

DEATH MESSAGE

Mark Billingham


sphere

SPHERE

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For Claire, as they all are.

Revenge triumphs over death; love slights it.

FRANCIS BACON

PROLOGUE

He could tell they were coppers the second he clapped eyes on them, but it was something in how they stood, in that formal awkwardness and the way their features set themselves into an overtight expression of concern, that drilled a hole straight through to his guts; that sucked the breath from him as he dropped into the chair the female officer had advised him to take.

He drew spit up into his dry mouth and swallowed. Watched as the pair of them tried and failed to make themselves comfortable; as they cleared their throats and pulled their own chairs a little closer.

All three winced at the sound of it. The dreadful scrape and its echo.

They looked like they'd been dropped into the room against their will, like actors who had wandered on to a stage without knowing what play they were in, and he felt almost sorry for them as they exchanged glances, sensing the scream gathering strength low down inside him.

The officers introduced themselves. The man – the shorter of the two – went first, followed by his female

colleague. Both of them took care to let him know their Christian names, like that would help.

‘I’m sorry, Marcus, but we’ve got bad news.’

He didn’t even take in the names, not really. Just stared at the heads, registering details that he sensed would stay with him for a long time after he’d left the room: a dirty collar; the delicate map of veins on a drinker’s nose; dark roots coming through a dye-job.

‘Angie,’ he said. ‘It’s Angie, isn’t it?’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Tell me.’

‘There was an accident.’

‘Bad one . . .’

‘The car didn’t stop, I’m afraid.’

And, as he watched their mouths forming the words, a single, banal thought rose above the noise in his head, like a distant voice just audible above the hiss of a badly tuned radio.

That’s why they sent a woman. Because they’re supposed to be more sensitive. Or maybe they think there’s less chance I’ll break down, get hysterical, whatever . . .

‘Tell me about this car,’ he said.

The male officer nodded, like he’d come prepared for this kind of request; was happier to be dealing with the technical details. ‘We think it jumped the lights and the driver couldn’t brake in time for the zebra crossing. Over the limit, like as not. We didn’t get much of a description at the time, but we were able to get a paint sample.’

‘From Angie’s body?’

The copper nodded slowly, took another good-sized

breath. ‘We found it burned out the next morning a few miles away. Joy-riders . . .’

It was sticky inside the room, and he could smell the recent redecoration. He thought about sleeping, and of waking up from a nightmare in clinging sheets.

‘Who’s looking after Robbie?’ He was staring at the male copper when he asked the question. Peter something-or-other. He watched the officer’s eyes slide away from his own, and felt something tear in his chest.

‘I’m sorry,’ the woman said. ‘Your son was with Miss Georgiou at the time of the accident. The vehicle struck them both.’

‘They were both pronounced dead at the scene.’ The male officer’s hands had been clutched tightly together. Now he loosened the grip and began to spin his wedding ring around his finger. ‘It wasn’t drawn out, you know?’

He stared at the copper’s thumb and forefinger working, shivering as his veins began to freeze and splinter under his skin. He felt the blood turning black and powdery, whispering beneath his tattoos and his yellowing flesh, like the blood of something that had been dead for a very long time.

‘OK, then,’ the female officer said, meaning: Thank Christ for that. Now can we get the hell out of here?

He nodded, meaning: Yes, and thanks, and please fuck off before I smash my head into your face, or the wall, or the floor.

Walking back towards the door, where the warder was waiting, it was as though each one of his senses were suddenly working flat out; heightened in a momentary rush, before everything began to shut down.

Cracks in the painted brick gaped like crevasses, and he was tempted to push his fingers inside. He felt the material of his jeans, coarse against his legs as he walked. And, from across the room, the whispers of the two police officers came to him easily – deafening above the sound of his own feet and the noise of the water streaming through the radiators.

‘When’s he get out?’

‘A couple of weeks, I think.’

‘Well, at least he won’t have to wear handcuffs to the funerals . . .’

PART ONE

‘SEND’

ONE

Tom Thorne wasn't convinced that the old woman had the ace she was so obviously representing. He wasn't fooled for a minute by the sweet-old-lady smile and the spectacles; by the candyfloss hair or the cute tartan handbag. He didn't believe the square-jawed type in the tux either, whose bluff he'd successfully called a couple of hands earlier. He put the guy on a pair of tens at most.

