



DEATH SENTENCE

MIKKEL BIRKEGAARD

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

About the Book

A murder committed on paper, safely within the confines of a novel, is one thing. To see that same crime in the real world, is something else entirely ...

Frank Føns is a very successful crime writer. His novels, famed for their visceral descriptions of violent death, have made him a household name. But now someone is copying his crimes. For Frank what once seemed a clever, intriguing plot twist has suddenly become a terrifying, blood-spattered reality.

Frank unwittingly swaps his role of writer for detective. He must find out who is using fiction to destroy his life, and why. What had once been a game is now a matter of life and death.

In fiction, the bad guy always gets caught, but in real life there is no such guarantee. Fear becomes real. The knife cut hurts like hell. Our narrator may not survive. And as Frank knows, no one is promising him a happy ending ...

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Death Sentence

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Prologue

Until recently I had only killed people on paper.

As it happened, I was good at it. Good enough to make a living from it and so experienced that I could refer to it as my job. Being able to write full-time in a country the size of Denmark is something of a privilege, but there are those who will argue that I'm not a 'proper writer' or what I write aren't 'proper books'.

I have had to put up with criticism, ridicule even, my whole career, and at times I have secretly agreed with my detractors. It's not easy to admit, but when critics accuse me of laziness and cynicism, of resorting to shock tactics to make up for weaknesses in a plot, they are not altogether wrong.

But the story you're about to read is something else entirely.

I know it will be unlike anything I have ever written. Normally I'm invisible, the anonymous narrator who reveals the story without drawing attention to himself. But this time I can't hide. I have to reveal myself. And this introduction is primarily for my own benefit, a reminder of my project, a wagging finger, telling me what to do and on what terms. That's what motivates me.

Because I must go on and I must do so alone.

I'm cut off from the world. There are no distractions. At night, the darkness and the silence are as dense as though

I were in a bunker. No sounds or impressions can reach me.

But then again, I don't need outside inspiration.

What follows here has already happened to me and merely needs communicating through my fingers and a keyboard to the computer. The events of the past week have forced me to train the spotlight on myself and document what's happened while it's still fresh in my mind and I have sufficient time left. There is no filter. No possible interpretation or perspective can show me or my role in the story in a better light. A shame, really, but no matter how tempted I might be to embellish the distressing and dreadful incidents I have taken part in recently, this time I can't make it up.

In a way, it's liberating.

I don't need to lie.

The technique is different, too. I won't have to resort to a range of literary devices to serve the plot or build the tension. I can write it as it is, without beating about the bush. The protagonist won't need to look in the mirror to give the reader an idea of his appearance because the protagonist in this story is me, Frank Føns, a 46-year-old writer, of medium build and height, slim, with dark hair, a closely trimmed beard and a pair of steel-grey eyes which I have been told don't blink very often.

There, that's that out of the way.

Had it not been for the gravity of the situation, I would probably have relished my newfound creative freedom. I have some regrets I didn't try this experiment earlier. Not that I haven't launched into literary experimentation before, but I discovered early, too early perhaps, a formula that worked and I've stuck to it ever since.

But not now.

The rules of the game have changed.

I have been freed from my own and others' expectations and conventions. I don't need to worry about conforming to rules determining what a writer can or cannot do. Just as

well, really, as I'm forced to start with one of the biggest clichés in the genre, the event that set everything in motion, a telephone call ...

Tuesday

1

NO ONE DARES to ring me in the morning.

People who think they know me expect me to be hungover. Those who really know me know that I write in the morning and hate being disturbed. I was in 'the Tower', as my older daughter had once nicknamed our holiday cottage, and when the telephone rang, I wasn't actually writing. True, I was at my desk, the computer was on and a mug of steaming hot coffee was next to the screen, but my thoughts were elsewhere. From my study on the first floor I had a view of the garden below. I was wondering if it was worth raking up the leaves today or whether I should wait until the autumn gales had shaken the last of them loose.

My gut reaction was to ignore the telephone. Calls at this time were never good news, or they would be unimportant, cold-callers or wrong numbers. I let the telephone ring five times before I grunted my name into the handset.

'Your body has turned up,' I heard down the other end.

It was Verner. He never introduces himself. Verner is one of the people who think they know me and yet hasn't grasped that he can't ring whenever he feels like it.

