

# THE MAYFLY







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# THE MAYFLY



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To Jo Words are meaningless without you.













'[Men are] creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him.'

Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents











December. Post-festivities. The frozen earth was veiled in a thin covering of snow that crunched under Detective Chief Inspector Tiff Rowlinson's boots. In a glade, the log cabin looked as though it had come out of a fairy tale, complete with a tall stone chimney and heart-shaped etchings above the door. A local landowner had built it for his daughter as a summer house sixty years ago, but it had long since been abandoned, and was now swathed with climbing plants and moss. A sanctuary built out of love and innocence, defiled in the most grotesque manner.

Rowlinson slowly circled the little wooden structure, his hands behind his back and his coat collar turned up inside the white plastic overall. The crime scene investigators mingled uncertainly, watching where they trod. They had established a perimeter with reams of blue-and-white plastic tape around the glade. Rowlinson had been here before, too many times. He had seen too many bodies, too many weeping loved ones and too few prosecutions. He didn't feel much anymore. The endless cycle had anaesthetised him.

Except in these woods.

In these woods, Rowlinson felt again.

He approached the entrance to the cabin and ducked through the doorway. Inside, the air was stale and heavy. He fumbled





for the inhaler in his coat pocket. Felt a little relief at feeling the familiar plastic tube and the tip of the metal canister. He no longer noticed the bitter cold.

The room was empty, save for the victim. And the flesh-eating flies swarming around what was left of him. The victim's head was slumped over the back of a wooden chair, mouth and eyes wide open. His skin was yellow and withered. A reaction to the poison, Rowlinson had been told, but he now understood a comment one of the SOCO team had made a short while ago -'Poor bastard looks like someone sucked his soul clean out.'

He was naked and his arms were covered with deep lacerations, but that was nothing compared to his chest. The flesh was hanging off, exposing a crimson network of muscle and tissue. There were similar wounds on the lower half but everything was so saturated in blood, it was hard to make out which parts of him remained intact and which didn't.

'Jesus,' a voice behind Rowlinson gasped.

He turned to find Hardwick in the entrance, hand over his mouth.

'What the hell have we got here, guv?'

DS Hardwick was a foot shorter than his superior but still managed to fill the little cabin with his portly frame. He was a city boy with a swaggering gait, but a decent copper despite his lack of charm.

'The damage is self-inflicted,' Rowlinson said quietly.

'He tore his own skin off, boss?'

Rowlinson peered more closely. Ptyalism – excretion of foamy saliva, but to such an extent that the victim had been unable to control it by swallowing alone. At some point, he had introduced his fist into his mouth in order to induce vomiting but had





ended up biting down so hard that he had almost taken his hand clean off.

'The alkaloid caused unimaginable pain for many hours. To combat it, the victim attempted to fillet himself.

'Why?'

'To get at his heart, Hardwick. It was the only way to end the pain.

Three hours earlier, Sir Philip Wren had been sitting in the study of his Kent home, his belly full of port and chicken, and his mind full of gushing phrases to use during his acceptance speech for an OBE. He had received the phone call only yesterday in the strictest confidence - the Honours Committee had resolved to acknowledge the incumbent Attorney General's services to the legal profession and Her Majesty's Government in the New Year's Honours list. Finally, a lifetime's commitment to public service was to be recognised and Wren had spent the last twentyfour hours in a state of euphoria.

But his jubilation had been short-lived and he was now in south Wales, cold and anxious, and with a sharp pain in his head.

The scene was as he had expected – a glade swarming with a forensic team. Blue flashing lights. A feeling of uncertainty hanging in the air. And in the centre, a little wooden cabin with hearts carved above the door.

It's happening again.

He had been told that the detective in charge, Rowlinson, was competent. He had no doubt that this was true, but a local detective couldn't possibly keep this case. Not if Wren's fears were realised. He found Rowlinson standing with another man











by the cabin door, looking at him with the same expression of uneasiness as all the detectives he had seen over the years. He didn't blame them. If he could have it any other way, he would leave them to get on with their job – but he couldn't. Not this time.

He walked across the glade, conscious of the questioning eyes following him.

'Philip Wren.' He offered his hand and received a firm grip in response.

