

Chapter 1

Saturday 28 June 2014

3.50 a.m.

Wolf groped blindly for his mobile phone, which was edging further across the laminate floor with every vibration. Slowly the darkness began to disassemble itself into the unfamiliar shapes of his new apartment. The sweat-sodden sheet clung to his skin as he crawled off the mattress and over to the buzzing annoyance.

‘Wolf,’ he answered, relieved that he had at least got that right as he searched the wall for a light switch.

‘It’s Simmons.’

Wolf flicked a switch and sighed heavily when the weak yellow light reminded him where he was; he was tempted to turn it off again. The tiny bedroom consisted of four walls, a worn double mattress on the floor and a solitary light bulb. The claustrophobic box was sweltering thanks to his landlord, who still had not chased the previous tenant up for a window key. Normally this would not have been such an issue in London; however, Wolf had managed to coincide his move with one of England’s uncharacteristic heatwaves, which had been dragging on for almost two weeks.

‘Don’t sound so pleased,’ said Simmons.

‘What time is it?’ yawned Wolf.

‘Ten to four.’

‘Aren’t I off this weekend?’

‘Not any more. I need you to join me at a crime scene.’

‘Next to your desk?’ asked Wolf, only half-joking as he hadn’t seen his boss leave the office in years.

‘Funny. They let me out for this one.’

‘That bad, huh?’

There was a pause on the other end of the line before Simmons answered: ‘It’s pretty bad. Got a pen?’

Wolf rummaged through one of the stacked boxes in the doorway and found a biro to scribble on the back of his hand with.

‘OK. Go ahead.’

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a light flickering across his kitchen cupboard.

‘Flat 108 . . .’ started Simmons.

As Wolf walked into his ill-equipped kitchenette, he was dazzled by blue flashing lights strobing through the small window.

‘. . . Trinity Towers—’

‘Hibbard Road, Kentish Town?’ Wolf interrupted, peering down over dozens of police cars, reporters, and the evacuated residents of the apartment block opposite.

‘How the hell did you know that?’

‘I *am* a detective.’

‘Well, you can also be our number one suspect then. Get down here.’

‘Will do. I just need to . . .’ Wolf trailed off, realising that Simmons had already hung up.

Between the intermittent flashes, he noticed the steady orange light coming from the washing machine and remembered that he had put his work clothes in before going to bed. He looked around at the dozens of identical cardboard boxes lining the walls:

‘Bollocks.’

Five minutes later Wolf was pushing his way through the crowd of spectators that had congregated outside his building. He approached a police officer and flashed his warrant card, expecting to stroll straight through the cordon; however, the young constable snatched the card out of his hand and examined it closely, glancing up sceptically at the imposing figure dressed in swimming shorts and a faded ’93 Bon Jovi: *Keep the Faith* tour T-shirt.

‘Officer Layton-Fawkes?’ the constable asked doubtfully.

Wolf winced at the sound of his own pretentious name: ‘Detective Sergeant Fawkes, yes.’

‘As in – Courtroom-Massacre Fawkes?’

‘It’s pronounced William . . . May I?’ Wolf gestured toward the apartment building.

The young man handed Wolf’s warrant card back and held the tape up for him to pass under.

‘Need me to show you up?’ he asked.

Wolf glanced down at his floral shorts, bare knees and work shoes.

‘You know what? I think I’m doing pretty well by myself.’

The officer grinned.

‘Fourth floor,’ he told Wolf. ‘And be careful heading up there alone; it’s a shitty neighbourhood.’

Wolf sighed heavily once more, entered through the bleach-fragranced hallway, and stepped into the lift. The buttons for the second and fifth floors were missing and a brown liquid had dried over the remainder of the control panel. Using all of his detective skills to ascertain that it was either poo, rust or Coca-Cola, he used the bottom of his T-shirt, Richie Sambora’s face, to push the button.

He had been in hundreds of identical lifts in his time: a seamless metal box, installed by councils all over the country. It had no floor covering, no mirrors and no protruding lights or fixtures. There was absolutely nothing for the underprivileged residents to destroy or steal from their own life-enriching piece of equipment, so they had settled for spray-painting obscenities all over the walls instead. Wolf only had time to learn that Johnny Ratcliff was both ‘ere’ and ‘a gay’ before the doors scraped open at the fourth floor.

Over a dozen people were scattered along the silent corridor. Most looked a little shaken and eyed Wolf’s outfit disapprovingly, except for one scruffy man wearing a forensics badge, who nodded in approval and gave him a thumbs up as he passed. A very faint but familiar smell intensified as Wolf approached the open doorway at the end of the hallway. It was the unmistakable smell of death. People who work around such things quickly become attuned to the unique mix of stale air, shit, piss, and putrefying flesh.

Wolf took a step back from the front door when he heard running footsteps from inside. A young woman burst out through the open doorway, dropped to her knees and then vomited in the corridor in front of him. He waited politely for an opportune moment to ask her to move when another set of footsteps approached. He instinctively took another step back before Detective Sergeant Emily Baxter came skidding into the corridor.

