



Kill

TIM

A SHORT STORY BY IMOGEN MANN

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CHAPTER 1

When Martha Bosco opened her office window and got a blast of the strong easterly wind, she slammed it shut and quickly retreated, pulling the neck of her heavy jumper up around her ears. As she did so, she paused and studied the reflected room behind her.

She sighed. It was late. Then turned, and bent to the laptop on her desk - its screen dark save for a few lines of white text and an insistently blinking cursor.

It was no ordinary thing that had her attention. In fact, it was probably the least ordinary part of an extraordinary thing that one could ever imagine. And yet, for her, it was an unavoidable inevitability...in its own way.

She checked her watch. She was running very late, and with a grimace she hunched over the keyboard and swiftly typed.

Startled by an urgent knock, Martha looked up to see the wide bulk of Charles Nagelman filling her doorway.

“What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same,” he said.

Martha stared at him, and, without looking down, pressed return and quietly closed the laptop.

“Finishing up.” She forced a smile. “You?”

“Oh, you know... ditto.” He smiled and moved forward into the centre of the room.

Martha carefully slipped the laptop into her open briefcase and whipped the zip closed.

“I, I don’t mean to hold you up, but ah, since we’re both here...” stuttered the new finance director.

Martha raised an eyebrow.

“I, I’ve spent the last couple of months getting to know the company and, ah, wow! It’s beyond what I imagined, and I’m just excited by the opportunity to help take it forward.”

The side of Martha’s mouth flickered at the compliment.

“Well, Tim’s recommendation was compelling. But er...” she moved round from behind the desk and gestured towards the door with her briefcase. “If you don’t mind, I really mu—”

BOOOOOM!

CHAPTER 2

A thunderous explosion stole the air from Martha's lungs and an accompanying shockwave pulsed through her body, forcing her instincts to drive her down into a low crouch. The building shuddered around her and she froze. Her time stopped, and yet distorted sounds swirled all around, fighting for access to her brain but locked out by the rapid pounding of her heart.

The next thing she knew was Nagelman's pale face, fear writ large on it, looming in front of her, his lips moving but the words lost in a dull cacophony of sirens and voices. Confused, Martha stared unmoving at him.

Gradually, as each moment passed, the deafening pounding of her heart subsided, giving passage to external sounds.

"Dr Bosco? Martha! Martha!"

His tense voice finally burst through. It grabbed hold of her consciousness and dragged her back to the reality of the situation.

She gathered herself, shrugged his heavy hand off her shoulder, spun round and lunged towards the window, flinging it open.

Braced against the cold, Martha leaned out and peered into the dark night, searching.

It did not take long.

A faint orange glow a good hundred meters off to her right caught her eye. She stared at it long and hard, fighting the acrid smell catching at the back of her throat, willing the darkness to extinguish the glow and disprove what she already knew to be true.

"Where is it, Martha?" Nagelman shouted against the blaring alarms. "Where away?"

Martha turned to face him. The man was a picture of panicked energy, whereas she felt as if a plug had been pulled rapidly draining all hers away. She slumped into her chair, and taking two deep steadying breaths, reached for the desk phone. She hesitated momentarily, then held the handset out to Nagelman.

“Charles,” she said, her tone calm and measured. “I want *you* to call the fire brigade.”

His brow furrowed as he took the receiver from her.

Martha smiled weakly. “The system should have already alerted them. But they need the specifics.” She jerked her head backwards towards the open window. “That it’s the Mirror Block, not here.”

Nagelman nodded. “Right.”

“Would you mind?” Martha added, pointing behind him.

He frowned, followed her gaze, then stooped to retrieve her briefcase.

“What are you doing?” he said cautiously, his excess energy now subsided and his curiosity alive.

“Just make the call, Charles.” Martha snatched the briefcase from him. “Now!”

CHAPTER 3

The fire crew commander emerged from the dripping shell of the building into the soft dawn light and gave the much awaited all clear before heading to his waiting vehicle in which Martha Bosco snoozed lightly under a blanket. “Ma’am,” he whispered as he opened the door.

Martha’s eyes flickered open.

“Fire’s out, ma’am. I’ll leave a crew here while the investigators finish their work - just in case.”

Martha rubbed her red eyes and nodded.

“Once the report is done, you’ll get a copy. And so too will the police.”

Instantly alert. “Is that really necessary?” Martha asked, her voice scratchy from the dryness in her throat.

