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ANTHONY HOROWITZ

She planned her funeral.

But did she arrange her murder?

The Word is Murder

The Word is Murder

'Horowitz is strong on plot . . . and infectiously zestful'
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'A real page-turner. I loved it!'
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The Word is Murder

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One
Funeral Plans

Just after eleven o'clock on a bright spring morning, the sort of day when the sunshine is almost white and promises a warmth that it doesn't quite deliver, Diana Cowper crossed the Fulham Road and went into a funeral parlour.

She was a short, very business-like woman: there was a sense of determination in her eyes, her sharply cut hair, the very way she walked. If you saw her coming, your first instinct would be to step aside and let her pass. And yet there was nothing unkind about her. She was in her sixties with a pleasant, round face. She was expensively dressed, her pale raincoat hanging open to reveal a pink jersey and grey skirt. She wore a heavy bead and stone necklace which might or might not have been expensive and a number of diamond rings that most certainly were. There were plenty of women like her in the streets of Fulham and South Kensington. She might have been on her way to lunch or to an art gallery.

The funeral parlour was called Cornwallis and Sons. It stood at the end of a terrace, with the name painted in a

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classical font both on the front of the building and down the side so that you would notice it from whichever direction you were coming. The two inscriptions were prevented from meeting in the middle by a Victorian clock which was mounted above the front door and which had come to a stop, perhaps appropriately, at 11.59. One minute to midnight. Beneath the name, again printed twice, was the legend: *Independent Funeral Directors: A Family Business since 1820*. There were three windows looking out over the street, two of them curtained, the third empty but for an open book made of marble, engraved with a quotation: *When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions*. All the wood – the window frames, the frontage, the main door – was painted a dark blue, nudging black.

As Mrs Cowper opened the door, a bell on an old-fashioned spring mechanism sounded loudly, once. She found herself in a small reception area with two sofas, a low table, and a few shelves with books that had that peculiar sense of sadness that comes with being unread. A staircase led up to the other floors. A narrow corridor stretched ahead.

Almost at once, a woman appeared, stout, with thick legs and heavy, black leather shoes, coming down the stairs. She was smiling pleasantly, politely. The smile acknowledged that this was a delicate, painful business but that it would be expedited with calm and efficiency. Her name was Irene Laws. She was the personal assistant to Robert Cornwallis, the funeral director, and also acted as his receptionist.

'Good morning. Can I help you?' she asked.

'Yes. I would like to arrange a funeral.'

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'Are you here on behalf of someone who has died recently?' The word 'died' was instructive. Not 'passed away'. Not 'deceased'. She had made it her business practice to speak plainly, recognising that, at the end of the day, it was less painful for all concerned.

'No,' Mrs Cowper replied. 'It's for myself.'

'I see.' Irene Laws didn't blink – and why should she? It was not at all uncommon for people to arrange their own funerals. 'Do you have an appointment?' she asked.

'No. I didn't know I'd need one.'

'I'll see if Mr Cornwallis is free. Please take a seat. Would you like a cup of tea or coffee?'

'No, thank you.'

Diana Cowper sat down. Irene Laws disappeared down the corridor, reappearing a few minutes later behind a man who so exactly suited the image of the funeral director that he could have been playing the part. There was, of course, the obligatory dark suit and sombre tie. But the very way he stood seemed to suggest that he was apologising for having to be there. His hands were clasped together in a gesture of profound regret. His face was crumpled, mournful, not helped by hair that had thinned to the edge of baldness and a beard that had the look of a failed experiment. He wore tinted spectacles that were sinking into the bridge of his nose, not just framing his eyes but masking them. He was about forty years old. He too was smiling.

'Good morning,' he said. 'My name is Robert Cornwallis. I understand you wish to discuss a funeral plan with us.'

'Yes.'

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'You've been offered coffee or tea? Please come this way.'

The new client was taken down the corridor to a room at the end. This was as understated as the reception area – with one difference. Instead of books there were folders and brochures which, if opened, would show images of coffins, hearses (traditional or horse-drawn) and price lists. A number of urns had been arranged on two shelves should the discussion veer towards cremation. Two armchairs faced each other, one beside a small desk. Cornwallis sat here. He took out a pen, a silver Mont Blanc, and rested it on a notepad.

'The funeral is your own,' he began.

'Yes.' Suddenly Mrs Cowper was brisk, wanting to get straight to the point. 'I have already given some consideration to the details. I take it you have no problem with that.'

