

# The Price of Darkness

Graham Hurley

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## *Chapter one*

TUESDAY, 5 SEPTEMBER 2006. PORTSMOUTH, ENGLAND

There are no post-mortem clues for last impressions. Was this body on the slab really asleep when it happened? Was he dreaming? Or did some faint scrape jolt him into wakefulness? Did he half-discern a strange shape – mysterious, uninvited, inexplicable – beside the bedroom door? Did he hear the lightest of breaths? A footfall on the carpet? Was he aware of a looming shadow in the darkness? And maybe the soft rustle of clothing as an arm was slowly raised beside the bed?

Faraday, watching the pathologist lift the glistening brain from the cuplike remnants of the shattered skull, could only wonder. Soon, he thought, they'll be developing a test for all this, some kind of clever biochemical method for reproducing a man's last thoughts imprinted before the neurones shut down for ever. The process would doubtless be both lengthy and expensive but days later investigators would find themselves looking at a multicoloured printout, admissible in court, a digital snapshot of this man's final seconds of life. What had gone on inside his brain. What he'd seen. What he'd felt. The green line for apprehension. The red for disbelief. The black one, the thickest, for terror.

Looking up, the pathologist caught Faraday's eye. Earlier, before peeling back the face, he'd indicated the powder burns on the pale skin of the man's forehead. Now he pointed out the pulpy blanc-mange of the frontal tissue, pinked with blood and tiny fragments of bone, where the bullet had tumbled into the deep brain, destroying everything in its path.

'Single shot,' he murmured, reaching for the scalpel, 'Unusual, eh?'

It was. Driving back to the Major Crimes suite at Kingston Crescent, Faraday pondered the investigative consequences of the pathologist's remark. The post-mortem he'd just attended was a coda to the day's events, a painstaking dismemberment of flesh, bone and

connective tissue that normally yielded a modest helping of clues. Killings were usually ill-planned, spontaneous explosions of violence, sparked by rage or alcohol, or a simple desire to get even, and that kind of retribution left a telltale spoor of all too familiar wounds. In this case, though, it had been evident from the start that the Major Crime Team were dealing with something very different.

A single bullet at point-blank range was the mark of a professional hit, a calling card rarely left at Pompey scenes of crime. The news had found its way to the duty D/C at Major Crimes at 07.56. An agency cleaner, failing to raise the tenant at a leased house in Port Solent, had let herself in. In the master bedroom lay the body of the man she knew as Mr Mallinder. At first she'd assumed he'd overslept. Only when she saw the blood on the sheet beneath his head did she take a proper look at his face. She'd never seen an entry wound before and the statement she'd volunteered that afternoon had recorded the faintest disappointment. So small. So neat. So different to what you might have expected.

Faraday had driven up from the Bargemaster's House, pushing north against the incoming rush-hour traffic, summoned by the Duty D/S at Kingston Crescent. Port Solent was a marina development tucked into the topmost corner of Portsmouth Harbour. No. 97 Bryher Island was an end unit in a tightly packed close of executive houses, and uniforms had taped off the scene within minutes of their arrival. By the time Faraday added his ageing Mondeo to the line of cars in the central parking bay, an investigator from Scenes of Crime was already sorting out a pile of silver boxes from the back of his van.

'Beautiful job.' He nodded towards the open front door. 'Nice to have a bit of quality for once.'

Back at Kingston Crescent, early evening by now, the car park was beginning to empty. Faraday slotted his Mondeo into a bay beside the rear entrance and spent a moment or two leafing through the post-mortem notes he'd left on the passenger seat. Amongst them was a reminder to phone home and tell Gabrielle that their planned expedition to the Farlington bird reserve would have to wait.

He peered out through the open window. After another glorious September day, it was still warm, the air thick with midges. Shame, he thought. There would have been swallows everywhere, a manic scribble of scimitar wings overhead, and later a chance for Gabrielle to pit her camera skills against a classic Pompey sunset.

