Sample Chapters from

TWIST OF FATE

by D.L. Mark

1

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Mount Carmel House, Thames Embankment, London

‘Lovely, exquisite… ex-animo, perhaps *ecrasant* – that is acceptable, yes? Ecrasant. Overwhelming. Not a croissant, ha, haha… that’s something else. But loveliness, yes? No? *Non*, perhaps… non, erm… *mignon,* non *seduisant*… ah, formidable! Yes, formidable! That is how you appear, *oui,* if that is the intention. However you wish to look, that is most certainly how you look. Was that wrong also? Forgive, *je me ridiculise*, forgive…’

He pinches his nostrils shut: a diver clearing their tubes. Tilts his head as if encouraging dirty water to run from his ears. Slaps the smile on again: bog-brown teeth and split gums: skin missing from his lips.

‘Claudine?’ He pushes the word at me: a dog nosing a ball towards its owner. ‘Sister?’

I can’t make myself speak. I’m one of the most important communications consultants in the country and I can’t even get my mouth to form the right shape for a ‘hello’. There’s dead air between us – an invisible wall of things unsaid. A scent rises off him – that stale, whispering odour of buried memory, muddling my senses in a rush of olfactory images. I don’t let my face show what I’m feeling. I feel dizzy and sick – memories rising and popping like marsh gas.

He peers at me as if I were at the far end of a microscope. Glares past the make-up and the scowl. Sees the little girl he half remembers.

‘It is you, yes, *Moineau*… sister, zus, *sorella*… sister, yes? My little sister.’ He’s blinking as he speaks, as if mentally flicking between files in his big, muddled brain – seeking the right language, the right words.

My heart’s thudding so hard I expect it to be visible through my top: a maniac head-butting their cell wall. There’s a pain low down in my stomach. I’m picking the shellac off my thumbnail; gnawing the Rouge d’Armani from my lower lip. Why here? Why now? I’ve already got too much to carry. I’m already full to bursting – a plump sponge saturated with unspilled tears. One more drop and I’ll burst.

‘Moineau… don’t be cross, don’t be, it pulls down the corners of your mouth and you become a marionette, a dummy, something unreal, and you are real. I know it, I cling to it…’

His accent changes. For a moment he’s a public schoolboy again: a fine English gentleman-in-waiting. He’s suddenly ebullient, eloquent – gleeful as he glances around him and takes in the majesty of the big, bright reception area. Then something passes over the lenses of his eyes; some strange milky film briefly occluding his pupils. When he speaks again, he has a rural

accent. Fenlands. That little green world where Suffolk and Cambridgeshire slap wetly against the lowest reaches of Lincolnshire: an ancient, watery vastness of rivers, marshes and reeds. Home, for him. Home for me, too, when I still believed in such things.

'I don't know which Tube to get on,' he mumbles, thickly. 'I had a ticket but the wind took it. Are the taxis expensive? Everything is expensive. And they don't stop when I wave. Would they take a cheque? I tried to buy my tobacco with a promissory note and the young lady just laughed, and…'

God help me but I'm ashamed of him. There's a journalist upstairs – a twenty-something in flared cords and retro trainers, busy writing a profile about the movers and shakers in the Westminster bubble. I'm holding it together for long enough to validate the lies spoken about me. I've earned the right to hide behind a persona, haven't I? I've given up so bloody much to become somebody of consequence.

I'm sorry, Esme. I don't blame you. I know you'd have stayed if you could. It's not your fault. None of it is your fault. But look. This would have been your uncle. He's a good-hearted man. More than that. He's pure, I guess. Entirely untainted by self-interest. He'd give you the skin off his back if you were cold and said you needed a jacket. Better than me. I'd have been more than I am if you'd stayed. But you didn't. And now I'm thirty-eight and single. Childless, despite my best intentions. An orphan, if you can be such a thing in adulthood. I've got my house in Southwark and my career and I've made my peace with it.

