

DEATH AND DECEPTION

By

B.A. Steadman

For Stuart

Acknowledgments:

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Chapter 1

Date: Sunday 23rd April Time: 01:47 Devon

The driver flicks off the headlights, killing the puddle of light. He puts the vehicle into neutral and lets it coast to a stop at the kerb. The night is mild.

Two men get out of the vehicle, leaving their doors open, and move to the rear, pressing their hands against the cold metal of the doors as they twist the handles. A girl lies curled amongst the detritus in the back of the vehicle, her white skin reflecting the silver sliver of spring moon. The taller man picks her up, cradling her head, and follows the smaller figure through the trampled green netting into the stand of bent and beaten pine trees.

He lays the girl carefully behind a fallen log and the other man covers her with a branch he tears from a tree.

Back at the vehicle, the smaller man notices the girl's shoe, a flat, black ballerina slipper lying in the mud on the side of the road. He retrieves it, folds it in half and thrusts it into his hoodie pocket. 'She'll be safe there for a little while,' he whispers. The other does not reply, but wipes sweat from his face with the bottom of his tee shirt.

Starting the engine, they creep forward, only switching on the headlights as they turn onto the main road.

Hours later, a shaft of early sunlight like the beam of a lazy torch, searches the patch of pine trees. It passes over golden highlights in a curl of dark hair half-buried in a nest of needles and cones. A bird sings in the still of the morning. A black-eyed magpie sidles over and makes a tentative stab at the onyx and silver ring on the girl's finger. Her face turned into the bed of pine needles, the girl lies on her side under the broken branch, as if simply asleep.

'Gi's a fag, then, Parker.' Lee Bateson leapt onto his mate's back and grappled him to the ground, pummelling his head. Joey Parker squirmed out from underneath in a tangle of skinny legs and arms;

'Gerroff me. I haven't got any smokes, so piss off.' He swung an arm back and grabbed Bateson by the tie, throttling him while the other boy floundered, gasping and wriggling to get free.

'Oi, is this a real fight, or what?' said a voice from the other side of the barbed wire fence.

Parker dropped Bateson and scuttled over to the bigger boy.

'Just messin', Ryan. Got any fags?'

'Might 'ave. Come on.'

Ryan Carr disappeared amongst the conifers of a wood at the top of the school field. The others dumped their bags and slipped after him through the broken fence, casting furtive glances towards the school buildings.

Joey Parker checked his phone as he followed. 8.25am, just about time to cadge a smoke and get to registration before they were missed.

Carr waited by the clearing, kicking a dead crow with his boot. He fiddled about in his blazer pocket and fished out two cigarettes, passing one to Bateson and keeping one for himself. He slid a lighter from his sock and lit them.

Bateson shared a complicit smirk with Carr, who puffed in quiet contentment. He wandered off towards the fallen log dominating the small clearing.

Ryan went to sit, but stopped mid-movement, cigarette hanging from his bottom lip. He stared at a curl of hair peeking out from the side of the log.

Bateson trotted over.

'What is it? Let me see,' he said, words trailing a haze of smoke. He pushed past Carr and handed his cigarette to a grateful Parker. He moved closer, and flashed a look back at the other boys, eyes wide, as a magpie appeared from behind the log and began to pick at something on the ground, its black beak stabbing. Bateson's eyes narrowed to a single focus. A ripped and shredded finger, the remains of an eye, hanging by who knew what, to a dark, empty socket.

Bateson stared, mesmerised by the whiteness of bone protruding from the bloodiness of flesh and the pinkness of the string attaching eyeball to socket and the shining silver ring the magpie was attempting to steal.

Closer now, Carr leapt backwards startling the magpie into a defiant caw as it flapped for the sky.

'Oh, shit!'

Dread gripped Lee Bateson. It was obvious now what would be under the branch. He knew. But he couldn't stop himself. He had to look.

Behind him, Parker threw up the Weetabix he had consumed not an hour before.

'Shit, shit, shit!' Lee Bateson dragged the branch away, exposing the still and silent form of Carly Braithwaite.

