

JIM KELLY

DEATH WORE WHITE

NINE PEOPLE TRAPPED IN A BLIZZARD.

ONE BRUTAL MURDER.

EIGHT SUSPECTS WHO COULDN'T
HAVE DONE IT ...



www.penguin.co.uk

Death Wore White
by
Jim Kelly

Copyright © Jim Kelly, 2009

All rights reserved



Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from Death Wore White

To find out more please visit www.penguin.co.uk

Monday, 9 February

The Alfa Romeo ran a lipstick-red smear across a sepia landscape. Snow flecked the sands at the edge of the crimped waters of the Wash. To the landward side lay the saltmarsh, a weave of winter white around stretches of cold black water. And out at sea a convoy of six small boats were caught in a stunning smudge of purple and gold where the sun was setting.

The sports car nudged the speed limit as Sarah Baker-Sibley watched the first flake of snow fall on the windscreen. She swept it aside with a single swish of the wipers and punched the lighter into the dashboard, her lips counting to ten, a cigarette held ready between her teeth.

Ten seconds. She thrummed her fingers on the leather-bound steering wheel.

It was two minutes short of five o'clock and the Alfa's headlights were waking up the catseyes. She pulled the lighter free of its holder. The ringlet of heated wire seemed to lift her mood and she laughed to herself, drawing in the nicotine.

A spirograph of ice had encroached on the windscreen, so she turned the heating up to maximum. The indicator showed the outside temperature at 0°C, then briefly -1°C.

She dropped her speed to 50mph and checked the rear-view mirror for following traffic: she'd been overtaken once – the vehicle was still ahead of her by half a mile – and there were lights behind, but closer, a hundred yards or less.

She swished more snowflakes off the windscreen. Attached to the dashboard by a sucker was a little picture frame holding a snapshot of a girl with hair down to her waist, wearing a swimsuit on a sun-drenched beach. She touched the image as if it were an icon.

Rounding a sharp right bend she saw tail lights ahead again for a few seconds. And a sign, luminous, regulation black on yellow, in the middle of the carriageway, an AA insignia in the top left corner.

DIVERSION

Flood

An arrow pointed bluntly to the left – seaward down a narrow unmetalled road.

'Sod it.' She hit the steering wheel with the heel of her palm. Slowing the Alfa, she looked at her watch: 5.01 p.m. She had to pick her daughter up at 5.30 outside the school. She was always there, like clockwork. That was one of the big pluses of owning her own business: she kept her own time. And that's why she always took the old coast road, not the new dual carriageway, because this way there were never any traffic jams, even in the summer. Just an open road. Once, perhaps twice, she'd got caught up at the shop and phoned ahead to say she'd be late. Jillie had walked home then, but Sarah didn't want to let her down.

Not tonight, when snow was forecast. She'd make it in time, even with the diversion, as long as nothing else delayed her.

Looking in the rear-view again she saw that the following car was close, so she put the Alfa in first and swung it off the coast road onto the snow-covered track. The headlights raked the trees as she turned the car, but she failed to see that they fleetingly lit a figure, stock-still, dressed in a full-length dark coat flecked with snow, the head – hooded – turned away. But she did see a road sign.

Siberia Belt

Ahead were the tail lights of the vehicle she had been following. There was a sudden silence as a snow flurry struck, muffling the world outside. The wind returned, thudding against the offside, fist blows deadened by a boxer's glove. She searched the rear-view mirror for the comforting sight of headlights behind. There were none. But the tail lights ahead were still visible: warm, glowing and safe. She pressed on quickly in pursuit.

Half a mile away Detective Inspector Peter Shaw stood on the beach as the snow fell, trying to smile into an Arctic north wind. The seascape was glacier-blue, the white horses whipped off the peaks of the waves before they could break. Offshore a sandbank was dusted with snow – icing sugar on marzipan. As quickly as the snow flurry had come, it was gone. But he knew a blizzard would be with them by nightfall, the snow clouds already massed on the horizon like a range of mountains.

‘Tide’s nearly up,’ he said, licking a snowflake off his lips. ‘So it should be here. Right here.’ He tapped his boot rhythmically on the spot, creating a miniature quicksand inside his footprint, and zipped up his yellow waterproof jacket. ‘A bright yellow drum, right?’ he asked. ‘Mustard, like the other one. Floating a foot clear of the water. So where is it?’

Detective Sergeant George Valentine stood six foot downwind, his face turned away from the sea. He stifled a yawn by clenching his teeth. His eyes streamed water. An allergy – seaweed perhaps, or salt on the air. Valentine looked at his feet, black slip-ons, oozing salt water. He was too old for this: five years off retirement, rheumatism in every bone. They’d got the call from HM Coastguard an hour before: toxic waste, spotted drifting inshore off Scolt Head Island.

Six weeks earlier three drums had come ashore on Vinegar Middle, a sandbank just off the coast near Castle Rising. Shaw had been on the early shift at St James's, the police HQ in Lynn – his daughter Francesca played on the beach sometimes, so he'd taken a parental interest. When he got to the scene there was a five-year-old poking a stick into the top of the drum where it had ruptured. Shaw had told her to drop the stick but he hadn't been able to keep the urgency out of his voice, the note of command. Reading a child's face wasn't a textbook exercise. He'd spotted the sudden fear, but missed the anger. The kid didn't like being told what to do, so she'd waved the stick in Shaw's face as he'd grabbed her, pulling her clear of the liquid pooling at her feet. She hadn't meant to do it, but the single thrust as Shaw bent down had caught him in the eye.

