

SUNDAY TIMES NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

MARK
BILLINGHAM

Rabbit Hole

Police. Patient. Killer.
Which is Alice?

Mark Billingham has twice won the Theakston's Old Peculier Award for Crime Novel of the Year, and has also won a Sherlock Award for the Best Detective created by a British writer. Each of the novels featuring Detective Inspector Tom Thorne has been a *Sunday Times* bestseller. *Sleepyhead* and *Scaredy Cat* were made into a hit TV series on Sky 1 starring David Morrissey as Thorne, and a series based on the novels *In the Dark* and *Time of Death* was broadcast on BBC1. Mark lives in north London with his wife and two children.

Also by Mark Billingham

The DI Tom Thorne series

Sleepyhead

Scaredy Cat

Lazybones

The Burning Girl

Lifeless

Buried

Death Message

Bloodline

From the Dead

Good as Dead

The Dying Hours

The Bones Beneath

Time of Death

Love Like Blood

The Killing Habit

Their Little Secret

Cry Baby

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In The Dark

Rush of Blood

Cut Off

Die of Shame

MARK
BILLINGHAM

**Rabbit
Hole**

sphere

SPHERE

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Bob Dylan quote transcribed from *Rolling Thunder Revue: A Bob Dylan Story*.

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*Dedicated, with gratitude and respect, to the memory of
the great many doctors, mental health nurses and health-
care assistants who lost their lives to Covid-19.*

You only tell the truth when you're
wearing a mask.

BOB DYLAN

I was on my way to scrounge some tobacco from Lucy, who I sometimes call L-Plate, and is probably the poshest person I've ever met – who doesn't like anyone touching her and thinks the world is flat – when I heard it all kicking off in the little room next to the canteen. The room with the yellow wallpaper and the settee. The 'music' room, because there's some dusty bongos on a shelf and a guitar with four strings.

I could still smell that watery curry Eileen had done for lunch.

I'd eaten it all, don't get me wrong. Two plates full, because I've always had a big appetite and you eat what's put in front of you, but the whiff of it an hour or so afterwards was making me feel slightly sick. Yeah, I remember that. Mind you, lots of things make me feel a bit green around the gills these days and it's not like this place ever smells particularly lovely, let's be honest.

So . . . I was bowling down the corridor, trying not to think about the smell and gasping for a fag, when I heard all the shouting.

Swearing and screaming, stuff being chucked about, all that.

This was a Wednesday afternoon, two days before they found the body.

The sound really echoes in here, so I didn't think too much about it to begin with. It's not like I haven't seen people lose it

before, so I thought it might just be a row that sounded a lot worse than it was and it wasn't until I actually got to the doorway and saw how full-on things were that I knew I was going to have to do something about it. That I needed to step in.

I'm an idiot. *Three* days before they found the body. Three . . .

It was a proper scrum in there. A couple of people were watching – one bloke I don't know very well was actually clapping, like he thought it was some kind of special entertainment that had been laid on – but everyone else was grabbing and grunting, lurching around the room and knocking furniture over. Watching from the doorway, I couldn't really tell who was doing the fighting and who was trying to stop the people who were doing the fighting. It was too late to work out what had started it, but I guessed it didn't really matter by then and had probably never mattered much to begin with.

It doesn't take much round here.

Half a dozen of them tangled up, scratching or pulling hair and calling each other all sorts. A *mêlée*, that's the word, right? French, for a bunch of bad-tempered twats making idiots of themselves.

Wrestling and cursing, spitting threats.

The Waiter, he was there, and the Somali woman who likes touching people's feet was getting properly stuck in, which was amazing as she's about five foot nothing and skinny as a stick. Ilias was throwing his considerable weight about as was Lauren, while Donna and Big Gay Bob wriggled and squealed. And The Thing was there, obviously . . . he was right in the thick of it, kicking a chair over then trying to swing a punch at Kevin, who was backed up against a wall,

while somebody else whose face I couldn't see beneath their hoodie was hanging on to The Thing's arm for dear life.

I mean, Christ on a bike.

I wasn't remotely surprised that none of the people who get paid to sort out stuff like this were in much of a hurry. They've seen it all before, that's the truth. What I'm saying is, I couldn't just hang about waiting for one of that lot to get their arse in gear and put a stop to it. Besides, I'd broken up plenty of rucks in my time, so it wasn't a big deal. I've been trained for it, haven't I?

Bloody hell, Al . . . get a grip. Getting the facts straight is important, right? Something else I've been trained for.

The *first* body. The first of the bodies.

It was obvious pretty quickly after I'd steamed in that I wasn't really making a lot of difference, that I wasn't going to be able to do much physically. To be fair though, I didn't have my equipment – baton, pepper spray, taser, what have you – so I wasn't going to give myself a hard time about it. In the end, the only thing I could do was climb on to one of the few chairs that was still the right way up, take a breath and scream louder than anyone else until I had their attention.

Well, most of them at least, though a few were still muttering.

'I'm going to give you one chance to break this up before things get serious, all right?' I left a little pause then, for what I'd said to sink in, because I've always thought that's effective. Makes them think a bit. 'So, do yourselves a favour and stop playing silly buggers.' A good hard look after that, at each and every one of them. 'Do you understand what I'm saying? I'm not messing around, here. This is a public order offence and I am a police officer . . .'

