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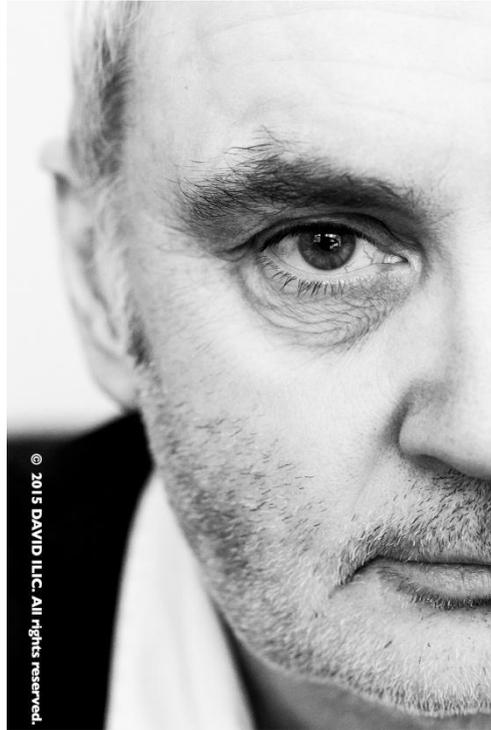
The DCI Jones Casebook:

Sean Freeman

“Diamonds are nothing more than compressed carbon.”

Kerry J Donovan

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Dedication:

I'd like to send my particular thanks to Michaela Miles for her unstinting help throughout this project.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1.

Chapter 2.

Chapter 3.

Eighteen Months Ago

Spring

Opening Gambit

Chapter 1.

Tuesday 3rd March

Digby Bertrand ‘DB’ Parrish rapped the butt of his Montblanc on the table to silence the boardroom and turned to the final page on the agenda: Any Other Business.

“‘Arry. Found anyone yet?”

Human Resources Director, Harry Bryce—slim bordering on scrawny, with a huge overbite and Toby jug ears—wilted under the scrutiny. He opened his mouth but didn’t answer.

“Well?” Parrish kept his voice low. He learned long ago that a quiet voice in a big room could travel a long way if you carried a big stick. In Hutch, his ever-present pit-bull, he had a stick big enough to silence a roar.

Six directors of *Parrish Enterprises Ltd*—all competent, all men—stared at Bryce, their expressions ranging from studious concentration to relief. Each had been on the receiving end of Parrish’s interrogations and he liked to keep them sharp.

“Hutch. Am I speaking Russian?”

The blue-eyed giant with the muddy-blond hair rose from his seat in the corner of the soundproofed, electronically secure room and positioned himself at Parrish’s right hand. He towered over the table.

“No, Mr Parrish, you spoke English,” Hutch said, matching Parrish’s volume. “I could understand you perfectly.”

“So why ain’t he answering my questions, d’you think?”

“No idea, sir. Perhaps he’s deaf.” Hutch curled his fingers into fists, cracking his knuckles.

The hairs on the back of Parrish’s neck tingled at the narrow-eyed dread the noise induced in Bryce and the others. “Yeah, maybe that’s it. He’s gone fucking deaf.” Parrish jabbed the Montblanc towards Bryce. “‘Arry?”

“Yes, Mr Parrish?” Bryce’s voice cracked. He kept his eyes fixed on the pen.

“You deaf?”

“No, sir.”

Parrish looked up at Hutch, the only person he’d allow stand that close to him outside of a bedroom or a barber’s shop. “See, Hutch. He ain’t mutton.”

Hutch nodded. “I have to agree with you, Mr Parrish. There doesn’t appear to be much wrong with Mr Bryce’s auditory sense.”

“Yeah, right, but if that’s the case, why ain’t he answering?”

“Sorry, Mr Parrish,” Bryce mumbled. “I was trying to put my thoughts in order.”

“You ought to come to the boardroom prepared.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry.”

“Get on with it.”

Bryce stiffened his backbone. “We’ve tried hiring from within the organisation, but there’s no one as fits the bill, see. They’re either useless, past their sell-by date, or banged up. I trawled the other firms but none of the applicants was good enough. Not even close.”

“Fuck,” Parrish said. “Vacancy’s been open nearly a month. I want someone in place before I have to pass on another job. If I’d known it would take this long I might’ve given that piece of shit a reprieve.” Parrish nodded toward a vacant chair, the back of which rested against the table’s edge.

The directors looked anywhere but at the empty space.

Bryce found his voice again. “It’s not easy finding an applicant with that particular skill set, Mr Parrish. Cracksmen are a dying breed.” He flicked a glance at the empty chair, blanched, and soldiered on. “These days it’s all hacking, electronic locks, and money transfers...”

