

SUMMER
OF GHOSTS

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P.D. VINER



EBURY
PRESS

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Published in 2014 by Ebury Press, an imprint of Ebury Publishing
A Random House Group Company

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Designed and set by seagulls.net

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives PLC

Hardback ISBN: 9780091953317
Trade Paperback ISBN: 9780091953324

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*To my parents.
It's all your fault.
Thank you.*

ZERO

‘Guv! The body is through here,’ Detective Inspector Jane Thorsen calls before she turns away and is swept up in the maelstrom of white-clad figures who busily sweep the room for every last trace of the life that has been extinguished there.

Detective Superintendent Tom Bevans remains on the threshold, but he doesn’t, or can’t, move to join her. He watches as the rest of the SOCO team pass him to enter the building. They carry test kits, evidence markers, cameras, tapes, tarpaulins and a body bag. The double doors are held open by two large fire extinguishers wedged against them, so the cold of the night can seep into the building like a virus to the lungs. Tom hugs his arms around his chest and, suspended in the wool of his coat, there is the tang of smoke. He loves Bonfire Night; the 5th of November – fireworks, greasy burgers and a burning man. He’s had such a great evening. He recalls how close he stood to the giant bonfire as it was lit. The wood caught with an earthy sweetness and within seconds flames darted high, crawling up to kiss the body at the summit.

Remember, remember. Fireworks exploded high in the sky above him and orange flames danced in his eyes as—

‘Guv,’ DI Thorsen calls from the doors, breaking the spell. ‘SOCO have taken samples and photographs; the area’s secured, we can examine the victim.’

‘Okay,’ he calls to her. She nods and turns back. For a moment, involuntary sadness jags across his face and then is gone. *No more hiding in the past*, he tells himself. Slowly he walks into the school, to see a dead girl. As he passes under the oak-lined entranceway, above his head the school motto is carved into marble. *Rather death than false of faith*. Really?

The SOCO team have created a pathway that spirals to the body, avoiding the direct route and any contamination of evidence; zig-zagging around the blood spatter, but there is so much blood to avoid. Jackson Pollock turned killer. Thorsen reaches the body in moments and then turns to watch Tom as he signs the logbook and checks the date and time. It is 2.35 a.m. 6th November 2006. With his arrival, he is the senior investigating officer on site. She feels her hackles rise a little at the slowness of his approach. Most SIOs are pretty confident, arrogant even. She expects the officer-in-charge to storm in, barking orders and demanding an update; then to rush to the body. But Bevans enters the crime scene like a reluctant guest at a wedding, unsure if he is on the bride or groom’s side, moving slowly, as if he does not want to disturb the air as he passes through it. He takes a few steps and pauses; she can see him soaking in the atmosphere, reading the room. It makes her feel a little self-conscious as she had just barged in and made a bee-line for the body. DI Thorsen needs instant gratification.

Tom scans the room as he traverses it, very impressive for a city centre school – even an independent one. The main hall is about half the size of a football pitch, with dark wood-panelled walls that hold large crests of the four houses that make up the school. The floor is an intricate herringbone of interlocking wood, with about ten per cent of the whole room being taken up

by a raised stage. On it sits a piano, covered with a green cloth. To the right are stacks of plastic chairs, maybe four hundred in all. It's been a while since he was in a school hall. When he first joined the police one of his jobs was to visit classrooms and talk about being aware and safe on the streets. The kids called him *Officer Tom* and he had a badger glove puppet that knew all about road safety. Later, when he was a family liaison officer, the badger knew all about bullying and peer pressure, self-harming, anorexia and incest. The glove puppet committed suicide eventually. Very sad.

Tom reaches the middle of the room and stops. He can see Thorsen standing by the body; she looks impatient. He'll get there. He looks up, and through a large skylight, can see the moon hanging in the sky and, to the side of it, the wishing star. He closes his eyes for a second and wishes he were a real boy. He looks over at the long fluorescent strip lights that hang from the ceiling and illuminate the room with a dodgy puke-yellow hue. They buzz like a swarm of bees. 'Were the overhead lights on when the body was found?' he calls out to the assorted officers scattered around the room.

'Don't think so, guv,' Fat Eddie calls back louder than anyone else. Jane Thorsen confirms it with a shake of the head. Tom files it away for later and speeds up his movement to the body; as the SOCO floodlights finally burst into life – banishing all shadows from the room. Tom joins the spiral pathway that leads to her.

'Oh.' The breath is pushed from his lungs as he reaches the dead girl. She is naked, more than naked if that is possible. She has blonde hair, though it is mostly red with blood now. Her arms are stretched out from her body and the legs are splayed. He

wants to close them, to cover her with a thick blanket and warm her up. This death is so undignified; there is so little respect.

Poor little dead girl. He catches himself creating stories for her, imagining a life full of ... Stop it Tom, that's how you make yourself crazy. He will do better by her if he forgets she is someone's daughter/sister/friend and regards her merely as an intellectual challenge, a series of problems to solve; *not as the poor little dead girl.* He cannot consider the family and their tears, the corrosion of loss and—

Concentrate on what you see, he tells himself. *Focus.* He can see that loops of plastic have been used around the wrists and ankles. *Good, what else?* There are no signs of a struggle, her wrists are not bruised or cut, he would guess that she was tied while unconscious – drugged, and never regained consciousness. That, at least, is something. Later, when he talks to the parents, he will be able to tell them that she did not suffer, and he will probably be telling the truth. That will help. It will help both them and him to get through this.

