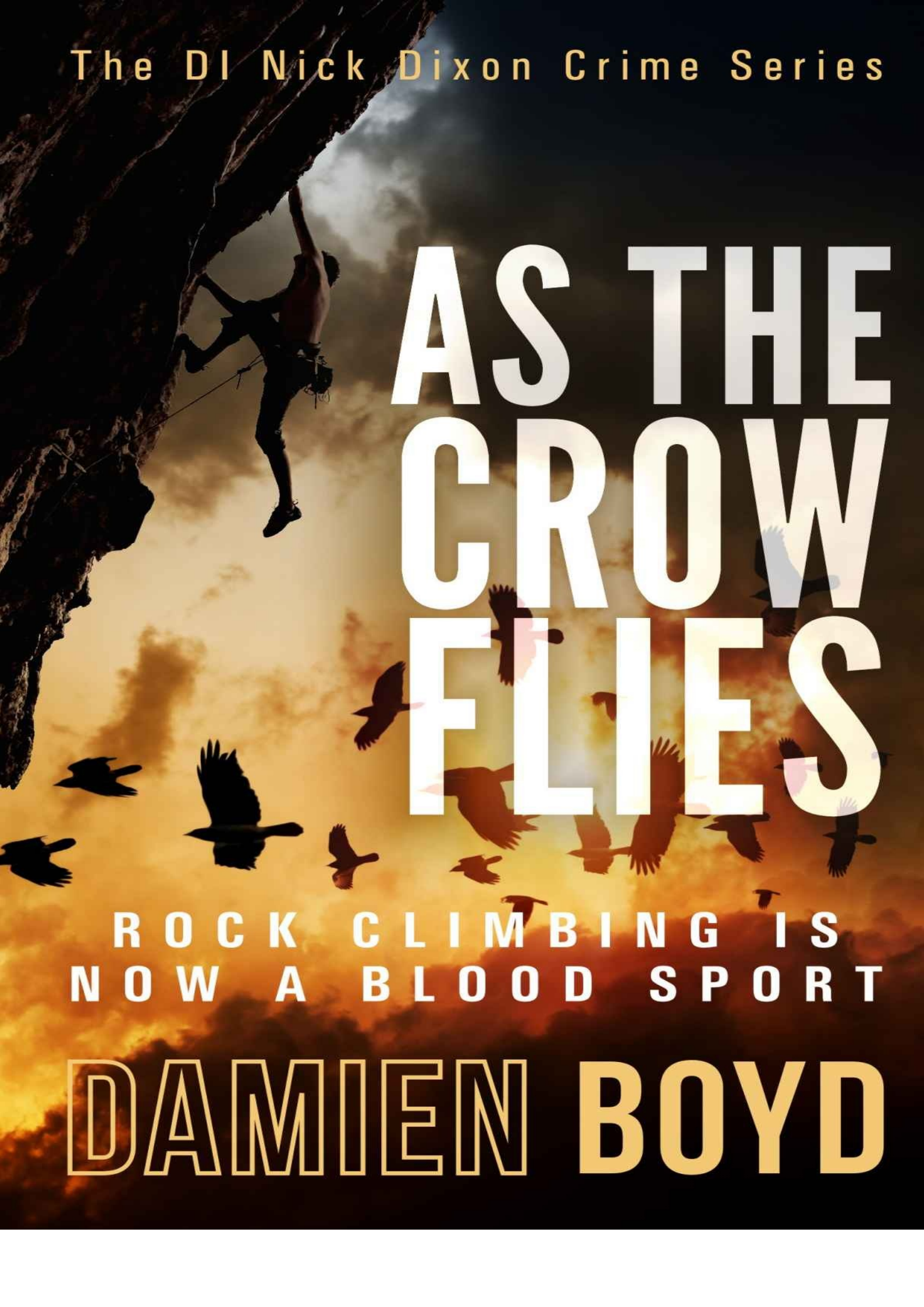


The DI Nick Dixon Crime Series



AS THE CROW FLIES

ROCK CLIMBING IS
NOW A BLOOD SPORT

DAMIEN BOYD

As The Crow Flies

Damien Boyd

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About The Author

Damien Boyd is a Solicitor and crime fiction writer.

Drawing on extensive experience of criminal law as well as several years in the Crown Prosecution Service, Damien writes fast paced crime novels featuring Detective Inspector Nick Dixon.

Find out more at www.damienboyd.com

Also by Damien Boyd:

The DI Nick Dixon Crime Series

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For Shelley

Prologue

*As the Crow Flies; E7 6c 130 ft; A direct finish to the classic Crow (E3 5c/6a***). From Crow pitch 3 ignore the traverse left and continue direct to a hanging stance under the left hand end of the small overhang. Pegs. Continue direct over the left hand of the small overhang via a shallow chimney to enter the shallow crack above. Follow the crack to its finish. RP2 (last gear). Continue direct up the exposed and bulging wall above (crux) to finish in the shallow groove. Exit. Very exposed and strenuous.*

He had been working on it for two years on and off. The restrictions in the gorge didn't help, limiting climbing on the south side to the winter months, but he knew he was getting close. He had managed each of the moves individually, several sections in sequence and was now working on stringing those sequences together.

It made for a relaxing evening after work, on the rare occasions he was working and for the few weeks before the clocks went back. Then it would become weekends only. Abseil in to the peg belay and climb out. Perfectly safe but the tourists loved it. He wondered how many photographs had been taken of him over the years.