But I have a brother. I have Jethro, tucked away in his tumbledown cottage like a mad wife locked in the attic. I pay for his life, his occasional care, his bouts of medication. All he has to bloody do is stay there. Read his books, write his stories, indulge himself in his enthusiasms.

I suddenly hear the echo of our last conversation. Hear him pleading with me to come and see the thing that he's found, the thing that's making him giddy and stopping him from sleeping, the thing that's making him forget to take his tablets and not eat the meals that his neighbour brings for him each day and for which I pay a grand a month.

I'll visit, I promise. I swear, Jethro, it's just so busy, but I'll come see you, I will. Of course I love you, but there's so much on at work…

My lip wobbles as I look at him. He deserves better. Deserves a hug and a smile and a few words that map out my delight at seeing him and my amazement that he made it all this way on his own. I can't give it to him. There's not enough kindness left in me. Not now. Not here.

I don't know what to do with my face. If I scowl at him he'll burst into tears. If I'm mean he'll dissolve and then I'll have to be kinder to him than I'm capable of. I can't meet his eyes or my own lip will start to wobble so I just stare past him and out into the chaotic, rain-jewelled darkness beyond the glass. Every surface seems to have been transformed into a funfair mirror: each surface throwing back concave reflections; streetlamps and headlights are turning the night air into a collage of gaudy shimmering spheres.

He's rambling, now. Making a show of himself. He looks wrong here, in this big, broad, brightly lit space. I can see our reflection in the darkened glass of the huge front doors. Can see myself with my hands on my hips, huffing and puffing like a mum at the school gates, trying to get him to lower his voice. He's much taller than me but he's stooping to accommodate the hefty, tatty rucksack on his back. He looks like Krampus, hobbled beneath the weight of his bag of naughty children.

I open my mouth to tell him that there's a café down the road, that he should head there and buy a hot chocolate and thaw himself out with the hand dryer in the disabled toilet. He doesn't let me get the words out. Catches his own reflection in the glass of a modern-art print on the wall behind me and raises his eyes. He cannot stand to see himself. Cannot stand to see what he has become.

I step back: kitten heels loud on the faux-marble floor. Take a moment to digest the full scale of his shabbiness. He looks bloody awful. It's nothing new, but Christ. I'm standing here in a grand's worth of Misha Nonoo and LK Bennett and he looks like he's been covered in glue and kicked around in a skip. There's a stink about him too: something fusty and bad, like yesterday's jellied eels or parsnips on the turn.

It's not the clothes; I'm not that shallow. He can wear what he likes. I'm all for self-expression and if he feels comfortable in his patched-up vagabond cords and stained anorak then good for him. But he doesn't look eccentric, he looks mad. And Jethro isn't supposed to look mad – not if he wants to stay in his little house and take care of himself the way he says he wants to. All he has to do is stay home, take his tablets, eat the food I have delivered for him and get himself to his appointments without a fuss. It's not a lot to ask.

'Mercy, Jethro,' I mutter, looking him up and down. My smile appears unbidden: a carp rising to snatch a dragonfly from the surface of a pond. 'It's a good job I changed my outfit. I was wearing that same ensemble this morning.'

He grins, dirt-streaked cheeks creasing into familiar folds. He's red-faced, blue-eyed; pupils little more than pinpricks in the glacial mist of his irises. His shoulders shake for a moment as he gives in to a torrent of silent tears, and then he's sniffing and smiling and making fun of himself again. He has been this way ever since the accident. Has been my problem since Mum gave up and went back to France and left me the responsibility of keeping him alive.

