



A KILLER CRIME DEBUT

**SIMON
KERNICK**

**The Business
of Dying**

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For Sally

**Thanks to all those who helped in both the writing and the publication
of this book.**

You know who you are.

Part One

INTRODUCING THE DEAD

1

There's a true story that goes like this. A few years back a thirty-two-year-old man abducted a ten-year-old girl from the street near her house. He took her back to his dingy bedsit, tied her to a bed, and subjected her to a brutal hour-long sex ordeal. It might have been a lot worse but the walls were paper thin and one of the neighbours heard the screams. She phoned the police and they came and knocked the door down. The girl was rescued, although apparently she still bears the scars, and the perpetrator was arrested. Seven months later he goes on trial and his lawyer gets him off on a technicality. Apparently she takes the legal view that it's better that ten guilty men go free than one innocent one's imprisoned. He returns to the area where he committed the crime and lives the life of a free man. The lawyer gets her money, courtesy of the taxpayer, as well as the congratulations of her partners on a worthy performance. They probably even take her out for a celebration drink. Meanwhile, every parent in a two-mile radius of this guy is living in fear. The police try to defuse the situation by saying they'll keep a good watch on him, but admit there's nothing else they can do. As always, they appeal for calm.

Three months later, the girl's dad gets caught pouring petrol through the guy's letterbox. The police, for once, have been true to their word and are actually watching the place. He's arrested, charged with arson and attempted murder, and remanded in custody. The local newspaper sets up a campaign to free him and starts a petition that gets something like twenty thousand signatures. Predictably the powers-that-be ignore it, interest fades, and then, before his case comes to trial, the dad hangs himself in his cell. Is this the tale of a progressive, forward-looking society, or one that's about to go down the pan? You tell me.

But the moral of the story, that's easier. If you're going to kill someone, plan it.

9.01 p.m. We were sitting in the rear car park of the Traveller's Rest Hotel. It was a typical English November night: dark, cold and wet. Not the best time to be out working, but who can choose their hours these days? The Traveller's Rest didn't look very restful at all. It was one of those modern redbrick structures with loud lighting, revolving doors, and that curse of modern times, a weekly karaoke night. The one thing going for it was the fact that the front car park had been shut for resurfacing. This meant our quarry would have to come round the back, away from the main entrance, and hopefully away from any stray civilians. Would they smell a rat? I doubted it. Not until it was too late anyway.

I hate the waiting. It's the worst part. It gives you too much time to think. So I lit a cigarette and took a long but guilty drag. Danny wrinkled his nose but he didn't say anything. He doesn't like smoking but he's not the kind to make a big deal about it. He's a tolerant sort. We'd been talking earlier about this case of the 'alleged' paedophile and Danny had been the one supporting the lawyer's ten-guilty-men argument, which was

typical of him. And bullshit too. Why the suffering of many is seen as being preferable to the suffering of one is beyond me. It's like running a TV station where twenty million viewers want to see gameshows and two million want to see operas, and only showing operas. If the people who believed it ever ran a business, it'd go bust in a day.

But I like Danny. And I trust him. We've worked together a long time and we know each other's capabilities. And that, in our line of business, is the key.

He opened the driver's side window to let some air in and I shivered against the cold. It really was a shitty night.

'Personally, I'd have gone after the lawyer,' I said.

'What?'

'If I was that girl's dad, I would have gone for the lawyer rather than the rapist.'

'Why? What good would that have done?'

'Because there's an argument that the rapist couldn't help what he did, that his urges were just too much to handle. I'd still cut his balls off, but that's not the point. The point is, the lawyer had the choice not to defend him. She was an intelligent, rational woman. She knew what he'd done and still she did all in her power to put him back on the streets. Hers was therefore the greatest crime.'

'I don't understand that argument at all.'

'The greatest evil in the world comes not from those who perpetrate it, but from those who excuse it.'

Danny shook his head like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. 'Jesus, Dennis, you're beginning to sound like some sort of Angel of Death. You want to calm down a little. It's not as if you're whiter than white yourself.'

Which was true. I wasn't. But I consider myself to have principles – codes of conduct to which I strictly adhere –

and that, I felt, gave me the justification to say my piece.

I was about to tell Danny this when the radio crackled into life.

