

PROLOGUE

1988

When they had finished with her they left her face down on the mattress and it was as if she was already dead.

The pack of boys in the basement room, boys with the strength of men and the cruelty of children. They had taken all they wanted, and now it was as if there was nothing left.

Their voices were no longer in her face, leering above her, pressed hard against her ear. Now they were coming from the long dining table where they smoked and laughed and congratulated each other on what they had done.

There was her T-shirt. If she could only get her T-shirt. Somehow she found the strength to reach it, pull it on and roll from the mattress. She was not meant to stay in this room. She began to crawl towards the basement stairs.

THE MURDER BAG

The voices at the table fell silent. The pipe, she thought. The pipe makes them slow and stupid and sleepy. God bless the pipe.

There was blood in her mouth and her face hurt. Everything hurt. The blood was coming from her nose and it caught in her throat and made her choke back the sickness.

She stopped, gagged, then began to move again.

The muscles in her legs were heavy slabs of pain. Nothing worked as it should. Nothing felt like it would ever work again.

Everything was ruined.

She could have wept with frustration. But she bit back the tears and gritted her teeth and kept edging to the door, an inch at a time, no more than that, feeling the torn skin on her elbows and knees as she dragged them across the basement floor, doing it again and again and again.

There was evil in this room.

But she was not meant to die tonight.

She was not meant to die in this room.

At first she thought they hadn't noticed. Because of what the pipe did to them. Because of the way the pipe made them slow and stupid. God bless the pipe. Then she stopped to rest at the foot of the stairs and she heard their laughter.

And when she looked, she saw they were all watching her, and that they had been watching all along.

Some of them gave her a round of mocking applause.

PROLOGUE

Then the one who had been the worst, the fat one who had talked to her all the time, and called her names, and taken pleasure in hearing her cry out, and left his marks on her from tooth and nail – the worst bastard in that bunch of rotten bastards – he yawned widely, revealing a mouth full of expensive orthodontic work, and said, ‘We can’t just let her go, man.’

She took a deep breath and placed the palms of her hands on the bottom step.

There was something wrong with her breathing. Because of her nose.

A single bead of livid red blood fell on to the back of her hand.

She ran her fingers across her top lip and with great effort struggled from her hands and knees on to her feet, leaning against the wall, closing her eyes and longing for sleep.

The pain revived her.

And the fear.

And the presence of the boy.

One of them was standing right next to her, a look of wicked amusement on his face. The one who had spoken to her first, and stopped her with a smile, and pretended to be nice, and brought her to this place.

Now he took a fistful of her hair and pulled her head to one side. Then, tightening his grip as he turned away, he began to drag her from the stairs and back into the room, that underground room where she was not meant to die.

THE MURDER BAG

Without the prompting of conscious thought, her hands flew to his face and she pressed her thumbs into his eye sockets as hard as she could.

Deep and deep and deep.

His turn to feel the pain.

Rotten bastards. Rotten bastards the lot of them.

The two of them stood there, locked together in the intimacy of dance partners, his fist still in her hair while she summoned all her remaining strength to push into the mocking blue eyes, her fingers with their nails cracked and bloody and suddenly stinging as she scrambled for purchase in his thick black hair, gripping his ears, losing the grip, finding it again, pushing the thumbs deeper, then her left hand falling away as he reeled backwards with a rising shriek of agony, lashing out at her, and missing, but her right thumb still there, still pushed into his left eye socket as he tried to shove her away, her thumb pressing against his eyeball for a few more crucial seconds until she suddenly felt it give with a soft wet squelch and sink towards the back of his head.

He screamed.

His scream filled the basement, filled her head, filled the night. They were on their feet at the table but paralysed by the screams of the boy who had just lost an eye.

Then she ran.

How she ran.

Flying up the stairs.

PROLOGUE

The door locked from the inside but with the key mercifully still in the lock – *thank God for the key* – fumbling with it, the cries behind her, and then she was out into the air, stunned to find the night had almost gone.

How long had they kept her there?

In the distance was the road, on the far side of playing fields with a misty shroud hanging over the great white H-shapes of the rugby posts.

She began to run across the playing fields, the fog wet on her face, her bare feet sliding on grass slick with the dawn, and the beautiful buildings of the famous old school rising up black and timeless behind her.

She ran without looking back, expecting to hear their voices at any moment, waiting for the pack to come and run her down and rip her to pieces.

But they did not come.

On the far side of the playing fields there was a tiny stone cottage, as unlikely as a woodman's house in a fairy tale, but its lights were out and she made no attempt to run towards it. Instead she headed for the road. If she could make it to the road then she would not die tonight.

Halfway to the road, she rested against a rugby goalpost and dared to look back. They had not followed her.

A leather strap slapped against her side, and she remembered that at some point they had put a dog

THE MURDER BAG

collar and lead around her neck. She tore them off and threw them aside.

A solitary car had stopped by the road, headlights on, engine running.

Someone had seen her.

