

Blood and Honey

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Prelude

MONDAY, 16 FEBRUARY 2004

Flat on her belly on the freezing turf, she sucked in a tiny lungful of air and then steadied the binoculars and tried again. Hundreds of feet below, a flooding tide washed over the tumble of chalky boulders at the foot of the cliff, wave after wave curtaining the shape she thought she'd glimpsed. The shape worried at her. It couldn't be, just couldn't be. Not the way she'd seen it. Not in that kind of state.

Shifting her weight in the bulky anorak, she tracked slowly left, waiting for the next wave to fold, collapse and die. Sluicing back, it revealed only the pale whites of the broken chalk latticed with the rich greens and browns of half a winter's growth of seaweed. She swallowed hard, wondering whether she might have imagined it, this split-second image that refused to go away. Maybe it was a mirage, a trick of the light. Maybe getting up at six in the morning and shipping across to the island on the rumour of an abnormally early nesting season did funny things to the inside of your head.

On the point of giving up and finding a new location, she eased the binoculars a little further to the left, trying to go with the grain of the tide. For an instant came the blur of a black-headed gull riding the column of wind blasting up the cliff face then – all too distinct – she found herself looking at the shape again, unmistakable this time, momentarily trapped against a sizeable boulder. She watched, fascinated, appalled, then fumbled for her mobile, one hand still locked on the binoculars. For a second, presented by the operator with a brisk list of options, she didn't quite know what to say.

'Police,' she managed at last.

But it was the coastguard who arrived first, bumping over the frosty turf in a new-looking Land Rover. Pausing for a brief account of what had happened, he accompanied the woman to the edge of the cliff, using his own binoculars to confirm the presence of the body beneath. Back at the Land Rover, he leaned into the cab and reached for the

radio. The woman caught mention of 'Bembridge' and 'lifeboat' before the clatter of a big helicopter drowned out the rest of the conversation. The helicopter seemed to appear from nowhere, tracking low over the down, then banking steeply as it left the cliff face behind it. The coastguard motioned the woman away from the edge of the cliff as the rotor wash swirled around them.

'Cliff rescue team should be here any minute,' he said. 'Police, too.'

The policeman was young. He took the woman through what she had seen and asked her if she was prepared to make a statement later. Beyond them, on the cliff top, the rescue team were lowering four men and a stretcher on a skein of ropes while the helicopter hovered offshore, the face of the watching pilot clearly visible. Abruptly, he waved to someone down below; gave him the thumbs up. Then, as if this was something they did every day of their working lives, the team on the cliff top were hauling their cargo in.

The woman edged back to the cliff, absorbed by this small drama, by the way that the shape in her binoculars had surrendered to this smooth exercise in retrieval. Peering over, she had time to register two of the men steadying a stretcher, halfway up the cliff. Strapped to the stretcher was a plastic body bag, grey, bulky. From this distance it looked like a parcel they'd found on the beach.

The woman shifted, unable to tear herself away. The blast of the wind. The steady *whump-whump* of the helicopter. The angry scream of disturbed gulls. And the deadweight of that strange grey package, bumping against the cliff face. Then came a hand on her shoulder and she turned to find herself eye to eye with the coastguard. He was tall, blue jumpsuit, tightly cropped grey hair.

'Best not to look, madam. This wind. Don't want two of you down there, do we?'

Chastened, the woman stepped away from the edge. But, try as she might, she couldn't rid himself of that first glimpse of the body now on the stretcher, the image that had registered for a split second in her binoculars and triggered this extraordinary operation. The mottled naked greyness of the flesh. The huge distended belly. The floppy limbs flailing in the tide. And how strange a body looked without a head.

Chapter one

FRIDAY, 20 FEBRUARY 2004

Faraday stood at the window in the Southsea hovercraft terminal, staring out. The gale anticipated on last night's TV weather forecast had arrived at last, low ragged skirts of cloud and a hard, driving rain that had soaked him in the brief dash across the road from the seafront car park. Now, half-expecting the service to be suspended, he peered through the blurry, salt-caked glass.

The low, dark swell of the Isle of Wight had long disappeared. Beyond the angry lunge of the waves and a glimpse of the heaving buoy that marked the deep-water channel, he could see nothing. Even the seaweed, long brown ribbons of the stuff, was blowing like litter across the glistening concrete ramp that plunged down towards the boiling tideline.

The woman at the ticket office, to his faint disappointment, met his enquiry about cancellation with a shake of her head. Conditions weren't perfect, she admitted, but the weather was still within operating limits. If the inbound service was a minute or two later than scheduled, she counselled patience.