I was in no mood for games.

'What do you mean?'

'Someone has committed your murder.'

'Which one?' I asked, failing to suppress a yawn.

Verner worked for Copenhagen Police and he checked police procedures for me. He didn't regard being a writer as a proper job, but he was still proud to contribute to the process. Sadly, pride had gone to his head and given him the impression he had the right to ring me at any time with ideas or suggestions.

'The murder in the marina,' he exclaimed. 'They've found the body of a woman in Gilleleje Marina, mutilated and bound in chains.'

I closed my eyes and pressed two fingers against my temple. My mind was still drifting between thoughts of raking up leaves and guilt at not having produced that day's quota of words. Verner's news sank in only slowly.

'Is this a joke?' I asked, mostly to say something.

'I'm telling you, this is your murder.'

'What possible connection—'

'The woman was alive and equipped with an oxygen tank when she went in,' Verner interrupted me. 'She has the same physique. Everything matches. Even the weight used to hold her down.'

'A marble bust?'

'Precisely.'

'And you're sure it happened in Gilleleje?'

'Yes.'

My head started to ache. The murder Verner described did sound exactly like one of the killings in my new novel, *In the Red Zone*. It was the story of a psychopathic psychologist who subjected his patients to their greatest phobia, not in order to cure them, but to kill them in a way that realized their worst nightmare. Hence the murder in the marina involved a woman who had a fear of drowning. The psychologist dived down with her and studied the woman's panic as she ran out of oxygen and suffocated. He got off on her terror in the cold dark water, her pupils widening and her screams muffled through her mouthpiece and the mass of water. I had murdered other characters via

their fear of needles, tight spaces and spiders. Not one of my best efforts.

'Frank?' Verner's tone was harsh.

'Yes, I'm still here,' I said.

'What should we do?'

I shook my head. 'It's impossible. It must be a coincidence.'

'She's dead, Frank. *That's* no coincidence.'

'But the book has only just been printed,' I protested. 'It hasn't even been published yet.'

Verner had to get back to work. He was on the beat in Copenhagen and dealt mostly with prostitution and petty crime. Murder wasn't within his remit, so he had nothing more to tell me the first time he called. Thanks to an extensive network within the police force he was normally able to sniff out the information I needed for my books, be it arrest procedures, traffic regulations or ways to kill people. He assured me he would follow the investigation during the day and keep me posted.

It seems to me now that not telling anyone about the possible connection to my book was an unfortunate decision. However, Verner had supplied me with confidential information for years and was probably panicking at the thought of the consequences if he was found out. I was probably too shocked to think straight, though for a moment I fantasized about how the publicity could boost sales. I quickly dismissed that idea, though. It was just as likely the police would stop publication out of respect for relatives or concern for the investigation, and I needed the money. In the last ten to twelve years, I had written a book every eighteen months, and I relied on the income. Not that I lived a life of luxury. Since the divorce, the cottage had become my permanent home - contrary to the terms of the lease - and although it was in reasonable nick, it wasn't exactly a palace.

'The Tower' was one of the older holiday cottages in Rågeleje, third row from the beach, on the north coast of Sjælland, with a spacious garden consisting mainly of lawn surrounded by tall birches and spruces. It was only ten kilometres from Gilleleje Marina, where I regularly bought fish from stalls on the quay.

It was local knowledge that made me pick the marina as the crime scene in *In the Red Zone*, but now it felt like a mistake. I couldn't imagine ever shopping at the marina again. In fact, I couldn't even begin to understand why anyone would commit a murder in the sleepy little fishing village.

So I decided to potter around the cottage doing odd jobs in an attempt to forget that a woman had been killed. It wasn't easy. I work with death every day. Not an hour goes by without me thinking about new ways to kill people or inflict pain and injury. I turn ordinary household articles and utensils into murder weapons or instruments of torture all the time, but only in my imagination.

Now someone had tried it out for real.

I never got round to raking up the leaves or writing the 2,500 words that constituted my daily target. An hour later, having given up on keeping thoughts about the murder at bay, I comforted myself with a whisky, even though it was only just gone eleven. I sat on the terrace and watched the autumn sun battle large drifting clouds. Piles of fallen leaves were spread around the garden. The wind took hold of the tall trees and shook them, and sometimes a cloud of birch seeds would scatter across the terrace. Several of the tiny three-leaved flakes landed in my drink. They floated around on the surface like pieces of a puzzle, and I studied how they sank to the bottom of the glass as they absorbed the liquid.