You and your bleeding heart. A memory cuts him for a moment; it had been an accusation Dani had made, such a long, long time ago. *Concentrate.* He drags his attention back to the body: her pale skin is scratched in places and there appear to be bite marks around her breasts. Love bites? The phrase makes him want to laugh. There is not one drop of love here. He cranes forward and looks at her head, above her right eye, where the claw hammer entered. He can see its trajectory, swung with real force sweeping up into her skull, dragging bone and blood and brain-matter out and up, making a spire, a crenelated tower of red and pink, like a Disney Princess castle. A part of him wants to lie down next to her and hold her. But it is too late. There was

no one to hold her hand or sing a lullaby to her while she died. She was alone, except for the monster who did this. He hopes she wasn't scared.

In his peripheral vision he sees DI Thorsen has just finished talking with the SOCO team commander; she shakes his hand and then walks up alongside Tom. Together they stand sentinel over the fallen girl.

'What do we know about her?' Tom finally asks his DI.

'No name yet. We found some clothes,' Thorsen takes a deep breath, 'School uniform.' Tom flinches. 'We think they're hers. There's a prefect's badge, so if they are, then she's in the sixth form. The headmistress is on her way and I've got Jenkins looking through the school office for photos. Either way we should have a name soon.'

He nods. 'When she gets here hold her at the gate. Once the body is ready to move, the headmistress can view the body away from the crime scene, if she is up to it, but I don't want her to see the wounds – just the face.' *Just the sweet face.*

'Guv.' Jane nods. Then the two of them stand silently over the body, each wrapped in their own thoughts. For Tom, he feels the buzz of anger in his chest. *She was a schoolgirl.* It makes his heart burn. Such a waste of life, such a vile, vicious act. Jane Thorsen can only stand there for another minute. She is armoured against the grief but needs to be moving, doing something. It isn't good to wallow – it isn't healthy to get attached to the dead. She wishes Tom Bevans knew that. She watches how he reaches out to them and makes it personal. He makes them promises and sometimes ... Oh what does she know; his success rate is phenomenal isn't it. He turns rocks over and finds them, the men who harm, scuttling in the shadows like beasts. Tom

Bevans has saved countless young women. He is an inspiration to all these young officers. So why does she want to put her arms around him, and tell him it will be all right? With a heavy sigh she goes to look at more blood spatter.

Tom stands still, the anger washing through him like fire in his veins. He stares into her dead face for five minutes. From the outside he must look like he is studying everything about the victim, but in reality he is just trying not to cry. If he lets one tear break through the levee they will not stop. So often he feels like this, in the presence of the dead. He sees them all stretched out before him. Dozens of them, all the way back to the first dead girl. To Dani, who he loved. Who, pathetically, he still loves. *Pull yourself together*, he hisses to himself, just as another officer walks over to him and hovers by his side.

‘DI Jenkins.’ Tom greets him without a smile.

‘I don’t know if you’ve been apprised of the course of events this evening?’ Jenkins asks with a nasally twang.

‘I think I have the gist; the victim’s details were entered into the HOLMES computer and a flag was triggered. The locals called us in.’

‘Pretty much. A local response team found the body at just after 11 p.m. They called an ambulance, even though they were pretty sure the girl was dead.’

Tom can’t help but sweep his eyes across the floor – blood and brain-matter everywhere. Of course she was bloody dead.

‘Then they called in the local CID and suggested a SOCO unit was dispatched straight away. The area gold commander okayed the request about ten minutes later. After that they secured the building and searched the ground floor.’

‘When did the local CID arrive?’

‘They didn’t. Before they got here the case details were inputted and the case was kicked over to us. The local CID team stood down. They never even entered the building.’

Tom sighs wearily. He should be pleased that the protocol worked so well; the fact that no other team has been in to mess with the crime scene is excellent. However, it means that there is another killer out there targeting young women. It means there are at least two dead women. ‘What was the trigger?’ he asks Jenkins, even though he is afraid of the answer.

‘One previous victim: Spall, Heather Spall. Sixteen years old.’

‘When?’

‘Five weeks ago, in Leeds.’

He nods, it could have been worse – could have been years. ‘What are the similarities?’

‘We’ve only got the bullet points so far – but the positioning of the body—’

‘Including the use of the plastic ties to splay the legs and arms?’

Jenkins consults his notes. ‘Yes, the initial reports seem to tally.’

‘What else?’ Tom asks, feeling his chest flutter a little.

‘The murder weapon in the Leeds case was also a claw hammer. Cause of death: blow to the back of the head, hammer exit above the right eye.’ He pauses. ‘The Leeds case also states bites to the breasts.’

‘Sounds pretty strong.’ Tom starts to move away from his DI, thoughts already racing, then he swings back to ask: ‘Do we have an ID on the victim yet?’

