

1

2003

He is still alive at the end of the fight. He still stands, but only just. He knows he is soon to die, yet he does not give up the struggle for life. He continues to fight and rage against the inevitable end. The cruel swords of the relentlessly tormenting matadors feast on the sacrificial flesh. Yet still he stands, still he fights, as smiling and exultant, his executioners silently surround him, moving in for the kill and the final twist of the knife that will end him. The last sound he will ever hear will be the crowd applauding his bloody death.

Chief Commissioner Trantor pressed pause and the bloody scene flickered and froze upon the television screen - the violent image of the bull on its knees, the matador standing above him, the sword poised above his neck, an expression of triumph upon his tanned face and behind him a crowd captured in mute exaltation.

Trantor looked at the three men before him expectedly.

Doctor Bronowski was the first to speak. "An obvious obsession with the rituals of sacrificial slaughter. The killer identifies with the glory of the bullfighter. He wants his kill to be appreciated by an adoring audience. He wants to be worshipped. That's why he sent us the video. He wants us to be the audience, otherwise there is no purpose to his career as a murderer."

Trantor nodded. "From what we have, can you give me a profile within the next few days?"

Bronowski leaned forward confidently in his chair and smiled at the Commissioner. "I can do better than that. I can give you one now, with, I believe, a ninety per cent degree of accuracy. Would you like to hear it?"

Trantor nodded.

"The killer is a Caucasian male in his twenties or thirties. Probable repressed homosexual tendencies thus the fascination with bullfighters. Has poor social skills. Not married, no girlfriend, something of a loner employed in a low-grade office job."

Detective Hudson looked suitably impressed. "You can tell all that just from watching the video. Not bad going."

Trantor turned to the man who was sitting at the back of the room. "What do you think, Alex?"

Inspector Alex Burton appeared not to have heard him. He was staring at the television screen intently with an expression of quiet perplexity upon his face.

“Alex?”

Still staring at the screen, Burton spoke, his voice soft and with a degree of certainty which was at odds with his normally diffident manner. “I think the killer is a woman.”

Bronowski made little attempt to disguise his snort of derision. Shaking his head with almost comical disbelief, he turned round to study the man who had made such a preposterous remark.

Bronowski prided himself on his ability to accurately assess a person’s character in no more than a few seconds. He had spent years studying all the small individual mannerisms and physical idiosyncrasies which revealed a person’s innermost thoughts and motivations. He often boasted that he believed he could tell from the way a person tied their shoelaces whether they were a psychotic or not.

He scrutinised Burton for a few brief moments and was alarmed to realise that he could tell almost nothing about him. Burton was singularly nondescript. There seemed at first glance to be absolutely nothing about his exterior appearance which would hint at the man within. He seemed too ordinary to be real. A man of slight build in his forties with a quiet, serious face which seemed almost expressionless and eyes that were almost a blank canvas - eyes that absorbed the world which they perceived rather than reflected it. He was dressed conservatively in a light grey suit, white shirt, light blue tie, well-polished black shoes. His body language revealed nothing. He sat in his chair apparently neither particularly tense nor at ease.

Bronowski decided that he didn’t like him, but more importantly, he did not consider him to be a threat to his authority. “And who are you, exactly?”

Burton opened his mouth to speak, but Trantor interrupted him. “I should have introduced you earlier. This is Inspector Alex Burton. He has kindly agreed to act as an unofficial adviser on this investigation.”

Bronowski glared at Burton, attempting to undermine him with a look which he liked to believe was a perfect combination of dismissiveness and subtle derision. He was disappointed that Burton refused to meet his gaze, but instead seemed determined to concentrate solely upon the flickering television screen. “May I ask what your professional qualifications are, Inspector Burton?”

Again, Trantor answered on behalf of his colleague. “As I said, Inspector Burton is here on my special request. He has a great deal of experience in cases such as these.”

"I have never heard of him," Bronowski stated as dismissively as he could.

Burton turned towards Bronowski. "I prefer to work in an unofficial, unrecognised capacity."

"Any particular reason?" Bronowski did little to hide the sarcasm in his voice.

"I find it is easier that way," Burton replied.

Burton slowly turned his head and gazed dispassionately at his antagonist. Bronowski felt a momentary chill run down his spine. Burton returned to his study of the frozen bullfight.

"What makes you think it is a woman we are looking for, Alex?" continued Trantor.

Burton shrugged. "It was just an idea."

Bronowski pounced, the collective weight of thirty years of psychological research behind him. "Statistically, less than seven per cent of murders are committed by women. They simply do not have the necessary levels of testosterone the majority of killers possess. And in this case, the physical strength needed to throttle a sixteen stone man to death."

Despite the obvious aggressive undercurrent in Bronowski's accusation, Burton's reply betrayed no emotion. "That's just it. It's because she has unusual size and strength that she has become a killer. She wants to become a real man. This explains her fixation with bullfighters – an idealised version of male beauty and strength, and one which encourages the adoration of killing in a legitimate manner." Burton no longer seemed to be aware that there were other people in the room. It was as though he was talking aloud to himself, articulating his innermost thoughts. His eyes were closed.

When he opened them again, he looked mildly embarrassed to see the other three men in the room staring at him.

"You got all that from watching a three-minute tape of a bullfight?" asked Hudson. "How?"

"As I said, it was just an idea. I could be wrong."

Bronowski turned back to the Commissioner. "There is a dangerous killer on the loose and it is very likely that he will strike again soon, if he hasn't done so already. I really don't think we can afford to waste time on hunches from amateurs. Why don't you just go the whole hog and call in a psychic. Apparently, Uri Gellar is quite cheap these days."

Bronowski waited for Burton to retaliate but he remained silent.

The psychologist was not to be denied a confrontation so easily. "Perhaps you can use your incredible intuitive powers to tell us what the killer did with the victim's brains?"