I have never quite understood the English phrase 'copycat murder'. I assume it has nothing to do with cats. In Danish you say that a murderer 'aped' another, which

makes more sense to me. I can imagine that apes, like children, enjoy mimicking someone else's movements. The more I thought about 'copycat', the more absurd it seemed.

I had drunk my whisky and so I went to fetch another one, along with one of the advance copies of *In the Red Zone* I'd received a couple of weeks ago. Back on the terrace, I flicked through the book and found the place where the murder occurred. It was roughly two-thirds in and lasted seven pages. The murder was the book's emotional climax, the scene I tended to plan most carefully.

Kit Hansen, the name of the fictional victim, is a beautiful 28-year-old redhead, slim and fit with large breasts. Her fear of water and of drowning stems from a tragedy in Sharm el Sheikh, where she and her boyfriend go diving by themselves only a few days after completing their training course. They get caught in a fishing net on the seabed. Kit manages to free herself and tries desperately to save her boyfriend, but he is helplessly entangled and she is forced to watch him drown. Bereaved, and laden with guilt, she has to return to Denmark and tell his family how he died, after which she suffers a breakdown. She loses her job with an advertising agency, withdraws from the world and becomes increasingly dependent on prescription drugs. Some time later her neighbour falls in love with her. He is the only person to look after the reclusive woman and slowly his love is noticed and reciprocated. With his help, she quits taking the pills. He also encourages her to see the psychologist, Venstrøm, who ultimately murders her. The story ends with the neighbour killing Venstrøm, but not before he has been subjected to a torture based on his fear of needles.

I flicked back in the book to the description of Kit Hansen and wondered to what extent she resembled the murdered woman - or, rather, vice versa. If it really was a copycat killing, did the real victim have red hair? Did she

have a scar on her shin where the fishing net had cut right through to the bone when she struggled to free herself at the bottom of the sea in the Egyptian diving paradise? How far would the killer go to find a victim who matched the fictional character?

The alcohol was starting to take effect. My body felt heavier and it was getting harder to think clearly. I reread the chapter where Kit Hansen was murdered. Things seemed more and more unreal and I started to doubt if Verner had even called me. Perhaps it had all been just a daydream, a subconscious displacement activity to avoid doing any work.

I decided to go to Gilleleje to see for myself. I needed to find out if a murder really had been committed and, if so, try to establish how far the circumstances surrounding this murder matched mine - or if Verner was simply being paranoid.

2

THE TOYOTA HADN'T been exercised for several months and it protested loudly when I turned the key in the ignition. Finally, it surrendered and I drove along the coast to Gilleleje. Most of the road was flanked by holiday cottages and spruces, but in a few places there was a clear view of the sea. The waves had white crests and in several places the beach was reduced to three to four metres of shingle by the salty foam. It was high tide.

There were few people out and about. November is well outside the tourist season and the cafés and pubs had put away their outdoor furniture, leaving me room to park the Corolla on the marina, close to the quay.

The book didn't state precisely where in the marina the murder was committed so I stayed in the car, peering out through the windscreen. The strong wind formed sharp crests on the waves in the basin. Many of the boats had already been put into dry dock for the winter. Those that remained ground restlessly into one another, producing the unpleasant squeal of rubber against rubber, drowned out only by the noise of steel wires lashing aluminium masts.

Five cars were parked on the far side of the basin; one revealed itself to be a police car. I suddenly felt dizzy and grabbed the steering wheel, closed my eyes and inhaled sharply. I sat like this for a while, breathing as regularly as I could. Relax, I told myself. There could be hundreds of

reasons for the police to be in the marina; it didn't have to mean that Verner was right.

After a few minutes I summoned up the courage to open my eyes. Some people were standing around the cars, but more had gone out on to the breakwater and were looking out to sea. There was no police tape as far as I could see.