‘Wolf! I thought I saw you lurking out here,’ she roared across the hushed hallway.
‘Seriously, how cool is this?’

She glanced down at the woman retching on the floor between them.

‘Could you puke somewhere else, please?’

The woman sheepishly crawled out of their way. Baxter grabbed Wolf by the arm and excitedly led him into the apartment. Nearly a decade his junior, Baxter was almost as tall as him. Her dark-brown hair turned black under the gloom of the unimpressive entrance hall and, as always, she wore dark make-up that made her attractive eyes appear abnormally large. Dressed in a fitted shirt and smart trousers, she looked him up and down with a mischievous grin.

‘No one told me it was a mufti day.’

Wolf refused to rise to the bait, knowing that she would quickly lose interest if he only remained quiet.

‘How pissed is Chambers gonna be he’s missed this?’ she beamed.

‘Personally I’d take the Caribbean cruise over a dead body too,’ said Wolf, bored.

Baxter’s huge eyes widened in surprise: ‘Simmons didn’t tell you?’

‘Tell me what?’

She led him through the crowded apartment, which had been dimly lit in the glow of a dozen strategically placed torches. Although not overpowering, the smell grew steadily stronger. Wolf could tell that the fetid source was close by because of the number of flies zipping about feverishly above his head.

The flat had high ceilings, contained no furniture, and was considerably larger than Wolf’s own, but was no more pleasant. The yellowed walls were peppered with holes through which the antiquated wiring and dusty insulation bled freely on to the bare floor. Neither the bathroom suite nor the kitchen looked to have been updated since the 1960s.

‘Tell me what?’ he asked her again.

‘This is the *one*, Wolf,’ said Baxter, ignoring the question, ‘a once-in-a-career case.’

Wolf was distracted, mentally sizing up the second bedroom and wondering whether he was being overcharged for his poxy box of a flat across the road. They rounded the corner into the crowded main room and he automatically scanned the floor, between the assorted equipment and pairs of legs, for a body.

‘Baxter!’

She stopped and turned to him impatiently.

‘What didn’t Simmons tell me?’

Behind her, a group of people, standing in front of the large floor-to-ceiling window that dominated the room, moved aside. Before she could answer, Wolf had stumbled away, his eyes fixed on a point somewhere above them: the one light source that the police had not brought with them: a spotlight on a dark stage . . .

The naked body, contorted into an unnatural pose, appeared to be floating a foot above the uneven floorboards. It had its back to the room, looking out through the enormous window. Hundreds of almost invisible threads held the figure in place, which, in turn, were anchored by two industrial metal hooks.

It took Wolf a moment to identify the most unnerving feature of the surreal scene before him: the black leg attached to the white torso. Unable to comprehend what he was

seeing, he pushed his way further into the room. As he drew closer, he noticed the huge stitches binding the mismatched body parts together, the skin tented where the material punctured through: one black male leg, one white; a large male hand on one side, a tanned female counterpart on the other; tangled jet-black hair hanging unsettlingly over a pale, freckled, slender, female torso.

Baxter was back at his side, clearly relishing the look of revulsion on his face:

‘He didn’t tell you . . . One dead body – six victims!’ she whispered gleefully in his ear.

Wolf’s gaze dropped to the floor. He was standing on the shadow cast by the grotesque corpse and, in this simplified state, the proportions appeared even more jarring, gaps of light distorting the joins between the limbs and body.

‘What the hell are the press doing out there already?’ Wolf heard his chief shout at no one in particular. ‘I swear, this department has got more leaks than the *Titanic*. If I find anyone talking to them, they’ll be suspended!’

Wolf smiled, knowing full well that Simmons was only play-acting the part of the stereotypical boss. They had known one another for over a decade and, until the Khalid incident, Wolf had considered him a friend. Beneath the forced bravado, Simmons was in fact an intelligent, caring, and competent police officer.

‘Fawkes!’ Simmons strode over to them. He often struggled not to address his staff by their nicknames. He was almost a foot shorter than Wolf, was now in his fifties, and had developed a managerial belly. ‘Nobody told me it was a mufti day.’

Wolf heard Baxter snigger. He decided to adopt the same tactic that he had used on her by ignoring the comment. After an uncomfortable silence, Simmons turned to Baxter.

‘Where’s Adams?’ he asked.

‘Who?’

‘Adams. Your new protégé.’

‘Edmunds?’

‘Right. Edmunds.’

‘How am I supposed to know?’

‘Edmunds!’ Simmons bellowed across the busy room.

‘Work with him a lot now?’ asked Wolf quietly, unable to hide the hint of jealousy in his voice, which made Baxter smile.

‘Babysitting duty,’ she whispered. ‘He’s the transfer from Fraud, only seen a few dead bodies. He might even cry later on.’

The young man bumbling through the crowd towards them was only twenty-five years old, stick-thin and immaculately presented, apart from his scruffy strawberry-blond hair. He was holding a notebook at the ready and smiled eagerly at the chief inspector.

‘Where are forensics up to?’ asked Simmons.

Edmunds flicked back a few pages in his book.