And I have to say, that did the trick, though watching some of them put the furniture back where it belonged while the others drifted back out into the corridor, I can't say I felt particularly proud of myself. Like, I wasn't exactly happy about it. I knew even then that, later on, crying myself to sleep, I'd be thinking about why they'd done what I wanted.

Not because I'd made anyone see sense or frightened them.

Not because I had any kind of authority.

Truth was, they just couldn't be bothered fighting any more because they were all too busy laughing.

PART ONE

SUDDEN OR SUSPICIOUS

ONE

In the interests of getting the key information across as efficiently as possible, as well as jazzing the story up a tad, I've decided to pretend this is a job interview. I think I can still remember what one of those is like. So, imagine that I'm dressed up to the nines, selling myself to you in pursuit of some once-in-a-lifetime career opportunity, and not just mooching about in a nuthouse, wearing tracksuit bottoms and slippers, like some saddo. Right, *nuthouse*. Probably not the most politically correct terminology, I accept that, even though it's what the people in here call it.

So . . .

Acute. Psychiatric. Ward.

That better? Can we crack on? Last thing I want to do is offend anyone's delicate sensibilities.

My name is Alice Frances Armitage. Al, sometimes. I am thirty-one years old. Average height, average weight – though I'm a bit skinnier than usual right this minute – average . . .

everything. I'm a dirty-blonde, curly-haired northerner – Huddersfield, if you're interested – something of a gobshite if my mother is to be believed, and up until several months ago I was a detective constable in north London with one of the Metropolitan Police's homicide units.

To all intents and purposes, I still am.

By which I mean it's something of a moot point.

By which I mean it's . . . complicated.

The Met were very understanding about the PTSD. I mean, they have to be, considering it's more or less an occupational hazard, but they were a little less sympathetic once the drink and drugs kicked in, despite the fact that they only kicked in at all because of the aforementioned trauma. See how tricky this is? The so-called 'psychosis' is a little harder to pin down in terms of the chronology. It's all a bit . . . chicken and egg. No, I'm not daft enough to think the wine and the weed did a lot to help matters, but I'm positive that most of the strange stuff in my head was/is trauma-related and it's far too easy to put what happened down to external and self-inflicted influences.

In a nutshell, you can't blame it all on Merlot and skunk.

Very easy for the Met though, obviously, because that was when the sympathy and understanding went out of the window and a period of paid compassionate leave became something very different. I'm fighting it, of course, and my Federation rep thinks I've got an excellent chance of reinstatement once I'm out of here. Not to mention a strong case for unfair dismissal and a claim for loss of earnings that he's bang up for chasing.

So, let The Thing and the rest of them take the piss all they like. I might not have my warrant card to hand

at the moment, but, as far as I'm concerned, I am still a police officer.

I think I'll knock the job-interview angle on the head now. I can't really be bothered keeping it up, besides which I'm not sure the drink and drugs stuff would be going down too well in an interview anyway and the work experience does come to something of an abrupt halt.

So, Miss Armitage, what happened in January? You don't appear to have worked at all after that . . .

Yeah, there are some things I would definitely be leaving out, like the whole assault thing, and, to be fair, *Detained under Sections 2 and 3 of the Mental Health Act, 1983* doesn't tend to look awfully good on a CV.

Actually, limited job opportunities aside, there's all sorts of stuff that gets a bit more complicated once you've been sectioned, certainly after a 'three'. Everything changes, basically. You can choose not to tell people and I mean most people do, for obvious reasons, but it's all there on your records. Your time in the bin, every nasty little detail laid bare at the click of a mouse. Insurance for a start: that's a bloody nightmare afterwards and travelling anywhere is a whole lot more hassle. There are some places that really don't want you popping over for a holiday, America for one, which is pretty bloody ironic really, considering who they used to have running the place.

It's the way things work, I get that, but still.

You're struggling with shit, so you get help – whether you asked for it or not – you recover, to one degree or another, then you have loads more shit to deal with once you're back in the real world. It's no wonder so many people end up in places like this time and time again.

There's no stigma when you're all in the same boat.

Anyway, that's probably as much as you need to know for now. That's the what-do-you-call-it, the *context*. There's plenty more to come, obviously, and even though I've mentioned a few characters already, there's loads you still need to know about each of them and about everything that happened. I'll try not to leave anything important out, but a lot of it will depend on how I'm doing on a particular day and whether the most recent meds have kicked in or are just starting to wear off.

You'll have to bear with me, is what I'm saying.

Difficult to believe, some of it, I can promise you that, but not once you know what it's like in here. Certainly not when you're dealing with it every minute. When you know the people and what they're capable of on a bad day, it's really not surprising at all. To be honest, what's surprising is that stuff like this doesn't happen more often.

I remember talking to The Thing about it one morning at the meds hatch and that's pretty much what we were saying. You take a bunch of people who are all going through the worst time in their life, who are prone to mood swings like you wouldn't believe and are all capable of kicking off at a moment's notice. Who see and hear things that aren't real. Who are paranoid or delusional or more often both, and are seriously unpredictable even when they're drugged off their tits. Who are *angry* or *jumpy* or *nervy* or any of the other seven dwarves of lunacy that knock around in here twenty-four hours a day. You take those people and lock them all up together and it's like you're asking for trouble, wouldn't you say?

A good day is when something awful *doesn't* happen.

A murder isn't really anything to write home about in a place like this, not when you think about it. It's almost inevitable, I reckon, like the noise and the smell. You ask me, a murder's par for the course.

Even two of them.