'I didn't think… I had a clean jumper, I think, but then I thought I'd need a shirt, but you wouldn't see it was clean if I put it under the jumper so I wore it on top, but then I thought that might look odd so I put a waistcoat on but that had a cherry brandy in the pocket and I thought it might slosh when I walked so I drank that and then I felt bad and realised I should have poured it out but then that would have splashed my shoes so I changed into the rubber plimsolls but I hadn't cut my toenails so I had to cut through the plimsolls to reach them with the scissors and then they were broken so I used the gaffer tape…'

I put my face in my hands. It's like he's made up of half-finished projects: the oddments snatched from a mound of other people's discarded eccentricities. His beard's not really a beard, just a patchy smattering of vaguely pubic spider legs. It only seems to grow with any degree of luxuriance around his Adam's apple, where it sprouts in an absurdly thick patch of coarse whiteness. His glasses are an amalgam of two different pairs of spectacles, held together across the bridge with a twisted paper clip. One is thick as the bottom of a pickle jar: the other a more feminine frame with a feline sleekness. And the hat! Jesus, the hat. He's sewn ear flaps onto a flat cap and they dangle loosely down the side of his face, fluttering and flapping whenever he turns into the wind and looking a lot like a spaniel on a speedboat.

'He's looking at me,' says Jethro, jerking his head towards the reception desk. I step into his line of sight, bringing his attention back to me. I glance behind me. Sure enough, the security guard's staring. He's got his arms folded. He's broad across the shoulders and there's a tattoo climbing over the collar of his blue, logo-embossed V-neck jumper and up the bovine

thickness of his neck. He's regarding Jethro with a sort of mild detachment: paying attention but displaying no outward signs of any urge to get involved.

The Spanish girl on reception keeps flicking her eyes over to where we stand: tucked away behind the huge vase of lilies and the horseshoe of luridly coloured chairs. I can't help but wonder what she's thinking. I'd fought an overwhelming need to explain myself to her as I clip-clopped across the wooden floor and flicked my security badge over the scanner. I almost wanted to make sense of him for her.

I could have made it easy. *He's my brother. He's brilliant. He's got an IQ of 188 and three doctorates. He's a kind, caring, slightly batty man and London scares him. I haven't got time for him and I'm horribly embarrassed that he's come to my place of work where I've spent the past two years cultivating an image of a polished professional and if you tell anybody about this, I swear I'll follow you home and hurt you in your sleep.*

I don't say any of it. I don't explain myself to anybody. I don't apologise unless there's mileage in it for me. I don't show weakness until I'm alone. And then I cry until there's nothing left.

'Could we talk, Moineau? I will try, I swear. I will keep on the straight and narrow path. It's important. Perhaps, at least. I don't know what's going on… It doesn't make sense…'

I don't take in any of what he's saying. He's so much bloody trouble and I'm too damn busy to listen as he explains some incredible thing he's found in some archive or textbook or dusty old grimoire. He keeps making the same discoveries over and over. He writes symphonies I already know. He finds paintings that he scribbled in his youth and imagines he has discovered some unappreciated master. Each day is full of new and wondrous discoveries for him, and he always wants to share them with the one person he never seems to forget. But he's never come all the way to my workplace before. Never shown me up like this.

'Jethro, why didn't you call ahead?' I say it with my eyes closed, trying to keep my tone as bright and carefree as I can. 'I mean, it's lovely to see you – it's always lovely, of course – but this is my place of work and I really do have far too much…'

He's nodding, his glasses slipping down his red-veined nose. He pushes them back up with his middle finger: a dirty Elastoplast covering the nail. His hands are filthy. There's writing on the back of them but he's moving his fingers so quickly that I can't make out what he's scrawled into the grime. I glance down at the floor. He's left a trail of muddy water behind him on his way from the double doors to the reception. I can't help but think of it as a snail trail: a line of ooze marking his passage.