Parrish threw the Montblanc. Bryce ducked too late and squeaked as the fountain pen hit him below his left eye and bounced onto the tabletop.

“Don’t fucking tell me what ain’t easy, shit-for-brains!” Parrish yelled. “Human Resources is your responsibility. Or are you tellin’ me you ain’t up to it no more?”

Parrish’s gaze returned to the empty chair and wondered whether Bryce had pissed himself yet.

“N-no, Mr Parrish. It’s not that, see. I contacted the Locksmiths Guild last week but it took them an age to get back to me.”

“Why?”

“I-I don’t know. It took them a while to find the information.”

“Give Hutch the name of the tosser what dragged his heels. Hutch has ways of teaching people not to keep me waiting. Don’t ya, Hutch.”

The blond giant dipped his chin in agreement.

“Yes, Mr Parrish,” Bryce said. “All the relevant names will be in the personnel report.”

“So, what they say?” Parrish asked.

“Turns out they *do* have a bloke on their books who meets the criteria.” Bryce picked up the Montblanc and stretched to place it on the table in front of Parrish. His mouth turned up at the edges in a weak smile. “It’s just that I didn’t want to say nothing until we’d found him.”

“What you mean, ‘found him’? Where is he? Gone on his ‘olidays?”

Bryce shook his head. His shoulders twitched into a shrug. “That’s just it, Mr Parrish. Nobody knows. The Guild lost track of him a year or so back. He got into financial bother and they dumped him from their system.”

“Financial bother?” Parrish frowned. “Is he inside too?”

“No, sir. Nothing criminal. Bankruptcy. His business failed and he closed up shop and moved away.”

“Where from?”

“Redditch.”

“Where?”

Hutch leaned close and spoke. “It’s a toilet south of Birmingham, just off the M42.”

“How comes I’m only learning this now?” Parrish picked up the Montblanc and twiddled it between thumb and forefinger.

“My contact at the Guild only called late last night, Mr Parrish. One of my girls is working up a file on the bloke. I told her to call me when she prints it off.”

Parrish dropped the pen. “Give the bitch a bell. Tell her to pull her finger out her fanny and get me that file.”

Bryce pulled out his mobile.

“What’s this geezer’s name?” Parrish asked.

“Freeman, sir. Sean Freeman.” Bryce bowed his head and dialled.

“Right,” said Parrish. “I want him found—yesterday. Call in some favours from our favourite plods. This Freeman sort’s gotta be somewhere. Am I right?”

Seven directors nodded. Seven voices chimed out in unison, “Yes, Mr Parrish.”

Parrish waited a second before exploding. “Well? Why you all still sitting on your arses? Go find me Sean Freeman!”

Chapter 2.

Thursday 5th March

Sean Freeman didn't smile, sing, or whistle—it wouldn't have been professional—but he felt good. Were he anywhere but at work he might have launched into a street dance, if he could street dance.

He removed the brass key-blank he'd spent the past two hours roughing out from the rubber-jawed vice, and held it under the doughnut-shaped magnifying lamp. A fine burr clung to the inner groove of the upper shaft. He wiped a piece of emery paper over the edge and blew. Tiny pieces of swarf fell to the velvet cloth lining his workbench.

He compared the blank's double-shafted profile with the insurance photograph from which he worked. They matched perfectly, as he knew they would. The top shaft complete—bar cutting the notches and ridges—he turned his attention to the lower shaft.

A shadow fell across the bench.

Fuck, here we go.

The ignorant old sod should have known better than to stand over him while he worked. Freeman hated when Archibald did that. He tried to ignore the man's hovering presence.

Archibald coughed. "Mr Freeman?"

"Yes, sir?" he answered, without lifting his eyes from the task.

The groove on the lower shaft's outer face was too shallow and needed enlargement. When that was finished he could begin work cutting the twenty-four teeth—six on each edge of each shaft. Satisfied with the basic configuration, Freeman returned the key-blank to the vice before pushing away the lamp. He met Archibald's calculating glower and waited.

The senior locksmith pulled back the sleeve of his Armani suit and pointed at the blue-faced Tag Heuer Monaco adorning a fleshy wrist. "You've been working on that same key for nearly two hours. How long are you going to be?" He tapped the glass face of the watch. "Time is money, Mr Freeman. Why aren't you using the key-copier?"

Freeman paused and bit back his gut response. He'd been marking time at *Archibald & Daughter, Locksmiths and Jewellers of Golders Green*, but if things worked as planned, he wouldn't be there much longer. He'd taken the underpaid job in this specific locksmith's shop for a reason, and the key-blank in his vice made the humiliation worthwhile.

