

HE WATCHES YOUR  
EVERY MOVE.

HE CONTROLS  
YOU.

HE WILL  
MAKE YOU PAY.



THE  
PUPPET  
MASTER

SAM HOLLAND

THE  
**PUPPET**  
MASTER  
S A M H O L L A N D



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*For Dom*

*Death is the wish of some, the relief of many, and the end of all.*

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, 4 BC–AD 65

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# Part 1

# DAY 1

## MONDAY

### Chapter 1

In the battle of human versus 127-ton diesel locomotive, there can only be one winner.

Cara stands on the edge of the platform, looking along the railway track. A hundred metres to her left, a gaggle of PCs wearing latex gloves and clutching yellow biohazard bags peer beneath the wheels of a stationary freight train. Disgruntled commuters gather around her. Some voices are sympathetic, shocked. Others moan about the delay, consulting their smartphones.

‘Why can’t they do this at home?’ a woman says next to Cara’s shoulder. ‘Selfish, isn’t it?’

Cara turns slowly. The woman is staring at her, expecting a response. Cara’s black jeans and smart coat are deceiving; she’s not an early-morning traveller, about to offer something agreeable – what an inconvenience it is to be standing here, freezing to death, in the dim light at seven-fourteen a.m. on a cold January morning.

‘DCI Cara Elliott,’ she says, flashing her police warrant card. ‘And I’d say the selfish one is you. Take a look at yourself. In your cashmere scarf, your leather gloves. You can’t get to the office. So what? Instead, you’ll work from home, in your twenty-two-degree central heating, a mug of Fairtrade coffee by your side because you pride yourself on doing the right thing, don’t you?’

The woman gapes, speechless.

‘Think, as you drive home,’ Cara continues, getting into her stride now, ‘about how lucky you are, compared to this poor sod, spattered all the way from the platform edge to where those coppers are, on the tracks. Do you

realise that the force at which he was struck knocked his head clean off? It's over there.' She points, the woman still open-mouthed. 'His hair caught in the brambles. While the rest of him ...' Cara makes an expansive gesture with her hands. 'When the driver got out of the train, he stood on the guy's intestines. Had to be taken to hospital, hysterical. So, when you think about who might be worst affected this morning, maybe, just consider, it isn't you.'

'Boss?'

Cara is distracted by the large man appearing at her side, awkwardly clearing his throat.

'They're waiting for us,' he says.

He turns to the stunned woman as they leave; Cara hears him give her a mumbled, 'Sorry for the inconvenience. Have a nice morning,' as he ushers her away.

'You went a bit hard on that one,' Jamie says as they duck under the cordon. 'Bad night?'

'You could say that.'

'Here.' He hands her his coffee; she takes it gratefully.

'I owe you one.'

'You owe me five,' Jamie replies with a smile.

They walk in silence down the deserted platform, yellow line to their left, white paint marking the edge to their right. On the tracks, the massive class 66 diesel-electric locomotive is quiet, the line of freight containers on flatbed wagons stilled behind it. A dinosaur, put to sleep. Chances are it'll be there for a while.

Cara notes overhead lights, but no cameras this far along. A metal fence separates them from the car park. Six feet high, not easy to scale.

They step over black rubber pyramids, designed to deter people from leaving the end of the platform, down to paving slabs then gravel. She approaches the main gathering of people cautiously, looking at her feet as she walks. Cara has no desire to tread on something nasty – there are pieces of their victim distributed down this entire stretch of track.

The call had come through at half six that morning. A likely category two, a violent and unnatural death at Southampton Airport Parkway station. Normally an accident on the railway would fall under the BTP; Cara's in the dark as to why they're there.

Hopefully all will become clear soon. Cara and Jamie stop next to the uniformed officer, British Transport Police emblazoned on his fluorescent yellow vest. He smiles, an apologetic grimace.

‘You must be DCI Elliott. I’m Sergeant Pearson. Sorry to bring you out. I’m starting to think it’s a wasted trip.’

‘We’re here now,’ Cara replies. ‘This is DS Jamie Hoxton.’ The two men shake hands although Pearson’s gaze stays locked on Cara. ‘Tell us what you know.’

‘Well,’ Pearson turns and scowls at the uniforms as they pick their way around the track, depositing what can only be described as ‘samples’ into yellow plastic bags. ‘It seems that our victim was stood at the far end of platform one, waiting for the six-oh-four to London Waterloo. The normal announcement went out about the non-stopping diesel, and while everyone else moved behind the yellow line, he stepped forward.’

Cara’s eyes narrow. ‘So, a suicide?’

‘Yes, but ...’ Pearson pauses. ‘Our initial witness statements were confused. It was a full platform, rammed with commuters. Still dark. A girl was doing some filming. Everyone was looking at her.’

‘Filming?’ Jamie repeats. ‘We’ll need that footage.’

