

CHAPTER 1

Friday August 29th

I could not have known that this day, of all days, was the one that would change my life so much for the worse.

I was walking down the steps at the side of Southwark Cathedral. I'd left work in time to get to Borough Market while it was still open. Julia was away in Florence working on a project for her conservation studio, absorbed in her work restoring paintings and we hadn't seen each other for over a month.

The old Market had been transformed in recent years with the arrival from all over the world of so many young workers in London. Now almost every taste and every cuisine was catered for at the bustling stalls wedged beneath the Victorian overhead railway, its cast iron supports forming an ornate roof.

It was still a wonder to me how much I loved Julia. And how much she loved me. We were soul mates. It was as simple as that. Nor could I believe how lucky we'd been to buy the apartment overlooking the Thames.

As I left the Market, the view across the river, taking in the Embankment and with St Paul's dominating the opposite skyline, was magnificent. The Thames was always in flow, turbulent and full of interest, a working river with craft of all shapes and sizes.

Turning onto the riverside walk, popular with tourists but still retaining enough of the character that for centuries had made it a mysterious place, I walked on through a low brick walled tunnel where a busker, no doubt a young musician from one of the London orchestras, was playing Brahms. I walked past the terrace restaurant at the base of our apartment building, typed in the security number on the touchpad, pushed open the door and walked up the flight of stairs that led to the apartment.

Something was wrong. The door to the apartment was open; not ajar, but open just four or five inches.

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We never left the door open no matter how good the security system of the apartment building was supposed to be.

I approached the door, trembling. I pushed against it. It would hardly give; there was something behind the door, stopping it from opening. I pushed harder until it gave. I forced my way inside.

It was Julia. She'd collapsed against the inside of the door trying to escape the apartment. There was blood everywhere.

I felt for a pulse - at her wrist, at her neck- but there was none.

I felt the deepest sadness welling from the base of my soul. It began with a scream that progressed to a howl of bitter regret followed by tears that shook my whole body.

Someone had killed her. Her body was still warm. It must have happened not many minutes before.

CHAPTER 2

The police arrived quickly after my call.

I hadn't been allowed to remain in the apartment for long. While a forensic team set to work analyzing the scene, it was politely suggested it would be better if I gave as much information as possible at the Station to allow them to track the killer.

The Inspector - his name was Hendricks - had been very persuasive.

I'd been with a female police officer in a small room in Euston police station for over an hour, nominally receiving grief counseling. But there was something false about her manner, as if she was stalling while elsewhere in the building enquiries were being made - about what I did not know.

And now I was sitting on an uncomfortable chair in an adjacent interview room that smelt of sweat and corruption, answering questions. I'd been through the immediate events: Name - James Blake. Age - thirty-one. Occupation - radio producer. Height - 6' 1". Eyes - hazel green.

Where had I been that day? Why had I returned to the apartment? How I had found Julia? Why I had not expected her return?

Nothing I said was flagged up as out of place.

"Mr. Blake, can you think of any reason why your wife should be killed?"

Hendricks, who shaved his head on the assumption that no one would then notice his pattern baldness, had eyes that were slightly too far apart. There was a look in those eyes that told me if we were the last two alive I would not have wanted to trust him.

My mind was not functioning. The shock had been too great.

Why would anyone want to kill her? It made no sense.

"Can you think of any threats made to her? Any enemies?" Hendricks continued.

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“No, nothing, I mean... no one.” It was all I could bring myself to say.

What is the point? She was gone. That was the inescapable, saddest fact.

“Your wife; it’s almost certain she knew her attacker,” Hendricks said. “There was no forced entry, either at the main entrance to the apartments or at your door.”

Eighty per cent of murders are carried out by persons known to the victim. So, was it any surprise the police often looked as close to home as possible?

“I just can’t imagine anyone who would want to do harm to Julia.”

“We’ll just have to follow up on all her contacts,” Hendricks said with an underlying note of resignation. “If you can’t help, that is.”

Why did it feel they were already thinking of fitting me up? Whatever happened to the grief counseling?

What did they know that they were not telling me? How did they think I would be able to help them when I was so distressed?

“She kept an address book in her bedside drawer.”

