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The Devil's Edge

Written by Stephen Booth

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THE DEVIL'S EDGE

Stephen Booth

sphere

SPHERE

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For Lesley

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1

Tuesday

A shadow moved across the hall. It was only a flicker of movement, a blur in the light, a motion as tiny and quick as an insect's.

Zoe Barron stopped and turned, her heart already thumping. She wasn't sure whether she'd seen anything at all. It had happened in a second, that flick from dark to light, and back again. Just one blink of an eye. She might have imagined the effect from a glint of moonlight off the terracotta tiles. Or perhaps it was only a moth, trapped inside and fluttering its wings as it tried desperately to escape.

In the summer, the house was often full of small flying things that crept in through the windows and hung from the walls. The children said their delicate, translucent wings made them look like tiny angels. But for Zoe, they were more like miniature demons with their bug eyes and waving antennae. It made her shudder to think of them flitting silently around her bedroom at night, waiting their chance to land on her face.

It was one of the drawbacks of living in the countryside. Too much of the outside world intruding. Too many things it was impossible to keep out.

Still uncertain, Zoe looked along the hallway towards the kitchen, and noticed a thin slice of darkness where the utility room door stood open an inch. The house was so quiet that she could hear the hum of the freezer, the tick of the boiler,

a murmur from the TV in one of the children's bedrooms. She listened for a moment, holding her breath. She wondered if a stray cat or a fox had crept in through the back door and was crouching now in the kitchen, knowing she was there in the darkness, its hearing far better than hers. Green eyes glowing, claws unsheathed, an animal waiting to pounce.

But now she was letting her imagination run away with her. She shouldn't allow irrational fears to fill her mind, when there were so many real ones to be concerned about. With a shake of her head at her own foolishness, Zoe stepped through the kitchen door, and saw what had caused the movement of the shadows. A breath of wind was swaying the ceiling light on its cord.

So a window must have been left open somewhere – probably by one of the workmen, trying to reduce the smell of paint. They'd already been in the house too long, three days past the scheduled completion of this part of the job, and they were trying their best not to cause any more complaints. They'd left so much building material outside that it was always in the way. She dreaded one of the huge timbers falling over in the night. Sometimes, when the wind was strong, she lay awake listening for the crash.

But leaving a window open all night – that would earn them an earful tomorrow anyway. It wasn't something you did, even here in a village like Riddings. It was a lesson she and Jake had learned when they lived in Sheffield, and one she would never forget. Rural Derbyshire hadn't proved to be the safe, crime-free place she'd hoped.

Zoe tutted quietly, reassuring herself with the sound. A window left open? It didn't seem much, really. But that peculiar man who lived in the old cottage on Chapel Close would stop her car in the village and lecture her about it endlessly if he ever found out. He was always hanging around the lanes watching what other people did.

Gamble, that was his name. Barry Gamble. She'd warned the girls to stay away from him if they saw him. You never knew with people like that. You could never be sure where the

danger might come from. Greed and envy and malice – they were all around her, like a plague. As if she and Jake could be held responsible for other people's mistakes, the wrong decisions they had made in their lives.

Zoe realised she was clutching the wine bottle in her hand so hard that her knuckles were white. An idea ran through her head of using the bottle as a weapon. It was full, and so heavy she could do some damage, if necessary. Except now her fingerprints would be all over it.

She laughed at her own nervousness. She was feeling much too tense. She'd been in this state for days, maybe weeks. If Jake saw her right now, he would tease her and tell her she was just imagining things. He would say there was nothing to worry about. Nothing at all. *Relax, chill out, don't upset the children. Everything's fine*.

But, of course, that wasn't true. Everyone knew there was plenty to worry about. Everyone here in Riddings, and in all the other villages scattered along this eastern fringe of the Peak District. It was in the papers, and on TV. No one was safe.

Still Zoe hesitated, feeling a sudden urge to turn round and run back to the sitting room to find Jake and hold on to him for safety. But instead she switched on the light and took a step further into the kitchen.

She saw the body of a moth now. It lay dead on the floor, its wings torn, its fragile body crushed to powder. It was a big one, too – faint black markings still discernible on its flattened wings. Was it big enough to have blundered into the light and set it swinging? A moth was so insubstantial. But desperate creatures thrashed around in panic when they were dying. It was always frightening to watch.

There was something strange about the moth. Zoe crouched to look more closely. Her stomach lurched as she made it out. Another pattern was visible in the smear of powder – a section of ridge, like the sole of a boot, as if someone had trodden on the dead insect, squashing it on to the tiles.

She straightened up again quickly, looking around, shifting her grip on the bottle, trying to fight the rising panic.