'DCI Rowlinson. We weren't expecting the Attorney General, sir. Is there a jurisdictional issue I should be –'

'Not at all. No one wants to tread on any toes here, Chief Inspector. Your authority is not in question.'

It was a lie. There was a task force already in place to take over the investigation, a sub-division of the National Domestic Extremist Unit. A covert, specialist Met unit.

'Then I don't see -'

'May I see the body, DCI Rowlinson?'

Rowlinson shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The Attorney General had arrived in a Jaguar XJ accompanied by a small company of dark-suited men. These men had gathered the bewildered SOCO team together and were issuing them with confidentiality agreements to sign. After a further moment's hesitation, Rowlinson stood aside.

Wren inhaled the cold air greedily before stepping inside the log cabin. His stomach churned. He didn't want to see that chicken again.

Rowlinson stood in the doorway watching him curiously, hands wedged in his pockets.

He cleared his throat.









'The poison was administered through a catheter in his wrist, probably while he was unconscious. The poison takes over the whole body, arrests every single nerve. The pain is excruciating, but the brain is too overloaded to shut down. The sensation apparently lasts for hours, during which, as you can see, the victim mutilated himself."

'Is there anything in his mouth, Chief Inspector?'

Rowlinson faltered. 'What?'

Wren felt a lump in his throat, something restricting his airway. 'His mouth, Chief Inspector. Is there anything in his mouth?'

Rowlinson looked behind him, as if he thought it might be a test, before taking two strides across the floorboards to within touching distance of the victim. The foam around the victim's gaping mouth had begun to congeal but some of the froth dripped down the side of his face like egg white. Wren watched as Rowlinson peered in.

'There's nothing there.' Rowlinson straightened up.

'Check again.'

Rowlinson bent over the body again and looked closer. Wren balled his hands into fists. Perhaps Rowlinson was right. Perhaps there was nothing there.

'Hang on,' Rowlinson said, digging a pen and a pair of blue plastic gloves out of his pocket. 'There is something . . .'

Wren felt the tension in his body snap as Rowlinson repositioned himself, dipped the pen into the victim's mouth and gently eased it back out.

'What in God's name is that?' He held up a black object to the light.

Behind him, Philip Wren walked swiftly out of the cabin.







## 6th April, 1945 Buchenwald concentration camp, Germany

Captain Ainsworth stood outside the main gate, a cigarette clinging perilously to his bottom lip. The rain had let up in the last hour and sunlight was daring to penetrate the cloud covering.

The 89th Infantry Division had arrived two days earlier. They had been up for a fight, but instead they had found the camp under the control of its inmates. News of the arrival of the British and American armies had reached the camp a few days previously and the Germans had begun a hasty retreat. With the command structure dissolved and most of the guards having either fled or committed suicide, a group of inmates had stormed the watchtowers. The plucky inmates – most of them Communists – had been hiding weapons for years, which they were now, finally, able to put to good use. They had even had the guts to take prisoners, showing mercy to the Nazi wardens who had shown them nothing but inhumanity.

Ainsworth's men had been ill-prepared for what lay waiting for them at Buchenwald. They had heard about the camps of course, and heard rumours of mass killings with gas. A





Polish-Jewish lawyer named Lemkin had even coined a new word for it. Genocide. But words were so easily absorbed into the skin. Seeing a man so overwhelmed by the relief of his emancipation from a hell on earth that he fell to the floor dead at your feet. Nothing had prepared Ainsworth for that.

They had met the Czechs first. Thousands of them crammed into spaces designed for a few hundred at most. Stripped naked except for loin cloths. Freezing. Dying. Their bodies had shrivelled through malnourishment to such an extent that they barely resembled human beings anymore. The walking dead, with yellowy-white skin that tore as easily as paper, stretched so taut that Ainsworth could count every single rib.

With their last remaining energy, the inmates had greeted the 89th Division like heroes. So weak they could hardly walk, but somehow, they had managed to hoist up some of the infantrymen – lean and heavy lads, at that – to parade them around the camp in triumph. Embarrassed, but desperate not to offend, the soldiers had reluctantly allowed them to do it, although some of the inmates had collapsed from the effort.