"Mr Archibald," he said, pointing to the insurance photo and then lifting the damaged original key that rested on the bench next to the vice. "The customer had an accident with the original." Freeman pushed the damaged key under Archibald's bulbous nose. "Some moron tried to straighten it with a pair of pliers and sheared off the lower shaft. Criminal treating something as beautiful as this as though it opened a bloody padlock."

Archibald reached into his waistcoat pocket for his reading glasses. "Why make all that fuss over a single key?"

"Take a closer look, sir." Freeman pointed at the lamp, leaned away from his workspace, and waited for the light of knowledge to blind the ignorant old fossil.

Archibald polished the lenses of his half-moon glasses and perched them on his shiny nose. He took the damaged key and squinted to read the letters and numbers etched into an extra-large head in the shape of the Ace of Spades. Piggy eyes opened wide. "No. Surely not," he said, grabbing Freeman's work lamp and angling the light to bring the engraving into clearer focus. "My God. A Monarch 1908!"

"Yes, Mr Archibald. It's the real thing," Freeman said, failing to keep the excitement from his voice.

Archibald's expression hardened and his jaw muscles worked as though chewing on a piece of gristle. He shoved the magnifying light away and fixed Freeman with a cold glare. "We have the original key to a Miles & Archer, Monarch 1908 safe on the premises and you don't see fit to tell me? For God's sake man, as far as anyone knows, the only Monarch 1908 in the UK is in the vault at Buckingham Palace!" He paused and covered his mouth with a trembling hand. "My word, do you think?"

Archibald's eyes glazed over. Freeman guessed he was wondering what would happen to the profile of his little shop if he had a *Royal Warrant of Approval* displayed above the front door. Freeman could almost hear the words *By Appointment to Her Majesty* rattling around inside Archibald's head.

Freeman understood the man's shocked reaction; it mirrored his own when he first saw the key that opened something the locksmith industry considered the pinnacle of pre-World War One engineering. "Sorry sir, but

you were at the bank when the customer arrived. He said the job was urgent and he needed it completed by closing time. You know what I'm like when working. Get lost inside the job."

Freeman tried a disarming grin. He knew it wouldn't work, but didn't mind wasting it. Today, he had smiles to spare. He decided to twist the knife a little more. "If you're worried about the bill, Mr Parrish didn't look like he was short of a few quid. Pulled up outside in a chauffeur-driven Bentley Flying Spur."

Colour drained from Archibald's face and his skin turned the colour and texture of old putty. He placed a steadying hand on Freeman's bench. Freeman hoped the man didn't keel over; he wouldn't want to give the wet-lipped old bastard mouth-to-mouth.

"Are you okay, Mr Archibald?"

"Mr Parrish was here? Digby Parrish?"

Freeman shrugged. "Didn't give his first name, but the key's letter of provenance had him as DB Parrish. Why? Do you know him?"

Duh, look at him squirm, Sean. Course he knows Parrish.

The shop's proximity to Parrish's base of operations was the reason Freeman applied to work for Archibald in the first place. Freeman's day couldn't get much better than this.

"Fuck's sake, man," Archibald shouted, swearing for the first time since Freeman met him. "The whole of North London knows Digby Parrish."

"I'm from Redditch, sir," Freeman said, eyes wide and innocent. "It's nowhere near London."

Archibald's lower lip trembled. "Did he ask for me?"

"Who? Mr Parrish?"

Winding up the old man could be such fun.

Colour returned to Archibald's face, a puce stain spread up from loose neck flaps and rushed all the way to the top of his shiny pate. "Yes. Who else are we talking about, man?"

"Sorry, sir, but no he didn't ask for you. Turned up a couple of minutes after you left and handed over the damaged key. Didn't say much, apart from that he'd be back at closing time. Seemed to know what time we closed. Of course, I had start from scratch as we don't have a blank Monarch lying around."

Archibald tried to snap his fingers, but they sweated so much they only managed a damp slap. He waved them at Freeman's bench. "The photo?"

"The insurer's scaled image of the original key. The bittings code is on the back. That and the damaged original are all I need to make the replacement."

"Mr Parrish was happy to leave *you* with the insurance blueprint?" The arrogant prick stared down his nose.

Freeman ignored the slight; his good mood trumped Archibald's snide bitching. "Yes, sir. In fact, I had the impression he wanted *me* to make it rather than you. Any idea why?"

"None," he answered, but his hushed tone smacked of immense relief, and his shifty eyes gave lie to the answer.

"Mr Parrish knew about the shop's Locksmiths Guild certification and I insisted he show me the insurance company's seal of ownership for the key. I asked for Mr Parrish's credentials too."

Archibald shuddered. "Oh, God," he sighed, and leaned even more heavily against the bench; it creaked but withstood the load. "You questioned Digby Parrish?"

