

The road through the small industrial estate had not been repaired in a long time and Freddy Ryan carefully manoeuvred the car through the gloom of a North-East late autumn morning, struggling to avoid the worst of the potholes. He kept his eye on the satnav until he saw the flashing blue lights and turned the steering wheel in their direction. He drove up to the gate and past two squad cars to where a uniformed police officer stopped the car and asked him to identify himself and his passenger. Freddy showed him his badge.

‘Detective Inspector Ryan,’ he said and indicated the tall, thin man sitting next to him, ‘and Detective Superintendent Peel.’

The officer nodded and noted their names on the clipboard. He pointed to one side and asked them to park in a marked bay, then indicated a large building on the other side of the yard.

‘Dr. Blenkinsop and the responding officers are in there, Sir.’

Ryan parked the car where he had been told and both men got out, shivering involuntarily in the sudden chill. They looked around and saw a large open space on which large piles of steel I and H sections were piled in an orderly fashion, four or five rows high, each row separated by timber battens. In one corner, a large trailer stood with a blue tarpaulin covering its cargo. It was all very neat and tidy and delivered a message that whoever was in charge of this operation ran a tight ship.

The building to which they had been directed was about thirty metres distant. It was a bog standard, grey-clad industrial shed with a shallow sloping roof, about eight to ten metres in height and perhaps ten times that in length. It was open at one end and they could see light spilling through the large doors. A separate, much smaller, two storey building stood to one side and this, clearly housed the offices from which the operations on the site were controlled

They walked towards the light, past a tightly bunched group of perhaps a dozen or so men who broke off their conversation to glance at them sullenly. The two policemen returned the looks with interest but didn’t stop until they reached the shed. Peel turned to Ryan and said, ‘Check out who that lot are, Freddy. I assume that they’re the workforce. If they are, get them into the office and get one of the lads from the squad cars to babysit them until we’re ready to talk to them.’

Ryan nodded. ‘OK, Sir.’ Then he continued. ‘Did you see what I saw?’

‘I did indeed. And if we’re correct, then the owner of this little enterprise is being a naughty boy. Which may or may not have a bearing on what happened here.’

Ryan disappeared and Peel turned to face into the building. Some police tape had been strung across the entrance, guarded by another uniformed officer clutching a clipboard. He went through the routine of identifying himself and then took a minute to put on the protective overalls and shoes which he was handed. When he had finished, the officer lifted the tape and he entered the building, taking a moment to look around.

He saw a large, sterile looking open space with a pitched roof. Steel frames at about three or four metre intervals supported the roof and walls. At a height of about six metres, rails ran horizontally between the steel columns and, at the far end of the building, a large yellow crane sat on these, hulking and brooding like some great monster. To his right stood row after row of trestles on which had been placed steel beams and columns, some of them glowing with an iridium sheen and others painted various shades of white and green.

The building was brightly lit and he saw that about half a dozen people, dressed as he was, were congregated around a large, complicated looking blue machine. A long roller conveyor ran

from one end of the building into this and then came out the other side, where some screens had been set up to shield whatever was there from view.

One of the people at the machine detached from the group and walked towards him. He recognised who it was and as she stopped in front of him, he asked, 'What can you tell me then, Barbara?'

'The company is called Heaton Corrosion Coatings, Sir. It's owned by a man called Patrick Robertson. It specialises in shot blasting and painting structural steelwork. It's a relatively small operation and employs about a dozen men in this building and two women who work in the office in general administration. Work starts at eight every morning, but Mr Robertson arrives half an hour before that to open the gates and the buildings. He says that he arrived at the usual time this morning and was surprised to find that the chain securing the main gate had been cut. He called us and then went to investigate. He could see light seeping under this door, which apparently got him very worried, as he was sure he'd turned everything off before leaving last night. There's another, smaller door at the top corner of the building, which gives access to and from the offices. He entered through that and found what's we've now hidden behind the screen.'

'Which is what?'

'I think that you need to look for yourself, Sir, although you may want to take a while to brace yourself before you do.'

Peel gazed at her curiously. This was a rock-steady officer, one of his best and the comment was unlike her. However, he decided to let it pass.

'Is the ME here?' he asked.

'Yes, Sir. Dr Blenkinsop is on the other side of the screen.'

'Lead on then, Sergeant.'

'This way please.' She turned and led him towards the machine. At one point she stopped and pointed to something yellow and unpleasant on the ground.

'Careful here, Sir,' she said. 'Unfortunately, Mr Robertson threw up when he realised what was on the conveyor.'

Peel sidestepped the mess and approached the screen. As he did so a figure appeared from behind it and pulled the hood off her head. It was several years since Roberta Blenkinsop and the Detective Superintendent had first met and time had not been kind to her. He was aware that she'd had a short-lived marriage, which she had walked out on amid rumours of domestic violence, and it had left a legacy in the form of lines around her eyes and tautness to her features. She'd put on weight and her hair, which had once been immaculate, was now a mass of unruly curls in which grey was beginning to glint through the brown. She looked somewhere between agitated and harassed, and in the glance which she threw Peel, he thought that he saw the glint of tears. She must have become aware of this because she turned away from him for a few seconds and he could see her taking some deep breaths to compose herself before turning around to face him again.

'Richard,' she said, 'what's behind the screen is the most horrible thing I've ever seen, and I thought I'd witnessed all the worst things that people can do.'

Peel felt his heart sink but his face remained impassive.

‘Can you give me an idea of what I’m letting myself in for?’ he asked.

Blenkinsop waved her hand as the blue machine. ‘That’s an industrial shot blaster. It is used, I have been told, to clean dirt and rust from the surface of steel prior to it being painted. What happened here is that someone, or some people, tied a man to a piece of timber and then passed him through the machine. He’s been shredded to the bone.’

Peel struggled to think of what to say next. Eventually he asked, ‘Is the body intact? Is it recognisable?’

She shook her head. ‘One can recognise that it was once a person, but that’s about it. There will be no visual identification available. We will almost certainly have to rely on DNA matching to identify him, and I suspect that there will be zero chance of finding DNA traces from the person or people who did this.’

Peel took a moment to absorb this information. He was aware that everyone, Blenkinsop, the forensics investigators, Wireman and the uniformed officers were looking at him, and he was left in no doubt as to what he was expected to do next.

He emerged from behind the screen ten seconds later, his face as white as a sheet, with a picture now imprinted on his consciousness which would never leave him. It would be there, in the back of his mind for the rest of his life, ready to leap forward, to ambush him at moments when he was unprepared and unready. He walked over to the shot blaster, steadied himself against it with his hand and then repeated Robertson’s performance from earlier that morning.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to find the Doctor with a bottle of water in her hand. He nodded his thanks as he took it from her. He tipped the bottle to his lips and swirled it around his mouth before spitting it on the ground. Then he drank heavily, swallowing this time. This bought him enough time to recover his composure so that, by the time he returned his gaze to the onlookers, he was ready to continue.

‘OK,’ he said, ‘please carry on. I’m going to speak to Mr Robertson.’

He turned to Wireman. ‘Where can I find him?’

‘He’s in the office building, Sir. I’ll take you to him.’

Peel was only too pleased for the opportunity to clear the building and followed her willingly. Once outside, they took off the overalls and she led him to the smaller building. They met Ryan in the lobby.

‘Did you get them into the room, Freddy?’

‘Yes Sir. There’s a uniform outside the door.’

‘Good. Come with me. We’re going to have a chat with the owner.’

He turned to Wireman and said, ‘OK, what I want you to do is...’

She interrupted him. ‘It’s under control, Sir. I’ll get some people up here to take statements from everyone. Then I’ll start some officers on door to door on the neighbouring premises and looking for CCTV.’

Peel shut his mouth. This woman's ability to read his intentions was beginning to verge on uncanny.

'That's fine then,' he muttered. He looked at Ryan who was trying to wipe a grin off his face. 'And you can follow me smart arse.'

They found Robertson in his office upstairs, a bottle of Glenfiddich on the desk and a glass grasped in hands that were still trembling. Peel had never seen a man looking so traumatised and he felt a rush of sympathy. At least he had been warned about what he was going to see. He introduced himself and Freddy and asked him if he felt ready to answer some questions.

Robertson was a short man thin but wiry, with a mass of curly dark hair, a goatee beard, a round face and a nose that looked as though someone had tried to rearrange it at some point. Peel put him at somewhere between his late forties to early fifties. In response to the request, he indicated a couple of chairs.

'Pull them up.'

The two policemen did as they had been told and it was Peel who kicked off.

'What exactly do you do here, Mr Robertson?'

'I told the woman all that.'

'I know, and Sergeant Wireman has relayed the information to me, but I'd like to hear it again from you.'

Robertson shrugged. 'We do shot blasting and corrosion coatings for structural steel. Those are the beams and columns that you see out in the yard and in the shed. We work mainly as a sub-contractor to the big steel fabricators. Those are the companies that buy the steel from the manufacturers and cut, shape and form it. If the steel is going to go into a corrosive environment, it needs a protective coating but that coating has to go on to a surface that is clean. So, we shot blast the steel in the blue machine to clean it and then apply the coating on the trestles.'

'How's the company been doing recently?' The question came from Ryan.

Robertson looked at him in surprise. 'What the hell has that got to do with anything?'

'Please answer the question, Mr Robertson,' said Peel.

Robertson shrugged. 'We're doing OK. It's a tough environment at the moment but we're keeping our head above water.'

'It's just,' said Ryan, 'that we had a look at the lads you've got working for you and I couldn't help but notice that a few of them look distinctly middle-Eastern and African, and appeared to be very nervous.'

The statement hung in the air for a few seconds before Robertson responded, his voice dripping sarcasm.

'Well, who's a clever boy then?'

'Please don't talk to me in that way, Mr Robertson,' said Ryan flatly. 'We are investigating a possible murder and we need your cooperation. I will ask you a straight question. Are you employing illegal immigrants on this site?'

Robertson was a man who knew when to cut his losses. 'Yes,' he said. 'I have four at the moment. And if you're asking me why, I'll tell you. This is a cutthroat industry. Margins are small and I'm only just hanging on. I have to pay my English workers twenty thousand a year. With the added costs of national insurance and the rest, each one of them costs me over twenty five thousand pounds. I give the illegals a hundred and fifty pounds a week, cash in hand and they're glad of it. You do the maths.'

Freddy did some rapid calculations in his head. 'I make it that you're saving the best part of seventy thousand pounds a year.'

'That's right,' Robertson said. 'And that's my profit. That's how much I'll take out of this business this year. Without that, I might as well pack up and go stacking shelves in a supermarket. So, what are you going to do about it? Are you going to be on the phone to the Home Office as soon as you leave here?'

Peel interrupted the conversation. 'I'm in charge of this investigation, Mr Robertson and I have no intention of saying anything to anyone, unless it is relevant to the inquiry. We will be speaking to all your workforce and taking statements. That will include yourself. If we are able to eliminate everyone who works here from suspicion, then we will leave you and your people alone.'

Peel could see Robertson visibly relax. He could only imagine the stress under which the man was struggling so when he spoke again, he kept his voice low and conciliatory.

'What we'd like you to do, Mr Robertson is to tell us everything that happened this morning which led to you finding the body. Can you do that?'

Robertson drained the glass and put it down before starting to speak.

I come in every morning at about seven thirty to open up the office and the shed. I'd locked the gate when I left at about six last night so I was surprised and angry when I arrived to find it open, with the chain cut.'

'How do you lock it Sir?' asked Freddy.

'With a simple chain and padlock. I can't afford anything fancy and, before you ask, the sign on the gate saying that there is a security patrol on the site is bullshit. It's there to scare off casual intruders.'

'Do you have any CCTV?'

Robertson shook his head. 'No. We have a few dummy cameras around the place but a proper system is too expensive. Anyway, we have nothing on the site that is worth stealing. I know that steel had a big value at the moment, but to come in here and nick what I've got in the yard would require a very sophisticated operation and there are much better targets around here than me for that sort of thing.'

Peel nodded. 'OK, so you found that the chain had been cut, presumably with bolt cutters. What did you do next?'

'I phoned your lot, who told me to stay where I was and wait for the squad car to arrive.'

'But you didn't, stay put that is?'

‘No. This is my business. I’ve spent a dozen years building it up. If someone was threatening it then I wanted to stop them. So I walked up to the shed. I could see light escaping from underneath the big front door, which I’d closed last night, and that’s when I knew that something was very wrong, because I’d turned those lights off before I left. When I got close to the shed, I could see that the small side door was open and I went through it.’

He paused for a moment to gather his thoughts before continuing. ‘At first, I noticed nothing wrong but when I walked into the middle of the floor, I saw what was on the conveyor. I didn’t recognise what it was at first, until that is, I went up close. Then I threw up and ran out of the building. I’m not ashamed to say that I was scared out of my wits. Your lads were driving in as I ran out and I told them what I’d seen. They checked it out for themselves and then told me to wait here until reinforcements arrived.’

‘We think,’ said Peel, ‘that the body on the conveyor was passed through the shot blaster,’

Robertson looked at him as though he was an idiot. ‘No shit, Sherlock. How did you work that out?’