They were a mixed bunch, from what Ainsworth could gather. There were the Czechs, but then there were Poles, Soviets, French, Croats. Women too, Many of them had been forced into sexual slavery in the camp brothel. Perhaps most satisfyingly for Ainsworth, there were a few of their own: American airmen who had been shot down over occupied France; British, too. The false papers they had carried that were supposed to have helped them escape from enemy territory had backfired. When they were captured the Nazis treated them as spies and shipped them to Buchenwald along with the Jews.

Iews. An entire race the Nazis branded the 'useless eaters'.





There was a polite cough. Ainsworth had been lost in his own thoughts, hadn't noticed the corporal behind him. Henderson was a good soldier and bright for an infantry lad, but, like the rest of the boys, he looked pale and sickly.

'First part of the roster, sir,' said Henderson.

He handed over some papers, which Ainsworth took but didn't read. Instead, he gazed over at the horizon, past the battered-down gates and across the yard to where he could see a sign that had been torn from the wall and stamped into the muddy earth. Arbeit macht frei. Work sets you free.

After a while, Henderson said, 'We don't have enough medicine for these people, sir. We can't stop them dying.'

Ainsworth nodded grimly. 'If you can't stop the bleeding, that's no reason not to try to stem the flow.' His stomach was churning – the chlorine tablets they added to the water didn't agree with him. After a brief pause, he said, 'Doesn't make any sense, does it, Henderson?'

'Sir?'

'Hitler knew the tide of war had changed months ago. The invasion of Russia was a fiasco. He needed resources, but he prioritised trains transporting Jews to death camps over his own army convoys. Tanks, soldiers, weapons, munitions. They could have made a difference. Doesn't make an ounce of sense.'

'Some say they were making sacrifices to the Norse gods, sir.'

'Is that what you think, Henderson?'

The soldier hesitated. 'Maybe, sir.'

'Did you see the Dora on the way up here?'

'We all did, sir.'

The Dora had been abandoned, but even though it was unmanned, the 89th had approached the massive railway gun





with considerable apprehension. Weighing 1,350 tons, the only way for the gargantuan barrel to be moved was on double tracks. The techs had doubted it was ready for combat, but the estimated range was over twenty-eight miles.

'You think a race capable of producing a weapon as advanced as that also believes in resurrecting gods through human sacrifice?'

Henderson didn't answer. He had turned at the sound of an engine. In the distance, a car was approaching, its wheels kicking up dust and dirt along the track. Ainsworth looked at Henderson, who turned back and barked a series of orders at nearby soldiers. They spread out across the entrance, taking shelter where they could, rifles at the ready.

Ainsworth stood stock still in the open, a revolver hanging loose at his hip. He doubted very much the Nazis would return to try to salvage anything, and even if they did, they were hardly going to show up in a Rolls Royce.

The car pulled up facing Ainsworth. The chassis paintwork was splattered with dirt but the areas not covered in mud were otherwise clearly well maintained. This was not a civilian car. Ainsworth held his hand up, signalling to Henderson and the rest of the boys to back off. Weapons were lowered.

A tall man with wavy blond hair emerged from the back seat. He put on a hat and pulled a trench coat over a pinstripe suit, the coattails flapping helplessly in the breeze. He was young for someone being chauffeured across hostile territory.

'Captain Ainsworth, I presume.'

Ainsworth raised an eyebrow before taking the visitor's hand. He was English, but what the hell was he doing out here? Ainsworth registered the tight grip on his hand. Not a reporter or a politician, then.







'Welcome to Buchenwald,' Ainsworth grunted. 'Mr -' 'Ruck. Colonel Ruck.'

The visitor handed Ainsworth some papers and this time he read them with care. When he had finished, he looked up sceptically. 'British Secret Intelligence?'

'The very same. Military Intelligence, Section Five, actually.' Ruck smiled pleasantly, the pencil moustache above his top lip curling upwards like a second mouth. His voice was as smooth as his manners.

'And how is it that I can help you, Colonel Ruck?'

'First, may I congratulate you, Captain, on an outstanding operation.'

'Yeah. Several years earlier and perhaps we'd have actually done some good.'

'Please, Captain, don't belittle your achievement. Your very presence here had the Jerries scurrying for cover, did it not? A most satisfactory victory, I'd imagine.'

