

THE TREATMENT

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BANTAM BOOKS

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When it was all over, DI Jack Caffery, South London Area Major Investigation Team (AMIT), would admit that, of all the things he had witnessed in Brixton that cloudy July evening, it was the crows that jarred him the most.

They were there when he came out of the Peaches' house – twenty or more of them standing in their hooded way on the lawn of the neighbouring garden, oblivious to the police tape, the onlookers, the technicians. Some had their beaks open. Others appeared to be panting. All of them faced him directly – as if they knew what had happened in the house. As if they were having a sly laugh about the way he'd reacted to the scene. The unprofessional way he was taking it too personally.

Later he would accept that the crows' behaviour was a biological tic, that they couldn't see into his thoughts, couldn't have known what had happened to the Peach family, but even so the sight of them made the back of his neck tingle. He paused at the top of the garden path to strip off his overalls and hand them to a forensics officer, pulled on the shoes he'd left outside the police tape, and waded out into the birds. They took to the air, rattling their petrolly feathers.

* * *

Brockwell Park – a huge, thrown-together isosceles of forest and grass with its apex at Herne Hill station – rambles for over a mile along the boundary of two very different parts of South London. On its western perimeter, the badlands of Brixton – where some mornings council workers have to drop sand on the streets to soak up the blood – and, to the east, Dulwich, with its flower-drenched almshouses and John Soane skylights. Donegal Crescent lay snug up against Brockwell Park, anchored at one foot by a boarded-up pub, at the other by a Gujarati-owned corner shop. It was part of a quiet little council estate, rows of fifties terraced houses bare to the sky, no trees in the front gardens, doors painted chocolate brown. The houses looked on to a horseshoe-shaped piece of balding grass where kids skidded their bikes in the evening. Caffery could imagine the Peaches must have felt relatively safe here.

Back in his shirt-sleeves, grateful for the fresh air outside, he rolled a cigarette and crossed to the group of officers next to the Scientific Support Command Unit's van. They fell silent as he approached and he knew what they were thinking. He was only in his mid thirties – not a senior-rank warhorse – but most officers in South London knew who he was. 'One of the Met's Young Turks', the *Police Review* had called him. He knew he was respected in the force and he always found it a bit freaky. *If they knew half of it.* He hoped they wouldn't notice that his hands were trembling.

'Well?' He lit the cigarette and looked at a sealed plastic evidence bag a junior forensics officer was holding. 'What've you got?'

'We found it just inside the park, sir, about twenty yards from the back of the Peaches.'

Caffery took the bag and turned it over carefully. A Nike Air Server trainer, a child's shoe, slightly smaller than his hand. 'Who found it?'

'The dogs, sir.'

'And?'

'They lost the trail. At first they had it – they had it good, really good.' A sergeant in the blue shirt of the dog handlers' unit stood on tiptoe and pointed over the roofs to where the park rose in the distance, blotting out the sky with its dark woods. 'They took us round the path that scoots over the west of the park – but after about half a mile they just drew a blank.' He looked dubiously at the evening sky. 'And we've lost the light now.'

'Right. I think we need to speak to Air Support.' Caffery passed the trainer back to the forensics officer. 'It should be in an air-drying bag.'

'I'm sorry?'

'There's blood on it. Didn't you see?'

The SSCU's dragonlights powered up, flooding the Peaches' house, spilling light on to the trees in the park beyond. In the front garden forensics officers in blue rubberized suits swept the lawn with dustpans, and outside the police tape shock-faced neighbours stood in knots, smoking and whispering, breaking off to huddle around any plain-clothed AMIT detective who came near, full of questions. The press were there too. Losing patience.

Caffery stood next to the Command Unit van and stared up at the house. It was a two-storey terraced house – pebble-dashed, a satellite dish on the roof, aluminium-framed windows and a small patch of damp above the front door. There were matching scalloped nets in each window, and the curtains had been drawn tight.

He had only seen the Peach family, or what was left of it, in the aftermath, but he felt as if he knew them. Or, rather, he knew their archetype. The parents – Alek and Carmel – weren't going to be easy victims for the team to sympathize with: both drinkers, both unemployed, Carmel Peach had sworn at the paramedics as they moved her into the ambulance. Their only son, nine-year-old Rory, Caffery hadn't seen. By the time he'd arrived the divisional officers had already pulled the house apart trying to find the child – in the cupboards, the attic, even behind the bath panelling. There was a thin trace of blood on the skirting-board in the kitchen and the glass in the back door was broken. Caffery had taken a Territorial Support Group officer with him to search a boarded-up property two doors down, crawling through a hole in the back door on their bellies, flashlights in their teeth like an adolescent's SAS fantasy. All they found were the usual homeless nesting arrangements. There was no other sign of life. No Rory Peach. The raw facts were bad enough and for Caffery they might have been custom-built to echo his own past. *Don't let it be a problem, Jack, don't let it turn into a headfuck.*

'Jack?' DCI Danniella Souness said, suddenly at his side. 'Ye all right, son?'