I left my car and strolled to the far side of the basin as calmly as I could. As I approached I could hear voices and the crackle of police radios. A couple of divers in wetsuits were sitting at the back of an open van drinking coffee in silence. A uniformed officer followed me with his eyes as I passed them. I didn't look at him, but carried on walking towards the breakwater. Out there twenty or thirty people had gathered, adults as well as children, all peering out to sea. Some had brought binoculars and cameras. I joined a group and followed their gaze.

A hundred metres out were two boats, a large yellow and red rescue boat and a black rubber dinghy. Four buoys with red flags marked out a square of twenty metres by twenty metres.

'They fished out a woman this morning,' a voice chirped up. 'She didn't have any clothes on.'

A red-haired boy of about ten, wearing a yellow raincoat and blue wellies, was standing on a bench next to me. Around his neck he had a pair of binoculars almost as long as his upper arms.

'She was completely white,' he carried on. 'And red.'

'You saw that?' I asked. My voice was trembling slightly.

He nodded eagerly.

'I've been standing here all day.' The boy planted his hands on his hips and turned his gaze towards the boats. 'They came this morning. Loads of divers and police officers. At first, they told me to go away, but I kept slipping past them. They've given up trying to get rid of me now.' He smiled and stuck out his chest.

'And ... the woman?'

'She was completely white,' he repeated. 'There were chains around her and a stone.'

'Did she have red hair?'

Wide-eyed, he turned to look at me. 'How did you know that?'

I shrugged. 'You just told me she was red as well.'

He nodded. 'She had red hair. But she was also red here and here.' He made a cutting movement with his hand across his chest and then his throat. 'And on her arms and legs.'

I didn't know what to say, or if I could even speak at all, so I turned to look at the boats. We stood like this for a couple of minutes until I cleared my throat and pointed to his binoculars.

'That's a very smart pair of binoculars you have there. Could I borrow them, please?'

The boy nodded and lifted the binoculars over his head. 'But I want them back if anything happens.'

I put the binoculars to my eyes and zoomed in on the boats. In the rubber dinghy a man in a wetsuit was sitting down and holding a rope that trailed over the side and into the water. The dinghy was rocking precariously and every now and again he was forced to take one hand off the rope and grab hold of the gunwale for balance.

Obviously I knew there wouldn't be an outline of the body on the surface on the water, but I think I had expected something. At any rate, I felt disappointed. There should have been some evidence that a violent act had happened there, but the water revealed nothing, and only the boats and the buoys suggested the area was special.

'What's happening?' the boy asked.

'Nothing,' I said and gave him back his binoculars.

He lifted them to his eyes immediately to make sure he hadn't missed anything.

'Do you think there's another one?' His voice sounded hopeful.

'There won't be,' I said and turned around to walk back to my car.

'Are you a policeman or something?' the boy called out, but I ignored him and carried on walking.

As I passed the officers on the quay, they threw me a look filled with contempt.

'Get a good eyeful, did you?' one of them sneered as I passed them.

I sympathized. Rubbernecking is tasteless, but I hadn't come out of curiosity. At least, not the kind of curiosity that drives some people. I wasn't here to get a rush of adrenaline at the sight of blood, bones, intestines and brain matter. Though they were my props when I depicted murder and mutilation in my books, my inspiration didn't come from real-life accidents. Simply closing my eyes sufficed. The images my own brain could conjure up were more than enough.

But, yes, I saw what I came to see in Gilleleje Marina.

WHILE I DROVE back to the cottage, I tried to work out how many people had read *In the Red Zone*. My editor was the first person to read the script and I guessed that probably three or four other people at the publishing company, as well as a couple of bookclub editors, must have seen it. The book would be published in a few days; it had been printed, so the printers must have had access to it for a month or two. I had received thirty complimentary copies in the post and it was likely that several copies had been sent to reviewers and to bookshops as pre-orders. Of my thirty copies, I had sent one to Verner, given one to my neighbour, and sent one to my ex-wife and one to my parents.

In total I estimated that somewhere between one and two hundred people had had access to the printed text of *In the Red Zone*, but both my publishers and the printers had the electronic version and that tends to appear in the strangest of places. I once received a printout of my sixth book, *Nuclear Families*, where the names of the victims had been replaced with mine and my family's. I didn't take threats like that seriously. I had grown used to letters that attacked my work or me personally, but on that occasion someone on the inside had leaked the electronic version of the script. My publishers couldn't explain it, but took the opportunity to enhance their security procedures. However, this was now some years ago and such precautions quickly

become ineffective if they aren't reviewed at regular intervals.