“We have it.” Hendricks looked disappointed. “It will take quite some time to work our way through that list. And we have the computer from the apartment. We’ve taken it away for examination. Your computer?”

“Yes, that’s mine. Julia uses a laptop”

“Which is where?”

“At her work. At the conservation studio.”

“So there’s nothing unusual you know of about your wife’s recent contacts?”

“I don’t know what you expect me to tell you.”

“You could begin by telling me about your wife’s affair.”

There was no compassion in Hendricks’ voice.

CHAPTER 3

I didn't want to think about it.

Someone had told me, I couldn't quite remember who it was. It could have been my brother Miles who had been working as a journalist for over ten years now. The police know how to lie to get a result.

Why else would Hendricks be saying Julia had been unfaithful? Was it no more than a trick to help them to pin Julia's murder on me?

Or had they found something in Julia's possessions in the hour they'd kept me waiting?

"I have no idea what you mean," I said. My thoughts were beginning to clear enough for me to face up to what the Inspector had told me.

"Your wife, Mr. Blake, she was an attractive woman." Hendricks was warming to the task. "She spent time away in her work; she must have been hit on by any number of men trying their luck. You don't think she would not have finally given in to the charms of one of the Italian gigolos she was bound to have met on her art conservation travels?" He almost made *art conservation* sound like a perversion. "Florence, wasn't it?"

I could feel my anger rising. It was emerging despite the weight of the grief I felt. Hendricks was deliberately playing with my fears. Hoping to get lucky, hoping I would break down and, if there had been an affair, he could develop this as a motive.

"Look, my wife has been killed, I'm in a state of shock, and you're making insinuations she is being unfaithful. Tell me what you know. Or leave me alone."

"I know what you must be feeling." There was a note of compassion in the Inspector's voice that I didn't buy. "But you know we have to get at the facts as quickly as possible. We found this."

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Hendricks passed across the table a postcard sealed in a transparent evidence bag. It was a typical tourist scene, showing the Ponte Vecchio in Florence resplendent at night, straddling the Arno.

“Turn it over.”

I read the words in the message with growing fear and anguish. The message said:

As ever, my perfect love.

Remember Michelangelo's slaves.

I can't wait to see you again.

Giancarlo

“We found it near her bedside table, between the pages in the book she'd been reading. Do you know this Giancarlo?” Hendricks asked. “Go on, tell me. He's been poking her all the time she was out in Florence and you got to know all about it and you came up with the idea of having her killed and walking away with the deeds to that nice flat overlooking the Thames, didn't you?”

“You must be crazy.”

“We checked. The insurance on the apartment was increased only six weeks ago. If either of you died, the other would pick up enough to pay off the mortgage. A cool half million.”

“Our solicitor told us to do it. The value of the apartment has almost doubled since we bought it. You know what London property prices are like. There is nothing sinister in that and I don't know who the hell Giancarlo is or why he would be writing to my wife like that. And I didn't kill her. “

“She's back in London and she doesn't phone you or text you?”

“I haven't heard from her.”

“It's funny,” Hendricks said, “we haven't been able to find her phone. How many women get separated from their phones? On your own account, she's made a sudden change of plan and yet doesn't try to contact you. Why would she do that?”

“I don't know why... I'm struggling to understand any of this.”

“Her lover. Giancarlo. It's not that deep is it?” Hendricks paused. “It's the sort of thing that could lead to subterfuge and, if you knew about it, the sort of thing that could arouse a certain jealousy of mind. Enough to have your wife killed.”

“What makes you think it was someone who had planned to have her killed? It could have been a failed burglary, some demented crack-head trying to steal enough for the next fix.”

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“I don’t think so,” Hendricks said. “We haven’t had the full autopsy report back yet but the pathologist has seen cases like this before. He phoned straight away as soon as he saw the pattern of the damage to your wife’s head.”

There was worse to come. Hendricks was playing with me.

“The bullet had been expertly tampered with. The killer used a dum-dum to make sure the slug didn’t pass through your wife’s head but expanded at the base of her brain when she was shot in the back of the head.”

Hendricks paused.

“Mr. Blake, whoever did this intended to kill.”