Today was no different. The early autumn sun was catching the top of High Rock as he abseiled in to the hanging stance. He fed the rope through the belay plate with his right hand and held the Petzl Shunt open in his left. Just below the small overhang he clipped into the pegs and then hung his rucksack on the end of the rope to keep it taut. He removed the belay plate and was now free to climb out. The Shunt would move freely up the rope with him but lock to catch him when he fell.

He had mastered the first sequence some time ago. He made short work of the small overhang and then sat back on the rope for a rest at the base of the shallow crack above. His forearms were screaming at him. He was fit but knew he would need to be fitter when the time came for the first ascent.

The shallow crack would be particularly strenuous because he would be using one hand to fix where meagre protection was available. A Friend 2 low down in the flared crack and an RP2 higher up, the last before the crux twenty feet above. He was determined that this would be a clean first ascent. The route offered a long fall onto precious little gear but there would be nothing to hit on the way down and no chance of reaching the ground. That was the advantage of starting the route three hundred feet up.

The exit from the crack to become established on the wall above was the key to unlocking the next sequence. He sat on the rope for several minutes to rest and worked through the moves in his mind. In the still evening air he could hear shouts from below and the clicking of cameras. Better put on a good show for the holidaymakers.

It was right at the limit of his reach to make the first handhold on the wall from the top of the crack. The footholds were thin at best. He reached out and up with his right hand and made a lunge for the handhold above just as his feet slipped. Fuck it. The screams from below told him that it must have looked spectacular from the ground as he swung out from the rockface on the end of the rope, his arms and legs flailing in thin air.

On the second attempt he managed to get his left foot a fraction higher. This was the key. Another sequence unlocked. Today was proving to be productive.

The crux offered technically the hardest climbing, he thought grade 6c, but he had rehearsed it many times. The wall bulged making it gently overhanging for the most part and exceptionally strenuous. He had yet to complete it in one go but was getting closer with each attempt.

He reached into the bag on the back of his harness for fresh chalk and took several deep breaths. Two testing moves and then a rest of sorts on the only decent holds on the wall. A good start. More chalk and more deep breaths. Now for the crux.

It took just a moment to register that the rope in front of him had gone slack. He was taking his own weight on the rock but the rope should still not be slack. It took another moment to realise that the rope was getting slacker.

He looked up to see the rope above, his lifeline, falling towards him. Instinctively he braced himself. If the rope did not knock him off then the weight of it falling would pull him off. He could only close his eyes and wait.

He felt the rope hit his back as it fell past him. He felt the sudden weight of it pulling down on him and then it stopped. The third alternative had not occurred to him. He had hung on.

He reached down gingerly with his left hand and released the bar on the Shunt to allow the rope to feed through. The weight of the rucksack should pull it through. It worked. The rope and rucksack fell to the ground.

He was now free of the trailing rope but had only one way out. Up. He had not completed the crux sequence in one go before but if he was going to do it, it had to be now.

He tried to move but couldn't. He was frozen. Movement up or down was no longer an option. Then he began to shake. It started in his left leg, almost imperceptibly at first, before it began to overtake him. He had seen climbers shake themselves off the rock face before and now it was his turn. The shaking became more violent with the passing of each second. He was out of control. The realisation of what was about to happen hit home. Tears began to stream down his face.

He thought about his parents and his girlfriend. The end when it came would, at least, be quick.

One

Very few people had understood his decision to leave the Metropolitan Police and join the Avon and Somerset force but Nick Dixon had never regretted it for a minute. Walking along the base of the cliffs at Brean Down on a gloriously sunny morning in early autumn, he was reminded more than ever that it had been the right decision. There was not a soul around, the tide was out and the wet sand glistened in the low morning sun.

Ambition and career had never been all that important to him and it had always been his intention to return home at the first opportunity. Career advancement in the police meant management and he wasn't having that either. Crime detection was what it was about for him. He had to concede that the quality of work was better in the Met but that had never really motivated him either. It was just a job. A job doing what he enjoyed and now in a place he loved. Definitely the right decision.

His girlfriend had certainly not understood, making it abundantly clear, shortly before she became his ex-girlfriend, that she had no intention of burying herself away in the back end of beyond.

His parents had not understood it either. It was always expected that he would go on to become the Metropolitan Police Commissioner with a knighthood at the very least, and they never missed an opportunity to remind him how much his education had cost and the sacrifices that had been made along the way. They had left him in no doubt that his decision was an enormous disappointment to them.

Dixon had graduated from university with a degree in law and had gone on to qualify as a solicitor. Only then had he opted for a career in the police. Being a graduate, his promotion had been fast tracked to the rank of Inspector, a fact that was openly resented by most of his colleagues. Much to the irritation of his superiors, he had then insisted on a switch to CID. He had spent five years based in Wimbledon before the transfer to the Avon and Somerset force came up.

He was not entirely convinced that his new colleagues in the Avon and Somerset force understood why he had transferred from the Met either. Various rumours were circulating, each with a different reason for what was universally believed to have been his removal in circumstances that needed to be hushed up. Dixon took the view that no one would believe the simple truth that he wanted to move so he had given up trying to explain.