She stumbled towards it, waving, calling, crying out for the car to please wait for her, don't-go-don't-go, running alongside a wire mesh fence, looking for a gap, the wet grass of the playing fields no longer under her bare feet, asphalt now, then through a hole in the fence and running on the road's rough tarmac, crying oh please don't go; and then the passenger door opened and the fat one got out, the one who had been the worst, his face not laughing now, but clenched with absolute murderous fury, and for the first time she knew with total certainty that she would die in this place tonight.

More of them were getting out of the car.

The fat one flipped open the boot and the black hole waited for her like an open grave.

Some part of her mind registered that someone was screaming in the back of the car, screaming about his eye.

The one she had hurt. The one she had blinded.

She wished she could have hurt them all. She wished she could have blinded them all. God knows they deserved it.

But it was too late. She was done now. She felt the weakness and exhaustion flood her body, overwhelming her. They had won.

PROLOGUE

Angry hands on her, touching her, squeezing the last juice out of her, and then the hands lifting her off the ground and forcing her into the boot of the car.

The lid slammed down on her and she was lost in darkness as the car drove slowly back to the grand old school where she would die on the mattress in the basement where she was never meant to die.

In her last moments she saw the family who would never see her again, and – beyond them, like a road briefly glimpsed but never taken – she saw quite clearly the husband she would never meet, and the children who would never be born, and the good life full of love that had been taken away.

And as her soul passed over, her last breath was a silent cry of rage and grief for everything they had stolen on the night she died.

OCTOBER

#killallpigs

1

I was waiting for a man who was planning to die.

I had parked the old BMW X5 just up the road from the entrance to the railway station and I drank a triple espresso as I watched the commuters rushing off to work. I drank quickly.

He would be here soon.

I placed three photographs on the dashboard. One of my wife and daughter. The other two of the man who was planning to die. A passport photo from the Home Office and what we called a snatch shot taken from some CCTV footage.

I slipped the photo of my family inside my wallet and put the wallet inside my leather jacket. Then I taped the two photos of the man who was planning to die to the dashboard.

And I watched the street.

I was parked with my back to the station so I could

THE MURDER BAG

face the busy main road. It was washed in thin autumn sunshine that was like a fading memory of summer days. One hundred metres away there was a young woman who was dressed for the gym looking in the window of the newsagent's, a large German Shepherd sitting patiently by her side, its lead loose, its intelligent face carefully watching her, the dog totally at ease among the rush hour crowds.

'Now that's a beautiful dog,' I said.

The woman smiled and scratched the back of the dog's ears in response, and then there was a man's voice in my ear, although he was not addressing me.

'Reception's good for Delta 1.'

Then there were more voices in my ear as they checked transmission for the other radio call signs and all over the surveillance chatter I could hear the studied calm that the police use at moments of extreme tension, like a pilot talking to his passengers when all his engines are on fire. Nothing at all to worry about, folks.

I scanned the street for the spotter vans and unmarked cars and plainclothes officers on foot. But they were good at their job. All I could see was the woman with the beautiful German Shepherd.

'Delta 1?' the surveillance officer said to me. 'We see you and we hear you, Max. You're running point. We're waiting on your positive visual ID when Bravo 1 is in the grab zone. Stay in the car.'

Bravo 1 was the man who was planning to die.

'Copy that,' I said.

OCTOBER: #KILLALLPIGS

And then a voice I knew: 'DC Wolfe, it's the chief super.'

Detective Chief Superintendent Elizabeth Swire. My boss.

'Ma'am,' I said.

'Good luck, Wolfe,' she said. Then there was a little smile in her voice as she played to the gallery: 'And you heard the man. Stay in the car. Let the big boys do the heavy lifting.'

I stared at the street. It would not be long now.

'Ma'am,' I said, as nice and calm as the German Shepherd.

If I tilted my rear-view mirror I could look up at the grand Victorian façade of the station hotel. It was like a castle in a fairy story, the turrets and spires rising up to a blue sky full of billowy white clouds. The kind of place where you blink your eye and a hundred years go by. I could not see any of the big boys. But inside the railway station hotel there were enough of them to start a small war.

Somewhere beyond the net curtains and drapes, SCO19 were waiting, the firearms unit of the Metropolitan Police. Every one of them would be armed with a Heckler & Koch G36 assault rifle and two Glock SLP 9mm pistols. But no matter how hard I stared I still couldn't see them.

There would also be bomb disposal squads seconded from the RAF in there. Negotiators. Chemical and biological warfare specialists. And someone to order

THE MURDER BAG

pizza. We also had maybe twenty people around the station but I could still only see the woman and the dog. The surveillance chatter continued.

'All units report. Echo 1?'

'No sign.'

'Victor 1?'

'Nothing.'

'Tango 1?'

'Contact,' said a woman's voice.

For the first time the piece of plastic stuffed in my ear was totally silent.

'I have visual with Bravo 1,' said the same voice. 'Contact.' And then a terrible pause. 'Possible,' she said. 'Repeat – possible contact.'

'Possible,' the surveillance officer said. 'Checking. Stand by.' His voice was winding tighter now.