“So you think I hired someone to kill my own wife and then went to the apartment to find her dying in my arms?”

“You tell me, Mr. Blake. The one thing you learn in this line of work is there is no end to the devious intentions of our fellow man. People think it throws people like me off the scent. They couldn’t be more wrong.”

CHAPTER 4

I was allowed one call. My brother, Miles, was in London, staying at the Bridge Hotel close to London Bridge Station. We'd met for lunch the day before. I placed the call.

Within an hour I was out. The solicitor Miles had brought with him must have known his craft well. Hendricks was left with no reason to hold me, though he made it clear he did not approve of the release.

Even so, I had my fingerprints taken and I had to give a nasal swab so my DNA could be analyzed and logged. The result would remain on the police database no matter what the outcome of their investigation. It was not enough that I'd been brought to the Station and questioned. No doubt they would be trying all they could to match my DNA to what they'd found at the crime scene.

"I want you to report here every day," Hendricks had said.

"Does that mean I'm a suspect?"

"Let's just say we will need to talk to you again at short notice and you should not stray too far. Make sure you give us the address where you're staying before you leave."

I couldn't go back to the apartment; even if I could have faced that, it would be off-limits for some days while the police continued their investigation. Miles suggested I should stay at his hotel and within half an hour of being released we were sitting in Miles' room. It was more of a suite with a large seating area and more than a hint of comfort about it.

Miles had noted my expression. "It's on expenses. The newspaper picks up the tab when I have to work in London. It's a major investigation that should lead to a story with world wide importance." But then, remembering the gravity of the situation, his voice lowered. "I can't tell you how sorry I am."

"They've killed her." I said. "I don't know how I'm going to come to terms with that. But I'll tell you something, whoever they are,

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whoever did this thing, I'm going to find them and I'm going to make sure they get the justice they deserve."

"Jim, you don't know who they are, where they came from, why they killed her, what kind of people you might be dealing with."

"So, help me, Miles."

This was just the opposite of how it was when we were kids, growing up in Birmingham. I was the elder brother, Miles the youngster, looking up to his big brother, James, who just by virtue of being three years older had been made to be the responsible one. Only now it was big brother saying never mind about caution, fight back whatever the risk.

"Of course, I'll do everything I can to help you, Jim."

"I've got to do this for Julia." I could barely hold back the tears. "It's the only thing that makes sense."

I didn't doubt my brother knew I was serious. We had shared a difficult and precarious childhood. The family had been poor even by the lowered standards of the Birmingham families around us. Our father, Danny, was some kind of war hero. He'd fought in the Falklands war back in 1982, yomping into Port Stanley, striking the fear of God into those ill-prepared conscripts in the Argentinian army. No doubt, he'd killed. But like all those who killed in war he'd chosen not to talk about it.

Our mother, June, had tried her best to present us as a normal family but the marriage never recovered when Danny came home from the war. There were fights, endless arguments, and the children, James and Miles, would frequently get drawn in. There was invariably some petty pretext, some minor crime of which me or Miles were supposedly guilty. The more our mother sought to defend us, the more Danny took this as a sign that his wife was turning his children against him. It became one of those vicious spirals where the next inevitable incident fed off the embers of the last.

And violence, real violence, broke out when things got really twisted and began running out of control.

As the elder child, I always chose to put myself in the firing line, protecting my mother, protecting my younger brother. It had hardened me. Facing down limitless rage, not knowing when the threat of violence might break in again, had made me ever on my guard, ever careful to try to head off the next incident.

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And being the eldest, I'd become a confidante to my mother. When my father was at work, she would offload her troubles, seek my advice, tell me about their failed sex life, tell me how difficult it was to keep the family together. So by the age of twelve, I'd become wise, too wise, in the ways of the world.

Danny was not a bad man. He was the victim of circumstance. I came to realize that as I grew older. But it hadn't made my childhood an easy one.

The escape had been through education. By burying myself in schoolwork I could block out the seemingly endless problems that surrounded me. I had a flair for mathematics that developed into an interest in science. I passed the exams. I wanted to succeed.