'Jake?' she said.

A faint thump on the ground outside. Was that what she'd heard, or not? A footstep too heavy for a fox. The wrong sound for a falling timber.

This wasn't right. The only person who might legitimately be outside the house at this time of night was Jake, and she'd left him in the sitting room, sprawled on the couch and clutching a beer. If he'd gone out to the garage for some reason, he would have told her. If he'd gone to the front door, he would have passed her in the hall.

So it wasn't Jake outside. It wasn't her husband moving about now on the decking, fumbling at the back door. But still she clung on to the belief, the wild hope, that there was nothing to worry about. *I'm perfectly safe. Everything's fine*.

'Jake?' she called.

And again, louder. Much louder, and louder still, until it became a scream.

'Jake? Jake? *Jake!*'

Six miles from Riddings, Detective Sergeant Ben Cooper turned the corner of Edendale High Street into Hollowgate and stopped to let a bus pull into the terminus. The town hall lay just ahead of him, closed at this time of night but illuminated by spotlights, which picked out the pattern in its stonework that had earned it its nickname of the Wavy House. Across the road, the Starlight Café was doing good business as usual, with a steady stream of customers. Taxis were lining up for their busiest time of the day. It was almost ten o'clock on an ordinary August evening.

The pubs were even busier than the Starlight, of course. Cooper could hear the music pounding from the Wheatsheaf and the Red Lion, the two pubs on either side of the market square. A crowd of youngsters screamed and laughed by the war memorial, watched by a uniformed PC and a community support officer in bright yellow high-vis jackets, the pair of them standing in the entrance to an alley near the Raj Mahal.

Even in Edendale there were often fights at closing time, and drug dealers operating wherever they could find a suitable spot. On Friday and Saturday nights there would be a personnel carrier with a prisoner cage in the back, and multiple foot patrols of officers on the late shift. A change came over the town then; a place that had looked so quaint during the day, with its cobbled alleys and tall stone buildings, revealed its Jekyll and Hyde nature.

'Hey, mate, shouldn't you be out arresting some criminals?'

'Ooh, duck, show us your baton.'

Looking round at the shouts, Cooper saw that the bus was a Hulley's number 19 from the Devonshire Estate. Oh, great. He took a sharp step back from the kerb, turning his body away towards the shop window behind him. There were too many eyes gazing from the windows of the bus, and the likelihood of too many familiar faces, people he didn't want to meet when he was off duty. Half of the names on his arrest record had addresses on the Devonshire Estate. He didn't recognise the voices, but there was no doubt their owners knew him.

Well, this was his own choice. Many police officers opted to live outside the area they worked in, for exactly this reason. When you went for a quiet drink in your local pub, you didn't want to find yourself sitting next to the person you'd nicked the day before, or sharing a table with a man whose brother you'd just sent to prison.

But Cooper had resisted moving to a neighbouring division. He could easily have travelled into Edendale every morning from Chesterfield or Buxton, but that wouldn't be the same. He belonged here, in the Eden Valley, and he wasn't going to let anything push him out. He intended to stay here, settle down, raise a family, and eventually turn into a cantankerous pensioner who rambled on about the good old days.

That meant he had to put up with these awkward moments – the looks of horrified recognition on faces, the shying away as he passed in the street, the aggressive stare at the bar. It was all part of life. *All part of life's rich pageant*. That was what

his grandmother would have said. He had no idea where the expression came from, but he knew it would stick inside his head now, until he found out. He supposed he'd have to Google it when he got home. He seemed to be turning into one of those people whose mind collected odd bits of information like a sheep picking up ticks.

As he walked, Cooper checked his phone in case he'd missed a text message, but there was nothing. He carried on towards the end of Hollowgate, ignoring the loud group of youngsters. Not his business tonight. He'd only just come off shift, at the end of a long-drawn-out series of arrests and the execution of search warrants. With six prisoners processed through the custody suite at West Street, there wasn't much of the evening left by the time he finally clocked off.

At the corner of Bargate he stopped again and listened for the sound of the river, just discernible here above the noise of traffic. The council had been talking about making Hollowgate a pedestrianised zone, like neighbouring Clappergate. But of course the money had run out for projects like that. So a stream of cars still flowed down from Hulley Road towards the High Street, forming Edendale's version of a one-way system. 'Flowed' wasn't exactly the right word for it. Half of the cars stopped in front of the shops to unload passengers, or crawled to a halt as drivers looked for parking spaces, the little car park behind the town hall already being full at this hour.

Cooper studied the pedestrians ahead. There was no sign of her yet. He glanced at his watch. For once, he wasn't the one who was late. That was good.