Faraday returned to his sodden briefcase and extracted a thin manila envelope. Settling damply in the moulded plastic chair, he reread the file that had been sent back to Major Crimes a couple of days ago.

The details were sparse. A twenty-five-year-old white male, name of Aaron Tolly, had been found dead at the back of a block of flats off Ryde seafront. The body had been discovered before dawn by a local runner in early training for the London marathon. His 999 call had brought both an ambulance and a patrol car to the scene and by mid-morning Detective Superintendent Willard had dispatched Detective Inspector Nick Hayder plus two DCs from Major Crimes to spearhead what the local DI was already calling a murder investigation.

Faraday flipped quickly through the file. Same-day inquiries had established that Tolly was an alcoholic and occasional heroin user with a long record of convictions for shoplifting and benefit fraud. He'd

shipped over to the island from Pompey and now lived in a heavily secured squat on the third floor of the premises. On the night of his death, according to a witness who knew him by sight, he'd been drinking alone in a shelter on the seafront. Later that evening he'd evidently tried to cadge money for more drinks in a local pub. His keys had been found inside the squalid flat he called home. To someone with a head for heights and plenty of nerve, a fire escape to a locked door at the rear of the flat offered access to an adjacent bedroom window. One of the other vagrants who dosses there thought he might have heard a bang or two at the door and then a brief scraping noise at the window. At the post-mortem the pathologist identified injuries consistent with a fall. Recorded body temperatures put the time of death at around midnight. In Nick Hayder's judgement Tolly had got pissed again, found his way up the fire escape, tried for the half-open bedroom window, and missed.

At the back of the file Faraday found a sheaf of colour stills from the Scenes of Crime photographer. He lingered for a moment on the last of the shots. Tolly lay sprawled beside a line of brimming dustbins, his arms outstretched, one leg buckled beneath the other. There was a glimpse of white flesh through a tear in his jeans and Faraday noticed that one of his battered runners was unlaced. Faraday gazed at the thin, gaunt face, the eyes wide open, the mouth shaping the beginnings of a scream. Tolly hadn't shaved for a day or two and a brown trickle of congealed blood tracked through the stubble below his left ear. The post-mortem report had spoken of multiple skull fractures with haemorrhages in the underlying brain tissue. With injuries like these, according to the pathologist, Tolly would have been killed on impact.

Faraday leafed back through the file, checking every link in the sequence of events Hayder and his team had put together. The stretch of unswept concrete where Tolly had met his death lay directly beneath the bedroom window. With his keys inside a locked flat, there was every possibility he'd tried to find an alternative way in. No witnesses had spoken of any kind of altercation earlier in the evening. Drunk and alone, Tolly had tumbled into oblivion.

Faraday looked up, hearing the approaching roar of the hovercraft. Hayder and his team had stayed on the island for another couple of days. Unearthing no evidence to convince him otherwise, he'd returned the file to the local DI with a note confirming an absence of suspicious circumstances. By now the Coroner should have held an inquest and returned a verdict. Yet here was Faraday, en route to CID headquarters in Newport. The DI was insisting on a full review. And Willard, whose responsibility for Major Crimes extended to the Isle of Wight, wanted to know why.

Faraday got to his feet, slipping the file into his briefcase. The hovercraft was a dark shadow fifty metres offshore. Emerging through the grey curtain of rain, it yawed violently from side to side, clawed its way out of the waves, climbed the weed-strewn ramp, and then settled unsteadily on the wet concrete.

The departures hall had mysteriously emptied. The youth on the exit door inspected Faraday's ticket.

'You ready for this, sir?' he muttered.

The trip across was mercifully brief. Never had he been closer to losing his breakfast. On landfall at Ryde, half-expecting a waiting CID car, Faraday was obliged to take a taxi. Half an hour to Newport with the heater on full blast was enough to dry out and by the time he'd settled himself in the DI office he felt a good deal better.

Detective Inspector Colin Irving had been in charge of the island's CID for longer than anyone could remember. A tall, bespectacled, slightly bookish figure, he guarded his independence with the kind of fierce pride that went with an Aldershot youth and three years in uniform patrolling the badlands of Basingstoke. As someone who himself had once lived on the island, Faraday was the first to acknowledge that the most passionate islanders were always the ones who'd blown in from somewhere else.

'Busy?'