The bottom line was I had no way of knowing who or how many people had access to *In the Red Zone*, so I was none the wiser when I pulled into the drive of the Tower.

'Hello, FF,' my neighbour, Bent, called out as I got out of my car.

He was standing in his own drive wearing baggy army trousers, a far too tight black T-shirt and resting an axe on one shoulder. During the summer he had chopped down seven or eight trees on his own property and three on mine, and most of his garden was littered with timber in all lengths and widths. He had an artificial leg, but he was remarkably active and insisted on splitting all the wood into logs by hand.

'Hello, neighbour,' I replied and tried to produce a smile.

'We're running a bit late today,' he said, grinning.

He was referring to our afternoon ritual of meeting up for a drink or two around three o'clock. Bent drank beer and I had a whisky, usually a single malt, Laphroaig or Oban. For me, it often marked the end of my working day. I rarely wrote for more than five or six hours and I had started to value human company after thinking about my book all day. My discussions with Bent were seldom very sophisticated and at times I got irritated by his prejudiced views about immigrants, women or politics, but he was always friendly and willing to lend a hand whenever I needed it.

'I think I'll have to make my excuses today, Bent.' I pointed to my temples. 'I've got a splitting headache.'

'Oh, all right,' he said, sounding disappointed. 'I guess it must be hard work committing all those murders.'

'What?'

'Coming up with them, I mean.'

'Oh, right, I see. No, I think it's something else,' I lied. 'Might be flu.'

Bent nodded. 'OK, I hope you feel better soon.' He swung the axe from his shoulder and was about to carry on chopping, but stopped when I called out to him.

'By the way, have you started the new book?'

Bent shook his head. 'Not yet,' he replied. 'I haven't finished your last one yet. I'm not a fast reader and when I've been outside most of the day, I fall asleep once my head hits the pillow.' He grinned. 'I'm not saying your books are boring, it's just all that fresh air wears me out.'

'That's quite all right, Bent. I was just checking.'

'See you later, FF.'

FF was the nickname he had given me shortly after we met. It was not only the initials of my name, but also of his favourite beer, Fine Festival, which for him was the perfect trade-off between price and strength.

Bent was only ever known as Bent. He came from a working-class family. His father was a blacksmith and his mother a housewife until Bent and his brother, Ole, were old enough to look after themselves, when she got a job as a cashier in the local supermarket. Even though Bent did well at school, he started an apprenticeship at fifteen and became a smith like his father. But the trade bored him, so he was delighted when his name came up for National Service and he was sent to the barracks in Næstved. He showed considerable promise and jumped at the chance to pursue a career in the army, a career that saw him posted to Iraq. He loved being stationed abroad and extended his posting several times - until he saw one of his mates ripped to pieces by an IED and was himself hit in the leg by shrapnel. The doctors couldn't save his leg and after three years' service abroad he was invalided out with miserly compensation.

Back home in Denmark, he realized he had no chance of getting a job and took early retirement at the age of twenty-six. He was in the habit of saying that his

experiences in Iraq had aged him forty years, so technically he had reached retirement age.

He kept his army haircut and usually wore camouflage clothes and army boots, possibly out of habit, but more I suspect because it was important to him to remind himself and those around him of his past.

The mental calculations I had done on the way home were still buzzing around my head. I checked the stack of *In the Red Zone* that was on my desk. My publishers appeared to have short-changed me by one book on this occasion. At any rate, I'd given away four, but only twenty-five copies remained, including the one I had taken out on to the terrace earlier.

These days I'm rather wary of handing out copies of a new novel until it has been reviewed, so it was unlikely I'd given one away and forgotten about it. In the past I had given away books when drunk, sometimes with preposterous dedications to entice the recipient into bed, but it was several years since I had last done that.

I poured myself a whisky, which I knocked back before calling Verner. He wasn't back from work yet, his wife said, so I asked her to get him to call me. For the first time since moving to the cottage, I was actually waiting for the telephone to ring.

Which it did after another two whiskies.