“Yeah. The size of the explosion, I’d say you’ve been extremely lucky. Of course, the lateness of the hour helped, but ah...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The man swallowed, hard. “We believe someone was inside. We haven’t yet located him: Timothy Linden.”

Martha stared at him.

“We found these in the debris.” He held up an evidence bag containing the melted and twisted but unmistakable remains of a pair of glasses.

Martha caught her breath. “Are you sure he was in there? Those could have just been left in there. What would he have been doing there, that time of night?”

The commander shrugged. This was not his business.

Pushing the blanket aside, Martha looked past the commander at the shell of what used to be the Mirror Block.

“What do you think caused it? I mean, that was a mighty explosion. I felt it.” She pointed towards the main office building.

The commander referred briefly to his notes and said stiffly, “It would be unhelpful to speculate at this time.”

Martha rubbed her temples and fixed him with a penetrating stare. That wasn’t good enough. She wasn’t going to let him off the hook. Too much was at stake here.

His discomfort clear, the commander closed his notebook and, leaning in, said quietly, “Gas. It has the hallmarks of gas.”

Martha’s eyes ballooned. “No. That’s not possible. There’s no gas here.”

The fire crew commander frowned.

“Look,” he said. “It’s cold. Maybe someone brought in a heater. We’ll—”

“No.” Martha shook her head. “There’s need, not with all the servers.”

“Okay. I hear you, and we’ll find out. But...” he pointed at a building in the distance. “We know they run off cylinders over there.”

Martha’s eyes followed his gesture before retreating within. Then a polite smile spread across her face.

“Ah,” she said, and stalked back to the main building.

CHAPTER 4

Sweeping past her assistant's office, Martha did a double take as she noticed the young man already at his desk. He was never early.

She leaned back with a smile. "No interruptions please Jake."

But as the young man steeled himself to speak, she held up a hand. Closing his mouth, he rose and fell silently into step behind her, only to nearly cannon into her as she stopped abruptly on opening her office door.

Martha shot an accusing glance back at the assistant before redirecting her attention to Charles, who was comfortably perched on her desk, casually turning an ornament over in his hands. He looked up and beamed.

"Ah Martha, I assumed you wouldn't mind if I waited in here."

She did mind. She quickly swept an assessing gaze around her office.

"So. How bad is it? What's the damage?" He said. He then waved his free hand in a dismissing gesture. "Forget that. The wider implications are more critical."

Martha turned back to her assistant. "Jake, would you mind?"

The young man pursed his lips in understanding and left.

"I think, Charles, that first you should know the full extent of 'the damage'." Martha said, as she rounded her desk and sat heavily in her chair. Her eyes flickered momentarily upwards and without meeting Charles' eyes, she held out her hands, slightly lifting them as if a conductor commanding an orchestra to rise. Charles sniffed loudly and slid from his perch and into the seat by its side. When Martha did not continue, he noisily plonked the ornament down on the desk.

Choosing to ignore this, Martha allowed silence to fill the room - she wasn't going to be hastened. In the end, she only looked up with the clunk of the door as Jake returned, tablet and stylus in hand.

Beckoning him to pull up a chair beside her, Martha noticed a subtle change in Charles' demeanour - from casual defiance to rigid uneasiness. That surprised her, but she never-the-less dismissed it as an insecurity of being new and pushed it out of her mind.

Taking a deep breath, Martha said firmly, her voice cracking ever so slightly, "Tim is dead."

Charles snapped to attention, bringing his eyes to meet hers. They stared silently at each other for several moments before Martha broke the contact. "This is the damage," she said. "Right now, nothing else matters."

"No." Charles shook his head. "I don't agree. Everything else matters. Everything. And we must get control of those implications right now."

CHAPTER 5

It's mid afternoon now and Martha's curled up on the couch at the far end of her office. The night before had taken its toll and having nodded off some time in the small hours, she'd fallen into a deep sleep. So deep, in fact, that she neither heard nor sensed a trio of strangers enter her office. One had gone directly over to her, casting a grey shadow across Martha's face, and yet she still did not stir.

"Bosco. Martha Bosco," the woman said, holding out her hand.

Martha yawned, waking slowly.

"DCI Anders. Can we speak?"

"Excuse me? Er, who are you?" Cora asked sleepily as she accepted the woman's outstretched hand.

