



ONE

Tom Thorne leaned down and gently picked up the small glass bottle from the bedside table. It was already open, the white cap lying next to the syringe, a few drops of cloudy liquid pooled beneath the tip of the needle. He lifted the bottle and took a sniff. The faint smell was unfamiliar; something like sticking plasters or disinfectant. He offered it up to the woman waiting behind him, raised it towards her face.

‘What do you reckon?’

He had spent the last half an hour taking a good look around the house. In the bathroom he had found plenty of medication, but that was not particularly surprising given the ages of those involved. Nothing seemed to have been disturbed and there were no signs of forced entry, save for the broken window in the back door. That was down to the





woman now taking a good long sniff at the bottle, a young PC named Nina Woodley. She and her partner had been the first officers at the scene after the dispatch had been sent out.

‘That’s insulin,’ Woodley said, finally. ‘My brother’s a diabetic, so . . .’

Thorne put the bottle back. He pulled off the thin plastic gloves and stuffed them back into the pocket of his Met vest.

‘Thing is,’ Woodley said, ‘it’s normally prescribed.’

‘So?’

‘There’s no label on the bottle.’

They both turned as the bedroom door opened and one of the PCs who had been stationed downstairs stuck his head around it. Before the officer could speak, the on-call doctor pushed past him into the room; young, rosy-cheeked and ruggie-buggie-ish. He spent no more than a few minutes examining the bodies, while Thorne watched from the corner of the room. Downstairs, Woodley hammered a small piece of MDF in place across the broken window while another PC made tea for everyone.

‘Right then,’ the doctor said. He closed his bag and checked his watch to get an accurate time for the pronouncement. ‘Life extinct.’ He sounded rather more cheerful than anyone had a right to be at quarter to four on a drizzly October morning.

Thorne nodded, the formalities out of the way.

‘Nice easy one for you.’





‘How long?’ Thorne asked.

The doctor glanced back at the bodies, as though one final look might make the difference. ‘At least twenty-four hours, probably a bit more.’

‘Sounds about right,’ Thorne said. The emergency call had come in just after 1.00 a.m. One of the children – a man, now living in Edinburgh – was concerned that he had not been able to get either of his parents on the phone since teatime the previous day. Neither of his parents was reliable when it came to answering their mobile phones, he had told the operator, but there was no reason why they should not be picking up at home.

Searching the house an hour before, Thorne had found both mobiles, side by side in the living room. Half a dozen missed calls on each.

‘Assuming they go to bed nine, ten o’clock,’ the doctor said, ‘dead pretty soon after that, I would have thought. Obviously it depends on what they did, how long they waited before . . . you know, but insulin’s a good way to do it. The right dosage and it’s all over in about an hour.’

‘Right.’

‘Very popular with doctors, as a matter of fact. As a way to go, I mean. If you’re that way inclined.’

Thorne nodded, thinking that coppers were more likely to be ‘that way inclined’ than almost anybody else he could think of. Wondering how most of them would choose to do it.





How *he* would choose to do it.

The door opened again and Woodley appeared. ‘CID’s here.’

‘Here we go,’ Thorne said. ‘Fun and games.’

‘I’ll leave you to it then,’ the doctor said.

Thorne said, ‘Right, thanks,’ and watched the doctor gather up his jacket from the corner of the bed and leave the room without bothering to close the door. Pills, most probably, Thorne decided, but he guessed that if he were feeling desperate enough, then he might have other ideas.

Just a shame that the quickest ways were also the messiest.

He turned back to look at the bodies on the bed.

They look tired, Thorne thought. Like they’d had enough. Paper-thin skin on the woman’s face. The man: spider webs of cracked veins on his cheeks . . .

He could already hear the voices from the hall below; a bored-sounding, mockney twang: ‘Up here, is it?’ Heavy footsteps on the stairs, before the man appeared in the doorway and stood, taking a cursory look around the room.

Detective Inspector Paul Binns was based at Lewisham police station, as Thorne was, though CID worked on a different floor, so their paths had crossed no more than a few times in the three months Thorne had been working there. Binns was several years younger than Thorne, somewhere in his mid-forties, and he was carrying a lot less weight. He had shaved what little hair he had left to the





scalp and over-compensated for the appearance and demeanour of a cartoon undertaker with a grey suit and a tie that might have been a test for colour blindness. He gave Thorne a nod and walked over to the bed as though he were browsing in the furniture department of John Lewis.

‘So?’ he asked after a minute. ‘What am I doing here?’