The injury was covered by a dressing, secured with a plaster across the socket, the inflamed red edges of a fresh scar just visible beneath. He touched it now, moving it slightly to relieve the pressure. The chemical had proved a mystery: an unstable mix of residual sulphuric and nitric acid, the by-products of some poorly monitored manufacturing process. A 'class eight' substance; highly corrosive, with a ferocious ability to attack epithelial tissue. Skin.

'So where is it?' Shaw asked again. Standing still like this was a form of torture. He wanted to run along the water's edge, feel his heart pounding, blood rushing, the intoxicating flood of natural painkillers soaking his brain – the runner's high.

He raised a small telescope to his good eye, the iris as pale and blue as falling water, scanning the seascape.

Shaw's face mirrored the wide-open sea; the kind of face that's always scanning a horizon. His cheekbones were high, as if some enterprising warrior from the Mongol Horde had wandered off to the north Norfolk coast, pitching his tent by the beach huts.

DS Valentine looked at his watch. He'd bought it for £1 and was pretty sure the word ROLEX was fake. Its tick-tock was oddly loud. He shivered, his head like a vulture's, hung low on a thin neck. He tried to keep his mouth shut because he knew his teeth would ache if they got caught by the wind.

A radio crackled and Valentine retrieved it from the shapeless raincoat he was wearing. He listened, said simply, 'Right.' Fumbling it back inside the folds of the coat he produced a tube of mints, popping one, crunching it immediately.

'Coastguard. They lost sight of the drum an hour ago. The water's churning up with the tide.' He shrugged as if he knew the moods of the ocean. 'Not hopeful.'

Shaw ran a hand through close-cropped fair hair. They stood together, one looking south, the other north, wondering how it had come to this: Shaw and Valentine, West Norfolk Constabulary's latest investigative duo.

Some joker in admin, thought Shaw, some old lag who knew the past and didn't care about the future. They needed a new partner for Shaw, who at thirty-three years of age was the force's youngest DI, the whiz-kid with the fancy degree and a father once tipped to be the next chief constable. And they'd come up with George Valentine – a living relic of a different world, where cynical coppers waged a losing war against low life on the street.

A man who'd been the best detective of his generation until one mistake had put him on a blacklist from which he'd never escape. A man whose career trajectory looked like a brick falling to earth.

It was their first week as partners; already – for both of them – it seemed like a lifetime.

Shaw looked around. He'd played on this beach as a child. 'Let's get up there,' he said, pointing at a low hill in the dunes. 'Gun Hill. Get some height. We might see it then.'

Valentine nodded without enthusiasm. He turned his back on the sea wind, looking inland, along the curve of the high-water mark. 'There,' he said, taking a bare hand reluctantly from his coat pocket.

A yellow metal oil drum, on its side now, rolling in with the waves.

'Let's go,' said Shaw, already jogging; a compact, nearly effortless canter.

The lid of the drum was rusted and crinkled so that the contents had begun to seep out. From six feet he could smell it, the edge of ammonia almost corrosive. The liquid spilling down the side was Day-Glo green, the paint of the drum blistering on contact.

'I'll get the Coastguard,' said Valentine, breathless, digging out the radio. 'The boat could be out there – they'll have dumped others.'

'And call St James's,' said Shaw. 'They need to get a chemical team out to make this safe and get it off the beach. We better stay till they get here. Give them the grid reference.' Shaw read out the numbers from his hand-held GPS.

As Valentine worked on the radio Shaw squatted down, picking up ten butter-yellow limpet shells and placing them in a line on the sand. 'We could do with a fire,' he said out loud. The breeze was dropping, a frost in the air now that night was falling. He imagined the brief dusk, the fire on the high-water mark, and felt good. Pocketing the shells, he began collecting flotsam, a beer crate, a few lumps of bog oak, the dried-out husk of a copy of the *Telegraph*, then turned with his arms full.

Which is when he saw something else in the waves. The beach shelved gently out to sea on Ingol Beach, so even though it was a hundred yards away it was already catching the bottom, buckling slightly, flexing in the white water. An inflatable raft, a child's summer plaything in Disney colours. Shaw stood for a few seconds watching it inch ashore. Thirty yards out it ran aground, snagged.

Valentine watched his DI pulling off his boots and socks. *Jesus!* he thought, looking around, hoping they were still alone, hoping most of all that he'd stop at the socks. Shaw waded on, the jolt of the iced water almost electric, making his bones ache.

There was something in the raft, something that didn't respond to the shuffle and bump of the waves. A dead weight. When he saw the hands – both bare – and the feet, in light trainers swollen with seawater, he knew it was the body of a man: the black hair on the hands, a chunky signet ring. He felt his pulse suddenly thump in his ears as his body reacted to the sight of death. The atavistic urge to flee, to run from danger, was almost overwhelming. And there was the sensation that time had stopped, as if he'd been caught in the middle of an acci-

dent, unfurling around him in agonizingly slow motion.

He forced himself to observe; to step out of the scene.

Dead – but for how long? Less than forty-eight hours. The arms and legs were askew, locked in ugly angles, so rigor had yet to pass.