Irving took the question at face value. He was still describing a recent series of encounters with the Animal Liberation Front when a kindly-looking management assistant appeared with coffee. Faraday took his chance to change the subject.

'Tolly . . .' he began. 'What else do we know about him?'

'Not a lot. He's Pompey born and bred. Shame he didn't stay, really. Saved us all a lot of bother.'

'Is that what this is about?'

Irving shook his head but said nothing. Both men understood the reality of divisional CID work only too well. Successful detections on dwelling burglaries or thefts from vehicles won lots of brownie points from the Home Office but serious offences – stranger rape, homicide – brought you nothing but grief and a heavy overtime bill. Hence the bid to offload onto Major Crimes.

'So why isn't he done and dusted?' Faraday tapped the file. 'What's happened?'

'We've picked up good intelligence. Stuff we can't ignore.'

'About Tolly?'

'Of course. That's why I phoned Mr Willard.'

An informant, he said, had come forward with information about a

prisoner on the island, a Scouse drug dealer serving seven years for supply. The Scouser had a girlfriend who made regular prison visits and it seemed she'd run into Tolly. After a couple of meetings they'd started some kind of relationship.

'Which prison?'

'Albany.'

Faraday nodded. HMP Albany was one of a complex of three prisons on the road to Cowes. The Isle of Wight had long become a temporary home for relatives of convicts, especially those banged up for years on end. Wives and mothers liked the island so much they often stayed forever.

'So what happened?' Faraday asked again.

'We think the Scouser may have put the word out. There'd be no shortage of takers if he was talking decent money. Maybe he only paid for a beating but these things get out of hand.' Irving offered a bleak smile. 'Know what I mean?'

Faraday nodded. On the face of it Irving's theory sounded plausible enough but the total absence of supporting evidence argued for caution. According to Hayder's investigation, no one had seen Tolly in company. Neither were there any physical signs of assault prior to Tolly's death. Not that Irving cared. The recent intelligence had become part of the file and that meant he had to cover his arse.

'How good is this intelligence?'

'It exists.'

'That's not my question. I'm asking you where it came from.'

'You'll have to talk to his handler. You know the score.'

'Of course I know the score. I'm simply asking what else you've done before you lifted the phone. Have you checked this guy out? Is he a regular? Has he got debts of his own to settle? You know Willard's views on crap intelligence.'

Mention of Willard brought colour to Irving's face.

'You're telling me I'm jumping the gun?'

'I'm suggesting you might need to do a little more footwork.'

'Like how?'

'Like getting one of your blokes to poke around a bit, find out what this informant of yours is really up to. There'll be a story in there somewhere, you know there will.'

'And you think I've got the bodies to waste on something like that?'

Irving had abandoned any pretence of indignation. He was angry now, the anger of a hard-pressed divisional DI, but Faraday could cope with that.

'I know there's no brownie points in homicide,' he said gently. 'But I've got a boss you wouldn't believe and he thinks you're cuffing it.'

‘Willard said that?’

‘Good as.’

‘And you’re the messenger?’

‘Not at all. But I know the way he works, what he thinks, and on the evidence of this –’ Faraday tapped the file – ‘he’ll tell you you’re taking the piss. What are your PIs looking like?’

‘Bloody good. Best on the force. Plus a clear-up rate most DIs would die for.’

‘And you want to keep it that way.’

‘Of course we bloody do.’

‘But you’re stretched, like we’re all stretched.’

‘Too right.’

‘So the more running around we do on your behalf . . .’

Irving began to shake his head, then abandoned his seat at the little conference table and stepped across to the window. Home Office Performance Indicators had become the bane of divisional life. Devoting precious CID resources to Aaron Tolly would do absolutely nothing when it came to ranking Irving’s PIs against other Basic Command Units, a merciless comparison tool that was driving good coppers insane.

‘It’s barmy, isn’t it?’ Irving might have been talking to himself. ‘No fucking way to run a wheelk stall.’

‘I agree.’ Faraday drained his coffee. ‘Does your canteen still do toast?’

The canteen was virtually empty, just a single figure bent over a magazine at the table beside the microwave. Faraday found himself a jar of coffee and refilled the electric kettle. The remains of a loaf of sliced white lay in an open cake tin and Faraday was still looking for something to put on it when a voice prompted him to try in the cupboard beside the fridge.

‘There’s peanut butter and some of those sachets of jam. Uniform finished the marmalade first thing. Animals.’

Faraday turned round. The figure at the table hadn’t stirred. The mail beside the hang-gliding magazine was addressed to DC Darren Webster.