'On the contrary. Individual requirements are important to us. These days, pre-planned funerals and what you might call bespoke or themed funerals are very much the mainstay of our business. It is our privilege to provide exactly what our clients demand. After our discussion here, and assuming our terms are acceptable to you, we will provide you with a full invoice and breakdown of what has been agreed. Your relatives and friends will have nothing to do except, of course, to attend. And from our experience I can assure you that it will give them great comfort to know that everything has been done exactly in accordance with your wishes.'

Mrs Cowper nodded. 'Excellent. Well, let's get down to it, shall we?' She took a breath, then dived straight in. 'I want to be buried in a cardboard coffin.'

Cornwallis was about to make his first note. He paused,

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the nib hovering over the page. 'If you are considering an eco-funeral, might I suggest recycled wood or even twisted willow branches rather than cardboard? There are occasions when cardboard can be . . . not entirely effective.' He chose his words carefully, allowing all sorts of possibilities to hang in the air. 'Willow is hardly more expensive and a great deal more attractive.'

'All right. I want to be buried in Brompton Cemetery, next to my husband.'

'You lost him recently?'

'Twelve years ago. We already have the plot, so there'll be no problems there. And this is what I want in the service . . .' She opened her handbag and took out a sheet of paper, which she laid on the desk.

The funeral director glanced down. 'I see that you have already put a great deal of thought into the matter,' he said. 'And this is a very well-considered service, if I may say so. Partly religious, partly humanist.'

'Well, there's a psalm – and there's the Beatles. A poem, a bit of classical music and a couple of addresses. I don't want the thing going on too long.'

'We can work out the timings exactly . . .'

Diana Cowper had planned her funeral and she was going to need it. She was murdered about six hours later that same day.

At the time of her death, I had never heard of her and I knew almost nothing about how she was killed. I may have noticed the headline in the newspapers – ACTOR'S MOTHER MURDERED – but the photographs and the bulk of the story

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were all focused on the more famous son, who had just been cast as the lead in a new American television series. The conversation that I have described is only a rough approximation because, of course, I wasn't there. But I did visit Cornwallis and Sons and spoke at length to both Robert Cornwallis and his assistant (she was also his cousin), Irene Laws. If you were to walk down the Fulham Road you would have no trouble identifying the funeral parlour. The rooms are exactly as I describe them. Most of the other details are taken from witness statements and police reports.

We know when Mrs Cowper entered the funeral parlour because her movements were recorded on CCTV both in the street and on the bus that took her from her home that morning. It was one of her eccentricities that she always used public transport. She could easily have afforded a chauffeur.

She left the funeral parlour at a quarter to twelve, walked up to South Kensington tube station and took the Piccadilly line to Green Park. She had an early lunch with a friend at the Café Murano, an expensive restaurant on St James's Street, near Fortnum & Mason. From there, she took a taxi to the Globe Theatre on the South Bank. She wasn't seeing a play. She was on the board and there was a meeting on the first floor of the building that lasted from two o'clock until a little before five. She got home at five past six. It had just begun to rain but she had an umbrella with her and left it in a faux-Victorian stand beside the front door.

Thirty minutes later, somebody strangled her.

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She lived in a smart, terraced house in Britannia Road just beyond the area of Chelsea that is known – appropriately, in her case – as World's End. There were no CCTV cameras in the street, so there was no way of knowing who went in or left around the time of the murder. The neighbouring houses were empty. One was owned by a consortium based in Dubai and was usually rented out, though not at this particular time. The other belonged to a retired lawyer and his wife but they were away in the South of France. So nobody heard anything.

She was not found for two days. Andrea Kluvánek, the Slovakian cleaner who worked for her twice a week, made the discovery when she came in on Wednesday morning. Diana Cowper was lying face down on the living-room floor. A length of red cord, normally used to tie back the curtains, was around her throat. The forensic report, written in the matter-of-fact, almost disinterested manner of all such documents, described in detail the blunt-force injuries of the neck, the fractured hyoid bone and conjunctiva of the eyes. Andrea saw something a great deal worse. She had been working at the house for two years and had come to like her employer, who had always treated her kindly, often stopping to have a coffee with her. On the Wednesday, as she opened the door, she was confronted with a dead body and one that had been lying there for some time. The face, what she could see of it, had gone mauve. The eyes were empty and staring, the tongue hanging out grotesquely, twice its normal length. One arm was outstretched, a finger with a diamond ring

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pointing at her as if in accusation. The central heating had been on. The body was already beginning to smell.

According to her testimony, Andrea did not scream. She was not sick. She quietly backed out of the house and called the police on her mobile phone. She did not go in again until they arrived.