Peel felt a flush of anger and when he spoke, he struggled to keep his voice level. ‘There’s no need for that, Mr Robertson,’ he said. ‘We are trying to find out what happened here and we need your cooperation. It would be best for everyone concerned if you were able to remain civil.’

Robertson put down his glass and held up a hand, palm outward. ‘You are right and I am sorry. But this puts me under a lot of extra pressure that I don’t need. As I told you, this company is marginal at the best of times. I’m guessing that you are going to be holding up production for a few days at least. And God alone knows what’s going to happen to the shot blaster. I have no idea if it will be even possible to clean it or to use it again. And I might end up losing some of my workforce or be prosecuted for employing illegal workers. This is turning into a bad day.’

‘I understand that, Sir,’ said Ryan, ‘and we’ll do everything we can to get out of your way as quickly as we can. However, it will be the forensics team who will control when that will happen. I have a few questions about the shot blaster. What can you tell me about it? I mean, what does it do?’

Robertson considered the question for a few seconds before answering. ‘I’ll give you the short version. We receive fabricated steel from our customers. We have to paint it with a corrosion resistant coating. To make sure that this coating adheres to the surface, we need to clean off all the surface dirt and any rust or mill scale. On top of that, we need to rough up the surface. It’s an industrial scale version of what you do when you sand down a gatepost before painting it. The shot blaster in the shed does this by a process known as abrasive blast cleaning. In simple terms, this involves firing a continuous stream of either metal shot or abrasive grit, depending on the type of coating, at the surface at high speed to clean it and to rough it up to provide a key. Typically, the profile is about seventy microns deep, that’s seventy thousandths of a millimetre. As you’ll appreciate, that requires a huge amount of force.’

He paused and the two policemen considered this for a moment. Then Ryan asked, ‘When you say a great deal of force, has this been measured?’

‘I’m sure that there’s someone out there who’s done so, and it likely that the manufacturer could tell you. But what I can tell you is that the velocity of the particles is typically about two hundred and fifty feet per second.’

Ryan pulled out his phone and did a quick calculation. 'That's about one hundred and seventy miles an hour.'

Robertson looked at him with something like respect. 'If you say so, Inspector.'

'Can you tell me, Mr Robertson', asked Ryan, 'if everyone employed at this site turned up for work today?'

'Yes, they did.'

'OK,' said Peel 'that's enough for now, Mr Robertson. I want you to attend the Forth Road station tomorrow morning at ten. Inspector Ryan or one of his colleagues will be able to take a full statement from you at that time. Will you be able to do that?'

Robertson shrugged. 'I suppose I don't have a lot of choice. Do I need to bring a solicitor?'

'No, it's just a statement. Unless you have something else which you'd like to tell us.'

Robertson greeted this with silence and the policemen stood up and left.

They paused outside the front door. 'What do you think then Freddy?' asked Peel.

'My instinct is that he had nothing to do with it, Sir. His story rings true and it's difficult to fake throwing up. But we'll need to do a thorough background check on him and how this company's doing.'

'What did you think about what he told us about the illegal workers?'

'It sounds plausible. He'll not be the only one doing it around here. I know from a friend of mine who works for the immigration service that most of the refugees and asylum seekers who arrive in this country are sent North because the cost of accommodating them while their claims are being assessed is much cheaper here than it is down south. A lot of these people are well educated and intelligent and desperate to work. That makes them fair game for people like Robertson.'

Peel nodded. 'OK, make sure that we know where to find them if we need to speak to them again. But I'll be surprised if they're involved in what happened here, if for no other reason than, if they were, they wouldn't have shown up this morning. But we have to be sure.'

'OK Sir. I'll have a chat with the lads taking the statements. What are you doing next?'

'I'm going to speak to Dr Blenkinsop again and have a chat with the forensics people. Meet me in the lobby when you're finished.'

Peel suited up again and re-entered the shed. Blenkinsop was tidying up her equipment and an ambulance had arrived to take the body away.

'What can you tell me then, Rob?'

'I can tell you that the victim is male and of medium height. He was slightly built with brown hair. I'll be able to determine an approximate age once I have him on the table. What I can't tell you yet, which I guess is the answer you really want, is whether he was alive or dead when he went into

the machine. If I was to put money on it, I'd say that he was already dead but you'll have to wait for a definitive answer.'

'When will you be able to do the post-mortem?'

'I'll clear my schedule and do it this afternoon. I'll let you know when so that you can come along, although you might want to wait until I've finished.'

Peel smiled. 'I think that would be an excellent idea.'

He turned his attention to the Crime Scene Examiner, the person in charge of the SOCO team. He and his people were suited and booted and busily combing the scene. The last thing that they needed was interference from him so the conversation took no more than a minute. Peel was assured that they had everything they needed and he moved on to speak to the Crime Scene Manager, the person responsible for ensuring that the site was preserved and processed correctly. Peel had worked with these men many times over the previous decade and had confidence in their competence. This conversation also took less than a minute and then he was able to move on.

He met Ryan outside the office.

'Everything appears to be under control, Freddy. I'll leave you to look after things here. I'm going to report to Lyons. I'll get everyone together in the incident room after the post-mortem. Rob will let me know what time that's likely to be later this morning.'

'OK, Sir. I'll let you know if anything happens here.'

Half an hour later Peel was debriefing Chief Superintendent Lyons. This was followed by a visit to the incident room where he spent an hour with the Major Incident Team Office Manager, pulling together the crew that was going to support the investigation. He was leaving the meeting when his phone rang to tell him that the post-mortem was about to begin.

Attending a post-mortem is not for the faint hearted but when Peel was involved in a murder investigation, he made a point of attending. When it was finished, he met Blenkinsop in her office and she gave him the summary.

'I can tell you that the person whose body was put through the shot blaster was probably in his mid to late fifties. He was in generally good condition and would probably have been reasonably healthy. He had a full head of hair, which was brown but beginning to go to grey. He had a partial set of upper dentures, which is unusual and should be of some help in identifying him. Given the state of the body, it is difficult to make an estimate of the time of death, but my best guess is that it happened about five to ten hours before he was found. The clothes he was wearing were shredded but they appear to be a fairly standard, mass produced pair of jeans, and ditto coat, shirt and jumper. His shoes were leather and Marks & Spencer size eight.'

She paused and he realised that he was expected to contribute. He obliged by asking, 'The question is, was he dead before he was put in the shot blaster, or was he alive?'

She nodded her approval. 'You'll be pleased to hear, Richard, that he was almost certainly dead. His skull was shattered in a manner consistent with being hit by a blunt object. I may be able to give you more details on what that was later.'

'Is that it?' he asked.

What more do you want? You'll get the full report later today and the forensics around any traces left in the wound will be available in a day or two.'

An hour later, Peel was in the Incident Room facing his team. He knew most of them well and they were a competent, capable crew who understood the demands of the job and what would be asked of them. He outlined the details of the scene of the crime and what he had been told by Blenkinsop. As he spoke, the Office Manager was pinning photos and maps on the board. When he finished, the floor was opened to anyone who wanted to give an opinion. The invitation was greeted with silence, which was eventually broken by a Detective Constable standing at the back of the room. Her voice was hesitant and unsure.

'I think,' she said slowly, 'that this was personal. The victim was not put in the shot blaster to kill him. He was put in it to disfigure him, to destroy what he was. Whoever did it, hated him.'

Everyone turned to look at the speaker and she flushed slightly in embarrassment. Peel looked at her intently and said, 'This is good, DC Cartwright. Carry on.'

She took a deep breath before continuing. 'The Doctor says that he was probably dead before he was put into the machine. We also know that he was placed on a board. On top of that is the fact that whoever did this took a huge chance in breaking into the premises. They could have buried the body or just dumped it some place it wouldn't have been found for days. Instead, they, and I am assuming that it is more than one person because someone on their own couldn't have carried and manoeuvred the body, unless they were massively strong, decided to make a statement.'

She stopped and Peel said encouragingly, 'Don't stop now; you're on a roll.'

The words came out in a rush. 'This was thought out well in advance. They brought the board with them; they couldn't have depended on finding one that was fit for their purposes on the premises. The other thing is that whoever did this knew how to work a shot blaster. That's probably specialised knowledge and restricts the range of suspects to people who have worked in the steel coatings industry. On top of that, the people who did this know the site. It's in an obscure location and yet they knew where it was. They also knew how to get into it, that there was no security and that the CCTV cameras were dummies. When you put all that together, we are probably looking at the involvement of either someone who works there, has worked there, of someone who was in and out a lot, perhaps a regular customer or some sort of representative.'

There was silence in the room and then someone gave a low whistle of approval. This was followed by a ripple of applause, which turned the young woman's complexion a deep shade of pink. Peel waited until it had died down before speaking.

'Stay behind and have a word with me afterwards, Ms Crawford. Now, has anyone else got anything to say?'

The next half an hour was taken up with contributions from the Crime Scene Manager and Examiner. The latter was able to say that they had found small traces of blood on the ground leading from the door to the shot blaster. They were still checking for forensic evidence that could be tied to the people who had brought the body to the site but could not say anything definitive until the following day at the earliest. Then the Office Manager gave the run down on how the incident room

was being set up and who was going to be doing what. Finally, Wireman gave an update on the search for CCTV footage and the premises-to-premises canvassing.

‘We’ve not got a lot so far. Some of the companies on the industrial estate have security but it’s of the type that comes around a couple of times a night in cars to make sure that everything is as it should be. We’ve talked with the people who were on duty last night but none of them saw anything. It turns out that these people follow a fairly regular pattern. If DC Crawford’s theories are correct, then the people who did this would probably have been aware of that and known how to dodge the patrols.

‘Quite a few of the premises have CCTV but mostly it’s focused on their gates and internal areas. However, there are a few cameras available which show part of the road that leads up to the scene, so we’re trying at the moment to see what comes up on these. We should have some sort of answer by tomorrow morning.’

Peel nodded approval. ‘Good work. What about identifying the victim? Have we made any progress on that?’

Freddy took up the story. ‘We’re trawling through the missing person’s reports at the moment, Sir. But if Dr Blenkinsop is correct regarding the time of death, and we assume that he wasn’t kidnapped or anything like that, there may not be time for someone to realise that he’s missing. He wasn’t wearing a wedding ring, which doesn’t mean that he isn’t married or living with someone of course, but it does make it more likely that he was living on his own. We will of course try to match any fingerprints we can get off him and a DNA profile against our database, but that’s probably a long shot, and we won’t have anything definite until tomorrow.’

The following day, three things happened which moved the investigation along. The first was that a CCTV image picked up a vehicle travelling along the road to Heaton Corrosion Coatings at just after midnight on the day that the body was found, and returning just over an hour later. It was a battered, nondescript looking white Ford transit van and, despite the poor quality of the image, it was possible to make out that there were two people sitting in the front. The bad news was that the license plates were false. They had been removed from a similar vehicle that had been sent to a scrapyards the previous week. There was no security on the site so anyone capable of climbing a fence could have got in.

The second was that the forensics people had managed to lift some fabric from the board on which the victim had been placed. These proved to be from a sixty five percent polyester, thirty five percent cotton general purpose coverall. The bad news was that these were manufactured in the thousands and individual clothing would prove impossible to trace. They also managed to lift a partial thumbprint from a corner of the board.

The third, and most interesting development was that the victim’s DNA turned out to be a partial match for someone on the police database¹. The match was a man who lived in Wallsend who’d been arrested and charged, although not convicted, for assault two years previously.

¹ According to the charity Justice, “under the Criminal Justice Act 2003, the police have the power to take and retain a DNA sample of any person arrested for any recordable offence, regardless of whether they are even charged or, if charged, subsequently acquitted. This has led to the establishment and development of the National DNA Database (NDNAD, also known as the National Criminal Intelligence DNA Database), which now has DNA samples from more than 3.5 million people,”

‘The match is not that of a son to father,’ Peel told Ryan. ‘It seems to be more like uncle to nephew. But we have a name and address to follow up and I want you to speak to this person.’

He handed Ryan a sheet of paper. ‘His name is Richard Parker. All the details are here. Please treat this as a priority.’

An hour later, Ryan pulled up in front of a terraced house just off the High Street in Wallsend. He was accompanied by DC Crawford who rang the bell of Parker’s house. This set off a cacophony of barking and they heard the sounds of claws on a wooden floor seconds before something large appeared to be thrown against the door. A few seconds later they heard a woman’s voice calling urgently.

‘Get away, Festus. How many times have I told you not to do that?’

The door opened and they saw a slim young woman with curly blond hair and a friendly smile. She was holding a black Labrador by the collar and the animal was on two legs, its front paws turning in mid-air.

‘Ignore the noise,’ she said. ‘He’s a pussy cat really. If I let him go, you’re in more danger of being licked to death than you are of being attacked.’

Freddy had heard similar statements on previous occasions and didn’t always share the owner’s confidence. He looked at the dog doubtfully as he took out his identification and flashed it in front of her.

‘DI Ryan and DC Crawford. Can you tell me if Richard Parker lives here?’

A look of alarm passed across the woman’s face. ‘He’s not been up to no good again, has he? What’s he done this time? It’s just that I told him that if he got in trouble again, I’d have him out the door.’