Verner had worked late to find out more about the Gilleleje murder. He got a bit annoyed when I told him I had been to the marina. He couldn't see why I would want to do that; on the contrary, he said, I ought to stay away to avoid suspicion. But I had nothing to hide, and I reckon the real reason for his anger was that he thought I didn't trust him. It was a poor start to the conversation, but after I made a couple of placatory remarks, he got to the point.

'I've got some bad news for you,' he began. 'Turns out the dead woman wasn't a redhead after all.'

'And you call that bad news?' I burst out. 'That's brilliant!'

'Not really. She has short black hair, but when they found her, she was wearing a red wig.' He waited a couple of seconds for the penny to drop. 'The killer put her in that wig to make her look like the woman in your book.'

I didn't interrupt him again.

Verner told me someone had reported seeing light in the water last night. A couple of divers were sent to investigate this morning and had discovered the body. The light originated from a powerful diving lamp aimed straight up at the surface and it had clearly been placed there to make sure she was found. No one appeared to have noticed any boats anchored in the area.

The police believed the woman had been dead for thirty-six hours when they found her, and they established that she had been alive when she was immersed and would probably have been conscious for at least fifteen minutes before she suffocated to death. The cuts to the body were caused by a sharp knife or scalpel and inflicted underwater.

In my book I had given the victim those cuts to attract small fish so she would feel them nibbling little chunks off her, but Verner told me there were very few bites to the body and they definitely hadn't been inflicted while she was alive. Somehow I couldn't help feeling annoyed about this difference.

'Do you know who she was?' I asked.

'A local girl,' Verner replied. 'She worked in a bookshop in Gilleleje High Street. Mona something; I don't remember her surname.'

My heart skipped a beat.

'Mona Weis?' I said.

Silence down the other end of the telephone.

Then, 'Yes ... do you know her?'

'You just told me she worked in a bookshop in Gilleleje. I've signed books there a couple of times and I've met her,

that's all.'

'Hmm,' Verner grunted. 'And yet you can remember her surname?'

To my ears his question was tinged with a certain amount of suspicion, but then again he is a copper.

'It's an interesting name,' I replied. 'Authors collect interesting names.'

In truth there was a completely different reason why I remembered Mona's surname. I had indeed signed autographs in the bookshop in Gilleleje High Street and that was where I had met her, but it had turned into more than just an incidental meeting.

I can't deny that Mona was the inspiration behind Kit Hansen in the book - apart from the hair. Mona Weis had short black hair, as Verner had said, but came across as incredibly feminine. Her face was narrow and she had luminous blue eyes, a fine pointed nose and a small round mouth that made her look as if she was constantly blowing kisses. She was tall and slim without being gangly. Later, when I addressed her as Cleopatra, she rolled her eyes and said she had heard that one before. It failed as a compliment, but I couldn't help it, she really did look like her.

I was due to spend two hours in the bookshop and I signed a grand total of four copies, of which one was a borderline sleazy dedication to Mona. The shop wasn't very big, but they had found room for me in a corner where they had displayed a selection of my books and put up a till to serve the hordes of fans expected to queue up to buy a copy and get it signed by the author. It was Mona's job to operate the till, so we had ample time to talk, and flirt, in two hours while we waited for customers. She offered to add a little something to my coffee to help both of us stay awake and to my delight the next cup she brought me had an overpowering taste of whisky. We drank a lot of coffee

and became increasingly animated, something the other staff members couldn't help noticing.

Afterwards we went to the Kanal Café or the 'Carnal Café' as the locals call it, where we carried on drinking whisky. It was there that I called her Cleopatra and she told me she couldn't stand my books. I must have looked taken back because she quickly added that she liked me very much. She said she was fed up with dating fishermen and country bumpkins who drank beer and only ever talked about cars. At this point we both agreed there was no reason to stay in the café, and we returned to her flat, two rooms above the town's photo shop, where we tore each other's clothes off as soon as the door had slammed shut. We fucked like rabbits, changed positions and places constantly, but my most vivid memory was being ridden by Cleopatra, whose blue eyes practically glowed down on me.

She tired of me after six weeks. I wasn't surprised; she was twelve years younger than me and I was just grateful for the time we had together. She told me little about herself and I didn't encourage her to tell me more. We were lovers at a time when we both needed someone, that was all.

Yet her death hit me like a blow to the chest. I hadn't seen her for over two years, but the thought of *anyone* dying in this way, let alone her, made me feel nauseous.