Before Thorne could answer, a message came through from one of his team’s patrol cars. Things were kicking off at a house party on the Kidbourne estate and it was suggested that Thorne might want to get down there. He said that he was still tied up, ordered two more units to head across, then turned the volume on his radio down. ‘I told one of my constables to call you,’ he said.

‘Yeah, I know *why* I’m here.’ The nod from the doorway had clearly been as polite as the detective intended to get. He pointed towards the bodies, straightened his cuffs. ‘Seems fairly straightforward, doesn’t it?’

What the doctor had said.

Thorne moved to join Binns at the end of the bed. ‘There’s something off.’

Binns folded his arms, barely suppressed a long-suffering sigh. ‘Go on then, let’s hear it.’

‘The old woman took her teeth out,’ Thorne said.

‘*What?*’

‘False teeth. Top set. They’re in a plastic case in the bathroom, probably the same place she leaves them every night.’





‘So?’

‘You take your teeth out when you’re going to bed. When you’re going to sleep, right? That’s what you do on an ordinary night, isn’t it? It’s not what you’d do if you were planning to do . . . this. It’s not what you’d do if you and your old man were going to take an overdose of insulin and drift off to sleep in each other’s arms. Not if you knew you weren’t ever going to wake up.’

Binns stared at him.

‘It’s not how she would have wanted to be *found*,’ Thorne said.

‘You knew her, did you?’ Binns shook his head, sniffed, snapped his fingers. ‘Next!’

Thorne took a breath, took care to keep his voice nice and even. ‘Where did they get the insulin from? There’s no label on the bottle, so it obviously wasn’t prescribed. Nothing anywhere else in the house to suggest either of them was diabetic.’

‘They could have got it anywhere.’

‘So could a third party.’

‘I’m not exactly getting excited here.’

‘Where did it come from?’

‘How should I know?’ Binns said. ‘Internet? I saw there was a computer downstairs.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Come on, you can find anything on there, you look hard enough.’





‘Maybe.’

‘You decide to top yourself, you find a way, don’t you?’

Thorne said nothing.

‘That it, then?’ Binns asked. ‘The false choppers and the insulin? Seriously?’

Thorne stared down again at the bodies of John and Margaret Cooper, aged seventy-five and seventy-three respectively. The duvet had been pulled up high, but it was obvious that Margaret Cooper’s arm was wrapped around her husband’s chest, her face pressed against his shoulder. Spoons, he thought. Couples ‘spooned’ in some of the old songs his mother had listened to, crooning love’s tune or whatever it was; the same songs this pair might have heard on the radio when they were teenagers. The old woman’s mouth hung slightly open. The cheeks, hollowed. The top lip sucked in towards the gap where the plate would otherwise have been. Her husband’s lips were curled back, yellowing teeth showing, a sliver of greyish tongue just visible. His eyes were screwed tightly shut.

They had died pressed close to one another, but Thorne could not pretend that they looked remotely peaceful.

‘Anything else?’ Binns asked. ‘I’ve got paperwork I could be getting on with.’

There *was* something. Thorne *knew* there was.

His eye had taken something in within those few seconds of entering the room for the first time: a piece of visual information that had not quite made sense, but which his





brain had so far failed to process fully. A shape or a shadow, a *something* that was wrong. It stubbornly refused to come to him, like a tune he recognised but could not place.

Without making it too obvious, he looked around the room again.

The wardrobe, closed. The curtains, drawn. Cosmetics and other bits and pieces on the dressing table: hairbrush, wallet, wet-wipes. A few coins in a small china bowl. A woman's dressing gown draped across one chair, a man's clothes neatly folded on another. Shoes and slippers underneath. A biro, book and glasses case on the wife's bedside table, a paperback book of crossword puzzles on the floor by the side of the bed, a large black handbag hung on the bedstead. The bottle and syringe on the husband's side. A half-empty water glass. A tube of ointment, a can of Deep Heat . . .

What was wrong with the picture?

'There isn't a note,' Thorne said.

Binns turned round, leaned back against the bedstead. 'You know that means nothing,' he said.

Thorne knew very well, but it had been the best he could come up with while he tried and failed to identify what was really bothering him. His friend Phil Hendricks had told him a great deal about suicide during the last investigation they had worked on together . . . the last case Thorne had worked as a detective. The pathologist had recently attended a seminar on the subject and delighted in giving





Thorne chapter and verse. The fact was that in the majority of cases, people who killed themselves did not leave notes. One of the many myths.

‘I know what you’re doing, by the way,’ Binns said.

‘Oh, you do?’ Thorne ignored the burst of twitter from his radio. Reports of a suspected burglary in Brockley. The violence escalating at the house party on the Kidbourne. ‘I’m all ears.’