‘DS Matthews thinks he has a match from the school office files. But—’

Tom nods. Sometimes it is just impossible to match a dead face to a photograph. So much of who we are is our vitality, the

twinkle in the eye and the smile on the lips. Drain the life away and she could be any one of a hundred blonde teenagers.

‘Okay. Do we have any arrival time on the headmistress?’

‘A local squad car is bringing her in; she couldn’t drive herself. Shock.’

‘Let me know when she arrives.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Jenkins turns to leave, but Tom stops him for a second.

‘Is Dr Keyson here yet?’ Tom asks, hoping his chief pathologist might get to see the body in situ, not just in the sterile environment of the morgue.

‘No, but he’s been called.’

‘Okay, well don’t wait for him to get the body removed if SOCO are ready. But I do want him to get up to Leeds and examine the body there as quickly as possible.’

‘Assuming there is one, guv.’

‘Yes, well if there isn’t a body, then he can get all photos, police reports, pathologist and coroner’s reports. Then he can start comparing our girl with the Spall girl. I want to know for certain that these cases are linked.’

‘Okay.’ Tom turns to walk away but – *what is nagging at him?* ‘Wait!’ He calls out, Jenkins stops. *Something isn’t right.* Slowly the cogs turn in Tom’s head. ‘You said a response team found her?’

‘There was a 999 call.’

‘Who called it in?’

‘We believe it was the victim. When the response team got here the place was dark. They had to force entry, they almost left without finding—’, he tilts his head towards the dead young woman.

‘What exactly did the caller say?’

Jenkins opens his notepad and flicks back through it. ‘Here’s the transcript: The call operator picked up at 10.54 p.m. and before they could ask what service was required there was a girl who, according to the operator, was hysterical. She said: “Help, we are at St. Mary Magdalene School. Help. He’s coming.” Then the phone was dropped but not turned off.’

Tom is quiet for a second. ‘Has the phone been found?’

‘No, guv.’

‘Has the building been combed?’

‘Every room. It is a big building though, there are lots of hi—’

‘She said “we are”.’

Jenkins suddenly realises what he’s getting at. ‘There’s another victim?’

‘Or a witness.’ Tom feels cold creep into his chest. ‘Christ.’ In a whirl, Tom jumps up onto the stage and claps loudly. ‘Listen up. Everyone quiet. QUIET!’ The noise in the room drops. ‘There may be a second victim somewhere in the building, hurt or in hiding. They could be in a cupboard, under tables, unconscious or—’ He suddenly has flashes of a film he saw about Columbine, how the students and teachers hid in any rabbit hole they could find, any place they could crawl into. ‘I want every inch of this building searched – look for overturned desks, any kind of barrier that could have been built to keep someone safe and look for blood, on the floor, on door handles – anywhere and everywhere. Make noise, friendly noise. Call out your names, first names, tell the world and their wives that you’re police and that the area is safe – there is no need to hide. Anyone wearing protective suits take them off so you don’t scare any potential witness. Forget evidence gathering, this is the highest priority. GO.’

Tom catches DI Thorsen's eye across the room; she flashes a quick smile to him and runs off to round up the rest of the core Operation Ares team. Tom jumps down from the stage and for a second he halts by the unknown girl. 'Who is out there,' he asks the lifeless girl, 'a friend? Will there be another body tonight?' The thought makes him sick. He turns slowly and walks to the double doors at the other end of the hall, pushes through and into a dark corridor. He slips a torch from out of his pocket and heads up the stairs.

'There's no need to hide. The police are here. My name is Tom.' *They call me the Sad Man, because later tonight I might have to tell your parents you are dead.* He tries not to think such ugly thoughts but he cannot keep them away, 'Detective Superintendent Tom Bevans. I am here to help you.' *I am here to save you.*

My hero. A memory of Dani slices through his mind – her mocking him when she first saw him in his uniform; she had hated him joining the police.

'Tom. Tom Bevans.' He keeps calling out his name as he moves from room to room. He even starts to sing, thinking it might convince her he can be trusted. Killers don't sing, do they? After ten minutes he can hear DI Thorsen calling from another corridor. Then DI Clarke and DI Jenkins join in – lastly DS Eddie Matthews starts to shout out. They are the main Ares team. The fantastic five or the five stooges?

They finish searching the first floor and then head up to the second, which seems to be all art rooms. Everything is dark. They fan out at the top of the stairs, switching on their torches and picking a classroom.

'Don't be scared. My name's Jane,' he hears Thorsen call out in a sing-song voice.

‘I’ve got some chocolate,’ Fat Eddie shouts, sounding more like the child catcher than a sympathetic police officer.

Tom walks to the end of the corridor and enters the furthest of the art rooms. He slides his hand across the wall inside, trying to find the light switch, but there is nothing. All these rooms are probably operated by a master switch. *Damn*. It is almost pitch black; very little light creeps in from the moon hanging in the sky outside. Tom plays his torch through the room. Squares of smears and squiggles are hung on strings that span the walls like spider webs. One half of the room seems different; the art is no longer in two dimensions but three. Malformed children appear to perch on the windowsills like gargoyles. On a table, hands and arms stretch up into the air like zombies rising from the gr— *Change the record, Tom*. He’s scaring himself. Sculptures. Clay and nothing more.

