

# The Death List

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Extract

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# 1

The day I made my deal with the devil started the same as any other.

It was one of those sunny late spring mornings when your soul was supposed to take to the air like a skylark. Mine hadn't. A few miles to the north, the white steel circle of the London Eye reflected the rising sun, its iris vacant and its pods already full of tourists who were more in awe of the ticket prices than the supposedly inspiring view. Suckers.

I was on my way back from walking Lucy to school in Dulwich Village. The stroll down there, hand in hand with my beautiful eight-year-old, chattering away, was one of the high points of every weekday. The other was when I met her in the afternoon. The uphill slog back to my two-room flat was the nadir. A blank computer screen was waiting for me there, and in the last month I hadn't managed more than a couple of album reviews. Today my next novel seemed as far away as the skyscrapers of Manhattan; tomorrow it would probably have moved on to Chicago.

I had to face up to it, I told myself as I walked along Brantwood Road. I was blocked, good and proper. Suffering from terminal writer's constipation. About as likely to make progress as the government was to increase taxes on the rich.

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It was time I came up with an alternative employment strategy. There seemed to be plenty of work available destroying the pavements for the cable companies. I stepped across the uneven, recently laid strip of asphalt and went up the path to my front door. Except it wasn't mine. I was renting it from the retired couple below. The Lambs were charming on the surface, but sharp as butchers' knives when it came to anything financial or contractual. I'd only taken the place so I could be near Lucy after the divorce. She and my ex-wife, Caroline, were round the corner in what had been our family home overlooking Ruskin Park. The way things were going, I wouldn't even be able to afford this dump for much longer.

There wasn't anything special in the mail—certainly no checks; a music magazine I was forced to subscribe to even though I wrote for it occasionally, the electricity bill, and an invitation to a book launch. Someone in the publicity department of Sixth Sense, my former publishers, was either stunningly incompetent or was winding me up. No way was I going anywhere near what they were calling 'a low-life party' to celebrate Josh Hinkley's latest East End gangster caper. When he started, the toe-rag had half the sales I had. Now I was a nobody and he was a top-ten bestseller. Could he write? Could he hell.

I made myself a mug of fruit tea, trying to ignore what Caroline had said when I gave up caffeine. 'Brilliant idea, Matt. You'll be even less awake than you are now.' She could nail me effortlessly. A top job in the City, daily meetings with business leaders, international credibility as an economist—and a tongue with the sting of a psychotic wasp. How had I managed to miss that when we got together? It must have been something to do with the fact that she was the owner of a body that still turned heads in the street. Who was the sucker now?

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I logged on to my computer and opened my email programme. I had several writer friends who proudly said that they never checked their mail until they'd finished work for the day. I'd never had that sort of discipline. I needed to feel in touch with the world before I wrote my version of it. Or so I'd convinced myself. Deep down, I knew it was a displacement activity on the same level as arranging your paper clips or dusting your diskettes. When I was moderately successful, I still got a rush from unexpected good news, even if it was only my agent's assistant proudly telling me that they'd sold the translation rights for one of my books to some Eastern European country for a small number of dollars. It had been almost a year since something as insignificant as that had happened.

The contact page on my website was connected to my inbox. For the time being. I was struggling to pay the bill, so *www.MattStonecrimenovelsfordistinction.com* wouldn't be on-line for much longer. When my books were selling, I used to get up to five messages a day from fans bursting to tell me how much they loved my work. Now that I wasn't the apple of any publisher's eye, I was lucky if I got five a week. But I lived in hope. There was nothing like a bit of undiluted praise to crank the creative engine.

After I'd deleted the usual cumshot and cheap drugs spam, I looked at what was left. A brief mail from the reviews editor of one of the lad mags I contributed to. I'd sent him a message begging for work and here he was informing me that my services were not required this month. Great. That went the same way as the spam. Then there was yet another message from WD. I had to hand it to him or her. No, it had to be a guy—he knew too much music and movie trivia. He was as

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loyal as it got. And as regular. Three times a week for the past two months. I had foolishly made a commitment on my website to reply to every message, so I'd kept the correspondence going. But WD had a solicitous way with words and I'd made my feelings about some of the issues he raised clear enough. In short, I'd given him a glimpse of the real me.