Crawford rushed to assure her. ‘He’s not in any trouble. We just need to speak to him as part of an investigation. We think that he may be able to identify someone.’

Ryan butted in. ‘Are you Mrs Parker?’ he asked.

She shook her head. ‘His partner. We live here together.’

‘Is he in?’

‘No. He’s at work.’

‘Can you tell us where that is?’

Fifteen minutes later, the two officers stood in the Manager’s office at a vehicle service centre on the coast road. The Manager reappeared with a sturdy looking man, probably in his mid-twenties but with a receding hairline that made him look older than his years, and left the three of them alone. Ryan and Crawford introduced themselves.

Parker wasn’t in the mood for being friendly. ‘What the hell do you want? Didn’t you cause enough trouble two years ago?’

‘We’re not here to discuss that, Mr Parker,’ said Ryan. ‘We’re here because we are trying to identify a body which has been found in Heaton. The body is a partial DNA match with you, which indicates that he may be a relative.’

The hostility drained out of Parker and he said, ‘Oh.’ Then he sat down.

Ryan continued. ‘The person in question is a man. We think that he was in his fifties and generally in good health. He had a full head of hair, which was brown and beginning to grey. He had a partial set of upper dentures. Does this ring any bells with you?’

Parker put his head in his hands and nodded. ‘It sounds like it’s my uncle Joseph, or Joe as everyone calls him. Joe White. He’s my mother’s brother. He has the dentures because he got his front teeth knocked out in a motorbike accident around the time I was born.’

‘Can you tell me where he lived?’ asked Crawford.

Parker looked up at her and she thought that she saw a tear in his eyes. ‘He had a flat in Jesmond. One of the fancy ones off the top of Osborne Road. He was the family success story. The only one to go to university and all that. He was an accountant and earned good money.’ He drew a deep breath and said, ‘This is going to kill my Ma. The two of them were very close.’

Two hours later Ryan was reporting to Peel. He flicked through his notebook as he spoke.

‘Joseph White, or Joe as he was known. Fifty-six years of age and unmarried, although according to his sister, he had lots of women friends over the years. She was very insistent that he wasn’t gay, just not the marrying type. He lived in a flat in one of the blocks off of Addison Road in Jesmond. He studied business at Newcastle University and then became an accountant. He lived in the city all his life and worked for the past twenty years in County Durham at a company called Kalmar Steel. They’re a Swedish company, apparently a specialist steel manufacturer.’

Peel leaned forward and put his elbows on the desk. ‘That’s interesting. That’s the second time that steel has come up in this investigation. I think that we need to look a lot more closely at Mr White and his place of work.’

That afternoon, the policemen were sitting in the office of the General Manager of Kalmar Steel. In response to Peel’s request, she was explaining the operation in perfect English with only a hint of a Scandinavian accent.

‘In simple terms, what we have here Gentlemen is what’s called a mini mill. We obtain most of our feedstock from scrap steel, which we melt in an electric arc furnace. We are a very specialist operation. We don’t make the mass-produced plate or sections that you see in buildings or bridges, or even the strip that goes into things like cars. That kind of product is relatively easy to make and manufacturers in this country are in competition with second and third world producers with a fraction of their costs and that’s a one-way street to oblivion. We make the specialist steels that require the sort of high technology and advanced knowledge that allows us to compete on quality and acts as a barrier to entry to low cost competition. We shove out about a hundred thousand tonnes a year, which is small beer in global terms but it makes us a decent sized manufacturer in our niche markets.’

Peel acknowledged the description, which sounded like it had been well polished and practised. 'Thank you for that, Ms Olsen. It's useful to understand what's happening here. Now, as I am sure you will have worked out, we will not have come here to learn about specialised steel manufacture. We are here unfortunately as the bearers of bad news. Yesterday, the body of a man was discovered in the Heaton area of Newcastle. We have reason to suspect foul play and also to believe that the body is that of a man called Joseph, or Joe, White and that he worked here as an accountant. Did you know Mr White?'

Olsen's hand flew to her mouth as Peel was speaking and her eyes opened in horror. 'That's dreadful. The name is familiar to me but the person who knew him well is our Commercial Director. I'll call him.'

She dialled an internal number and spoke to someone at the other end, a conversation which included a statement along the lines that she didn't really care if he was in a meeting, this had priority and if he wasn't in her office in five minutes, she was going to come down and drag him out.

While they waited, she asked about the circumstances of Joseph White's death. Peel gave her the bare details but omitted the role of the shot blaster. There were some things which were just better off not said.

Within the five minutes, they were joined by a tall, gloomy looking man with the grey complexion of someone who rarely saw daylight. He had a lugubrious manner which reminded Peel of Droopy, the cartoon character from his childhood. Olsen introduced him as Richard Todd and told him the news. He dropped to a chair, his face registering shock.

'We were wondering what had happened to him,' he said. 'He's usually so punctual and reliable. Not turning up two days in a row was unlike him. He wasn't answering his phone and I had intended to call around to his house after work tonight to see if he was OK. I live in Gosforth so it was only a little out of my way.'

'How well did you know him?' asked Ryan.

Todd scratched his head and thought about that for a few seconds. 'To be honest, not very well, even though we've worked together for almost twenty years. The two of us were on the same level for quite a while and then the Director's job came up about a decade ago, we were the two main candidates. But he dropped out of the running because he said that he didn't fancy the hassle. He was polite and courteous and well liked in our department as far as I am aware. He had no enemies and seemed to have a knack for getting along with people. But in all the years that I knew him he never spoke to me about anything personal. To tell the truth, I didn't know if he had a girlfriend, or what his politics were or what sort of family he had. We lived only a mile apart as the crow flies but we never socialised together. He was just a very private individual.'

Peel had heard worse obituaries, including one case when the only emotion expressed by a workmate of the murdered man had been regret that someone had gotten to the victim first. He would have preferred, in truth, a more negative response, or something which might have indicated a direction for the investigation.

'Can you tell me,' he asked, 'what Mr White did here?'

'He was the Chief Accountant. He managed the major reporting and reconciliation duties and handled special projects when necessary. He supported the work of the credit control

department and he was also in day-to-day charge of the accounting team. It was quite an important role and he was very good at it.'

'Can you show me his desk and locker?'

'I can certainly show you his desk. We don't have lockers here in the administration centre. That's a feature of the mill.'

He stood up and the policemen took their leave of Olsen. He led them down a flight of stairs and into a large open office area. A number of small private offices lined one side and he led them across to one of these. He opened the door and ushered them inside.

It was an austere space with one window which looked out onto a car park. The desk was tidy and the metal filing cabinets closed. It was simple, sparse and utilitarian, and fitted into the picture that was emerging of Joseph White. Peel turned to Todd and said, 'Thank you. What I want you to do now is to lock this door and keep it locked until we get our officers here later today to carry out a search. The officers will also want to speak to you and Mr White's colleagues. Can I ask you to let them know and to make themselves available?'

That request received an affirmative response and they left.

That was the start of it. The investigation carried on its painstaking course over the following weeks, and got precisely nowhere. Joseph White had led a blameless life, not even a speeding ticket. He was a good uncle and brother, a charming and helpful neighbour, and a funny and clever friend within the confines of a small and tightly-knit group of people who had known each other for decades.

The police had been able to work out that he had probably been killed while walking home from a night out at a local pub. The weather had been foul that night, with heavy rain which had kept people off the streets. He had left the pub before last orders, which chimed with Dr Blenkinsop's estimate of the time of death. House to house enquiries had unearthed several eye witnesses who had seen a white van that evening not far from where he lived and the probable murder scene was quickly narrowed down to a short, dimly lit snicket between two houses. It was clear that whoever had killed him had been aware of his movements and had almost certainly been following him, but detailed examination of CCTV images from the local streets, recorded in the weeks prior to his death, failed to identify any suspects.

The white van had been tracked on cameras through Heaton and then Gosforth before disappearing from view. It was found burned out in a remote area of Northumberland two days after the discovery of Joseph White's body. The flames had done their job well and when Peel turned up several hours later, the person in charge of the forensics team shook his head and held up his hands in the universal signal that said, it's hopeless. When Peel read the report a few days later, it said that the killers had been very thorough. They had even gone as far as to remove the vehicle identification number.

Two weeks later Peel was having an uncomfortable interview with Lyons. The senior officer's manner was polite but cold.

'You are telling me, Richard, that you have come up against the proverbial brick wall. You have no suspects and no leads.'

It was a statement, not a question and Peel squirmed uneasily.

'That is correct, Sir. Everywhere we go, we draw a blank. Joseph White was, it appears, a model citizen. He was liked by almost everyone he knew. He gave money to charity. He volunteered at the hospice for several hours every second Saturday. He has no criminal record of any sort. His wider family are clean, apart from a nephew who was arrested but not convicted for assault. He never married but had three long-term relationships at various times. All the women involved speak warmly of him and there is no indication that he was violent, aggressive or coercive. He was good at his job and well respected by his colleagues. There's no indication that he was doing anything untoward, like cooking the books and buying a house in Bermuda. There was no need anyway since he earned well and his financial records indicate that, if you include all his savings and the value of his flat and another one that he owned and rented out near the University, he was close to being a millionaire.'

'Did anyone have anything negative about him?'

'Very few. One of his friends, who had known him for over twenty years, said that he could be a bit truculent, his word, if he didn't get his way, and one of his brothers claimed that he was well able to hold a grudge if he felt that he's been slighted. But apart from that, nothing.'

Lyons tapped his pen on the desk while he considered this. 'The key to this has to be the manner in which the person or people who killed him disposed of the body. As you have said, that was an act of hatred. So somewhere along the line, Mr White did something that made somebody or some people very angry. And that must have been something really bad.'

'I agree, Sir. I've run a load of checks on other cases in the past with similar characteristics, that is, where a hitherto blameless man was killed without apparent reason. Every one of those cases hinged on the fact that the victim had a secret life. On a number of occasions, it turned out that he was a paedophile; on others he was using a position of trust to steal from somebody. There was a couple also where the victim was having an affair with the wife of a jealous man. But in this case, there is nothing like that. Basically Sir, there appears to be no possible reason why someone would want to kill this man. To tell the truth, if his body had been left where he was killed, I'd almost certainly have concluded by now that it was a random killing carried out by some nutcase.'

Lyons nodded. 'Well, I'll leave you to it. But you have two more weeks to get to the bottom of this, Richard. The investigation is eating up resources. After that, I'll have to scale down the operation. It may well be that this is one where we have to admit defeat.'

Peel knew that he was right. The chances of solving this murder were receding with every day. The thought that whoever was responsible was getting away with it gnawed at him, but he also knew that almost a quarter of murders went unsolved and that sometimes it was necessary to admit defeat and move on. He stood up and left.

A further week passed with no sign of progress. Officers were still knocking on doors. CCTV footage was being re-examined, and statements were being looked at again. The latest team meeting was a subdued affair. At the end, Peel asked for any further comments or ideas. He gave it a few seconds and then said 'OK, let's just'

'Well...' It was a woman's voice, hesitant.

Peel looked up and smiled encouragingly, 'Speak up, DC Crawford.'

All eyes turned to her but she stared straight at Peel. 'It occurred to me, Sir, that the key to this has to be his work. We've investigated every aspect of his private life and he was cleaner than the Dali Lama in a barrel of bleach.'

A laugh rippled through the crowd and Peel grinned. 'Carry on.'

'It has to be something from his work, Sir. It just has to be. We need to rip through that place again until we find what it was. He worked in the steel industry and his body was mutilated on the premises of a company that was associated with that industry. It's too much of a coincidence. There has to be a connection.'

'It was different parts of the industry though,' said Ryan. 'The stuff that they make in Durham is different from what was being worked on in Heaton.'

'I know, Sir, but it's still too big a coincidence. I think that what we need to do next is go back to Durham and look at all the records of everything that Mr White worked on for the past decade. We need to identify what external companies and organisations he came in contact with and cross reference those to the people and organisations that had access to the company in Heaton.'

'That's going to be a hell of a job,' someone commented doubtfully.

'It is indeed but I think that we've just had someone volunteer to do it,' said Peel. 'Right, DC Crawford, you've convinced me. DI Ryan will get the authorisation to search through the records of both companies. As soon as that comes through, the two of you can begin the work. Report back to me as soon as you have anything.'

The two officers reappeared three days later. Ryan deferred to Crawford, who began the story.

'When you and DI Ryan went to see Joseph White's boss, he told you what Mr White's job involved. Can you remember what he said?'

Peel cast his mind back several weeks. 'I'm not absolutely certain I can recall everything. But I do remember that in day-to-day charge of the accounting team and did special projects, whatever that means, and he was also involved in something called credit control.'

'That's it, Sir; credit control. Do you know what that means?'

'No, I don't. But I'm guessing that you're going to tell me.'

'I'll do my best. If you look on the Internet or in the textbooks, you will get a load of complicated jargon. But, in short, the job of a credit control department is to make sure that any sales extended on credit are going to customers who are capable of paying and will do so on time. That makes a credit control department in a large company very influential.'