The move itself had been a bit of a rush. He had gone from a furnished flat in Wimbledon to an unfurnished cottage in Brent Knoll, both rentals, and, two months on, his only furniture consisted of a bed and a TV. He had also needed a car. For those living inside the M25 a car is an unnecessary expense, particularly when public transport is so readily available. The same cannot be said for life in rural Somerset. Dixon had opted for a blue long wheelbase Land Rover Defender that had clearly seen better days. He had also invested in the relevant Haynes manual and was determined to do all the work on it himself.

Dixon's most recent acquisition, if acquisition was the right word, was an eight-month-old white Staffordshire bull terrier he had called Monty. A cheerful soul, despite what he had been through. Monty had come from a rescue centre and had been found abandoned. Dixon felt sure that Monty had never been allowed to run off the lead before but he was certainly making up for it now. He was also getting the hang of chasing a tennis ball. Bringing it back could come later.

Dixon walked out as far as Boulder Cove and sat on a rock to take in the view. He noticed the cha

marks on the cliffs above. It was obviously still a popular spot with local climbers. He was aware that the tide was coming in now and knew from experience that it races across the flats at a fast walking pace. No place for the unwary. He tucked Monty under his arm and scrambled up the steep path to the left of the Cove. When he reached the top he stopped to put Monty's lead on, remembering many years before finding a Staffordshire terrier dead at the foot of the cliffs. He had rung the owners to break the news. It had been chasing rabbits. He had broken worse news to many more people since.

He was standing on the gun emplacement near the Fort when his phone rang.

'Dixon.'

'Harding, Sir, sorry to trouble you on a Sunday.'

'No problem, Dave. What's up?'

'We've had a John Fayter on the phone, several times, asking for you.'

'What does he want?'

'His son's been killed in a climbing accident at Cheddar Gorge. On Friday evening.'

It was a solid blow to the pit of Dixon's stomach.

'Jake?'

'Yes, Sir. Do you know him?'

'I do.'

'Mr Fayter's asking to see you. He says it's urgent. He lives at....'

'...Burnham-on-Sea. I know. Ring him back and tell him I'm on my way will you?'

The walk back to his car took Dixon twenty minutes. What should have been an enjoyable walk in the sunshine became a sombre trip down memory lane. He had first met Jake Fayter when he left school. Dixon had arrived home determined to take up rock climbing. He had got a job manning the putting green at Burnham-on-Sea and this had paid for a pair of climbing boots, a harness, a rope, a few bits of gear and a chalk bag. Then he cycled to Brean Down to make a start. That he got home at all that evening had been down to Jake.

Jake recognised straightaway that Dixon had no real idea what he was doing and offered to lead him up Pandora's Box, a very inviting VS 4c crack at the right hand end of Ocean Wall. In at the deep end for a novice but Dixon had made short work of it. It marked the start of a successful climbing partnership that lasted until shortly before Dixon left for London to join the Met.

It had quickly become apparent to Dixon that there are two types of climber; those who push the limits and those who push *the* limits. He accepted early on that he was going to have to be content with pushing his own limits but it was equally clear that Jake was determined to push *the* limits. Climbing trips to Wales, the Peak District and the Lakes had followed, pretty much every weekend with Dixon spending most of his time holding Jake's rope. He was able to match Jake technically perhaps but he had never been able to match him on the lead. That ability to climb above the last piece of protection and take the consequences had always eluded him.

It came to an end for Dixon one afternoon at Stanage. It was a rare occasion for him to lead and he and Jake had been waiting their turn on Left Unconquerable, the classic E1 5b. Looking back on it, he was convinced it happened in slow motion but what he remembered most of all was the noise. A single runner in the horizontal crack. He had never understood that. The climber slipped, the runner pulled out and he had landed flat on his back right next to Dixon. A loud crack. The Air Ambulance had arrived within half an hour.

Three days later Dixon had left for London and had never climbed again. He had kept in touch with Jake for a while, and they had gone for a curry on the rare occasions when he was home, but even that had petered out over time. Jake had kept a blog enabling Dixon to keep up with his new routes. He had

subscribed to email alerts too but it had not been updated for a while, so Dixon had felt sure that Jake was working on something big. They had often talked about the direct finish to Crow and he wondered whether that was what Jake had been working on. They had talked about dying too.

Dixon stood on the doorstep of the small double fronted bungalow in Braithwaite Place for what seemed like an age before he finally rang the doorbell. Nothing much appeared to have changed over the years. The roses either side of the garden path were still immaculate although the windows needed a touch of paint perhaps. Dixon noticed two cars in the drive. A Honda Civic and a Subaru that he guessed belonged to Jake. He had always enjoyed a fast car.

John Fayter was a small man with thinning grey hair and a white moustache. He greeted Dixon with a firm handshake and as warm a smile as he could manage in the circumstances.

‘Hello, Nick. Thank you for coming.’

‘Hello, Mr Fayter.’

‘Do call me John, please, we’ve known each other long enough by now, I think.’

‘I will. How are you these days, if that’s not a stupid question?’

The look on John Fayter’s face told Dixon that it had been a stupid question.

‘Bearing up. You remember Maureen?’

Maureen Fayter appeared in the hallway. She immediately threw her arms around Dixon and burst into tears. Dixon could feel her body heaving as she sobbed. She tried to speak but no words would come. Dixon put his arms around her and looked at John Fayter, who shrugged. Dixon remembered the stiff upper lip that comes with a life in the Royal Marines and thought that this was probably the first time that Maureen Fayter had been able to let her grief show.