Binns smiled. ‘Yeah, I mean considering where you were before and where you are *now* . . . it makes perfect sense that you’re going a bit stir crazy, or whatever. Only natural that you might want to make something ordinary like this into . . . something else.’ He casually checked the mobile phone that had not left his hand. ‘I understand, mate. I sympathise, honest.’

Patronise, Thorne thought.

‘If I was in your position, *Christ* knows what I’d be doing.’

‘You’d be getting pissed off with smartarse detectives who think they know it all.’

‘Really?’ Binns feigned a shocked expression. ‘What type did *you* used to be then?’

Thorne wrapped his hand around the old-fashioned metal bedstead and squeezed. ‘I want to get the HAT car round,’ he said.

It was the job of detectives on the Homicide Assessment Team to evaluate any possible crime scene and to collect





vital evidence where necessary before handing the case over. It was solely their decision as to whether or not a 'sudden' death had occurred. A *suspicious* death.

'Well, you know how *that* works,' Binns walked across and leaned back against a wall next to an old-fashioned dressing table. 'Different system these days. Between your lot and my lot, I mean. Different to your day anyway, I would have thought.'

'You'd have thought right,' Thorne said.

Your day. Nearly twenty-five years since Tom Thorne had pulled on the 'Queen's Cloth' every day to go to work. Since he'd worn a uniform.

Crisp white shirt with his two shiny inspector's pips on the epaulettes.

Black, clip-on tie.

The fucking cap . . .

'It's my decision,' Binns said. 'Whether or not to bring the HAT team in.'

'I know how it works,' Thorne said.

Binns told him anyway. 'Only a *detective* inspector can make that call.'

'Got it,' Thorne said. 'So, on you go.' Binns had been right to suggest that the procedure had been somewhat different two decades earlier. The protocol a little more flexible. The chain of command not followed quite so religiously. There might have been a few less backsides covered, but it was certainly quicker.





‘Frankly, I can’t really see the point.’

‘Can’t you?’ Thorne said.

‘That stuff about the false teeth is near enough laughable and I don’t think anyone’s going to give a toss where the insulin came from.’ Binns cast an eye around the room and shrugged. ‘I pull Homicide in here and they’re only going to say the same thing, aren’t they? You know, we both end up looking like idiots.’

‘All the same,’ Thorne said, ‘I’d be happier if you made the call.’

Binns shook his head. ‘Not going to happen.’

‘Right,’ Thorne said. He could feel the blood rising to his face. ‘Because of where *you* are and where *I* am. Prick . . .’

Binns reddened too, just a little, but otherwise gave a good impression of being impervious to an insult he’d clearly been on the receiving end of before. ‘You think whatever you like, pal, but I’m not going to waste anybody else’s time just because you’re seeing murders where there aren’t any.’ He walked towards the door, then turned. ‘Maybe you should have taken a bit more time off after what happened. Maybe you should have chucked it in altogether. King of all cock-ups, that one.’

Thorne could not really argue, so did not bother trying.

‘Take this up with the MIT boys if you want,’ Binns said, gesturing back towards the bed. ‘We’ve got a Murder





Investigation Team at Lewisham, haven't we? A nice big one.'

A team just like the one Thorne used to be part of. 'Yeah, well, I might just do that.'

'I mean it's up to you, if you want even more people taking the piss.'

Thorne was suddenly more aware than usual of the various *pro-active* items attached to his Met vest.

Cuffs, baton, CS gas . . .

'I'll be off then,' Binns said, straightening his cuffs one final time. 'Leave you to wind this up.' The detective turned away and was checking his BlackBerry again as he walked out of the bedroom.

Thorne took half a minute, let his breathing return to normal, then bellowed for Woodley. He told her to contact Lothian and Borders police and get someone to deliver the death message to the Coopers' son in Edinburgh. He told her to find out if the dead couple had any other children, and, if so, to make sure the message was delivered to them wherever they were. He told her to stay put until the on-call Coroner's officer arrived.

'Try not to disturb anything in this room though,' he said. 'Not just yet.'

Woodley raised an eyebrow. 'Guv.'

Thorne took one last look round, grabbed his raincoat and cap then hurried downstairs and out to the car. No more than a few minutes with the blues and twos to the





Kidbourne and if things were still lively he really felt like wading in. There was every chance he would find himself on the end of a smack or two, but it could not make him feel any worse.





TWO

It was almost eight o'clock in the morning by the time Thorne got back to the flat in Tulse Hill and, as was usually the case if he didn't miss seeing her altogether, he walked in to find Helen just about to leave. She was in the kitchen, which opened out into an L-shaped living area: a sofa, armchair, stereo system and TV; the floor littered as usual with toys and children's books. She finished buttoning her son's coat and removed an uneaten piece of toast from her mouth. 'God, you all right?'