"She probably ate them. I think she believes that by ingesting some vital organ of her victim such as the heart or the brain somehow some of the

victim's masculine traits will enter into her. It used to be a common belief amongst some cannibal tribes."

Bronowski rolled his eyes in disbelief. "I suppose she is called 'Hannibal' and likes a nice glass of Chianti?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Bronowski could see Burton quickly rising to his feet. He swivelled round, fearing that he might have provoked the strange man too much, but was relieved to see Burton's manner betrayed no hint of violence.

"Do you mind if I get some fresh air for a few minutes?" Burton asked the Commissioner.

"Of course. Take your time."

Burton quietly left the room.

"What's the deal with him?" asked Hudson.

"You remember the Thames Valley killings five years ago?" Trantor asked him.

Hudson nodded. "Of course. We caught the bastard just a couple of minutes before he claimed another victim."

"We didn't catch him. Burton did. And what's more, we took the credit for it because he refused to do so. In the past seven years, Burton has helped us capture more than two dozen killers, sexual predators and paedophiles."

Hudson was impressed and intrigued. "How?"

Trantor shrugged. "I honestly don't know. I don't think he even knows himself. I guess he's very lucky, or maybe, unlucky. All I know is that he gets results."

Bronowski remained determinedly unconvinced. "But surely you can appreciate how ridiculous the idea of this killer being a woman is?"

Trantor switched off the video unit and removed the tape from the machine. "I like to keep an open mind." He handed the tape to the Doctor. "How long will it take you to make a full psychological profile of our..." Trantor hesitated, "...man?"

Bronowski smiled. "So, you admit that it's a man we're after? Two, maybe three days. Don't worry, Commissioner, I'll help you find him."

Outside, in the hallway, Burton got himself a cup of coffee from the vending machine, crossed over to the window and gazed down on the city below.

Once again, the unwanted and long feared words stole unbidden into his mind, – *A crowd flowed across London Bridge, so many. I had not thought death had undone so many.*

The words settled in the back of his mind where they continued to loop incessantly and insidiously, coiling themselves around his consciousness like a whispering serpent. He had learnt to ignore them a long time ago

and had almost managed to convince himself that they no longer bothered him.

He gazed down at the Thames Embankment. It was late in the afternoon, the time of day he liked to refer to as the 'tourist hour'. Within another couple of hours, the pavements would be flooded by a deluge of office-workers pouring out from their air-conditioned bubbles, out into the dying day, never pausing to consider the city streets they pounded on their way to the tube station or bus-stop, all rushing to scurry underground, away from the swollen city and homewards for dinner, television and the eventual relief of sleep.

And somewhere among them was a murderer, Burton reflected. Maybe a thousand murderers. But this particular one worked in an office somewhere in this city which sprawled before him. And the killer was a woman, of that much he was certain. But how to find her amongst this sprawl, how to isolate one individual amongst so many millions? ... *I never knew death had undone so many...* forensics had found nothing. She was highly intelligent, too intelligent, that was the problem. Her environment didn't appreciate intelligence, it got in the way of the job, made you question everything, made you stand out, made you an outsider, a freak, made you want to kill those that refused to appreciate or understand you... *death had undone so many...* they didn't realise that beyond her unusual height and size, and the deep down intelligence, hidden behind the clumsy awkwardness was a human being, a person with feelings and needs, the need to be understood, to be valued, appreciated, loved... worshipped. She was an amazing goddess and soon all the idiots that heaped indifference or abuse upon her would be made to realise it... *death... so many.*

Burton almost found himself feeling sorry for her and then he remembered what she had done and what she would continue to do if he did not find her. He turned away from the window.

Commissioner Trantor was standing in front of him. "You okay, Alex? You don't look so good."

"I'm fine. Just haven't been sleeping too well these last few weeks."

Trantor cast a mock disapproving glance at the plastic cup in Burton's hand. "Black coffee is always good for that."

Burton gave a half smile. "I have to admit it's probably not the best thing to drink when you have a bout of insomnia, but it's just about my only vice."

Trantor smiled, appreciating the truth of this statement. He knew of Alex Burton as being, what was traditionally described as 'clean-living. He didn't smoke, drink, take drugs or have any kind of personal or social life that Trantor or anyone knew of. He was an eminently private person. "Seriously though, do you want me to get the Unit Doc to take a look at

you? She's very good, can probably prescribe something to help you sleep."

"I'll be fine. I don't think I made a very good impression on Doctor Bronowski in there."

Trantor shrugged. "Don't worry about him. He's just worried that you're going to steal his thunder. By the way, what did you think of his profile?"

Burton drained the last of his coffee and threw the cup in the recycling bin. "I think he described just about every murderous sociopath in the annals of crime history. It's worrying when even serial killers get stereotyped."

"You still believe the killer is a woman?"

"I'm pretty sure."

"Any particular reason?"

Burton looked apologetic. "Just instinct."

"It would be nice if you could give me something a little bit more tangible than instinct. If I designate resources in this investigation I need to be able to justify them. I have the auditors breathing down my neck at the moment and they're not exactly great fans of the whole instinctual school of policework."

Burton was sincerely apologetic. "I'm sorry I don't have anything a bit more concrete to give you, but at this stage, I haven't got much to go on. I'll understand if you don't want me involved in this investigation."

Trantor smiled reassuringly. "Of course, I want you involved. You get results. You get more results than anyone I have ever known, and besides that, you're a good man, and God knows there's not many of them left in the world. Now let me buy you a decent cup of coffee."

2

The car turned down another suburban road and drove a steady thirty miles an hour along the tree-lined, residential street. Burton gazed distractedly out of the window as Hudson sat restlessly in the driver's seat, his nicotine-stained fingertips ceaselessly tapping on the steering wheel. The intense silence and the endless succession of almost identical streets was beginning to get to the younger detective, and with each passing minute he could feel his resentment towards Burton growing stronger. "Remind me again why we're doing this?"