‘How about a cup of tea?’ John Fayter moved towards the kitchen but Maureen waved him away and went through to the back of the bungalow. Dixon could still hear her sobbing as he and John Fayter moved into the sitting room.

‘It’s nice to see you again, John, I’m only sorry that it’s in these circumstances.’

‘It’s something we always feared might happen but never really thought it would, if that makes any sense?’

‘It does.’

Dixon thought that John Fayter was about to burst into tears. His eyes welled up and his lip trembled when he spoke.

‘They’re going to have to identify him from DNA, apparently. He fell over four hundred feet so there’s not a lot left of him...I haven’t told Maureen...’ His voice tailed off.

Dixon took the initiative.

‘Has the Coroner been informed?’

‘Yes. I’ve spoken to the Coroner’s Officer and a PC Cole from Wells rang to say that he’s been asked to investigate. He told me about the identification.’

‘Is that Jake’s car outside, the Subaru?’

‘Yes, that’s Jake’s. I didn’t know what else to do with it so I told them to bring it here. At least it’s off the road. The tax has expired. Silly arse.’

‘Do we know what happened yet?’

‘Not really. He fell from near the top of High Rock so he must have been working on the direct finish to Crow. That was his pet project. PC Cole said that there were some witnesses on the ground. Tourists. They’d been taking photos immediately before he fell. He was on his own, of course.’

‘That means he must have abseiled in and been climbing out on a shunt?’

‘That’s right. They’ve recovered his climbing gear, which is intact. PC Cole’s theory is that the rope came undone.’

Maureen arrived with the tea on a tray. Cups and saucers and cake.

'You really didn't need to go to all that trouble on my account, Maureen.'

'It's no trouble, really.' She poured the tea. 'John has told you they think it was an accident?'

'I said that PC Cole thinks Jake's rope came undone. I mean, for Christ's sake, Nick, how many times have you ever known that happen?'

Dixon thought for a moment. 'It's not a mistake a climber makes twice.'

'No, it isn't. And it's not a mistake Jake would make...would have made.' John glanced across at Maureen who pretended not to have noticed.

'We always used to use a reef knot with a half hitch either side. The more you pull on it, the tighter it gets. If he'd abseiled over High Rock then there is no way that knot could or should have come undone.'

'Exactly,' said John. 'Look, we don't know what happened, obviously, but we don't want it just written off as an accident without proper investigation. It needs looking at by someone who understands climbing and, preferably, someone who knew Jake as well.'

'All we are asking is that you keep an eye on the investigation,' said Maureen. 'Make sure that no stone is left unturned. Please. You owe it to Jake.'

'I do. I'll do what I can, of course.'

'How is your diabetes these days?' asked Maureen. 'Is it a problem in the police?'

'No, not at all. I'm not allowed to drive response cars but then I wouldn't do that anyway in CI. Apart from that, I just have to demonstrate that I've not had a hypo recently and I've got it under control now so that's no problem either.'

'Good. I remember when you were diagnosed. It was quite sudden wasn't it?'

'Yes.'

Dixon felt the need to change the subject.

'Where was Jake living?'

'He was renting a flat in The Grove behind the tennis club with his girlfriend, Sarah,' replied Maureen.

'Sarah? What happened to Ruth?'

'They split up about a year ago. Then he met Sarah and moved in with her. He still has his room here as well.'

'Do I know Sarah?'

'You may do. She used to work in the Clarence apparently. I'm not sure what she does now,' replied John.

'Was he working?'

'Not officially. He did a bit of cash in hand work but spent most of his time climbing. He did the high work on the rollercoaster at the leisure centre. Cash, of course. That sort of thing.'

'Ok. I'll speak to PC Cole tomorrow and see what I can find out. It may not be much at this stage but I'll let you know. Can you let me have the number of the coroner's officer you spoke to, John?'

John Fayter went out into the hall to fetch a pen and paper from the sideboard. Dixon could see that Maureen was struggling to keep her composure.

'I have to know what happened to him...' Her voice tailed off as she began to sob.

John came back into the room and sat next to Maureen. He put his arm around her.

Dixon wrote his mobile phone number on the bottom of the piece of paper handed to him by John Fayter. He tore it off and then handed it back.

'That's my mobile phone number. If anything comes up you think I need to know, please, just give me a ring.'

'So, what happens now?' asked John.

'PC Cole will take statements from all of the witnesses and I would expect him to get hold of any photographs taken by the tourists at the time as well.'

'Will we get to see them?'

'Not initially, Maureen. But you will at the inquest.'

'I feel much better knowing that you will be involved.'

'It'll have to be unofficially, and remember that I am relatively new around here too, which doesn't help.'

'I understand that but remember, Nick, no stone unturned. Promise me.'

Dixon drove along the Berrow Road and turned right into Allandale Road. He drove to the end and parked overlooking the sea. It was a familiar view across to Hinkley Point but he was staring in disbelief at the space.

Maureen Fayter had been quite right, of course. Dixon did owe Jake. He had saved him on more than one occasion but then Dixon had done the same for Jake. Such was the nature of a climbing partnership.