'Is what way?' asked Peel.

'It's probably best demonstrated by an example. Let's suppose that you own a company that wants to buy steel from Kalmar. You approach them to purchase a thousand tonnes per year. Now, Kalmar's standard terms will be something like full payment must be received within sixty days of delivery. For Kalmar, there is a risk involved in that. You could go bankrupt, in which case Kalmar will never get their money and the steel will be impounded by the receiver. Or you might try to

renegotiate payment terms once you have the stock. There are other potential problems as well but you'll get the picture.'

Peel nodded. 'Keep going, Ms Crawford. You have my undivided attention.'

'The role of the credit control department in the situation that I've outlined is to ensure that you are financially stable and secure; in other words, that it is safe to trade with you. And here's the rub; if a credit control department at a company like Kalmar Steel decided that they shouldn't trade with you, it could be devastating for your business. It would send out a message to your other customers and your suppliers that your business is not sound. And that makes the credit control department at Kalmar, and the people who work there, extremely powerful. They could literally have the power of life and death over your company.'

Peel put his elbows on the desk and rested his chin on his hands. 'Now, this is interesting. And let me guess. You've trawled every company or individual that had been given a negative rating by the credit control department at Kalmar over the past few years and cross-referenced that list with Heaton Corrosion Coatings' customers over the same time.'

Crawford looked at Ryan, who took up the story. 'That's correct, Sir. It took a while but we were able to identify some possibilities. The other thing that we did was to look at those companies that got a negative rating from Kalmar and which went into liquidation within a year. There were two which fitted the bill. We have details of the owners of those companies and should be able to trace them without any great difficulty.'

'And can you say what role Mr White had in the decisions which harmed those companies?'

For the first time, Crawford and Ryan looked a little uncertain. It was the latter who answered.

'That's where it becomes a bit more difficult, Sir. You see, some of these decisions were a long time ago. And also, White was just one person of many involved. He supported the credit control department and did a lot of the financial assessments. But the decisions were ultimately down to the credit control manager. If anyone was going to be the target of a revenge attack as a result of those decisions, she would have been a better target.'

'So,' said Peel thoughtfully, 'you have a possible area for further investigation but there are reasons to suppose it might be a dead end.'

Ryan shrugged. 'That's a reasonable conclusion, Sir. But it's all we have at the moment and it's worth investigating further. I support DC Crawford's theory that the reason for the murder of Joseph White must lie in something that happened at his workplace. We just have to find it.'

Peel considered this for a few seconds and then said, 'OK, Freddy. I'm happy to back what the two of you are doing. Write up what you've come up with so far and then follow up the leads. Speak to the people who ran or are running these companies you've identified. But we're in a race against time now. Lyons has said that if we don't have something concrete by the end of this week, this investigation will be wound down and most of our resources will be redeployed to other enquiries.'

With that warning ringing in their ears, Ryan and Crawford stood up and left.

A week later Peel was once again sitting in front of Lyons and reporting failure.

'The credit control lead turned out to be a dud, Sir. We followed up on the companies that went bust and those that had links between Kalmar Steel and Heaton Corrosion Coatings. The people who own or owned those companies had watertight alibis.'

'What,' asked Lyons, 'do you think of the theory that the key to White's murder lies in his work?'

'It seems the most likely, Sir. His personal life was squeaky clean and he was what appeared to be a model citizen. If he was involved in the sorts of no-good that creates enemies, like paedophilia or drugs, he hid it unbelievably well. We've dug incredibly deep and there is no sign of him doing anything that he shouldn't.'

Lyons leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head and he considered his options. He made his decision and leaned forward.

'OK, Richard. I think that we've given this enough. I want you to keep DI Ryan and DC Crawford on the case for a little longer. Their priority is to review everything we have and see if anything was missed. Other than that, I'm going to disband your team. I know that this will be a disappointment to you but I hope you'll understand my reasons.'

Peel couldn't argue. He left to give Ryan and Crawford their new instructions.

And that was how it remained for the next two months. The enquiry was wound up and all the documentation was brought up to date for the cold case review that would take place years later. Everyone moved on.

Ryan took the call as he was eating his sandwich at his desk. The officer at the front desk informed him that a man had just walked in and asked to see somebody involved in the Joseph White murder investigation.

Ryan finished chewing before answering. 'Has he given any details of what he wants?'

'No, Sir. He's just sitting down reading a copy of the *Telegraph*. He won't speak to anyone other than the investigating officer.'

'Has he given a name?'

'He calls himself Roland Griffith.'

Ryan looked at the pile of files on his desk waiting for his attention and cursed silently. 'Tell him that I'll be down in five minutes.'

He finished off his sandwich before making his way downstairs. The man sitting reading a newspaper rose when he entered the lobby. He held out his hand in greeting and said, 'You must be Inspector Ryan. You're younger than I expected.'

Freddie saw a tall, languid looking individual, who he estimated to be somewhere in his mid-fifties. He had about him the lean, well-tended appearance of someone who knew how to take care of himself, and he wore a long tweed coat that looked as though it would have cost a sizable proportion of Ryan's monthly salary. He had a full head of greying hair, cut short and a smile that spoke of a nature that was friendly and easy-going.

‘Everyone says that,’ he responded. ‘If it’s true then I must look younger than I feel. Now, how can I help you? You said to my colleague that you might have some information about the murder of Joseph White.’

Griffith laughed lightly. ‘I said no such thing. All I said was that I wanted to speak to someone involved in the investigation into his killing. But as it happens, I may have something germane to the investigation, or I may not. If it turns out that I have wasted your time, I hope that you will forgive me.’

Ryan considered this for a few seconds and then said, ‘Why don’t you come upstairs. We can talk there.’

Five minutes later they were seated at Ryan’s desk. His visitor had refused an offer of tea or coffee and seemed eager to both begin the interview and get it finished. Ryan positioned his notepad and took up a pen. They went through the formalities of noting down Griffith’s details, in the course of which Ryan found out that he was Dr Griffith and a senior lecturer in structural engineering at the University of Southampton. Ryan began with the obvious question.

‘Can I ask first, was Joseph White known to you?’

‘Yes, for many years. In fact, for most of my adult life, I would have classed him as a close friend. We met because we were at Newcastle University at the same time; we played in the rugby team together. The third fifteen of course; we weren’t actually very good. But we bonded in the way that young men do and we both got jobs locally when we graduated. I worked for an engineering consultancy in Sunderland for a number of years and then went back to the University to do a doctorate and embarked on an academic career. But we stayed in touch. I got married, had a family and got divorced and through all that, we always managed to meet up once or twice a month for a meal or a few pints in a local pub.’

Ryan took a few moments to gain access to the investigation data on his computer. He pulled up a list of people who’d been interviewed after the murder, specifically looking at the names of White’s friends. Roland Griffith’s was not amongst them.

‘We spoke to all of Mr White’s friends after the killing,’ he said. ‘Your name did not feature amongst the people that were identified. Is there a reason for that?’

‘Yes, there is. Unfortunately, a number of years ago, something happened in this country which caused a huge deal of aggravation. It turned family members against each other and broke up friendships. Unfortunately, Joe and I were victims of this. We sat on opposite sides of the debate and, looking back on it, I think that we both presumed that the length and depth of our friendship would protect us from damage. We were wrong. We ended up having a frightful argument one evening and we never saw each other again.’

Griffith paused and then said wistfully, ‘I wish that it hadn’t happened and that I’d been man enough to pull back, but I wasn’t.’

‘That,’ said Ryan, ‘tells me that Mr White was capable of very strong feelings and quite passionate. It doesn’t quite square with what we have been told by other people. Most of those emphasised how calm and unflappable he was.’

'I can see how they might have arrived at that conclusion,' said Griffith, 'and by and large, that was correct. But he could, given the right circumstances, be quite volatile. It's just that those circumstances rarely occurred. He hated seeing injustice and unfairness, which was an admirable quality, and he also had a deep dislike of unpleasantness or threatening behaviour, especially if it was directed at him.'

A bell started ringing in the back of Ryan's mind and he turned back to his computer again. He took a few minutes to find what he was looking for and he read it carefully before turning back to Griffith.

'I noticed that one of the people who provided character statements said that he was well able to hold a grudge. Would you agree with that?'

Griffith looked thoughtful for a few seconds before nodding his head. 'Yes, I think that I would. Although I was never aware that he sought to take out any sort of revenge or retribution on anyone. Despite being a rugby player when he was young, physical action really wasn't Joe's style.'

Ryan tapped his pen on his desk while he thought about this. 'Tell me,' he asked, 'why did you move to Southampton?'

'It's where I'm originally from and I still have family there. To tell the truth, the only reason I stayed in Newcastle all these years is because my ex-wife remained here after we split up and I wanted to be around my sons as they grew up. But the last of them flew the nest about the time I had the argument with Joe. They're now making their own lives and so there was no reason to stay. I'm only back in Newcastle now for the wedding of a friend.'

'Why did you not contact us before?'

'Well, to tell you the truth, Inspector, I was waiting for you to call me. After I heard about Joe's murder, I called his sister to offer my condolences. She told me that all his friends were being contacted by the police but I heard nothing from you. I assumed that this was because I'd been out of his life for such a long period, you thought that there was little that I could offer.'

Ryan could not remember the details of the discussions on who the police should interview, but he suspected that either he or Peel had had some involvement in that decision and cursed silently.

'What you have told me about Mr White's character is interesting. But I'm guessing that what you came here to tell me is something specific. Something that you think might be relevant to this investigation.'

For the first time, Griffith looked uncertain. 'Well,' he said, and paused. 'It's probably nothing, and to tell you the truth, sitting here, in a police station, it seems silly. I am concerned that I might be wasting your time.'

Ryan had heard this before and knew what to say. 'Don't worry about that, Sir. We can make our own judgements and if your information turns out not to be of use, we will not hold it against you.'

The statement appeared to satisfy Griffith and he began his story.

'I mentioned that Joe and I used to meet regularly for a few pints. Just occasionally, that became more than a few. In fact, it occasionally became quite a lot. This happened about a year or so before our big argument. We were in the Collingwood in Jesmond if my memory serves me correctly. As happens when one has too much to drink, the conversation became somewhat maudlin, and turned towards what we regretted in our lives. And that was when he said something interesting.'

Griffith paused and Ryan encouraged him. 'Go on.'

'He said that part of his job at Kalmar was to do the figures on new business opportunities. It was part of a process called due diligence, which in simple terms is the procedure for making sure that what you're buying is what you think it is. You can probably guess the sort of thing he was brought in to do in that situation, but one of the main things was that, If Kalmar was looking to buy a company or invest in a new technology, Joe's job was to examine the potential profitability and decide on how much the company should pay.'

Ryan felt the itch in his brain that told him he was hearing something important. He sat up straighter. 'Keep going,' he said.

'He told me of something that had happened a year previously. It appears that Kalmar was approached by a company in Scotland that had developed a new system for applying corrosion protection for the sorts of product that Kalmar was making. The two men who had set up this company were looking for a large chunk of money from Kalmar to cover the loans that they'd taken out to develop the technology and also to allow them to take it on to the next level. In return, they were offering Kalmar a share of the business. They were looking for about two and a half million pounds and initially it all looked good. The technology appeared sound and the forward projections appeared to be positive. But then the people in Scotland made a serious mistake.'

He paused and this time Ryan didn't interrupt, gauging that his visitor needed time to get his thoughts in order. Eventually Griffith started speaking again.

'The problem was that they appeared to think that they had the investment from Kalmar in the bag. But Joe was very precise and believed in leaving no stone unturned. He went back to the two men on a number of occasions looking for clarification on certain issues. He assured me that he had found no fault in their operation but he didn't want anything to rebound on him later. However, they got annoyed and they blew up in his face. There was a horrible argument in which they became aggressive and abusive. Joe told me that he had felt absolutely humiliated.'

Griffith asked for a glass of water which Ryan got for him. He drank quickly and then continued.

'This incident angered Joe and ate away at him. He eventually took revenge on them by redoing the calculations and advising the Kalmar senior management that they should offer about half of what was being sought. Needless to say, the gentlemen in Scotland refused and walked away. The problem they then had, of course, was that the Kalmar refusal became common knowledge in the industry and nobody else would touch them. Their company folded six months later when the banks called in the loans.'

Ryan tapped his pen on the desk for a few seconds before speaking. 'That's an interesting story, Dr Griffith. I'm thinking on my feet here but I need to understand what you are telling me. Are you saying that you think that the two men in Scotland had something to do with the death of Joseph White?'

Griffith shook his head emphatically. 'No. I am just offering you a story that Joe told me. It's entirely up to you to do what you wish with it. It is in your hands now.'

Ryan reckoned that that was as much as he was going to get for the moment. He asked Griffith to wait until he had typed his notes. He then gave them to him to read and sign before escorting him back to the front door of the station. He said goodbye and added a caveat that it might be necessary for them to speak again.

An hour later he was sitting in front of Peel explaining what had happened. The older policeman read the statement and asked Ryan what he made of it.