Detective Inspector Dan Hellier hurtled across Topsham Road, ignoring the red traffic lights, and ducked down Trew's Weir Reach to the echo of an angry lorry's horn. The new bike was living up to the hype. He grinned and stood into the pedals, powering the bike up to speed, hitting 25mph as he took a sharp right followed by an equally sharp left across Trew's Weir Bridge and onto the cycle path. Morning air crisp in his nostrils, he breathed deeply, relishing the peace of this stretch of river. Trees were springing green after a long winter, and the River Exe, wide and shallow at this point, rolled along beside him. Swallows, newly returned and hungry, raced with him past the apartments and waterfront houses of Exeter's quayside, looking for insects.

Thighs pumping, Dan pushed himself for the last few hundred metres and slewed to a halt outside his apartment building, heart working hard. He tapped his stopwatch. It read 9.32 a.m. Thirty-four minutes. Better than yesterday morning. He climbed off the bike and let it rest against a bench. Gulping air, he wiped his face with his jersey and stared into the green water, transported for a moment back to childhood summers when he and his skinny mates would play and swim in the river all day. He looked around, as if he could see them still, but that all felt like a very long time ago. Things had moved on. There were only strangers there now, staring back at him.

Dan shook off the mood and stretched out his shoulders and legs. He had a nice flat in a great part of Exeter, what on earth was he getting miserable about? The café opposite

had been baking. He could smell croissants across the water and hear his stomach rumbling in appreciation. He turned away from the water and looked up at his flat, situated on the corner with its own balcony overlooking the bustle of the quayside pubs and restaurants. It was good. He'd have been lost in the countryside after so many years in London's noise and craziness. Not the spacious Victorian flat he had owned in London, it was true, but it suited his needs. His single needs.

His phone vibrated against his back. Dan unhooked his helmet, dangled it from the handlebars, and took the phone from the back pocket of his cycling jersey. Dammit, Sally Ellis. He thumbed the slide across; 'It's my day off.' He walked the bike towards the doorway, steadying his breathing.

'Sir? Is that you?'

'Yes, Sally, it's me, hoping this is really important.'

'Oh, I don't think you'll be disappointed. Superintendent Oliver's looking for you. A body's been found.'

Dan stopped mid-walk.

'Suspicious?'

'Oh, yes. Young girl, in the woods at the back of a school playing field. Kids found the body. Scene is being secured now. DCI Gould is on his way and you're to head straight over there. I'll text you the details.'

Dan flushed, bending forward to catch his breath. Gasbag Gould, of all people.

'Is he going to be leading the case, Sal?'

'Don't *think* so, but you'd better talk to the boss. She's waiting for your call.'

Dan raised his head and stared back towards the weir in the distance. Ducks and swans squabbled for bread to the delight of a screaming toddler. Runners and cyclists sped past, enjoying the spring morning. He breathed out. First case in charge, if he was in charge.

'Are you breathing heavily down the phone at me, sir? Sort of panting?'

'Only in your dreams, Sergeant Ellis.'

Sally laughed. 'There was I thinking you were harbouring lustful thoughts.'

He chuckled, 'You're way out of my league, Sal. Tell the Superintendent I'm on my way. And now get off my phone - I need a quick shower first. I don't think she'd be impressed if I turned up in Lycra.'

'Now, there's an image I'll have to inwardly digest,' she replied, and rang off.

Dan locked his bike in the hallway, and took the stairs to his apartment two at a time, excitement and nerves vying with the hunger in his empty stomach.

Twenty minutes later, Dan was splayed flat on his front with his left arm wedged under the bed up to the shoulder. He was sure he'd kicked his shoe under there the night before. His phone rang. He rolled onto his back, squeezed the phone out of his trouser pocket and looked at the screen, Superintendent Oliver. He scrambled to his feet.

'Ma'am?'

'DI Hellier, where are you?'

'At home, Ma'am. I'm almost ready...'

'Save it, I know it's your day off, but I need you. Get your notebook.' She waited.

Dan reached over to the other side of the bed and grabbed notebook and pen.

'Got it, Ma'am.'

Two slices of toast popped up and their warm scent wafted through from the kitchen. His stomach rumbled again.