I double-clicked on the inbox icon and went into the file I'd made for WD—giving all my correspondents their own file was another displacement activity that had kept me going for days.

I ran down the messages, opening some of them. They had started off as standard fan stuff—Dear Matt (hope first name terms are acceptable!), Really enjoyed your Sir Tertius series. Great depictions of Jacobean London. Squalor and splendor, wealth and violence. My favourite is *The Revenger's Comedy*. When's there going to be another one? To which I'd replied, with the deliberate vagueness that I used to cultivate when I had a publishing contract, Who knows, my friend? When the Muse takes me. Dickhead.

WD was also one of the few people who liked my second series. After writing three novels set in 1620s London featuring 'the resourceful rake' Sir Tertius Greville, I'd decided to pull the plug on him. The books had done pretty well—good reviews (sarcasm and irony, always my strong suits, turned a lot of reviewers on); *The Italian Tragedy* had won an award from a specialist magazine for best first novel; I'd had plenty of radio and TV exposure (admittedly mostly on local channels) and I'd done dozens of bookshop events.

Then, for reasons I still didn't fully understand, I had decided that 'A Trilogy of Tertius' was enough. I wanted to jump on the bandwagon of crime fiction set in foreign coun-

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tries. I didn't know it at the time, but jumping on bandwagons is a talent possessed only by the very brave or the very lucky. I was neither. My choice of country probably didn't help. WD wrote, Your private eye Zog Hadzhi is a superb creation. Who would have thought that a detective would prosper in the anarchy of postcommunist Albania? I particularly enjoyed *Tirana Blues*. Very violent, though. I suppose you must have seen some terrible things on your research trips out there. I didn't tell him that I'd never been near the benighted country and that all I knew I'd learned in the local library. No one seemed to realise. The critics were still approving (apart from a scumbag called Alexander Drys who called Zog 'an underwear-sniffer'), but sales plummeted from the start. By the time my intrepid hero had defeated the Albanian Mafia in the second novel, *Red Sun Over Durrës*, they were down to a couple of thousand and my overworked editor had declined any further offerings from me.

I'd known the series was in trouble from the start. There was a strong correlation between falling sales and the number of emails from fans. But I hadn't expected my publishers to deposit me in the dustbin of unwanted authors with such alacrity. After all, they'd invested in me for five books and I was already planning a new departure to get myself back on track. But they were more interested in twentysomethings with pretty faces and, if at all possible, blonde hair, rather than a thirty-eight-year-old former music journalist whose looks could at best be described as rugged and whose author photograph had scared more than one sensitive child.

Never mind, Matt, WD had said. You have so much talent that I know you'll be back in print soon. James Lee Burke went unpublished for years. And look at Brian

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Wilson. Decades of silence and then a great new album. He was trying to help, but he didn't succeed. I didn't have five percent of Burke's talent and, besides, I'd never liked the Beach Boys' warblings.

Normally authors who have been dropped by their publishers do their best to keep that fact from their readers. Not me. In what my ex-wife described as 'a career-terminating act that Kurt Cobain would have been proud of,' I decided to air my grievances in the columns of a broadsheet newspaper. I'd met the literary editor at a party and I thought he'd be interested in an insightful piece on the cutthroat nature of the modern publishing business. He was, but not for the reasons I'd assumed. I bitched about how much money my publishers had invested in me only to cut their losses before I made the big time, I whined about how the author's appearance was more important than a skilled turn of phrase, and I looked back nostalgically to the weeks I'd spent on the road chatting up booksellers—all thrown away at the whim of a callous managing director. Controversy flowed for almost a week, and then the literary world moved on to more pressing issues (the next bald footballer's ghosted biography, the kiss-and-tell story of a large-bosomed singer). And, too late, I realised that, by deploying my cannon as loosely as a blind-drunk pirate captain, I'd made myself unpublishable. Smart move. It got worse. A few days later my agent, a rapacious old dandy called Christian Fels, sent me an email in which he graciously relinquished his representation of me. I had hit rock bottom. No publisher, no agent, no income.