"DCI Anders, Mrs Bosco."

Martha nodded, then squinting past, added, "and those two?"

"We're here about last night."

"About?"

"The explosion, ma'am. I'm leading the investigation and..." Anders glance over her shoulder.
"This is my team."

Martha nodded. "Go on."

"Certain evidence already recovered points to a cavalier if not criminal disregard to health and safety in the workplace. And then there's..."

"What?"

Anders shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Timothy Linden. We still have to account for his whereabouts. Forensic analysis is under way, but, ah..." she swallowed hard.

“Our working assumption is that he was inside the block at the time of the explosion.”

Martha froze. She was fully awake now.

Anders continued. “Preliminary review of CCTV footage positively identifies Linden entering the block at 18.46hr, but there is an absence of footage showing him coming out again.”

Eyes cast down, Cora said, “Yes, I know.”

“Oh? How’s that then?”

“The fire crew commander showed me the remains of his glasses.”

Anders eyebrows shot up. “Oh, he did, did he? I think we’ll let forensics provide the definitive answer on that. But I see no reason not to take your statement now, since you’re awake.”

Martha blinked.

“So you were in this room at the time? When the explosion happened?”

“Yes. I mean no. Not right now please - Jake!” Martha stood up so abruptly that Anders almost stumbled backwards with surprise.

“Jake!” repeated Martha, looking past Anders towards the open door. The young man’s head popped round, and she smiled, rubbing her stomach. “Anything vaguely food-like floating around? Biscuits. Anything.”

The young man shrugged. “I’ll see.”

“No need,” came Charles’ voice from behind Jake. He pushed past the young man, a broad, forced smile plastered on his face. “I’ve already sorted something, while you slept - figured this would take some time.”

Cora was speechless, but too sapped by hunger and weariness to question. Instead, she turned back to DCI Anders, “I’ll answer your questions Chief Inspector, but first I must eat.”

Anders smiled. “Not a problem. You don’t mind if we just wait here,” Anders said, gesturing to one of her officers to pass her a chair.

“No,” Martha said. “You wait outside. While I eat, I make calls - legal, insurance, you know, private calls.”

“No need. Done that too,” Charles’ voice boomed once more, this time laced with smugness.

Martha forced a tight smile.

Anders sat down, notebook in hand.

“Er, no chief inspector,” Martha said. “Like I said. You wait outside or down in reception. I don’t care which, just not in here.”

CHAPTER 6

Two weeks have passed since that fateful night plunged Martha's life and her business into a subconscious state of limbo. Subconscious because, no matter how hard she tried to get on with the ordinary day to day, there was always something lurking. Something poised to drag her back into the nightmare and its aftermath.

Martha was sitting at her kitchen table, mouth agape, newspaper in hand, her bowl of cereal shoved aside.

She couldn't believe what she was reading: gross exaggerations and wild speculations, pure sensationalism as far as she was concerned. And yet, she couldn't help but feel concerned, because what was written had a basis in truth. Specifically, in the truth disclosed in the preliminary forensic report, which she knew had not yet been published.

She knew that the report focussed on the death of Tim Linden in the explosion at her company's mirror data block. She knew that the explosion had been caused by a faulty gas heater. A gas heater which neither this nor any other news report bothered to mention should not have been there.

She couldn't believe it. Why on earth was that thing in there? Whose was it? Certainly not the company's, not hers. But hey, why ruin a good story with a fact or two? Martha snorted and tossed the paper aside. She had better things to do with her time.

Just then, a faint unfamiliar sound caught her attention. She paused, listening intently, but still couldn't place it. She shovelled in a last mouthful of porridge and pushed back from the table, taking her bowl to the sink and looked out the window. Nothing untoward in the garden or the paddock beyond. Perhaps she had imagined it.

But no, she hadn't. The sharp sound of the front doorbell had her spin round with surprise.

Martha opened the door to find DCI Anders and one of the other detectives she had seen before standing in her porch. Behind them, a police constable was leaning on their patrol car, talking into a handheld radio.

"Chief Inspector," Martha said. "What brings you up here? You could have just phoned."

Anders gave a brief, tight smile. "There's been a development. May we come in?"

Martha nodded and ran an appraising eye down the two detectives. She paused when she saw their heavily shod feet. "Shoes off. This is a no shoe house."