And then the woman's voice again, and all the doubt creeping in: 'Possible. Red backpack. Just passing the British Library. Proceeding on foot in an easterly direction towards the station. Approaching the grab zone.'

'Delta 1?'

'Copy that,' I said.

'And I'm off,' Tango 1 said, meaning she had lost visual contact with the target.

I glanced quickly at the two photographs taped to my dashboard. I didn't really need to because I knew exactly what he looked like. But I looked one last time anyway. Then back at the crowds.

'I don't see him,' I said.

OCTOBER: #KILLALLPIGS

Then a more urgent voice in my ear. Another woman. The officer with the dog. It watched her intently as her mouth moved.

'This is Whisky 1, Whisky 1. I have possible visual contact. Bravo 1 coming now. Two hundred metres. Far side of the road. Easterly direction. Red backpack. Possible contact.'

A babble of voices and a sharp call for silence.

'Possible. Checking. Checking. Stand by, all units. Stand by, Delta 1.'

Then there was just the silence, crackling with static. Waiting for me now.

At first I stared straight through him.

Because he was different.

I looked quickly at the two photographs on the dashboard and he was nothing like them. The black hair was light brown. The wispy beard had gone. But it was far more than that. His face had changed. It was filled out, puffed up, almost the face of someone else.

But one thing was the same.

'Delta 1?'

'Contact,' I said.

The red backpack was exactly the same as the one in the CCTV snatch shot on the day he bought hydrogen peroxide in a chemist's wholesale warehouse.

He was wearing that red backpack when he wheeled out the 440 litres of hair bleach to the cash desk. Wearing it when he counted out the £550 in fifty-pound

THE MURDER BAG

notes. Wearing it when he unloaded his van at the lock-up garage where we had put our cameras.

You couldn't miss that red backpack. It looked like the kind of bag you would use to climb Everest. Big and bright – safety red, they called that colour.

But his face was not the same. That threw me. It was meant to. The face had been pumped full of something. He was planning to go to his death with the face of another man.

But I could see it now.

There was no doubt.

'That's him,' I said. 'Contact. He's had something done. I don't know. Some work to his face. But that's him. Contact. Confirming visual identification. Contact.'

'Sniper 1 in range,' said a voice, and across the street I saw the shooters for the first time, three figures moving on the rooftops above a shabby strip of shops and restaurants, their weapons winking in the sunlight. Police marksmen, settling into position.

Our last resort, if it all went wrong. And it was already starting to go wrong.

'Sniper 2 in range. But I don't have a trigger. No clear shot. It's crowded down there.'

The man with the red backpack had paused on the far side of the road, waiting for the lights to change. Traffic thundered by, and in the gaps there were flashes of safety red. I touched my earpiece. Suddenly nobody was talking to me any more.

OCTOBER: #KILLALLPIGS

‘That’s our boy,’ I said. ‘Positive ID. Contact. Contact. Over.’

The lights changed and the traffic reluctantly stopped. The commuters began to shuffle across the road. The man with the red backpack went with them.

I spoke slowly and clearly: ‘This is Delta 1 confirming contact. The target is about to enter the grab zone. Do you copy me? Over.’

And nothing but the white noise in response.

And then: ‘Possible. Checking. Stand by.’

I shook my head and was about to speak again when the calm voice of DCS Swire said, ‘It’s a negative, Wolfe. That’s not him. Negative. Cancel.’

And then the voice of the surveillance officer: ‘Negative. Cancel. Stand down all stations.’

The lights changed again.

The man with the red backpack had crossed the road.

He was heading for the railway station.

‘Do you expect him to wear a burka?’ I said. ‘That’s Bravo 1. That’s the target. That’s our boy. His face—’

‘We do not have visual confirmation,’ the surveillance officer said. ‘We do not have positive ID, Delta 1.’

And then Swire. ‘That’s not him,’ she repeated. ‘Stop talking, Wolfe.’ A note of steel now. ‘You had one task. It is concluded. No further action necessary. We’re standing down all units. Negative. Cancel. Thank you everyone.’

The crowd slowed outside the station as it merged with the flow of commuters coming over from King’s

THE MURDER BAG

Cross. I figured that I had one minute to stop him before he disappeared inside the station. Once on a mainline train or down on the tube or on the concourse of the station itself, the man with the red backpack would simply touch his hands together and the world would blow apart.

The battery he probably already held in one hand would create an electric current connecting it to a simple terminal held in the other. The current would then pass down two wires and into that red backpack – a discreet slit would have been cut in the side – where a modified light bulb would trip a detonator stored inside a small tube. This would trigger the main charge – the hydrogen peroxide I had watched him buy with eleven £50 notes on CCTV.

At the same time he had bought a bulk supply of six-inch steel nails. Sacks of them. They would be taped to the outside of the main charge to inflict enough misery to last for several hundred lifetimes.

If it detonated.

If he was that smart.

If he hadn't messed up the cook.

I choked down a lump of hot bitter nausea as it rose in my throat.

'You're wrong,' I said. 'That's him. Contact.'