'I didn't know,' he's saying. 'Wasn't sure, I mean. Sorry, sorry, I can't seem to get the words into the right order. It's been a little… Well, what's the word – I mean, it's more than unsettling, but rather less than debilitating. Is there a word for that? The Germans will have a word for that. Marvellous language. *Teutonophilia* – that's a word I rarely get to employ. A love for all things German. Though, of course, how can one have a love for all things. One must leave room for doubt…'

He stops. Scratches at his throat. I see that every one of his fingertips is wrapped in masking tape. He sees me looking and puts his hands into the pockets of his raincoat. I hear the clink of a glass on glass, and he gives me the twitchy little smile that makes him look, for a moment, like my big brother. And then it's gone.

‘You don’t look well, Jethro,’ I say, flicking my hair behind my ear. ‘You’re taking the tablets, yes? And the lady – she’s checking on you? You don’t look like you’ve been eating.’

He ignores me. Looks me up and down. ‘You don’t look like you,’ he says, accusingly. He reaches forward and for a moment I think he’s going to do what he used to and start poking his fingers into my mouth and tugging at the skin beneath my eyes, looking for whoever’s wearing me as a mask. He stops himself, twitching another toffee-toothed smile. ‘Black. *Preto. Schwarz. Noir.* Black, yes? Why’s your hair black? Your hair isn’t black. You’re a sparrow, not a crow. And you don’t look comfortable. Those shoes will hurt your feet. Where are your glasses? You know contact lenses are dangerous. And the air around you – it hasn’t got any colour.’

I wait for him to finish. Even like this, his mind astounds me. There’s a colossal library of knowledge in his head but he has no control over which books present themselves for inspection at any given moment. His genius exhausts him. He stops talking, panting for breath. He looks all sad and sorry for himself. His bottom lip starts to go. I feel the sudden bloom of sympathy open up inside my chest; feel parts of myself threatening to come to life.

No, I tell myself. *No, you let yourself care and you’ll let yourself down. Stop. Don’t feel. Kill it. Push it down and kill it…*

The double doors open again as one of my colleagues pushes inside, letting in a blast of cold, rain-speckled air. I get a whiff of the river, of exhaust fumes and spilled oil, of beer and fried food and the low, sonorous hum of the rain-disturbed sewers. My colleague does a double take as she spots him. I can see her working him out. An activist? A new client, perhaps? An eccentric genius? She gives me a toothpaste-advert smile, manic and bright, then scurries across reception and swipes her pass against security. She makes a face at the guard, and he gives a reassuring nod. *Don’t worry,* it says. *I’ve got this.*

I force myself to keep my hands at my sides. If I touch him I’ll want to hug him, and if I hug him I’ll cry. And if I cry then everything will come crashing down and I can’t deal with that. Not yet. Not now. I’ll break some other time. I’ll crumble when it’s convenient.

‘I recognised him, you see,’ mutters Jethro. ‘Not who I thought. Or who I thought wasn’t who he was. Sorry, sorry, that’s all gobbledygook, isn’t it? First used in 1944, gobbledygook – used by a congressman to describe politicians. Said it reminded him of turkeys gobbling. You’ll know that, of course. Sorry – I’m not mansplaining. That’s a new word, isn’t it? Explaining, when one is a man.’ He twitches, his face contorting in pain. ‘I don’t know what I thought you would do. I look a little silly, I’ll be bound. I shouldn’t have… no, I’m sorry, I just didn’t know where to…’

I take a breath. I know that if I were any kind of decent person, I would take him to one of the chairs and fetch him a tea and listen to what he has to tell me. I should get my coat and take him home, feed him and clean him up and find out what on earth he’s doing here. I should be a decent sister or at the very least, a decent person.

‘Okay,’ I say, softening my voice and forcing myself to look into his eyes. ‘I don’t know what’s happening but we’re going to…’

He turns away from me mid-sentence. A shrill noise is spilling in through the open doors. I don’t register it at first: the world outside is dark and cold and full of other people’s business. But Jethro doesn’t know London. Jethro lives alone in the dank green silence of the Fens. So

the scream means something to him. The scream is a cry of distress, of fear, of somebody in need.