He took the stairs two at a time, with a steely resolution that lasted until the first landing. A minute or so later, still out of breath, he put

his head round the door of the office that housed the Intelligence Cell. D/C Jimmy Suttle occupied one of the three desks.

‘So what’ve you got for me?’

Suttle abandoned a packet of crisps, wiped his fingers on the chair, and reached for his notepad. Still on light duties after a serious run-in with a Southsea drug dealer, the young D/C had surprised even himself with his talent for coaxing some kind of picture from a multitude of databases and carefully placed phone calls.

‘You want the story so far?’

‘Yeah.’

‘The guy was a property developer. Jonathan Daniel Mallinder. The firm’s called Benskin, Mallinder. His oppo’s name is Stephen Benskin. They work out of a suite of offices in Croydon. The stuff they do is residential mostly, town-centre developments, mainly in the south. I talked to the FIU and belled a couple of contacts they gave me. Seems that the blokes themselves, Benskin and Mallinder, are a bit of a legend in the business. Came from nowhere but put together some really shrewd deals. Class operators. Staked out some territory of their own. Real respect.’

Faraday nodded. The Financial Investigation Unit was an obvious port of call in a case like this.

‘You’ve talked to Benskin?’

‘Yeah, this morning. I assumed the news would have got through but it turned out it hadn’t. The bloke couldn’t believe it. He was sitting in Heathrow waiting for a flight to Barcelona. He’ll come back after the meeting and says he’ll be down here first thing tomorrow.’

Suttle glanced up, his finger anchored in the pencilled scribble on his notepad. According to Benskin, Mallinder had been shuttling down to Portsmouth for a while in a bid to sort out a major project. Lately, he’d been staying over for nights on end. Hence the three-month lease on the house in Port Solent.

‘Project?’

‘The Tipner site. You know when you come in on the motorway? The greyhound stadium? The scrapyards? All that? The land’s zoned for development. It’s complicated as hell but it seems that our Mr Mallinder had become a player. There was nothing signed and sealed but it seems that he was keen to have the whole lot off the people who own it. Benskin says that Mallinder was looking for a result before Christmas.’

Faraday sank into the chair across the desk. Tipner was a muddle of terraced houses, light industrial sites and acres of scrapyard littered with the bones of dismembered military kit. The spur motorway straddled the scrapyard and on the harbour side, for years, incoming

motorists had enjoyed a fine view of a rusting submarine alongside the tiny quay. The sight had often brought a smile to Faraday's face. It buttonholed you. It made no apologies for the mess. It was chaotic, deeply martial and spoke of the perpetual struggle to make money out of half-forgotten wars. As an introduction to the rest of the city, it couldn't have been more perfect.

'What are they going to do with the site?'

'Develop it. There's some kind of plan already. Basically, we're talking offices, a bit of retail, plus a load of apartments. That's where the real money is. Secured parking, posh kitchen, balcony you can sit out on, nice view of Portchester Castle, three hundred grand a shot, easy.' Suttle glanced up. 'That's according to an estate agent mate of mine. Put in a couple of hundred units and you're looking at serious money. No wonder Mallinder was up for it.'

'What else have you got on him?'

'Married, Wimbledon address, two kids, both school age.'

'Anyone been in contact with the wife yet? Apart from the local uniforms?'

'Me, boss. She's coming down tomorrow with Benskin first thing. Jessie's going to find somewhere up near Port Solent for her to use as a base. The scene won't be released for a while yet.'

'Jessie's FLO?'

'Yeah.'

Jessie Williams was a long-serving D/C, new to Major Crimes, with a smile that could warm an entire room. As Family Liaison Officer, she'd be doing her best to buffer Mallinder's widow from the pressures of the coming days.

Faraday sat back in the chair, turning his gaze towards the window. Try as he might, he couldn't rid his mind of the sight of Mallinder's brain, lying in a big stainless steel bowl, swimming in a thin broth of pinkish fluids. How many enemies might a man like this have acquired? Who had he upset?

'Form?'

'Nothing to get excited about. Got himself involved with a traffic stop a couple of months back. Some kind of dodgy manoeuvre on the A3 running north towards Petersfield. The woollies let him off with a caution.'