Ainsworth resisted the temptation to say 'get to the point'. This man was a bureaucrat. A pen-pusher. He wouldn't have survived a battlefield.

'Hardly a victory, I'd say. Forgive me, Colonel Ruck, but what is it that you're doing here?'

Ruck motioned for Ainsworth to re-examine the paperwork. 'You'll find a letter explaining everything at the back.'

Ainsworth found the letter and read it through carefully.

'I've never heard of these people,' he declared.

'Perhaps you would be kind enough to make some enquiries, Captain.'

Ainsworth turned to look at Henderson. His glance was met with a blank expression. The letter had been signed by Fleet







Admiral Leahy – Roosevelt's chief of staff. The seal looked genuine enough. The signature was a good one, too. Then he looked beyond Ruck for the first time, at the Rolls and the two Yankee soldiers now standing either side of the gleaming bonnet with red spearheads on their shoulders. Black Devils. Commandos. Escorting a British secret agent with a letter from the highest-ranking military officer after the President himself, ordering Ainsworth to hand over a bunch of people under his control *if* they were found alive in Buchenwald.

Ainsworth hesitated. *Time to buck my ideas up a bit.* 'We don't have a complete list of inmates yet, sir,' he explained, handing the letter back to Ruck. 'It could take days to find these people.'

Ruck smiled curtly. 'Read the letter more closely, Captain. They're Nazis I'm after – not Jews. Doctors, actually.'

'Doctors?' Ainsworth couldn't help but chuckle. 'There aren't any doctors here, Colonel Ruck. This place wasn't designed to prolong human life. This is – *was* – an extermination camp. Tens of thousands of people were behind these walls, kept in worse conditions than poultry. Those that aren't dead aren't far off. There are no doctors here.'

Ruck shrugged and lit a cigarette produced from a small packet hidden in his coat. One of the commandos by the car shuffled his feet impatiently.

'Have you found a surgery here?' Ruck asked.

'A *surgery*? There's no such thing. All we've seen are huge rooms where they crowded in hundreds of scared people and gassed them. Then they got the ones who weren't gassed to drag the bodies to giant pits and throw them in. That's what's here. If you're expecting a cosy waiting room with a fish tank and a







#### THE MAYFLY | 12

copy of *Punch* on the coffee table, then you're a long way from home, Colonel.'

Ruck sniffed the air and for a moment Ainsworth was reminded of a predator sensing its prey. 'Aside from those rooms, then. Something smaller. Instruments, perhaps. Saws, scalpels, masks. That sort of thing.'

Ainsworth shook his head. 'Only death and -'

'Sir?' Henderson interrupted. He coughed nervously. Ruck and Ainsworth turned to look at him. 'What about the Hell Rooms?'







Charlie Priest was pan-frying sole.

It hadn't been a particularly successful enterprise, so far. The pan was too hot and the butter was foaming around the edges. The fish was crimping at the ends, shrivelling up before his eyes like paper curling in a flame.

'Too much heat,' he muttered.

He chucked his failed experiment in the bin with the two previous attempts and threw the pan in the sink. It hissed angrily. Even the cookware was disgusted with his efforts.

He wondered about another takeaway but was distracted by the sound of someone rapping on his door.

There was a little security monitor in the hall; all the new penthouses had one. Someone could jab a knitting needle through a spyhole too easily if they wanted. Priest glanced at the monitor. *Great. This evening's getting better by the minute.* 

He unbolted and opened the door.

'Evening, Officer,' he sighed.

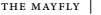
Priest's visitor smiled. The sort of smile where the mouth twists upwards at the corners but all the other facial muscles remain completely motionless.

'Mr Priest?'









'Yes.'

The policeman was clutching a box. Just a regular cardboard box, nothing exciting. A bit bigger than a shoe box. He was around Priest's age, maybe a few years older, with strands of greasy black hair protruding from underneath the custodian helmet. The Brunswick Star gleamed in the light cast out into the hallway from Priest's penthouse.

'Can I come in?' the uniform asked.

'Is there any food in that box? I'm starving.'

'Perhaps if I could just come in, sir.'