To begin with, the police assumed that Diana Cowper had been the victim of a burglary. Certain items, including jewellery and a laptop computer, had been taken from the house. Many of the rooms had been searched, the contents scattered. However, there had been no break-in. Mrs Cowper had clearly opened the door to her attacker, although it was unclear if she had known the person or not. She had been surprised and strangled from behind. She had barely put up a fight. There were no fingerprints, no DNA, no clues of any sort, suggesting that the perpetrator must have planned this with a great deal of care. He had distracted her and plucked the red cord off the hook beside the velvet curtain in the living room. He had crept up behind her, slipped it over her head and pulled. It would have taken only a minute or so for her to die.

But then the police found out about her visit to Cornwallis and Sons and realised that they had a real puzzle on their hands. Think about it. Nobody arranges their own funeral and then gets killed on the same day. This was no coincidence. The two events had to be connected. Had she somehow known she was going to die? Had someone seen her going in or coming out of the funeral parlour and been

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prompted, for some reason, to take action? Who actually knew she had been there?

It was definitely a mystery and one that required a specialist approach. At the same time, it had absolutely nothing to do with me.

That was about to change.

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Two

Hawthorne

It's easy for me to remember the evening that Diana Cowper was killed. I was celebrating with my wife: dinner at Moro in Exmouth Market and quite a lot to drink. That afternoon I had pressed the Send button on my computer, emailing my new novel to the publishers, putting eight months' work behind me.

The House of Silk was a Sherlock Holmes sequel that I had never expected to write. I had been approached, quite out of the blue, by the Conan Doyle estate, who had decided, for the first time, to lend their name and their authority to a new adventure. I leapt at the opportunity. I had first read the Sherlock Holmes stories when I was seventeen and they had stayed with me all my life. It wasn't just the character I loved, although Holmes is unquestionably the father of all modern detectives. Nor was it the mysteries, as memorable as they are. Mainly I was drawn to the world that Holmes and Watson inhabited: the Thames, the growlers rattling over the cobblestones, the gas lamps, the swirling London

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fog. It was as if I'd been invited to move into 221b Baker Street and become a quiet witness to the greatest friendship in literature. How could I refuse?

It struck me from the very start that my job was to be invisible. I tried to hide myself in Doyle's shadow, to imitate his literary tropes and mannerisms, but never, as it were, to intrude. I wrote nothing that he might not have written himself. I mention this only because it worries me to be so very prominent in these pages. But this time round I have no choice. I'm writing exactly what happened.

For once, I wasn't working on any television. *Foyle's War*, my wartime detective series, was no longer in production and there was a question mark over its return. I'd written more than twenty two-hour episodes over a sixteen-year period, almost three times longer than the war itself. I was tired. Worse still, having finally reached 15 August 1945, VJ Day, I had run out of war. I wasn't quite sure what to do next. One of the actors had suggested 'Foyle's Peace'. I didn't think it would work.

I was also between novels. At this time I was known mainly as a children's author although I secretly hoped that *The House of Silk* would change that. In 2000, I'd published the first in a series of adventures about a teenaged spy called Alex Rider which had sold all over the world. I loved writing children's books but I was worried that with every year that passed I was getting further and further away from my audience. I had just turned fifty-five. It was time to move on. As it happened, I was about to travel to the Hay-on-Wye literary festival to talk about *Scorpia Rising*, the tenth and supposedly last book in the series.

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Perhaps the most exciting project on my desk was the first draft of a film screenplay: 'Tintin 2'. To my amazement, I had been hired by Steven Spielberg, who was currently reading it. The film was going to be directed by Peter Jackson. It was quite hard to get my head around the fact that suddenly I was working with the two biggest directors in the world; I wasn't sure how it had happened. I'll admit that I was nervous. I had read the script perhaps a dozen times and was doing my best to convince myself it was moving in the right direction. Were the characters working? Were the action sequences strong enough? Jackson and Spielberg happened to be in London together in a week's time and I was going to meet them and get their notes.

So when my mobile rang and I didn't recognise the number, I wondered if it might be one of them – not, of course, that they would call me personally. An assistant would check it was me and then pass me across. It was about ten o'clock in the morning and I was sitting in my office on the top floor of my flat, reading *The Meaning of Treason*, by Rebecca West, a classic study of life in Britain after the Second World War. I was beginning to think that this might be the right direction for Foyle. Cold War. I would throw him into the world of spies, traitors, communists, atomic scientists. I closed the book and picked up my mobile.