'It's interesting, Sir. It definitely opens up a new line of enquiry. The work that White did, as described by Dr Griffith, was not something that DC Crawford and I looked into when we went through the books at Kalmar. But there is something puzzling about this story that only occurred to me after Dr Griffith had left. It's this. White and Griffith had their big argument over five years ago. White told Griffith this story a year or two before that, and the events that he described took place a further year prior to that. Putting that together, it means that White did the dirt on these two Scottish blokes between seven and eight years before he was killed.'

He left this hanging and Peel made the connection. 'So, if White's actions led to the company that these men had built up going into liquidation, and consequently to his death, why wait that long before looking for revenge?'

'Exactly, Sir. Let's assume that there is something in this. If I was to put money on it, I'd say that somehow or another in the past year, they got hold of what happened and decided that payback was in order. So, how did they get that information and who was responsible? Those are our questions.'

'I agree. OK, let's play it by the book on this. First thing is to go back to Kalmar. Get hold of the records on the approach used to assess the new corrosion coatings system and find out who these two men were. Take DC Crawford with you. I'll let Lyons know what's happening.'

Ryan stood up to leave and Peel gave him a final word of caution. 'Freddy, be careful and discreet with this. I think that we must regard it as a long shot for the moment. Tell nobody at Kalmar why we are interested and play it down if anyone asks any questions. Just say that we are tying up some loose ends. If these men in Scotland are involved in this, we need to be sure that word doesn't get to them before we're ready.'

Ryan and Crawford returned two days later. Crawford led the report.

'It took a while to find the spreadsheet which White used to come up with the price that was offered. It was as Dr Griffith described. It wasn't on his computer because Kalmar policy is that, after a few years, all files are put on an internal intranet. The price offered was one million four hundred thousand pounds. We also found the documentation relating to the discussions. It turns out that the company in Scotland was called Powder Solutions and it was based in Hamilton, which is in the south side of Glasgow.'

She looked at his notebook before continuing. 'The owners were called Sandy Booth and James McDonald. I've looked at their social media profiles and they would have been in their early

thirties at the time that they approached Kalmar. They were at the University of Glasgow at the same time, which is presumably where they met. The idea that they came up with was a method of fast application of powder coatings to provide corrosion protection to steel of any shape or size. Powder coating is a fairly widely used technology and is usually used on strip steel, that's the sort of material that you'll find in fridges and other white goods. The powder is applied electrostatically and then dried by effectively baking it in an oven. It's a slow, time consuming process and if someone came up with a method which speeds it up, it would be very lucrative.'

'And they came up with a quicker method?'

'It appears so, Sir. This new technology used a continuous assembly line approach and infra-red heating to dry and set the powder. It was unproven and still had a long way to go, but it apparently had real potential. Booth and McDonald had put several years into it and had a lot of skin in the game.'

'OK. So, we have the details of the approach to Kalmar, and we know how the price that was offered to Booth and McDonald was derived. But we don't have any evidence that Joseph White deliberately reduced the Kalmar offer to these men as an act of revenge.'

Ryan was beaming at Peel, a big cheerful grin that made him look like the Cheshire cat. Peel knew the signs and sighed melodramatically. 'OK, Freddy, you've got something. Spit it out.'

'It occurred to me, Sir, that if Griffith was correct, and White redid the spreadsheet that determined the amount offered to Booth and McDonald, and he changed it after the argument, there must have been a first spreadsheet with a higher offer. It wasn't on the Kalmar intranet but I oversaw the search of White's flat and I recalled that we bagged his personal computer and an external hard drive. Our technical people had a look for anything naughty but they found nothing incriminating, which fed into our initial picture of White being squeaky clean. However, I spent some time yesterday with the hard drive to see if I could find any spreadsheets. There were quite a few, mostly dealing with personal financial issues and membership lists for various clubs and societies. But I did find one spreadsheet that aroused a degree of suspicion, mainly because it was the only one that was password protected. You can get software now that can unlock these passwords in minutes and the technicians had the job done in no time.'

He paused and Peel said impatiently, 'Come on, Freddy. Let's have the big reveal.'

'It was the original spreadsheet. White had kept it. God alone knows why; perhaps vanity or even a guilty conscience. It doesn't matter now. The key point is that the original offer was going to be two million, six hundred thousand pounds.'

Ryan held out his arms like a conjurer who'd just pulled the rabbit out of the hat and Peel obliged by clapping slowly.

'Well done, both of you. Is there anything else that you want to surprise me with?'

Ryan pointed at Crawford, who took up the story.

'I've spent quite a bit of time digging up any information that's available on Booth and McDonald. As you might have already gathered, they both have a significant presence on social media, so we've been able to build up a picture of both men. The other thing that we've been able to determine is that their company, Powder Technology, went belly up less than a year after the approach to Kalmar. Over twenty people lost their jobs and both men were declared personally

bankrupt with discharged debts of more than half a million pounds each. They were also banned from assuming any company directorships for a period of ten years.'

'Where are they now?'

'Sandy Booth works as the coatings manager for a fabricator based outside York called Jorvik Steel. He's been there for about five years. James McDonald is a technical rep for a paint company and lives near Hexham. They have Facebook accounts and are friends on these, so we can assume that they are still in touch.'

She looked up and straight into Peel's eyes. 'Jorvik Steel frequently subcontracts work to Heaton Corrosion Coatings and I've checked the visitor's log. Sandy Booth visited three times in the past year.'

Peel whistled slowly. 'Bloody hell, DC Crawford; a rocket into the top corner from thirty yards.'

He smiled at the two officers. 'Brilliant work, both of you. I'm going to have a chat with Chief Superintendent Lyons to ask if we can get some of our team together again. In the meantime, I want the two of you to continue the deep dive into these two men. You know the drill so I won't tell you what to do. Report back to me tomorrow.'

Some hours later Peel and Ryan were hunched over two mugs of coffee in the canteen.

'The thing is,' said Ryan, 'if we assume that Booth and McDonald are our men, then there is one question that we need to answer; why did they kill Joseph White now? It can only be that something happened relatively recently to make them aware of what he'd done. But what?'

Peel agreed. 'It can only be that someone said something to one or both of them. Now, let's look at this logically. We know that White told Griffith what he did. We are not aware that he told anyone else, although that needs to be checked, and so we need to speak again to all his friends and family. There is also of course the possibility that someone at Kalmar twigged what White had done and told McDonald and Booth, but that's unlikely. Why wait all that time?'

'So,' said Ryan, 'I'll do the friends and family first and then speak to Griffith again to see if we can trace a route that links to our Scottish friends.'

'OK, I'll leave it to you. I'm going to set the team on trying to track the cars belonging to these men on the night of the murder. We'll start to get their phone records as well to see if, when and where they've been meeting. This is going to be a balls-aching process but Lyons has given me the people to do it. Let's get started.'

Ryan was on the phone with Griffith, who was clearly having second thoughts about having gone to the police. He was a reluctant participant in the conversation and Ryan found himself having to push for a response.

'I can understand why you might not want to get anyone else involved, Sir,' he was saying, 'but this is a murder enquiry, and personal preferences cannot be allowed to get in the way.'

There was silence on the other end of the line which extended for long enough to make Ryan wonder if he'd been cut off. Then Griffith asked, 'If there are any prosecutions resulting from the information which I provided to you, will it be possible to keep my name out of it?'

Ryan cursed silently but held his temper. 'I cannot guarantee that, Sir. We will do our best but it will depend on circumstances. The decision will ultimately be taken by the Crown Prosecution Service.'

Griffith fell silent again and Ryan decided that it was time for some home truths. 'Let me lay it on the line for you, Dr Griffith. Any murder investigation has collateral damage. We, and by that I mean the police, dig into people's lives and let the light into areas where sometimes they'd prefer we didn't go. Lots of people get hurt in this process, but it is necessary if we are to get to the truth. I understand your reluctance to help us further and your concern that we may uncover a sequence of actions and consequences for which you might feel you bear some responsibility, but that is incidental now. Whatever you did was not your fault and the responsibility will not be placed at your door. Your primary duty now is to help us apprehend the person or people who killed Joseph White. Do you understand what I am saying?'

Griffith's voice was quiet. 'Yes, I understand.'

'Thank you. Now, I have two questions to ask you. The first is, do you know if Mr White told anyone else, other than yourself, the story about Kalmar Steel and Powder Technology?'

'No, I don't. I presume that you've asked that question of all the people in his circle, Inspector. What was the answer there?'

Ryan debated whether or not to answer this question and eventually decided that it might make Griffith less reluctant if he told the truth.

'You are correct, Sir. I have done that and as far as I can ascertain, you are the only person to whom he spoke about this. My second question is, can you tell me, did you repeat to anyone, at any time, the story that Joseph White told you about how he sabotaged the investment that Kalmar Steel was due to make in Powder Technology?'

Griffith's voice still betrayed reluctance but he answered the question. 'I told my ex-wife a few days later, but I swore her to silence. We have a very good relationship and I trust her absolutely.'

'And what does your ex-wife do for a living?'

'She's an NHS manager at the Freeman Hospital.'

'I'll need her contact details.'

'I'll text them to you. You should have them by the time you put the phone down.'

'And was there anybody else?'

There was silence on the line again and Ryan had to prompt for a response. When he spoke, Griffith's voice was quiet. 'About nine months ago, I was in Nottingham for a funeral of an ex-colleague; a man that I'd worked closely with at Newcastle University. Many people from my old department attended and we had something of a reunion. I ended up speaking for quite a long time with an old friend from the materials science department. It turned out that he was doing some

research on powder coatings and, in particular, infra-red drying. I'd had a lot to drink at that stage and I repeated to him the story that Joseph had told me.'

Ryan asked Griffith to text his ex-colleague's details also and then thanked him for his time. As he made to put down the phone, Griffith asked a single question.

'Inspector, do you think that I was the cause of Joseph's death?'

'I don't know, Sir,' said Ryan 'But if your actions did have anything to do with this, you can't bring guilt on yourself. It wasn't you who killed Mr White, and whoever did it, that person or persons bear sole responsibility.'

As he returned the phone to its cradle, his mobile phoned bussed to inform that he had a text message. It was the contact details for Rosemary Curtis at the Freeman Hospital and Dr Patrick Winterbottom at the University of Newcastle. Ryan responded by asking Dr Griffith not to contact either person until he'd had the opportunity to speak to them.

Ms Curtis turned out to be a dead end. She was happy enough to see Ryan and was able to recall the conversation that her ex-husband and she had shared.

'But to tell you the truth,' she said, 'I can only vaguely remember it. It wasn't remotely the sort of thing that interested me and I'd already forgotten most of the details the following day. A week later, I couldn't have told you who was involved.'

'And you are sure that you told nobody about it?'

She shook her head emphatically. 'Definitely. It was absolutely none of my business.'

Ryan left it at that and drove to the University. Which is where things started to get more interesting.

Everything about Peter Winterbottom was round; from his tree trunk legs to his moon shaped face, both of which were separated by an enormous belly straining against a yellow waistcoat. He blinked at the world from behind a pair of wire rimmed glasses and was, to Ryan's eyes, what Billy Bunter might have looked like if he'd ever reached his sixth decade. But his voice, when he spoke, was deep and strong and his handshake was firm.

They were in his office and Ryan thanked him for agreeing to see him at such short notice, to which he received the standard reply that Winterbottom was always pleased to help the police. In response to Winterbottom's query about what he could for him, Ryan replied, 'We are investigating an incident which occurred at Heaton some months ago. It is possible that you may be able to help us, although I wish to assure you that you are not in any way under investigation. Are you happy to speak with me on that basis?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Thank you. I want to discuss a conversation that you had with Roland Griffith some months ago in Nottingham.'

Winterbottom looked thoughtful as he racked his memory. Yes, 'I recall that occasion. It was very sad; the funeral of a decent man and a good friend.'

Ryan nodded sympathetically before continuing. 'I am interested in something that Dr Griffith told you that day. It was about a company that had developed a new technology for applying powder coatings. Do you recall what he said?'

If Winterbottom was surprised that the police were interested in such an obscure subject, he was too polite to show it. 'Yes, I do. It was something that was close to my own area of research and I was particularly interested. It involved a method of quick drying of the coatings using a portable infra-red device; this is something of a holy grail in the industry.'

Ryan pursed his lips thoughtfully. 'Do you remember exactly what he told you?'

'Not word for word of course. But the gist of it was that a company in Scotland had come up with a prototype device for doing the sort of thing that we're discussing and that they had sought development funding from Kalmar Steel to take it to the next stage. Kalmar had appeared interested for a while but then dropped out. The real gossip was that one of Kalmar's accountants had had an argument with the developers and he had blocked it.'

'Did Dr Griffith tell you the name of the company?'

'He did, and I made a note of it afterwards. I had an idea that it might be possible to revive the technology.'

'And did you approach any of the people who had owned that company?'

Winterbottom nodded. 'I did in fact. They weren't particularly difficult to find if one knows how to surf social media. I went as far as to visit one of them, a gentleman called James McDonald in Hexham. However, it wasn't a conducive meeting. He was not a happy man and said that he wished that he'd never tried to develop the process; it had cost him his house and his marriage. He was really quite bitter and very unwilling to speak with me at any length. If the truth be told, I found him quite disturbing, almost as though he was a little disturbed.'