Dixon had to admit that the incident Maureen had been referring to was out of the ordinary. Jake had gone above and beyond the call of duty. It had been soon after Dixon had been diagnosed with diabetes and he had not got the hang of controlling his blood sugar levels. They had been on a trip to Pembrokeshire and were in Huntsman's Leap. A favourite spot. Dixon had been leading Quiet Waters E3 6a when he had a hypo above the crux. His blood sugar levels dropped, his strength went and he fell off. Left helpless, he needed sugar immediately.

Without hesitation, Jake had tied him off at the bottom of the cliff and then climbed up alongside him unroped, with a Mars bar in his chalk bag. They had laughed about it later in the pub at St Govan's. They marked it down as a solo ascent of Quiet Waters by Jake, against the clock too, but the consequences of failure would have meant death for both of them.

On another occasion, Dixon had been leading Poetry Pink E5 6a in the slate quarries at Llanberis. With the last bolt at twenty-five feet and the crux at fifty feet, a fall from the crux meant that he would have landed on the terrace where Jake was standing. Dixon had frozen and Jake had seen that his legs had started to shake. Jake had also noticed that the rope was looped around Dixon's right leg and realised that he would be flipped upside down when he fell, hitting the terrace headfirst.

When Dixon fell, Jake stepped back and jumped off the terrace to take up the slack rope. No hesitation. No shout. He just jumped. Dixon stopped, hanging upside down two feet above the terrace. Dixon took a deep breath, put his seatbelt on and started the engine. He looked across at Monty sitting on the passenger seat with his tennis ball in his mouth. He switched off the engine, reached across and opened the passenger door. Monty didn't need a second invitation and Dixon needed some fresh air.

Two

Dixon had never been a huge fan of Monday mornings and today was no exception. It was to be his first appearance in court since joining the Avon and Somerset force and experience told him that he could look forward to several hours of waiting around followed by the entry of a late guilty plea and an early lunch. He had been the arresting officer on a routine case of grievous bodily harm resolved with the assistance of CCTV and a confession. The only argument left was whether the assault amounted to grievous bodily harm or the lesser offence of unlawful wounding.

Dixon found his suit still packed in the bottom of a suitcase and, whilst slightly crumpled, it would have to do. He decided to call in at Bridgwater police station on his way to Taunton Crown Court and quickly realised his mistake when DCI Lewis spotted him.

DCI Lewis was Dixon's immediate superior and whilst they had not yet had occasion to fall out, could not be said that they had exactly hit it off either. Lewis was a copper's copper. At least that was the cliché Dixon heard used many times to describe men like Lewis. He was certainly one of the lads with the leather jacket and beer belly to show for it.

Dixon had taken over Operation Magpie a week earlier and Lewis was keen to know what progress he had made in the investigation. Magpie was a countywide investigation into an organised gang burgling empty properties and taking only documents to be used for identity theft. The gang appeared to be targeting properties where the owner had recently died, at least that was Dixon's theory. He had been cross-referencing the bereavement notices in the local papers with the burglaries and had come across a pattern of sorts. DCI Lewis appeared impressed.

'What's your next step?'

'I'm going to place a fake death notice in the paper and lie in wait for the buggers, Sir. Or rather, the property will be placed under surveillance, budgetary constraints permitting.'

'Sounds like a plan, let me know what you need. Incidentally, I can let you have DS Gorman now that he has put the Williams case to bed.'

'Williams case?'

'The girl who died from an ecstasy overdose in the loos at Rococo's. Anyway, you had better be off to court.'

Gorman was certainly methodical and would be useful after the arrests were made but Dixon doubted that he would be much help if a surveillance operation turned nasty. Gorman made sure everyone knew that he had played prop forward for the Somerset Police 1st XV but Dixon reckoned that was a good few years ago. Time and too much beer had definitely not been kind to him since then. At least he didn't wear a leather jacket.

CID occupied the top floor of the purpose built Bridgwater Police Station. One of the advantages of his rank was that it afforded Dixon his own office, although cubicle was a more accurate description and he had to share it with another DI, Janice Courtenay.

'You're supposed to be in court in twenty five minutes.'

'Thank you for that, Jan. Could you do me a favour?'

'What?'

'Ring PC Cole at Wells and tell him I want to speak to him about Jake Fayter. Give him my mobile and ask him to ring me, will you?'

'Ask him?'

'No, you're right, tell him to ring me. Thanks.'

Dixon was waiting in the CPS room at Taunton Crown Court when his mobile phone rang.

'You'll remember to switch that thing off when we go in, won't you?'

Dixon didn't recognise the number.

'Nick Dixon.'

'Nick, it's John. John Fayter. I've just had PC Cole on the phone. They want to come today and get some DNA swabs from me and Maureen. What the hell do I tell her?'

'Tell her the truth, John. Maureen's no fool.'

Dixon's prediction had not proved far off the mark and he was back in his office at Bridgwater police station by mid-afternoon. A guilty plea to the lesser offence of unlawful wounding had been entered just before lunch but this meant that the hearing had carried over into the afternoon. The offender had been remanded in custody pending sentence and Dixon was not unhappy with the outcome. He could look forward to at least two years with his list of previous convictions.

Operation Magpie was not due to recommence until the following morning, with a briefing scheduled for 9.00am sharp. Dixon thought that he would use the opportunity to look into Jake's death. He remembered that he had not switched his mobile phone back on after the court hearing and did so only to find that he had missed a call from PC Cole.