I had been inside his lock-up. I had seen the hundreds of empty bottles of hair bleach. I had watched the CCTV footage of the day he bought them until my eyes were burning with the sight of him.

OCTOBER: #KILLALLPIGS

I didn't need the photographs taped to the dash. I knew him. He was in my head.

He could not hide from me.

'Stand down all units,' a self-consciously calm voice was saying. 'Do you copy me, Delta 1?'

'No,' I said. 'You're breaking up.'

Thirty seconds now.

And among all those crowds, and surrounded by all those firearms, I was on my own with the man who was planning to die.

I once attended a lecture at the police academy in Bramshill, Hampshire – the Oxford and Cambridge of police higher education.

An FBI agent had been flown over to help us combat terrorism. I had been impressed by the whiteness of the agent's teeth. They were a fine set of teeth. Very American teeth. But what impressed me more was that the man knew his business.

His teeth shining, he told us that the FBI had identified twenty-five threat areas for terrorist activity. It wasn't quite an A to Z, but it was close – it was an A to T, from airports to tattoo parlours.

Everywhere, basically.

The Fed also suggested what possible terrorists might look like.

Everyone, basically.

The students at Bramshill, the brightest and the best, all these fast-tracked cops, the next generation of CID,

THE MURDER BAG

young and tough and smart, had almost wet themselves with laughter. But unlike the rest of them, I did not find the talk useless. Just the opposite. Because I remembered the FBI man's number one point of potential indicators.

The suspect significantly alters his appearance.

Although my colleagues had smirked and rolled their eyes, I thought that was a point well worth making. Never overlook the obvious. Don't expect him to look like the photographs and the CCTV images. Be ready for him to look like someone else.

And here was another thing the FBI agent could have mentioned. The target who significantly alters his appearance will probably not bother to get a new bag.

'The same backpack,' I said, opening the car door. 'In the CCTV. Red backpack. When he bought the gear. Red backpack. All the way through. That's the red backpack. And that's him.'

'You can't park here, mate,' an Afro-Cockney voice said through my window, and I jumped to hear a voice that did not come from somewhere inside my head.

A traffic warden was writing me a parking ticket. I got out of the car. He was a tall man with West African tribal scars on his cheeks, and he reared back slightly, expecting trouble. I looked past him and could see the man with the red backpack.

The crowds had thinned now.

He was about to enter the station.

OCTOBER: #KILLALLPIGS

Fifteen seconds.

Then a voice inside my head: 'This is DCS Swire. Get back in the bloody car, Wolfe.'

All pretence at calm now gone.

I hesitated for a moment.

Then I got back into the car.

The traffic warden was tucking a ticket under my windscreen wiper. I shook my head and looked in the rear-view mirror. The man with the red backpack was directly behind me now, standing right outside the main entrance to the station. The crowds were melting away. There was nothing stopping him entering. But he had paused directly outside the station.

He was talking to himself.

No.

He was praying.

Ten seconds.

The man with the red backpack moved forward.

Nine seconds.

I stuck the car into reverse.

Eight seconds.

I twisted in my seat and slammed my foot to the ground.

The car shot backwards and I stared at the man with the red backpack as I hurtled towards him. I had one arm braced across the passenger seat for the shock of impact and the hand on the wheel pressed down hard on the horn, keeping it there, scattering the stray commuters.

THE MURDER BAG

He did not move.

But he looked into my eyes as the old X5 shot towards him, his mouth no longer praying.

Five seconds.

The car ploughed into him, striking him just above the kneecaps, shattering the thigh bones of both legs as it whipped his torso forward against the back of the car. His face shattered the rear window and the rear window did the same to his face.

Then the impact threw him backwards into a wall of red Victorian brick where the back of his head erupted like a soft-boiled egg being hit with a sledgehammer.

Three seconds.

I stuck the car in drive and tore back across the forecourt to where the traffic warden was staring at me, motionless, open-mouthed, his ticket machine still in his hand.

I put the car into reverse, ready to go again.

But there was no need to go again.

Zero.

I slowly got out of the car.

People were screaming. Some of them were commuters. Some of them were the voices in my head. A dog, getting closer every second, was barking wildly.

One voice in my ear was shouting about gross misconduct and manslaughter. Another was shouting about murder.

'Wolfe!'

OCTOBER: #KILLALLPIGS

Swire.

I tore out the earpiece and threw it away.

The man with the red backpack was sitting up against the brick wall, staring straight at me with a baffled expression on his ruined face. One hand still twitched with the surprise of sudden death. Both of his hands were empty.

I was not expecting his hands to be empty.

Suddenly there were armed men in balaclavas. Guns were trained on the dead man. Glock SLP 9mm pistols. Heckler & Koch submachine guns. Then I saw that some of them were pointing at me.

'He was the target,' I said.

Armed officers from SCO19 were everywhere. Commuters were running and crawling for cover. A lot of people were screaming and crying because these men with guns did not look remotely like police officers. They wore Kevlar body armour. They had metal carabiners on their shoulders so they could more easily be dragged away if they were down. The black balaclavas they wore had the eyes and mouths cut out. They looked like paramilitary bank robbers.