'Tony?' a voice asked.

It certainly wasn't Spielberg. Very few people call me Tony. To be honest, I don't like it. I've always been Anthony or, to some of my friends, Ant.

'Yes?' I said.

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'How are you doing, mate? This is Hawthorne.'

In fact, I'd known who he was before he'd spoken his name. There could be no mistaking those flat vowels, that strangely misplaced accent, part cockney, part northern. Or the word 'mate'.

'Mr Hawthorne,' I said. He had been introduced to me as Daniel but from the very first I had felt uncomfortable using his first name. He never used it himself . . . in fact I never heard anyone else use it either. 'It's nice to hear from you.'

'Yeah. Yeah.' He sounded impatient. 'Look – you got a minute?'

'I'm sorry? What's this about?'

'I was wondering if we could meet. What are you doing this afternoon?'

That, incidentally, was typical of him. He had a sort of myopia whereby the world would arrange itself to his vision of how things should be. He wasn't asking if I could meet him tomorrow or next week. It had to be immediately, according to his needs. As I've explained, I wasn't doing anything very much that afternoon but I wasn't going to tell him that. 'Well, I'm not sure . . .' I began.

'How about three o'clock at that café where we used to go?'

'J&A?'

'That's the one. There's something I need to ask you. I really would appreciate it.'

J&A was in Clerkenwell, a ten-minute walk from where I lived. If he had wanted me to cross London I might have hesitated, but the truth is I was intrigued. 'OK,' I said. 'Three o'clock.'

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'That's great, mate. I'll see you there.'

He rang off. The Tintin script was still on the computer screen in front of me. I closed it down and thought about Hawthorne.

I'd first met him the year before when I was working on a five-part television series which was due to be screened in a few months' time. It was called *Injustice*, a legal drama, starring James Purefoy.

Injustice was inspired by one of those perennial questions screenwriters sometimes ask themselves when they're casting around for a new idea. How can a barrister defend someone when they know they're guilty? The short answer, incidentally, is that they can't. If the client confesses to the crime before the trial, the barrister will refuse to represent him . . . there has to be at least a presumption of innocence. So I came up with a story about an animal rights activist who gleefully confesses to the murder of a child shortly after his barrister – William Travers (Purefoy) – has managed to get him acquitted. As a result, Travers suffers a nervous breakdown and moves to Suffolk. Then, one day, waiting for a train at Ipswich station he happens to see the activist again. A few days later, the activist is himself killed and the question is: was Travers responsible?

The story boiled down to a duel between the barrister and the detective inspector who was investigating him. Travers was a dark character, damaged and quite possibly dangerous, but he was still the hero and the audience had to root for him. So I deliberately set out to create a detective who would be as unpleasant as possible. The audience would find him

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menacing, borderline racist, chippy and aggressive. I based him on Hawthorne.

To be fair, Hawthorne was none of those things. Well, he wasn't racist, anyway. He was, however, extremely annoying to the extent that I used to dread my meetings with him. He and I were complete opposites. I just couldn't make out where he was coming from.

He had been found for me by the production supervisor working on the series. I was told that he'd been a detective inspector with the Metropolitan Police Service in London, working out of the sub-command in Putney. He was a murder specialist with ten years on the force which had come to an abrupt end when he had been kicked out for reasons that weren't made clear. There are a surprising number of ex-policemen helping production companies make police dramas. They provide the little details that make the story ring true and, to be fair, Hawthorne was very good at the job. He had an instinctive understanding of what I needed and what would work on-screen. I remember one example. In an early scene, when my (fictitious) detective is examining a week-old corpse, the crime scene examiner hands him a tub of Vicks VapoRub to smear under his nose. The mentholatum covers the smell. It was Hawthorne who told me that, and if you watch the scene you'll see how that moment somehow makes it come alive.

The first time I saw him was at the production office of Eleventh Hour Films, which was the company making the series. Once we got started, I'd be able to contact him at any time of the day to throw questions at him and would then

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weave the answers into the script. All of this could be done over the telephone. This meeting was really just a formality, to introduce us. When I arrived he was already sitting in the reception area with one leg crossed over the other and his coat folded over his lap. I knew at once that he was the person I had come to meet.