Burton did not immediately reply. He seemed entirely engaged in studying the fronts of the houses they drove past. After they turned into another street he turned to Hudson. "We are doing this because the Commissioner has instructed us to do so."

"So that's the plan, is it? We just drive round and round for days on end with you staring out of the window?"

The antagonism in his voice was unmistakable but Burton ignored it. "Is there something else you'd rather be doing?"

"Yeah. Some proper police work for a change. I don't think I can take another week of this."

"We'll stop for lunch soon. You can take a well-deserved break."

Hudson was not sure if Burton was being sarcastic or not. The monotone voice made it impossible to tell. "Big whoop. You know, when I joined the police force I never knew my job would be to drive very, very slowly down every bloody street in the whole bloody city." He slammed his fists against the steering wheel in frustration. "I should have joined the Fire Brigade. Anything would be better than this."

"Unfortunately, good police work involves a great deal of tedium. You get used to it after a while."

"This assignment isn't tedious – it's pointless!"

Burton understood that Hudson was attempting to rile him, to force some kind of emotional reaction from him, but he felt too exhausted to engage with any kind of hostility. The week had been extremely wearing. He had spent several days poring over every minute detail of the case, and it had left him feeling sickened. Then there followed two days of what he thought of as 'the search' which had involved systematically driving down every road within a ten-mile radius of the last murder victim's home. For Hudson it had been unbearably tedious, but to Burton it had involved keeping himself in a constant state of acute awareness and focus. Existing in that permanent state of heightened tension had proved intensely gruelling. He found Hudson's incessant fidgeting and frequent complaining to be distracting and irritating. "Maybe you should ask to be reassigned?" he suggested.

"I was thinking the same thing. This has been a massive waste of time."

Burton didn't seem to have heard him. "Pull over to the side, just here."

Hudson reluctantly pulled the car over and switched off the engine. He looked across at Burton and was surprised to see that his eyes were closed.

"If you're going to take a nap, I'm going to go buy some lunch."

Burton opened his eyes. "You remember the routine. Number forty-two."

Hudson scrutinised the front of the house. It looked exactly like every other house in every other street they had driven down during the past excruciating few days. He decided to humour Burton. At least it would give him the chance to get out of the car and stretch his legs. "Yeah, we're religious freaks."

Burton took the gleaming black Bible from the glove compartment. "We are representatives from the Church of Ezekiel. Straighten your tie and try to look a bit more pious."

Hudson muttered a sarcastic “Hallelujah” as the two men got out of the car and approached the house.

Burton rang the doorbell. “Remember, let me do the talking.”

“Be my guest.”

They waited for thirty seconds. Burton rang the bell again. Hudson began to shift restlessly from foot to foot.

They waited another minute. “There’s nobody in. Let’s go.” Hudson was halfway down the path when he heard the door opening. He turned around preparing himself to look benignly religious. Instead, his mouth dropped wide open in shock as he stood staring at the giant of a woman who stood in the doorway staring back at him.

He guessed that she must have been at least six foot four. She possessed the physique that most rugby players would kill for. He was also shocked to realise that she was actually quite attractive. Her features, although heavyset, were almost beautiful. He noticed that she was wearing pink rubber washing up gloves and smiling invitingly at him. She seemed oblivious to the presence of Burton who appeared to be almost dwarfed by her.

Burton cleared his throat to get her attention. She glanced at him momentarily and then returned her gaze towards Hudson.

Burton cleared his throat again. “Good afternoon. We hate to disturb you, but we were wondering if it would be at all possible if we could trouble you for a few minutes of your time?”

She glanced down at Burton as though annoyed that he had dared to disturb her rapturous contemplation of Hudson. She seemed to remember herself, and a look of fearful hesitation crossed her face. “Yes. Of course. Come in.” Her voice was high and soft, its femininity seemed at odds with her appearance.

She turned and led them into the hallway before showing them into the living room. “You’ll have to excuse the mess, I’m in the middle of cleaning. Please have a seat.”

Burton and Hudson sat down on the sofa, each still tightly clutching their Bibles.

Hudson, still acutely aware that the woman was carefully scrutinising him, gazed at the proliferation of women’s magazines on the coffee table. He took a quick glance around the room. There seemed to be nothing out of the ordinary – it reminded him of every other living room he had ever been in, it even had the same wallpaper pattern as his aunt’s hallway. The only unusual thing about the room was its lack of personal effects, no photos, no books or ornaments, just the stack of magazines. Maybe she’s only just moved in and hasn’t had a chance to get everything unpacked yet? Maybe she just didn’t have any? It wasn’t that unusual. God knows his own flat was pretty bare. Why did she keep staring at him like that?

Hadn't she ever seen a man before? – maybe he would come back later and get himself better acquainted? He noticed she was still wearing the rubber gloves.

He heard Burton's soft-spoken voice next to him. "Tell me, is there a place for God in your life, Miss...?"

"Miss Lancaster. But you can call me Angela."

"Well, Angela, we at the Church of Ezekiel would like to invite you to one of our regular prayer meetings. Would you be interested in attending? It is a great way to meet new people."

"Yes. I think maybe I would. It would be nice to meet some new people for a change. Would you like a cup of tea or coffee, Mr...?"

"Brother Burton and my young colleague is Brother Hudson."

She seemed delighted at the revelation of his name. "Hudson, like the river. That's a good strong, manly name."

Hudson was amazed to feel himself becoming embarrassed at the intensity of her flirtation. "Thank you."

They were distracted by the buzzing of a fly which appeared from the hallway. Burton stood up quite abruptly. "I'm afraid we will have to decline your kind offer of tea, Miss Lancaster. Brother Hudson and I must be about the Lord's work." He pulled out a small pamphlet from between the pages of the Bible and handed it to her. "I look forward to seeing you at our next church meeting." He began heading in the direction of the door.

They were in the hallway now. Burton was hurrying towards the front door with Hudson a couple of feet behind him.

