Suttle stuck to his story. Crawling across the intervening attic, he'd let himself down into number 34. Fully furnished, the place was either up for let or awaiting the return of the owners. It had fitted carpets, nice pictures, widescreen TV, the works.

'And?'

'They'd obviously been using it. Or someone had. The place is a shit heap. Beds slept in. Empty bottles. Telly on. Old food—'

'Pizzas?' Winter enquired drily.

'Everywhere. Kitchen. Lounge. Pepperami, bits of onion, HP sauce. These blokes are animals.'

'Yeah . . . like we didn't know.'

'Gear?' It was Lamb again, almost plaintive.

''Fraid not, boss.' The young detective was rubbing his knee. 'Bit of charlie, bit of draw, but we're talking personal, not supply. They must have taken it with them. Dunno.' He frowned. 'What I'm thinking, they probably kipped at number 34, used the place like a hotel. Bloody sight nicer than this khazi.'

'So why didn't we know?' Lamb was looking at Winter. 'About number 34?'

'No idea.' Winter looked round, pulling a face. 'What's that smell?'

'Dog shit, mate.' Suttle lifted his shoe, and then nodded up towards the bedrooms. 'Knee deep, it is. Bloody everywhere.'

The phone call came minutes later. Winter was first to the mobile, half hidden beneath a pile of unopened post.

He picked it up in his handkerchief and then turned his back on the watching faces, grunting from time to time.

'So who might you be?' he queried at last.

The conversation came to an abrupt end. Winter wrapped the mobile in the handkerchief, then laid it carefully on the plastic milk crate that served as an occasional table.

Cathy Lamb raised an enquiring eyebrow.

'Our absent friends.' Winter grunted. 'Definitely Scousers. They've got an address for us. Bystock Road. Number 93. They think we ought to pay a visit.'

There was a brief silence. Cathy Lamb was looking ever more resigned. Some jobs left you feeling worse than useless and this was definitely one of them.

'They're taking the piss.' She sighed. 'Aren't they?'

Bystock Road was a three-minute drive away, another of the endless terraced streets that had turned this corner of the city into a playground for double-glazing salesmen, dodgy roofers, and enforcers from the less scrupulous credit companies.

At Lamb's insistence, Winter took Suttle and two of the other DCs with him. Turning into Bystock Road, he nearly collided with a patrol car. Winter got out and walked across. Number 93 was way down the other end of the street but already he could hear the music.

'Neighbour complaint. Rang in a couple of minutes ago.' The young PC at the wheel was Asian. 'Bloke says he's going to take a hammer to next door if something isn't sorted.'

'Address?'

'91.'

The two cars drove on, double-parking in the street outside 93. The upstairs window was wide open but the house was in darkness and there was no sign of a party. Winter's knowledge of music didn't extend much beyond Elton John but Suttle helped him out.

'Dr Dre,' he said briefly. 'You're lucky you're so old.'

The PC was already talking to the neighbour who'd rung the complaint in. He was a huge man in his forties, crop-haired with a two-day growth of beard, and Winter couldn't take his eyes off the blur of tattoos beneath his string vest. He said he hadn't a clue who lived next door, dossers always coming and going, but he meant it about the hammer.

'What do you think, then?' The Asian PC had turned to Winter.

'Me?' Winter was still eyeing the man next door. 'I'd kick the door down and let him get on with it.'

'You're serious?'

'Always. Except the paperwork would be a nightmare.'

The PC offered Winter an uncertain grin. There were issues here – maybe drugs, maybe weapons – and the night-shift skipper was manic about playing it by the book. Maybe they ought to be thinking about a risk assessment.

Winter walked across to the front door. Twice, he shouted up at the open window but his challenge was lost in the thump of the music. Finally, he rapped at the door. When a second knock had no effect, he took a step backwards and motioned to Suttle.

'You're uglier than me.' He nodded at the door. 'Open it.'

The young DC needed no encouragement. His third kick splintered the wood around the lock and a shoulder charge took him inside. Winter followed, fumbling along the wall for a light switch. A gust of something stale and acrid made him catch his breath. When he finally found the switch, it didn't work.

'Here.'

It was the man next door with a heavy-duty torch. Winter took the torch and told him to get back outside.

'No fucking way.'

Winter tracked the beam of the torch back along the narrow hall and into the neighbour's face.

'I said get outside.'

The big man hesitated a moment, then shrugged and stepped back towards the pavement. Winter was already in the tiny lounge. The torch found a single mattress on the floor, one end surrounded with empty mugs, half-crushed milk cartons, and a small mountain of cigarette ends. There was a pool of vomit under the window and more vomit crusting in the fireplace. Two o'clock in the morning, thought Winter, and there have to be better things to do than this.

The kitchen occupied the back of the house. A tap dripped in the darkness and there was a low whirring from what might have been a fridge. A single sweep from the torch revealed a table, two bicycles, and a catering-sized tin of Nescafé in the sink.

It was obvious by now that the music came from upstairs, the entire house shuddering under the heavy bass. Another hour or two of this, and number 93 would explode.

Winter climbed the stairs, Suttle behind him. There were three doors off the narrow landing at the top, two of them ajar. Winter checked quickly in both, then turned to the third. This room was at the front of the house.

'Again?' Suttle nodded at the door and mimed a kick.

'No.' Winter shook his head, then patted the young DC on his arm.

The heavy torch at the ready, Winter turned the handle and felt the door give. The music came at him like a wave, a wall of noise. He stepped inside the room, aware at once of a panel of lights in the darkness. Snapping on the torch, he found himself looking at the hi-fi stack in the corner, an amplifier flanked by enormous speakers. He swung the beam towards the window, almost expecting someone to lunge out of the darkness, but saw nothing but an iron bedstead standing on the bare floorboards a couple of feet in from the open window. Lying on the springs of the bedstead was a woman, naked except for a pillowcase draped loosely over her head.

Winter stepped towards the bedstead, then changed his mind and sorted out the hi-fi. A cable ran to a point on the skirting board. When he tore out the plug, the silence flooded in, an almost physical presence. From the street, the voice of the neighbour.

'What's happening?'

Winter ignored him. The woman was alive, shivering in the draught from the open window. Winter could see the rise and fall of her chest, hear the faintest sound from inside the pillowcase. Both ankles were tied to the bed frame with cable ties, and more ties had chafed her wrists where she'd tried to struggle free. Winter stared down at her for a moment, trying to guess at an age. She was young, certainly, with the kind of body that deserved a better setting than this. Goose-pimpled white skin, big breasts, flat belly, and the faintest bikini marks from her last encounter with serious sunshine. Recent bruising had purpled her ribcage on the left-hand side but there was no sign of other injuries.

Winter reached down, telling her that everything was going to be OK, that everything was going to be fine, and eased the pillowcase off her head. A pale, almond-shaped face. A slash of scarlet gag across her mouth. Eyes that began to swim with tears.

Winter felt a jolt of recognition. For a second, the beam of the torch wavered. Impossible, he thought. Not here. Not like this.

'Lost a bit of weight, love.' He smiled in the darkness. 'Suits you.'