'But nothing on PNC?'

'Zilch.'

'Shame.'

The Police National Computer listed all known offenders. A conviction for fraud or money laundering would have been nice, thought Faraday. In these situations you were always looking for short cuts,

the first hint of debts unsettled, just a single tiny straw poking out through the toppling haystack of a man's life.

'Timeline?'

'He came down from London yesterday morning. His wife said he left after breakfast. His diary had a couple of meetings in the afternoon, one with a council bloke, the other with a planning consultant. That last meeting went on a bit and they had a drink afterwards.'

'Where?'

'Gunwharf.' Suttle named a pub, the Customs House. 'The guy he was with says Mallinder was on good form. In fact this guy would have stayed for a meal with him but he had to get home.'

'So Mallinder ate alone? At the Customs House?'

'As far as we know, though the girl at the food bar couldn't put a face to the check and card slip. His next-door neighbour in Port Solent says he was back at the house around half nine. It all seems to fit.'

'And was he alone then?'

'No idea. She just heard the car pull in.'

'Did she say anything else? Anything ...' Faraday frowned '... about regular visitors, for instance?'

'Yeah. Seems Mallinder had a girlfriend.'

'Description?'

'Asian girl. Medium height. On the young side. Nicely dressed. Called by three or four times that the woman knew about, mostly around ten. Stayed an hour or so, then left.' Suttle was grinning. 'Not rocket science, is it?'

'A tom?'

'Has to be. The guy's married. He has kids, a career, a reputation, all that bollocks. Plus he's probably minted. A proper relationship, a girlfriend, she's liable to have stayed the night. No ...' He shook his head. 'A tenner says Mallinder was buying it. Makes every kind of sense.'

'She came by car?'

'On foot, according to the neighbour. Need we enquire further?'

Faraday nodded. Suttle was probably right. Currently Port Solent supported two escort agencies, both catering for the higher end of the market. For someone in Mallinder's position, company was a phone call away.

'We've actioned it?'

'Tomorrow, first thing. We didn't get to the neighbour until close of play. She works at IBM. Gets home at five thirty. The description's pretty detailed. Piece of piss, boss. Should be.'

'Excellent. What have we got in the way of seizures?'

‘Just a laptop and a digital camera. Plus Mallinder’s briefcase. There’s an address book in the briefcase and some paperwork, but according to Benskin most of the real stuff will be on the laptop. Bloke came over from Netley to sort it out.’

Faraday nodded. In evidential terms, PCs and laptops needed careful handling. The process was time-consuming and the Hi-Tech Unit was overwhelmed with jobs. The last time he’d checked, there was a three-month wait for hard-disk analysis.

‘We may need to fast-track it,’ he said. ‘Is there anything else?’

Suttle shook his head, then bent to his notepad to make sure. Faraday was on his feet, tidying his own notes, when there came a knock at the door. It opened to reveal a woman in her early thirties. She was wearing jeans and a pair of battered Reeboks. A rumpled off-white linen jacket hung loosely over a bleached pink T-shirt and the tan suggested a recent vacation. She was looking at Faraday. Lightly freckled face. A hint of caution in the green eyes.

‘D/C Suttle?’

Faraday shook his head, nodded at the figure behind the desk. Suttle clearly hadn’t a clue who this woman was.

‘D/I Hamilton.’ She smiled. ‘Gina. We talked on the phone.’

‘Yeah, of course we did.’ Suttle pushed his chair back and shook the outstretched hand. ‘Shit, I’m sorry. This is D/I Faraday.’

Faraday, too, recognised the name. Gina Hamilton was a Devon and Cornwall Detective Inspector attached to the Major Crime Incident Team at Exeter. A long-term drugs inquiry had brought her to Portsmouth, though Faraday was vague about the details. A phone call from HQ earlier in the week had asked him to sort out a D/C to give Hamilton whatever assistance she required, and Jimmy Suttle – still largely office-bound – had been the first name in the frame.