He looked round. 'Danni. God, I'm glad you're here.'

'What's with the face? You've a gob on you like a dog's arse.'

'Thanks, Danni.' He rubbed his face and stretched. 'I've been on standby since midnight.'

'And what's the SP on this?' She gestured at the house. 'A wain gone missing, am I right? Rory?'

'Yes. We're going to be blowing fuses on it – he's only nine years old.'

Souness blew air out of her nose and shook her head.

She was solid, just five foot four, but she weighed twelve stone in her man's suit and boots. With her cropped hair and fair, Caledonian skin she looked more like a juvenile dressed for his first court appearance than a forty-year-old chief inspector. She took her job very seriously. 'Right, the assessment team been?'

'We don't know we've got a death yet. No dead body, no assessment team.'

'Aye, the lazy wee bastards.'

'Local factory's taken the house apart and can't find him. I've had dogs and the Territorials in the park, Air Support should be on their way.'

'Why do ye think he's in the park?'

'These houses all back on to it.' He pointed towards the woods that rose beyond the roofs. 'We've got a witness saw *something* heading off into the trees from number thirty. Back door's unlocked, there's a hole in the fence, and the lads found a shoe just inside the park.'

'OK, OK, I'm convinced.' Souness folded her arms and tipped back on her heels, looking around at the technicians, the photographers, the divisional CID officers. On the doorstep of number thirty a camera operator was checking his battery belt, lowering the heavy Betacam into a case. 'Looks like a shagging film set.'

'The unit want to work through the night.'

'And what's with the ambulance? The one that almost ran me off the road.'

'Ah, yes – that was Mum. She and hubby have both been trundled off to King's. She'll make it but he hasn't got a hope. Where he was hit –' Caffery held his palm against the back of his head '– fucked him up some.' He checked over his shoulder then bent a little nearer to her, lowering his voice. 'Danni. There're a few things we're going to have to keep from the press,

a few things we don't want popping up in the tabloids.'

'What things?'

'It isn't a custody kidnap. He's their child – no exes involved.'

'A tiger, then?'

'Not a tiger either.' Tiger kidnaps meant ransom demands and the Peaches were not in an extortionist's financial league. 'And, anyway, when you look at what else went on you'll know it's not bog standard.'

'Eh?'

Caffery looked around at the journalists – at the neighbours. 'Let's go in the van, eh?' He put his hand on Souness's back. 'I don't want an audience.'

'Come on, then.' She hefted herself inside the SSCU's van and Caffery followed, reaching up to grip the roof rim and swinging himself inside. Spades, cutting equipment and tread plates hung from the walls, a samples refrigerator hummed gently in the corner. He closed the door, hooked a stool over with his foot and handed it to her. She sat down and he sat opposite, feet apart, elbows on his knees, looking at her carefully.

'What?'

'We've got something screwy.'

'What?'

'The guy stayed with them first.'

Souness frowned, tilting her chin down as if she wasn't sure whether he was joking or not. '*Stayed* with them?'

'That's right. Just – hung around. For almost three days. They were tied up in there – handcuffed – no food and water. DS Quinn thinks another twelve hours and one or other of them'd be dead.' He raised his eyebrows. 'Worst thing's the smell.'

Souness rolled her eyes. 'Oh, lovely.'

‘Then there’s the bullshit scrawled all over the wall.’
‘Christ.’ Souness sat back a little, rubbing her stubbly head with the palm of her hand. ‘Is it sounding like a Maudsley jobbie?’

He nodded. ‘Yeah. But he won’t be far – the park is sealed now, we’ll have him before long.’

He stood to leave the van. ‘Jack?’ Souness stopped him. ‘Something else is worrying ye.’

He paused for a minute, looking at the floor, his hand on the back of his neck. It was as if she’d leaned over and peered keen-eyed through a window in his head. They liked each other, he and Souness: neither was quite sure why, but they had both fallen comfortably into this partnership. Still, there were some things he didn’t choose to tell her.

‘No, Danni,’ he murmured eventually, reknitting his tie, not wanting to hear how much she guessed of his preoccupations. ‘Come on, let’s have a shufti at the park, shall we?’

Outside, night had come to Donegal Crescent. The moon was low and red in the sky.

