

LET DEATH BEGIN

PROLOGUE

A YEAR AGO

He didn't know today was the day someone was going to kill him.

From the outside the police station is a mass of glass and concrete. Monument to a modern architectural desire to be individualistic, to be different, rather than an attempt to create a building that will blend in with its surroundings.

Detective Sergeant James Price often thought the building was a mess rather than a mass. He generally has the thought each time he walks up the short flight of stone steps to the smoked glass front doors that make an irritating swishing noise as they both open and close.

James wouldn't voice his thoughts, and certainly not to his Detective Chief Inspector. Joe Royce was a good man, and James considers he has a pretty good personal relationship with the older man, but there are lines that he knows not to cross. Joe is the boss and there is never any mistaking that. Besides, effective detective though he is, there have been enough times when his boss has covered his back with his superiors.

Inside the station James looks around him and thinks how quiet it is. There has been a ram raid on a cash and carry in Hertford, and that has taken quite a few members of the team out. There are a of couple of DC's who look bored as they file through computer records looking for profile matches to a recent spate of sexual assaults near a night club. It isn't James' case but if it was he'd have looked at the security team first. The bouncers were often a dubious lot who considered drunk and vulnerable young women easy game, perks of the job.

James is waiting on a call. One of his cases is a major robbery involving a Hatton Garden diamond company. The theft was huge and James has a lead that he has been told might lead to the man who planned and organised it. Major organised crime was on the increase – when was it any different James and his colleagues moaned. It is usual to use informants but this one is different. This is a new source who claims the name he will give James will open up a whole can of worms that he should think twice about using.

James is used to sailing close to the wind. His last appraisal report spoke of "...gets results and he is honest, but several of his colleagues have called him a maverick." One or two of his other appraisals have mentioned his tendency to act first and think afterwards. As Joe Royce succinctly put it – 'Don't shit 'til your trousers are down, boy.'

James is typing out a report when his mobile buzzes. He glances at the screen and sees it is an unknown number. He presses the button and holds the phone to his ear.

'DS Price.'

'Are you on your own?'

James looks around the all but deserted office. 'May as well be.'

'The meeting I mentioned. It's today.'

'Where and when?'

James scribbles down the address. It's about twenty minutes away.

'I hope you've got that.' The connection was broken.

James stands and grabs his jacket from the back of his chair. He glances towards Joe Royce's office but he can see it's empty. Joe, like the others, is in Hertford or out elsewhere.

James should report the call. He should co-ordinate back up. He should go in as part of a team.

He signs out his gun and heads down to the underground car park.

It's a bright sunny day. A day for beaches and sitting in the garden, not for chasing villains. James has waited for this lead for days and now it's come through he can't deny he is excited. It's an excitement he only gets from the job. Much of his work is repetitive and even boring, but when the adrenaline kicks in, there is no feeling like it.

He picks up his mobile phone from the cup holder. For a moment he almost dials Joe Royce's number but something stops him. He tells himself that he'll go to the address and take a look. There is plenty of time to call in reinforcements. The lead might not amount to anything and then no one would thank him for the waste of man power and hours. No, better to proceed, with caution, and make sure this is a genuine meeting.

He has his suspicions about who will be there. It is one of two major criminals that has carried out the robbery, he's certain of it, one of several recent crimes with a similar modus operandi. Two big time crooks have all but dominated London crime for decades, though foreign gangs are beginning to make their mark.

James is convinced it is either Frank Dyson or Harry Moss that is behind the recent armed robberies. The crimes were almost a throwback to the glory days of high street crime. These days much of the real money is made behind the scenes, high tech stuff.

He pulls off the A1 motorway in Hertfordshire and after a couple of wrong turns he finds a narrow service road that leads into an industrial estate on the perimeter of Stevenage. Some of the small factories and warehouses are clearly disused but some look as if they might still be functioning.

He glances at the piece of paper with the address he's been given. It's up ahead on the right. The building is large, several thousand square feet, and tall. A large factory warehouse. The walls are pale green concrete. Every window is boarded with exterior quality plywood, and the name board is barely legible.

James parks out of direct sight of the warehouse and climbs from the car. The tarmac surrounding the building is in a bad state. The whole estate has a rundown, nearly extinct atmosphere about it, and this large beast is the final dinosaur.

The main door is covered by the same strong plywood that boards the windows, and there is a steel centre bar, secured to a padlock.

James pulls out his gun and checks it is ready. He walks cautiously around the side of the building, past the kind of debris that empty and abandoned buildings seem to attract. A chain link fence surrounds the place, but it's easy for him to vault over, once he's at the back of the building.

A ramp leads up to a raised walkway, which leads up to the double doors that would once have been the busy loading bay. There is another door to the side of those, and with some gentle persuasion, James manages to get it open so he can go inside.

The air is stale, heavy with disuse, old oil, and a ghost stench of failure. There is a short passageway with doors that lead to old offices. At the end of the passage is a door that gives entrance to the factory floor. James pushes it open.

There is some sunlight in here, pouring like redemption through holes in the roof. The factory area is huge. It is like a vast industrial desert. Standing like forlorn trees are three stainless steel cylindrical vats, and running around them are a series of linked catwalks.

Overhead is another network of walkways, that lead from the vats to a small gallery.

James runs to the cover of the central vat. There were no other cars outside, none he has seen anyway. That didn't mean there is no one else here.

He listens. Nothing. No sounds, no echoes. Time to wait.

The first shot takes him across the top of his thigh. The pain is immediate and he hears himself cry out.

He stumbles, falls backwards onto the damp concrete floor. Water drips from a fractured pipe around the huge vats and it soaks into his trousers, and meets the blood that is beginning to pump out from his leg.

He can't see who has fired the shot but when he struggles to his knees he fires off a couple of shots in the general direction. Then he hears a man's voice, laughing.

James gets to his feet and peers round at the walkways above his head. Then he sees him. The shooter. He can't tell if it's a large man or not because he is distracted by just one thing. The man wears a clown's mask on his face. Then the man disappears.

When the clown's face appears again he fires at it but misses.

He fumbles for his mobile phone. It's got a weak signal and he presses buttons, tries to summon help.

The second time he is hit the bullet enters his shoulder, spins him round,

'Behind you.'

He hears footsteps on the metal catwalk, but the pain in his leg and shoulder is intense. He can't operate the hand that holds his gun. He transfers it to his left hand and fires off a couple of shots at random.

He must have blacked out. The next thing he can see is the clown, only a few feet away, gun in hand.

'Bye bye, James.'

The voice sounds familiar. If only he had more time he knows he can work out who it is, who it is that wants him dead. He doesn't have the chance. The clown fires a final shot.

The pain in his head is so fierce he can't breathe. It feels like an eternity as the bullet ricochets inside his skull.

Then it all goes black and he falls.