People thought it was to protect their identity but I knew it was to spread terror.

And it worked.

They were shouting into the radios attached just above their hearts. The masked faces were bawling at me to get down and stay down and lie on my face.

Now. Now. Now. Do it now!

THE MURDER BAG

Slowly I took my warrant card out of my jeans, showed it, and tossed it at them. Then I held up my hands. But I wasn't getting on my knees for them. I wasn't getting down on my face. I kept walking towards the man on the ground.

Because I had to know if I was right.

Last chance! Do it now!

Crouching above the dead man on the ground, I saw that the impact had not cracked the back of his skull. It had removed it.

A huge slick of fresh blood was already spreading across the pavement.

All around there were the screams of terror and fury. The dog was so close now that I could smell it, so close now that I could feel its breath.

I could see the strange flat-nosed Glocks in the corner of my vision, aimed at the dead man on the ground and also at my face. The safety catches were released.

But this was our boy, wasn't it?

I looked at my hands with wonder.

They were covered in the dead man's blood.

But they were not shaking as I tore open the red backpack and looked inside.

2

‘Sorry,’ I said, my body clenched tight inside the suit I had not worn since my wedding day.

The office was crowded with the full cast of a murder investigation. A SOCO was standing directly in front of me, trying to get past, all in white apart from the blue facemask that covered everything but the irritation in her eyes. I was in a big corner room near the top of a shining glass tower, but I flashed briefly on the many school playgrounds of my childhood, and how you can feel both invisible and in the way just because you are new.

And then there was a spark of recognition in the SOCO’s eyes.

‘I know you,’ she said.

‘I’m the new man,’ I said.

‘No,’ she said. ‘You’re the hero. At the railway station. When did you start working Homicide?’

THE MURDER BAG

'Today.'

Now she was smiling behind her blue facemask.

'Cool. What did they call you in court?'

'Officer A.'

'You kill anybody this week, Officer A?'

'Not yet,' I said. 'But it's only Monday morning.'

She laughed and left me standing by the dead man's desk. There wasn't much on it. Just fresh blood and an old photograph.

In the photograph, seven young men in military uniform smiled for the camera as if they were looking at their unbreakable future. Blood had splattered across one corner of the glass. But it did nothing to hide their cocky faces.

It was a strange photograph to have on an office desk. No wife, no kids, no dog. Just seven young soldiers, defaced now with a bright spurt of blood.

Travel blood. Fresh from an artery.

I looked closer and saw the photograph was taken in the eighties, judging by the washed-out colours and the mullet haircuts of the cocky lads. Their hair was from another decade and their uniforms were from another century. They looked like Duran Duran at Waterloo.

And I saw that they were not men. These were boys who would be boys for perhaps one more summer. And despite the military uniforms, they were not real soldiers. Just students dressed as soldiers. Two of them looked like twins. One of them was the dead man on

the far side of the desk. He had grown up to be a banker. He had grown up to be murdered.

I stood aside as a forensic photographer started taking pictures of the desk's bloody mess.

'Who would want to kill a banker?' the photographer said.

It got a laugh. Mostly among the SOCOs, chuckling away behind their facemasks. Spend your life collecting microscopic samples of blood, semen and dirt and you are grateful for any laugh you can get. But the senior detective standing on the far side of the desk did not smile, although I could not tell if he had not heard the remark, or if he was preoccupied with the corpse before him, or if he disapproved of levity in the presence of death.

He was waiting patiently while a small man with a briefcase – the divisional surgeon, here to pronounce death – knelt over the body.

The detective's large head was shaved so clean it shined, and despite his extravagantly broken nose – and it had been broken so often that it looked like a wonky ski run – he had enough vanity to keep his pale goatee beard neatly trimmed.

He turned his piercing blue eyes on me and I thought that he looked like a Viking. I could imagine that pale, fierce face coming up the beach for a spot of pillaging and monk bothering. But Vikings didn't wear glasses and the detective's were round and rimless, John Lennon Imagine specs; they softened his

THE MURDER BAG

ferocious appearance and gave his hard face a kindly, slightly perplexed expression.

My new boss.

'DC Wolfe, sir,' I said.

'Ah, our new man,' he said, the quiet voice precise and clipped with the vowels of the distant north, Aberdeen or beyond, the kind of Highlands accent that sounds as if every word is carved from granite. 'I'm DCI Mallory.'

I already knew his name. I had never met him before but I had heard of him enough. Detective Chief Inspector Victor Mallory was one of the reasons I wanted the transfer to Homicide and Serious Crime Command.

We were both wearing thin blue gloves and made no attempt to reach across the desk and shake hands. But we smiled, and took a second to size each other up.

DCI Mallory looked very fit, not just for a man in his early fifties but for a man of any age, and it looked like the kind of fitness that comes from natural athleticism rather than hours in the gym. He watched me with his blue eyes as the divisional surgeon fussed briskly over the corpse.