From the back of Donegal Crescent, Brockwell Park appeared to ramble away for miles into the distance, filling the skyline. Its upper slopes were mostly bald, only a few shabby, hairless trees across the backbone and at the highest point a clutch of exotic evergreens, but on the west slope an area about the size of four football pitches was thick with trees: bamboo and silver birch, beech and Spanish chestnut, they huddled around four stinking ponds, sucking up the dampness in the soil. There was the density of a jungle among those trees – in the summer the ponds seemed to be steaming.

At 8.30 p.m. that night, only minutes before the park was sealed off by the police, one solitary man

was not far from the ponds, shuffling among the trees, an intent expression on his face. Roland Klare's was a lonely, almost hermitic existence – with odd tempers and periods of lethargy – and sometimes, when the mood was on him, he was a collector. A human relative of the carrion beetle, to Klare nothing was disposable or beyond redemption. He knew the park well and often wandered around here looking through the bins, checking under park benches. People left him alone. He had long, rather womanly hair, and a smell about him that no one liked. A familiar smell – of dirty clothes and urine.

Now he stood, with his hands in his pockets, and stared at what was between his feet. It was a camera. A Pentax camera. Old and battered. He picked it up and looked at it carefully, holding it close to his face because the light was fading fast, examining it for damage. Roland Klare had four or five other cameras back at his flat, among the items scavenged from skips and dumpsters. He even had bits and pieces of film-developing equipment. Now quickly he put the Pentax in his pocket and shuffled his feet around in the leaves for a bit, checking the ground. There'd been a summer cloudburst that morning, but the sun had been out all afternoon and even the undersides of the long grass were dry against his shoes. Two feet away lay a pair of pink rubber gloves, large ones, which he slipped into his pocket with the camera. After a while he continued on his way through the fading light. The rubber gloves, he decided when he got them under a street-light, were not worth keeping. Too worn. He dropped them in a skip on the Railton Road. But a camera. A camera was not to be discarded lightly.

It was a quiet evening for India 99, the twin-engined Squirrel helicopter out of Lippits Hill air base. The

sun had gone down and the heat and low cloud cover made the Air Support crew headachy: they got the unit's twelve fixed tasks completed as quickly as possible – Heathrow, the Dome, Canary Wharf, several power stations including Battersea – and were ready to switch to self-tasking when the controller came through on the tactical commander's headset. 'Yeah, India nine nine from India Lima.'

The tactical commander pulled the mouthpiece nearer. 'Go ahead, India Lima.'

'Where are you?'

'We're in, uh, where?' He leaned forward a little and looked down at the lit-up city. 'Wandsworth.'

'Good. India nine eight's got an active, but they've reached endurance, grid ref: TQ3427445.'

The commander checked the map. 'Is that Brockwell Park?'

'Rog. It's a missing child, ground units have got it contained, but look, lads, the DI's being straight with us, says you're a tick in the box. He can't promise the child's in the park – just a hunch – so there's no obligation.'

The commander pulled away his mouthpiece, checked his watch and looked into the front of the cockpit. The air observer and the pilot had heard the request and were holding their thumbs up for him to see. Good. He noted the time and the Computer Aided Dispatch number on the assignment log and pulled his mouthpiece back into place.

'Yeah, go on, then, India Lima. It's quiet tonight – we'll have a look. Who are we speaking to?'

'An, um, an Inspector Caffery. AMIT—'

'The murder squad, you mean?'

'That's the one.'

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There were marks on the camera casing where it had been dropped and, later, at home in his flat on the top floor of Arkalg Tower, a council block at the northerly tip of Brockwell Park, Roland Klare discovered that the Pentax was damaged in other, less visible ways. After wiping the casing carefully with a tea-towel he attempted to wind on the film inside and found the mechanism had jammed. He fiddled with it, tried forcing it and shaking it, but he couldn't free the winder. He put the camera on the sill in the living room and stood for a while looking out of the big window.

The evening sky above the park was orange like a bonfire and somewhere in the distance he could hear a helicopter. He scratched his arms compulsively, trying to decide what to do. The only other working camera he had was a Polaroid. He'd acquired that, too, in a not totally honest fashion, but Polaroid film was expensive, so this Pentax was worth salvaging. He sighed, picked it up and tried again, struggling to unjam the mechanism, putting the camera between his legs to hold it still while he wrestled with it, but after twenty minutes of fruitless struggle he was forced to admit defeat.

Frustrated and sweating now, he made a note of it

in the book he kept in a desk next to the window, then placed the camera in a purple Cadbury's Selection tin on the window-sill where, along with a neon-pink-handled screwdriver, three bottles of prescription pills, and a plastic wallet printed with a Union Jack that he'd found last week on the upper deck of the number two, it would remain, its evidence wound neatly inside, for more than five days.