He decided to wait in front of the estate agent's, looking back towards the clock on the Wavy House to make sure his watch wasn't fast. There was always a smell of freshly baked bread just on this corner, thanks to the baker's behind the shops in Bargate. The scent lingered all day, as if it was absorbed into the stone and released slowly to add to the atmosphere. It was good to have somewhere in town that still baked its own bread. For Cooper, it was the sounds and smells that gave

Edendale its unique personality, and distinguished it from every other town in the country, with their identikit high streets full of chain stores.

He turned to look in the estate agent's window, automatically drawn to the pictures of the houses for sale. This was one of the more upmarket agents, handling a lot of high-end properties, catering for equestrian interests and buyers with plenty of spare cash who were looking for a country residence. He spotted a nice property available not far away, in Lowtown. An old farmhouse by the look of it, full of character, with a few outbuildings and a pony paddock. But six hundred and fifty thousand pounds? How could he ever afford that? Even on his new salary scale as a detective sergeant, the mortgage repayments would be horrendous. He had a bit of money put away in the bank now, but savings didn't grow very fast these days, with interest rates still on the floor. It was a hopeless prospect.

'So which house do you fancy?' said a voice in his ear.

It was totally different from the voices that had shouted to him from the bus. This one was warm, soft and caressing. A familiar voice, with an intimate touch on his arm.

Liz appeared at his side, laid her head against his shoulder, and slipped her hand into his. He hadn't seen her approach, and now he felt strangely at a disadvantage.

'What, one of these?' he said. 'Chance would be a fine thing.'

She sighed. 'True, I suppose.'

Cooper looked beyond the pictures of houses and caught their reflections in the glass. The pair of them were slightly distorted and smoky, as if the glass was tinted. Edendale's traffic moved slowly, jerkily behind them, like a street in an old silent film. And not for the first time, it struck him how well matched they looked. Comfortable together, like an old married couple already. Liz looked small at his side, her dark hair shining in the street lights, her face lit up with a simple, uncomplicated pleasure. It delighted him that she could respond this way every time they met, or even spoke on the phone. Who wouldn't love to have that effect on someone? It was a

wonderful thing to bring a bit of happiness into the world, to be able to create these moments of joy. A rare and precious gift in a world where he met so much darkness and unhappiness, so many lonely and bitter people.

'Kiss, then?

He bent to kiss her. She smelled great, as always. Her presence made him smile, and forget about the gaping faces. Who cared what other people thought?

They crossed the road, squeezed close together, as if they'd been parted for months. He always felt like that with Liz. At these moments, he would agree to anything, and often did.

'So, any progress on the big case?' she said.

'The home invasions, you mean?'

'Yes. The Savages. That's what the newspapers are calling them.'

Cooper grimaced at the expression, sorry to have the mood momentarily spoiled. It was typical of the media to come up with such a sensational and ludicrous nickname. He knew they were aiming to grab the public's attention. But it seemed to him to trivialise the reality of the brutal violence inflicted on the victims of these particular offenders.

'No, not much progress,' he said.

'It must be awful. I mean, to have something like that happen to you in your own home.'

'The victims have been pretty traumatised.'

The gang of burglars the papers were calling the Savages had struck several times this summer, targeting large private houses in well-heeled villages on the eastern edges. E Division was Derbyshire Constabulary's largest geographical division by far, and those long gritstone escarpments in the east marked its furthest fringes, the border with South Yorkshire.

Cooper wondered how he would feel if he owned that nice house in Lowtown, and someone broke into it. He'd been told that owning property changed your attitude completely, made you much more territorial, more aggressively prepared to defend your domain. Well, he'd seen that at first hand. Because it had certainly happened to his brother. He'd watched Matt

turn into a paranoid wreck since he became responsible for the family farm at Bridge End. He patrolled his boundaries every day, like a one-man army, ever vigilant for the appearance of invaders. He was the Home Guard, ready to repel Hitler's Nazi hordes with a pitchfork. That level of anxiety must be exhausting. Was owning property really worth it?

'Do you think the Savages are local?' asked Liz, voicing the question that many people were asking. 'Or are they coming out from Sheffield?'

There were few people he could have discussed details of the case with. But Liz was in the job herself, a scene-of-crime officer in E Division. She'd even attended one of the scenes, the most recent incident in Baslow.

'They know the area pretty well, either way,' said Cooper. 'They've chosen their targets like professionals so far. And they've got their approaches and exits figured out to the last detail. At least, it seems so – since we haven't got much of a lead on them yet.'

They had a table booked at the Columbine. It was in the cellar, but that was okay. In Edendale, there wasn't much of a choice of restaurants where last orders were taken at ten. And even at the Columbine that was only from May to October, for the visitors. Edendale people didn't eat so late.