The hammer made a dull thud as it connected with the back of Hudson's head. Burton turned just in time to catch the young man's body as it tumbled towards the floor.

He felt an explosion of agony at the left side of his temple, just above the eye, as the hammer wielded by the mad woman came swinging around for the second time and its blunt edge caught the side of his head.

Stunned, he stumbled back against the front door, the blood streaming down his face turning everything a hazy shade of dark crimson.

As he tried to steady himself, the murderess moved in for the kill. He fell to his knees as she grabbed him by the throat and began to strangle him with her powerful hands. He could smell the sterile rubber of the gloves and then, as she leaned in closer, the stench of rotten flesh upon her breath.

He could feel the darkness consuming him as she continued to choke the life out of him. He tried to grab her wrists, but they were too thick and strong, and his grip quickly became weak. Desperately, he grasped at the floor beneath him until he could feel Hudson's unconscious body beside him. With numb fingers he reached inside Hudson's jacket for his holster.

Somehow, his finger managed to slip inside the holster. With no idea which way the gun was pointing, he squeezed the trigger.

3

Twilight.

Commissioner Trantor liked to call it 'the darkling hour'. It was usually his favourite time of the day. It meant that work was over and that he could go home to his wife and two daughters.

Today was different. It was far from over and it wouldn't be until long after midnight until he finally got home. He gazed at the crime-report on his desk. A photo of a dismembered limb stuck out from the manila folder, and he carefully pushed it back inside and out of view. He had looked at enough horror for one day.

There was a knock at his office door. "Come in," he said hearing the weariness in his own voice. Burton entered the room and took a seat opposite Trantor. He glanced at the report and quickly looked away as though guessing its contents.

"We found two more bodies in the kitchen," Trantor informed him. "All neatly dissected and ready for disposal. We're guessing that she was burying the bodies in some nearby woods. She was quite methodical about it. Had a degree in logistics, so it's not surprising, really."

"What about the brains?" asked Burton.

Trantor grimaced. "No trace. We're presuming she ate them. Looks like your theory was correct, after all. Congratulations, you should be feeling very proud."

Burton shifted uneasily in his chair. "How's Hudson doing?"

"Pretty good. He's being treated for concussion, but they should be letting him out sometime tomorrow."

Burton looked greatly relieved. "I'd like to visit him if that's possible."

"Of course. He's in St Thomas'. So is our friend, Miss Lancaster. She lost a lot of blood. The bullet went straight through her groin area."

"Will she live?"

"Most probably. Though part of me wishes you'd killed her outright. People like that don't deserve to live, do they?" Trantor quickly corrected himself. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound so judgemental. It's very unprofessional of me. It's just that sometimes... it gets to me – what we have to see, the kind of things we have to deal with. No one can remain immune to that sort of thing after a while. Well, you know that better than anyone." Trantor realised with some shock that Burton was trembling slightly. "Today can't have been very easy for you. God knows how you must be feeling right now."

Burton shrugged. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not. No one expects you to be. I've booked you a session with the Trauma Counsellor for tomorrow morning. She's very good."

Burton looked visibly alarmed at the suggestion. "I'd much rather not, if you don't mind. I'll be fine by myself."

"You can't get out of it. It's official police procedure now. Besides, I think it might do you the world of good. I've also given you the rest of the week off."

"I've got to make up my report," Burton responded.

"It can wait a week. Your health is more important."

"I'd rather get straight back to work," Burton replied more firmly.

"We'll see what Doctor Ballion recommends. Your appointment is for ten am. You will be here, won't you?"

Burton nodded reluctantly.

"Good. Can I suggest that you go home and get a good night's sleep? Don't worry about visiting Hudson, I'm sure he'll be ok."

Burton stood and headed towards the door. "I'd better see him. I'd like to apologise."

Trantor looked surprised. "Apologise for what? He's just helped you apprehend one of the country's most wanted criminals, earning himself a promotional recommendation in the process. A headache is not such a bad price to pay."

"I'd like to see him anyway."

"Okay. Take it easy."

Burton smiled and opened the door. Trantor called after him. "I don't suppose you'd like to tell me how you found her? Off the record."

Burton paused in the doorway and looked back. "I really wish I could."

Trantor stared at the closing door reflectively. The poor bastard doesn't even know himself. With a sigh, he returned to his paperwork.

4

Ignoring the lift, Burton wearily climbed the four flights of stairs to the fourth floor of the hospital. He spoke briefly to one of the staff at the Nurse's Station and quickly found his way to the private room. A plainclothes officer was sat outside, keeping guard. He recognised Burton, and after a few brief words, allowed him to enter the room.

She lay immobile on the bed, kept alive by the numerous tubes and machines by her bedside. Her eyes were closed and her breathing heavy as though she was in a deep sleep.

Burton stood by her bedside for a short while watching her and wondering if she would live, and if she did, would her life be filled with even more suffering that she had already endured. He whispered an apology and quietly left to find the room of his other victim.

A blurred vision. The outline of a man, or that monster of a woman, a blinding pain in the back of his head, falling, falling, someone would live to regret this, the hazy outline of a stranger's face, an expression of concern, the pain, the pain, hospital smells, a doctor, a pretty nurse, maybe later when he was feeling better, the face still there in the darkness. Again, the almost beautiful monster smiling at him and another monster beside her, pain within the pain, a sedative haze and more faces, the sound of a distant gunshot and a scream even more terrible than his own, was he dying? He would be a hero now, shiny medals and the adoration of his peers, a solemn speech and wild celebrations, and the light that burned his eyes and hurt his head, her almost beautiful face smiling at him and the other, never smiling monster. Who had died or were they all somehow still alive?

Hudson opened his eyes and stared up at Burton. "What the hell do you want?"

Burton had anticipated a hostile reaction. "I just thought I'd come and see how you were doing. You had quite a nasty knock."