All prisons in London insist on being informed about any helicopter that passes. It keeps them calm. India 99, seeing the familiar glass-roofed gym and octagonal emergency control room ahead on their right, got on to channel eight and identified themselves to HMP Brixton before they continued towards the park. It was a warm and breathless night; the low cloud cover trapped the orange city light, spreading it back down across the roofs so that the helicopter seemed to be flying through a glowing layer of heat, as if its belly and rotor blades had been dipped in hot, electric orange. Now they were over Acre Lane – a long, spangled, untangled row of pearls. On they went, out over the hot, packed streets behind Brixton Water Lane, on and on, over a warren of houses and pubs, until suddenly, on a tremendous rush of air and aviation fuel – *flak flak flak FLAK* – they floated out into the clear darkness over Brockwell Park.

Someone in the dark cockpit whistled. 'It's bigger than I thought.'

The three men peered dubiously down at the vast expanse of black. This unlit stretch of wood and grass in the middle of the blazing city seemed to go on for ever – as if they'd left London behind and were flying over an empty ocean. Ahead, in the distance, the lights of Tulse Hill marked the furthest borders of the park, twinkling in a tiny string on the horizon.

‘Jesus.’ In the little dark cockpit, his face lit by the glow from the instrument panel, the air observer shifted uncomfortably. ‘How we going to do this?’

‘We’ll do it.’ The commander checked the radio frequency card in the plastic leg pocket of his flying suit, adjusted the headset and spoke above the rotor noise to Brixton divisional control. ‘Lima Delta from India nine nine.’

‘Good evening, India nine nine. We’ve got a helicopter over us – is that you?’

‘Roger. Request talk through with the search unit on this code twenty-five.’

‘Roger. Use MPS 6 – go ahead, India nine nine.’

The next voice the commander heard was DI Caffery’s. ‘Hi there, nine nine. We can see you. Thanks for coming.’

The air observer leaned over the thermal-imaging screen. It was a bad night for it – the trapped heat was pushing the equipment to its limits, making everything on the screen the same uniform milky grey. Then he saw, in the top left-hand corner, a luminous white figure holding up its hand into the night. ‘OK, yes. I’ve got him.’

‘Yeah, hello there, ground units,’ the commander said into his mike. ‘You’re more than welcome. We’ve got eyeball with you too.’

The observer toggled the camera and now he could see them all, the ground units, glimmering forms strung out around the perimeter of the trees. It looked like almost forty officers down there. ‘Jeez, they’ve got it well contained.’

‘You’ve got it well contained,’ the commander told DI Caffery.

‘I know. Nothing’s getting in or out of here tonight. Not without us knowing.’

‘It’s a large area and there’s wildlife in there too, but we’ll do our best.’

‘Thank you.’

The tactical commander leaned into the front of the cockpit and held up his thumb. ‘OK, lads, let’s do it.’

The pilot put the Squirrel into a right-hand orbit above the southern quarter of the park. About half a mile to the west they could see the chalky smudge of the dried-out boating-lake, and from among the trees the basalt glitter of the four lakes. They took the park in zones, moving in concentric circles five hundred feet in the air. The air observer, hunched over his screen, steeled against the deafening roar of the rotors, could see no hotspots. He toggled the controls on his laptop. The ground crews had been easy, hot and moving and outside the trees, but tonight the thermal return was as poor as it got and anything could be hiding under that summer leaf canopy. The equipment was virtually blind. ‘We’ll be lucky,’ he murmured to the commander, as they moved on through the rest of the park. ‘Peeing in the wind.’ Peeing, not pissing, careful what he said – everything up here was recorded for evidence. ‘Peeing in the wind is what we’re doing.’

On the ground, next to the TSG’s Sherpa van, Caffery stood with Souness and stared up at the helicopter lights. He was relying on the Air Unit to crack this – to find Rory Peach. It was an hour now since the alarm had been raised. It had been the Gujarati shopkeeper who had dialled 999.

Most of the Peaches’ dole money went on Carmel’s Superkings – by the weekend the money had run out and there was usually a tab to be settled at the corner shop. This weekend nobody had paid off the bill so on Monday evening the shopkeeper went down Donegal

Crescent to demand his money. It wasn't the first time, he'd told Caffery, and no, he wasn't afraid of Alek Peach, but he had taken the Alsatian with him anyway, and at 7.00 p.m. had rung the Peaches' doorbell.

No reply. He knocked loudly but still there was no reply. Reluctantly he continued into the park with the dog.