Priest shrugged and stood aside. Why not? The fake smile reappeared momentarily before Priest led him through to the kitchen. The policeman placed the box carefully on the side. His uniform was immaculate. Must be new to the job.

'Nice place,' he remarked, looking round, taking it all in.

It was a showroom kitchen. Black granite surfaces on softcoloured wooden units. Streaks of lime green across the back wall over the appliances, reflected on the tall bar stools. The smell of burnt fish lingered in the air.

'The smell . . .?' the officer asked.

'Lemon sole.'

'I see. Easy thing to burn.'

'Not really. It's actually quite hard to mess up.'

A sympathetic but unconvincing smile.

'So what can I help you with, Officer?'

'Well, the Super sent me over. They're clearing out the archives and came across a load of your old stuff. Actually, I've never heard of you but the Super says you were a big deal in the Met and I should deliver this back personally.

'I left CID ten years ago.'

'Really? You obviously left an impression.'





### JAMES HAZEL | 15

'Seemingly. Can't say I recall missing anything from ten years ago.'

'Well, let's see what we got here.'

The uniform reached over and flipped the lid of the box and brought out a long, metal object.

'T-baton,' Priest said. 'American truncheon. Circa nineteen nineties by the looks of it. Never owned one.'

'Really?' The uniform glanced down at the baton, apparently surprised. He studied it again, as if it might reveal some hidden secret. He tested the weight in his hand, softly shaking his head.

'You say the Super sent you?' Priest queried.

'Yeah.'

'Pritchard?'

'Yeah'

'DSI Pritchard?'

'Yeah.'

Priest went down hard against the corner of the breakfast bar. His head took two impacts. One from the tip of the baton as it swung violently at him, catching the side of his temple – he'd anticipated the blow a fraction too late. The second was his head against the corner of the granite top. It was the second blow that turned the lights out.

Priest opened his eyes and for a moment there was nothing. Just the sound of blood rushing past his ears.

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Pritchard had retired three years previously. The uniform was real but the man wearing it hadn't been. Priest should have guessed earlier. He'd been wearing a helmet. The nearest police station was three miles from here. Helmets were what beat



officers wore – officers who travelled in cars wore peaked caps. There was no way this guy had walked three miles in a helmet carrying a compendium of Priest's old stuff.

Bloody idiot. Burning the fish was bad enough . . .

At first Priest couldn't detect anyone else in the room but he was sure the fake copper was still there, somewhere. He had been dumped in a chair. His wrists were tied to the chair arms with cable ties, as were his legs. The plastic cut into his skin. Some involuntary movement while he was unconscious had drawn deep lacerations across his ankles. There was duct tape wound around his chest, binding him to the chair. He could move his head a little but not much else.

There was a wet tea cloth on his head, restricting his view. He could have been anywhere but the stench of burnt fish told him he was still in his own kitchen.

He tested the restraints around his wrists and pain seared up his arm in response. He wasn't going anywhere in a hurry. So far, the upper hand was with the man in blue. Priest figured he had a few minutes at the most to turn the tables. On an even footing, a confrontation would have had only one outcome. The fake copper was under six foot and didn't look like he was carrying much underneath the uniform. Priest was six foot three and weighed fifteen and half stone, most of which was muscle. Knocking him out had been more luck than judgement, too.

He sat, immobilised, for what seemed like an age, although he guessed it was only a few minutes. A few minutes in which Priest couldn't think of anything but the buzzing in his head and the bastard smell of fish.

The towel was suddenly whipped away and Priest's kitchen came into view, spoilt by the figure of the grinning policeman.





'Gotcha!' the fake copper announced.

Priest didn't say anything, just stared at the intruder as neutrally as he could.

'Why so upset, Priest? Should have seen it coming?' The fake copper threw the towel aside and took a few steps back, folding his arms and grinning. 'This uniform cost me two grand. So don't feel too bad.'

He was probably telling the truth about the price. Getting hold of a replica that good wasn't impossible, but it was very expensive. Priest started to wonder about his chances.

The fake copper continued, 'Ah, it was worth it. Guessed you wouldn't open the door to any other type of visitor. The concierge downstairs was also very helpful.'

'What do you want?' Priest asked.