‘DI Faraday. Major Crimes.’ Faraday extended a hand. ‘Any butter?’

‘In the fridge.’ Webster at last looked up. ‘Sir.’

His handshake was firm and the smile came as a slight surprise. Webster had a stubble-cheeked, outdoor face. There were hints of strength in the set of the jaw, and the newness of his suit was offset by the loosened tie. Here was a young detective, thought Faraday, who knows exactly who he is.

‘Over from Pompey?’ Webster enquired.

‘Yes.’

‘Anything else you need?’ His eyes had returned to the magazine.

Faraday shook his head. He made himself a couple of slices of toast, then decanted boiling water onto a spoonful of Happy Shopper instant.

‘Mind if I join you?’

Faraday sat down without waiting for an answer. Webster was deep in a feature article about hang-gliding in New Zealand. With some reluctance he finally closed the magazine and put it to one side.

‘These guys fly over glaciers.’ He sounded wistful. ‘Can you imagine what that must be like?’

Faraday thought about the question over a mouthful of toast. He hadn’t tasted peanut butter in years.

‘You do it yourself?’ He wiped his mouth. ‘Hang-gliding?’

‘Yep.’

‘Here? On the island?’

‘Yep. Last weekend we were down at St Catherine’s.’

‘Good?’

‘Crap. They were giving a steady force four, south-south-west, but the wind was all over the place. Bloody cold, too. We never got off the cliff.’ He hesitated, uncertain about the real strength of Faraday’s interest.

‘I watch birds,’ Faraday said simply. ‘I’ve been at it for years. Fascinates me.’

‘The flying or the birds?’

‘Both.’

Webster hesitated for a moment longer, then plunged into what the last couple of months had yielded for him and his mates. They’d flown most of the cliffs along the south coast of the island, and spent a dodgy weekend trying to stay airborne from a new launch site on Culver Down, the looming chalk shoulder that fell into Sandown Bay. Winter flying wasn’t to everybody’s taste but you could normally rely on a good blow, and if you had the right kit, and the bottle to go with it, the views could be awesome.

‘You’ve got a favourite?’

‘Needles, without a doubt. We kick off from a little bowl above the emplacements. There’s a bay below it, a cove really, and you can’t see it from the landward side which I suppose makes it even more special. The colours can be incredible, especially those times when a front’s on the way and the wind’s spot on the nose and the vis is so good you just know it’s going to piss down before very long.’

Faraday answered Webster’s grin with one of his own. He’d lost count of the days when he’d been up before dawn, tucked into a niche

on a cliff top or a woodland copse with his binoculars and his Thermos and the much-thumbed notebook he carried to record bird sightings, waiting to read the weather from the clues scrolled across the slowly lightening sky. Miles from the nearest road life took on a totally different feel. You'd feel exposed, yes, but infinitely less vulnerable.

'I used to live down in Freshwater,' he murmured. 'Years back.'

'You grew up here?'

'No. Bournemouth. After school I went off to the States for a bit. By the time I came back my folks had moved onto the island. Dad had a health problem, couple of strokes. Mum ran a B. and B. in Freshwater Bay. They had to put up with us for a couple of months before we found a place to rent.'

'Us?'

'Me and my wife.' Faraday looked at him for a moment, surprised by the directness of the question, wondering whether to elaborate, but decided against it. Instead he talked about those first days on the island, the mornings he'd abandon the hunt for a job and simply walk on Tennyson Down, out towards the Needles.

'I'd never been anywhere like it,' he said. 'Not then, not now. God's country.'

'You mean that?'

'Absolutely. And the birds make it better. Ever catch a lark – May, June, way up in the blue – belting its little heart out?'

'Yeah.' Webster was grinning again. 'Yeah . . . and those bloody gulls, giving us grief when we launch. Listen to them and you'd think they owned the bloody cliff.'

'But they do. Nesting time, they've got parental rights. Ever think about that?'

'Never.' Webster pushed his chair back and stretched. 'What's Major Crimes like then? Hectic?'

'Comes and goes. Just now it's quiet . . . which is why I've got time to pop over.' Faraday's fingers strayed to the last corner of toast.

'You've come on a specific job?'

'Yes.'

'One of ours?'

'Yes.'

'Mind if I ask which one?'

'Not at all. Aaron Tolly? Name ring any bells?'

'Of course. The Ryde Skydiver.' He glanced towards Faraday. 'You bring a car over, sir?'

Faraday shook his head. 'Cab from the hovercraft.'