"Course I did. You wouldn't expect me to take a commission for a Monarch key without checking the client's credentials, would you? That would be breaking the law." Freeman nearly laughed; he hadn't had so much fun in the six weeks he'd been working for Archibald. After the years he'd suffered, he took full advantage of any little pleasure he could find, whether it made him feel guilty later or not.

"You don't need to tell me the rules of our industry, Freeman," Archibald snapped. "But to question DB Parrish, oh God."

"Who is this Parrish bloke?" Freeman asked, loving the effect the man's name was having on his boss. "I mean, he appeared legit. He even had the original receipt for the safe. Fantastic piece of calligraphy, by the way. Work of art. I'd love to have taken a copy, but well, you know. Didn't seem proper to ask."

Archibald tried to push himself away from the bench, but his arms shook so much he couldn't manage the task.

"You okay, Mr Archibald? You don't look well. Want some water?"

"Yes, please."

Freeman strolled to the office at the back of the shop and grabbed a bottle of Buxton from the fridge. By the time he returned, Archibald had taken his seat behind the till and sat round-shouldered, elbows on the counter, head in hands. He took the water, cracked open the top with trembling fingers, and took a deep swallow. Water dribbled down his chins. He pulled a starched white handkerchief from his waistcoat and dabbed them dry.

“So, who is this Parrish bloke?”

“A very bad man, Freeman.” Archibald kept his voice low, eyes staring through the window as though in fear that the man would arrive early for his property. “You’re doing a good job? Please say you’re doing a good job.” His eyes pleaded and he used the handkerchief to wipe sweat from his brow.

Freeman stood up straight. “Mr Archibald, I’m more than capable of fabricating a key when I have maker’s blueprints, the bittings code, *and* the original to work from, even though it’s in that state.” He hitched a thumb towards his vice. “Care to take a look at my work?”

Archibald shook his head. “Absolutely not. Don’t even want to touch the bloody thing, but I have to, I suppose.”

He shuffled back to Freeman’s bench and examined his work.

“Before you say it, I know the inner groove on the lower shaft needs work. I was just about to do that when you interrupted me.”

“Don’t be so damned impertinent, boy.”

“Yes, sir,” Freeman said, managing to sound contrite. “Sorry.”

Freeman smiled inwardly; the man’s outward show of arrogance was just that—a show.

While Archibald examined the key, Freeman turned his back and studied the people filing past the shop front. *Archibald & Daughter* didn’t attract the mass-market punter. This emporium had pretensions. It was less H. Samuel and more Harrods Wannabe. Still, Freeman hadn’t applied for the job here for its mass-market appeal, he’d chosen it with expectations of this very day.

“Hmmm.” Archibald waggled his head. His pate glistened under the shop’s subdued lighting. “Good. In fact, excellent. So far. Make sure the finished article’s perfect.”

Freeman’s jaw slackened. To date, Archibald had never passed his work as acceptable without pointing to some imagined flaw. “Thank you, Mr Archibald.” He tried to hide the sarcasm.

“Now, finish up before Mr Parrish returns. Closing time you say?”

“That’s right. Should be plenty of time to make it perfect.”

“Which it must be.”

Parrish’s arrival that morning was exactly what Freeman had been hoping for since starting at the shop. Working on something so damned intricate was ace, and the fact that DB Parrish had made the approach in person, made the treat doubly important. He bent to the task and tried to block out the image of Archibald slumped in the corner behind the till, staring at the door through dread-filled eyes.

They had only the one customer all day.

#

The rumble of early evening traffic drowned out the ticking of display clocks. Freeman finished the key to his satisfaction by four-thirty and spent the subsequent minutes watching the clocks, the passers-by, and the flickering sun poking through the scudding cloud.

Archibald shot Freeman another pleading look. “Are you sure it’s up to snuff?” he asked for the fifth time.

“Yes, Mr Archibald,” he answered, trying not to add a sigh. “I stand by my work.”

“You’d better. DB Parrish doesn’t accept failure.”

Freeman wanted to say, ‘Neither do I’, but decided against it; arrogance wasn’t flattering.

As Archibald checked his Tag Heuer once again, the shop bell tinkled its merry, hopeful warning.

Parrish breezed in, ignored Archibald, and strode to Freeman’s bench. An expectant glint shone in blue-grey eyes half-hidden behind designer glasses. As before, the shadow cast by a big man darkened the doorway, but its owner stayed on guard outside.

Archibald’s ‘very bad man’ wore a dark blue pinstripe suit, cut well, and clearly made-to-measure. Middle-aged, lightweight, greying hair cut short but not severe, Parrish was short, very short. With back straight and neck stretched high, he might have tipped a measuring stick at five foot seven—providing he didn’t remove the handmade shoes with the two-inch heels.