The next question was the big one. 'In the course of that conversation,' Ryan asked, 'did you mention the role of the accountant at Kalmar; the one who blocked the funding?'

'Yes, I must admit I did, but in a casual way. I wasn't getting through to him you see, and I thought that if I could tell him that what had happened was not his fault, he might open up to me a bit more.'

Ryan felt a surge of adrenalin but his face remained impassive. 'Did this provoke any reaction from Mr McDonald?'

'No, not particularly. Or at least, not that I noticed.'

Winterbottom's voice trailed away and he reached the end of the sentence and Ryan could see some instinct for self-preservation begin to assert itself and tell him that he was heading into very deep water. A look of alarm flashed across his face as he realised that he might just have implicated himself in something very unpleasant and he suddenly became defensive.

'Look,' he said, 'what's this all about? Why are you, why are the police asking all these questions? Should I be speaking to a solicitor?'

Ryan held up his hands, palms outward in an effort at reassurance. 'There's no need to be alarmed, Dr Winterbottom. As I told you, we are investigating an incident in Heaton and we believe that Mr McDonald may have some information which could prove helpful to us. But before going to

speak to him, we need to clear up some details first. As far as I am aware, you have done nothing wrong and we are not investigating you. Nor do we intend to do so.'

Winterbottom looked unconvinced. 'I think that I've said enough. I'm going to finish this conversation now and ask you to leave. If you wish to speak to me again, please submit the request in writing and I will get my solicitor to contact you.'

Ryan decided that it was time to change tack and to play hardball. 'You are at liberty to do so, Dr Winterbottom, if that is what you wish. However, I should tell you that the incident which we are investigating is extremely serious. We will almost certainly want to speak with you again and it will be entirely at your discretion as to whether you will wish to cooperate at that time. We will also need a statement from you summarising this conversation and I would appreciate it if you would come to the station as soon as possible to give that. In the meantime, I should warn you that any attempt on your part to speak to Mr McDonald, or anyone else, regarding this discussion might be construed as interfering in our investigation and we would regard that very unfavourably. Do you understand?'

Winterbottom appeared stunned by the unexpected direction that the conversation had taken. Like most law-abiding, middle-class, well-educated Englishmen, all previous involvements which he'd had with the police had been relatively harmless, and he regarded them with a benign benevolence; the friends in need if they were ever required, the protector of his interests. Now he was finding out that, if it was deemed to be necessary, they were prepared to ride roughshod over him. It was a rude awakening.

Ryan repeated the question. 'Do you understand, Sir?'

Winterbottom found his voice, which was suddenly pitched an octave higher. 'Yes, of course.' Then he recovered some of his poise and continued. 'I will call you this afternoon to arrange a time to come to the station to make a statement. I should warn you that I will be accompanied by my solicitor.'

Ryan could now afford to be gracious. He inclined his head and said, 'That is your right. I'll look forward to seeing you.'

Peel and his team were gathered in the incident room and there was a tangible sense of excitement in the air. He was running them through the events of the past few days. When he had done so, he summarised the situation.

'We have two men, Sandy Booth and James McDonald who developed a potentially valuable technical process into which they had invested huge amounts of time. They also mortgaged themselves to the hilt to fund it. They then approached Kalmar Steel to get funding to take it to the next level. We know that Joseph White sabotaged that approach following an argument, and that this led directly to the failure of their company and also had catastrophic personal consequences.

'We know that, about a year or so ago, James McDonald was told about what Joseph White had done. This potentially explains the time lapse between the failure of the approach to Kalmar and the murder. On top of that, we know that Sandy Booth was a regular visitor to Heaton Corrosion Coatings and, given his background, would almost certainly have known how to operate a shot blaster. We now have the motive and the means; we just need to link the murder to these two men. Over the next few days we are going to go through their lives with a fine-tooth comb. We need to

trawl through their phone records to see when and if they were talking to each other. We need to know if and when they met and we need to know their movements on the night of their murder. There's a mountain of work to be done, so let's get started.'

Two days later, Peel was in Lyons' office describing progress.

'They've been quite clever, Sir. I suspect that they did their homework on how to avoid their movements being traced. Assuming that we have the right men, then it appears that they left their mobile phones at home on the night that Joseph White was killed. That probably means that they were using burners to stay in touch, which are probably sitting in the bottom of a landfill by now. What we do have is the date on which Dr Winterbottom went to see James McDonald. In the days immediately after that, both their registered mobiles logged a large number of calls to each other. This abruptly stopped after three days.'

'Had they been in touch much before then?' asked Lyons.

'No Sir. At least, not for quite a while as far as we can determine. We've done a deep dive into both men and we've found out that McDonald is divorced and lives alone in a rented house in the village of Acomb, just outside Hexham. The local police say that he's not known to them. Booth lives in the village of Wigginton, south of York. He is also divorced but has remarried to a local GP. They have a young daughter.'

'What sight do we have of them on the night of the murder?'

'Relatively little. Given that they knew enough to make sure that their phones could not incriminate them, I'm pretty certain that they'll have taken their satnavs offline as well. We'll check that when the time comes of course but it will be a surprise if they didn't.'

'Do we have anything at all?'

'I said that we have relatively little. That doesn't mean that we have nothing. We have trawled the ANPR records. As you will be aware, ANPR cameras can be deployed following strategic assessments in areas with high local crime. We got lucky because a number of these cameras have been set up over the past few years across the North Yorkshire Moors to deter rustling.'

Lyons' eyebrows went up and Peel smiled 'Yes, I was surprised as well. But it appears that top breeding rams can fetch prices well in excess of five figures. There's big money in sheep apparently, if you get the right ones, and they sometimes get stolen to order. Anyway, we found that a car registered to Sandy Booth's wife was captured three times that night. Once near Rosedale Abbey and a second time on a minor road near Great Ayton, both times heading north, and once again much later, again near Rosedale Abbey, heading south.'

'So,' said Lyons thoughtfully, 'he was using her car to travel to Newcastle by a circuitous route to avoid detection.'

'Exactly. And McDonald was caught on camera at a local accident black spot on a minor road off the Military Road in his own car heading east at about the same time.'

'So, both of them travelling towards Newcastle on the night of the murder. They must have met up somewhere.'

‘That’s our reading of it. I suspect what happened was that they had the white van hidden away in a lock-up. It was probably close to a metro station. Our best guess at the moment is that they will have parked their own cars close to two out of town stations and then met up. Our initial investigation found the van on ANPR several times on the night of the murder, but the first was on the Felling bypass near Heworth, heading west, and the second was crossing the Tyne Bridge from Gateshead, heading north. We put quite a lot of resources into looking for where it was stored but it was like attempting to find a needle in a haystack. We’re trying again but, given how careful these men have been, even if we do find it, the place is likely to be as clean as a whistle.’

‘I agree. I assume that you are looking at CCTV in Jesmond from the period before the killing to see if you can spot either McDonald or Booth?’

‘Yes, Sir. As you will no doubt recall, we trawled through everything we could find from the weeks before Mr White was murdered, on the assumption that the people who killed him must have been aware of his movements and the local geography, and must therefore have checked it out. At the time, we didn’t see anything suspicious. We found Mr White on quite a few recordings as he went about his business but there was never a figure consistently in the background that was acting suspiciously or drawing attention to himself. We are going through that again with the difference that we now know the man that we are looking for.’

Lyons arched an eyebrow. ‘Man, not men?’

‘That’s correct. Let’s look at it logically. If our assumption that Mr White was being watched is correct, then the person involved must have been able to spend some time doing so. That eliminates Booth. He’s married with a child and living over ninety miles away. He could never do it. But McDonald lives a thirty minute drive away, and is not in a relationship. If anyone was watching Mr White, it had to be him.’

Lyons nodded approvingly. ‘Well done, Richard. What’s next?’

Peel spoke slowly and carefully. ‘As things stand, we are confident, but cannot be certain, that we have our men. We also think that we understand their motive and how they carried out the attack on Mr White. But it’s all circumstantial. If we tried to take it to court, the CPS would block us on the grounds that we wouldn’t stand a reasonable chance of success. We need to tie them into the events of the night Joseph White was killed, and then we need to get them to either confess or make a mistake. They have been very careful and very clever, and they have covered their tracks well; we now need to match them.’

‘Is there anything else?’

‘Only one thing, Sir. We have conducted detailed background research into the backgrounds of these men. We know that they met when they were at University in Glasgow together. We checked for criminal records and we found that they had a little bit of form. It appears that, when they were students, someone hit on McDonald’s then girlfriend in a nightclub and they gave him a bit of a hammering outside. They were convicted of category three common assault and got a fairly hefty fine. But it shows two things. Firstly, that they are capable of violence, and secondly, that they are prepared to stand by each other when things turn nasty.’

Peel returned to the incident room and was met by a beaming Wireman.

'Bingo, Sir. We've got McDonald on CCTV. We've been using the photograph from his Facebook profile and we've definitely found him twice. On both occasions he got a bit careless. The first time is coming out of the Waitrose on Osborne Road behind White, and the second time he's following White as he goes into the Collingwood pub. White is with a group of friends and McDonald just walks by and doesn't follow him inside. We think that we have him on several other occasions, but he has a hat pulled down over his face or a scarf around his mouth, so we can't definitively say that it's him.'

Peel returned the smile and said, 'Well done, Barbara. How much of the film have you checked so far?'

'We're about half way through.'

'OK. Keep it up and please make sure how grateful I am to everyone for what they're doing. I know that it's needle in a haystack stuff and that they must be bored out of their heads, but it's important.'

He went to Ryan's desk and tapped him on the shoulder. 'Can you join me in my office, Freddy?'

The two men sat on opposite sides of Peel's desk. 'We possibly have enough to question McDonald and Booth, but we need more. If they just clam up and stonewall us, we'll get nowhere.' He held up the forensics report. 'The key to cracking this lies somewhere in this document.'

He flicked through it and started to summarise. 'White was hit with extreme force by what appears to have been a metal object, perhaps a golf club. The shot blasting process destroyed any DNA contamination from his assailants on the body. There's a partial fingerprint on the back of the board that the body was placed on, but we don't have anyone that we can tie it to. In addition, the board appears to have been cleaned of any DNA evidence using a surface decontaminant, of which there are several commercially available for laboratory use. The board was hardwood plywood, which was originally a standard two point four by one point two metres and eighteen millimetres thick. It can be bought at dozens of builders supply merchants all over the North-East. The only thing that forensics could give us is that it appears to have been trimmed at some point, probably to fit more easily onto the roller conveyor that fed the body into the machine.'

He threw the report on the table in exasperation. 'Any ideas, Freddy?'

Ryan leaned back on his chair and laced his fingers behind his head. He looked at the ceiling as he considered the question and Peel knew the man well enough not to interrupt. It took several minutes for him to reach a conclusion, at which point he sat up straight and began to talk.

'I think that we've missed a trick, Sir. Stick with me while I work through this. We know that the white van was stored somewhere south of the river until it was needed. And we think that both McDonald and Booth travelled to Newcastle by back roads, picked up a metro and met up somewhere close to where the van was hidden. You're with me so far?'

'I'm sticking to you like glue. Carry on.'

'OK. The place where the van was hidden was south of the river and, given where it was picked up by the ANPR camera, probably east of Heworth. Now, if I am right, and the van was somewhere close to a metro station in that area, they'd want one that was as rural as possible, to

avoid road cameras. So, the question now becomes, what is the most out of the way metro station in the area between Heworth and Sunderland or Heworth and South Shields?’

‘Have we got OS maps of the local area?’

Ryan stood up and reappeared two minutes later. ‘These are number 308 and 316. They are one in twenty five thousand scale and should give us an answer.’

The maps were spread out on Peel’s desk and both men examined them for several minutes before looking at each other and simultaneously mouthing the same two words.

The following morning Peel and Ryan were standing outside a lock-up at the end of a back lane on the outskirts of East Boldon. Men and women in white Tyvek suits were combing the interior inch by inch and both men knew better than to interfere.

‘Well done, Freddy. You’ve pulled it off again.’

‘It was a long shot, Sir. And it’s not done and dusted yet. It took us several hours to find this place and longer to track down the owner. He’s been renting it out for several years apparently, on a strictly cash basis. Initially he was a bit evasive because he thought that we were going to shop him to the tax people, but I eventually persuaded him that I had no interest in that and he became more cooperative. He recognised Booth’s photo immediately as the person who rented the place for a month around the time that Joseph White was killed. He is claiming however to be ignorant of the presence of a white van.’

‘That’s as good as we’re going to get, I suppose. Is he prepared to make a statement?’

‘I made it clear to him that he didn’t really have a choice.’

The two men were silent for a few seconds, then Ryan continued. ‘The thing that might make this difficult is that two other people have rented this place since Booth and McDonald. And, as I predicted, our men appear to have cleaned the place thoroughly before they left. However, the forensics people are confident that they’ll pick up anything that’s been left.’

‘What about house to house?’

‘Sergeant Wireman is in charge, Sir. She has people knocking on doors and looking for CCTV throughout the village. If there’s anything there, she’ll find it.’