"Yeah, and whose fault was that?" Hudson snarled. He raised himself up on one elbow. "You're as big a freak as she is, you know that." He was shouting with fury now. Other patients began to look around to see what the commotion was. A young doctor appeared at the far end of the ward and started running towards them.

Hysterical now, Hudson attempted to climb out of the bed. His head spinning and feeling like it was about to explode, he fell back upon the pillow, still screaming abuse as Burton stood at the end of the bed unable to move or reply. "Freak! Freak!" The Doctor pulled the curtain around Hudson's bed, cutting the two men off from each other's sight. A nurse arrived and disappeared behind the curtain. Burton could hear the Doctor and the nurse attempting to soothe Hudson as they administered a sedative.

Burton wanted desperately to leave. He was aware of the other patients regarding him suspiciously. It was obvious that they were all wondering what he had done to alarm a bedridden hero. The whole ward was aware that the brave young policeman had captured a notorious serial killer. Maybe Burton was a friend or accomplice of the serial killer come for revenge?

Burton was relieved when the Doctor finally emerged from the other side of the curtain. He smiled apologetically. "I just came to make sure he was okay."

"He's suffered a major concussion, and from what I can gather, underwent a severely traumatic experience earlier today. He is quite obviously still not himself. Are you a relative?"

"No. A colleague. We were working together when he was injured."

The Doctor seemed to be irritated by Burton's presence. "Then, hopefully you can appreciate the condition he is in. Coming in here and disturbing him won't do anyone any good, will it?"

Burton opened his mouth to say something in his defence, but then reconsidered. He was too tired to argue anymore. Let people think whatever they wanted to. What did it matter? No one would ever believe the truth anyway. They never did.

"I'd better be going."

As he left the ward the other patients shrank back as he passed them. He could still hear Hudson's accusing words echoing in his head.

He got home after ten. He dressed and took a shower, carefully scrubbing and rescrubbing every inch of his body until his skin was red raw. He still didn't feel clean.

The phone rang three times while he was showering. He ignored it. He dried himself carefully and put on his dressing gown. He went into the living room and put on some music. There were three new messages flashing on the answer phone. He deleted them without listening to them. He'd had enough of the rest of the world. He'd had enough of everything.

He settled back into his armchair and listened to the music that flooded out into the total darkness of the room. He knew he would not sleep tonight. Instead, he sat absolutely still, contemplating the night and awaiting the dawn which he hoped would eventually come.

5

Doctor Ballion glanced at the clock on the office wall and frowned. She was a tall, slender woman in her mid-thirties. She was naturally serious but when at work would deliberately make herself seem even more so. She was all too aware of the dangers of allowing her patients to find her personally attractive. It was more than a distraction; in therapy it could be ruinous, and ultimately extremely damaging to the people she was trying to help. She tried to make herself appear as nondescript as possible, hiding behind a pair of large, unflattering glasses and wearing officious suits in dull greys and light browns. She wore her hair pulled back and tied in a bun which gave her a somewhat severe demeanour. She exuded an efficient yet kindly manner, never allowing anyone to come too close. She had been briefly married in her early twenties. It was a mistake she was determined never to make again.

She started reading through Burton's notes again. She had to admit to herself that what she had read was intriguing. It was more what had been omitted rather than what had been included, though the little that she had been able to deduce was fascinating in itself. From what she had read she could build very little of an overall picture. Usually, she considered herself

very skilled at filling in the missing pieces in her patient's backgrounds but now she found herself confronted by only greater blanks.

Most intriguing was his apparent ability to track down violent criminals, with, what his file recorded, as an almost 'sixth sense'. She had read through the details of several of his cases. Again, and again the same phrase kept appearing referring to Burton's 'seemingly psychic powers.'

She knew this to be absurd and misleading and potentially harmful. She had made a study of so-called psychics as part of her doctorate research, and had come to the conclusion, that while their abilities were certainly remarkable, there was never anything remotely supernatural about them. Most of them had obviously been fraudsters preying upon the gullibility and desperation of people who were often vulnerable or susceptible to suggestion. A few others had appeared to possess powers that seemed at first to be almost entirely inexplicable. Some people it seemed were able to know things which they simply could not have known.

However, the more she studied the phenomena, the more she realised that however extraordinary they might at first appear, there were nevertheless always non-paranormal and often quite reasonable explanations. She eventually concluded that certain gifted individuals had somehow developed powers of deductive reasoning to an extraordinary degree. She believed that these worked at a subconscious level, which is why in many cases, the individual concerned did not know how they knew what they knew, and believed quite understandably that they were psychically gifted.

Her own sister, Jeanne, was one of these people as she had been able to witness throughout their life together. She surmised that Burton was also likely to fall into this category, although his abilities were unusual in that they had a genuinely beneficial and highly functional application.

She glanced up at the clock again. He was almost fifteen minutes late. She was slightly annoyed and disappointed though hardly surprised. It was a regular occurrence. Most police officers believed that they didn't need to see a counsellor and considered it a waste of time. In many cases they were right. They were used to dealing with disasters and trauma on a daily basis and most of them had found their own ways of coping with it. Many managed to desensitise themselves against the more than occasional horrors of the job and were able to develop a substantial degree of detachment from their work, often developing a macabre gallows humour which allowed them to confront and deal with situations which would otherwise be deeply traumatic. There was little she could do with these people – they didn't want her help, and probably didn't need it.

There were others though that most definitely did. One of the most important aspects of her work was to know which ones they were. They often didn't realise it themselves until it was too late. That was why the

brief interviews had been made compulsory after any exposure to any particularly violent or traumatic incident.

Twenty minutes. That was long enough to wait. She sighed, knowing that she would probably have to waste the remainder of the morning chasing up the whereabouts of Detective Inspector Burton. She decided to get herself a coffee from the machine first before she started phoning round. She crossed the office, fumbling in her handbag for change. She opened the door and was startled to see a man standing outside, directly facing her.