Freeman half-rose in greeting, but Parrish waved him back into his seat. “Sit down, son. I ain’t royalty. Finished?” His tone was brusque; the harsh north London twang stood out in sharp contrast to the nicely-tailored suit.

“Yes, sir.” Freeman passed Parrish the key together with a key box containing the damaged original. He threw the switch on his magnifying lamp. It flickered twice before shining a halo onto the bench surface.

Parrish held the key under the light, flipped it over, rubbed the working edges between finger and thumb, and compared it with the original. He asked for the insurance photo—scaled to life size—and laid the new key on

top, checking both faces. He sniffed, nodded, dropped the new key into the box with the old one, and snapped the lid closed. “Not too shabby, son. That’ll do.”

Parrish slipped the box into his breast pocket and gave Freeman a one-sided, cool-eyed smile.

“How much for the work?”

“That’s not up to me, sir.”

He pointed Parrish toward Archibald. The jeweller cowered behind the till, using it as a barricade.

Parrish nodded a curt ‘thank you’ and turned to Archibald. He crossed the shop but made sure to keep Freeman in his sightline. Archibald seemed to shrink as Parrish approached.

“What’s the damage, Archie?”

The shopkeeper raised his hands, palms out. “Nothing, Mr Parrish.”

“What’s the problem, *Mr Archibald*?” Parrish spoke with a voice so low he almost growled. “Ain’t my money good enough?”

Archibald’s eyes popped. “No, no. Not at all, Mr Parrish. I wondered whether you would accept the key with my compliments.”

“Don’t want your fuckin’ compliments. I pay my way. What’s the charge?”

Tears of sweat popped formed on Archibald’s brow and upper lip and glistened under the spotlights. “What would you say is a fair price, Mr Parrish?”

The short man nodded and looked at Freeman, who guessed Parrish wanted to make sure he was paying attention.

“There ain’t no need to quibble,” Parrish said, all smiles again. “I’m more than ‘appy to pay top wedge for quality work. Five-hundred quid cover it?”

Archibald’s jowls wobbled as he nodded with enough enthusiasm to risk his head falling from his shoulders. Parrish peeled ten fifty-pound notes from a roll thick enough to choke a carthorse. “Here you go. And don’t never say DB Parrish won’t pay his way.”

“Oh no, Mr Parrish,” Archibald said, the words tumbling out. “I’d never say...”

Archibald let the sentence trail off as Parrish turned to face Freeman full on. He didn’t seem to mind turning his back on Archibald. Besides, the giant owner of the shadow in the doorway had a perfect view inside the shop.

Freeman stood and walked around to the front of his bench. He towered over Parrish and made sure to keep a deferential distance. “Are you happy to pay without testing the key, Mr Parrish?” he asked, knowing Archibald didn’t have the stones to make the offer.

Parrish paused. A gold tooth flashed. “Ain’t an issue, son. I can see the quality of your work. Job’s a good ‘un.” He leaned closer to Freeman. Spicy cologne wafted across the narrow space between them. Freeman imagined hot mince pies on a winter’s night—sweet and sickly. “I’ll be seeing you.”

With Archibald’s attention focused on putting the money in the till, Parrish pressed two fifties and a business card into Freeman’s hand.

Freeman slipped the cash and the card into his pocket and watched Parrish leave. His heart raced. At long last things were looking up.

Present Day

*Midlands Police Serious Crime Unit
Holton, Birmingham*

Chapter 3.

Monday 27th June

Detective Chief Inspector David Jones—David, never ‘Dave’ or ‘Davy’—climbed out of his elderly Rover 415, scrunched up his shoulders, and worked the stiffness out of his neck. He stared up at the new police headquarters and tried once again to work out why he disliked the place so much.

Eight storeys tall, faced in blue-tinted glass and faux white marble, the building boasted clean modern lines, bullet-resistant windows, and state-of-the-art electronic security. Although cleaner, ‘future-proofed’ against electronic advances, and more comfortable than its predecessor it lacked the old building’s red brick and slate-tiled charm. On the other hand, it also lacked the shabbiness, the drafts, and the black mould growing in every dark and damp corner.

Despite the new building’s shortcomings, after a week’s annual leave, Jones was pleased to be back. He’d missed the place. Well, if not the place then certainly the job.

That’s it, Jones. Lighten up.

He strode across the car park, skipped up the three steps to the covered entrance, and reached for the intercom button to have the desk sergeant buzz him entry.

“Hold on a minute, David,” called out a female voice from behind him.

He turned and waited as Helen Ambridge, Director of Human Resources manoeuvred her wheelchair up the ramp. Good disabled access was perhaps the new headquarters’ greatest single improvement over its predecessor. Watching Helen gain entry through the front, as opposed to the rear service entrance, lifted Jones’ spirits further.

“Morning, Helen,” he said. “Lovely day.”