At least WD remained supportive. Loved your piece in the paper, Matt. Such a shame the people running publishing are so shortsighted. So what if so-called experts like Dr.

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Lizzie Everhead tear you to shreds in public. Don't lose heart. There's a story out there waiting for you to write! Typical nonwriter, I thought. Stories didn't hang around like pythons waiting to ambush passing writers. Stories were in writers' heads, hidden away like lodes of precious metal. You had to dig deep and hard to find them, and I wasn't up to that anymore. I was too dispirited, too cynical, too ground down. I could have done without being reminded of Lizzie Everhead, as well. She was a poisonous academic who'd taken exception to my use of the Jacobean setting in the Tertius books. She and Alexander Drys were my biggest hate-objects.

Then I clicked open WD's latest message and entered a world of pain and torment.

Something I'd noticed as I scrolled down the messages in WD's file was that the email address was always different. I'd been aware of that before, but I hadn't paid much attention, assuming my correspondent was the kind of cheapskate who jumped from Microsoft to Google to Yahoo, setting up free accounts and giving himself all sorts of different identities for fun. Except WD was always WD, no matter what his email server was. This time he was WD1612@hotmail.com.

Dear Matt, I read. Hope you're well. I've made the most interesting discovery. You haven't been honest with me! There I was thinking that your name was Matt Stone and now I find that you're actually called Matt Wells.

That was interesting. I'd never revealed my real name anywhere on my site or in the media. I was a music journalist before I started writing novels, and I wanted to keep my two professions separate. I had the feeling that people who read my interviews with the Pixies and my career assessments of



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Neil Young and Bob Dylan might not be too impressed by the fact that I also wrote crime novels. I should have realised that being embarrassed about what I did was a bad sign. But the point was, how the hell had WD uncovered my real name?

Don't worry, I won't hold it against you, my correspondent continued. After all, some of the greatest writers hid behind nom de plumes. George Eliot, Mark Twain, Ross Macdonald, Ed McBain, J.J. Marris—yes, I know, Matt, it is rather a downward progression in terms of quality and you're at the end of it, but you get my drift. I imagine you wanted to keep your two audiences unaware of your alter ego. Didn't your publisher's publicity department give you a hard time about that?

Who was this guy? Not only had he found out my pseudonym, but he'd latched on to the fact that my former publicist had spent years trying to get me to be open about my music journalism in order, as she put it, 'to make people realise how cool you are.' Well, I couldn't be any cooler than I was now in career terms. Cool, as in stone-cold dead. But how did WD know all this?

Anyway, Matt, I imagine you're wondering how I came by this information. Well, that'll remain my little secret, for the time being at least. If we come to an agreement, as I'm sure we will, I'll try to be more forthcoming.

Agreement? What agreement? The only time I'd made an agreement by email with a fan was when a woman called Bev pestered me into meeting her in a Soho pub. She was bigger than I was, not to mention more pissed and substantially more determined to exchange saliva. Fortunately I was a faster runner. Just.

You see, Matt, I have an ongoing project that I think you

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might be interested in. Before you get too uncomfortable, let me assure you that this is a genuine business proposition. And, as the blessed Zog says in *Tirana Blues*, 'business only works on a cash-up-front basis, my friend.' I seem to remember Sir Tertius saying something similar, except that gold was the commodity required rather than money. Your investigators are nothing if not careful in their financial dealings. It's a pity you don't share their acumen!

Arsehole. I was getting irritated now. When I got to the end of WD's message, I was going to have a lot of fun telling him where to stick his business proposition. The idiot probably wanted to flog me his life story. Why was it that people couldn't see how boring their lives were?

You're getting a bit hot under the collar now, Matt, so let's take a short break. Why don't you go downstairs and see if there's been another mail delivery? I know, it's a bit unlikely, but you never know your luck. Go on, Matt. No time to lose.