'Just a chat. For now. Little chat. So you can get to know me a bit better.'

'And you know me?'

The fake copper smiled. 'You're Charles Priest but everyone calls you Charlie. Divorced. No children. Forty-three years old. Cambridge first. Joined the Met in ninety-four, did two years on the beat. Fast-tracked through CID to DS in ninety-seven and then DI in two thousand and one. In two thousand and four you left the Force under a cloud and retrained to become a lawyer. You worked in the commercial litigation department of an international firm before setting up your own practice in the City specialising in fraud investigation. Now you earn half a million a year and rank pretty highly in the Legal 500 as one of the most respected solicitor-advocates in the UK. Your parents are dead but you have one sister, Sarah Boatman, thirty-nine years old, a co-owner of a PR agency, and one brother, William





Priest, forty-six years old, currently residing at Her Majesty's pleasure in a secure psychiatric hospital outside the city having been declared criminally insane five years ago. You suffer from dissociative disorder, which means you constantly feel detached from reality, occasionally experiencing fits in which you descend into a state of complete dissociation, much like an out-of-body experience. Shall I go on?'

Priest sniffed. He'd earned more than half a million last year but the rest was accurate enough.

'You've clearly been reading my Facebook profile.'

The intruder's pallid skin and dilated pupils suggested there was more to his charm than just a natural swagger, but Priest had seen something in his eyes other than coke. Something that troubled him more than the cable ties around his wrists and legs. Something dead.

The fake copper started digging through a pile of papers on the work surface. They weren't much – bills, lists, receipts. An instruction manual for the expensive coffee machine his sister Sarah had bought for him last Christmas that he still hadn't got around to using. But *his* stuff, nonetheless.

'Priest and Co,' the fake copper muttered. He was examining a business card. 'Course he would have sent it to you.' He pocketed the card and turned back to Priest.

'Are you going to tell me what all of this is about?' Priest was surprised by how calm he sounded, despite the anger swelling in his chest.

'You've come into possession of something of mine,' the man said slowly. 'Something very important to me.'

'Your dermatologist's address? You should sue the bastard.'

'No, Mr Priest. Something infinitely more valuable.'









Priest did the best impression of a guy shrugging while strapped to a chair that he could.

When he didn't say anything, the fake copper carried on. 'Well, then, let me help you a little. I'm looking for a flash drive. A data stick. I want it back. Then I'm going to burn your house down, Mr Priest. Whether you give me the drive voluntarily or not determines whether you'll still be strapped to that chair when I strike the match.'

Priest said nothing but kept on watching. Watched the guy walk over to the box on the kitchen table. Watched him rummage around inside. Watched him take out a drill.

'You're here to put up some shelves?' Priest quipped.

The intruder's smile didn't materialise this time.

'I have all night, Mr Priest. And you're not going anywhere. Know how many holes I can drill in you before you pass out?'

'No.'

'Neither do I. Perhaps we can find out together.'

The fake copper took a drill piece out of the box and screwed it in. Pulled the trigger a few times, watching the barrel whirl. A rising sense of panic washed over Priest. *I wasted those few precious minutes*. He swallowed but his throat was still dry. He started jolting his arms, trying to find some movement, but he was helpless.

The intruder took the drill and pressed the flat of the barrel to Priest's ear. Priest kept his mouth shut, tried to control the overflow of oxygen he was taking in through his nose. It didn't seem real – nothing ever did. But it *felt* real, this time. He needed to avoid hyperventilating. At least while he was conscious, he had half a chance of talking his way out of this. Although that prospect seemed to be fading by the second.







Fake Copper pulled the trigger. Priest threw his head sideways and grimaced as the barrel burnt the side of his face. He heard the maniac laugh. *The fucker's enjoying this!* Priest was running short of ideas so he decided to stall.

'OK. OK. The data is through there.' He nodded towards the dimly lit lounge.

The visitor pulled back reluctantly. 'Where?'

'I downloaded the data on to the computer in the corner of the room and destroyed the flash drive.'

'Why?'

Good question. 'I just did.'

Priest's visitor looked at him. Rubbed his hand across the drill. Leant in close. Priest could smell stale smoke and alcohol.

'If you're lying, I'll take your fucking eyes out first.'