“Hi, David,” she said, breathing hard as she reached the flat section. “I see the holiday did you good. You bounded up those steps like a spring gazelle.” She pushed out a hand enclosed in a fingerless cyclist glove and they shook. She held on and Jones covered her hand with his free one.

Helen, a happy, usually smiling woman in her mid-forties, never complained about a medical condition that he knew caused her great pain, and Jones admired the hell out of her for it.

“Nonsense,” he said. “I haven’t been a spring anything for decades. And don’t try to soft soap me, Ms Ambridge. I still haven’t forgiven you for forcing me to take the holiday in the first place. Hardly diplomatic. Let me see now, what was it you said?” He glanced up at the clear blue sky as if searching for the memory. “Can’t remember exactly, but the phrases, ‘your subordinates need the break from you’ and ‘use it or lose it’, spring into my aged mind.”

“We all need a holiday, David. Even you. Go anywhere nice?”

He shook his head. “Stayed at home and took things easy. Caught up on a little reading, listened to the test match. I think young Ryan Washington would call it ‘chilling’.”

Helen, still holding his hand, turned it over and traced her fingers over his palm. Her gentle touch tickled and he jerked the hand away. She tutted and finished it off with a heavy sigh. “Oh dear, Detective Chief Inspectors shouldn’t lie. It sets a bad example to the troops. Those calluses are fresh. You’ve been renovating your cottage, haven’t you?”

“Okay, I confess,” he said, lowering his head and clasping his hands together, playing a schoolboy caught in a lie. “You’re wasted in personnel. Should have been a detective. If you must know, I did lay a few courses of stonework and nearly finished the roof on the kitchen extension ... while listening to cricket on the radio.”

Helen’s smile brightened an already cheery morning. Jones tried to recall the last time they’d had a decent conversation.

“January 10th,” Helen said.

“Excuse me?”

Helen’s blue eyes sparkled. “You were trying to remember the last time we chatted. January 10th. DI McDougall’s leaving do.”

“Added mind reading to your list of accomplishments, I see.”

“You always were an open book to me, David.”

Bloody hope not.

Detective Inspector Jock McDougall had been Jones' second-in-command until his wife's illness forced him to relocate to Scotland. Jones and Helen had spent the evening of his farewell party deep in conversation and staying sober while everyone else did the opposite.

"He's a fine detective. Pity he had to leave, but I understand his reasons." Jones lowered his voice, uncomfortable discussing personal matters in the open.

"Heard from him recently? How's Sheilagh?"

"Chemo's taking its toll, but being close to their families helps with the kids. Jock sounded almost optimistic on the phone—or at least he tried to. I'll make time to visit soon. He was with me for a long time."

The farewell party had been a boisterous and poignant affair. Nobody wanted Jock to go, least of all Sheilagh, who attended the 'do' and was little more than a ghost of the vital woman that Jones had first met nearly a decade before. He'd met their three young children a number of times at social functions. Surprisingly, their runny-nosed, bright-faced presence hadn't completely horrified him.

The party had taken place back in the long dark days of winter. In the months that followed Jock's leaving, Jones had managed to keep the DI vacancy open for Phil Cryer, Jones' next 'chosen one'. Unfortunately, as a Detective Sergeant, Phil didn't qualify for the post.

"So, how are you, Helen?" he asked.

"As well as can be expected, thanks."

Jones reached for the call button on the door release keypad again.

"2-1-3-5," Helen said.

"Right, thanks."

"They change it every night at midnight."

"I know."

"Control would have sent you a text last night."

"I know that, too." The conversation was getting uncomfortable and the south-facing entrance had become an over-warm suntrap. "Forgot to charge my mobile last night," he lied.

"Still struggling to work the inbox?" Helen asked, lowering her voice.

Jones frowned.

"Would you like me to book you on an IT refresher course?" she asked, employing her serious face and professional voice. "I can make it one-to-one, to save you the embarrassment if you like."

"Yes, please. That would be wonderful. I'll send you a memo with my availability. I'm bound to have a day or two spare next winter."

Or when hell starts spitting out icebergs.

Jones' most recent attempt to familiarise himself with the various police databases—PNC, HOLMES2, PNDNAD, and a lexicon of other ridiculous acronyms created by people with nothing better to do—lasted all of three hours. The discovery of a dead body in a wheelie bin behind a row of garages in Sandwell had delivered him a wonderful reprieve. That had been six months ago. He'd sworn the course leader—a sergeant from IT security—to secrecy, and hadn't rebooked another course.

Reading from VDU screens gave him a headache. That was his excuse and he'd stick with it until someone higher up called him to account.

Jones dialled in the numbers and the lock mechanism disengaged with an extended *fizz-click*. He held the door open for Helen and accompanied her through the foyer; her wheels squeaked on the highly polished floor.