He put a hand on the side of the raft to steady it, his fingers gripping a raised handle at the prow. Jeans, a T-shirt, a heavy fur-lined jacket only half on, leaving one arm free. The limb was thick, knotted with muscle, the hidden shoulder broad. In the bottom of the boat there was an inch of swilling bloody seawater.

Valentine met him on the dry sand, and they pulled the raft round so that what was left of the sunset caught the dead man's head; unavoidable now, lifeless, despite the movement of the waves. The human face: Peter Shaw's passion, each unique balance and imbalance of features as individual as a fingerprint. He noted the bloated, profound pallor, like cold fat, with almost iridescent tinges of blue and green. A young man, stubble on the chin, the eyes half-open but flat, lightless, one eyelid more closed than the other. The lateral orbital lines – crow's feet – deeply scored, as if he'd spent a lifetime squinting in the sun. The muscles beneath defined the skin like the surface of a piece of beaten metal. But it was the mouth that drew Shaw's attention. The lips, uneven lines, were peeled back from teeth which were smeared with blood.

'Shit,' said Valentine, turning, taking three steps and vomiting into the sand.

He came back, dabbing at his lips. 'Sight of blood,' he

said, avoiding Shaw's eyes. He might be a copper with thirty years' experience, but it hadn't helped him get used to being in the company of the dead.

Shaw tried to reanimate the victim's face in his mind as he'd been trained to do. He tightened up the jaw, balanced the eyes, replaced the graceful bow of the lips. Not a cerebral face, a muscular face.

It was Valentine who first saw the mark on the arm. The seawater had washed it clean and so it bled no more, but there was no mistaking the shape: a bite. A human bite. The teeth puncturing the skin deeply, viciously driving into the sinew and muscle, almost meeting in a crisp double incision.

Sarah Baker-Sibley pulled the Alfa up three car lengths behind stationary tail lights. The vehicle ahead had stopped, a fallen pine tree blocking the way, lit silver by the headlights. Looking ahead she saw that it wasn't a car but a small pick-up truck, with an open back, and a covered low load. The cab had a rear window which showed a light within through a frosted window. The engine idled, the exhaust fumes spirited away each time there was a breath of wind. In a lull she heard music: something urban, jagged and loud. Then silence, and the next track, louder, even less melodic. The flurry of snow had passed, but flakes still fell.

She activated central locking and searched her handbag for her mobile. The latest model: a gift from one of her suppliers, retail price £230. Internet link, GPS, camera, video, the casing decorated with a detail from Monet's *The Water Lilies*.

NO SIGNAL **Searching network**

She threw the mobile onto the passenger seat. Ahead the snow lay three inches thick on the road, as clean as hotel linen, the two parallel tyre tracks just visible, running forward to the stranded truck.

Then she heard the crunch of a vehicle behind her and looking in the rear-view mirror she saw headlights coming up until they were so close they fell into her shadow, revealing the driver, once the glare of his lights was gone. A man alone. She checked that the door was locked.

She watched as the man levered himself out of the driver's seat, straightening, with a hand on the car for support. When the wind blew he stopped, braced, waiting for a lull.

He lowered his face to the closed driver's window. A strained smile, the white hair matted with snow, the plump fingers holding an outsized working jacket to his throat. Glasses, heavy with black frames, magnified his eyes, which were milky with age. The cold had brought some blood to his cheeks but otherwise he was pale, drained, a cold sweat on his forehead.

'You OK?' he said when she wound the window down an inch. She heard the sound of music again, louder, from the pick-up truck.

'We're stuck,' she said, briskly. 'I need to get through – I'm picking up my daughter from school. Could you check ahead, see if we can move the tree?'

He looked forward, licking his lips, reluctant, but then set out. She watched the prints he made in the snow – a single line of flat-footed impressions, slightly unsteady. He slipped at the edge of the ditch when the wind blew, his arms flying out in a crooked semaphore, the coat billowing.

'That's all we need,' she said out loud, punching in the lighter. 'Grandad in the soup.'

She rubbed clear the condensation on the windscreen and watched as he reached the pick-up's window. He bent slightly at the waist, talking, just for a few seconds, then he straightened up, both bare hands deep in the jacket's pockets.

A minute, less, and he was back, out of breath so that he had to lean on the Alfa's roof. 'OK then. We're not gonna move the tree – not now. He says we'll have to all back out. Have you got a mobile?' he asked.

'No signal.'

'Same with him. I don't own one.' He rubbed one of his eyes under the thick spectacles. Despite the cold she could see now that his whole face was wet with sweat.

Baker-Sibley pushed smoke out of her nostrils, her lips pressed in a humourless line. 'You should take it easy,' she said.

He held his jacket's lapels together. 'I'm OK. I'll try and reverse back to the turn, there was a farm track there, just give me a few minutes.' He set off before she had time to answer.

He tottered back to his car and wiped the snow from the windscreen with his sleeve before lowering himself into the driver's seat and starting the engine. He peered down at the dashboard, then at the rear-view mirror.

'Come on, come on,' said Sarah. 'It's not a fucking Space Shuttle.'

He didn't move. She threw open the door and stepped out into the night, holding a hand above her eyes to stop the snowflakes snagging her lashes. The cold made her back arch and she hunched her shoulders to try to protect the exposed skin at her neck.

Now she saw the old man's car clearly for the first time. A two-door silver Corsa, a pair of ladders neatly strapped to a roof rack.