‘My name is Tom.’ He calls into the air. ‘I am a policeman, there are a few of us here in the building – we heard your phone call and came to help.’ He listens. There is nothing. ‘We found your friend.’ Still nothing. He turns to try the next room and as he does so something glows for a second and is gone. He steps slowly back, a single ray of moonlight hits the floor at just the correct angle and – it could be art. It looks moist and red. He squats down to it. There is a footprint on the floor. It is a bare foot. He kneels down and touches a finger to it. He brings it up to his nose and inhales; sweet, not paint, it’s blood. He plays the torch beam across the floor, looking for more signs to show where somebody may have gone. There is nothing.

‘Hello sweetheart. It’s the police, is somebody hurt in here? We’re here to help.’ Nothing. Maybe they would trust a woman more. He runs back to the door and shouts out, down into the long black corridor. ‘Thorsen, I’m in Art block B. Room 4. I

think—’ There is a sound, the faintest of buzzes – like a mosquito settling on your neck, about to strike. He thinks it is a mobile on silent. ‘Jane, get down here now,’ he shouts to her, then turns back to room 4. Tom looks across its length and shines the torch ahead of him. On the floor, pushed behind a cabinet, he sees some fabric has been thrown back there. He slides his hand as far as he can, under a desk and pulls out a school shirt. It is smeared with red, still tacky. He is pretty sure it is blood. He holds his breath and strains into the darkness. There is nothing. He stretches his hand out to the cabinet and grips the door, shifting his weight to his back foot in case anything wants to jump out at him. Then he slowly twists the handle, and yanks it open. Empty. There is nowhere else in the room that could be a hiding place – unless. In a corner stands a kiln. A fat, squat bell-jar. It stands about 4 feet high, an oven for baking and glazing, but there will be shelves, compartments, nobody could hide in it, could they? Tom walks over to the kiln. The door is slightly ajar. He raises the torch and examines the handle. It could be glaze. It could be paint. It could be blood.

‘Where are you, guv?’ Jane calls out.

‘Here. Ceramics and pottery. There’s a kiln.’ As he says it, he feels something inside shift, like a kick to the metal sleeve. ‘Fuck.’ He whispers to himself, gripping the door handles and leaning back, it starts to shift. Using his whole bodyweight the doors begin to swing open. It is deep, in five sections, the middle one being the biggest but still only twelve or fourteen inches high. At that second Jane reaches him and together they peer into the black of the kiln. It is like a concrete bunker, with its walls jagged and sharp, pitted from hundreds of firings as glass has melted, bubbled and erupted – covering the sides with miniature blades.

Tom bends down to look deeper into the abyss. There is something there, a shape, he cannot tell. He slowly lifts the torch and its light touches the kiln wall.

‘Jesus Christ,’ Jane breathes. They can see blood and flesh on the walls, ripped and gouged from a human body. He lifts the torch higher to see all the way to ... *Oh Christ* there is a body, wedged inside. Naked, a girl, dead. He reaches in to touch and—

‘Fuck!’

Her eyes spring open – deep blue in contrast to the blood red of her face. Her mouth opens and—

‘Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!’ she screams. High, shrill, total panic.

‘It’s okay, love, it’s okay. I am a policeman. There is no need to be afraid.’ But she continues to scream; he tries to get his hands in to her but she beats at them. She is sobbing and wailing. Her arms hitting the walls and shredding more, blood spills and starts to trickle out of the kiln. Tom jumps back – he is making it worse. She is terrified of him.

‘Jane, you try.’

Thorsen slowly raises her hands, palms out to the girl. ‘Shhhhhh ...’ she coos, as if to a baby. ‘Come on, my love. Safe now, you are safe now.’ She reaches inside, slowly, always with open hands. She reaches close enough to touch the girl and stops. She waits for the girl to reach out to her. ‘It’s okay, Jane is here. You’re safe. It’s all over, all over.’

Tom steps back, away into the shadows so as not to frighten the girl. Fat Eddie pokes his head around the door but Tom shoos him away. He watches DI Thorsen stand there, strong and calm, waiting for this poor injured child to reach out to her. Finally she does take hold of her hand. Her screams begin

to melt into sobs, uncontrollable sobs as the girl allows Jane to pull her out. It is difficult, like a cork in a bottle. She takes more skin and flesh off as she moves. Tom can see her pain – it is heart-breaking.

‘Come on, darling, almost out,’ Jane continues to coo and cajole. Always keeping the pressure on her to move forward, even though she can see the pain in the girl’s eyes. She keeps moving, and blood trickles before her – it is like she is being born again. From the tiny confines of the kiln she emerges, a bloody mess. Tom pulls off his coat and has it ready to wrap her in.

‘Christ, Tom, something softer,’ Thorsen hisses. Tom looks at his coat, wool and scratchy and smelling of smoke. He drops it and runs to the supplies cupboard, his torch beam dancing ahead. He pulls open the doors; inside is a basket with a sign that reads *fabrics*. He tips the basket over and watches the smaller pieces flutter, but there is one large piece – it is white cotton, like gauze – for a bloody bride. He takes it and dashes back, just as the head emerges, then the shoulders. ‘Christ,’ he whispers.