'You're just in time,' Mallory said. 'We're about to begin. Welcome to Homicide.'

Friendly, but skipping all small talk.

The divisional surgeon was standing up.

'He's dead all right,' he said, snapping his bag shut.

Mallory thanked him and gave me the nod. I stepped forward. 'Come and have a look at our body,

Wolfe,' he said, 'and tell me if you've ever seen anything like it.'

I joined DCI Mallory on the far side of the desk and we stood above the dead man. At first all I saw was the blood. Lavish arterial sprays with a man in a shirt and tie somewhere beneath it all.

'The deceased is Hugo Buck,' Mallory said. 'Thirty-five years old. Investment banker with ChinaCorps. Body discovered by cleaning staff at six a.m. He gets in early. Works with the Asian markets. While he was having his first coffee, somebody cut his throat.' Mallory looked at me keenly. 'Ever seen one of these?'

I did not know how to respond.

The banker's throat had been more than cut. It had been ripped wide open. The front half of his neck was cleaved away, sliced out with clean precision. He was flat on his back but it felt like only a bit of bony gristle was keeping his head attached to his body. The blood had erupted from his neck in great spurts; his shirt and tie looked like some monstrous red bib. I could smell it now, the copper stink of freshly spilt blood. I shut my mind to it.

Hugo Buck's jacket was still on the back of his chair. Somehow the fountains of blood had not touched it.

I looked quickly at Mallory and then back at the dead man.

'I've seen three cut throats, sir,' I said.

I hesitated and he nodded once, telling me to carry on.

THE MURDER BAG

'First week in uniform, there was a husband who saw a text message on his wife's phone from his best friend and reached for a carving knife. Maybe a year later I attended a robbery in a jewellery shop where a gun failed to discharge and the thief produced an axe and went for the man who pushed the security button. And then there was a wedding reception where the father of the bride objected to the best man's speech and shoved a champagne flute into his neck. Three cut throats.'

'Did any of them look anything like this?'

'No, sir.'

'This is almost a decapitation,' Mallory said.

I looked around.

'Somebody must have heard something,' I said.

'Nobody heard a thing,' Mallory said. 'There are people around in a building like this even at that time of day. But nobody hears a thing when a man almost gets his head chopped off.'

He considered me with his pale blue eyes. But I didn't get it.

'Because the victim's windpipe was cut,' he said. 'The trachea. There was no air. And you need air to scream. Nobody heard anything because there was nothing to hear.'

We contemplated the body in silence while all over the large office the SOCOs moved in slow motion like scientists examining the aftermath of a biological catastrophe. They were identical in their masks and

gloves and white suits, patiently hunting for prints, placing tiny fibres in evidence bags and taking samples of blood from the desk, the carpet and the glass walls. There was a lot of blood to choose from. One SOCO was drawing a sketch. The photographer who had wondered why anyone would want to kill a banker had stopped taking stills and was now filming the room. Small numbered yellow plastic markers were blooming all over the lush carpet as SOCOs harvested footprints for forensics to match against SICAR, the Shoeprint Image Capture and Retrieval database.

Mallory watched them. 'Most professional hits are very amateur, Wolfe. Is that an irony or a paradox? They're carried out by thugs hired in the pub. Morons who will kill anyone for some cash in hand. Most professional hits come with a guarantee – they guarantee to do it badly. But not this one. You see how clean that cut is? Most people, cutting someone's throat, they slash and chop and saw. They make a mess, don't they? You saw that with your three. About as big a mess as an enraged human being can make to flesh and blood with something sharp. But this looks like just one cut. It almost took his head off, but it's just one cut. Now who cuts a throat like that?'

'Someone who knew what they were doing.' I thought about it. 'A butcher. A surgeon. A soldier.'

'You think we've got Rambo running around out there?'

THE MURDER BAG

'I don't know if he's running around, sir. Maybe he's sleeping on the streets.'

Mallory nodded beyond the glass walls to the city thirty floors below, spangled with autumn sunshine around the old grey serpent of a river.

'How many ex-servicemen are sleeping on those streets?' he asked.

'Too many,' I said. I tried to imagine it. 'He comes in here during the night. To find somewhere warm to sleep. To find something worth stealing. Gets disturbed.' I couldn't make it work. 'But he has to get past security.'

'Butcher, surgeon, soldier,' Mallory said. 'Or perhaps it was someone who had no idea what they were doing. One of Mr Buck's fellow bankers. One of the cleaning staff. Perhaps it was just beginner's luck. Or perhaps it was his wife. Apparently she didn't like him much. Officers were called out to a domestic dispute between Mr and Mrs Buck three nights ago. There was some violence. Did you see the marital bed?'

A mattress was leaning against one of the glass walls, a king-sized bed still wrapped in courier's cellophane and bearing the purple and orange FedEx markings.

'That's their bed?' I said. 'His wife sent their bed to his office?'

'Mrs Buck returned home early from a business trip and discovered Mr Buck with the housekeeper.' Mallory frowned with embarrassed disapproval. 'And he wasn't helping her to unload the dishwasher. So Mrs Buck went for Mr Buck with an oyster knife.'