Thorne tossed his raincoat on to a kitchen chair, yanked off the clip-on tie and unbuttoned his shirt. He touched a fingertip to the lump beneath his right eye and winced a little. 'I'll live.'

'Did you wind up that bolshy skipper again?' Helen asked. 'I said she'd deck you one day.'





Thorne smiled and walked across to flick on the kettle. ‘Some idiot fancied a party and thought it would be a good idea to put the address on Facebook. Three hundred people trying to crash one of the flats on the Kidbourne.’

‘Sounds like fun.’

‘It was once we sent a couple of dogs in.’ Thorne reached up to grab a mug. ‘Cleared the place faster than a Phil Collins single.’

Helen laughed and tore into her toast.

‘Nicked half a dozen for affray.’ He touched his face again as he poured the hot water. ‘Plus the lad that did this.’

‘Nice.’ Helen chewed. ‘Other headlines?’

Thorne shrugged. ‘A few break-ins.’ He mashed the teabag against the side of the mug and thought through some of the reports he’d signed off on at the end of the shift. ‘A three-way knife fight come chucking-out time at the White Lion. Two kids trying to smash up the KFC with baseball bats, because *apparently* they got beans when they asked for coleslaw . . .’

‘Fair enough,’ Helen said, stepping out into the hall.

‘A bus driver assaulted with a machete after he told a woman to stop pissing on his bus—’

‘What, the *woman* had the machete?’ Helen reappeared in the doorway, one arm inside a long down coat.

‘Obviously,’ Thorne said. ‘A shiny new Volvo driven straight into the front of a house on the High Road when





someone tried to nick it. The normal quota of pissheads, the usual domestic argy-bargy. Oh, and a bit of dogging in the car park behind Comet.'

'Well, no harm treating yourself after a long night, is there?'

He dropped the used teabag into the bin. 'I was only looking, honestly!'

'Nice easy shift, then?'

Thorne turned. He cradled the mug as he watched Helen check that everything she needed for work was in her bag, then hang the bag with everything Alfie would need over the handles of the pushchair. 'There were a couple of bodies as well,' he said. 'An old couple, dead in bed.'

Helen looked up. 'A couple? What, they killed themselves?'

Alfie wandered across to the cupboards next to Thorne, began opening and shutting one of them, enjoying the noise.

'Probably,' Thorne said.

'Probably?'

Thorne could not quite read her expression. Concern? Suspicion? They still did not know one another quite well enough yet. 'It's fine,' he said.

'Sure?'

'I had a bit of a run-in with some DI about it, that's all.'

'Doesn't sound like you.'

Thorne smiled. He knew when she was being sarcastic





well enough. ‘Tosser wouldn’t give the necessary *authorisation*.’ He took a mouthful of tea to wash away the taste of the word. The memory of his altercation with Binns.

‘Listen, I need to get going . . .’ Helen moved over to collect her son. She lifted him up and plonked him down in the pushchair, began fastening the straps.

‘Why don’t I take him?’ Thorne asked. He stepped across, took the small woollen hat from Helen’s hand and put it on the boy’s head. Once or twice, when Helen had been running very late, Thorne had walked her eighteen-month-old son down to the childminder’s. He enjoyed the time he and Alfie spent together, but the shift patterns meant there was precious little of it. Precious little with his mother, come to that.

Ships in the night, especially when Thorne was on the graveyard shift.

‘It’s fine,’ Helen said. She kissed him and straightened her son’s hat. ‘You get to bed.’

‘It’s no trouble.’

‘Nana,’ Alfie shouted.

Helen said, ‘When we get to Janine’s,’ and pushed her son out towards the front door. ‘I’ll call you . . .’

‘Have a good one,’ Thorne said.

After a few seconds she reappeared, buttoning her coat, while from the hallway Alfie continued to demand a second breakfast. ‘We can talk about this later if you want,’ she said. ‘OK?’





‘Nothing to talk about,’ Thorne said. He turned around to occupy himself, wiping away the ring his mug had left on the worktop, then putting the milk back in the fridge, until he heard the front door close.

He carried his tea across to the kitchen table. He spent a minute or two turning the pages of the previous day’s *Evening Standard*. He moved across and switched on the TV in the corner, watched the news without taking any of it in.