They walked along the back gardens of Donegal Crescent and were some distance into the park when the Alsatian turned suddenly and began to bark in the direction of the houses. The shopkeeper turned. He thought, although he wouldn't swear to it, he *thought* he saw something running there. Shadowy and wide-beamed. Moving rapidly away from the back of the Peaches' house. His first impression was that it was an animal, because of how furiously and nervously the Alsatian was barking, straining at the lead, but the shadow disappeared quickly into the woods. Curious now, he dragged the reluctant dog back to number thirty and peered through the letterbox.

This time he knew something was wrong. There was junk mail scattered on the hallway floor and a message, or part of a message, had been spray-painted in red on the staircase wall.

'Jack?' Souness said, over the roar of the helicopter above. 'What're ye thinking?'

'That he has to be in there somewhere,' he yelled, jabbing his finger at the park. 'He's in there.'

'How do you know he didn't come back out of the park?'

'No.' He cupped his hand around his mouth and leaned into her. 'If he did come out I can promise you someone's going to remember. All the park exits lead into main streets. The little boy's bleeding, probably terrified—'

'WHAT?'

‘HE’S NAKED AND BLEEDING. I THINK SOMEONE WOULD PICK UP THE PHONE FOR THAT, DON’T YOU? EVEN IN BRIXTON.’

He looked at the helicopter. He had other good reasons to think that Rory was in the park – he knew the statistics on child abduction: most studies would predict that if Rory wasn’t alive he would probably be found within five miles of the abduction site, less than fifty yards from a footpath. Other worldwide stats would tell a more chilling story: they’d predict that Rory wouldn’t be killed immediately, that his kidnapper would probably keep him alive for anything up to twenty-four hours. They’d say that the motive in an abduction of a boy within Rory’s age range would probably be sex. They’d say that the sex would probably be sadistic.

If Caffery had more than a passing knowledge of the habits and lifecycle of the paedophile there was a simple reason: he could reach back twenty-seven years into his own past and find a mirror image of this in another disappearance. His own brother, Ewan – the same age as Rory – had been sucked out of the middle of a normal day. From the back of the family house. Rory could be Ewan all over again. Caffery knew he should say something about it to Souness, he should take her aside right now and tell her, ‘Maybe you should cut me out of this – give it to DC Logan or someone – because I don’t know how I’m going to react.’

‘WHAT IF THEY DON’T FIND ANYTHING?’ Souness yelled.

‘DON’T WORRY. THEY’LL FIND SOMETHING.’ He lifted the radio to his mouth, lowering his voice and getting on to the helicopter commander’s channel. ‘Nine nine, anything happening up there?’

* * *

Five hundred feet overhead, in the dark cockpit, the commander moved as far forward as the coms lead, which tethered him like an umbilicus to the roof of the helicopter, would allow. 'Hey, Howie? They want to know how we're doing, Howie.' He couldn't see the air observer's face, hunched over as he was, his attention on the screen, the helmet obscuring his eyes.

'I'm struggling. Looks like an effing snowfield. Unless it moves it just blends in. Has to pretty much stand up and wave at me.' He tried switching so that heat showed black on his screen. He tried red, he tried blue, sometimes a different colour helped, but tonight the thermal washout was beating him. 'Can you give us some more right-hand orbits?'

'Rog.' The pilot nosed the helicopter over, turning in circles, both he and the commander looking out of the right-hand side of the craft at the dense wood below. The air observer narrowed his eyes on the screen. He moved the laptop joystick and under the cockpit, in the sensor pod, the gyroscopically mounted camera, deathly stable, rotated its cool eye across the park.

'What you got?'

'I dunno. There's something at about ten o'clock but . . .' Without depth perception it was difficult to tell what he was seeing on the screen, and every time they got near the helicopter made the leaf cover shift. He thought he had seen an odd, doughnut-shaped light source, about the size of a car tyre. But then the leaf cover shifted again and now he thought he'd dreamed it. '*Scheisse*.' He leaned intently over the screen, moving his head from side to side, flicking the screen from wide field to narrow and back again. 'Yeah, maybe get them to have a look at that.' He tapped the screen. 'Can you see it?'

The commander leaned forward and looked at the

screen. He couldn't see what the observer was talking about but sat back and tuned the radio control into DI Caffery's loop. 'Ground unit from nine nine.'

'Yeah, have you got anything?'

'We think we might've got a heat source but we can't quite confirm. Do you want to have a look at it?'

'Will do.'

'Right, well, there's a pool, or a paddling-pool or something . . .'

'The boating-lake?'

'The boating-lake – and the forest starts, I dunno, two hundred metres away?'

'Yup – sounds about right.'

The commander leaned forward and looked to where the observer held his finger over the screen. 'If you could start at that edge of the forest and move in about a hundred metres . . .'