'Right, so far we know the victim is a teenage girl. No obvious cause of death on first look, so it's not murder until the Pathologist arrives and confirms either way. The PC first on the scene has made a preliminary ID. Seems she knew the girl.' She hesitated and he could hear her pen tapping the paper, 'Carly Braithwaite, age sixteen. Just bringing up her address. I'll text it to you.'

'It's OK, Ma'am, Sally Ellis has sent over the details already, and I know the way to St Andrew's.'

What he really wanted to know was where he stood in relation to Ian Gould, but he couldn't think of a way to phrase it without sounding whiny. 'Ma'am?'

'What?'

Here goes nothing, he thought,

'Is DCI Gould leading? Because I thought the next major case was mine, but if he's already at the scene...' he drifted to a halt. Whiney, definitely.

'Oh, got you. No, Inspector, that's the whole point of me getting you in on your day off and bringing you up-to-date. This will be your first lead.'

His heart did a sideways lurch. Leading the case, and with a possible murder to solve. Christmas!

‘But before you get all gushy and start imagining your face on the evening news,’ she continued, ‘DCI Gould will be with you all the way. Acting as your senior support and sharing the load. Especially as the silly pillock has messed up the rosters in your unit and let two Sergeants and a DC go on leave in the same week.’

Right, so he was ‘in charge’ but he’d have Gould breathing down his neck the whole time. Great.

‘I have got Sergeant Ellis, Ma’am, and a couple of good lower ranks. With all due respect, I don’t think I need to be supervised. Except by you, of course.’

He stumbled to a halt and listened to the change in her breathing, and the speed of her pen tapping.

‘With all ‘due respect’, Inspector, this is DCI Gould’s last shout before he retires. You’ll work with him and enable him to slope off in three weeks feeling good about himself, or I’ll make your life such a misery you’ll be begging for yet another transfer and your fledgling career will go right down the toilet. Is that enough ‘respect’ for you?’

Dan sank onto the bed, face burning.

‘Yes, Ma’am. Sorry. Just wondering.’

‘I’ll bet you were.’ Her tone changed. Back to business. ‘Everything you do comes straight to me, Inspector, no keeping stuff to yourself and giving me nasty surprises. Let’s keep this one clean and tidy. Right, I think that’s all for now, you know the ropes. Off you pop, then. Back here for five o’clock briefing.’ She didn’t say goodbye.

Dan stared at the phone for a second. Tough but fair, they said at the Station. Well, tough, for sure.

He pulled the bed away from the wall and located his shoe. The toast cooled to inedible leathery cardboard as he slammed the front door behind him.

Chapter 2

Date: Monday 24th April Time: 10:07 St Andrew's Academy, Exeter

By 10.07 a.m., DCI Ian Gould was resting his bulk against the Reception desk at St Andrew's Academy, chatting to the Receptionist. He sighed when he heard the siren blasting away as Hellier arrived with a scream of tires into the car park.

Dan switched off the siren, jumped out of his Audi and surveyed the school. On the eastern edge of the city outskirts, five miles from the centre, this was practically a country school. Low rise and low key at the entrance, he could see evidence of new building further on the site. He thought it probably took its catchment from a mix of farms, the large estates at Whipton and the villages of East Devon. Almost a thousand students, and over a hundred staff, Sally had said, a successful school. This could be a mess. He corrected himself, the death of a child was always a mess, wherever it occurred. He locked the car door and made his way into the Reception area.

'Alright?' Gould said, eyeing Dan's damp hair and red face.

'Cycling,' Dan replied. He signed in and smiled at the Receptionist as she let them through the double doors into the corridor.

Gould pursed his lips. 'The boss says you're leading on this case. You know I'm retiring in a few weeks?'

Dan glanced across at him, unable to gauge the DCI's mood.

'Yeah, that's what she said.'