He rang Cheddar Police Station.

'This is DI Dixon from Bridgwater CID. Could you put me through to PC Cole, please?'

'Can you hold for a moment, Sir?'

Cole came on the line. 'You're ringing about the climbing accident, Sir?'

'It's nice to know you have an open mind about the cause of death, constable.'

'Well, it looks like an accident, Sir.'

'Appearances can be deceptive.'

'Sorry, Sir.'

'Do you have any witnesses?'

'We have five members of a coach party down from Birmingham. They've gone back now, so I'll be asking the local force to take statements from them in due course. We have their cameras. They're working with the High Tech team now. There are a number of photos, apparently, and one of the witnesses believes that he may have shot a short length of video footage on his digital camera shortly before the fall.'

'Good, can you email the photographs and video to me as soon as you get them?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'Where's his climbing equipment?'

'We have that here.'

'I'd like to have a look at it, so please ensure that it's not disposed of or returned to the family until I get there. Let me have copies of the witness statements as soon as you get them too. Have instructions been given to the Birmingham lot yet?'

'No, not yet. We only completed the identification today. May I ask whether you have any particular interest in the case, Sir?'

'No, you may not. What about the post-mortem?'

'Yesterday. Multiple injuries. There wasn't a lot left of him, to be honest, after a fall from that height.'

'So I gather. What time do you shut up shop over at Cheddar this afternoon?'

'I'll be here until 6.00pm tonight, Sir.'

~~'In that case, I'll be over before then to have a look at the climbing equipment, if you can have ready, please.'~~

'Will do, Sir.'

Dixon called in at his cottage in Brent Knoll for a change of clothes and to pick up Monty before heading over to Cheddar Police Station. PC Cole had Jake's climbing equipment ready on the table in the back office. It consisted of a small rucksack, with two 9mm ropes attached to it. Both the rucksack and the ropes were spattered with blood. There were also two slings and a screw gate karabiner that had been found still looped around a tree at the top of High Rock.

Dixon looked at the ropes and could see that neither had been cut. He checked the free ends of each rope for damage and could see none. No scuff marks. Nothing.

At the other end, the ropes had been tied together and then attached to the rucksack with another karabiner and a figure of eight knot. The rucksack itself was a small day sack. It had in it a small bottle of diet coke that had burst in the fall, a pair of trainers, a pair of jeans with wallet, keys and cash in the pockets, and a lightweight fleece top.

'No phone?'

'No, Sir.'

'Don't you think that's a bit odd?'

'Well, I hadn't really...'

'Have you checked his car?'

'No, Sir.'

'Asked his parents?'

'No.'

'Don't you think that might be a good idea?'

'Yes, Sir, I'll get onto it.'

'Where's his harness and shunt?'

'The harness is at the mortuary, Sir. What's a shunt?'

'It's a device that moves up a rope but locks under downward pressure. It should have been attached to the harness. It might be an idea if you familiarised yourself with climbing equipment, don't you think?'

'Yes, Sir. It'll be at the mortuary with his harness, I expect. It'll be bagged up and brought over here in due course.'

'Let me know when it is, please, I'd like to have a look at it. And let me know when you find his phone.'

'Yes, Sir.'

Dixon left Cheddar Police Station and drove up the gorge until the cliffs began to tower above him on either side. The early evening sun was striking the tops of the cliffs. He parked in the car park at the bottom of High Rock and could see an area at the base of the cliff still sectioned off with blue tape. There was a large patch of blood stained sand marking the spot where Jake had landed. He got out of his car, leaned back against the bonnet and looked up.

What the fuck happened, Jake?

Dixon called the meeting to order just after 9.00am. DS Gorman had read the file over the weekend and so was up to speed on the investigation. Also present was DC Dave Harding. Harding had been a detective constable for twenty years and Dixon reckoned that he would retire a detective constable. He also had the disconcerting habit of wearing a crumpled grey suit and brown suede shoes. Dixon

remembered his father always telling him never to trust a man who wore a grey suit and brown suede shoes, although he had been referring to the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time.

DC Jane Winter was young and keen. She was sitting her sergeant's exams and clearly had her eye on promotion. Dixon was glad to have her on the team. Police Sergeant Wilkins from uniform was also there for liaison. Assistance from uniformed officers would no doubt be needed when the surveillance operation came to a head. Dixon was irritated to see DCI Lewis was also sat at the back of the incident room listening in.

'There's been another burglary over the weekend. This time in Torquay. I've spoken to the Devon and Cornwall lot this morning. An elderly lady by the name of Avril Wilkins died last Monday and the property was burgled either Saturday or Sunday. The MO is identical to our lot. Nothing of value taken at all and as far as anybody can tell only paperwork is missing.'

'Has the death notice been placed in the paper yet?'

'No, it hasn't, but there lies the key to this whole operation, Steve. In every burglary bar one the break-in has taken place before the death notice has been placed in the newspaper, right?'

'That's right, which is why we thought that the two were unconnected.'

'They are connected, Dave, and for this reason. Most of these local newspapers are now weekly papers. In fact, I think they're all weekly papers these days. This means that a death notice placed on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday or Friday will not be published in the paper until the following week. But what was missed before is that the death notice will appear online straightaway.'

Dixon paused for effect.