Suttle was indicating the spare chair across the desk. In a couple of minutes he’d be through for the day. She could use the phone, read the paper, whatever. Then, if she fancied it, he’d take her to the bar upstairs for a drink. Hamilton was watching him, amused.

‘A phone would be good,’ she said.

Detective Superintendent Martin Barrie headed the Pompey Major Crime Team. He was thin to the point of near-invisibility, chain-smoked whenever the opportunity offered itself, and had never bothered to scrub the flat Essex vowels from the throaty whisper that passed for his voice. In the early days, barely a year ago, a couple of the younger detectives on the MCT had found it difficult to take him seriously as a boss – no obvious presence, none of the bullish leadership qualities of their former leader – a mistake Barrie hadn’t allowed

them to repeat. One was now back in uniform, teaching road safety awareness to class after class of stroppey Pompey kids. The other had binned the job completely.

Now, finding Faraday at his door, Barrie nodded at an empty chair. As Senior Investigating Officer, he was in formal charge of the Mallinder inquiry but a year under Barrie's command on other jobs had taught Faraday to expect the lightest of touches on the investigative tiller. If you'd won this man's trust, then he gave you plenty of leeway. Better still, if you got into trouble, there was no one better to watch your back. And for Faraday, as Deputy SIO, that was no small comfort.

'The PM?' Barrie ripped a page from his notepad and reached for a pencil.

'Exactly as we assumed, sir. Single bullet, point-blank range. According to the cleaner, Mallinder slept with two pillows. Both were missing, so we're assuming the bullet got no further than the bottom one. Remove it from the scene, and we're left with nothing.'

'How about the shell case?'

'Same MO. The pathologist recovered tiny shreds of fabric from the entry wound. That tells me the killer had the gun in a cloth bag of some kind to contain the expended case. This is a guy heading for sainthood. The anti-litter people would love him.'

'Any other keyholders? Apart from Mallinder and the cleaner?'

'Only the agency. We're checking on keys.'

'OK.'

Barrie was scribbling himself a note. Faraday watched the bony, yellowing fingers racing across the notepad. At length the Detective Superintendent looked up. Less than an hour earlier, he'd chaired the first Operation *Billhook* squad meet. The size of the investigative team – twenty-three and counting – was testimony to the importance he attached to an early result. People like Mallinder were Pompey's guarantee of a decent future. The fact that somebody had killed him did little for the city's reputation.

'So forensically, we're nowhere,' Barrie muttered. 'No bullet, no shell case, no reports of a gunshot from neighbours. Scenes of Crime have found entry damage around the front door but nothing we can positively ID. We've got prints everywhere but I'm betting most of them are Mallinder's or the cleaner's or this bloody girlfriend of his. Is the pathologist sticking with three to four in the morning?'

'Yes. I think he'd like a bit of wriggle room either side but basically ... yes.'

'Terrific. So here's a guy turns up in the middle of the night. No one sees him arrive, no one hears him at work, no one has a clue how or

when he goes. He wears gloves, he uses an automatic and presumably a silencer, and he leaves sod all behind. He isn't pissed, he isn't forgetful, in fact he's Mr Tidy. These people don't exist in Portsmouth ...' he shot Faraday a bleak smile '... do they?'

'Prima facie, sir, you'd say not.'

'Fine. So where next?'

'We need to take a good look at his laptop. It's over at Netley at the moment but we ought to fast-track it. Do you want me to talk to Wowser?'

Wowser Productions was a Southsea consultancy security-cleared to analyse seized computer equipment. They normally turned jobs round within a working week but charged the earth.

'I'll give them a ring,' Barrie was wincing. 'What else?'

The two men quickly ran through the tick-list of actions generated by a major incident like this. Checks on CCTV footage were already under way, with two D/Cs trawling through videotapes at the Civic Centre control room. Suttle was pressing the force Telephone Intelligence Department for billings on Mallinder's mobile and landlines, and had drawn up an application for a Production Order to access the dead man's bank accounts. The D/S in charge of Outside Enquiries had detailed two D/Cs to locate and interview Mallinder's lady friend, and Barrie seemed confident that further actions would follow.