From his guilty expression she guessed that he had been standing there for a considerable amount of time. Their eyes met momentarily, and she could feel him scrutinising her intently as though in one glance he could weigh her soul and guess all her darkest sins.

"Sorry I'm late," apologised Burton.

"That's okay. I was just going to get a coffee. Would you like one?"

Burton nodded. "I'll give you a hand."

They began walking along the corridor in silence. Doctor Ballion quickly realised that Burton was in a far from conversational mood. From his demeanour she guessed that he was not a chatty person even at the best of times. Everything about his manner and appearance, from the way he avoided direct eye contact to the way he maintained a steady half metre distance from her suggested a wary evasiveness. He was a closed book of a man. She realised instantly that he would be a challenge – though she hoped, an interesting one.

Two other police officers passed them in the corridor. She observed that they stopped talking as they passed by and then resumed their conversation again once they were past. Burton didn't give any indication that he had noticed.

"How do you like your coffee?" she asked as they reached the machine.

"Black, one sugar."

"Same as me." This was a mirroring technique she would often use to create a rapport with her clients and to put them at their ease. She had the feeling that Burton was aware of this.

Burton got the two coffees and carried them back to Doctor Ballion's office all the while maintaining the same cautious distance from her.

At her door, Burton seemed reluctant to enter. "Maybe this isn't such a good idea. I don't want to waste your time."

"You won't be. And I won't be wasting yours. We'll just be two people chatting over a cup of coffee. How can that ever be a waste of time?"

Without replying, Burton followed her into her office. It was not quite how he expected it to look. He had imagined a full-length psychiatrists couch or at least a desk with two chairs on opposite sides. Instead, there were two comfy looking sofa chairs set at right angles. The room exuded a

sense of cosy familiarity. The coasters had pictures of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* upon them. Burton placed the two coffees carefully down.

Doctor Ballion gestured towards one of the sofa seats. "Please make yourself comfortable."

After a moment's hesitation, Burton awkwardly took a seat and gazed at the still swirling coffee.

Doctor Ballion pretended to scan through her notes. She had already virtually memorised them, but she found that her clients often found this little ritual reassuring. "So let me introduce myself and tell you a little about what we do here. My name's Doctor Ballion, but you can call me Laura. My role is primarily that of a stress counsellor. That basically means that it's my job to meet with police officers such as yourself who are exposed to high levels of stress in the course of their duties, and then I help them to find ways of coping with these stresses."

Burton gave a slight nod to indicate he understood.

"Firstly, we begin with a preliminary informal interview and then, from there, we can either proceed to a process of ongoing counselling or maybe a few drop-in sessions on a casual basis if we feel that it would be beneficial. Most fundamentally, we're here to help you with any emotional issues you may be experiencing in or outside of work. Now, do you have any questions before we begin?"

"No. It seems quite straightforward," Doctor Ballion got the impression that he was determined to get this over as quickly as possible.

"Okay, then. Let's begin with yesterday's events if you feel comfortable discussing them with me." She glanced at Burton expectantly.

He paused momentarily before he answered. "There's really not very much to discuss. The whole incident only lasted less than ten minutes. I got a few cuts on my forehead but nothing serious."

"And how did you feel immediately after you shot the suspect?"

Burton visibly flinched. "I didn't feel anything. I was just relieved that when I pulled the trigger the gun barrel was pointing towards her and not towards me."

"You mean you didn't know which way the gun was pointing at the time?"

"No. It was impossible to tell, but I had to risk it otherwise she would have throttled me."

"I see. And how do you feel now that you've had some time to reflect?"

"Fine."

It was obvious that he was lying.

She raised her eyebrows at him cynically and awaited a more truthful answer.

"Really. I'm fine."

"I don't believe you." Doctor Ballion found that this type of abrupt approach often enjoyed greater success than a more subtle manner.

Burton didn't reply for some thirty seconds as though selecting his words with incredible care. "I felt...unclean."

She had to admit she was surprised by his answer. "In what way?"

Again, the long pause. "I don't know how to explain it. I just felt like I wanted to get away from everyone I knew and everything I knew and just scrub myself and keep on scrubbing till all the blood and the filth would be washed away and I could feel clean again." He stopped suddenly as though realising that he had revealed too much. "Sorry."

"Why are you apologising?"

Burton picked up one of the spare coasters and gazed at it. "I just feel bad burdening you with my problems."

"Don't. That's what I'm here for. Do you still feel unclean now?"

"Yes."

"The incident is still fresh in your mind. It's quite normal to feel this way. The emotions you are feeling will fade with time."

"Supposing they don't?"

"Then you will have to develop ways of dealing with them. I can help you. How long have you had these feelings? Is it since joining the police force?"

Burton took a long sip of his coffee and shook his head. "No. They have always been there. It's as though I was born tainted."

"I see. So, you felt like this even when you were a child?"

Burton closed his eyes. "Yes. It's as though I was born with this invisible stain on the inside of me that only I am aware of and that it has been growing ever blacker and is spreading outwards and I know one day it will utterly consume me." He opened his eyes again. His expression was a mixture of wonder and horror. "I didn't mean to tell you that. I don't know why I did."

Doctor Ballion smiled. "I'm glad that you did. It's good that you're able to open up."

Burton looked acutely embarrassed. "I think maybe I should go now." He rose as if to leave, knocking over the half empty coffee cup as he did so.

Doctor Ballion grabbed him gently by the wrist and eased him gently back into his seat. She surprised herself by doing this. She was not naturally a tactile person, and she had a strict rule about physical contact with patients. She pulled out a tissue and dabbed at the spilt coffee. "I'd prefer it if you stayed. We're making a lot of progress, don't you think?"

Burton did not reply, but neither did he move, and she interpreted this as a good sign. She sensed that at some level he desperately wanted to talk to her. "Would you like another coffee?"

"No. I'm fine."

"Ok, let's continue. Just a few background details. It says here that you were brought up by your maternal aunt. What was she like?"