'So, if we look again at the eleven burglaries, all of them took place after the death notice was placed online, in fact within forty-eight hours of it going online, but only one took place after the death notice was published in the newspaper.'

Dixon could see light bulbs coming on around the room.

'This means that the gang are using the online death notices and not those published in the newspaper,' said Dave Harding.

'That's right, and this is why it was missed first time around. Does that makes sense to everyone?'

There was a general nodding of heads.

'Jane, what I need you to do is look again at all the witness statements we've got in each burglary and check to see if reference is made to when the death notice was placed online. I'm afraid it may mean taking further witness statements from the funeral directors. Can you get onto that, please?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'So, what we do is place a fake death notice online and wait for them?'

'That was my first thought but it's not quite that simple, Steve.'

'It never is.'

Dixon ignored him.

'I think this gang is too intelligent to fall for that. I certainly wouldn't. At the very least, I'd check with the Land Registry website to see that the deceased is the registered proprietor of the property.'

'Registered proprietor?'

'Owner, you twat, Dave.'

'Thank you for that, Steve.' Dixon continued. 'This means that we're going to need to use a genuine death notice where the deceased was the owner of the property. Steve, can you liaise with funeral directors in, say, Bridgwater and Wells? We're looking for a death where the property has been left unoccupied. Ideally, one where the executors are local solicitors and there's no direct family involved. Ok? Ask that they notify us immediately.'

'I'll get onto that straightaway.'

'Hopefully, we'll have time to set up surveillance inside the property and around before the death'

notice is placed online. Assuming all goes to plan, we should have a visit from the gang within two days.'

'Are you proposing to wait inside the property?'

'I don't think so, Dave. It could be a long wait. I suggest we look for a friendly neighbour who might let us sit in an upstairs room overlooking the property. We can have a surveillance van nearby and perhaps even the helicopter on standby?'

Dixon looked towards DCI Lewis who nodded in agreement.

'I'd suggest having an armed response unit on standby just in case.'

'Thank you, Sir. We'll certainly take you up on that. Any other questions?'

'Have you thought about checking with the Land Registry, Sir, to see if they can tell you who has been searching against the eleven properties burgled so far?' asked Jane.

'I looked at that. I did ask but the Land Registry tell me that they can't help us on that one, at least not officially.'

'Can't or won't?'

'A bit of both probably but I'm not too concerned about that. I'd expect this lot to be too savvy to leave that sort of footprint. They're probably using web-based email set up via a proxy server and almost certainly a stolen credit card each time to pay the Land Registry fee.'

'Good point, Sir.'

Dave Harding leaned across to Steve Gorman. 'What the hell is a proxy server?'

Dixon ignored it.

'Ok, Dave, can you help Jane with the statements from the funeral directors, please? Again, what we're looking for is the date when the notice was sent to the newspapers for publication. It may also mean taking statements from the editors or somebody at the newspaper to confirm when the notice was actually placed online. I reckon it'll prove that the death notice went live on the internet forty-eight hours before each burglary.'

'Are you keeping Devon and Cornwall in the loop, Nick?' Lewis again.

'Yes, Sir. I'm dropping down to Torquay this afternoon to liaise with the officer investigating down there. They're already looking into when the death notice was placed in the Herald Express. It's published every Wednesday and I'm guessing that the death notice went online either Friday or maybe Thursday at the earliest. I'll let you know.'

There was a general gathering up of papers.

'Right then, everybody, if we could meet back here at, say, 6.00pm this evening. It will then be a matter of waiting for a call from a funeral director. Be aware that when the call comes, we'll have to move pretty damn quick.'

Dixon had only just sat down in his office when DCI Lewis appeared in the doorway.

'Very impressive. Let's hope we get a result.'

'Yes, Sir.'

'I gather you've been asking questions about the climbing accident in Cheddar Gorge last week?'

'Accident?'

'Incident then.'

'It's my job to ask questions, Sir. Is there a problem?'

'Not as far as I am concerned, no. I'm just wondering why you're so interested in the case?'

'Jake Fayter was my climbing partner for six years before I joined the Met.'

'What I'm not clear about is why you would think it was anything other than a straightforward accident? The ropes had clearly not been cut so the obvious inference is that the knot came undone?'

'That is not a mistake Jake would have made...'

Lewis interrupted. 'Let's look at it another way then. If the knot at the top had been properly tied the

is simply no way that anybody could have undone it with his weight sitting on the ropes, surely?’

‘I can think of at least one way straight off the bat.’

‘How?’

‘Using a second anchor and a clamp fixed to the ropes below the knot to take the weight.’

‘Possible but unlikely.’

‘It is, Sir, but actually it’s far more straightforward than that.’ Dixon leaned back in his chair. ‘Jake was using the ropes to protect himself while he was practising the moves on a new route. He’d been trying it for nearly two years, according to his parents. They told me that he was very nearly at the point when he was ready for the first ascent, which means that he was able to do all of the moves on the climb.’

‘Which means that his weight would have been on the rock face for longer?’

‘And off the rope, that’s right, Sir. So, assuming Jake was practising one of the easier sequences, his weight could have been off the rope for anything up to 5 minutes, longer even, which is plenty of time for the knot to have been undone at the top.’

Lewis nodded slowly.

‘Not only that but the weight on the end of the rope Jake was using to keep it tight was his small rucksack, which contained just a small bottle of Coke and some clothing.’

‘Have you told anybody about this?’