But I learned early on that aggression would get me nowhere. I'd been provoked by a kid in school who deserved to be taken down a peg. And, hardened as I was, when it had come down to it, I found it easy to overcome him and hurt him. Somehow I'd broken a golden rule. The schoolyard violence was meant to be symbolic, with no one really getting hurt. And I'd hurt that kid for real and it had shocked everyone. I'd been in big trouble and was almost expelled. But in the end I escaped with the sternest warning, and I'd learned that if I wanted to succeed I would have to believe violence got you nowhere and reason and tolerance and understanding the other's point of view was what mattered.

And I'd lived that way for the past twenty of my thirty-one years. It had been a success, I'd gone to university, I'd won a good Physics degree. I'd become a successful radio producer and had joined the ranks of the good and would-be great.

And now those bastards had killed Julia, without a second thought. That had thrown everything into doubt.

"Try to concentrate on the facts," Miles said. "Have you checked your messages? Perhaps Julia tried to contact you?"

I took out my phone, slipped it out of its case and pressed the scroll wheel. There were about twenty email messages waiting. The usual rubbish about changing the security code at banks I'd never banked with, offers from Nigerian inheritors of oil fortunes who needed just a small investment to free up ten million dollars and all those messages from all those companies I'd made one time contact with who now had me on their list.

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And right in the middle of all the dross was a message posted earlier that day from Julia. I hadn't seen it until now.

I clicked to open the message.

Her last message: *help me*

There was an attachment. I clicked on its icon and the data began to download from the server.

As I waited I felt that at least this link remained with Julia, however slight, however tenuous.

The screen filled up as the download was completed. It was just a single picture.

I gave it to Miles who frowned as he looked at it.

It showed a naked woman cradling between her legs the head of a large swan. The woman was corpulent, as beautiful women were supposed to be in classical times. The swan's long neck was supremely phallic. It was very sensual, very erotic.

"What on earth is that?"

Miles allowed himself a smile. "It's *Leda and the Swan*, he said in a knowing tone. "The guy I palled up with at university, Charles Dowd, he was a big Bjork fan. Had posters of all her album covers on the walls of his room. You had to notice the one where the photo of Bjork is overlaid with a traced out outline of a swan. He was into all sorts of stuff about his favorite singer. Told me it was a reference to the painting *Leda and the Swan*. Told me it was in the National Gallery right here in London." He paused with resumed seriousness. "So why send you an almost blank message and just that picture?"

"It's from her email address, the Hotmail one she uses from her phone and from her laptop," I said. "So it's from her. She wasn't in the habit of sending me pictures of the paintings she was working on and I don't have any idea why she would send just the picture and that message. Except she was in trouble and maybe it was the only thing she could send. I just don't know. But it's a point of connection, something about her I can still hold on to."

Miles' expression told me how sad he felt it had come to this. "I've booked you a room just down the corridor. Get some sleep; you must be exhausted."

I spent the night without sleep, as if in a trance, seeing over and over Julia dying in my arms, then seeing the burnt-in image of the swan towering over the reclining woman. I wished it was a dream,

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but the truth was this was a movie loop of what I'd actually seen that would not go away.

CHAPTER 5

Saturday, August 30th

I was not aware I was being followed until it was almost too late.

I'd set out for the National Gallery early next morning. It had been only a short walk to London Bridge station and soon I was on the descent to the underground, down the old brown walled tunnels under the oldest railway station in the city.

The weight of numbers rushing up and down the long escalators was a shock to those who were not used to such levels of crowding. To the newcomer, the senses could be easily overwhelmed, the mind led to shut down to a minimum where all but the most essential signals were ignored. But, although the passage of people around me and the distraction of the animated advertising panels was all around, I still noticed something disturbing.

The fat man in the black shirt and trousers had been behind me almost since I'd left the hotel. He was trying to look anonymous but was not succeeding. Maybe it was something about his weight and the cut of his hair. He was trying to appear natural, just another of the travelers going about their business, but there was something about his bulk that made me think he earned his living doing something altogether more physical and worrying than the average commuter.

Paranoia. Grief and pressure. Lack of sleep.

Don't be foolish.