Cooper was looking forward to getting in front of a High Peak rib-eye steak pan-fried in Cajun spices. Add a bottle of Czech beer, and he'd be happy. And he'd be able to forget about the Savages for a while.

They opened the door of the restaurant, and Cooper paused for a moment to look back at the street, watching the people beginning to head out of town, back to the safety of their homes. If anyone's home was safe, with individuals like the Savages on the loose.

'Well,' he said, 'at least they haven't killed anybody yet.'

In Riddings, a figure was moving in the Barrons' garden. Barry Gamble was approaching the house cautiously. The last time

he'd been on the drive at Valley View, it hadn't been a happy experience. Some people just didn't appreciate neighbourly concern. He hoped there was no one hanging around outside, no chance of seeing any of the Barrons. He would just have a quick check, make sure everything was okay, then get back to his own house a few hundred yards away in Chapel Close.

Gamble tutted at the roof trusses and window frames stacked untidily against the wall. That was asking for trouble, in his opinion. It gave the impression the house was empty and vulnerable while construction work was going on. The improvements seemed to have stalled, though. The area that had been cleared behind the garage was supposed to be an extension for a gym and family room, so he'd heard. But the foundations were still visible, the breeze-block walls hardly a foot high where they'd been abandoned. Perhaps the Barrons had run out of money, like everyone else. The thought gave Gamble a little twinge of satisfaction.

He wondered if some item of builders' materials had made the noise he'd heard. A dull thump and a crash, loud on the night air. And then there had been some kind of scrabbling in the undergrowth. But he was used to that sound. There was plenty of wildlife in Riddings at night – foxes, badgers, rabbits. Even the occasional deer down off Stoke Flat. The noises animals made in the dark were alarming, for anyone who wasn't used to them the way he was.

Gamble skirted the garage and headed towards the back of the house, conscious of the sound of his footsteps on the gravel drive. He tried to tread lightly, but gravel was always a nuisance. He'd learned to avoid it whenever he could. A nice bit of paving or a patch of grass was so much easier.

He began to rehearse his excuses in case someone came out and challenged him. *I was just passing, and I thought I heard . . . Can't be too careful, eh? Well, as long as everything's all right, I'll be getting along*. He couldn't remember whether the Barrons had installed motion sensors at Valley View that would activate the security lights. He thought not, though.

The house was very quiet as he came near it. The younger

Barron children would be in bed by now. He knew their bedrooms were on the other side of the house, overlooking the garden. Their parents tended to sit up late watching TV. He'd seen the light flickering on the curtains until one o'clock in the morning sometimes.

Gamble peered through the kitchen window. A bit of light came through the open doorway from the hall. But there wasn't much to see inside. No intruders, no damage, no signs of a break-in or disturbance. No one visible inside the house, no soul moving at all.

In fact, there was only one thing for Barry Gamble to see. One thing that made him catch his breath with fear and excitement. It was nothing but a trickle. A narrow worm, red and glistening in a patch of light. A thin trickle of blood, creeping slowly across the terracotta tiles.

2

Wednesday

Ben Cooper arrived under the Devil's Edge as the morning was already getting warm. He followed the directions of a uniformed officer and parked his Toyota on a narrow verge behind a line of vehicles that had reached the scene before him. He unbuckled his seat belt, pressed redial on his mobile phone, and stepped out of the car into the smells of new-mown grass and horse manure.

'Gavin, it's Ben. Did you get the message earlier? See if you can round up Luke and Becky and get them out to Riddings asap. Drop everything else, mate. This is a priority.'

As he put his phone back into his pocket, Cooper was wishing he'd got a call-out earlier. He couldn't deny that the adrenalin was flowing. This was his first big challenge as a recently promoted detective sergeant. He had to do a good job, make sure he got his team focused and producing results. Results were what everyone demanded. But you had to be on scene early, and get in at the start, if you were going to play a leading role. Otherwise you started to look like an extra.

He began to walk towards the blue and white tape marking out the crime scene. According to a street sign, he was on Curbar Lane.

Cooper wasn't too familiar with Riddings. In normal times, these villages weren't usually the focus of crime. Expensive houses and affluent middle-class residents, by and large. A few

months ago, this road had appeared on a list of the most expensive places to buy property in the East Midlands, along with a similar location in Curbar. Decent houses were pricey everywhere in the Peak District. But Riddings and its neighbouring villages seemed to have an appeal all of their own. *A highly desirable location*. He could almost write the estate agent's details himself.