Within days *Billhook* should be a great deal wiser about the small print of Mallinder's private life, but in the meantime Barrie could do little but steadily extend the reach of the house-to-house teams in the hope that someone in Port Solent might have noticed a tiny blip in the steady pulse of marina life. A strange car. A new face. Maybe even a visiting boat that no one had seen before. Anything, in short, that might flag a pathway forward.

Faraday mentioned Benskin, Mallinder's partner. Barrie nodded.

'He's down tomorrow, first thing. According to Suttle, he's cleared his diary. You need to talk to him, Joe, find out what the firm's been into. These developer guys are canny, keep their cards well hidden, but a class job like this might concentrate the man's mind. Unless ...' he frowned '... he knows more than we think.'

Faraday nodded. Barrie had a point. Business partnerships could be as volatile as a marriage. According to Suttle, Mallinder and Benskin had come from nowhere, piling deal on deal, taking established developers by surprise. The closer the relationship and the higher the stakes, the greater the possibility of events running suddenly out of control.

'You're suggesting Benskin might have something to do with this?'

‘It’s possible, Joe.’ Barrie smiled thinly. ‘Either that or Mallinder’s pissed a rival off. We have to start somewhere.’

He produced a packet of Rizlas from the desk drawer and got to his feet. The pouch of Golden Virginia lay on the sill beside the open window. He slipped off the elastic band and began to roll himself a cigarette, gazing down at the near-empty car park. At length came the scrape of a match and a long sigh as he expelled a thin plume of smoke through the open window. Then he turned as Faraday asked whether there was anything else he needed to know.

‘Yes. Willard’s been on a couple of times.’ He nodded at the phone. ‘It seems the Chief’s taking a personal interest. I gather the emphasis is on an early breakthrough. Quicker the better, Joe, eh ... ?’

Returning to his own office, Faraday sorted quickly through his e-mails, tapped a reply or two, and then put through a call to the Bargemaster’s House. As he’d half-expected, there was no response. Gabrielle loathed answering the phone. Her years as an anthropologist in various remote corners of the planet had taught her very different ways to measure the world’s pulse and he pictured her now, out in the garden enjoying the last of the sunshine, content for the caller to leave a message under this electronic stone.

‘Me,’ he announced. ‘Sorry about the birds. Back soon. À *bientôt*.’

He put the phone down and eyed it for a moment. Accounting for his every move was something new in his life and he wasn’t quite sure what to make of it. Gabrielle was on holiday from her apartment in Chartres, a month at the very most, but even so he’d found it odd to be fitting the rough contours of a copper’s life into someone else’s routine. Not that Gabrielle had burdened him with demands. Far from it. In fact he’d never met anyone who was so cheerfully self-sufficient. But in a relationship that was getting deeper by the day, he felt he owed her an honest account of himself. This is who I really am, he wanted to say. And this is the life that has made me this way.

He found Suttle upstairs in the social club. The young D/C had commandeered a couple of stools at the far end of the bar and was locked in conversation with Gina Hamilton. The moment Faraday appeared, he was on his feet.

‘What are you having, boss? My shout.’

Faraday settled for a pint of Guinness and found himself a stool. Gina made room for him at the bar. The sparseness of her frame and the steadiness in her eyes spoke of an appetite for regular exercise. She’d barely touched the glass of lager beside her battered leather bag.

‘You’re here for a while?’

‘Couple of days. Max.’

‘Drugs job?’

‘Yeah.’ She nodded. ‘Big time. At least in our neck of the woods.’

Without going into details, she outlined an operation she’d obviously been nurturing for a while. A distribution network centred in Plymouth. Cocaine mostly, with special offers on crack and smack when the Scouse dealers could be arsed to get out of bed. A supply chain running into Devon and Cornwall from sources upcountry. Dozens of outlets around the coast. Kick down a few doors, she said, and you’d spoil the party for a couple of weeks. But nail a truly major supplier and the damage might be a little more permanent.

‘So why Pompey?’ Faraday didn’t bother to hide his interest.