‘A YouTube thing, she said. I’ll help you find her. But everything’s ... muddled. So we called you. Your team is more accustomed to dealing with such matters. Murder, and—’

He stops abruptly. *Serial killers* is what he was going to say. Cara’s used to it. The slight nervousness, the reverent way she’s treated. She’s DCI Cara Elliott. The senior investigating officer from the Echo Man case. Infamous, in her own way.

‘Plus, we’re understaffed,’ Pearson finishes apologetically. ‘We cover a huge area and there’s a potential jumper at Basingstoke. My team’s been deployed up there. Better if we can stop one before ...’

His voice trails off as his gaze drifts to the ground. Between them, resting in among the crushed stone ballast, is a single white tooth. Jamie takes a glove out of his pocket, puts it on and picks the tooth up, letting it rest solemnly in his palm. Cara looks at it for a moment. A piece of gum is attached, blood leaving a trail on the blue latex. Jamie closes his fingers around it then trudges towards one of the PCs.

Cara watches as he drops it into a double-layered yellow bag, thinking that she should feel something other than bone-deep weariness. This is a piece of a human, after all.

She sighs and tips the last dregs from Jamie's cold coffee into her mouth. 'Fetch me another one of these,' she concludes to Pearson. 'And we'll see what we can do.'

An hour later, Cara is warm, hyper-caFFEinated, and sitting in front of the CCTV surveillance screens in the station office. On the array of monitors she can see Jamie outside, nearly six inches taller than the majority of the people around him, taking a preliminary witness statement from a uniformed woman on the platform.

Her new right-hand man for ten months now, Cara's become accustomed to his calm, solid style. His reliability, his steadfast approach. She appreciates having him around.

The footage from that morning loads, and Cara cranes forward as people mill about on the platform, drinking coffee, chatting, waiting. A train comes through, passengers get on, some disembark. The roster changes.

'There he is,' Pearson says, pointing to the far left of the screen. Cara squints. The man's clearly nervous, circling like a caged dog, his hands fluttering.

'The station staff spotted him, went over to see if he was okay.'

As Cara watches, the man is approached by a woman in uniform. He's agitated, rendered panicky by the conversation.

'She tried to persuade him to come with her, but he refused. She left to fetch someone who could help.'

'What was he wearing?' Cara asks. He stands out from the rest of the commuters in their smart suits and business attire.

'That's just it. It seems to be a tracksuit.'

'Or pyjamas,' she comments.

She continues to watch as he paces, until he moves out of the range of the CCTV and the view is lost.

'Is there a better angle on this?'

'No, that's—'

Pearson pauses as the diesel comes racing through the station. The moment of impact isn't caught, but Cara can tell what happens from the

shock and panic on the faces of those waiting.

The door opens behind her, and Jamie enters. He has a woman with him – Cara recognises her from the CCTV. She’s young, in a light blue shirt and navy fleece. Her badge says, *Sharon. Happy to Help*. She shrinks in the face of three staring police officers.

‘I couldn’t stop him,’ she says immediately. ‘I should have ... I dunno.’

A droplet of snot trickles from her nose; she sniffs.

Jamie gestures to one of the chairs and she reluctantly sits down. Cara edges closer so that their knees are nearly touching. She leans forward, hands together.

‘Sharon, I’m DCI Elliott,’ she begins, her voice soft. ‘You can call me Cara. And you’ve done nothing wrong. But could you tell me what you’ve been discussing with DS Hoxton? With Jamie here. I’d like to hear directly from you what happened this morning.’

The girl nods. Sniffs again. Jamie hands her a tissue.

‘What was it about this guy that made you talk to him?’

‘I’ve just been on my training. You know. The suicide prevention programme. And I thought ... he looked how I was told.’

‘And how was that?’

‘Nervous. Out of place – he didn’t have a bag with him and he was dressed all casual. He was by himself, and he wouldn’t look at me. He seemed ... random. And—’ She sits up, getting into her stride. ‘He didn’t have a coat. He must have been freezing.’

‘What did you do?’

‘What I was taught. I went up to him, said hello. Asked if I could help. But he stared at me, fidgeting, his eyes all glassy. Like a zombie.’

Cara glances up at Jamie. He meets her gaze, reading her mind, but both stay quiet.

‘And then what?’ she asks Sharon.

‘Asked his name. And then I didn’t know what to do so I thought I’d better get someone. I told him to stay there and I’d be right back but then I heard the train coming in and the screams and ...’ She starts crying again, messily, tears streaking through her mascara. She raises a shaking finger to swipe it away, only making the smudging worse. ‘I should have ...’

‘You did all you could, Sharon,’ Cara says gently. Jamie passes across



another tissue; the girl dabs at her eyes. 'Did you see anyone around him? Anyone with him?'

'No. Just the usual commuters. If anything, he was trying to get away from them, like he was scared. Can I go now? There's all these people here and I need to help my boss.'

'Yes, of course. But what was his name?'

She pauses. 'I dunno. I didn't catch it. I should have asked again, but I thought it was more important that I get someone. I—'

Cara reaches out and touches her arm. 'You did everything you could.'

Sharon nods, her eyes pleading, desperate to believe her. Cara thanks her and she hurries out of the room.

