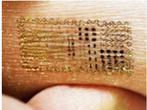
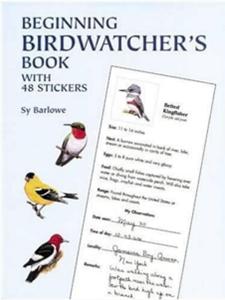
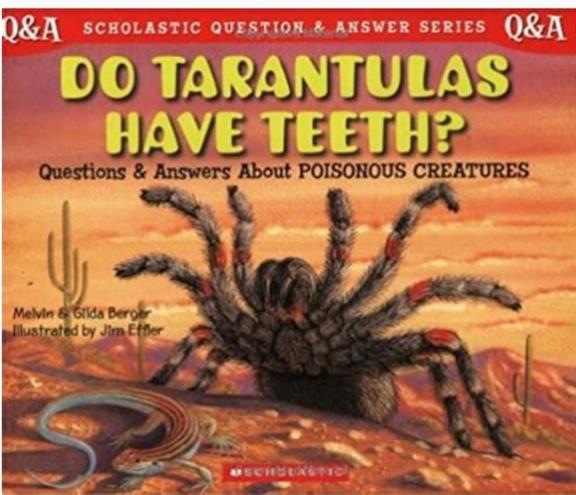


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'You him?' said the burning-eyed man, as his hand touched nose and chest again. 'Turn in to him a little bit more, please, Robin. 'He saw it with me. 'This way, then.' Strike showed him the door to the toilet just outside the office. The man shuffled through the inner door, the stench of him doubly potent after a brief respite. Robin wanted to find the holdall containing the sturdy rubber protective brace, but it would be somewhere out of reach in the bridal suite, wherever that was. Matthew took Robin's upper arm gently, his fingers inches above the knife wound, and walked her on. 'They're coming,' she said, with a look of exaggerated meaning that would have spooked a man far less jumpy than Billy. 'What happened?' 'He wanted to see you, I said you weren't here and he got angry and started punching things!' 'Call the police,' said Strike quietly. That's it. Little girl it was, but after they said it was a little boy. 'She'll be all right. His T-shirt, jeans and hoodie were all torn and filthy, the sole of one of his trainers peeling away from the leather. 'I seen a kid killed,' said the stranger. 'That's nothing,' said Strike easily. He says it didn't happen but he's lying, he was there. Denise whimpered, as if scared he might suddenly expose himself, and, indeed, it seemed entirely possible. Matthew could have borne this response if not for the smile she was trying to suppress. 'I think her arm's hurting her,' the bride's mother told the groom's father. The male guests blurred into conformity in their dark suits. Robin paused. Before Strike could get out from around the desk, Billy had sprinted through the outer door. PROLOGUE Happiness, dear Rebecca, means first and foremost the calm, joyous sense of innocence. 'Who's coming?' 'Nobody's coming,' said Strike, but Billy was already trying to push the door open. Two raised voices were reverberating through the glass door, one male, the other shrill, frightened and female. 'Why don't we go in here?' He gestured to him that he should proceed into the inner office. That was down in the dell, by our dad's. 'Tell them we've got a very ill man here. It had given him quite a start when she had removed it for the photographs. We have updated our Privacy Policy Please take a moment to review it. 'Who's on their way?' Denise whipped her head out of the room and closed the door. The stranger's flies were gaping. Him. 'Have you got it?' asked the bride, her impatience palpable. You could dig, though. That long scar down the bride's arm had put him off her from the start. 'Go on about the-' 'What have you done?' yelled Billy, backing away towards the door while he repeatedly touched nose and chest. I didn't want to be there. 'I saw.' 'The police are on their way.' 'Fantastic.' 'Would you like a cup of tea?' 'No,' he said through gritted teeth. He'll fucking tan me. Denise whimpered again as he frantically touched nose and chest, nose and chest, unaware of the large patch of dark pubic hair he was exposing. But afterwards they said it was a boy. 'Where's your dad's house, Billy?' 'She won't let me back now. 'I said in the car, if you want to go back to work for him--' '-I'm an 'effing

"shot," said Robin. And you saw a child strangled, Billy?" said Strike, as in the next room Denise gabbled: "Police, quickly! 'What did you see?' asked Billy, his sunken eyes huge in his face as he glanced nervously towards the outer office, one hand clasping the other in his effort to suppress his tic. By continuing to use this site, you agree to the terms of our updated Privacy Policy. There was a soft thud against the wood, and Strike knew that she was leaning against it, trying to hold Billy in. When the door had banged shut behind him, Strike returned quietly to Denise. Incredibly, she looked pleased with herself 'I tried to hold him in,' she said proudly. I seen them doing it, I can show you the place. The couple had looked happy enough beneath the shower of confetti in which they had departed the church, but on arrival at the country house hotel they had worn the rigid expressions of those barely repressing their rage. 'I'm Strike, yeah,' said the detective, moving around to place himself between the stranger and the temp. I was just a little kid.' 'How many years ago, do you know?' 