I carried on. The fat man would soon set off on his own route. I headed down to the Jubilee Line and sought out the platform that would take me to Trafalgar Square. The man was still there. I boarded the train and managed to find a seat as it set off down the next tunnel. He was still there. He'd taken to standing near the exit door and was reading the free newspaper.

It couldn't be Hendricks. The police just didn't have the manpower. But if not Hendricks, then who?

I thought about challenging the man; just going up to him and taking him on right there and then. But something told me to hold back. He would just deny it and make me look like a fool.

I had to change at Bank. As I left the train, the man also got off and was walking along behind me, getting ever closer as we moved along the connecting passageway to the next platform.

As I rounded the end of the passageway to the new platform, I was surprised to see how empty it was. After all that crowding at London Bridge, it was difficult to understand why there were so few people here. It was part of the ebb and flow, one of the troughs in the peaks and troughs that marked the chaotic flow of humanity in one of the most crowded cities in the world.

The man was behind me, getting closer all the time. The train was about to rattle into the station. I felt there was nowhere to go. The man behind me was approaching now more rapidly; the train was just yards from the platform. It would take nothing for a man of his size to push me under the train. I had to act quickly. I stopped and turned, rushing headfirst at the bulk of the still approaching man. The collision was painful. I felt a searing pain in my head as I made contact with his chest, but I had done enough. In the

delay, the train had arrived and the doors had opened. Turning, I ran for the train, getting on well before the doors closed.

My attacker could have made it to the train but he did not try. His cover was blown. With a wry smile he pointedly dusted down his clothes, calmly walking away back down the connecting passageway.

That had not been paranoia. That had been an attempt to kill me.

I tried to control my heart rate but the adrenalin had kicked in too surely. I took deep breaths. I tried to concentrate on sharing the composure of my new fellow passengers. No one had seen a thing. I could have been pushed under this train and no one would have been any the wiser about who had done it. That was the frightening fact of the matter.

I hadn't recovered much by the time I arrived at Trafalgar Square. The paranoia was real. I kept looking behind me to see if the man in black was still there, or if he'd been replaced by another stalker. No one could be seen but that didn't make me feel any more secure.

Tell Hendricks?

What was the point. He was not going to believe me.

As I came out of the station the familiar throng of tourists that met me eased some of my fears.

Numerous children, as tradition now dictates, were clambering on the lions at the base of Nelson's column. The pigeons, culled from their heyday, were nonetheless abundant, pecking at the corners of sandwiches tossed for them by the crowd. To my right, the reassuring sight of St Martins in the Fields peeked out from the hoardings that encased most of it in what was becoming one of the longest and most expensive of makeovers. And ahead of me, in all its kitsch classical elegance, was the National Gallery.

I walked up the right-hand side stone steps leading to the elevated entrance hall. Entrance was free but in the event of queries by the public there was a bank of information desks to the right peopled by half a dozen receptionists. It was one of the delights of London that you could view all the art you wished for free. It was a constant dismay that ninety per cent of the visitors to the National Gallery, the Tate or Tate Modern were overseas tourists.

I didn't have long to wait. An attractive young girl with the expected East European accent asked me what I wanted.

"I'd like to see *Leda and the Swan*."

Despite my intentions, I must have sounded desperate. The girl became defensive immediately.

"Yes?"

"It's a painting. You have it here."

"Yes, it is in Room A." She was looking at me as though I was a problem.

"Can I see it?" I didn't know why but I was sure she was about to disappoint me.

"Only on Wednesdays," she said.

"What do you mean?" My anger was rising. "The gallery is open six days a week."

"It's a special room. The reserve collection; we only open that room one day per week - on Wednesday afternoons."

I was not going to be able to see the picture. Wednesday was four days away. I almost lost my temper. But why take it out on this girl; she was clearly only doing her job and she must get more than her fair share of the deranged and the demented.

"Is there any way I can look at the picture?"

"You could try our intranet." Her tone was making it clear the enquiry was coming to an end. "There is a study room on the third floor. You can access the intranet there."

This was as much as I was going to get. I said thanks and headed for the study room.

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I found a seat with a modern flat screen monitor and pretended to be accessing the information. But it was a long time before I began to recover even a semblance of composure.