Momentarily taken aback, the officers stooped to comply, Martha noting their awkwardness with barely concealed amusement. She led the now more reasonably sized officers into the kitchen and as she busied herself with a fresh pot of tea, Anders launched into a monologue.

"While we do not have an intact body, Mrs Bosco, and I do apologise for being so blunt about this, we do have sufficient circumstantial and forensic evidence for a significant degree of certainty that Timothy Linden died in the explosion."

Martha poured the tea silently, without betraying her thoughts. She wondered where this was leading, what 'development' could Anders possibly be alluding to?

"Accordingly," Anders went on, "I am advising you that your company is likely to be charged with Corporate Manslaughter under Section 1 of the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007."

"I see. Actually no, I don't see. Is that it? You came all the way up here just to tell me what I've already learned from the newspapers?"

Anders opened her mouth to speak, but instead glanced at her colleague beside her.

"Look," said Martha, reaching for the newspaper, "you've got a leak, Chief Inspector."

Anders glanced at the paper and then met the challenge in Martha's gaze. "In addition to *that*, a new line of enquiry may or may not lead us in a different direction."

Anders paused, then without breaking eye contact, said, "Sergeant!"

The neatly dressed man shifted in his seat and spoke for the first time, his thick west country accent at odds with his snappy city suit. "How well do you know Charles Nagelman, ma'am?"

Taken aback by his voice and the apparently disconnected question, Martha paused momentarily before turning to the sergeant and answering, "Um, well enough, I guess."

“Meaning?”

Martha stiffened. “As well as can be expected for someone who’s only worked for me for a few months. He was engaged in good faith. I have no cause to doubt him. Why?”

“Well, he’s very loyal to you.” The sergeant said, pointing a stubby finger at Martha.

Martha smiled. “I’m glad to hear it. I would expect all of my people to be loyal to the company. What’s your point?” She fired back.

The sergeant glanced over at Anders, who gave him an authorising nod. “Being that he had concealed information possibly relevant to our investigation.”

Martha looked from the sergeant to Anders and back again. “Which one? You’re running two concurrently if I’m not mistaken.”

The sergeant did not answer, and the room fell silent except for the gentle ticking of the clock on the wall directly above the detectives’ heads. Martha’s attention drifted to the clock and its metronomic beat.

The characteristics of time had always been a feature of her life and work, and in this moment she was soothed equally by the sound of its presence and its irretrievable passage. But as she noticed her breathing fall into rhythm with the clock, she knew that its passage was of no benefit to her, and she forced herself to break the silence. “Let’s just rewind a second here,” she said. “On what basis, what specific basis does my company, and therefore me too, I suppose, face a potential charge of Corporate Manslaughter?”

“Gross breach of duty of care, ma’am,” answered the sergeant rigidly.

“I see. The gas heater.” But this didn’t really interest her. She had already considered the possibility and was confident that any such charge, if brought, could be defeated. So what was Anders fishing for? “And the other matter?”

The sergeant opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

“Oh, come on, just spit it out, man!” Martha exclaimed as she plonked her mug on the table.

He cleared his throat. “Mr Nagelman came forward a few days ago to, and I quote, ‘unburden himself of an action that conflicted with his loyalties to you and the company and his duty as a law-abiding citizen.’”

Martha stared at him a long moment, then turned and spoke directly to Anders, “I’m sorry. If you think talking in riddles is going to get me any closer to knowing what you’re talking about, then I would suggest that you think again.”

Anders jerked her chin up, signalling for the sergeant to resume.

“Mr Nagelman told us that he had become aware of an email from you to one of your programmers and that he had planned to remove said message.” The sergeant paused, clearly for effect. Then, puffing out his chest, continued, “However, on discovering that he could not do so, he brought it forward to us.”

Martha’s eyes narrowed, and she let out a long sigh. “Chief Inspector, I am a cryptographer. I built my company on an ethos of trust and transparency, as befits someone with my background. Our internal emailing system is unique in that only three people have the joint authority to permanently delete messages. Charles is not one of them.”

“In that case,” Anders interjected, “I ask you this: are you transparent and trusting of all your staff? Were you with Timothy Linden?”

“What’s my relationship with Tim got to do with Charles’ email?”

“Just answer the question, please.”

“I have always been as open and trusting as my position allows Chief Inspector. Across the board, with everybody. Even when...no, especially when we might not see eye to eye.”