"Religious. Very religious."

"Roman Catholic?"

Burton nodded.

"Are you a practising Catholic?"

"No. I stopped going to church a long time ago."

"Any special reason?"

"Yes," he looked straight into her eyes, and she felt herself shudder under the intense scrutiny of his gaze. "I stopped believing in God."

Doctor Ballion sought refuge in her notes. She was aware that she had begun to blush and fought hard to conceal it. She could still feel him staring at her. She felt like an insect trapped beneath a magnifying glass. She took a sip of coffee to reassure herself. "My notes seem somewhat incomplete. You left school at the age of sixteen and then twelve years later you joined the police force. What were you doing in between?"

She was relieved to find that his gaze had returned to the coffee table. She felt as though an oppressive weight had been removed.

"Nothing much. A lot of travelling and a few dead-end jobs. Nothing interesting."

"Travelling must have been interesting. Where did you go?" she was relieved that he was opening up gradually and believed that she had won over some of his resistance.

"Europe mainly. I was very interested in medieval history. I saw almost all the main castles in Europe. It took me some eight years altogether."

Doctor Ballion was extremely impressed. "That's quite amazing. How did you support yourself?"

"I lived very cheaply. I walked everywhere and camped at nights."

"You walked all the way across Europe?" Doctor Ballion asked incredulously, "How far did you get?"

"Jerusalem. I spent about eighteen months exploring the Holy Land and then I walked back to England."

Burton had a faraway expression on his face as though he were still exploring distant lands.

"It must have been quite difficult for you to readjust to life in London."

Burton nodded. "It wasn't easy," he replied and something in his voice suggested that he still hadn't adjusted and believed that he never would.

"And how do you feel about your life now?" She asked the question casually, hoping that she would catch him off guard and that he would reveal hidden truths in his answer, but the length of his pause told her it was not so.

At last, he spoke, "Uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable, how?"

"I mean I don't belong now."

She glanced up at him, genuinely startled. "Can you explain that last sentence?"

Flushed and awkward, he rose from his seat. "I mean I don't belong here. Sorry, I don't feel very well. I have to go."

He was already moving in the direction of the door. He stopped suddenly and turned back to her. "Are you going to treat her as well?"

"Who do you mean?"

"The suspect. I know it may sound odd, but I felt very sorry for her afterwards."

"Because you shot her?"

"No, because of everything that had led up to that. Because of everyone who had made her the way she was."

Burton looked down and noticed he was still holding one of the Van Gogh 'Sunflowers' coasters in his hand. "I felt that she was not naturally a violent or evil person. I felt that she had been treated so badly by others all her life because of the way she looked, because she was different, that it made her become evil somehow."

He awkwardly crossed the room and placed the coaster back on the table.

A moment later, Doctor Ballion found herself alone in the room. She was surprised at herself for feeling so exasperated. She had witnessed this scenario countless times before, the patients often fearing that they were getting too close to confronting their fears would make some feeble excuse and leave. She knew that at the next session they would have composed themselves and feel strong enough to openly discuss their issues. But this time it had been different. She felt as though she had been tantalisingly close to discovering something, but it had been snatched away from her at the very last moment.

She tried to convince herself that it didn't matter – that she would somehow manage to discover the truth about him during their next session. There was plenty of time.

She pencilled a note in her diary reminding her to inform Commissioner Trantor to insist that his officer attend another session. This done, she began reading through the notes for her next patient.

But still, the mystery surrounding Burton continued to nag at the back of her mind.

6

Dusk was rapidly descending as Burton left the New Scotland Yard building. The London streets were crowded and noisy and he knew that he would find little solace in them. His compulsion was to be away from

people. He needed to be alone however unbearable that might prove to be. In a few hours the streets would be far quieter, and he would be able to walk them in peace, but for now, he must get home and hide himself away from the rest of the world.

Although he detested it, he realised that the quickest way home would be the Underground.

He walked along Victoria Embankment until he reached Westminster Station where he plunged reluctantly into the bowels of the city. A mass of impatient people swarmed about him as he bought his ticket. He allowed himself to be swept along until he found himself struggling for space on the packed platform.

He felt someone jab him sharply in the side with their elbow as they jostled past. All around him he could feel the hot, fetid breath of a thousand people filling the dank air and could smell the accumulated stench of the city oozing from the pores of their bodies. He had never felt such a revulsion towards the human race before. He wanted to scream, but he bit his tongue until he could feel the blood in his mouth.

At last, his train arrived. The door nearest him opened and two people got off. Another dozen tried to force their way onto the already crammed carriage.

Against his will he found himself carried along with the deluge of bodies heaving around him. Somehow he found himself crushed into the carriage, unable to move his body as he struggled to remain upon his feet.

The doors shuddered to a close and there was no escape. Burton grasped at one of the handrails, closed his eyes, and prayed for the journey to be over.

He could hear the phone ringing as he unlocked the door to his flat. He made no attempt to hurry. The answerphone kicked in as he walked into the living room.

"Hello Alex. It's me. Please pick up if you're there."

It was Trantor. Burton's hand reached out in the direction of the phone and then stopped. He listened, hesitating, as Trantor continued.

"I'm guessing that you've gone for one of your long walks and you're not home yet." There was a pause before he continued. "I don't know if you've had a chance to hear the news today, but the Kent police have found a body washed up on the beach near Hastings. I know this probably isn't the best time, but..."

Not wanting to hear anymore Burton moved into the bathroom and turned on the shower, drowning out the sound of Trantor's voice from the other room. He had had enough. Enough of death. Enough of horror. Enough of himself.

He undressed and climbed into the shower where he began scrubbing himself until his skin was red and raw.

An hour later, he dressed himself in clean clothes. He realised that he didn't feel any better. He was still shaking slightly, and his head had begun to pound with an intense insistence.

He made himself a cup of coffee and put the evening news on. Settling in an armchair, he muted the television with the remote.