That evening, Peel received an e-mail which contained some forensic initial findings from the lock-up. A lot of DNA and fingerprints had been found, although it wasn’t possible to connect these to the two suspects yet. Once all the people who had been in the building since McDonald and Booth were traced and able to give prints and samples, a process of elimination could begin. The most interesting item in the report however was that some sawdust had been found and it was possible to say that it was from the same type of board that had been used to carry the body of Joseph White.

‘It’s time to bring them in, Sir,’ said Peel.

Lyons looked doubtful. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. We need to get them in for questioning now, and we need to formally arrest them so that we can get their fingerprints and DNA samples which we can then hopefully tie to the partial print that we have on the board and what we might be able to get from the lock-up. We still have the element of surprise. They don’t have a clue that we’re onto them and the shock factor if we lift them at their places of work might be enough to make them say things that they shouldn’t. We’ll bring them in separately and make sure that they both know that the other person is being questioned in another room. We’ll also need to talk to Booth’s wife. There’s no way that she will have been unaware that her husband was out and about until the small hours on the night that Mr white was killed. I want to know what he told her and what she knew.’

‘I’ll accept your judgement on this one, Richard. But it’s a risk. If they just clam up, and we don’t have any evidence linking them to the murder, we’ll have shown our hand.’

‘If we don’t do it, Sir, when will be the best time?’

Lyons smiled faintly. ‘Very good. OK, you have the green light.’

Ryan and Wireman travelled to York the following morning, accompanied by a squad car. At the same time, two other officers travelled to Hexham. After making sure that both McDonald and Booth were present at their places of work, the men were arrested simultaneously. Neither showed any particular surprise and went quietly. They were driven to Newcastle, where fingerprints and a DNA sample were taken. As planned, they were allowed sight of each other as they were being led to the holding cells. If Peel had hoped that one of them would break at that point, he was disappointed. Both men rejected the offer of a duty solicitor and asked for their own.

Peel had primed the forensics laboratory for a quick turnaround on the DNA samples and he let the two men stew in their cells while he waited for the results. They came back just after midday and he called his team together.

‘We have the DNA results,’ he said. ‘They prove that both McDonald and Booth were in the lock-up. We also have a match on the partial fingerprint on the board. It belongs to McDonald.’

He waited until the applause and the whistles had died down before continuing.

‘Well done to everyone. It will be open bar at the Dog and Parrot this evening and my credit card will be behind the counter.’

That drew another round of applause, this time so loud that he had to hold up his hands to silence it.

‘I don’t need to tell you, that this is a long way from over yet. We still have to interview them and get them to own up. And that won’t be easy. These are two clever and very cool operators. We’ll do the interviews in tandem. Inspector Ryan will lead on Booth. In light of her excellent work on this case, I’m going to ask DC Crawford to sit in with him. The other interview will be led by DS Wireman and DS Newman.’

Four hours later, Ryan, Wireman, Crawford and Newman were sitting with Peel in his office. There was a palpable air of anger and it was Ryan who gave vent to it.

‘Stonewalled. Absolutely stonewalled by both of them. Not a word out of them except “No comment.”’

‘The same here,’ said Wireman. ‘The only time we got a reaction from McDonald was when we told him that we had a match for his fingerprint on the board. He looked frightened for a few seconds but then recovered his composure.’

Peel had watched the interviews on the monitors and understood the frustration of his officers.

‘We are in the process of applying for an extension to hold both men for ninety six hours. That’s how long we have to break them. The CPS is happy that we charge McDonald on the back of the fingerprint evidence, but I don’t want to do that just yet. I want Barbara and Gerry to get back in the room and bear down on him. Push on the fact that the fingerprint evidence leaves him with no place to go but he might get off more lightly if he implicates Booth. Are you happy with that?’

They nodded and he continued, ‘OK. Now I need to speak to Booth’s wife. She’s been on the phone all day and will be here shortly. Freddy will fetch her when she arrives and will be in on the conversation with me.’

Booth’s wife was called Dr Claire Tomlinson. She was standing in the lobby of the station when Ryan went to fetch her. He saw a petite woman somewhere in her mid to late thirties, with light brown hair cut close to her head and a thin, angular face, which was now blotched and red from tears. She was clearly in a state of extreme agitation and ready for a fight. As soon as he appeared, she screamed at him, ‘I want to see my husband.’

The Front Counter Supervisor looked on with interest. Ryan’s effect on the opposite sex was famous around the station and he was interested to see it in action. He wasn’t disappointed.

Ryan remained calm and stared straight into her eyes. His voice, when he spoke, was soft and reassuring. ‘I’m afraid that won’t be possible at the moment, Dr Tomlinson. But Detective Superintendent Peel would like to speak to you. He is the Senior Investigating Officer. Would you be prepared to see him?’

She drew herself up as if to deliver another broadside and then seemed to visibly deflate in front of him. When she spoke, her voice was a whisper. ‘Yes please.’ Then she continued, a note of pleading in her voice, ‘Has Sandy been arrested? Nobody will tell me what’s happening.’

‘I can’t tell you that at the moment, Doctor. But if you come with me, Superintendent Peel will be able to give you some of the answers that you need.’

He took her gently by the arm and she went with him calmly as he nodded at the Supervisor to unlock the security door.

He led her to Peel’s office and they sat around the table. She declined an offer of a drink. ‘Where’s my husband?’ she asked, her voice shaky and uncertain. ‘I got a telephone call from his work to say that he’d been arrested and taken to Newcastle. Then I received another call telling me to return to my house because the police were there with a search warrant. They’ve taken his computer and my car. I want to know what’s happened to him. Why won’t anyone tell me what’s happening?’

Peel looked at her with some sympathy, aware that he was about to bring her world crumbling down around her ears. He was a man of some sensitivity and he knew, as did most police officers, that it wasn't just the victim that suffered when a murder was committed. The intrusive, and sometimes brutal, nature of the investigation which followed, created a circle of destruction, which radiated out to consume families and relationships, often leaving them damaged or broken beyond repair. The innocent were often collateral damage, left to carry the pain and hurt long after the investigation had been completed. When he spoke however, his voice was clear and without emotion, betraying none of his inner feelings.

'I need to check something first. You have told us that you are Dr Claire Tomlinson. Do you have any identification?'

She opened her handbag and rooted around inside for several seconds. Then she pulled out a debit card and a driver's license. She handed them to Peel, who looked at them for a moment before handing them back.

'Thank you, Doctor. Am I correct that you are the wife of Sandy Booth?'

'Yes. His name is Alexander, but everyone calls him Sandy. Can you answer my question please? Have you arrested my husband and if so, why?'

Peel looked at Ryan, who took up the story. 'We have arrested your husband, Dr Tomlinson, because we believe that he, along with a second man, James McDonald, was involved in the murder of Joseph White in Jesmond on the nineteenth of October of last year. We are questioning both men at the moment and we have applied to the courts for an extension for the period of detention to ninety six hours.'

He paused and waited for a reaction. He saw her face drain of colour and her hand flew to her mouth. 'You can't be serious. There must be a mistake! Sandy is not a violent man. What evidence or proof do you have?'

Peel answered. 'We are not at liberty to release that information at the moment. It will only be made available to you if and when your husband is formally charged. We do however have some questions for you and I would like to take this opportunity to put them to you. Are you happy that I do so?'

She hesitated, and then asked, 'Is this a formal police interview? Am I a suspect in this investigation?'

'No, Dr Tomlinson, you are not a suspect. I would simply like to ask you some questions about your husband's movements on the night that Mr White was killed.'

'I want to see Sandy before I answer any questions.'

'That is not possible, I'm afraid. He is being questioned at the moment. He has asked for his solicitor to be present and we have arranged that.' He reached into an inside pocket and pulled out a business card. He handed it to her and said, 'These are her details and you can speak to her when the interview has been completed.'

She glanced briefly at the card and put it in her bag. She stood up and said, 'I'm leaving now. If you want to interview me, please speak to my husband's solicitor and a time will be arranged. I will ask her to attend with me.'

She walked out, slamming the door behind her. The two police officers looked at each other and Peel asked, 'What do you think?'

'She's either the best actress I've ever seen, Sir, or she knows nothing about this.'

'I agree. But it will be interesting to hear what she has to say when we ask her about her husband's absence from home on the night Joseph White was killed.'

The interview took place the following morning. Ryan took the lead, supported by Wireman. Tomlinson looked composed and alert, and was accompanied by her solicitor, a tall, stick-thin, angular woman with dark hair pulled back in a severe bun, dressed in a grey Prisoner Cell Block H suit. Her sharp, pointed face was set in a position of permanent disagreement which brought to mind for Ryan the phrase from his younger days, a bulldog licking piss off a nettle. But he had come across Gillian Gill before and knew that, behind this professional facade, lay a very sharp operator with a dry, sardonic sense of humour, which she must have got, he imagined, from her parents.

Once the preliminaries had been established, Ryan turned on the recorder. He then issued a statement to the effect that Dr Tomlinson was not being treated as a suspect, the interview was voluntary and she could leave at any time. This was followed by another one from Gill outlining her role and what she would and would not advise her client to say. Once these had been completed, Ryan kicked off, his voice neutral.

'As you will know, Dr Tomlinson, we are currently holding your husband in custody and he is being questioned in regard to the murder of a man called Joseph White in Newcastle Upon Tyne on the nineteenth of October of last year. We are also holding a second man called James McDonald in relation to the same charge. Do you know Mr McDonald?'

'Yes. He's a friend of my husband. The two of them met at University and owned a business together for a few years before it went bankrupt. He's turned up at the house a few times after Sandy and I got married.'

'What did you think of Mr McDonald?'

Gill interrupted. 'Claire, you don't have to answer that question.'

Tomlinson shrugged. 'It's OK. I was going to say that I didn't particularly like him. He was a bit intense. He must have picked up on that because he stopped turning up.'

'Did your husband ever meet up with him on other occasions that you know of?'

'They'd have occasional calls and they made a point of meeting up once a year somewhere in Newcastle for a boy's day out. Sandy would get back late and be really quite drunk.'

'Did you think that they were close friends?'

'Please don't answer that,' said Gill sharply. 'It's asking you to speculate.'

Ryan tapped his pen on the table while he considered his next question. 'Did you, at any time last year, notice an increase in communication between your husband and Mr McDonald?'

Gill coughed pointedly and when Tomlinson looked at her, she shook her head. Then she turned to Ryan. 'You're fishing, Inspector Ryan, and you know it. Please make your questions relevant to what you need to know, not what you want to know.'

Ryan nodded and looked pensive. He looked towards Wireman, who took the hint and took up the questioning. Keeping her voice calm and polite, she said, 'I'm going to ask you some questions now, Doctor about the events of Nineteenth of October last. Does the date ring a bell with you?'

'Not until Inspector Ryan mentioned it last night.'

'Really! Let me give you a reminder. Your car was tagged by Automatic Number Plate Recognition cameras several times while travelling through rural North Yorkshire and south County Durham that evening and early the following morning. There can't be too many nights when you are up and driving around at that time and I'm sure you'd remember it if you had. So, is it fair of me to assume that it was not you behind the wheel of your car?'

Tomlinson turned to Gill and the two women put their heads together for a few seconds. Then she faced Wireman again. 'That is correct,' she said. 'It was not me in that car.'

'And you had not reported it stolen. Was your car stolen that night?'

'No, it wasn't.'

'Had you lent the car to anyone outside your family?'

'No, I hadn't.'

'Was it your husband therefore who was behind the wheel of the car?'

'I suppose so.'

Wireman's voice was gentle. 'I suppose so isn't good enough, Dr Tomlinson. On the Nineteenth of October last, did your husband drive your car away from your house in the early evening and return in the early hours.'

Tomlinson started to look frazzled. 'I...I don't know. I can't place the date.'

Wireman looked at her notebook. 'You should be able to do so. It was two days before your birthday.'

There was silence in the room, which was eventually broken by Gill. 'Can I ask you, Inspector, to pause this interview for ten minutes while I speak to Claire?'

Ryan nodded and announced that the interview was suspended. Wireman stopped the recording and they left the room, leaving the two women alone, speaking in quiet whispers.

When they returned, Wireman turned on the recorder and once again did the preliminaries. Gill then announced that her client wanted to make a statement. Tomlinson had regained something of her composure and spoke in a monosyllabic voice, looking over Ryan's shoulder.

'I was not truthful when I said that I did not remember anything of significance happening on the Nineteenth of October last year. I do recall that Sandy had come home early from work that evening. He said that his car had broken down and had had to be taken to the garage. He also said that he needed to go out and that I was not to wait up for him. He refused to answer my questions as to what he was doing, saying that it was something important and he would tell me later. This was out of character for him and I was quite worried. He returned home in the early hours of the morning. I woke briefly when he arrived and looked at the clock. It was after four o'clock. He slept in

the spare room so as, he told me the next morning, not to disturb me. At breakfast, he was in a very distant mood and refused to tell me where he'd gone or what he'd done. The following day, which was my birthday, we were supposed to be going out for dinner at a local restaurant but we had to cancel. He said that he didn't feel well. When I persisted in trying to find out what was wrong, he screamed at me to shut up and raised his fist as though to hit me. He stopped himself but he had never done anything like that before and it was a frightening moment. He was bad tempered and edgy for most of the following month but eventually calmed down and life returned to something like normal.'