It was what stretched behind the Corsa that made Sarah Baker-Sibley swear. A line of headlamps running back, all stranded now in the snow.

She looked up and let some of the flakes settle on her face. 'Why me?' she asked. She thought of Jillie trudging home in the snow. 'And why now?'

On cue the blizzard finally broke, the snow thickening, the wind driving it in from the sea. Visibility dropped to a few feet. She brushed flakes from her eyelids and scrambled back into the safety of the car.

In the blizzard Shaw and Valentine worked quickly, dragging the raft across the sands to the DI's black Land Rover, parked beyond a copse of hawthorns. By the time they had a tarpaulin secured, weighting the corners with rocks, the snow was an inch deep. Then they sat it out, Shaw watching the high tide boiling on the sands through an open window. He'd been a policeman for eleven years but this was the first time he'd discovered a corpse: he was distressed to find that the emotional impact was refusing to fade. His stomach felt empty, and he kept seeing the dead man's mouth, the blood terracotta red between the white enamel.

Valentine bent forward, his hands over the warm-air vent, his throat glugging with phlegm as the hot dust triggered his immune system. He'd binned his last packet of Marlboro back at the station, so he closed his eyes, trying not to think about nicotine, trying not to think about the corpse in the raft. But the image of the apparently self-inflicted wound was difficult to shake off. He took a call on the radio: Control said the force pathologist was on her way and a unit of the West Norfolk CSI team were assembling, but the snowfall had brought chaos to the coastal roads, so they could be some time.

The storm itself passed in twenty minutes, rolling

inland, buffeting winds at its leading edge, while in its wake the air was still, the last of the snow falling like poppies on Armistice Day, bled white.

Shaw's patience snapped. He flung the door open and shuddered in the super-cooled air. He threw the keys to Valentine. 'Roll the Land Rover out on the beach and put the lights on – there's a floodlight there.' He leant in and tapped a red switch. 'Walk the high-water mark, see if you can find anything – clothing, a weapon, just anything. Any footprints in the sand other than ours, mark them with the scene-of-crime flags – they're in the boot – and there's some tape; try and box off the point where I dragged him ashore, although it's probably under water by now. There are evidence bags in the glove. When you see the fire brigade unit or our boys, fill them in. Scene-of-crime rules – so no smoking.'

Valentine popped another mint.

'I'm going to climb, see what I can see. I'll be ten, no more.'

'Right,' said Valentine.

Shaw detected the grudging note, a single syllable that said so much. He recalled George Valentine at his father's deathbed, a glass of malt whisky in his hand, a cigarette burning between the yellowed fingers.

Boredom, bungalow and early retirement (enforced) had killed DCI Jack Shaw. Luckily, they killed him quickly. The early exit to Civvy Street had come care of his father's last, notorious, case. Until then they'd been the force's star team: DCI Jack Shaw and DI George Valentine. A pair of old-fashioned coppers in an old-fashioned world. And so he knew what Valentine was thinking: that a

decade ago they'd have wrapped this case up without all the mindless mechanics of police procedure, without a fancy degree in forensic art (whatever that was), or the check-it, double-check-it philosophy.

Valentine turned over the pair of dice attached to his lighter and keys. Ivory and green, with gold dots. 'What's that smell?' he asked before Shaw had gone ten yards.

Shaw stopped, sniffed the sea breeze. 'Could be mint, George. You crunch any more of those things you'll start scaring the sheep.' But Valentine was right, there was something else on the breeze, something laced with the ozone and seaweed. 'Petrol. An outboard?' asked Shaw.

Valentine produced a handkerchief and dabbed his streaming eyes.

'Hold the fort,' said Shaw, padding through the dunes and beginning to climb, picking a narrow ridge where the snow was just clinging to the sand and grass. At the top he pushed himself up onto an old gun emplacement, a tangle of concrete and rusted iron. The physical effort made him feel better, dissipating the stress. This high there was still a breeze, the snowflakes jostling, streamers of light like sparklers. Down on the beach he could just see the Land Rover and the spread tarpaulin.

Swinging round he looked south, to the lights of a farmhouse: a glimpse of the corrugated iron of a barn and a white spotlight illuminating a dovecote on the roof of an old stable block. They'd driven through the yard an hour earlier to get down to the beach and Shaw had noticed the name: Gallow Marsh Farm.

And then, turning inland, he saw car lights – a line of vehicles backed up behind a pine tree which was in their

path, its branches twisted and broken. Exhaust fumes hung in the airless night. That was the smell on the air, not an engine at sea. Shaw got the telescope out and held it to his good eye, focusing on the vehicle in pole position. A small pick-up truck. The cab light was on, the windows flecked with snow, someone moving inside. He looked back along the line, each vehicle smoothed out by the gentle curves of snowdrifts.

Out at sea the storm clouds had unpacked themselves, revealing a wedge of clear night sky, a planetarium of lights, the moon clear of the sea. He watched the white lunar disc moving sideways along the horizon, like a prop in a child's theatre. The silhouette of a yacht, gliding east, turned in towards the coast, an engine humming efficiently, its white sail marked with a blue clamshell.