He wasn't a large man. He didn't look particularly threatening. But even that single movement, the way he got to his feet, gave me pause for thought. He had the same silken quality as a panther or a leopard, and there was a strange malevolence in his eyes – they were a soft brown – that seemed to challenge, even to threaten, me. He was about forty years old with hair of an indeterminate colour that was cut very short around the ears and was just beginning to turn grey. He was clean-shaven. His skin was pale. I got the feeling that he might have been very handsome as a child but something had happened to him at some time in his life so that, although he still wasn't ugly, he was curiously unattractive. It was as if he had become a bad photograph of himself. He was smartly dressed in a suit, white shirt and tie, the raincoat now held over his arm. He looked at me with almost exaggerated interest, as if I had somehow surprised him. Even as I came in, I got the feeling that he was emptying me out.

'Hello, Anthony,' he said. 'Nice to meet you.'

How did he even know who I was? There were lots of people coming in and out of the office and nobody had announced me. Nor had I told him my name.

'I'm a great admirer of your work,' he said, in a way that

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told me he'd never read anything I'd written and that actually he didn't care if I knew it.

'Thank you,' I said.

'I've been hearing about this programme you want to make. It sounds really interesting.' Was he deliberately being sarcastic? He managed to look bored even as he spoke the words.

I smiled. 'I'm looking forward to working with you.'

'It'll be fun,' he said.

But it never was.

We spoke on the phone quite often but we also had about half a dozen meetings, mainly at the office or in the courtyard outside J&A (he smoked all the time, sometimes roll-ups but if not, cheap brands like Lambert & Butler or Richmond). I had heard that Hawthorne lived in Essex but I had no idea where. He never talked about himself or his time in the police force and certainly not how it had ended. The production supervisor who had contacted him in the first place told me that he had worked on a number of high-profile murder investigations and had quite a reputation but I couldn't find anything about him on Google. He clearly had a remarkable mind. Although he made it clear that he was no writer himself and showed no interest at all in the series that I was trying to create, he always came up with exactly the right scenarios before I even asked for them. There's another example of his work in the opening scenes. William Travers is defending a black kid who has been framed by the police for the theft of a medal which, they claim, they found in the boy's jacket. But the medal had

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recently been cleaned and, when the boy's pockets are examined, there are no traces of sulphamic acid or ammonia – the most common ingredients in silver polish – proving that it couldn't have been there. All of that was his idea.

I can't deny that he helped me, and yet I slightly dreaded meeting him. He always got straight down to business with almost no small talk. You'd have thought he would have an opinion about something – the weather, the government, the earthquake in Fukushima, the marriage of Prince William. But he never talked about anything except the matter in hand. He drank coffee (black, two sugars) and he smoked but never ate when he was with me, not so much as a biscuit. And he always wore exactly the same clothes. Quite honestly, I could have been looking at the same photograph of him every time he came in. He was as unchanging as that.

And yet here's the funny thing. He seemed to know an awful lot about me. I'd been out drinking the night before. My assistant was ill. I'd spent the whole weekend writing. I didn't need to tell him these things. He told me! I used to wonder if he'd been talking to someone in the office but the information he came up with was completely random and seemed spontaneous. I never quite worked him out.

The biggest mistake I made was to show him the second draft of the script. I usually write about a dozen drafts before an episode is filmed. I get notes from the producer, from the broadcaster (ITV in this case), from my agent – and later on from the director and the star. It's a collaborative process although one that can sometimes leave me overwhelmed. Won't the bloody thing ever be right? But it works so long

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as I feel that the project is moving forward, that each draft is better than the one before. There has to be a certain amount of give and take and there's some comfort in the fact that, at the end of the day, everyone involved is trying to make the script more effective.

Hawthorne didn't understand this. He was like a brick wall and once he'd decided that something was wrong, nothing was going to get past him. There was a scene I'd written where my detective meets his senior officer, a chief superintendent. This is shortly after the dead body of the animal rights activist has been found in a remote farmhouse. The CS invites him to sit down and the detective replies, 'I'll stand if you don't mind, sir.' It was a tiny point. I was just trying to show that my character was a man who had problems with authority, but Hawthorne wouldn't have any of it.

'That wouldn't happen,' he said, flatly. We were sitting outside a Starbucks – I forget exactly where – with the script on a table between us. As usual, he was wearing a suit and tie. He was smoking his last cigarette, using the empty packet as an ashtray.

'Why not?'

'Because if your governor tells you to sit down, you sit down.'

'He does sit down.'

'Yeah. But he argues about it first. What's the fucking point? He just makes himself look stupid.'

Hawthorne swore all the time, by the way. If I was going to replicate his language exactly, I'd be writing the f-word every other line.

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I tried to explain. 'The actors will understand what I'm trying to get at,' I said. 'It's just a detail. It introduces the scene but it's a key to how the two men relate to each other.'