'Thank you for that, Dr Tomlinson,' said Ryan. 'Did you notice anything unusual about the car on the following day, the twentieth of October?'

'Only that the Satnav was unplugged and in the glove compartment.'

'Do you know,' asked Wireman, 'if Mr McDonald and your husband have been in touch since that night?'

'No. We didn't even get a Christmas card, which was unusual. I remember at the time wondering if he and Sandy had had a falling out, but I didn't mention it.'

Peel had watched the interview and was with Ryan and Wireman in his office reviewing the outcome.

'I think that there's more to their relationship than meets the eye,' he said. 'Most wives would have clammed up in that situation and looked to protect their husband no matter what. She gave him up very easily. Mind you, what she says proves nothing. He still hasn't said a word and all we have from her is a statement that puts him out of the house and in her car on the night that Joseph White was killed.'

'We have a non-result from forensics on the car, Sir,' said Ryan. 'They looked for McDonald's DNA but got nothing.'

Peel leaned back on his chair, his hands behind his head, fingers laced together as he considered their next move.

'We have enough to go after McDonald,' he said. 'But as things stand, we have circumstantial evidence only on Booth. We need something that definitely puts them together on the night of the murder. The question is now, how can we do that?'

The room went quiet for a while as they considered this. It was Wireman who broke the silence.

'There is one avenue that we haven't checked out fully, Sir. It's what happened when they drove out of Gosforth on the night of the murder.'

She stopped and Peel looked at her with interest. 'Keep going, Barbara.'

'It's like this, Sir. They killed White in Jesmond on a foul night with few people around. They then took the body to Heaton and put it in the shot blaster. After that, CCTV picked them moving north through Gosforth and out into Northumberland. The van was then found burned out at the end of a farm track near Whalton. They avoided all the major roads in order to get there, so clearly, they know the area. But once they set fire to the van, they needed to get back to their own vehicles,

'We know that the car Booth was using was parked up somewhere near East Boldon. McDonald's car was picked up in Northumberland earlier that evening but then fell off the radar, from which we previously concluded that he had parked close to a rural metro station to the north of the city and then made his way on the metro to meet Booth.'

She paused and Peel said, 'Don't stop now.'

'There is a question therefore as to how they got back to their cars. The van was set on fire in a sparsely populated rural area, but that's not to say nobody lives there. So, once they had done the deed, they needed to get away quickly and get back to their cars. So, how the hell did they do that?'

They considered this question thoughtfully and it was Ryan who spoke first.

'They wouldn't have kept a car there. There was too good a chance that it would be noticed. And they would have had to find a way of getting it there. It would all have been too difficult. So, where does that leave us?'

Wireman grinned and wiggled her eyebrows. Ryan smiled back and said, 'OK, smart arse; let's have it.'

'It can only be one thing, Sir. They had a van which was much larger than anything that was going to be needed to transport Joseph White's body. Why? Perhaps because they also needed to put something else in there.'

Peel finished it off. 'A motorbike. They had a motorbike in the back of the van and that's what they used to get away. McDonald will have driven it to East Boldon with Booth riding pillion, dropped him off and then taken it back to where he had parked his own car.'

Peel turned to his computer and started tapping the keys. It took him just under a minute to find what he was looking for.

'When McDonald was caught on camera driving towards Newcastle on the nineteenth of October, the car was a silver Honda CR-V. Could he have gotten a motorbike into that? Do we have any officers who're into bikes who might be able to tell us?'

'There's DC Crawford, Sir.' said Wireman.

Peel looked at her in surprise. 'Crawford? Are you talking about our Crawford? Five foot four and eight stone on a good day.'

'That's the one, Sir. She competes regularly at motocross. That's motorcycle racing held on enclosed off-road circuits. She also owns a Kawasaki KLR650 which she takes to Italy every year.'

Peel considered asking Wireman how she knew this but decided that it was, all in all, a question best left alone. 'Can you go and get DC Crawford please?' he asked.

Wireman left to do as he had asked and he turned to Ryan. 'Did you know about DC Crawford's hobby, Freddy?'

Ryan nodded. 'Yes, Sir. In fact, I've been on the back of that Kawasaki going down the hill at Hartside. I damn near shat myself. It was a never to be repeated experience.'

Wireman reappeared with Crawford and Peel rapidly appraised her of their thinking. 'What I need to know, DC Crawford, is whether you think that it would be possible for McDonald, acting on their own to fit a motorbike capable of carrying two grown men into the back of a Honda CR-V?'

She thought about this for a few seconds. 'No. I don't think that it would be possible; at least not without quite a lot of work. He'd probably have had to take off the front wheel and find a way of draining the tank. On top of that, the bike would be a pure dead weight. It would have needed at least two strong men to lift it and put it in position.'

The optimism seemed to drain out of the room. 'Damn,' said Ryan. 'That looked promising.'

Crawford ignored the comment and continued. 'If it was me doing it, I'd put a motorcycle carrier into the car and then attach it to the back when I needed to put the motorbike on. They're very like the bicycle carriers that you see on cars everywhere. They're fiddly to attach and you need to know what you're doing. But if McDonald had a bike that was relatively light, something like a Yamaha XT250, he shouldn't have had a problem. You can find videos of how to put these carriers together and attach them on YouTube.'

The other officers stared at her and Ryan muttered, 'DC Crawford, I think I love you.'

She blushed a deep scarlet but retained enough composure to ask Peel, 'Is there anything else, Sir.'

He smiled. 'No, not for the moment. We may need your help on this later but you have been very helpful.'

When she had left, he asked Ryan, 'We caught McDonald on ANPR heading towards Newcastle. Did we catch him later when he was returning?'

Ryan shook his head. 'Nothing Sir. Clearly, whatever route he took to get home, it was different from the one he took to get to Newcastle. There's something else as well; I will check but I'm pretty sure that McDonald doesn't own a motorbike. Or at least, there is not one registered to his name.'

'OK. Well, we know what to do next. Go through all the CCTV and ANPR footage we have. We are now looking for a motorbike, probably a relatively lightweight one, travelling from Northumberland to South Tyneside around midnight on the night of the killing, carrying two passengers, and then the same bike travelling north again with only one person riding it. We need to find that bike. We also need to look again at McDonald and check out if any of his neighbours or the people he works with have ever seen him on a bike. Let's get to it.'

They were back inside two hours.

'We have the bike, Sir, and the pictures we need. Two men on the A1 and then the Felling by-pass. An hour later, we have one man coming back on the same bike. We've checked the number and it's registered to someone called David Frazer. He lives in Corbridge and it appears that he works in the same company as McDonald. I'm making arrangements to get some people out there as soon as possible to impound the bike so that we can carry out the checks. The forensics people know that it's on its way and that they need to prioritise it. In the meantime. I'm just about to go to Hexham to speak to Mr Frazer.'

'Well done, Freddy. The cards are beginning to fall our way now.'

It was the following morning when Ryan and Crawford sat once again in the interview room with Sandy Booth and Gillian Gill. After the preliminaries, Ryan stared at Booth for several seconds. He saw an unremarkable looking man; short, stocky and powerfully built, with a square face, a large forehead and dark hair turning to grey at the temples. And yet, Ryan considered, this ordinary man had inside him the ability and willingness to kill and to mutilate, predicated on a capacity for cruelty and vengeance that was invisible and unknown, probably even to himself, until circumstances dragged it from the depths of his soul. Ryan knew that everyone had a capacity for cruelty, given the right circumstances, but that most people resisted it. This man had been provoked and had given in, and then committed a crime which was much greater than anything which had been done to him. Ryan felt no sympathy as he began to speak.

‘We’ve worked out how you did it,’ he said. ‘Your wife provided us with a statement that confirms your movements the night that Joseph White was killed. We got the motorbike and your DNA is all over it. In addition, our forensics laboratories have been able to lift traces of mud from the wheel arches that are consistent with samples from the area around where the van was found after you set it on fire. We have the two of you on CCTV when you were on the bike.’

He put several photographs on the table and slid them over to Booth, who glanced at them briefly. He continued.

‘In fact, we have everything but the murder weapon and the identity of the person who actually struck the blow that killed Joseph White. The CPS is happy that we have enough to get a conviction and you are going down for a very long time. The only thing that might save you now is if it was Mr McDonald who did the actual killing, and you can give us something that proves it.’

He paused but Booth’s face remained impassive. Ryan said nothing and the room fell silent. Eventually, it was Booth who spoke.

‘I need to speak privately with my solicitor.’

Ryan nodded and suspended the interview. The police officers left the room and, when they returned ten minutes later, Gill announced that Booth wanted to make a statement. The recorder was switched back on and he began to talk. His voice carried the gentle lilt of someone born in Fife and his words were precise and controlled.

‘I want to confess that I, along with James McDonald killed Joseph White on the nineteenth of October last year. We did it because, many years ago, Mr White did something that destroyed a business which James and I had spent years building up. This ruined us financially and cost both of us our marriages. James had a breakdown and spent a year in a mental institution. He has never fully recovered. We did not understand the full extent of what Joseph White had done until last year. I will assume that you have uncovered the facts and it was that which led you to us, so I will not add any details at this time. We followed him for some time and knew where to ambush him. It was James who hit him, with a length of steel pipe, and we both carried him into the van. It took us no more than thirty seconds.’

Ryan allowed several seconds after Booth had finished before asking, ‘Whose idea was it to put the body into the shot blaster?’

‘I am not answering that.’

Ryan was not bothered by that response; they would return to it later. He had one final question.

‘You have stated that James McDonald struck the blow that killed Joseph White. Do you know what happened to the steel pipe that he used? It was not in the van that you used and you clearly did not have it while you were on the motorbike.’

‘There’s a farm about half a mile east of where we left the van. It has a slurry pit which is quite close to the main road. We threw it in there. We reckoned it would never be found.’

Ryan didn’t envy the people who were going to have to evacuate that particular pit, but it wasn’t his problem so he didn’t let it worry him. He turned off the recorder and indicated to the officer at the door that Booth could be returned to his cell.

‘You and your team have done well, Richard,’ said Superintendent Lyons. ‘You are to be congratulated. It has been a difficult case but both men have now confessed and the CPS are happy that they can secure a conviction.’

‘Thank you, Sir. It has certainly not been easy. In the end, it all hinged on Joseph White’s ex-friend making a decision to come and see us. Without that, his murder would have almost certainly ended up as one of those unsolved killings that would have haunted me for years. I will complete the full report on the investigation shortly but I would like to commend in particular the efforts of DC Crawford and DS Wireman. Without their contributions, I doubt that we’d have gotten to the bottom of this.’

Lyons nodded. ‘That’s very generous of you to say so, Richard. I will make sure that it is reflected in their personnel files. There is something else that I want to discuss with you, and it is this. What do you think drove these two men to mutilate Mr White in the manner that they did? It was so dreadful and unnecessary.’

‘I agree, Sir. It was DC Crawford who put her finger on it in the first team meeting. She said that whoever did it must have hated Joseph White. It was not enough to kill him; they felt that they had to destroy what he was. They certainly took risks to do it. The manner in which they killed him was, relatively speaking, low risk. But their actions afterwards added huge levels of complexity to their plan and significantly increased their chances of being caught.’

‘But what drives men to such acts of hatred? I accept that they had lost a great deal through White’s actions, and those reflect very poorly on him, but the reaction was extreme. If they had given him a bit of a hiding and maybe put him in hospital for a few weeks, it might have been possible to understand it. But murder and mutilation were massively over the top.’

‘I know where you’re coming from, Sir, and I’ve given some consideration to it as well. No doubt the psychological evaluation of Booth and McDonald might shed some light on it, but I’ll throw in my thoughts, for what they’re worth.’

‘I think that there is something not right about these men. The story we dug up about them beating up a man outside a nightclub speaks to me of a predilection to violence and possibly an extreme reaction to being slighted or insulted. I looked at the report of that incident and they were very lucky to get away without at least a suspended sentence. The investigating officer was very unhappy with the result and wasn’t shy about putting that in writing. We are now going to instigate a detailed investigation into their past and I think that we will find that they will have crossed people

who may have been too scared to speak in the past but will be prepared to do so now. I was particularly intrigued by how quickly Booth's wife gave him up. We will speak to her but I think that we may well discover that all was not well in that marriage. She said that he had never hit her, but it would not surprise me if she has been under some degree of coercive control and sees this as her opportunity to break free from him.'

He paused before continuing and Lyons knew the man well enough not to intrude. 'I am guessing that one of them will turn out to be the dominant of the pair and the other will have been a willing follower. If I had to put money on it, I'd guess that Booth is the strong man and McDonald did what he was told. I say that because it was Booth who managed to reconstruct a life after their company failed and McDonald who cracked up. So, I intend to work on McDonald and see if I can break him.'

'That seems a reasonable course of action, Richard. Keep me informed about what happens.'

'I will, Sir. Now, if you'll excuse me, there's still a lot of work to be done.'