'Rog. Got you.'

The commander held his hand flat, instructing the pilot to hover, and the three crew members sat forward, not speaking, only the sound of their breathing in the headsets as they watched the glimmering forms of the TSG, the Territorial Support Group, streaming across the screen in the direction of the heat source.

'Right,' the commander muttered. 'Let's give them some help, shall we?' He threw a switch and powered up the Night Sun – the gargantuan spotlight dangling from the helicopter's belly. Thirty million candle power – it could burn through concrete at close range: the ground units followed it like the nativity star, yomping towards it through the trees. But on the screen the observer had lost the glowing ring-shaped heat source and now he was starting to wonder if he'd imagined it.

'Howie?' the commander said from behind. 'Are we in the right place?'

The observer didn't reply. He sat hunched forward, trying to relocate the source.

'Howie?'

'Yeah – I think, but I—'

'Nine nine from ground units.' Caffery came through on the radio. 'We're drawing a blank down here. Can you help us out?'

'Howie?'

'I dunno – I dunno. There *was* something.' He threw the screen into narrow field once more and shook his head. The noise of the engines and the rotor blades, the heat and the smells were oppressive tonight and he was having trouble concentrating. On the ground the TSG officers stood looking up at the helicopter, arms open. 'Shit,' he muttered under his breath. 'Howie, you sodding idiot.' He was going to have to back down. 'I – look – I don't know—'

'OK, OK.' The commander was getting impatient. 'How are we for fuel?'

The pilot shook his head. 'About twenty-five per cent.'

He whistled. 'So we need to be going somewhere in about, what? Twenty minutes. Howie? What are we thinking?'

'Look, I – nothing. I imagined it. Nothing.'

The commander sighed. 'OK, I've got you.' He switched to the CAD controller's frequency. 'India Lima, we're low on fuel so we're going to slip into Fair Oaks for a slurp. I think we've got a no-trace. Haven't we, Howie? Got a clear?'

'Yeah.' He ran a finger under his chin strap, uncomfortable. 'I guess so – a no-trace. I guess.'

'Nine nine to ground units, if you're clear down there so are we.'

'You sure?' DI Caffery sounded tense. 'You sure we're in the right place?'

‘Yeah, *you*’re in the right place but we’ve lost the source. It’s a hot night – we’re fighting interference up here.’

‘Rog, if you’re sure. Thanks for trying.’

‘Sorry about that.’

‘It’s OK. Good evening to you all.’

The commander could see Caffery on the screen waving. He adjusted his headset and switched back to the CAD controller. ‘That’s a no-trace in the open, so we’re complete on scene at grid ref TQ3427445, now routing to India Foxtrot.’ He noted the time on his assignment log and the helicopter banked away into the night.

On the ground below, Caffery watched the helicopter disappear across the rooftops, until its light was scarcely bigger than a satellite.

‘You know what it means, don’t you?’

‘No,’ Souness admitted. ‘No, I don’t.’

It was late. The TSG had zoned off the area where the air observer had imagined a heat source, got down on their hands and knees and covered every square inch of it. Still no Rory Peach. Eventually they’d given up, and Caffery and Souness had finalized arrangements for a specialized search team to come in the next day: a Police Search Advisory team would start at first light in Brockwell Park.

There was still an emergency team briefing to get through and search parameters to establish before the night was out and so, at 11 p.m., they drove back to AMIT headquarters in Thornton Heath. Caffery parked the car and swung the keys into his pocket. ‘If he’s in the park and they can’t see him then he’s not much of a heat source and he’s not moving.’ In spite of what it meant professionally, part of him secretly hoped, for the boy’s sake, that he was already dead.

There are some things, he believed, not worth surviving. ‘Maybe we’re too late already.’

‘Unless,’ Souness climbed wearily from the car and together they crossed the road, ‘unless he’s not in the park.’

‘Oh, he’s in the park. I promise you he’s in the park.’ Caffery swiped his pass card and held the door for Souness. ‘It’s just a question of where.’

‘Shrivemoor’ was how most officers referred to this old red-brick building, after the unexciting residential street in which it stood. AMIT’s offices were housed on the second floor. Tonight lights were on in all the windows. Most of the team had arrived, called away from dinner parties, pubs, babysitting duty. The HOLMES database operators, the five members of the intelligence cell, seven investigating officers, they were all here, wandering between the desks, drinking coffee, murmuring to each other. In the kitchen three embarrassed-looking paramedics in white-hooded forensic suits – nonce suits, the team called them – waited while the exhibits officer photocopied their boot soles and used low-tack tape to lift hairs and fibres from their clothing.