Gina hesitated a moment. She looked on the young side to be an experienced D/I, and she was plainly worried about sharing too much intelligence. Faraday was about to put the question a different way when Suttle helped him out.

‘Terry Byrne.’ He handed Faraday a brimming glass of Guinness. ‘Who’d have believed it, eh?’

Terry Byrne was a young Scouser who dealt from a chaotic terraced house barely a mile from Kingston Crescent and had won himself a city-wide reputation for ultra-violence. Lately he’d been settling heroin debts with a kettle full of boiling water tipped over the lower body, a process known as jugging.

Suttle resumed his seat beside the West Country D/I. Faraday could sense already that he was determined to make the most of his social responsibilities.

‘Cheers, boss.’ Suttle turned to touch glasses with Gina. ‘And here’s to some decent scalps, yeah?’

Faraday was still thinking about Byrne. The city’s cocaine trade was largely controlled by a prominent local criminal, Bazza Mackenzie. Recently, he’d been setting up a series of arms-length franchise operations, minimising his own risk while still enjoying huge profits, which he washed through his ever-expanding business empire. Dealers staked by Mackenzie were all Pompey boys, people he’d known most of his life, and collectively they’d made it very plain indeed that they intended to keep things local. A toerag Scouser like Terry Byrne could flog as much smack as he liked. But the moment he moved into something respectable like cocaine he’d be looking at a serious turf war.

‘Byrne’s really the target?’ Faraday needed to be clear.

‘Yes.’ Gina nodded. ‘He is.’

‘And you’re sure about the intel?’

‘Yes. I gather our Force Intelligence blokes have been talking

to yours. I don't know whether you're in the loop or not but he's expecting a delivery. Wholesale. Industrial quantities. Tomorrow, if we're lucky.'

'Cocaine?'

'Yes.'

'With some of it heading your way?'

'That's the story.'

'How much?'

'Between one and two kilos.'

'Shit.' It was Suttle. He looked impressed.

Faraday was still watching Gina. That weight of cocaine in the lock-up would be the making of a young D/I.

'You're serious? *Two kilos?*'

'Yes.'

'And you've got Byrne plotted up? Pennington Road? Surveillance? The whole nine yards?'

'Absolutely. And tomorrow, if it all pans out, we'll be on the road back west with him.'

'So who orders the strike?'

'Exeter makes the decision. Then I handle the tactical end. That kind of weight, I imagine we'll settle for a traffic stop once we're close to home. There's no way my bosses would let it run. We'd have the media all over us if we fucked up.'

'Sure.' Faraday nodded. 'So you'll be relying on interview for further arrests?'

'That's the plan. The bloke at the wheel will be looking at five to six years. That's a big incentive to come up with a few names.'

'And this guy's known to you? The courier?'

'We've had dealings, yes. Bloke's an animal but he's just hooked up with a Ukrainian lady, a real stunner, and she's another reason he might come across. Who knows?' She reached for her drink, took a tiny sip, then checked her watch. 'Shit. I'd no idea it was so late.'

Faraday ignored the hint. He still wanted to know how Byrne had laid hands on a couple of kilos of cocaine. In Pompey.

'I've no idea. Force Intelligence are talking some kind of deal in Manchester but that's something I can't vouch for. Me? I'll be happy with that kind of seizure and a day or two in the interview suite. Fingers crossed, we'll end up with both. Plus a handful of arrests down the line. You want the rest of this?'

She handed Suttle her glass, still two thirds full. Suttle looked at it a moment, then poured the contents into his own glass.

'You know who'd cream themselves over a conversation like this?' He was looking at Faraday. 'Paul Winter. Two kilos of the laughing

powder? Plus someone to work over in the interview room? Shit. A couple of days and you'd start running out of holding cells. Shame, eh?

'Shame, what?' Gina had slipped off the stool, slipping her jacket over her shoulders.

'Shame Paul's not around any more. You're driving?'

'Yeah.'

'No wonder.' Suttle gestured at her empty glass. 'If only he'd been as cluey as you.'