‘No, not yet. I’m told that one of the witnesses shot a short section of video footage shortly before the fall and I’m hoping that will show whether Jake was climbing immediately before the fall or whether he was sitting with his weight on the rope. If he was climbing, then his weight would have been off the rope and the knot could have been undone. It’s just something that is niggling me, Sir.’

‘I can see that. But an accident still remains the most likely explanation.’

‘Very possibly, Sir, but I shall keep asking questions until I am satisfied.’

‘You do that, Nick. Just try not to ruffle too many feathers.’

It had been a long day. Apart from half an hour on Meadfoot beach and a quick tour of the Torquay Police Station car park, Monty had spent the rest of the time in the back of the Land Rover. Dixon felt that this was better than leaving him at home on his own all day, particularly given that his tenancy agreement banned pets.

He was back in the incident room at Bridgwater Police Station just after 5:30pm. Everyone was there so he suggested that the day’s debriefing start straightaway.

‘What news? Jane, you first.’

‘I’ve checked with the funeral directors and with the newspapers and, surprise surprise, in each case the death notice went live on the internet between twenty-four and forty-eight hours before the burglary.’

‘Well done, Jane. How have you got on, Steve?’

‘I’ve been in touch with all the funeral directors in Bridgwater and Wells. I included Burnham-on-Seymour for good measure, as well. Got a call back within an hour or two from Carters in Bridgwater with an elderly gentleman in Spaxton who died yesterday, apparently.’

‘That’s good.’

Jane couldn’t stifle a laugh and Dixon realised immediately what he had said. ‘Well, you know what I mean.’

‘I wouldn’t get too excited, Sir. I spoke to the solicitor dealing with the estate and he won’t cooperate with us. Too worried about getting sued, I expect. It’s bloody irritating because the property looks ideal from Google Earth but, instead of playing ball, the jobsworth twat has instructed the funeral directors not to place the death notice at all.’

'Git.'

~~'Thank you for that, Dave. The news from Torquay is that the burglary took place thirty six hours after the death notice went online so we're now in a race with Devon to catch these buggers. Let's spread the net a bit wider. We need to get in touch with funeral directors across the whole county. Steve, can you get onto that first thing in the morning?'~~

'Yes, Sir.'

'Any other developments?'

Silence.

'Ok, well if not let's call it a day and meet back here in the morning. Jane, you will have your work cut out taking new statements from the funeral directors and newspapers, won't you?'

'Yes, I'm going to do the funeral directors and Dave will cover the newspapers.'

'Good, well I'll see you all tomorrow.'

Dixon arrived home just after 6.30pm. It was too late to take Monty for another walk so he fed him and then opened a can of beer.

Dixon had always enjoyed a good film. He regarded his favourite films as places to go rather than simply movies to be watched and this evening he fancied a trip to the high seas. He must have seen Master and Commander at least fifteen times. In fact, his collection consisted of no more than twenty films but he had watched all of them many times over. He stretched out on the floor in front of the television with Monty curled up beside him and was asleep before the first cannon shot was fired.

Three

Dixon was sitting at his desk waiting for the phone to ring when it rang. It was not the call that he had been expecting.

‘PC Cole, Sir.’

‘Good morning, constable. I’m assuming you have some news for me?’

‘Yes, Sir. I’ve got Fayter’s climbing equipment from the mortuary, or rather his harness and the shurlopp thing. They’re a bit of a mess, I’m afraid.’

‘Anything unusual about them?’

‘The harness had been cut off him at the mortuary but apart from that I can see no damage or anything unusual about them at all.’

‘Hang onto them for the time being will you? What about the phone?’

‘I’ve got that too.’

‘Where did you find it?’

‘I didn’t, Sir. It was dropped in by the father.’

‘Where did he find it?’

‘In the car.’

‘Am I to assume from that that you haven’t checked the car?’

‘No, Sir. It was recovered from the scene direct to the parents’ house.’

‘Don’t you think it might good idea to check the car then?’

‘What do you think I might find, Sir?’

‘Well you would have found the phone for starters, wouldn’t you?’

‘I can check it later on today, if you think it necessary?’

‘No, leave it to me. Just make sure that you hang onto the phone until I say so. What is it, by the way?’

‘An iPhone, Sir.’

‘Any news on the statements from Birmingham?’

‘We should have them by the end of the week. I’m expecting the photos from the High Tech Unit later on today or first thing tomorrow.’

‘Don’t forget to email them straight across to me as soon as you get them, constable.’

‘I won’t, Sir.’

Sarah Heath had readily agreed to a meeting when Dixon had telephoned her first thing in the morning and it was just after 10.30am when he pulled up outside the address in The Grove, Burnham-on-Sea. He had left strict instructions for Steve Gorman to ring him immediately he received a call from the funeral director.

Dixon guessed that the property was 1930’s. It was adjacent to the Avenue Lawn Tennis Club and had clearly been divided into flats. Jake had shared the garden flat with Sarah and this was accessed by a door at the side of the property.

Dixon thought that she was in her early thirties. She had short blonde hair and wore jeans and a white T-shirt but otherwise looked as if she had just got out of bed. At her invitation, Dixon followed Sarah through to the lounge, which was at the rear of the flat, overlooking the garden.

She offered Dixon coffee, which he accepted, and disappeared into the kitchen to put the kettle on. The

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