The villages of Froggatt, Curbar and Riddings lay on the banks of the River Derwent, between the bigger communities of Grindleford and Baslow. From all of these Derwentside villages, the view to the east was blocked by a series of high gritstone edges – Gardom, Baslow, Curbar, Froggatt. Created through glacial action twenty thousand years ago, they formed a great curve of rock faces swinging away to the north and south, a formidable barrier protecting the clusters of grey-roofed houses in the valley and the wooded dales to the west. An almost continuous twelve-mile-long wall of rock.

Cooper paused for a moment when he reached the outer cordon and looked up. Riddings Edge was considered a mecca for climbers, with routes up to seventy feet high. He knew a few rock climbers, and they told him it presented some of the most testing challenges, comparable to the popular sections of Stanage Edge. Sheer perpendicular faces were split vertically like shattered teeth, angles shifted suddenly to steep slabs or overhangs. Some stretches of rock were said to be notorious for crumbling unexpectedly under the fingers, so that a hold that seemed perfect one second disappeared into thin air the next. Climbers looking for something easier tended to head a bit further north, to Froggatt.

With one hand Cooper shaded his eyes against the sun to study the edge itself. Grotesque, twisted outlines of weather-worn gritstone. Jutting outcrops, misshapen boulders, broken shards of stone, so dark that they seemed to absorb the light. Against the sun, some of the rocks were impossible to distinguish from watching human figures.

He pictured what was beyond the edges. Desolate expanses of scrub known as flats, and vast tracts of moorland beyond

them. Above Riddings Edge was the biggest area of moorland, known simply as Big Moor. If you took the trouble to walk to the highest point of the moor, you would see what lay beyond – the suburbs of Totley, Dore, Beauchief, the first tentacles of the city of Sheffield, reaching out towards the Peak.

Cooper gave his name to an officer at the inner cordon, just inside an impressive entrance with electric wrought-iron gates and a long driveway leading up to the front of the property. A Land Rover Discovery stood on a paved parking area, next to a brick-red Beetle Cabriolet. Beyond the house, he saw landscaped gardens, a water feature with a fountain, shrub borders, a lawn containing a children's trampoline.

He headed towards a group of figures and made out his DI, Paul Hitchens, who nodded to him briefly.

'Ben.'

'Sir.'

Hitchens was looking well fed these days, or maybe losing a battle against middle-aged spread. He was always dressed smartly, though – in a suit and tie, like a middle manager in a large insurance company. Cooper brushed automatically at his own leather jacket, wondering whether he should think about changing his image.

The DI's expression was serious and preoccupied. Cooper decided he ought to make an effort not to let his excitement show too much.

'House invasion?' he said.

'And a bad one.'

August had been a hell of a month under the Devil's Edge. Warm weather and long evenings tempted people to leave their windows open at night, a back door ajar, their house unattended. It was an opportunist thief's dream.

But these weren't opportunist thieves. Their attacks were planned. They had everything so well worked out that they seemed to disappear after the event. Disappeared without a trace, the newspaper reports said. Well, almost.

'Ben, suppose we were looking at this scene without any preconceptions,' said Hitchens.

'Yes?'

'Well, if the children had been harmed, we might be thinking murder-suicide. Father kills the wife, the kids and then himself. It happens.'

Cooper nodded. 'Too often.'

They were both silent for a moment, watching the crime-scene examiners go about their work. The circus had arrived early this morning, the SOCOs and medical examiner, the photographers and CID, and the task force officers in their overalls conducting a fingertip search. They were all here promptly, arriving like magic. It was as if everyone had already known where to go, as though they were expecting something like this to happen. Well, it was that kind of summer. One where death had been inevitable.

'Or it can be the mother. That happens too,' said Hitchens, as if as an afterthought.

'No. The mother does it differently. A woman sets fire to the house, so she doesn't have to see them die.'

'Yes. And these children are unharmed anyway.'

'We know, though, don't we?' said Cooper at last.

'Yes, I suppose so. The Savages.'

'If you like that name, sir.'

'Well, this was definitely savage. They've upped the stakes, Ben. This is a deliberate escalation.'

As he listened to Hitchens, Cooper was trying to absorb the atmosphere of the house. There was always a lingering atmosphere after a violent crime – a sense of the shock and fear, the impact of death echoing from the walls.

'Maybe it was deliberate,' he said. 'But perhaps it all just went wrong for them this time.'

SOCOs were busy everywhere, dusting for fingerprints, hoovering up trace evidence, examining the garden for shoe marks. Cooper realised that he'd arrived only just in time to see the body in situ. A black van was already waiting on the drive to take it away.

'Besides,' said Hitchens, 'the husband isn't dead. Not yet. Want to take a look?'