While Souness made strong coffee, Caffery put his face under the tap to wake himself up and quickly checked his in-tray. Among the circulars, the memos, the post-mortem reports, someone had left this week’s copy of *Time Out*. It was folded open at a page titled: ‘The Artists who Turn Crime into Art.’ A photograph of Rebecca – eyes closed, head tilted back, a prison number painted on the centre of her forehead where a bindi spot would go.

Rebecca Morant, tabloid totty or the genuine article? You have to be a long way out of the loop not to have heard of Morant, sex-assault

victim turned art-world darling. Suspiciously beautiful, the critics found it difficult to take lynx-eyed Morant seriously, until a nomination for the ultra-cool Vincent Award and a short-listing by Becks confirmed her as a key player in the post YBA pack . . .

Caffery closed the magazine and placed it face down in the in-tray. *How much more publicity do you need, Becky?*

‘Right, crew. Listen up.’ He used an empty Sprite can to bang on the wall. ‘Come on, listen, everyone. I know you’re all on short notice but let’s get this bit done. We’ll do it in the SIO’s.’ Holding the videotape above his head, he started towards the office he and Souness shared, beckoning the officers to follow. ‘Come on, it’ll only take ten so you can have your piss breaks later.’

The senior investigating officer’s room was small – for all the team to cram in, the door had to be left open. Souness stood against the window, coffee mug cupped in both hands as Caffery plugged in the video and waited for everyone to gather.

‘Right. You all know the basics. DCI Souness is doing the search and house-to-house parameters so whoever’s on the knock come and see her after this. First light we’ve got the search-team meeting in Brockwell Park so I want everyone ready. SPECRIMs go out as usual, but bear in mind what I’m going to tell you now for hold-back on the press bureau. Exhibits, family liaison, organize yourselves. What else? We’ve got primacy but we’ll appoint a liaison officer for, I’m sorry to say, the paedophile unit and the risk-management panel at Lambeth and, uh, someone better have a whisper with the child-protection lads at Belvedere, make sure Rory hasn’t

made an appearance there before. Now . . .’ He gestured at the blank TV screen and took a deep breath. ‘When I show you this, the first place you’re going to wonder about is the Maudsley.’ He paused. At the mention of the Maudsley – the mental-health clinic on Denmark Hill – one or two of the civilian workers had sucked in a breath. He didn’t want that: he wanted the team thinking and functioning and not overreacting to the nature of the crime.

‘Look,’ he said, ‘I don’t want you writing him off as a psycho just yet. I’m only saying that’s how it looks.’ He glanced around at the faces. ‘Maybe that’s how it’s *meant* to look. Maybe there’s some trail-covering here – maybe he’s your common or garden paedo who’s trying to throw up a smokescreen, pave his way to an insanity plea if he gets caught. And keep in mind that he’s been in play for three days. *Three days*. That’s controlled, isn’t it? Have a think about those three days and what they mean. Do they mean, for example, that he knows he’s not going to get disturbed?’

Or do they mean he was enjoying himself so much with Rory that he’d decided to stay on for the long weekend?

He pointed the remote control at the video. Donegal Crescent appeared on screen. It was dusk. Beneath the time-code a crowd jostled the cordons, trying to get a better glimpse of the little terraced house: blue ambulance lights flashed silently across their faces. Caffery, standing back against the wall now with his arms folded, watched the AMIT detectives out of the corner of his eye. This was the first they had seen of the crime scene and he knew they’d find something terrible about the Peaches’ house. Something terrible about its normality.

‘This is on the edge of Brockwell Park,’ he said evenly. ‘Just to give you some geography, that tower

you can see in the distance is Arkaig Tower on Railton Road, which the divisionals know and love as Crack Heights.’

The camera tracked down the path to the doorstep of number thirty, and turned to pan across the street, the little scrap of grass opposite, the neighbours’ faces shocked white ovals against the evening sky. Any point that could be observed from the Peaches’ house could also be a vantage-point for a potential witness. The camera recorded everything then swung 180 degrees and faced the house head on. The number ‘30’ in gold screw-on numerals filled the screen.

‘All the doors and windows were closed.’ The camera ran itself around the splintered front door – opened with the Enforcer battering-ram – zooming in on an intact lock. ‘The Territorials had to batter their way in. The only thing not locked was the back door – we think it’s our point of entry. Watch.’

They were inside the house now, the camera flooding the hallway with halogen light. Slightly worn wallpaper, a grey cord carpet protected by a heavy-duty plastic runner. Two badly framed prints cast long, bobbing shadows up the hall and a child’s turbo water-gun lay on its side on the bottom step. Up ahead, at the end of the hall, a doorway. The tape blurred for a moment, helical scan traces across the screen, and when the picture steadied the camera had gone through the doorway and was in a small kitchen. A glazed terracotta chicken eyed the camera beadily from next to the breadbin and a checked curtain over the door wallowed in the breeze, revealing a broken window, flashes of the darkened yard, a glimpse of the trees in the park beyond.