'It's okay, Jethro,' I say, reaching out instinctively. 'It won't be important…'

He turns back to me. There's something like disappointment in his eyes.

There are raised voices. Shouts. Screams building up layer on layer, different voices overlapping like roof tiles.

Jethro drops his bag and totters towards the front doors. The Thames is fifty feet away, across four lanes of static traffic. I raise my wrist to my nose, breathing in my perfume before the reek of the river can climb inside me. For a moment I'm on the bridge again, staring down into the darkness, breathing in the high, silvery reek of the water. I can taste my tears, taste the blood in my throat. I'm looking out through a caul of tears, swaying, swaying, my grip on the cold black metal slipping, slipping…

And then there is a man in the doorway. There's blood on his face and down the front of his bright yellow coat. Blood on his hands, too. Blood pooling on the impeccably clean floor.

Jethro puts out a hand; raises it up, palm-first, as if commanding a car to halt. There are four paces between them. Jethro says something that I can't quite make out, but it doesn't matter because suddenly all I can see is the knife in the bloodied man's hand.

I try to speak but the word dies on my tongue. The man looks towards me. Looks past Jethro and directly at me – his face twisting, contorting. For an instant it seems there are a multitude of creatures twisting within the bones and tissue of his face, as if beasts and demons were writhing within the prison of his skin. When he speaks, his tongue seems to twist in upon itself like a burning serpent. I don't know what he's saying, but I know the words are ancient. Powerful.

'…pedes vermes, vermitudo interet…'

He comes towards me in brisk, unhesitant strides, raising his arm, his coat flapping open to reveal the red, scarred tissue of his chest…

Jethro pulls him back. Puts his hand upon his shoulder and turns him around.

I cover my face as it happens. Fold in on myself as the man sticks the blade into my brother's belly. Slide down onto the cold ground as he carves upwards to his neck. Slashes across his chest.

I don't see what happens next. Don't see him stick the blade in the security guard's neck. Don't see him slip and tumble in the great treacly ocean of fresh blood. Don't see him run back out into the road, stumbling his way through the cars that can't part to let the fleet of police vehicles through. Don't see him stick one last victim: a young man jogging along the embankment, pausing to film the commotion on his mobile phone. He's stabbed twice in the chest and once in the side of the head. And then the attacker is up on the railings of the bridge, staring down into the waters, and police gunmen are telling him to drop the knife, drop the knife.

From the floor, I hear the shots. Hear the screams. I think, faintly, I even hear the splash.

When I finally open my eyes it's because the blood is lapping at my cheek.

2

La Forchetta, Bethnal Green Road, London

His name's Billy Dean. *William* on the birth certificate, but he's been Billy since he was a lad. He looks a Billy, too. Bright eyes, strong jaw, bit of a twinkle about him when he's in a good mood. Likes a pint, likes his football, knows which boxer would win in a pound-for-pound clash between the greats. He's heard all the jokes. Knows how to laugh at himself, though nobody pushes him too far. He's got a temper, has Billy.

It was Billy that she fell in love with; Billy who made Francesca Steadman giggle and squirm. Billy who made her eyes gleam with his romantic gestures and his silly sayings and his absolute belief that she would become all that she wanted to be. Billy who bent so far backwards to accommodate what she wanted that he very nearly broke in two.

It's William who's going to have to sign the divorce papers. William Michael Dean. And he'll do it, too. He'll definitely sign them. Just not now. Not here, in the moment, when she's sitting there looking so bloody perfect and cool and insisting he make both of their lives '*easier*' by simply ripping out his heart and placing it, still bloodily pumping, upon the piece of paper in front of her. Here, as she tells him that he's got one last opportunity to make her happy; to give her what she wants – to free her from something that has come to feel like a cage. To let her go.

He's willing to give her his whole life. He's willing to love her and walk by her side until the day he dies. But she doesn't want that. Doesn't want him as Billy, or as bloody William. Instead she wants a graphic designer called Adrien. Adri*en*, with a fucking 'e'.