'OK.' Webster checked his watch again. 'I'm off to Freshwater on a load of calls. Should take a couple of hours. I don't know how you're

placed time wise but I could drop you down by the Albion if you fancied it. Pick you up again afterwards.'

Faraday thought about the invitation for a second or two, then glanced towards the window. The rain seemed to have stopped and the first daubs of watery blue were beginning to appear above the rooftops across the car park. At Freshwater Bay a footpath climbed up from the Albion Hotel onto Tennyson Down. It might be a touch muddy, and there'd doubtless be the odd shower, but just now he couldn't think of a better way of preparing himself for the file review.

'Great idea,' he said, getting to his feet.

In the privacy of the unmarked squad Fiesta Webster opened up about Aaron Tolly. The man had been, he said, a pain in the arse. He'd fled to Ryde after a run-in with a Pompey drug dealer. He had no friends, no visible means of support, and a thirst for White Lightning cider that had put him in front of the magistrates on a shoplifting charge within a month. Over the first couple of pints Tolly could string together a sentence or two, even manage the beginnings of a conversation, but after that he talked the purest nonsense. Webster knew women in Ryde for whom twat was too kind a judgement. Tolly, they said, was fit for nothing.

'No one special in his life?'

'You mean ladies?' Webster shot Faraday a look. 'You have to be joking. Bloke was a disgrace. On a windy night you could smell him from the end of the pier.'

Faraday nodded, settling back in the seat as a row of bungalows gave way to bare fields and the distant swell of Brighstone Down. The crime scene photos of Tolly sprawled by the dustbins had lodged deep in his brain. It was an image that seemed to sum up so many of the case histories that passed through Major Crimes. Young men trapped in cul-de-sacs of their own making, lost, adrift, wasted. At length he mentioned the possibility of some kind of contract.

'On Tolly?' Webster laughed. 'Who'd bother?'

'Someone he'd pissed off, obviously.' Faraday was watching the faraway silhouette of a hawk, maybe a falcon, circling high above a copse of trees. 'How about some Scouser banged up in Albany?'

'Who told you that?'

'Doesn't matter.'

'It's bollocks, sir. With respect.'

'How do you know?'

'Because I heard the same whisper. It comes from a local guy in Ryde, fancies himself as a bit of a dealer. He's putting the word around

about some kind of contract to see the opposition off. Didn't want Tolly's death to go to waste.'

'Opposition?'

'Scousers. They're running serious gear in. Mondays usually, off the Fast Cat. Set your clock by it.'

'Does DI Irving know about this?'

'Of course he does. He's as keen on stitching up the Scousers as every one else, our Ryde dealer included. This used to be a nice island once. Can't have scum like that around.'

Faraday grinned, watching the hawk swoop earthwards. Twenty years in the job already told him that Hayder had been right about Tolly but it was still good to have his instincts confirmed. Irving wanted to rev up Major Crimes to take a run or two at the Scousers. That way they might fold their tents and bugger off. Nice try, he thought.

Webster was making good time. In a mile or so they'd be down on the south coast, a couple of minutes drive from Freshwater Bay. The sodden fields beside the road were splashed with sunshine and Faraday could feel the thin warmth on the side of his face. He glanced across at Webster.

'You like CID?'

'Love it. Some days are a pain but there's lots going on if you know where to look. People think this place is toytown – acres of bungalows, old blokes in Morris Minors, nothing happening – but they couldn't be more wrong. Like I've said, we've got a drug problem you wouldn't believe. Bits of Ryde are Smack City, Ventnor too; all these old Victorian spas, overrun with lowlife. You get blokes down from the north, not just Scousers but all sorts, Manchester, Glasgow, you name it. They drift in for the summer, work in the camps, the hotels, pubs, whatever: then come the winter they sign on, draw housing benefit, and end up selling decent amounts of gear. The DI put an operation together recently – *Edith*. Charge list runs to a dozen or so blokes, all of them up for supply. Not bad, eh?'

He shot a sideways look across the car but they were on the coast road by now and Faraday was gazing out at the startling whiteness of the chalk cliffs stretching away towards the Needles. In conditions like these – racing clouds, sudden bursts of sunshine – the view still took his breath away.

'You're happy here?' He finally turned back to Webster.

'Of course. But I can't stay here forever, can I? Not if I want to get anywhere. That's the problem with the island. Shut your eyes, count to ten, and you're suddenly forty years old with a wife and three kids and absolutely no chance of ever doing anything else.'