'An oyster knife?'

'Yes, an oyster knife. It has a short, broad blade. These are affluent people. They like oysters. Anyway, she threatened to cut his testicles off and shove them up his back passage. Responding to sounds of a violent struggle, the neighbours call 999. Officers restrain both of them. Mr Buck hasn't slept at home since.'

We looked at the marital bed in its FedEx wrapping.

'You think the wife did this, sir?' I said.

Mallory shrugged. 'Right now she's all we've got. She's on record as making a threat to remove her husband's testicles.' He looked down at the banker's mutilated throat. 'Although nobody's aim is that bad.'

'She may have delegated,' I said. 'She has the money to hire someone good.'

'That was my thought,' Mallory agreed. 'But then there would be glove prints. And we can't find any glove prints. And unless she hired someone who didn't have any idea what they were doing, there should certainly be glove prints in this room. As you know, glove prints can be as distinctive as fingerprints. If the gloves are thin enough, fingerprints can pass through the material. Fingerprints can also be present inside the gloves. Few villains take their gloves home, preferring to ditch them close to the crime scene. So we're looking for a pair of gloves as well as glove prints.'

'And what happens if we can't find glove prints?'

'Then we have to eliminate every print in the room.'

THE MURDER BAG

I looked again at the photograph on the desk. And I could see it now – the boy the man had been. Hugo Buck was standing on the far right of the photograph and one tiny spot from the spray of blood had flecked his image. Twenty years had gone by but the smooth good looks of the future banker were there, buried under a shallow layer of puppy fat. The boys become the men, I thought, and the living become the dead.

‘Did you see his hands?’ Mallory said.

Buck’s hands had fallen by his side but still gripped the vial of pills he had been holding in the last moment of his life. It was another thing I was seeing for the first time.

‘Cadaveric spasm,’ Mallory said. Smiling now, perhaps happy to show me that I hadn’t seen everything yet. That I hadn’t seen anything yet. ‘Instant rigor, caused by shock of sudden death, locking the body in its final second of life. That Pompeii moment. Can you make the pills out?’

I crouched by the corpse and peered at the label, trying to shut out the copper stink of his blood.

‘Zestoretic,’ I read. ‘Take one daily as directed. Prescription only. Made out to Mr Hugo Randolph Buck. Zestoretic?’

‘For hypertension,’ Mallory replied. ‘Blood pressure pills.’

‘He was a bit young to be taking blood pressure pills, wasn’t he?’ I said, standing up. ‘Must be a lot of stress working in banking.’

‘And more stress at home,’ Mallory added.

We stared at the dead man in silence.

‘Why didn’t they just shoot him?’ Mallory asked suddenly.

I looked at him. ‘The banker?’

‘The bomber,’ Mallory said. ‘Your bomber. The chief super panics. The surveillance officer freezes. Nobody’s sure if it’s the man they want. I understand all of that. Nobody wants Jean Charles de Menezes on their CV. Everyone’s jumpy because any fatal shooting has to go before an IPCC inquiry now. You’ve got the Crown Prosecution Service waiting in the wings. The human rights lawyers.’ Mallory smiled shyly, blue eyes twinkling. ‘But you confirmed a positive ID. You overruled the surveillance officer. It was your call. You had seen the man. Watched him. Followed him. Studied him. It was your career on the line. Your liberty. Why didn’t they shoot him?’

‘They can only shoot him in the head, sir,’ I said. ‘New rules of engagement. Everything else is too risky. Can’t shoot him in the torso because he could be wearing a vest. Can’t shoot him in the arms or legs because then he still has a chance to detonate whatever he’s carrying.’ I shrugged. ‘Maybe they didn’t feel confident they could get a clean head shot. Maybe they believed the SO and the chief super and not me. All I can say is, there was a genuine element of doubt. And maybe shooting a man in the head when there was an element of doubt seemed . . . rash.’

THE MURDER BAG

Mallory nodded. 'And maybe we're becoming afraid to do our job. How do you like this for a robbery?'

'This wasn't robbery,' I said. 'The Rolex on Mr Buck's wrist has to be worth fifteen grand.'

'Unless it was a robbery that was disturbed,' Mallory said.

I looked beyond the banker's door to the vast open-plan office.

'This place must take some cleaning,' I said.

'All authorised personnel,' Mallory said. 'You can't take a leak in this building without a laminated card and photo ID. We're waiting for a translator so we can interview the cleaner who found Mr Buck. He's fresh from Vilnius.'

'I thought everyone spoke English now.'

'He can't speak it today. Just Lithuanian. Finding the body shook him up. The rest of the cleaning staff are down in the underground car park. We can't let them go until we've had a word. My two DIs are down there – Detective Inspector Gane and Detective Inspector Whitestone. If you can give them a hand . . .'

'Yes, sir,' I said.