Detective Sergeant Billy Dean chews on this thought. Chews on it like a wad of tobacco and forces himself not to spit. His stomach's sour and grumbling, hot acid rising up his oesophagus and burning his throat. The smells wafting through from the kitchen of the quiet little Italian restaurant are making him salivate, but he feels too sick to risk putting anything in his mouth. He can't seem to keep anything down these days. Nothing tastes right. His mouth always seems to be full of the taste of blood. He has to keep his hands in fists or they'll start to shake, but holding them so tightly leads to stiffness in his shoulders, which climbs up into his neck and across his head and across his broad, lined brow.

By early evening he always has a headache and is gasping for a drink that will numb the pain. But if he takes a drink, she wins. If he bristles at her use of his full name, she wins. If he threatens to harm Adrien, she wins. If he signs the divorce papers, she wins. He hasn't worked out a way in which he can avoid losing.

She's sitting across the table, looking so effortlessly beautiful that it fills his chest with a hot, tight pain. She's got a sparkling water with a wedge of lime and four ice cubes neatly balanced on top of one another. She looks slim and elegant in a cream suit over a silky, deep-

blue blouse. She drank cider and blackcurrant in pint glasses when they met. Wore flared cords and little crop tops, dyed the tips of her hair purple and smoked Silk Cut. She preferred Blur to Oasis but liked Pulp best of all. She played bass guitar and used to Tipp-Ex little patterns onto her leather coat.

He can't remember when she became the person who sits across the table looking a proper grown-up. They're only forty-seven, for God's sake. He'd thought she was just pretending; just doing what she had to in order to fit in and give herself the best chance of advancement. But somewhere down the line she stopped being who she was and became who she is.

She makes him feel like a vagrant in comparison. His suit's a three-piece but the buttons strain a little over his stomach. There's a blob of something unidentifiable on his tie. The collar of his shirt is slightly folded in on itself, like the ear of a spaniel. He shaved this morning but it was a half-hearted affair, and there's a distinct shadow on his cheeks and neck. He got wet on the walk from the Tube and his thinning hair has dried flat. He's drinking a non-alcoholic beer. It frothed up when he took his first sip from the bottle, spilling over his hairy knuckles and creating a little pool of syrupy liquid. She mopped it up with a coaster. Didn't say a word.

'I know this is hard for you,' she says, in the detached way she's adopted since she stopped loving him. 'This is the last little power you can assert over me. But, William, you have to ask yourself, is this really the way you want the final chapter of our story to go? You have an opportunity here to be a real adult. To do something that hurts, okay, but which is the right thing for all involved. You have the chance to walk away from this with dignity and a genuinely fair settlement of our finances. I don't understand why you want this last little bout of petulance to be the legacy of our relationship.'

Billy screws up his eyes. Rubs his forehead. Pushes his hand through his hair. He's never been very good at finding the right words, but he's never had any trouble making himself understood. He just doesn't know how to turn all the hurt and rage and sorrow that's thudding inside his brain into a sentence that does it justice.

'I don't want a divorce,' he says, his teeth clamped together. 'I don't want it to be over. I don't want half of the equity in the house or a settlement of our joint assets. I want you, home. I want to wake up in our bed, roll over and see you there, smiling at me.'

'That hasn't been our life for a very long time,' she says, with a little shake of her head. 'You're remembering a life that died years ago.'

'And whose fault was that?' he asks, sitting forward on the uncomfortable chair. 'I tried! I never once stopped trying to make you feel like you used to…'

'Please,' she says, words wrapped around a sigh. 'Let's not go through this again. We grew apart. We had good times but what was there has gone. There's nothing to be gained by delaying the inevitable.'