The line of eight vehicles stood as if fashioned in icing sugar, an exquisite model on an untouched wedding cake. The moon had appeared above the scene; the snow clouds had moved on after one last heavy flurry, the stars left to stretch north over the sea towards the distant pole. The marsh birds were silent, the sluices choked with ice, and the sea, past high water, tiptoed back over the sands. Closer to the marooned cars there were sounds of life: a bass note, strands of music, the rumble of vehicle engines running heating systems. From the pick-up truck in pole position the local radio now played – a jagged tinny melody which came and went with the signal.

Three vehicles from the tail of the little convoy was an off-white Astravan. Radio 2 played, a voice inside singing along loudly, a ballad about a young girl in pursuit of an older man. Fred Parlour held the final note surprisingly well, then laughed at himself. He was handsome, mid-fifties, with a compact symmetrical face, the jaw showing no signs of slackening despite the first strands of grey at his temples. His fingernails were neatly cleaned, the overalls laundered, the hair smartly trimmed.

Beside him sat Sean Harper, the firm's apprentice. His hair was sticky with product, cut short and spiky, his nose – pierced with a stud – was pressed up close to a pornographic magazine. 'You'll go blind,' said Parlour.

Harper looked at the lights of the stationary van in front. ‘So what? We’re gonna be ’ere all night, right? Might as well enjoy myself.’

A small dog – a Jack Russell – thrust its snout between the seats and nuzzled his fingers, the tongue making a liquid smack.

‘How much you reckon they got on board?’ asked Parlour, his voice friendlier. The van in front had a branded motif on the rear doors:

NORTH NORFOLK SECURITY

01553 121212

There’s safety in those numbers

Sean Harper had got out when they’d first pulled up. His mobile couldn’t find a signal so he’d run along the seaward side in the still falling snow to see if they had a radio. It was a refurbished Securicor van, but an old model, rust round the rivets. One guard in an ill-fitting uniform sat in the front, about as intimidating as a cinema usherette. Just a thumbs up: no window down. And no radio.

‘I don’t like uniforms,’ Sean had said when he got back. ‘Or the fuckers in them.’

Parlour shrugged. ‘It’s not Brinks Mat, is it?’

He got his mobile out of his breast pocket and checked the signal – one bar, but then it flickered and died. The dog sniffed at his neck so he reached back and lifted the animal onto his lap, rubbing its tummy where the fur was thinnest against the pink skin. He got a dog biscuit out of the glove compartment and fed it to her.

‘All right, Milly?’ Parlour thrust his head below the dog’s

chin, nuzzling. 'I'll take her for a walk; she must be busting.'

He checked his watch: 7.40 p.m. They'd been stuck for more than two hours. Pushing open the door against the small drift on the driver's side he let the dog slip out. The sound of the door slamming faded, absorbed by the snow, but a pair of geese rose quickly from the marsh, creaking overhead.

The air was unnaturally still, expectant, like an empty theatre.

Parlour stood and coughed in the cold, reviewing the line of vehicles. There was no echo, the snow smothering the sound, wrapping it in silence. Sean had said he'd seen a tree ahead, blocking the road, and a car skewed across the track at the rear, behind the Morris Minor which was behind them. When he'd gone forward, beyond the security van, he'd met another driver from further up the line, a 'Chink', he said, but well spoken. Sean had asked him what he thought they should do. 'Sit tight,' he'd said, turning away. So they'd all sat tight.

Parlour stretched in the cold and stood trying to hear the sea sigh. He edged down the side of the Morris and tapped on the window. There was no light within, and no sign of life at all. Then he saw frail fingers fumbling with the window handle, one encumbered by a large amber ring. The driver wound the window down. 'Are we going to be here long?' she asked, as if he were an AA man. Make-up, a savage attempt to defy the years, made her face look artificial, her eyebrows two black pencil lines, a smudge of crimson where the lips should have been. Parlour said he didn't know how long it would be, that

the sky had cleared and they'd be spotted soon. But it might be all night. And the mobiles were useless.

'I know that,' she said. 'I've always said that.'

Milly snuffled around his shoes.

'You've cut the heating?' he asked her.

She'd looked at him as if he were an idiot. 'I'm fine,' she said, and then, with what seemed like an effort, 'Please. Don't worry about me.'

He checked her fuel gauge; she had a quarter of a tank, perhaps less. 'OK. But like I say – if you get cold we're just in front.'

'I'm going to sleep now . . .' she said, winding up the window.

The next car was the last in the line, a Mondeo, stuck sideways across the track. Fred was leaning down to knock on the glass when the door opened with a jerk and clipped him on the forehead. He just had time to grab the frame, saving himself from a fall into the dark water and the reeds.

In the moonlight he looked at the smudge of blood on his fingers, touching the wound.

A teenager with a baseball cap got out of the car, the crotch of his jeans half-way down to his knees. He looked hot, his face flushed, a patch of sweat discolouring a T-shirt with the logo *Pi is God*. The rest of the fabric was covered in blue numbers. Adolescent-thin, the arms held at awkward angles, his skin clear, the narrow face dominated by thick, dark eyebrows. Parlour didn't notice the rapid shallow breathing and the trembling which made his hands vibrate in his pockets. Or the running shoes: Nike, £180 new.

‘Yeah?’ said the youngster, taking a hand out of his pocket before thrusting it back in.

‘Don’t suppose your mobile works?’ asked Parlour.

He shook his head and looked up and down the line. ‘Nope.’ The kid licked his lips. ‘What’s gonna happen then, do you think?’ Estuary English, but beneath it the subtle lilt of middle-class *Blue Peter*.