At the door of the banker's office two uniformed officers had established an entry and exit corridor where they logged everyone who came and went from the crime scene. Two PCs, one male and one female, both young, both of them with dark red hair. They could have been brother and sister despite the fact

that the woman was small and whippet-thin, and the man tall and gangly. From the state of them they had to be the officers who had answered the call.

The man – a boy, I thought, although he was in his mid-twenties and only a few years younger than me – looked on the verge of passing out. As I approached he leaned against the wall and choked back the urge to be sick. The woman – and she looked like a girl, despite the Metropolitan Police uniform – placed one small hand on her colleague’s shoulder.

She looked up at me as I signed out of the crime scene.

‘His first body, sir,’ she explained, almost apologetic. She hesitated for a moment. ‘Mine, too.’

She was dealing with it better than the boy. But both of their startled faces were wide open and frozen with shock, like children who had just come downstairs and found their pet dead in its cage, or seen through Santa’s disguise, and got their first real glimpse of this wicked world.

‘Breathe,’ I told him. I inhaled deeply through my nose, released it through my mouth with a controlled sigh. Showing him how to do it.

‘Sir,’ he said.

There were six lifts for the office workers and one, much larger and much dirtier, for the help. I took the stairs, thinking I might find gloves. Thirty flights. By the time I was halfway down I was starting to sweat but my breathing was still even.

THE MURDER BAG

I stopped at a sound in the stairwell, a hundred metres below.

Looking down, I glimpsed a blur of movement. There was the hint of a shadow and then a distant door slammed shut. I called out but there was no response and I took the final flights more slowly, stopping when I saw something written on the wall.

One word in black.

The shade of black that blood dries to.

P I G

Not taking my eyes from the three letters, I took out my phone and photographed the black word on the filthy wall. Then I went down the rest of the stairs, hearing a babble of voices now, rising up from below ground, the sound getting louder every second.

On the basement floor I shoved open the door and looked out at an underground car park that was full of cleaning staff. They had been invisible from the street. Men and women, young and old, talking in twenty different languages, the unseen people who came every day to clean the floors and the windows and the toilets in the shining glass tower.

And I saw that they were beyond number.

The armies of the poor.

3

When I arrived home that night I knew something was wrong even before I got through the front door.

We lived in a big top-floor loft and the stench filled every corner of it. I knew immediately where the stink came from because the clues were everywhere. A single shoe in the hallway, studded with teeth marks. Wooden floorboards that had been scrubbed clean to conceal evidence. A rubbish bin stuffed with stained kitchen roll. And everywhere there was that smell, meaty and musty and peaty. The smell of animal.

The dog had been bad again.

On the far side of the loft an elderly woman with white hair was sitting at one end of a sofa with a little red dog on her lap. At the other end of the sofa was a fresh wet stain that would now be there for ever.

Mrs Murphy was watching TV with the sound

THE MURDER BAG

turned off, which was always her custom when my daughter Scout was sleeping.

Without moving his tennis ball-sized head from his front paws, the red dog – Stan was his name – rolled his huge round eyes up to look at me. You could see the whites of his bulging eyes around the blackness, as though the sockets were too small to contain such a pair of headlamps.

He caught my eye and quickly looked away.

‘Mrs Murphy,’ I said, ‘you’ve had so much work again.’

‘Don’t worry none,’ she said, scratching the dog behind his ears, her soft accent sounding as if she had never left County Cork a lifetime ago. ‘Stan’s still little. And the good news is that Scout ate her dinner. Some of it, anyway. She doesn’t eat much, does she? There’s nothing of her.’

I nodded and went off to look in on my daughter.

Scout was five years old and still slept in the baby fashion with her hands held up in loose fists by the side of her head, like a tiny weightlifter. The light was on in her room, although she must have been sleeping for hours.

She had slept with the light on ever since we lost her mother.

I picked up a school sweater from the floor, folded it and placed it on the back of a chair where Mrs Murphy had tomorrow’s school uniform all neatly folded and waiting. I hesitated, wanting to turn off her

OCTOBER: #KILLALLPIGS

light. She couldn't keep it on for ever. But in the end, I didn't have the nerve.

Mrs Murphy was putting on her coat.

'It will get better,' she told me.

I woke before dawn.

I always woke before dawn.

In the dreaming period of sleep, the lightest phase of sleep, REM sleep, I surfaced, waking on my side of the double bed, the left side, chased from my rest by yesterday's coffee and my dreams of the dead.

I was always right there waiting for the day before the day ever had a chance to begin.

Turning off my alarm before it had the chance to ring, I slipped out of bed without making a sound. I brushed my teeth and went back into the bedroom, got down on my hands and knees and quickly pumped out twenty-five press-ups. Then I sipped the water by my bedside, looking out of the window at the October sky – six in the morning and still black over the nearby dome of St Paul's Cathedral.

I got down and did twenty-five more press-ups, slower and more deliberate this time, thinking about technique. I gave myself a minute's break then did twenty-five more, starting to feel it now, my arms shaking with the build-up of lactic acid in the muscles. I stayed on the ground, found my breath and forced out the final twenty-five – an act of will, not strength.

I padded quietly to the kitchen, anxious not to