Anders studied Martha’s face and then took a piece of paper out of a folder and placed it face down on the table between them. “Martha Bosco, did you not ‘see eye to eye’ with Timothy Linden?”

“Tim is... Tim was my head of research and development. We’d worked together for a long time. And yes, to answer your question, we did not always see eye to eye.”

Anders nodded and, changing tack, said, “Martha Bosco, did you send an email to one of your

programmers on the night of the explosion?”

“Er, yes I did. I sent one just as Charles came into my office. What of it?”

“Are you sure? How do you remember that?”

“It was a memorable night, Chief Inspector. What of it?”

Anders turned the piece of paper over and pushed it towards Martha. “Was it this message?”

Cora leaned forward, scanned the email and said, “Yes.”

“Would you read it out to us, please? All of it.”

Cora pursed her lips as she picked the paper up.

“Thanks for alerting me to this. This is significant. Fix it, kill tim”

Realisation washed over Martha as she heard the last few words leave her mouth. She looked up at Anders, her eyes wide and jaw tight.

“So you tell me Martha Bosco. Was this or was this not a direct order from you to this alleged programmer, this Willis chap?”

“Of course it was.”

“And you expected him to do as directed.”

“Of course.”

Anders shifted in her chair. “You realise what you’ve just said? What you’ve just admitted?”

“Of course I do. But do you realise what you’ve just done?”

Martha slid the piece of paper back across the table to the detectives, who looked questioningly at her and then at each other.

“You’re going to have to do better than that if you want to pin a murder or manslaughter

charge on me, detectives.” Martha challenged. “I assume you’ve read the rest of it? The entire thread?”

“Sergeant!” Anders snapped.

“This is all Mr Nagelman gave us, ma’am. We saw no need to—”

“—Establish the context, sergeant?” Martha glared at the man and then got up, noisily scraping her chair, and stalked out of the room.

“I will speak to you later,” Anders hissed at the sergeant.

Martha quickly returned, laptop in hand. “This is my laptop. The very one I had with me the night of the incident. The one from which I sent that email.” She pointed at the piece of paper.

“You know,” Martha continued as she opened up the secure internal company email system and scrolled through the folders. “We have something in common in what we do. Something inherent to our work - Time and timeliness.” She looked from one detective to the other, her finger pointing at the screen, at the message from Willis to which she had just read out loud her reply.

She stood tall and stretched her back. “The timely acquisition, interpretation and dissemination of information is crucial to your investigations. It’s fundamental to what our company does. Willis identified a potential source of a time lag in our system. I was telling him to fix it, to kill the time lag. What you have here...” Martha reached forward and placed her hand on the piece of paper, “This is nothing more than evidence of my haste: a typo. An incomplete sentence. Of my annoyance at being interrupted by Charles. Of my pressing send before the message was complete.”

Anders carefully scrolled down the messages on the screen, intently reading, and took a deep breath. “I’ll need a copy of all this, a copy from Willis’ folders too, all the logs and I’ll speak to Willis myself.”

Martha nodded. “Of course.”

“We still have a death, and evidence of a breach of duty of care to investigate.”

“Naturally.”

“This is not over.”

“Oh, I’m sure it isn’t,” Martha said, fully aware that the future would be awash with further wild speculation and accusations for her to weather.

As if reading her mind, Anders smiled and said, “I’ll deal with the leak. That aside, a thorough investigation is all I promise. Its wider effects...” she opened her hands. “...are beyond my control.”

With that, the detectives rose, and Martha escorted them to the front door. Neither of them spoke as they hastily slipped into their shoes and crunched across the gravel to the waiting car. She watched on long after the taillights had disappeared down the long lane.

When she finally turned to go back inside, the gentle mew of a passing buzzard caught Martha’s attention and she looked up and saw it spear effortlessly across the sky amongst the scudding clouds. She watched on, her mind devoid of thoughts until it was a distant speck and the chill air sent an involuntary shiver through her. With a last upward glance, she retreated inside and, slumping down on the porch bench, sighed and whispered to herself, “exonerated but not free.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Imogen Mann is a lifelong countrywoman from the South West of England. A graduate of the University of Roehampton, the College of Aeronautics Cranfield University, and BPP Law School, she worked as an aviation journalist, airline business development analyst and solicitor before becoming an author. Away from the academic, she is a sportswoman, qualified pilot, dodgy 'cellist, and has been a farmer pretty much her entire life.

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