‘Right. Important.’ Caffery rested his elbow on the monitor, leaning over to point at the screen. ‘Glass on the floor, door unlocked. This is not only the point of

entry but also the exit point. Intruder breaks window and lets himself in – we think this is some time after seven p.m. on Friday evening.’ The camera zoomed through the broken window and out into a small yard beyond. A carousel clothes-dryer, a child’s bike, some toys and four overturned milk bottles, their contents rancid and yellow. ‘The intruder then stays in the house with the Peach family until Monday afternoon when he’s disturbed – at which point he picks up Rory Peach and leaves through the same door.’ The camera pulled back into the kitchen and panned the room, pausing at a set of bloody drag marks on the doorpost. Caffery tapped the remote control on his leg and looked around the silent faces, expecting a reaction. But no one spoke or asked questions. They were staring at the blood on the screen.

‘The lab thinks his wounds aren’t fatal at this point. The received wisdom is that the intruder carried him out of the house – through this broken fence here and into the woods. He’s probably found a way to staunch the blood flow, maybe a towel or something, because the dogs lost him early. Right.’ The camera was moving. ‘Good, now I’m going to show you where the family were found.’

A woman’s face came briefly in and out of shot: DS Quinn, the crime-scene co-ordinator, the most experienced CSC in South London. After she and Caffery had orchestrated the video she had returned to the kitchen to ensure that the glass from the break-in was carefully photographed and removed. Then she had called the Specialist Crime Unit biologists down from Lambeth. While Caffery was with the helicopter crew the scientists had come through the house, dressed in protective suits, applying their specialized chemicals: ninhydrin, amido black, silver nitrate.

‘Alek Peach – that’s Dad – was found here,

handcuffed by the wrists to this radiator, and by the ankles to this radiator. You can tell the position he was in from the mark he's left.' Caffery pointed it out to the team – a large dark stain on the shag-pile carpet, stretching between the two radiators in the living room. 'He's got a wound to the back of his head so we won't be talking to him for a while. Maybe not at all. And the second place – watch, you'll see it now we're going upstairs – is where Carmel was held.'

Carmel, who was now sedated at the hospital, had given something of a statement in the ambulance. Although a cursory examination showed no head wounds it was assumed she had lost consciousness at some point: apart from making dinner at 6 p.m. on Friday, she remembered nothing until she had woken gagged and cuffed to a water-pipe in the airing cupboard on the first-floor landing. There she had remained until the shopkeeper had called through the letterbox three days later. She hadn't seen or spoken to the intruder, and, no, there was no reason, business or personal, that someone would want to hurt her family. When the paramedics helped her out of the cupboard they angled the stretcher so that she faced the stairs. They didn't want her to turn and see what was spray-painted on the wall behind her.

'And when you see it,' he looked around at the faces, 'I think you'll agree that, in spite of the heavy traffic through the house, it's what we should keep from the press.'

He turned back to the TV. The camera operator was climbing the stairs, the shadows danced across the landing ahead. When Caffery had seen the spray-painting he had instantly recognized it as a tool to weed out false confessions.

The camera wobbled, someone in the hallway said, 'Fuck,' and then in a louder voice on screen, 'Have

you seen this?' Darkness. A brief fumble then a flare of light, the camera aperture closed down momentarily, flinching like an iris. When the image came into focus the detectives in the SIO's room inched a little closer, trying to read the spray-painted message.

♀ HAZARD

Caffery paused the tape, allowing each member of the team time to bend in and examine it. 'Female Hazard.' He flicked off the video and turned on the light. 'We want this bottomed out by tomorrow – I won't insult your intelligence by telling you why.'

In the kitchen at the Fair Oaks base the air observer took off his helmet and rubbed his ears. He still wasn't sure what he'd seen. 'I'd like to have done that on maximum endurance, y'know.'

The commander patted him on the back. 'They said we were just a tick in the box, Howie. They don't even know if he's in the park.'

'It's a kid, though.'

'Maybe when we lift we'll go back, eh?'

But in the time they took to refuel, a traffic officer in Purley had been hit by a car while deploying a stinger. The offender was out of the car and running towards Croydon airfield, so India 99 rerouted to that instead. When his shift finished at 2 a.m. the air observer was finding it a little easier not to think about the hazy white doughnut shape he thought he'd seen among the trees in Brockwell Park.