Parlour shrugged. ‘Guess we’ll start eating each other eventually.’

‘No.’ The kid made a noise in his throat which wasn’t a laugh. ‘You know . . . like, what *will* happen?’ The note of pleading was unmistakable; Parlour saw the boy’s eyes flooding.

‘Nothing to worry about,’ said Parlour, looking up at the stars. ‘Police’ll get a chopper out soon. We can’t be the only ones stuck. You got any food? Water?’ He could see a bottle of vodka on the passenger seat.

The teenager looked out over the marsh, swivelling the baseball cap down over his short, thick hair. ‘Reckon I could get through? I could stop a car down on the road. Get help.’

Parlour shook his head. ‘Best wait. If you fall in tonight you’d freeze to death. Isn’t worth it – anyway, this thing can put out enough heat to trigger global warming. So you’ll be nice and snug. How’s the fuel?’

The kid got back in the driver’s seat, looking blankly at the instrument panel, and held the steering wheel with both hands. Parlour noticed that the wheel had a cover – snakeskin, chevrons in black and white. He focused on the fuel gauge. ‘Right. That’s not so good, is it? On the red. If I was you I’d kill the lights, heat her up again and

then turn off the engine. See how long you stay warm. Don't worry – if it cuts out just come in with us. OK?' Parlour held out his hand: 'I'm Fred. Your dad's car, is it?'

No answer. The boy pulled the door shut.

Parlour turned away and saw a pair of green reflecting eyes out in the marsh: a fox, watching him, smelling them all, petrified by the intrusion. It blinked first, and he followed the shadow as it slunk into the snow-capped clumps of grass. Ahead he saw someone walking back down the line of cars and trucks. A woman, forty-something, in an expensive yellow all-weather sailing jacket, waving a torch.

They met by the plumbers' van. 'I'm in the red Alfa Romeo,' she said. She produced a packet of cigarettes, fumbled until she got one between her lips and lit it with a gold lighter the size of a bullion bar.

'I should tell someone,' she said, implying that he'd have to do. 'The old guy in the Corsa behind me – that hideous little car – he said I could have some water if I needed it. So I went back.' She let the smoke circulate fully before ejecting it through her nose. 'I think he's dead.'

The tarpaulin over the body on the beach was now stiff with frost. Control had radioed to say the CSI unit was still an hour away, maybe more. Nothing moved on Ingol Beach except the tide, inching out. Valentine had taped off the toxic waste drum and lit it with one of the portable floodlights, then he'd gone down on his knees, his thin trousers soaked, fingertip-searching the high-water mark.

Shaw told him he'd seen the cars trapped behind the fallen pine tree up on the track. Had the driver crashed? Did anyone need medical help? The coincidence made Shaw uneasy: the violent unnatural death on the sands, the fallen pine on Siberia Belt almost within sight. 'OK,' he said, refolding the map. 'The scene's secure. There's only one road in and that's blocked. We're done here for now. We'll leave the floodlight on. Let's see if we're needed on Siberia Belt.'

Valentine followed, glad to be putting distance between himself and the unseen corpse. The sight of blood made him feel the earth wasn't solid enough to stand on. Which made him want a pack of cigarettes, which he didn't have, so he spat in the snow instead.

They crossed the frosted sands until they reached a dyke which separated Siberia Belt from the beach, bridging it where a sluice gate stood, the cogs and levers of the

iron mechanism choked with ice. Approaching the convoy from the south, Shaw got to the Mondeo first, but waited for Valentine to catch up. A lone figure, following Shaw's footsteps, his narrow bird-like head down. Breathless, the DS stopped when he reached Shaw, then nodded at the Mondeo. 'Latest model, SatNav as basic.'

Valentine could hardly speak for lack of breath. *Emphysema*, thought Shaw. *Fluid filling his lungs. If he's given up smoking, he's given up too late.* Shaw didn't need a SatNav to know Valentine's destination.

The bass note of a stereo system thudded from behind the misted windows of the car.

'Check it out,' said Shaw. 'I'll go along the line, see what the problem is up ahead.' A group stood beside the third car from the front of the line, lit by the interior light spilling from the open driver's door.

Valentine bridled at the peremptory tone, trying to get used to the fact that DI Shaw was the boss, not the kid in short trousers he'd once kicked a football with on the beach. It would be easier if Shaw could lay off the checklist philosophy. That's what they called him at the station. 'Check-It.' Check this, check that, check every bloody thing. Mr Politically Correct. Mr Rule Book. And Valentine knew where all that had its roots. He knew why Peter Shaw was so keen to show the world he was the perfect copper: it was because his father hadn't been, that's why. And because his father's partner hadn't been either. Jack Shaw and George Valentine had lashed up their last big case. Big time. What had the judge said? *Slipshod.*

Valentine used one foot to ease the black shoe off the other and, leaning against the Mondeo, poured out some water before putting it back on.

Shaw reached the Morris Minor and turned back with fresh instructions: 'And this,' he called. He placed his palms together and put them beside one cheek, tilting his head as if laying it down on a pillow. An elderly woman was asleep in the car, the windows slightly frosted on the inside, a tartan rug to one side where it had slipped off her body. Shaw could see her face: there was a smile on the thin lips and her hands were held slightly up from the quilt like a child's.

The door of the Mondeo opened before Valentine could tap on the roof. The teenager stood, leaning on the door. 'We getting out of here?'