‘Come on darling, almost there.’ Thorsen coos softly. One last push and she is out into the world. She looks as if she has been flayed alive.

‘Good girl, good, good girl,’ Jane keeps soothing her. Tom throws the fabric over her shoulders and between the two of them they swaddle her. Her legs are unsteady and Jane slowly drops her to the floor. She is shivering. Tom cannot take his eyes off her as blood begins to soak through her makeshift shroud. This is not Turin, he can’t see the face of Christ in the blood – he sees a monster. Tom pulls his *airwave* radio from a belt loop, and speaks softly into it as Jane hugs and cradles the girl.

‘We need urgent medical attention – witness found, alive but hurt and in extreme distress. She has major lacerations to the skin. We need a sterile body suit, bandages, and sedatives. A&E need to prep for skin salve, could be derma level trauma, skin grafts – like a burn, friction burn. Please be quick,’ he releases the transmit button. He puts the airwave down, *alive*. She is a miracle, but she is also a witness. He kneels down close to her, close enough to smell her blood.

‘Can you tell us your name?’ he asks her. She shakes. All she knows is pain and shock.

‘Later, guv,’ Thorsen says insistently.

‘Was it you who called the police?’

He thinks she nods – it is hard to tell, she is shaking so much.

‘W, w, w,’ she tries, but that is all she can say.

‘Guv—’

‘I know.’ His eyes flare at Jane, he is pushing too hard but he has to. Christ, can she not see that he has to do this? ‘Did you see his face?’ he asks the girl.

She shakes, he cannot see her eyes – there is only blood. Her hair is soaked with it – he can’t even tell if she is blonde – possibly redhead, possibly. In the street outside he hears the siren, they are almost here. Great for her, they can take her pain away – but downstairs there is a dead girl who needs to be avenged. In Leeds there is another girl and a family who have been in pain for a month already, that pain needs to be salved. He has to push, to be the bad guy. She opens her mouth to say something and—

Boom! The overhead lights flare into life. The girl squeals and hides her face. Tom’s eyes sting after so long straining in the dark – shitty timing.

‘No, please, please, it’s only the lights.’ Tom leans forwards, his shadow stretching over her. ‘I know you are hurting.’ He leans in, so close his mouth almost touches her ear, and whispers to her. ‘I am so sorry but I need to ask if—’ he hears their boots on the stairs ‘—you can identify him. If you can describe him.’

‘Paramedics coming through,’ a voice calls out from beyond the room. The sands have almost run out.

‘Please help me,’ Tom whispers to the girl as the double doors at the far end of the room burst open, and two medics enter with a stretcher. ‘The man who did this, was he known to you, a teacher or someone’s dad?’ Tom asks, his voice urgent and insistent.

‘Step back from her,’ the lead medic calls, not liking the way a Detective Superintendent is leaning over an injured and traumatised girl. Tom looks up at him, his eyes pleading for another minute.

‘Let me just ask—’

‘Please step away.’ The paramedic’s face is stone. He stretches down a hand to help Tom up, but he pushes it away and turns back to the girl once more.

‘We only have a second.’

‘NOW.’ The medic grabs Tom by the shoulders.

‘Back off!’ Tom yells at the medic firmly. ‘I know what you need to do but I must have a few seconds here.’ Tom turns to her and as lightly as he can he places his hands on her shoulders.

‘Your friend is dead,’ he tells the girl.

‘GUV!’ Thorsen and the medic grab him and lift him back from the girl. *Did he go too far?*

‘I need your help to save others,’ he tells her.

Jane gets between Tom and the girl. He can see she is upset with him, but the living have a lot of people looking out

for them, while the dead have so few. The medic grips him hard and Tom holds up his hands to get him to back off. He does – Tom’s palms are blood red. Tom sinks to his knees for one final try.

‘Please, please,’ he speaks softly to the girl, but her eyes are closed and she seems to have slipped out of consciousness.

‘Step away,’ the medic asks and pulls at his shoulder simultaneously. Tom nods slowly and lets himself be moved back, away from the only witness. The medics immediately move in to tend to her. Tom looks across at Jane, she pulls her eyes away from his. A gurney is slid alongside the girl. With an incredible tenderness she is lifted onto it and a mask is placed over her face. In seconds she will be anaesthetised and the pain will be gone. Tom steps forward and with his softest voice tells her: ‘Don’t worry – we can talk tomorrow, after you’ve been cleaned up and had a great night’s sleep.’ Her eyes snap open – they are the deepest blue but full of fear – she whimpers and shakes her head. She tries to free her swaddled arm, reaches out to grab Tom. He holds out his hand and she grips it; her fingers hold him strongly. Her mouth opens, behind the plastic of the mask. He can see she has braces on her teeth, she looks so young, he couldn’t tell from the bloody mess. She is desperately trying to get something out before the drugs take hold. ‘B ... b ... b ... b-b-b-beautiful,’ she says slowly through the obvious pain.