‘Helen said that her team still haven’t found a single drop of blood anywhere in the apartment. They have confirmed that all six body parts are from different victims and were roughly amputated, probably with a hacksaw.’

‘Did *Helen* mention anything we didn’t already know?’ spat Simmons.

‘Actually, yes. Due to the absence of blood and lack of constriction of the blood vessels around the amputation wounds . . .’

Simmons rolled his eyes and checked his watch.

‘. . . we can be certain that the parts were removed post-mortem,’ finished Edmunds, looking pleased with himself.

‘That’s some fantastic police work, Edmunds,’ said Simmons sarcastically before shouting out: ‘Could someone please cancel the milk carton ad for the man missing a head? Thank you!’

Edmunds’ smile vanished. Wolf caught Simmons’ eye and smirked. They had both been on the receiving end of similar putdowns in their time. It was all part of the training.

‘I just meant that whoever the arms and legs belonged to are definitely dead as well. They will know more once they get the body back to the lab,’ Edmunds mumbled self-consciously.

Wolf noticed the reflection of the body in the dark windows. Realising that he had not yet seen it from the front, he moved round to look.

‘What have *you* got, Baxter?’ asked Simmons.

‘Not a lot. Slight damage to the keyhole, possibly picked. We’ve got officers questioning the neighbours outside, but so far no one’s seen or heard a thing. Oh, and there’s nothing wrong with the electrics – every bulb in the apartment’s been removed except for the one above the victim . . . s, like it’s on show or something.’

‘What about you Fawkes, any ideas? Fawkes?’

Wolf was gazing up at the body’s dark-skinned face.

‘I’m sorry, are we boring you?’

‘No. Sorry. Even in this heat, this thing’s only just beginning to stink, which means the killer either murdered all six victims last night, which seems unlikely, or he’s had the bodies on ice.’

‘Agreed. We’ll get someone to look into recent break-ins at cold-storage units, supermarkets, restaurants, anywhere with an industrial-sized freezer room,’ said Simmons.

‘And see if any of the neighbours heard drilling,’ said Wolf.

‘Drilling is a reasonably common sound,’ blurted Edmunds, who regretted the outburst when three pairs of angry eyes turned on him.

‘If this is the killer’s masterpiece,’ continued Wolf, ‘there’s no way they would risk it dropping out of the ceiling and just being a pile of bits by the time we got here. Those hooks will be drilled into load-bearing metal beams. Someone should have heard it.’

Simmons nodded: ‘Baxter, get someone on it.’

‘Chief, could I borrow you a moment?’ asked Wolf as Baxter and Edmunds moved away. He pulled on a pair of disposable gloves and lifted a handful of knotted black hair away from the gruesome figure’s face. It was male. The eyes were open, the expression unnervingly calm considering the victim’s clearly violent end. ‘Look familiar?’

Simmons walked round to join Wolf by the chilly window and crouched down to better examine the dark face. After a few moments, he shrugged.

‘It’s Khalid,’ said Wolf.

‘That’s impossible.’

‘Is it?’

Simmons looked up again at the lifeless face. Gradually his expression of scepticism transformed into one of deep concern.

‘Baxter!’ he shouted. ‘I need you and Adams—’

‘*Edmunds.*’

‘. . . over at Belmarsh Prison. Ask the governor to take you directly to Naguib Khalid.’

‘Khalid?’ Baxter asked in shock, involuntarily glancing at Wolf.

‘Yes, Khalid. Phone me the moment you’ve seen him alive. Go!’

Wolf looked out towards his apartment block opposite. Many of the windows remained dark, others contained excited faces filming the spectacle below on their mobile phones, presumably hoping to capture something grisly to entertain their friends with in the

morning. Apparently they were unable to see into the dimly lit murder scene that they would otherwise have had front row seats for.

Wolf was able to see into his own flat, a few windows over. In his hurry, he had left all of the lights on. He spotted a cardboard box, at the bottom of a pile, with the words ‘Trousers and Shirts’ scrawled across it.

‘Aha!’

Simmons walked back over to Wolf and rubbed his tired eyes. They stood quietly, either side of the suspended body, watching the first signs of morning pollute the dark sky. Even over the noise of the room, they could hear the peaceful sound of birdsong outside.

‘So, most disturbing thing you’ve ever seen then?’ Simmons joked wearily.

‘A close second,’ replied Wolf without taking his eyes off the growing patch of deep blue sky.

‘Second? Do I even want to know what tops this – this thing?’ Simmons took another reluctant look at the hanging collection of dismemberments.

Wolf gently tapped the figure’s outstretched right arm. The palm looked pale in comparison to the rest of the tanned skin and the perfectly manicured purple nails. Dozens of silk-like threads supported the outstretched hand and a dozen more held the extended index finger in place.

He checked that no one was listening in to their conversation and then leaned across to whisper to Simmons.

‘It’s pointing into my apartment window.’

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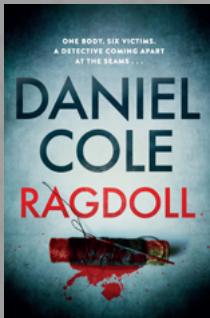
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