Gould stopped in the mid-lesson quiet of the corridor and regarded his hands. 'I know you all think I'm past it and it's time I was put out to grass. Maybe I am. But you will show me respect on this case, DI Hellier. I am still your senior officer.' He stared Dan down. 'And you, you're just a smart-arsed kid up from London, really, aren't you? Got it all to prove.' He placed his forefinger in the centre of Dan's chest. 'Everything you do goes through me.' Jab. 'No sneaking to the boss behind my back.' Jab. 'We're a team.' Jab. 'OK?'

Dan swallowed the flash of heat that being poked in the chest by the old bastard had ignited. He wanted this job.

'Got it, sir,' he said in as neutral a tone as he could manage.

Gould studied him. 'Right. So don't cock up.' He offered half a smile. 'You'd better follow me then. The crime scene's a quarter-hour walk away.'

Dan followed him through the building and out onto the play area. He'd recovered a little since the earlier phone call with Superintendent Oliver. Once it became clear that he would be working with Gould whatever he felt about it, he'd backed down swiftly. The alternative was a transfer - another transfer, he corrected himself. Oliver had also told him that everything he did had to go through her. What was it they said about a man serving two masters? He sighed, his earlier excitement at leading the case waning into resignation. He was the newbie, with everything to prove, no matter what he had achieved in London.

Gould tramped along for a few moments, grumbling. He hurried to match Dan's stride, puffing and wheezing.

'I don't suppose anyone would care if I did end up with a heart attack.' In the distance, they could see black and yellow tape and two figures in uniform at the far end of the large playing field.

'Probably should have shut the school.'

'Yeah, it's happening. Buses will be arriving back from their depots within the hour. Teachers are doing lessons as normal and will send the classes out one at a time. Better control that way. The Head teacher would prefer it to stay open, of course.'

PC Lizzie Singh came down the field to meet them. She gave her report as they walked towards the wood.

By 8.44 a.m., after the phone call had come in from the school, Lizzie had been first on the scene. (*Author's own words*): Disregarding the trouble they might be in, the boys had legged it back to the school as fast as they could to report their horrific find. The eldest, Ryan Carr, had led Lizzie back to the body.

'I knew Carly, sir,' she said to Hellier. 'I identified the body. She was a member of our Youth Matters group. She won 'Exeter's Got Talent' at Christmas.'

Dan glanced at her. 'What's that? Local talent show?'

Singh snorted. 'Bit more than that. The winner gets a recording session and the last two have gone on to get a contract. It's quite well-thought of in the music industry.'

'So she was that good?'

'Yes, she was a good kid all round, really. Bit loud, bit opinionated, but a fantastic singer.' She grimaced, close to tears. 'It's so sad, a young girl dead when she had so much to live for.' She sniffed and blew her nose on a tissue.

'Sorry. I've asked the school nurse to sit with Jenna until her Dad comes to collect her. He's a builder so he's got to get back from Newton Abbot.'

'Does she know what's happened?' asked Dan.

'No, only that we have news about her sister, and she's to wait until her father arrives.'

'Right, good move, PC Singh,' said Dan. 'Could you ask Mr Braithwaite to drive Jenna home and tell him we'll be round to talk to them as soon as possible?'

'Yes, sir, of course.'

Lizzie led them over a broken barbed wire fence towards a clearing where the Forensics team had set up shop.

'It's not great in the woods, sir,' she said. 'Someone's been shooting crows and there are half a dozen dead ones on the ground. The maggots have been busy. The floor is mainly pine needles so no footprints to speak of. There's loads of rubbish everywhere, too. Typical kids' mess - fag ends, tobacco pouches, sandwich wrappers. Forensics are all over it, and the pathologist is waiting for you.'

Gould winked at her. 'Good job, Lizzie.'

Dan stared at the DCI. He'd winked ... at a female PC. Jesus! What century did he come from? He shook his head as PC Singh handed them their protective clothing.

Gould complained through the entire process, irritating Dan, who had got into his suit with ease. He felt obliged to wait for Gould to make yet another attempt to close the zip before they could head into the crime scene.

They followed the path through the trees, pulling on latex gloves. Campbell Fox, the pathologist, was sitting on a log, writing up his notes. 'Aha! It's the cavalry at last. I was ready to lie doon next to the wee lassie myself.' He stopped and did an obvious double take. 'Ian Gould! I thought you'd retired to Budleigh Salterton or another one of God's waiting rooms.'