Valentine shrugged. 'What's up?' He nodded forward to the group by the silver Vauxhall Corsa.

'What bastard cares?' The young man bounced on his toes and Valentine noticed that he kept putting his hands in his pockets and then taking them out, then rubbing them on the backside of his jeans.

'This one.' Valentine flipped out his warrant card. 'Why are you on this road, sir, can I ask?'

The kid took a step back and laughed inappropriately. 'Diversion. There's a sign down on the coast road – floods it said.' His accent had flattened out: he'd gone up three socio-economic classes and moved fifty miles closer to London. He looked ahead. 'Then this happened.' He put his hand on the car door and then quickly removed it as if the metal were too cold to touch, but Valentine had

seen a mark on the top of his hand, the bluish remains of a stamp in the shape of a circle enclosing two letters: BT.

On the dashboard lay a mobile phone.

‘Yours?’

‘Shine,’ said the kid. ‘Two megapixel camera; hundred and fifteen grams; six point seven hours talk time.’

‘Right. But does it work?’

The kid shrugged. ‘I was gonna walk back to the road,’ he said.

Valentine shook his head. ‘A mile, and it’s treacherous.’

‘It’s one point three miles,’ he said. ‘I clocked it.’

‘Just stay here, OK?’ Valentine was running out of patience. ‘We’ve radioed for help but it’ll be a time.’ He took an extra breath and ran an eye over the Mondeo’s purple paintwork – spotless. On the back seat was a blanket, a picnic basket, a shooting stick and a Frisbee. The steering wheel had a cover, black and white chevrons: an animal skin, snake perhaps. He walked on, but turned and memorized the registration number. He had a good memory, if he could be bothered to use it. The kid had annoyed him. It always did: a teenager out in Daddy’s car.

Shaw was behind the plumber’s van now, and through the heated rear window and the grille he’d seen a young man in the passenger seat reading a magazine. He came alongside, noticing for the first time the paw prints in the snow between the footprints, and tapped on the driver’s window, then opened the door.

‘Police,’ he said, putting his knee on the driver’s seat

and looking at the magazine. ‘May I?’ He took it. It was German, an illegal import at the nastier end of the hard-porn market. He held his head slightly to one side that so that he could focus on the picture.

‘Name?’ said Shaw.

The man shrugged. ‘*Das Fleisch*,’ he said, mangling the words. ‘They got Turkish blokes on site, they bring them in from Frankfurt.’

‘*Your* name.’

‘I found it, the last job this morning. Building site down in the Arndale, in the Portakabin where I brewed the tea. There was loads. Worse . . .’

Shaw waited. He studied the young man’s face. Noted the premature hair loss at the temples, the acne scars, and the pronounced dimple in the chin – the mental fovea.

‘Sean Harper. That’s my boss,’ said the young man, nodding forward to the group standing in the pool of light. ‘Fred.’ He grinned as if this was the ultimate character reference.

‘I’ll keep this, Mr Harper,’ said Shaw, folding the magazine inside his jacket.

‘Like – it’s not a crime.’

‘Well, it is actually,’ said Shaw. ‘We’ll talk about it later.’

‘You go out?’ asked Harper, pointing at the RNLI lifeboat motif on the lapel of Shaw’s jacket, trying hard to smile.

‘Yup.’

‘That’s cool,’ said Harper, watching his magazine disappear from sight. ‘I’ve thought of it . . . you know? Volunteering.’

For the first time Shaw noticed the blanket behind the seats ruffled into a swirled nest of tartan. He paused, sniffed the air, expecting to detect the tell-tale stench of dog, but the van was clean and neat, the overpowering odour that of the strawberry-scented air freshener stuck on the dashboard.

‘You should,’ said Shaw, not smiling.

Next in line was the revamped Securicor van. The driver refused to open the window until he saw the warrant card pressed up against the glass, then he cracked it an inch.

‘Any trouble?’ asked Shaw, knowing he’d seen the man before – in the dock of the magistrates’ court. The crime? He searched his memory but couldn’t pinpoint the case. Something violent, he knew that. Something violent with his hands, in pursuit of cash. Why then, Shaw asked himself, was he sitting guarding a van full of the stuff? He was twenty-five to thirty, dark good looks marred by a narrow nose which had been broken and badly reset and which only just managed to separate his eyes, the eyebrows almost meeting at the bridge. He had a half-hearted moustache and designer stubble.

‘You got a control desk to contact?’ asked Shaw.

The driver found his voice. ‘We don’t have radios – and there’s no signal on the mobiles.’

Shaw stepped back, looking along the line of vehicles. ‘Get my DS to radio through for you – there’s enough chaos after the storm without half the force out looking for you and your bars of gold. What *is* in the back?’

The guard checked a clipboard. ‘Cash. We do corner shops, the supermarkets on the estates, wholesale fish

market down on the docks. About eighty thousand – not much more, anyway.’

‘Sit tight,’ said Shaw, wondering if his employer knew about the criminal record. He approved of rehabilitation, but putting the alcoholic behind the bar was asking for trouble.

Ahead he could see the Corsa’s two nearside doors open, two figures standing back, watching Shaw. One, a man in overalls, waved and placed a hand on his heart, patting a quilted jacket. Shaw raised a hand.

‘Problem?’ he shouted.

The man pointed inside the Corsa, patted his chest again. ‘Heart.’