What the...? I leaned back in the ridiculously expensive leather chair that I'd bought with my first advance and had somehow managed to keep my hands on in the divorce settlement. Where did this guy get off? I looked at the screen. There was a gap between the line I'd just read and the continuation of the text. A gap that I was supposed to fill by going downstairs and— I sat up straight. How did WD know that I had to go downstairs to get the mail? Even the most wet-behind-the-ears crime novelists knew not to reveal their home addresses to punters. There were too many weird specimens out there, too many crazies. So how had he found out? Was he just guessing? Most people probably did have their studies upstairs.

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I looked back at the message and scrolled down. It continued with the words I understand your confusion, Matt. You're wondering how I know that you have to go downstairs, aren't you? That's another of my secrets, to be revealed if you behave. Now, don't mess me about. GO AND CHECK THE MAIL!!!!

I pushed my chair back on its rollers. What the hell? I could do with stretching my legs, anyway. The pounding my body had taken playing amateur rugby league from my time at university until a couple of years ago meant that my muscles and joints stiffened up all the time. Besides, WD had piqued my curiosity.

I saw the brown paper package lying on the floor when I was halfway down the stairs. It was one of those bubble-filled envelopes, A4 size. There was something bulky in it. I wondered how it had landed on Mrs. Lamb's doormat without my hearing it. I felt a spasm of apprehension as I got nearer. Surely it couldn't be a bomb. I'd written about terrorism in the Balkans in the Zog books and I'd expected at least a verbal backlash from one or other of the armed groups. None of them even knew of my existence, of course. Until now?

I forced myself to walk forward. This was idiotic. WD was just playing games. Then I realised what it had to be. A manuscript. The fool was a budding writer who wanted me to vet his book. How many times had I been asked to do this? The same number of times that I'd told people, not particularly politely, that I was a writer, not a script reader.

I bent down, feeling the usual twinge in my right knee—that had been what had finally made me stop playing for the South London Bison. The package was weighty enough, but it wasn't solid in the way several hundred pages of copy paper

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would be. There were only two words on the envelope. *Matt Wells*. Now my correspondent really was taking the piss. Each word had been cut from a newspaper, my first name in a small black font and my surname in larger red letters. Who'd been reading too many crime novels?

I opened the front door and looked down the street, both right and left. There was no sign of anyone. Most people were at work, college or school and the others—retired people or au pairs—were indoors. There weren't even any builders in evidence, which made a change for Herne Hill. I knew the Lambs weren't around. They'd gone off to their holiday villa in Cyprus for a month. Whoever made the delivery had pulled off a clean getaway. As there was no address, it obviously hadn't come from the hands of a postman.

I felt the package in both hands as I went back upstairs. It was paper, all right—there was nothing hard or metallic inside. Reassured, I tore open the flap and emptied the contents onto my lap.

The money was new, the colours shining brightly in the light on my desk. There were five bundles of twenty-pound notes. Each bundle contained fifty notes, making a total of £5000.

My mouth suddenly felt very dry.

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I sat in front of the screen again and scrolled down.

So, Matt, I read. Now you know I'm serious about my business proposition. In case you're wondering, there are no counterfeit notes. Pick any one out and ask your bank to check it if you want. No, it's hardly worth the trouble, is it? Before I go into the details of what I want from you, I'd like to blind you with science. Or, more particularly, blind you with what I know about you. It's always good to do your research on a potential partner, don't you think?

'Is that right?' I said under my breath. 'And how am I supposed to do research on you, WD?' Or rather, WD1612. There was something about the combination of letters and numbers that rang a bell deep in my memory. My correspondent's earlier addresses had seemed to be the random numbers assigned by email servers, only the letters seemingly having significance. WD1612. What the hell did it mean?

Your full name, continued the message, is Matthew John Wells. You were born on March 13, 1967, making you thirty-eight years old. Place of birth—London Hospital, Whitechapel. Height, six foot one; weight, thirteen stone six pounds; hair, dark, no sign of grey yet. Eyes, brown.

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Great author photo, by the way. Brooding, intense. That must have had the ladies falling over themselves to get their hands on you.