Thorne raised fifteen dollars. The ace *he* was holding gave him top pair, but with three hearts on the board, he wanted to scare off anyone who might possibly be chasing the flush.

The guy in the tux folded, quickly followed by the bald bloke in the loud shirt who'd spent the entire game chomping on a fat cigar.

Now it was just Thorne and the old woman. She took her time, but eventually laid down her cards and let him take the twenty-five dollars in the pot.

This was the joy and the frustration of online poker. Though the players were real enough, the graphics of the characters around the table never changed. For all Thorne

knew, the old woman – who rejoiced in the username Top Bluffa – was in fact a dough-faced adolescent in the American Midwest.

Thorne, who for the purposes of Internet gambling was known as The Kard Kop, had been logging on to Pokerpro.com for a few months. It was just a harmless bit of fun, no more. He'd seen enough of its victims to know that gambling could take away everything you had as efficiently as a smack habit, and that there were many thousands around the country for whom its availability online only sped up that process. For him, it was a relaxing way of winding down at the end of a shift, no more than that. Or, like tonight, killing time while he was waiting for Louise to call.

He glanced at his watch and was amazed to see that he'd been playing for two and a half hours.

Flicking his eyes to the bottom of the screen, he saw that he was forty dollars up for the evening. Two hundred and seventy-five dollars ahead overall. There was no arguing with that, and he reckoned that even if he lost some money now and again, it would still be less than he'd get through in the same amount of time in the Royal Oak.

Thorne got up and walked across to the music system. He ejected the Laura Cantrell CD he'd been listening to and began looking for a suitable replacement, deciding that he'd give it another half-hour; forty-five minutes maybe, until two o'clock. Then he'd call it a night.

He'd been involved with DI Louise Porter since the end of May; since the end of a case they'd worked on together, when Thorne had been seconded to her team on the Kidnap Investigation Unit. The Mullen case had cost a number of lives, some lost and many more shattered

beyond repair. Thorne and Louise were as surprised as anyone that they had forged something positive out of the carnage, and even more so that, five months down the line, it was showing no obvious sign of running out of steam.

Thorne took out a Waylon Jennings compilation. He slid the disc into his player, nodded along with the guitar at the opening of ‘Only Daddy That’ll Walk The Line’.

It was tricky for two police officers working on different units to spend too much time together anyway, but Louise firmly believed that not being in each other’s pockets helped keep things fresh. She had her own small flat in Pimlico – a decent enough trek by Tube or car from Thorne’s even smaller one in Kentish Town – and though they usually spent at least two or three nights a week together in one place or the other, Louise said that the distance was enough to stave off any anxiety that might otherwise creep in. Any worries about losing independence or becoming over-familiar. Or even just getting bored.

Thorne had been prone to all those anxieties at one time or another, but he had still told Louise that perhaps she was worrying a little too much. A couple of months into it, they’d been drinking coffee at the Bengal Lancer and their discussion about domestic arrangements had been starting to sound like a squad briefing. Thorne had leaned across the table and touched her fingers, and said that they should just try to relax and enjoy themselves. That taking things a day at a time couldn’t hurt.

‘That’s a typical “bloke’s” attitude,’ Louise had said.

‘What?’

‘The “just relax” shit. *You* know.’

Thorne had grinned, feigned ignorance.

‘I’m always amazed at the way men can barely spare five minutes to talk about a relationship, but can happily spend all day putting a CD collection into alphabetical order . . .’

Thorne certainly knew that Krauss came before Kristofferson. But he also knew that he felt as good about everything, as happy, as he had since his father had died two and a half years before.

As Waylon Jennings – filed between The Jayhawks and George Jones – began to sing ‘The Taker’, Thorne returned to the computer and sat down to play a few more hands. He could feel Elvis mooching around beneath the table, nosing into his shins in the hope of a late snack, or a ridiculously early breakfast.

Thorne was searching for the Go-Cat and contemplating king-ten in the hole when his mobile rang.

‘I’m sorry,’ Louise said. ‘I’m only just leaving.’

The Kidnap Investigation Unit, along with others in Specialist Operations, was housed at Scotland Yard. It was another reassuringly good distance from where Thorne’s homicide team was based at the Peel Centre in Hendon, but at this time of night, it was probably no more than twenty minutes’ drive from Kentish Town.

‘I’ll put the kettle on,’ Thorne said. There was a pause, during which he could hear Louise exchanging mumbled pleasantries with officers on security duty, as she made her way out and down towards the underground car park.