‘Beautiful?’ Tom repeats. He can see her eyelids flutter as the drugs slide her under. ‘I need to get her back.’ He yells at the medic and grabs the mask away from her face; the medic grabs his wrist in a vice-like grip.

‘That is enough,’ the medic says to Tom, flexing a fist at the same time.

The second medic slides in and replaces the mask. ‘Don’t worry love, you’ll be asleep in a second.’ His voice like honey. ‘Just count to five.’

One. Tom counts in his head, *two* ...

She struggles as blackness slimes into her mind. ‘He said—’ *Three*, her eyelids flutter. *Four.* ‘—skin, beautiful skin,’ *Five.* She is unconscious.

‘Beautiful skin,’ Tom repeats. *Remember, remember.* A voice-in-his-head whispers.

‘I won’t forget,’ Tom answers back. ‘I promise.’

But he does forget, he forgets for a long time, more than four years. And then—

Four-and-a-half years later

Friday 17th June 2011.

Remember.

Tom's eyes flick open, panic sweeps through him as the final beats of the dream die from his chest. He is breathing heavily, bathed in sweat – his heart pounds. He was in the kiln, glass tearing at his skin as he pushed himself out – birthed in blood, surrounded by their ghosts who were calling to him, asking why he had forgotten them; why they were yet to be avenged. *Why is it taking so long?* More than four years in the wilderness. 'Christ,' he mutters, his throat dry and cracked. He looks to the clock by his bedside, it is early; too early – almost the night before. Today is important, he needs to be sharp and calm; not strung out from lack of sleep. Today he has to get his life back on track and—

Remember.

Tom can't tell if the voice is just in his head or in the air around him. 'I do remember, I remember everything,' he tells them, but he knows the ghosts won't let him sleep now. He sits up and swings his legs off of the bed. Maybe he'll polish his shoes and iron his clothes ready for his appointment.

'Detective Superintendent Bevans?' the man asks with a syrupy-sweet voice, standing as he does so. Tom Bevans does not reply

immediately. Instead his eyes flit across the unbearably beige office – taking in the diplomas and qualifications that cover almost every available inch of wall space. *Over-compensation*, Tom thinks, as he scans the room and his eyes alight on the bookshelves; they seem to contain at least a dozen copies of one book: *Opening the Criminal Mind* by Dr A. V. Harrison.

‘Dr Harrison.’ Tom extends his hand over the large oak desk and the psychiatrist takes it with a grip like a damp dishcloth. He gestures to a soft armchair, and Tom sits, thankful there is no couch to lie on.

‘Please tell me why you believe you are here today,’ Harrison asks and then sits back in his ergonomically designed steel and leather chair and looks out of the window at the blue, cloudless sky.

To convince you I’m not a lunatic, Tom thinks, but keeps his mouth closed; this is important, not something to play games with. Instead he is quiet for a few seconds while he sizes up the man who must judge him. A podgy face, mostly covered by a thick, reddish beard and owl-like glasses, with a mouth that seems to want to look sincere but finds it hard not to look superior and judgemental. Tom’s assessment of the man is that he is not to be trusted with Tom’s secrets, or anyone’s quest for sanity.

‘Did you not understand the question, Detective Superintendent?’ Dr Harrison asks as he makes notes on a large yellow pad, which is turned away from Tom. His tone reveals what little he thinks about the IQ of senior police officers.

Tom pauses, unsure what to say, what to reveal to this man. ‘Dr Harrison, I understand that what I tell you, what we say here is private.’

‘Detective Superintendent, that is true, but only up to a point. Whilst I may keep private from your superiors anything you confess to me, from an indiscretion or lapse of judgement to a predilection for dressing like a nineteenth-century whore in the comfort of your own home.’ He laughs at the image he has created. Tom assumes it is meant to put him at his ease – it doesn’t. ‘I am still here, primarily, to assess whether you can return to your duties without proving a threat to yourself, your team or the general public. That is what I have been tasked with here, consequently I will use all you tell me in making that assessment.’ He pauses. ‘So Superintendent Bevans, you have been off active duty, ever since—’

‘30th December 2010. Almost six months ago.’ Tom finishes his sentence.

Harrison takes a deep theatrical breath. ‘Six months. What have you been doing all that time, Detective Superintendent?’

‘I have spent some time volunteering in a hospital, a specialist head trauma unit. I help the staff. I feed the patients and I read to them. I have been there three or four days a week for the last few months.’ Tom sees Harrison’s eyes narrow and the man makes a note on his pad. It is the truth, of course, about Tom volunteering in the hospital, but not the whole truth. Outside a cloud limps across the sky and smothers the sun; the room they are in gets quite gloomy.

‘Sad Man.’ Dr Harrison says the name with some relish and watches Tom’s face spasm, for a second, in response. ‘That is what your colleagues call you, isn’t it. Sad Man?’