Yeah, right. I was still puzzled how WD had got past my nom de plume.

But, in fact, it's a bit more complicated than that, isn't it, Matt?

I felt a stir of disquiet.

Because you were adopted, weren't you?

My parents had told me so when I was Lucy's age. They'd always been straight with me and I'd never had the desire to go chasing after my birth parents, even though I was aware of a void in my life.

Don't worry, WD1612 continued. There's nothing to be ashamed about. Even though your real mother was a Cockney slapper called Mary Price. Good name for one of her kind! Except, I think her price was never more than a few port and lemons.

There was a gap of several lines. I let go of my cableless mouse and leaned back. Normally I could make out patterns in the cracks on the ceiling, rivers winding and splitting like the Amazon or the Nile. But now I couldn't see anything. My vision was dulled. Was the bastard telling the truth? What right did he have digging into my past? I blinked and ran my sleeve across my eyes. I was about to click on the reply button and terminate the exchange when I saw the next line after the gap.

KEEP READING, MATT! I realise you're pissed off with me now. You didn't know, did you? You didn't want to know. I just want you to understand that I do. I know everything about you. Your other mother, so to speak, is Frances, known as Fran, age sixty-three, address 24 Col-

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lingwood Grove, Muswell Hill. Profession—children’s author. Surely she could give you some hints about how to get back into the publishing business. She still produces a book a year. The last one was *Milly’s Excellent Adventure*, wasn’t it? DO NOT STOP READING, MATT! I’ve got much more to tell you.

My heart was pounding. He knew where my mother...my adoptive mother lived. And the tone had changed. This was no longer a besotted fan; this was someone who was able to manipulate. I glanced down at the wads of money in my lap and pushed them to the floor.

Good, you’re still with me! What else have I got for you? Father—not your real one, of course, even I couldn’t find that out; I don’t suppose your birth mother knew herself—father, Paul Jeremy Wells, born September 2, 1932, first secretary at the Department of Transport.

I felt my eyes dampen again.

Killed in a hit-and-run incident in Fortis Green, July 8, 2004. The driver who ran him down was never found. Would you like me to try to find him or her, Matt? My powers of research are formidable, as you can see. Just let me know. You attended Tumblegreen Primary School and Fortis Park Comprehensive. Your parents were—Fran still is—in the Labour Party, the old-style Labour Party, so no hoity-toity private education for you. But you were a good student, you got yourself two As and a D (what happened in that Modern History A level, Matt?) and went off to University College, Durham, to study English. You were on the rugby team there, not the union game that the toffs play, but league, the sport of the northern working man. Bravo, comrade. You were a fast and slippery winger who scored

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a lot of tries. But you let your studies slide, getting yourself covered in mud most afternoons and pissed most nights, so you ended up with a pretty average two-one. Were Paul and Fran impressed?

The bastard had left another space in his text, no doubt because he guessed that I was smarting. WD1612 was really sticking it to me, the pretence of worship completely abandoned. Maybe he thought that the five grand bought him mocking rights. He'd soon find out otherwise.

No, they weren't, were they? And Paul was even less pleased when you went off to Cardiff to do a journalism course and got yourself on the staff of *Melody Maker* before it went down the toilet. Still, I suppose he must have been proud of you when *The Italian Tragedy* was published. And when it won that award. What was it? The Lord Peter Wimsey Cocktail Glass? Handy.

I looked up at the red display case on the bookshelf above my desk. The tacky piece of engraved glass stood there as a symbol of my pathetic career. I should have smashed it years ago.

Still, I read, Paul and Fran must have been pleased when you and Caroline got married. Caroline Annabelle Zerb (crazy name...), born Bristol, December 27, 1969. Studied economics at Durham and the LSE. City highflier. How on earth did you two get together? Were you her bit of rugby-playing rough?

I clenched my fists. He was getting very close to the bone. Caroline had been a bit naive about life when I first met her on the train to an Emmylou Harris gig in Newcastle. I'd always had a suspicion that she was initially attracted to me because I was well known in the university for my on- and off-field antics.