'But it's not true, Tony. It's a load of cobblers.'

I tried to explain to him that there are many different sorts of truth and that television truth might have very little connection with real life. I argued that our understanding of policemen, doctors, nurses . . . even criminals is largely inspired by what we see on the screen, not the other way round. But Hawthorne had made up his mind. He had helped me with the script but now that he was reading it he didn't believe it and so he didn't like it. We argued about everything, every scene which involved the police. All he saw was the paperwork, the uniforms, the anglepoise lamps. He couldn't find his way to the story.

I was quite relieved when all five scripts were written and handed in and I no longer had to deal with him. When there were further queries I got the production office to email him. We shot the series in Suffolk and in London. The part of the detective was played by a brilliant actor, Charlie Creed-Miles, and the funny thing was that, physically, he was remarkably similar to Hawthorne. But it didn't end there. Hawthorne had got under my skin and, quite deliberately, I'd put a lot of his darker side into the character. I'd also given him a very similar name. From Daniel to Mark: one biblical character to another. And Wenborn instead of Hawthorne. This is something I often do. When I killed him off at the end of Episode Four, it made me smile.

I was curious to know what he wanted but at the same

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time I had a vague sense of misgiving as I strolled down to the café that afternoon. Hawthorne did not belong to my world and frankly I had no need for him just then. On the other hand, I hadn't had lunch and, as it happens, J&A serve the best cakes in London. They're in a little alleyway, just off the Clerkenwell Road, and because they're tucked away they're usually not too busy. Hawthorne was waiting for me outside, sitting at a table with a coffee and a cigarette. He was wearing exactly the same clothes as the last time I'd seen him: the same suit, tie and raincoat. He looked up as I arrived, and nodded – which was about all I was going to get by way of a greeting.

'How's the programme?' he asked.

'You should have come to the cast and crew screening,' I said. We'd taken over a hotel in London and shown the first two episodes. Hawthorne had been invited.

'I was busy,' he replied.

A waitress came out and I ordered tea and a slice of Victoria sponge. I know I shouldn't eat stuff like that but you try spending eight hours a day on your own. I used to smoke between chapters but gave up thirty years ago. Cake's probably just as bad.

'How are you?' I asked.

He shrugged. 'Can't complain.' He glanced at me. 'You been in the country?'

As it happened, I'd got back from Suffolk that very morning. My wife and I had just been there for a couple of days. 'Yes,' I said, warily.

'And you got a new puppy!'

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I looked at him curiously. This was absolutely typical of him. I hadn't told anyone that I'd been out of London. I certainly hadn't tweeted about it. As for the puppy, it belonged to our neighbours. We'd been looking after it while they were away. 'How do you know all that?' I asked.

'It was just an educated guess.' He waved my question aside. 'I was hoping you could help me.'

'How?'

'I want you to write about me.'

Every time I met him, Hawthorne had a way of surprising me. You know where you are with most people. You form a relationship, you get to know them, and after that the rules are more or less set. But it was never like that with him. He had this strange, mercurial quality. Just when I thought I knew where we were going, he would somehow prove me wrong.

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'I want you to write a book about me.'

'Why would I want to do that?'

'For money.'

'You want to pay me?'

'No. I thought we'd go fifty-fifty.'

A couple of people came and sat down at the table next to us. I used the moment, as they made their way past, to work out what to say. I was nervous about turning Hawthorne down. That said, I already knew – I'd known instantly – that was exactly what I was going to do.

'I don't understand,' I said. 'What sort of book are you talking about?'

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Hawthorne gazed at me with those muddy, choirboy eyes. 'Let me explain it to you,' he said, as if it were perfectly obvious. 'You know I do a bit of work here and there for TV, that sort of stuff. You probably heard that I got kicked out of the Met. Well, that's their loss – and I don't want to go into all that. The thing is, I do a bit of consultancy too. For the police. It's unofficial. They use me when something unusual happens. Most cases are pretty straightforward but sometimes they aren't. When something's outside their everyday experience, that's when they come to me.'

'Seriously?' I found it hard to believe.

'That's how it is with the modern police these days. They've made so many cutbacks, there's no-one left to do the job. You've heard of Group 4 and Serco? They're a bunch of tossers but they're in and out all the time. They've sent in investigators that couldn't find their way out of a paper bag. And that's not all. We used to have a big laboratory down at Lambeth – we'd send down blood samples and stuff like that – but they sold it off and now they use private companies. Takes twice as long and costs twice as much but that doesn't seem to bother them. Same with me. I'm an external resource.'