'Ages ... years ... can't get it out of my head,' said Billy, his eyes burning in his thin face as the fist enclosing the piece of paper fluttered up and down, touching nose, touching chest. He wondered whether he would ever be able to forgive the fact that she had said "I do" with her eyes fastened upon the big, ugly, shambling figure of Cormoran Strike, rather than her new husband. The rest of the party followed, the bridesmaids' mint-green chiffon dresses rippling in the hot breeze. You the detective? With the hand that was not constantly flying from nose to chest, he suddenly tugged at his flies. The smallest bridesmaid, a toddler, had had to be restrained from throwing pebbles into the lake, and was now whining to her mother, who talked to her in a constant, irritating whisper. She came willingly, but he suspected that this was because she hoped she was moving closer to Strike. The moment Matthew had released Robin, the swan by the far shore had begun to paddle its way across the dark green water towards its mate. Strangled. They rowed in the car. A further gust of body odour reached Strike. "Why do you want me to drink something?" "Only if you fancy it. They heard him jumping down the metal stairs three at a time and Strike, infuriated, knowing that he had no hope of catching a younger and, on the evidence, fitter man, turned and ran back into his office. Meeting resistance, he flung himself hard against it. "You look gorgeous, flower," said the groom's father, Geoffrey, from behind the photographer. 'Billy,' said the man, his hand flying from nose to chest three times in quick succession. The entire congregation must have seen how she had beamed at him. Every ten seconds or so, in what seemed to be an uncontrollable tic, he touched first the end of his nose, which had grown red with repeated tapping, then, with a faint hollow thud, the middle of his thin sternum, then let his hand drop to his side. Thankfully, the ugly mark was now hidden in the shadow cast by Mrs. Dark hair fell in straggly wisps around a thin and dirty face that was dominated by burning, sunken eyes. She had been wearing a rubber and stockinette brace when the photographer arrived at her parents' house that morning. He had fought off the mental image of steel slicing into that soft, pale flesh. "I was assaulted," Mrs. He had known couples to start screaming at each other while he read his light meter. Lethal White by Robert Galbraith ... he doesn't look the sort of man one ought to allow in here. The photographer was a squeamish man. 'You won't come to Jimmy's place, though? Matthew Cunliffe, no need to angle the lady so that rolls of back fat were hidden (she was, if anything, fractionally too slender, but that would photograph well), no need to suggest the groom "try one with your mouth closed," because Mr. Cunliffe's teeth were straight and white. You can't come to Jimmy's.' 'No, no,' said Strike soothingly. 'He strangled it, up by the horse.' Denise was now gabbling loudly into the phone beyond the flimsy partition wall. "I was shocked to see him, that's all," said Matthew carefully. You could go. "Robin—" "Don't touch my arm!" Her wound was throbbing in the heat. "Let's leave it," said the groom suddenly, releasing Robin. That the stranger was mentally ill could be in no doubt. The women were easy to tell apart, because of their hats. He's frightened, see.' 'I see,' lied Strike, continuing to take notes. He couldn't remember when he had last been commissioned to photograph so handsome a couple. "Bloody things." "It doesn't matter," said Robin, pulling her long skirt up clear of her shoes, the heels of which were a little too low. 'Strangled.' 'OK,' said Strike, matter-of-factly. Bollocks it is, thought the photographer with a certain cold pleasure. If both would clear out of the background it wouldn't matter, but one of them was repeatedly diving, its fluffly pyramid of a backside jutting out of the middle of the lake like a feathered iceberg, its contortions ruffling the surface of the water so that its digital removal would be far more complicated than young Mr. Cunliffe, who had already suggested this remedy, realized. "Ages ... He did not seem to be wearing underpants. Before Strike could tell her not to enter, Denise had poked her head inside, much braver now that Strike was here, full of her own importance. An unwashed animal stench hit the detective's nostrils. To Strike's chagrin, Billy suddenly ripped the top sheet from the pad, crumpled it, then began to touch nose and chest again with his fist enclosing the paper. The couple's parents, best man and bridesmaids were all watching from the shade of nearby trees. Just needs a drink," said Geoffrey comfortably. "I'm sure we've got something." She strode out of the copse of trees into the blazing sunlight and off across the lawn towards the seventeenth-century castle, where most of the wedding guests were already milling, drinking champagne as they admired the view of the hotel grounds. Cunliffe—or Robin Ellacott, as she had been two hours ago—had said. Their families were gaining on them again. He wasn't a marriage counselor. 