They nodded a greeting to the grey-haired desk sergeant, Barney 'Feathers' Featherstone, who pointed to the telephone handset clamped to his ear and rolled his eyes. A fresh-faced constable sat at his right hand, trying to look less than awestruck.

"I'm sorry, madam," Feathers said, patience itself, "but I'm afraid your dog doesn't constitute a missing person. I am unable to send a patrol officer ..."

Jones and Helen exchanged amused glances and continued until they reached the bank of lifts at the far end of the corridor. "Changing the subject," Jones said, "when are you going to stop trying to foist a new inspector on my team?"

"That's nothing to do with me, David. Superintendent Peyton wants to restore the head count before the next round of personnel cuts. Anyway, what was wrong with the last candidate? Came highly recommended from Thames Valley. He had a superb arrest record."

Jones pressed the lift 'call' button and waited for two constables to pass before answering. "There was nothing at all wrong with Inspector Lewis, but I have someone else in mind for the vacancy."

"DS Cryer?"

She really can read minds.

“If I can convince him to take the Inspector’s OSPRE exams.”

“What’s stopping him?”

“Modesty. Thinks he’s too inexperienced, but he’s wrong. An excellent detective. Always goes the extra mile, and I doubt he’s ever failed an exam.”

Helen craned her neck to stare up at Jones. “You’re talking about his gift?”

“Yep,” Jones answered. “Best memory I’ve ever come across. Uncanny.”

“So,” Helen said, removing her gloves. “If my average memory serves, DS Cryer’s been your bag man since he made DS two years ago?”

“Yep, sounds about right.”

“And he’s had nothing but glowing annual reports since he joined the force’s graduate leadership programme?”

“As I said, he’s one of the best I’ve ever worked with.”

“In that case, I can’t see a reason why he shouldn’t apply for promotion. One sec.” She dug into the valise-sized handbag resting on her lap and retrieved a mobile phone. Her fingers tapped and swiped the screen. She nodded. “Thought so. This year’s OSPREs are still open to applications. Want me to give DS Cryer a little nudge? I could send him an application form and put in a word with the Deputy Chief.”

“Please, but can you do it on the QT? I can’t be seen to show favouritism, but the Serious Crime Unit is my responsibility and I’ll make the hiring decisions this time.”

“Okay, David, enough said.”

Jones knew Helen understood exactly what he meant. Two years earlier, Jones’ immediate superior, Superintendent-bloody-Peyton imposed a new member onto his team in the overblown and largely ineffectual shape of Peyton’s drinking buddy, DS Charlie Pelham. Jones vowed never to let that happen again. He’d choose the next applicant, or resign in protest.

The red light above the lift doors pinged. “If you don’t mind, here’s where I leave you,” Jones said, pointing to the stairwell.

“Really? You’re on the top floor, aren’t you?”

Jones frowned as the lift doors slid open to reveal the shiny metal box—the small and enclosed, shiny metal box. “I need the exercise,” he said.

“No problem, I was only waiting for you. I need to use the facilities.” She swivelled her chair and headed towards the disabled toilets at the far end of the hall. “These ones are the most spacious in the building.”

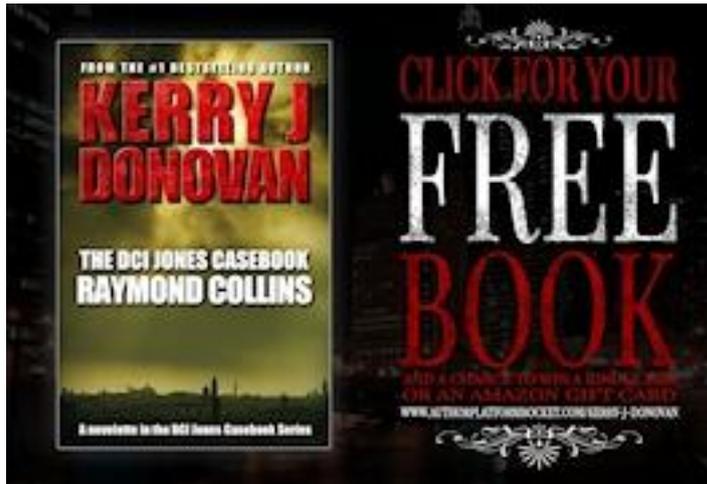
“Great chatting with you, Helen. Perhaps we could have lunch sometime. I’ll give you a call when I have a spare hour.”

“That would be excellent,” she called, “but I won’t hold my breath.”

Jones took the stairs two at a time and reached his floor without breaking into a sweat.