He moved quickly past the next car – a Volvo, an old model estate, a hand-painted sign reading ‘The Emerald Garden’ on the rear window. The distinctive aroma of soya sauce was laced with petrol fumes. No driver, no passengers.

An elderly man lay tilted back in the Corsa’s front seat. Shaw guessed he was sixty-five, perhaps seventy. He had heavy spectacles, with black plastic rims, and thin white hair stuck to his skull. His face was the colour of the streaks in Stilton cheese, saliva catching the light at the corners of his mouth. Vomit covered his chin and the front of the heavy jacket, a slimy eggshell-blue. Shaw picked up the strong scent of pine needles but couldn’t see the air freshener.

A woman in a yellow jacket stood back, smoking. Kneeling, the man in clean blue overalls held the sick man’s hand, his neat face screwed up with anxiety, a small wound on his forehead still wet with blood. A Jack Russell

lay under the vehicle, its nose rummaging at the man's foot.

'Like I say, heart attack, I reckon,' said the man in the overalls. 'Don't suppose you've got a mobile signal? You stuck too?'

'I'm a policeman,' said Shaw. 'We've radioed. Can I see, please?'

He bent down and found that another man was on the passenger seat. Chinese features, his knees drawn up beneath him. 'Can't find a pulse,' he said, the consonants dulled by his accent.

Shaw took out a pocket knife and cut the tie which had become fiercely knotted at the man's throat. Then he pulled both sides of his heavy oversized jacket and shirt apart, the buttons popping clear. He turned the collar away from the neck and noticed a name tag: RFA. He leant in close to his face, putting a hand to his forehead. He knew instantly that the man was alive: the drops of water in his eyebrows were warm, and although his lips were blue and didn't move they were moist with the breath that was passing between them, like the draught under a door.

He backed out and shouted to Valentine, who was down on his haunches by the Morris, talking through the driver's window.

'George,' he shouted. Valentine stood slowly, one hand on the Morris for support. 'Get a chopper. Medical emergency – cardiac arrest, male about sixty-five years of age. They'll see us from the air, tell 'em to come down on the seaward side – it's flat sand under the snow.'

Shaw ducked back into the Corsa and, feeling inside

the man's pocket, he found a wallet with a driving licence in a plastic see-through compartment. John Blickling Holt. Born 30 December 1941. The address was given as 14B Devil's Alley, King's Lynn. Shaw knew it well: a narrow cobbled street running down to the quay, reeking of fish and the tide. Poor, run-down, close-knit, a warren of rented flats and bedsits.

The man on the passenger seat said he was called Stanley Zhao. Even folded on his knees Shaw could see he bucked the racial stereotype by being the best part of six feet tall. He looked fifty, but his hair was still as black as a penguin's feathers. Shaw told him to stay in the Corsa, run the heating at half blast and sound the horn if Holt came round or got worse.

Shaw shut the door and straightened his back, bringing his face up level with the roof rack, the two sets of ladders strapped up neatly with webbing. The woman in the yellow coat and the man in the blue overalls stood between him and the first two vehicles in the convoy.

'My name's Baker-Sibley; Sarah Baker-Sibley,' said the woman. 'I need to get a message to my daughter. I should have picked her up from school – St Agnes' Hall – and I'm worried. I'm always there on time – or I ring. She won't have Clara with her – that's her best friend. She has a clarinet lesson after school,' she added. 'She'll walk home. She'll try to walk. Two miles, she's done it before and she has a key, but never in winter . . . in this,' she said, looking out over the snowfield. 'She's thirteen. So she won't think twice about trying.' She laughed, then dropped the half-finished cigarette and fumbled for the packet. 'I'm sorry – can I see your warrant card again?'

‘My colleague DS Valentine will take the details, Ms Baker-Sibley,’ said Shaw, holding his warrant card slightly too close to her face for comfort. ‘He can radio ahead.

‘This your Alfa?’ Shaw asked her, walking forward. ‘I’d stay put for now,’ he added when she didn’t answer. ‘And the vehicle in front?’

‘The man who’s ill went forward and checked when we first got stuck,’ she said. ‘I haven’t seen the driver. Perhaps he’s getting some sleep; he had some horrendous racket at full blast to start with.’

The radio still played, but the volume was now low, the sound reedy.

Looking forward along the causeway Shaw could see an unsteady line of footprints weaving its way to the pick-up truck beside partially filled tyre tracks, the return line an uncertain attempt to retrace the same steps. Paw prints, crisper, zig-zagged between the tracks. The observation window in the rear of the cab still showed a light within. The pick-up’s headlights burnt yellow, and Shaw guessed the battery was low. He walked forward, the hair on his neck bristling as a breeze took his skin temperature down a degree. Something moved in the sky and he looked up in time to see a meteor fall, a flashing line of silver that died before it reached the sea.

The truck was wide enough to block the track almost completely, leaving just the narrowest of paths down the driver’s side. Shaw held on to the side and took the chance to lift the tarpaulin cover to see the load beneath: plasterboard, sheets of it for cheap walls.

Leaning forward he grasped the door handle, breaking the silence with his voice for the first time.

‘Hello? Police.’

He turned the handle and swung the door open, stepping forward quickly to get a grip on the stanchion. He was less than two feet from the driver and it took him three seconds, perhaps less, to know that he was looking at a corpse.