He paused as if to be sure that I was following him. I nodded. He lit a cigarette and went on.

'I do well enough out of it. I get a daily rate plus expenses and all that. But the thing is, you see – and to be honest, I don't like to mention this – I'm a bit short. There just aren't enough people getting murdered. And when I met you on that TV show of yours and heard that you write books, I had this

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idea that actually we could help each other. Fifty-fifty. I get sent some really interesting stuff. You can write about me.'

'But I hardly know you,' I said.

'You'll get to know me. I've got a case on at the moment, as a matter of fact. It's early days but I think it could be right up your street.'

The waitress arrived with my cake and tea but now I wished I hadn't ordered them. I just wanted to get home.

'Why do you think anyone would want to read about you?' I asked.

'I'm a detective. People like reading about detectives.'

'But you're not a proper detective. You got fired. Why did you get fired, by the way?'

'I don't want to talk about that.'

'Well, if I was going to write about you, you'd have to tell me. I'd have to know where you live, whether you're married or not, what you have for breakfast, what you do on your day off. That's why people read murder stories.'

'Is that what you think?'

'Yes!'

He shook his head. 'I don't agree. The word is murder. That's what matters.'

'Look – I'm really sorry.' I tried to break it gently. 'It's a good idea and I'm sure you've got a really interesting case but I'm afraid I'm far too busy. Anyway, it's not what I do. I write about fictional detectives. I've just finished a story about Sherlock Holmes. I used to do *Poirot* and *Midsomer Murders*. I'm a fiction writer. You need someone who writes true crime.'

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'What's the difference?'

'All the difference in the world. I'm in control of my stories. I like to know what I'm writing about. Creating the crimes and the clues and all the rest of it is half the fun. If I were to follow you around, just writing down what you saw and what you said, what would that make me? I'm sorry. I'm not interested.'

He glanced at me over the tip of his cigarette. He didn't look surprised or offended, as if he'd known that was what I was going to say. 'I reckon you could sell a ton of copies,' he remarked. 'And it would be easy for you. I'd tell you everything you need to know. Don't you want to hear what I'm working on?' I didn't – but he went on before I could stop him. 'A woman walks into a funeral parlour, just the other side of London, in South Kensington. She's arranged her own funeral, right down to the last detail. And that same day, six hours later, someone murders her . . . goes into her house and strangles her. That's a bit unusual, wouldn't you say?'

'Who was she?' I asked.

'Her name doesn't matter just for now. But she was rich. She's got a famous son. And here's another thing. As far as we can see, she didn't have an enemy in the world. Everybody liked her. That's why I got called in. None of it makes any sense.'

For a brief moment, I was tempted.

The hardest part of writing murder stories is thinking up the plots and at that particular moment I didn't have any more in my head. After all, there are only so many reasons why anyone wants to kill someone else. You do it because

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you want something from them: their money, their wife, their job. You do it because you're afraid of them. They know something about you and perhaps they're threatening you. You kill them out of revenge because of something they knowingly or unknowingly did to you. Or, I suppose, you kill them by accident. After twenty-two episodes of *Foyle's War*, I'd pretty much covered every variation.

And then there was the question of research. If I decide that the killer is going to be, say, a hotel chef, then I have to create his world. I have to visit the hotel. I have to understand the catering business. Making him believable means a lot of hard work and he's only the first of twenty or thirty characters I have to invent, all of them lurking somewhere inside my head. I have to understand police procedure: fingerprints, forensic science, DNA . . . all the rest of it. It can be months before I write the first word. I was tired. I wasn't sure I had the stamina to begin another book so soon after finishing *The House of Silk*.

Effectively, Hawthorne was offering me a short cut. He was giving me the whole thing on a plate. And he was right. The case did sound interesting. A woman walks into a funeral parlour. It was actually quite a good opening. I could already see the first chapter. Spring sunshine. A smart area of town. A woman crosses the road . . .

It was still unthinkable.

'How did you know?' I asked suddenly.

'What?'

'Just now. You told me I'd been in the country and you said I'd got a puppy. Who told you that?'

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'Nobody told me.'

'Then how did you know?'

He scowled – as if he didn't want to tell me. But at the same time he was trying to get something out of me and so, briefly, I had the upper hand. 'There's sand stuck in the tread of your shoes,' he said. 'I saw it when you crossed your leg. So either you've walked across a building site or you've been on the coast. I heard you got a place in Orford, so I suppose you must have been there.'