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Biography

Kerry J Donovan was born in Dublin. He spent most of his life in the UK, and now lives in the heart of rural Brittany with his wonderful and patient wife, Jan. They have three children and four grandchildren (so far), all of whom live in England. An absentee granddad, Kerry is hugely thankful for the advent of video calling.

The cottage is a pet free zone (apart from the field mice, moles, and red squirrels).

Kerry earned a first class honours degree in Human Biology, and has a PhD in Sport and Exercise Sciences. A former scientific advisor to The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, he helped UK emergency first-responders prepare for chemical attacks in the wake of 9/11. This background adds a scientific edge to his writing. He is also a former furniture designer/maker.

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Other Works

CRIME THRILLERS

The DCI Jones Casebook: Sean Freeman

Veteran cop, DCI David Jones, is tough and uncompromising. His Serious Crime Unit has the best arrest record the Midlands Police Service has ever seen and Jones wants to keep it that way.

Locksmith turned jewel thief, Sean Freeman, is the best cracksmith in the UK. He's never been caught—the police have never even come close. When Freeman's boss forces him to break into the Stafford Museum, the UK's most secure premises outside of the Bank of England he's in trouble—the Stafford is in the heart of David Jones' jurisdiction.

Someone's record is going to suffer.

The DCI Jones Casebook: Raymond Collins

A 70-page novelette to introduce Detective Chief Inspector David Jones: Birmingham, England, a sunny day in the city park. Children play, adults walk—and a man lies dead in a pool of blood. His terrified fiancé screams for help.

The assailant smiles, waves goodbye, and strolls away into the city.

DCI David Jones and his protégé, Detective Sergeant Phil Cryer, are called to investigate the most difficult of crimes—an apparently motiveless and random attack. Hampered by a lack of resources, Jones and Cryer have to act quickly to prevent a murder spree.

The DCI Jones Casebook: Ellis Flynn

When fourteen-year-old Hollie Jardine fails to return home from school, her terrified parents call the police.

It doesn't take DCI David Jones, head of the Midlands Police Serious Crime Unit, long to discover a link between Hollie and convicted sex-offender, Ellis Flynn.

With Hollie's chances of survival fading, Jones and his colleague Alex Olganski risk their careers when they ignore protocol to follow Flynn's trail across the Channel into France.

What they discover in an idyllic backwater will stretch Jones' detection skills to the limit, and Alex's loyalty to heartbreak.

ACTION ADVENTURE

On Lucky Shores

In an action-packed tale of secrets and lies in small town America, Chet Walker is a man forced to make decisions that will affect his future and the life of the woman he loves.

Witness to a car crash and in receipt of a cryptic message from a dying man, traveling musician, Chet Walker, reaches the picturesque lakeside town of Lucky Shores. He faces hostility and suspicion from the locals and learns that the information he carries could unlock an eight-year-old mystery—it could also get him killed.

Josephine Dolan, owner of the Lucky Shores diner, wants to bury her past. When Walker arrives with a message from her father, she doesn't want to hear it. She cuts him cold.

When his life is threatened, Chet Walker learns the truth behind the saying, “no good deed goes unpunished.”

FANTASY THRILLER

The Transition of Johnny Swift

Before the accident ...

Frank Brazier has the perfect life. A contract to drive for a Formula 1 team. A supportive family. A stunning girlfriend.

On the surface, everything is great, but Frank keeps a secret. On race days, Shadow-man visits. He sits on the nose cone of Frank's racing car, or floats above the grandstand, waving, taunting, distracting, eating away at his concentration. An accident in the making.

After the accident ...

Frank starts hearing voices. Strange voices. Impossible voices. He's losing his grip on reality and Paula, his sister, is dying. Doctors say she is brain dead. They want to pull the plug, but Frank knows she's still in there, fighting. He can hear her calls.

One day later...

Shadow-man speaks. He says Frank can save Paula, but can Frank pay the price?

SHORT STORIES

The Collection

The Collection includes over two dozen stories ranging in length from fifty word micro shorts to a full-blown novelette. Comedy, drama, crime thrillers, romance, true-life tales, gory horror, historical epic—you'll find samples of each.

The hauntingly evocative semi-autobiographical tale, *Sweet William*, and the poignant, *The Phone Call*, are stories to tug the heart and bring tears to the eye.

In *The Long Wait*, Ryan Chisholm has spent seventeen years waiting to avenge the death of his father.

A Father's Tale is a heart-warming story of family life told in short vignettes.

At over 7,000 words, *The Chamber* is the longest in the book, and perhaps Kerry's most gruesome tale. Psychopath Porter Robinson holds Robert Forbes captive in a cellar and tells him a tale from Porter's childhood. Will Forbes survive, or will he go the way of countless other victims? This is definitely not for the people of a timid disposition.

If you enjoy your fiction in short bites and read across many genres, *The Collection* is certain to delight.