Tom feels his jaw clench involuntarily; he hates his nickname. It is all because of the tears. Other officers freak out when they see him cry, but he has no control, the tears just bleed from his eyes

at the slightest provocation. He was worse when he was a family liaison officer – he cried all the time then, but nowadays it is better. A bit better, maybe. He has seen two therapists – in secret of course – hoping they can help him. One of them prescribed drugs that made him thirsty and unhappy. The other said: *empathy is a gift*. He finished with both quickly. He has learned to live with the tears and the weird looks he gets from colleagues, and the whispers of *there goes the Sad Man*. It is no big deal.

‘Some perhaps have called me Sad Man, in the past. Fewer now and never to my face,’ Tom tells the psychiatrist.

Harrison smiles; he can see why Detective Superintendent Tom Bevans has that nickname – he looks as if he is filled to the brim with life’s pain, like the figure in Edvard Munch’s painting *The Scream*. His hair is white, his skin looks like shattered porcelain that has been painstakingly glued back together, but it is his eyes that make the biggest impression, they appear to burn in some unfathomable way; mineshafts to some inner hell that has corroded him, etched pain into his physical being. Harrison can see how the lost and vulnerable would trust him; he reminds them of themselves.

‘Why do your colleagues use it?’

Tom does not want to respond to that intrusive question. He would like to sit in silence, let the time run away, like sand through his fingers, but if he wants to return to duty he has to play the game; show a little of the wizard behind the curtain, but not too much. Just a tease, all a tease. As Freud might say: ‘It’s all tits and ass.’ Tom takes a deep breath.

‘Soon after I joined the force the woman I loved was abducted and murdered.’ Tom thinks to himself, *while I was weeping for her, the wind changed and I was stuck like this*. But he cannot say

that to this man, so instead he tells him: 'I was deeply affected by her death, emotionally and physically.'

Harrison nods and makes more notes. 'This girl—'

'Her name was Dani, Dani Lancing.'

'Dani. My understanding is that you founded your sexual crimes unit as some form of monument to her?'

'No. My experience with loss and grief led me into a role as a family liaison officer dealing with the bereaved. My founding of the unit came from that work – not some desire to build a shrine to any one person.'

Harrison nods and makes a note. 'I have read your service notes. Frankly, I was amazed.' He looks up and holds the other man's gaze. 'I believe you have investigated scores of murders and, in each case, you personally have broken the news to the parents that their daughters—'

'Sons too, sometimes.'

'You have broken the news yourself, that their children will not be returning home,' he pauses, and Tom thinks he sees a glint of excitement in the psychiatrist's eye, 'surely at your elevated position of authority you have other officers who are better placed to inform and counsel the parents?'

Tom makes no attempt to reply.

'Do you enjoy heart-break, Detective Superintendent?'

'Do you, Dr Harrison?'

A shaft of sunlight across the desk brightens between them.

'Operation Ares.' Harrison chews on the name. 'You named your unit after the Greek god of war. Are you a man of war, Detective Superintendent Bevans?'

'The unit is not named after Ares. The unit *is* Ares – we go after the men of war: those who hurt and kill and take what they

want from those they perceive as weaker than themselves. We try to protect women who would otherwise be victims, and if we cannot protect them, we avenge them.'

'Vengeance? Quite an emotional response to your work, Detective Superintendent.'

'Yes. Yes it is.'

Harrison nods to himself and makes another series of notes. Tom wonders if they are not merely items for a shopping list.

'Why did you suddenly take a six-month leave of absence last December – no notice given?' Harrison drops the hand grenade of a question and waits for the fall-out. Tom smiles what he hopes is a realistic and sane smile. He understands he cannot tell him the truth of that night, six months ago, when in the snow of a terrible winter, alongside her parents, he had finally discovered the truth about the death of Dani Lancing. Her mother, Patty, had kept at the case like a dog with a bone. For more than twenty years she gnawed and gnawed at it, desperate to find Dani's killer, until it finally shattered and the marrow of truth spilled out; but there was a cost. The cost was two people dead and another man with his skull bashed in, a man who had once been Tom's best friend – Marcus Keyson; a man who is now little more than a vegetable, slowly withering away to nothing in a hospital bed. Tom cannot tell Harrison any of this, cannot describe the guilt that haunts him.

He had not delivered the blow that felled Keyson; it had been some crazy accident, but that night and its tragedies had made him realise that his career, the career that he thought was so damned pure, was actually based on lies and pain. And for Tom, there had been an even more terrible realisation that night – that Dani had never really loved him. For twenty years he had thought

himself her protector, but now he had to come to the realisation that he had done great harm in her name, all for a love that was a sham. He had maimed an artist, Bix, who had date raped her – Tom had sliced his face in two. A journalist, Ben Bradman, who had written appalling slurs about her, found himself in prison for selling contaminated drugs – framed, of course. For Dani. All for Dani. *The things we do for love.*

For ten years after Dani's death, Tom mourned her loss and tried to make amends by saving other girls. When he finally founded Operation Ares, that first morning before any other member of the staff arrived, he wrote her name in giant letters with a spray can on the main wall of the office. Then he screwed four large notice boards over the top so only he knew her name was there. She was his ghost in the machine, the reason he worked so tirelessly – for the dead girls.