Three months, since he and Helen Weeks had begun more or less living together. ‘More or less’, because they had never really talked about it as a formal arrangement, the understanding being that as long as he was based at Lewisham, it was far more convenient for Thorne to stay in Tulse Hill than it was for him to travel all the way down from his own place in Kentish Town. They had talked once or twice about renting Thorne’s flat out, but Thorne was reluctant, despite the fact that the extra income would have come in useful. He didn’t particularly want strangers in his place and could not be bothered with the legal hassles of being a landlord, but if he were being really honest, it was more to do with the hope that he might find himself back in north London sooner rather than later.

The truth was, Thorne would always be a north Londoner and anywhere south of the South Bank still felt alien to him. Sprawling and soulless; dun-coloured. The air just that little bit harder to breathe. Estate agents and arty types in the





south-east doing their best to make ‘edgy’ and ‘gritty’ sound like selling points. The better-off in the greener bits talking about the tennis or the rugby or the deer in Richmond Park and all of them looking enviously across the water towards Camden, Islington and Hackney. The abysmal transport links and the terrible football teams . . .

Thorne knew very well that a good many south Londoners would view north London with the same horror, but he didn’t care. North London was the city he knew, that he loved.

Not that he had said any of that to Helen.

He still crossed the river as often as he could. He went back to meet up with Phil Hendricks at the Grafton Arms or the Bengal Lancer, and occasionally with Dave Holland, a DS in the Murder Squad at Becke House in Colindale. Thorne’s old squad . . .

‘How you finding it?’ Holland had said, the last time. Then he’d seen the look on Thorne’s face and gone back to studying his pint, knowing he could not have asked a more stupid question if he’d tried.

Three months, since the case that had brought Thorne and Helen together, the case that had seen him demoted to uniform.

‘Not a demotion strictly speaking, of course,’ the chief superintendent had told him. ‘You’re still an inspector at the end of the day.’ The man had barely been able to conceal his glee at finally being shot of Thorne, having tried on





many previous occasions. 'Who knows? You might end up feeling that this was a very good move.'

Slapped down, that was how Thorne *felt*. Though bearing in mind how he had earned it, he supposed that he'd got off relatively lightly. He knew that what he had done – what he had *needed* to do – to ensure a young mother's survival during an armed siege in a local newsagent's was never going to play well with the powers that be. Ultimately though – as he told himself often, pulling on that crisp white shirt with the epaulettes, straightening that cap – he had saved Detective Sergeant Helen Weeks and, much to the surprise of both of them, ended up in bed with her.

'*Another* one?' Hendricks had said when Thorne had told him. 'After the last one turned out so well?'

Thorne's previous girlfriend, another copper. They had split up only a few months before he and Helen had got together.

'You want to knock this business with women on the head, mate. Come to the dark side.'

'I don't think so.'

'You know it's always been a matter of time.'

'Actually, it's not even the sex that bothers me,' Thorne had said. 'It's having to like small dogs and musicals.' It was the kind of crack Thorne could get away with, as Hendricks was the least stereotypical gay man anyone could imagine. Heavily tattooed with multiple piercings and likely to break someone's arm if they so much as mentioned Judy Garland.





'I give it three months,' Hendricks had said. 'Tops.'

Thorne took his tea and walked into the hall and across to the small bathroom. He laid the mug on the toilet cistern while he pissed.

Detective Helen Weeks.

Thorne flushed and told himself he was being an idiot for even thinking that Helen was the sort to play those games. Not in a million years. He took a packet of painkillers from the mirrored cabinet above the sink and shut the door hard.

Said, 'Twat.'

He stared at the face looking back at him. Duller, *deader* than it was the last time he looked. Grey hair that was still more pronounced on one side than the other, but was now more pronounced everywhere. The small, straight scar on what had once been the only chin he had.

Thorne's mobile rang in the kitchen and he hurried back through to answer it. Helen sounded out of breath. She had just dropped Alfie off and was on her way to the station, she told him.

'So we'll talk when I get home, then. About last night.'

'I told you, I'm fine,' Thorne said.

'You didn't look fine.'

'I'm just tired. Feeling sorry for myself.'

'Well don't,' Helen said. 'Now go to bed, for God's sake ...'

He walked slowly through to the bedroom that still





smelled of sleep and mango body-butter. Helen had not bothered to open the curtains. He sat down on the edge of the bed and began to get undressed, looking forward more than anything to slipping beneath a duvet that he knew would still be warm.

One of the few perks of incompatible shifts.

Presuming that Helen got back before he had to leave, he would play it down, the business with the Coopers. He told himself it was because the last thing Helen needed was any of his shit to deal with. Because her own job was stressful enough. Because there was really nothing he could do about it now and he was almost certainly being ridiculous anyway.

He swallowed three painkillers with the last of his tea.

Not because he was worried that she might agree with Paul Binns.