Down the other end of the telephone, Verner cleared his throat.

'Listen, Frank. I have to ask you a question.'

'Of course.'

'Can you account for your whereabouts these last three days?'

4

OF COURSE, I couldn't prove what I had been doing or where I had been on the days Verner was asking about. Most of my evenings ended with a glass of red wine in front of the fire or the television and the three days he wanted me to account for had been no different. I didn't have a solid alibi, and I knew what that would mean if it had been a crime novel: I would have been the prime suspect. Not only had I described the murder, I also knew the victim, and it wouldn't take much imagination to come up with a motive of jealousy.

I didn't tell Verner how close Mona Weis and I had been. Our fling was probably known to most people in Gilleleje and I knew it was only a question of time before rumours about it reached the police, but I needed time to think. I was upset at Mona's death, but I had the sense to finish the conversation as quickly as I could. This involved me promising to come to Copenhagen to speak face to face with Verner.

I was going to Copenhagen two days later anyway for the launch of *In the Red Zone* at the Forum Book Fair, and we agreed that I would arrive a day early so we could meet. I wasn't happy about it.

Life in the small seaside village of Rågeleje had taken root in me and with every trip to the capital I felt more like a stranger. The noises had grown louder, the tempo faster

and the people more distant. They were unaware of each other's presence and pushed their way through the streets in their own bubble as defined by their car, music device or mobile telephone, or sometimes all three at once. If I had stayed in the city – as I had always sworn I would – I would most certainly have turned into one of them, but now I was a tourist. It was no longer my home territory and, with every visit, it took me longer to rediscover the old rituals and familiar ease. Simply navigating my way down Strøget was a major effort and necessitated an endless string of apologies because I could no longer read the pedestrian traffic in the street.

All the same, I needed to get away from the cottage. I wandered restlessly between the kitchen, living room and study, thinking about Mona. I convinced myself that if I physically distanced myself from the murder, I would once more be the master of my own thoughts. If nothing else, the impact of the city would at least be a distraction.

My annual trip to the book fair was carefully planned to ensure I spent as little time in the capital as possible. This year I had meetings with my publishers, a couple of interviews, three signing sessions at the book fair and one reading. In addition, I had squeezed in a visit to my parents, an evening with my best and only friend, Bjarne, and now a meeting with Verner.

This meant I had to change my hotel reservation. I always stay in the same place, Marieborg Hotel, in Vesterbro near the city centre, a tradition maintained since the first year I no longer had a fixed address in Copenhagen. Had I wanted to, I could probably have stayed with my parents or with Bjarne, but I liked being able to retire to my own space, and the hotel lay in a side street where I would get peace and quiet. The staff knew me, always gave me the same room and were politely interested without being intrusive. Part of their deference was due to the fact that I had used the hotel in my book *As You Sow*,

where a corrupt police superintendent is murdered by a prostitute he has double-crossed. The murder takes place in room 102, where I usually stay, and the hotel manager had even put up a small plaque on the back of the door mentioning the murder and my name. In the bedside table drawer there was a copy of the book in addition to the Bible.

When I called the hotel it turned out I would be unable to stay in room 102 on this occasion. The room had been booked for a week and prepaid for a couple of additional nights by another guest. This information angered me and I raised my voice to the poor girl at the other end of the telephone. I tried to explain that I always stayed in that room and that I had made my booking a fortnight ago. She apologized profusely, but no special requirements regarding room 102 had been registered in their booking system. As compensation, she offered me the extra night I needed for free. It failed to improve my mood.

My meeting with Verner would take place on Wednesday in the hotel restaurant. I knew I had to tell him the truth about my relationship with Mona Weis, if he hadn't already sussed it out, but I wanted to supplement it with my own theory as to what was going on. The only problem was I had no theory.

As I couldn't get to sleep anyway, I turned my thoughts to solving the mystery. I approached the situation as if it was one of my own novels. My books are usually constructed around a central murder, a crime so vile it remains in the reader's mind long after the book has been read. Once I have devised that particular scene, I get to work on the plot and the list of characters. In this case, the murder was already in place, but the cast and the plot were completely different to my book. I had to create a new storyline from the same starting point.

I soon realized that I was top billing. The question was: which role was I playing? Would I be the mentor, the