'Life is about delaying the inevitable.' He scowls, biting down so hard that he hears something pop in his jaw. He lowers his head, feeling the heat behind his eyes. Even now, even after all that's happened over the past few months, he wants nothing more than to hold her. He wants to reach across the table, take her hand and make her look at him properly. He needs to look into those blue eyes and see if she's still in there, to try and connect with the last vestiges of the woman who loved him and loved him and loved him and then didn't even like him any more.

She shakes her head, exhausted by his stubbornness. She removes one of her pretty little gold earrings and rubs at her earlobe, pulling it, elongating it. She closes her eyes. He hopes that when she opens them again there will be a sheen upon her lenses: something that suggests this pains her, something he can cling to, some whiff of hope. There's nothing. She just stares at him, icy and detached.

'Please, Fran,' he says, sitting forward and trying to take her hand. 'Please, I can try harder. I can be whatever it is that you need me to be. I've tried so hard, you know that. All the galleries, the plays, the exhibitions, the dinner parties – I took up golf just because your mate's husband plays. I'm in a Hugo Boss suit, for God's sake. Brown-and-white brogues, even though I keep slipping over and they make me feel like I should be at a bowling alley. I love us enough for both of us. Just come home, please, Fran. Don't do this, don't do this…'

The tears start to fall. He starts jiggling both legs up and down against the table. He feels ashamed of himself, disgusted by the sight he must present. And the shame becomes anger as quick as it did when he was still drinking. He feels himself about to smash his fists down on the table, to scream in her face through locked teeth, to tell her that she's a whore and a bitch and a slut and froth a great spray of venom in her perfect face.

'There he is,' she says, scorn curling her lip. 'There's my Billy Dean. That little flicker, that flash of who's underneath. That's why all the things you tried to change never made any difference. It's because it was all pretend. It made no difference to who's underneath. You're the same person you were twenty years ago. God, Billy, you could have been a detective superintendent by now.'

He sits back, throat dry. 'How could I, Fran? If we'd put my career first, then you wouldn't have had the opportunities you've had. We made a choice. You're the career animal – you're the one with those ambitions. I want to catch villains. That's what matters to me most. I achieved all my dreams when I married you!'

'Oh for God's sake, Billy…'

There's a moment when something flickers in her face, as if a petal has landed upon the surface of a still pond. There's a flicker of something he recognises, the merest whiff of true emotion. And then she's shaking it away, distracted and irritated with herself. He becomes aware of the sound of buzzing: her phone, in the expensive handbag on the back of her chair. He feels his own phone, damp in the pocket of his clammy, itchy trousers. Feels it vibrate against his leg.

She holds up her hand in the faintest gesture of apology. Pulls out the phone.

'Detective Superintendent Cesca Steadman,' she says, her voice sounding clear, clipped and professional.

Billy scowls into the neck of his beer. He didn't mind that she kept her name when they got married. But she used to be Fran. She started calling herself 'Cesca' around the same time she took up Pilates and started thinking of hummus and edamame beans as an actual lunch. That was when she first began introducing him to her friends as 'my husband, William'. He'd played along, thinking they were both enjoying the same joke. By the time he realised she was serious, she was three rungs above him on the career ladder and had come to the conclusion, quite independently, that they weren't ever going to have children. He'd been willing to accept those terms, provided she continued to love him. To be his Fran, like he was 'her Billy'.

He pulls his own phone from his pocket, irritated at the interruption. As he does so he gives a quick glance in the direction of the handful of other diners. Have they seen him make a show of himself? There's a couple at the nearest table, ploughing through a pizza and a carafe of house red. She's eating with a knife and fork – he's folding the slices with his fingers and eating them by hand. They're talking about stair carpets, talking about seagrass and hessian and whether or not the kids could be trusted with a lighter shade. Billy feels a surge of jealousy.

He turns his attention back to his soon-to-be-ex-wife. Her face is inscrutable as ever but there's a tension in her voice that he knows of old. This is important.