Gould laughed and shook Fox's hand.

'It's been way too long Cam, you old bear. Still fly-fishing? Still not managed to catch yourself a wife?'

Dan studied the clearing and the position of the tent that protected the body. He wouldn't approach until the pathologist gave him the nod, so he was trying to work out how the girl might have arrived at the wood. It was a nightmare of a crime scene, as PC Singh had said. He picked out a path through to the school playing fields, and one that seemed to lead to a narrow lane that ran alongside the school grounds. It was unlikely she would have entered via the school, too public. They were bound to have CCTV on the main gates, though, so he could check.

The DCI and his mate were still standing there joking with a dead girl lying just a couple of feet away. Dan shook his head for the second time that day. He wanted to shout at Gould, *Get your priorities right, man*, but common sense compressed his lips into a flat line. He ignored their banter until he heard his name.

'This is Detective Inspector Hellier,' said Gould, 'Dan Hellier. He's leading on this case – his first and my last. Dan, this is Dr Campbell Fox, the best, well, probably the only, leading pathologist to come out of the Gorbals. He is the expert. Be glad we've got him.'

Dan turned, took in the vast girth, height and beard for the first time, and felt a bit overwhelmed. Standing at just less than six feet, Dan felt short compared to this giant.

'Pleasure to meet you, sir.' He put out a hand and felt it disappear into the moist softness of Fox's paw. Together they ducked under the flap of the tent and Dan experienced the familiar feeling of cold, of quiet stillness, that being in the presence of death always brought. Even Gould was quiet.

Fox turned the girl onto her back. Dan knelt and studied her face, close enough to see each eyelash on the good eye, far enough away to ignore the gaping darkness where her other eye should have been. She had dark hair and pale skin, just like him. She was slender, and tall, just like him. She could be his sister.

He breathed rapidly through his nose. It had been the substance of his nightmares for years, that one day he would be called to a crime scene and it would be Alison lying there, white and silent instead of this girl. Although, in Alison's case, the cause of death would be only too easy to read in the mad dance of tracks that would, by now, be pocking every available vein in her body.

He pushed back a lock of hair from Carly Braithwaite's face. There was so little damage, it was hard to see how she had died. Would it have been better for everybody if Alison had died, he thought, early on in her chosen career of addict, thief and prostitute, before she'd become welded into the life? He and his parents could have grieved then, and shared good memories. As it was, the only time they heard from her was when she was begging for money, or had broken into the house and taken it.

He often wondered if it was the regular police visits when he was a boy, bringing Alison home drunk, or high on Christ knew what, the tension and relief mingling with his mother's tears, and the calmness and kindness of the officers, that had made him join up.

Fox winked at Gould over Dan's head.

'Straight to work, eh? Nice to see them keen. Well, you already know who she is. All the personal stuff can be read in my report at your leisure. No obvious cause of death, but there are marks on her neck and face which may indicate asphyxiation.'

Fox bent a knee and used Dan's shoulder to steady himself as he knelt next to the body. With some delicacy and precision, he pulled back the top of Carly Braithwaite's hood to expose her white neck.

'I draw your attention to the faint bruise marks on the front of the neck. Such marks may indicate pressure from a forearm, perhaps. She wasn't strangled in the way you would understand such a term, with fingers round the throat. No ligature used.' He pulled up the sleeve of her t-shirt. 'There are bruises on the upper arms, consistent with being held around the biceps. The eye appears to have been dislodged by a crow or magpie post-mortem. I don't think it relates to her death. She was fully clothed except for one shoe, and there is no bag, phone, purse or anything else personal in the immediate area.'

Dan noticed that Fox lost his strong Glasgow accent when he was in professional mode. Seven years at medical school in Edinburgh would do that to a man. He'd lost his own Devon burr after three years with the Met. It didn't do to give people too much ammunition.

'Any idea what time she might have died?'

Fox pushed himself up and sat on the log to gather his notes.