Jamie moves his chair next to Cara. 'Drugs?' he says, articulating her thoughts.

'Maybe.'

Cara wordlessly rewinds the CCTV footage, leans back so Jamie can see.

When the final act has played out for the second, awful time, Cara turns to him.

'What do you think? Suspicious death or suicide?'

'That's all we have?' Jamie addresses Pearson. Pearson nods. Jamie tips his head to and fro, considering.

'Based on this, and the statement from the desk clerk, my inclination would be suicide. He was agitated, panicked. He clearly wasn't there for work. He gave all the warning signs of someone about to kill themselves.'

'But?' Cara says, pre-empting.

'But,' Jamie says with a nod in her direction, 'if he was on drugs, and confused, it could have been an accident. And our budding Spielberg is AWOL.'

'Bloody fantastic. You can't get a better angle on the CCTV?'

Pearson looks apologetic. 'Not yet. Sorry.'

Cara sighs. It would be too easy to leave it with the British Transport Police. But she wants to cover all bases. Be certain nothing shady's going on before she hurls it back over the fence.

'Take a formal statement from this witness,' she directs to Pearson. 'Send me all the footage. And we'll need to interview the train driver. When he's in a fit state to talk,' she adds grimly.

‘Understood, boss,’ Jamie replies. Pearson looks relieved.  
‘Let’s take it all back to the nick. We’ll go from there.’

## Chapter 2

The incident room of the Major Crimes Unit is a shrunken shell of its former self. Once bursting with detectives and analysts and admin, it's now down to a few DCs and one DS, all working quietly behind aged computer screens. So many have left.

After the events of last February, nobody's keen to join Major Crimes. The team where they catch serial killers, the dangerous and the psychotic. But also where detectives die. Stabbed, drugged and mauled to death in the worst possible ways. Who would want to work there?

The job has always been hard, but more so now only the dedicated remain. The most loyal of these, DC Toby Shenton, looks up from his desk as Cara and Jamie return.

'Press are reporting it as a suicide,' he says. He sweeps his blond fringe out of his eyes with long, delicate fingers. 'Apparently the victim was depressed.'

Cara slumps down next to him. She gestures, and Shenton turns the screen around so she can read it. Sure enough, the *Chronicle* has churned out the standard phrases – 'train not able to stop in time', 'severe delays' – as well as a few remarks about the victim. Colin Jefferies, thirty-one. Unemployed.

'How did they get an ID so fast?' Cara asks Shenton. 'And how do they know about his mental health?'

'They interviewed a witness. Heard him talking to the clerk on the platform. And they've spoken to his mother. "Much-loved son",' Shenton quotes.

'Have we got the mother in?'

'No. It's—'

'It's what?' Cara snaps.

'Thought it might be dealt with by the BTP. It is their area?'

'Get her in,' Cara concludes, and leaves him to it.

She instantly feels ashamed of her bad temper; she's been the same for months now. No tolerance for sluggishness; fed up with waiting for her officers to read her mind.

Her other DC approaches her tentatively, holding out a mug of coffee as a

peace offering.

‘So, it’s ours?’ DC Alana Brody asks. She’s new. Black hair, nose piercing and an array of holes up her ear. From her appearance, Brody doesn’t seem conventional, but her work has been meticulous. Cara was wary of anyone requesting a transfer in, but Brody’s grown on her, steadily tackling the backlog of cases that had built up while Cara was barely functioning.

Cara takes the coffee with a grateful smile. ‘For now. There’s nothing cut and dried. I’d like to know for certain how this man died.’

‘CCTV and witness appeal, then?’

‘Please. With a special request for anyone who might have been filming that morning.’

‘Will do. And Halstead wants to see you.’

Cara winces. Their new Detective Chief Superintendent has been in role for two months but is making her presence known, albeit remotely from her office on the fourth floor. Cara had been summoned almost daily in her first week, generally for small infractions or policy decisions that could have been communicated – and ignored – in an email. Cara thinks about her last boss, Marsh, with his omnipresent cigarette stench and barked orders. Dead now for nearly a year. He was a detective who knew what he was doing – when to intervene and when to leave her alone. Usually the latter. She misses him.

Cara swigs back the coffee and plods up towards Halstead’s command centre. She’s glad it’s in a different place to Marsh’s old office; the memories and grief would have been hard to bear.

As it is, she greets Halstead’s suffering secretary quickly, and is ordered straight through. Halstead gestures to the seat in front of the desk with an abrupt flick.

‘I’ve heard about this suicide,’ she begins, steepling her fingers on the meticulously tidy desk in front of her.

‘We’ll get rid of it as soon as we can, ma’am—’ Cara begins, but stops as she sees Halstead’s frown.

DCS Halstead is young. Too bloody young to be doing this job, in Cara’s opinion. The words ‘fast-tracked’ and ‘nepotism’ had been bandied around when her name was announced, but whatever the reason, she’s here. She has severely straightened hair, carefully manicured nails, and a penchant for brightly coloured jackets over black vests and trousers. It’s a shocking pink