‘I think I’m going to go straight home tonight,’ she said, eventually.

‘Oh, OK.’

‘I’m knackered.’

‘That’s fine.’

‘Let’s do it tomorrow night.’

‘I’ll still be doing it tonight,’ Thorne said. ‘Just looks like I’ll be doing it on my own.’

She laughed; a dirty cackle. Her breathing was heavy and Thorne could picture her walking quickly, eager to get to her car and home. ‘I should have called earlier,’ she said, ‘but you know what it’s like. Have you been waiting up long?’

‘It’s not a problem.’ And it wasn’t. They’d both been working ludicrous hours of late, and there had been plenty of these late night/early morning conversations.

‘How was your day?’

‘Up and down.’ As ever, Thorne was working on half a dozen different murders, each at a different stage, somewhere between a body that was still cooling and a court case that was starting to warm up: a woman whose husband had flipped, bludgeoning her and her mother to death with an empty vodka bottle; an Asian teenager suffocated by an uncle in what looked suspiciously like an ‘honour’ killing; a young Turkish man, murdered in a pub car park. ‘What about you?’ Thorne asked.

‘A bundle of laughs,’ Louise said. ‘I had a fabulous afternoon, trying to convince a major crack dealer – who doesn’t want to press charges against another major crack dealer – that he didn’t hold himself hostage for a week and chop off three of his own fingers.’

‘How did that go?’

‘Apparently, he accidentally locked himself in a shed, decided to do a spot of DIY to pass the time and got careless with an electric saw.’

‘Don’t go jumping to any conclusions,’ Thorne said.

‘Has he got an honest face?’ Another big laugh. He heard the slight echo and realised she’d gone underground.

‘You sound tired,’ Louise said.

‘I’m fine.’

‘What have you been up to?’

‘Not a lot. I watched some shitty film . . . caught up on a bit of paperwork.’

‘OK.’ The call was starting to break up as the signal went. Thorne heard the squawk as she unlocked her car with the remote. ‘So, tomorrow night then, for definite?’

‘If I’m not washing my hair,’ Thorne said.

‘I’ll call you during the day.’

Thorne glanced at the computer screen as ‘fourth street’ was dealt. Saw that, with one card still to come, his king-ten had turned into an open-ended straight draw. ‘Drive safely . . .’

He walked into the kitchen to make tea, apologised to Elvis for forgetting her food and flicked on the kettle on his way to the fridge. He was reaching up for a mug when he heard the beeps of the message tone from his phone.

He knew it would be from Louise, was smiling as he pressed SHOW, and the text itself only widened the smile into a grin.

I know you’re playing poker. XXX

He was still trying to think up a funny comeback when the tone sounded again.

This time the message was not from Louise Porter.

It was a multimedia message, with a photograph attached. The picture was poorly defined, shot from close up and low down, and it wasn’t until Thorne had held the phone eighteen inches away for a few seconds and angled

it correctly that he could see exactly what it was. That he finally realised what he was looking at.

The man's face filled the small screen, pasty and distorted.

A clump of dark hair curled across the only visible cheek. The mouth hung open, its lips flecked with white and a sliver of tongue just visible inside. Chins bulged, one above the other; each black-and-silver stubbled, with a thin red line delineating the two. The single eye in shot was closed. Thorne could not be sure if the marks that ran across the brow and on to the forehead were from the camera lens or not.

He jabbed at the handset to retrieve the details of the message. Scrolled past the time and date, searching for the identity of the sender. There was no name listed, but he pressed the call button twice to dial the phone number that was shown.

Got a dead line.

He went back to the picture and stared, feeling the pulse quicken at the side of his neck. Feeling that familiar, dreadful tickle, the *buzz*, building further round, at the nape. When it came to a lot of things, there were times when Thorne couldn't see what was staring him in the face; but this, for better or worse, was his area of expertise. Accountants were good with numbers, and Tom Thorne knew a dead man when he saw one.

He angled the screen again, moved the handset closer to the lamp on the desk, the poker game forgotten. He stared at the dark patch below the man's ear that was certainly not hair. At the red line where it had run into the crack of his double chin.

Blood was not definitive, of course, but Thorne knew what the odds were. He knew that most people didn't go around taking pictures of friends and relatives that had been struck by falling masonry or accidentally tumbled down the stairs.

He knew that he was looking at a murder victim.