'Rigor Mortis has set in, so at least twelve hours ago, but I'll know more when we get her back to the hospital. She has got some pooling of the blood suggesting she was either

carried here and dumped, or moved within the copse to hide her. That's what Forensics are doing now, trying to work out if she was brought here post-mortem, and if so, how.'

Dan stood up and stepped back outside to join Gould.

'D'you know what I hated most about working Vice?'

'I didn't know you had,' said Gould.

'It was finding girls like this. I could cope with the whores and the druggies, but young kids like this, wrong place, wrong time...makes me angry.'

Gould sighed, 'Yeah, and this one doesn't even look used, does she? No needle marks, no smell of alcohol.'

'No obvious cause of death. Obvious result, though.' Dan stared off into the trees.

'You alright?'

Dan shrugged. 'Yeah, sorry, thinking about something else.' Thinking about my stupid, fucked-up sister. But he couldn't say that, not to this stranger. Gould had been around so long he'd probably arrested her on more than one occasion, and Dan didn't want to be associated with her through work. Not yet, anyway.

Fox tore off his gloves, 'Too soon to tell what time she died, but I can say that there are signs of some kind of altercation. Now, if ye'll back away nicely, boys, I'll get the lassie back to my nice cool hospital and we can find out what else she wants to tell us.' He finished stuffing his papers into his bag. 'I'll see you tomorrow. Post-Mortem will begin at 10.00am.'

He nodded at the waiting undertakers, who zipped Carly Braithwaite into a bag and lifted her onto a stretcher, ready for the long walk across the field to the waiting black van.

'She must have been killed somewhere else,' said Dan, eyeing the debris around their feet. 'Forensics aren't going to find anything useful amongst all this rubbish, and there's no sign of a bag or a coat or anything, just an old school scarf that could be hers.' They watched as the scarf was bundled into a bag and labelled.

Dan poked an empty tobacco pouch with his toe. 'If you killed her elsewhere, why bring her to this copse? It's hardly a safe place to dump a body with a thousand kids on site. Anybody could have come up here.'

'Maybe that's what the murderer wanted, for the body to be found,' offered Gould.

'Hmm, maybe. Or maybe he had to stash her somewhere quickly and was planning to come back the next night and move her, but three snot-nosed kids discovered her first?'

They watched the Forensic team tracing a third possible route through the trees to the quiet road beyond. One of them turned and gave them a thumbs up, indicating fresh tyre marks on the soft mud at the side of the road. 'Guess we were right about her being brought here,' said Dan. 'I'll bet you a tenner she was killed Saturday or Sunday and moved here in the dark.'

Gould thought about the bet for a moment.

'Nah, easy money for you.'

Dan shrugged. 'It'll be good if they can identify the tyre prints, it may help to identify the vehicle that brought her here.'

'And a set of footprints would be handy. At least we've got an idea when she died now.' Gould looked up at Dan from under bushy eyebrows, 'and it looks like you've got your murder.'

Dan fought the treacherous worm of excitement in his belly. First case, first murder, all his. He almost rubbed his hands together.

'We've got a lot of people to talk to, and there's no point hanging round here. If I go over and see the family once they're home, will you supervise the school interviews?'

'Sure,' replied Gould, unzipping the front of his suit with an audible sigh, and stuffing his hands into the pockets of his jacket. His earlier antagonism appeared to have been softened by the encounter with Fox. 'I'm quite looking forward to interviewing someone on a murder case for the first time in four years.'

'Right. I'll get Sally Ellis to meet me at the Braithwaite house, sir. She can act as family liaison for the next few days.'

'Good idea. By the way, you can call me Ian,' he said, 'as we'll be working together.'

Dan smiled, one small battle won.

'I won't mess up, you know, Ian. We'll get to the bottom of this and you can bow out in a blaze of glory.'

Gould snorted. 'Right, I'll look forward to that, then.'

They walked back to the small broken gate at the edge of the wood and handed their used coveralls, overshoes and gloves to the PC on guard duty. 'Another slog down the bloody field,' Gould grumbled. 'Come and meet the Head teacher on your way out. He

needs a bit of reassurance that we're not turning his school into an episode of "Midsomer Murders".'

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