'And the puppy?'

'There's a paw-print on your jeans. Just below the knee.'

I examined the material. Sure enough, it was there, so faint that I wouldn't have noticed it. But he had.

'Wait a minute,' I said. 'How did you know it was a puppy? It could have been a breed of small dog. And for that matter, how do you know I didn't just meet it in the street?'

He looked at me sadly. 'Someone's sat down and chewed your left shoelace,' he said. 'I don't suppose that was you.'

I didn't look. I have to admit I was impressed. But at the same time I was annoyed that I hadn't worked it out for myself. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'It's certainly an interesting case from the sound of what you say and I'm sure you could find a writer who would do it for you. But it's like I said. You need to ask a journalist or someone like that. Even if I wanted to do it, I can't. I'm working on other things.'

I wondered how he would respond. Again, he wrong-footed me. He just shrugged. 'Yeah. All right. It was just a thought.' He got to his feet, his hand reaching towards his trouser pocket. 'Do you want me to get that?'

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He meant the tea and cake. 'No. It's all right. I'll pay,' I said.

'I had a coffee.'

'I'll get that too.'

'Well, if you change your mind, you know where to reach me.'

'Yes. Of course. I can talk to my literary agent, if you like. She might be able to recommend someone who can help.'

'No. Don't worry. I'll find someone.' He turned round and walked away.

I ate the cake. It was a shame to waste it. Then I went back home and spent the rest of the afternoon reading. I tried not to think about Hawthorne but I couldn't get him out of my mind.

When you're a full-time writer, one of the hardest things to do is to turn down work. You're slamming a door which may not open again and there's always the fear of what you may have missed on the other side. Years ago, a producer rang me to ask if I might be interested in working on a musical based on the songs of a Swedish pop group. I turned her down – which is why I'm not on the posters (and have enjoyed none of the royalties) of *Mamma Mia!* I don't have any regrets, incidentally. There's no saying the show would have been such a success if I had ended up writing it. But it just shows the level of insecurity that most writers live with day by day. A bizarre crime that happened to be true. A woman walks into a funeral parlour. Hawthorne, an odd, complicated but genuinely brilliant detective, gets called in

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as some sort of consultant. Had I made another mistake, refusing his offer? I picked up my book and went back to work.

Two days later, I was in Hay-on-Wye.

It's funny how many literary festivals there are all over the world. There are some writers I know who never actually write any more; they simply spend their time travelling from one shindig to the next. I've often wondered how I would have managed if I'd been born with a stammer or chronic shyness. The modern writer has to be able to perform, often to a huge audience. It's almost like being a stand-up comedian except that the questions never change and you always end up telling the same jokes.

Whether it's crime in Harrogate, children's books in Bath, science fiction in Glasgow or poetry in Aldeburgh, it feels as if there's a literary festival in every city in the UK, and yet Hay, which takes place in a disturbingly muddy field on the edge of a tiny market town, has become one of the most pre-eminent. People come from miles around and over the years speakers have included two US presidents, several Great Train Robbers and J. K. Rowling. I was excited to be there, talking to about five hundred children in a large tent. As usual, there was a scattering of adults too. People who know my television writing will often come to my events and will happily sit through forty minutes of Alex Rider in order to talk about *Foyle's War*.

The session had gone well. The children had been lively and had asked some good questions. I'd managed to get in

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some stuff about *Foyle*. I was almost exactly sixty minutes in and had received a signal to close things down when something rather strange happened.

There was a woman, sitting in the front row. At first, I'd taken her for a teacher or perhaps a librarian. She was very ordinary-looking, about forty, round-faced with long, fair hair and glasses dangling from a chain around her neck. I'd noticed her because she seemed to be on her own and also because she didn't seem particularly interested in anything I had to say. She hadn't laughed at any of my jokes. I was afraid she might be a journalist. Newspapers often send reporters to author talks these days and any joke you make, any unguarded comment, may be quoted out of context and used against you. So I was on my guard when she put up her hand and one of the attendants handed her the roving mike.

'I was wondering,' she said. 'Why is it that you always write fantasy? Why don't you write anything real?'

Most of the questions that I've been asked at literary festivals, I've been asked many times before. Where do my ideas come from? Which are my favourite characters? How long does it take to write a book? Nobody had ever asked me this and I was a little put out. Her tone wasn't offensive but there was still something in what she'd asked that rankled.

'*Foyle's War* is real,' I replied. 'Every episode is based on true stories.'

I was about to go on to explain how much research I did, that I had spent the whole of the last week reading about

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