A succession of brutal images flickered before his eyes in a silent storm of violence and catastrophe – an armoured tank rumbling down the ruins of a Middle Eastern street, oblivious to the ragged children futilely hurling rubble in its direction - another street in another city, a small army of men in balaclavas waving swastika flags advanced upon a battalion of police in riot gear – the burning remains of a village in Africa, corpses strewn in the dust - a refugee camp where women and children huddled together for warmth whilst armed guards patrolled the perimeter fence - a close-up of an elderly woman's beaten and bruised face, another shot of countless stitches extending along her swollen red eye – *I never thought death had undone so many* – a beach in England, a journalist interviewing a police-officer, an blurred amateur snapshot of a decomposing corpse. Burton could stand it no more. He pressed the remote and the unending catalogue of human catastrophe disappeared.

Burton crossed to the window and gazed out. It was almost wholly dark now. He knew that the streets would be almost entirely deserted within another hour. It was a still clear night and in the distance he could see the Thames glittering in the moonlight as it twisted and weaved through the city..

He quickly put on his shoes and coat and plunged into the beckoning night. He breathed in deeply, luxuriating in the night air. He looked at his watch. It was nearly half-nine.

He started walking.

Reaching the riverbank, he turned left and walked for over an hour alongside abandoned dockyards until he reached the Greenwich foot tunnel. He crossed under the river and continued walking along West Ferry Road, never meeting anyone, his reverie disturbed only by the speeding cars which roared past him. In the distance he could briefly hear the smashing of glass followed by the manic shrieking of a car alarm.

He was in a more populated area now. People came stumbling out of pubs and staggered past him. He continued onwards, oblivious to them all. In a doorway he could hear someone vomiting, and somewhere down a small side road, he could hear two groups of young women screaming obscenities at one another.

He had reached Tower Bridge now. It was after midnight. Someone lurched out of a doorway at him and slurred something unintelligible. Burton hurried over the bridge and turned right and down Tooley Street.

He could see London Bridge not far off in the distance. His intention was to cross the river at every bridge until he reached Chelsea Bridge and then to turn around and repeat the process until he eventually reached home. He knew from long experience that this journey would take him until dawn to complete, and that it would allow him to become exhausted enough to sleep. This was his only remaining desire. To sleep and to forget all that had happened.

He could see something white shining in the moonlight upon the bridge. It was a young woman in a long white dress. As he approached the bridge he realised with some alarm that she was not actually standing on the bridge but had somehow managed to climb onto its underside. He could hear the sound of beeping car horns and the voices of many people shouting. Without knowing why, he began running towards the bridge.

As he came closer, he could see a crowd had gathered above the girl. He could now hear what they were shouting – a single word over and over again, “Jump! Jump! Jump!”

Looking over the edge of the bridge he had a clear view of the girl. She couldn't have been any older than nineteen. Her face was very pale and her hair danced about her in the wind. Her expression was one of absolute calm.

Burton wondered where he had seen her before. He tried to call out to her, but his words were lost within the jeers of the mob.

In desperation he started to climb over the edge of the bridge towards her. He reached out his hand. Her shoulder was only a fingertip away. He knew with blazing certainty that if he could grab her he would have strength enough to pull her to safety. He leaned out a little further. So close now.

She turned her head and smiled serenely at him.

He watched as she plummeted through the night air into the river below. He opened his mouth to scream but no sound emerged.

She hardly seemed to make a splash as she disappeared beneath the water.

He wanted to jump, to follow her. To save her, but he knew it would be futile and that they would both drown.

He waited for her to reappear above the surface, but she never did.

7

2008

It was going to be a good day.

The jogger had already decided this the previous night as he had carefully laid out his clothes for the morning's run. Yes. He was

determined that this should be a good day. No – it would be a great day! He would get everything off to a healthy, productive start with a brisk two-mile run along the beach and then home for a quick shower and healthy breakfast before setting down at his desk and beginning work at eight-thirty on the proverbial dot.

He had suffered a minor health scare a few months previously and his doctor had advised him to make a few lifestyle changes. An improved diet and more exercise were the obvious improvements he could make, but he had decided that it was also necessary to reduce his stress levels as much as possible. To this end, he had decided to leave behind city life with all its attendant stressors and find somewhere he could live a quieter yet equally productive life. He had spent several days researching the healthiest places to live in the country and after spending a week or so visiting various potential new homes, he had settled on the seaside town of Bexhill on Sea on the East Sussex coast. He had fallen in love with the little town the first time he had seen it. He had feared that he might become bored, but he had soon found himself adjusting to the more tranquil pace of life compared to the ever busy city. He had no regrets about leaving his old life behind.

Yes, this was going to be a great day!

He took a deep breath of air, his lungs filling with the extra oxygen, enriching his bloodstream. He could feel the good it was doing him. He smiled as he exhaled. He kept a steady pace, luxuriating in the dawn solitude. There was not a cloud to be seen and soon the sky would be ablaze with azure. He felt glad that he alone in all the world would be there to appreciate the breaking of this glorious new day.

The quietly rhythmic sound of the gentle waves was deeply soothing, their gentle music broken only by the harsh cries of the seagulls further along the beach.

I will definitely do this every morning before work, he promised himself. I feel so much better for it. He let out a loud whoop of joy as he leapt easily over the large piece of rotten timber upon which the gulls had alighted, scattering them into the sky.

He continued running for a few seconds and then stumbled to a standstill.

He stood absolutely still as his mind attempted to register what he had seen. It couldn't be. He could hear the sound of the gulls now just behind him as they returned to their feeding. A wave broke over his feet, soaking them. He didn't notice.

Unaware that he was doing so, he very slowly turned round and stared at the decomposing human torso.

Excerpted from I Have Always Been here by Jason Fité

Copyright © 2026. All rights reserved. No parts of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without the permission of the publisher.

www.peracals.com