‘All right, they’re here,’ hissed the disembodied voice. ‘Black Cherokee, three occupants. It’s them.’

Danny started the engine while I slid silently out of the car, flicked the cigarette away, and walked towards the spot where the Cherokee would appear, knowing that this was going to be the one and only chance I was going to get.

There was a clank as it hit the speed ramp, then it came round the side of the main building and drove slowly into the car park, looking for a place to stop. I broke into a jog, waving my hands to get the driver’s attention. In my Barbour jacket and shirt and tie, I looked every inch the harassed businessman.

The Cherokee continued moving but came to a halt as I reached the driver’s side window and banged on it. ‘Excuse me, excuse me.’ My voice was different now. Higher pitched, less confident.

The window came down and a hard-looking sod with a square jaw that looked like it was made of cast iron glared out at me. I put him at about thirty-five. My face dissolved into nerves. Both the driver and his front-seat passenger, a smaller, older guy with Brylcreemed hair and a greasy face, were already relaxing. They saw me as no threat. Just a man who pays his taxes and does what he’s told for a living. I heard the one in the back mumble something but I didn’t even look at him.

‘What do you want?’ demanded the driver impatiently.

‘Er, I was wondering . . .’

I brought the gun up from my pocket, had this momentary paranoia that I might not have released the safety, and shot him twice in the right eye. He made no sound, simply fell back into his seat, head tilted to one side, and shivered out the final ounces of his life.

The front passenger swore loudly and immediately flung up his arms in a futile effort to protect himself. I leaned down slightly to get a better view of him and pumped out a further two rounds. One hit him in the elbow, the other in the jaw. I heard it crack. He shrieked in pain and then coughed violently as his mouth filled with blood. He tried to retreat in his seat, scrabbling about like a madman, unable to accept the fact that it was all over. I steadied myself and fired again, hitting him square in the forehead. The window behind him bloomed with red and his greasy features immediately relaxed. So far the whole thing had taken about three seconds.

But the one in the back was quick. He was already swinging open the door and coming out with what looked like a gun in his hand. I didn't have time to take a closer look. Instead I retreated three steps and squeezed the trigger as he came into view. I got him somewhere in the upper body but still he kept coming, and fast. I continued firing, holding the gun two-handed, teeth clenched against the noise that was exploding in my ears. The momentum of the bullets forced him backwards, driving him into the door. He did a manic, confused dance to the tune of the gunfire, his arms and legs flailing, and angry red spots appeared like pox on his crisp, white shirt.

And then the magazine was empty and everything stopped as suddenly and dramatically as it had begun.

For a second he remained upright, holding on to the door for support, the energy almost visibly leaking out of him. Then he sort of half fell, half sat down, losing his grip on it in the process. He looked down at the blood on his shirt, and then at me, and I got a good look at his face, which I didn't want at all, because it was young, maybe late twenties, and his expression was all wrong. What I mean is, it wasn't the expression of a sinner. There was no defiance there; no rage. Just shock. Shock that his

life was being stolen from him. He looked like a man who didn't think he deserved it, and that was the moment when I should have known I'd made a terrible mistake.

Instead, I turned away from his stare and reloaded. Then I stepped forward and shot him three times in the top of the head. The mobile phone he was carrying clattered noisily to the ground.

I dropped the gun into my jacket pocket and turned towards Danny, who was now bringing the car round.

Which was when I saw her, maybe fifteen yards away, standing in the light of the rear fire door, a bag of rubbish in each hand. No more than eighteen and looking right at me, still too shocked to realize that what she was witnessing was real. What do you do? A movie pro would have taken her out with a single shot to the head, although there was no guarantee I'd even have hit her from where I was standing. And anyway, I'm not interested in hurting civilians.

Her hand went to her mouth as she saw I'd seen her, and I knew that any moment she was going to let out a scream that would probably wake the dead, which, with the dead only just being dead, I didn't want at all. So I lowered my gaze and hurried round to the passenger door, hoping that the gloom and wet had obscured my features enough to make any description she gave worthless.

I jumped in and kept my head down. Danny didn't say a word. He just hit the pedal and we were out of there.

It was 9.04.

The journey to our first change of transport took exactly four minutes and covered a distance of approximately two and a half miles. We'd parked a Mondeo in a quiet piece of Forestry Commission land earlier that day. Danny now pulled up behind