'…and how many injured?' she's asking, tucking the phone under her chin and retrieving a pen from her jacket. She starts to scribble on the pristine white napkin. 'Situation still live, yes? Yes, I know the building. The underwater search unit… right, no… and it was a foreign accent, you're certain… well, yes, of course. No, pays to be careful… sensitivities, of course… I've got a good relationship with the counter-terrorism lead, yes… yes, sir, of course…'

Billy stares at his phone. There are little icons on the screen, capital letters screaming headlines under the banner 'BREAKING NEWS'.

He answers the call. It's DCI Jim Mosley, his friend and boss.

'Billy, mate, it's Jimbo. Suspected terrorist attack down by the river, embankment way. Multiple dead. Borough commander is pushing for us to take it, but we might be underneath the wife, as it were. You cool with that before I confirm?'

He looks across the table. At Fran. At Cesca. At the divorce papers lying unsigned on the beery tabletop.

'I'm in,' he says.

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THREE DEAD AFTER ATTACK BY MASKED MANIAC SHOUTING 'IN FOREIGN TONGUE'

Live report by **Chief Crime Reporter Lis-Jayne Bingham** and *London Echo* staff

TERROR returned to the streets of London today when a masked attacker stabbed three people dead and left an unknown number of others fighting for life.

Armed response officers are understood to have opened fire on the suspect as he attempted to flee the scene of the slaughter.

Confusion now surrounds the fate of the suspected attacker, who was seen to plunge from Blackfriars Bridge into the Thames just moments after specialist firearms officers ordered him to drop his weapon. Witnesses report hearing four gunshots.

Information received by this publication suggest that the mayhem began in Victoria Embankment Gardens – an area of Victorian parkland popular with London's large homeless community. A spokesman for the Metropolitan Police was

unable to confirm or deny reports that the victims of the atrocity were congregating in the area waiting for their daily meal to be served up at the nearby soup kitchen.

Police received their first report of violence at 4.31 p.m. The final shot was fired at 4.46 p.m.

It is understood that the second wave of violence took place in the reception area of Mount Carmel House, a large office building on the Thames Embankment, which is home to a large publishing house and a communications agency. Police have yet to rule out a terrorist connection and witnesses report that the attacker was shouting in a foreign language as he lashed out at passers-by.

Lawyer Devon Subramanian, whose office overlooks the area where the bloodshed began, told this publication: 'It will stay with me forever. There are always lots of homeless people in that little area. They don't do any harm and there's never any real trouble. It just flared up out of nothing. One moment there were half a dozen of them just sitting around and trying to stay out of the rain, and the next this madman is sticking a knife into people. I heard the shouting and looked out of the window, and he was on top of this poor guy who was just laid out on his back with his arms out and the attacker was pushing the knife into him. When he looked up it was like something out of a film. He had a mask on, I think, but it was getting dark and with the rain and the blood it was impossible to say. I know what he was shouting sounded like it was in some foreign tongue.

'Somebody tried to grab him and he stuck the knife in them without a word. People started running. Screaming. There was blood everywhere. A couple of workmen looked like they were trying to get near enough to grab him, but he was swiping with his knife, screaming something I couldn't understand. Then he just sprinted off. We all heard the shots a little later. What we didn't know was that he'd dashed in at the big building by the bridge and gone for the first people he saw. It was genuinely horrific.'

Among the injured is security guard Kenzie Hamilton, 31, who used his body as a human shield to protect bystanders caught up in the slaughter. He is being treated for life-threatening injuries. A 52-year-old, believed to have been sheltering within Mount Carmel House, was pronounced dead at the scene.

Politicians are already under fire for their perceived failure to come down harder on suspected terrorists after a string of high-profile attacks in London and across the UK.

Reports just in suggest that the attacker slashed a passer-by across the throat while attempting to flee the police and that the deadly incident was streamed live on the victim's mobile phone. A spokesman for the mayor's office said…