His unit operated with the highest of standards and values; they were a phenomenal success. Their detection rate was far higher than any comparable serious crimes unit anywhere in the country – over time Tom had actually forgotten about the lies and the pain he caused trying to save Dani. He had forgotten that everything he had built was set on a foundation of pain. Then six months ago it all came home to roost, the truth of Dani's death and the crippling shame of his own guilt. It broke him. For weeks he stayed in the same clothes, not washing, not eating and barely sleeping. One night he beat his forehead on the wall until he lost consciousness. He lived rough in the park for a week and howled in the middle of the night; the sound was inhuman. He recalls, as a child, watching something on TV, something on *John Craven's Newsround*, a report from the zoo where an elephant had given birth, but after a day, the baby died.

The mother howled for twenty-four hours – they called it a death song. The mourning of the animal was heart-breaking, and as a child it had made him cry. Now he realises it was that same song that he had howled into the night. The song of loss and grief. For Dani, Patty, Jim, Marcus and himself. But none of that can be told to Dr Harrison. Stories like that will get him put in the nut-house, not back on active duty. There can be no sharing the harrowing tales – this is the ‘lite’ version of his last six months – because he must get back to work, he really must.

‘Burn-out. I needed to recharge. It just hit me all of a sudden, like monumental flu,’ he tells Harrison, and it isn’t a lie, not really. He had burned, deep inside he had roasted. ‘I couldn’t drag myself out of bed, I could barely move, all I wanted to do was sleep.’

Harrison nods slowly, classic reaction to trauma. He has seen it often in rookie police officers but rare in someone so senior. ‘So you just took yourself off for a – what, little holiday?’

Tom holds his face impassively. ‘It was hardly a holiday, I believe I suffered a grief overload.’ It is a plausible story, Tom thinks. He’s been reading about trauma in the military for the last week, to prepare himself for today’s show.

‘And so you rested, meditated yourself through it?’

‘Nothing spiritual. I just think I needed some time for reflection and rest,’ he smiles at Harrison, ‘I feel more balanced now, grounded. I’m ready to go back to work.’

‘Are you sure? Back to that same cycle of desolation, grief and loss? Back to the stresses of leading a murder investigation, to seeing young women who have been violated and killed?’

Tom frowns, unsure if Harrison asks this with a psychiatrist’s eye, or more that of a father who could not bear to view the

body of his own child laid on a slab. Tom hears the emotion creep into the man's voice; so few people can imagine spending a lifetime with the dead, and those who loved them.

'Back to helping people, Dr Harrison. Helping people in pain.'

Harrison narrows his eyes. He is confused about this man with the cracked face, this sad man. He can see in his file that he is an exemplary officer; he has more citations for bravery than he has seen in any other senior officer he has worked with. He has also reported five colleagues to the Directorate of Professional Standards and had three colleagues fired from the force. The man seems whiter than white, too white – too inflexible? Harrison cannot help but let a smile crawl across his face – it is an interesting question. But he stops himself sliding down that fanciful path, for he is a scientist not a storyteller. He must judge this man's capacity to work with an open and clear mind.

'You feel you are well enough to lead a team of—'

'Forty-seven men and women.' Tom completes his question. 'Yes, yes I am.'

'Why?' It is a simple enough question, Harrison thinks. Why would a man who has seen more than twenty years of pain and grief – seen the very worst of humanity – want to get back in?

'Do you believe in ghosts, Dr Harrison?'

There is the stab of a smile, slightly supercilious, from the mental health professional. 'Do you mean an oogy-woogy dead man in a sheet, maybe holding their head under their arm?'

Tom Bevans scowls his reply.

'I am sorry, Detective Superintendent Bevans, I should not mock the belief of others, even spiritualism.' He drops his pad onto his desk with a bang that shoots up a dust cloud to glitter in the sunlight that cuts his desk in two. 'I believe in guilt. I believe

in regret, shame, lust, anger. A whole plethora of emotional wounds we may build pathologies from, become *infected* by, if you like.’ He pauses, removing his glasses to clean them. ‘Ghosts. An interesting word.’ He retrieves the pad from the desk and makes a note. ‘But in answer to your question, I suppose in some form, I do believe in ghosts. At least I appreciate that human beings can feel haunted by their actions, or their inactions. Why, do you see dead people?’

‘Of course not. I mean that the dead, those who are murdered – ejected from the world before their time – need someone to help them, champion them.’

‘And that person is you?’

‘And my team. We work with the living but we answer to the dead.’

‘You really believe that?’

‘Yes.’ Tom pauses, drawing his thoughts together. ‘Dr Harrison. You seek to help people, those who have lost their way, those who are troubled and in pain – you release them from their anxieties.’

‘I hardly think—’

‘You must get a buzz from it, feel like you are valued – that this is how you better society, how you grease the wheels of life and living.’

Harrison nods. He does understand, sort of.

‘This is me, what I do, how I make the world a better place. I have a job to do and I am ready to go back to it.’ Tom knows that he will not be at peace until he confronts what he did to the men he hurt and, more importantly, remember and avenge the dead women he promised to help.

Harrison puts his pen down; maybe he has underestimated the intelligence of this man whose eyes burn with what looks like an almost religious zealotry.

‘So, Dr Harrison. Can I return to active duty?’