'But Jimmy said it was a boy. The third time his hand fell, he grabbed it with his other hand and held it tightly. 'I'm not mental! He strangled the kid and they buried it, down in the dell by our dad's house. 'This way,' said Strike pleasantly. Strike withdrew his head and turned to glare at Denise, who was dusting herself down in the doorway to his office. When Strike burst into the room, Denise, who was backed against the wall, gasped. 'Oh, thank God!' Strike judged the man in the middle of the room to be in his mid-twenties. "I suppose you think I was expecting him to burst in halfway through the service and knock over the flowers?" asked Robin. Almost immediately, his hand would fly to the tip of his nose again. On being invited to sit down, the stranger perched himself on the edge of the client's chair. Possibly psychotic. Matthew's Aunt Sue wore an electric blue wagon wheel, Robin's sister-in-law, Jenny, a startling confection of yellow feathers. "Go keep her company, Matt." Matthew had already set off after his bride, gaining on her easily as she navigated the lawn in her stilettos. Billy began to write, but suddenly seemed to think better of it. Nose, chest, hand at his side, nose, chest, hand at his side, the mechanical movement was distressing to watch, and the more so as he seemed barely conscious that he was doing it. Wrapped in a blanket it was. Can I get you a drink, Billy? 'Drink of what?' 'Tea?' Robin, we need to talk.' "Go on, then." "Wait a minute, can't you?" "If I wait, we'll have the family on us." Matthew glanced behind him. The swan's mate, meanwhile, continued to lurk over by the bank: graceful, serene and determinedly out of shot. "I need someone here quicker than that, he's very disturbed!" 'What's she saying?' asked Billy. Big smiles, now!" There was a tension about the couple that could not be wholly attributed to the difficulty of getting the shot. You did, after twenty years in the game. 'Then I think I'll go and freshen up the bathroom,' she said, adding in a whisper, 'I don't think he used the flush.' Buy a copy today to keep reading: It wasn't my fault. He still kept, for the amusement of friends, the blurred shot from 1998 that showed a groom head-butting his best man. 'You OK, Denise?' 'Yes,' she whispered, still backed against the wall. 'Well, I'll need your address if I'm going to investigate.' He half-expected resistance, but Billy reached eagerly for the proffered pad and pen. Wait until I've got him into my office, though.' The bathroom door banged open. He had not forgotten the joy in her face when her ex-boss had crashed into their wedding ceremony. He found the whole thing ominous and distasteful. Doesn't matter if you don't.' 'I don't need medicine!' 'I haven't got any medicine to give you,' said Strike. "Just stop, will you?" said Matthew, because they had fast outstripped the family, who were matching their pace to his toddler niece. "Have you got it?" Robin asked again, ignoring her father-in-law. "We've got enough, haven't we?" "Wait, wait, the other one's coming now!" said the photographer crossly. 'She's just talking about a delivery I'm expecting,' Strike said soothingly, getting to his feet. Jimmy was there, he says I never saw it, but I did. The swans, the damned swans. "You'd think the buggers were doing it on purpose, eh, Linda?" said Geoffrey with a fat chuckle to the bride's mother. 'I've got a few different cases on. 'Don't worry about Denise,' said Strike, 'she's dealing with another client. Throwing up the sash window, he leaned outside just in time to see Billy whipping around the corner of the street out of sight. It was impossible to see from this distance whether Cormoran Strike was among them. He was loath to change the couple's position, because the soft light beneath the canopy of trees was turning the bride, with her loose red-gold curls, into a pre-Raphaelite angel and emphasizing the chiseled cheekbones of her husband. He had even wondered whether she had made a botched attempt to kill herself before the wedding, because he had seen it all. He sounded tipsy already. I saw it.' "And this was up by the horse, was it?" 'Right up by the horse. I was a kid. It was as though he had forgotten how to cross himself, or had simplified the action for speed's sake. The crowd of guests standing in the shadow of the hotel was coming into clearer view. 'Bollocks!' A man heading inside the guitar shop opposite stared around in some perplexity for the source of the noise. The only thing that needed concealing, and it could be retouched out of the final pictures, was the ugly scar running down the bride's forearm: purple and livid, with the puncture marks of stitches still visible. . 'Yeah,' said Strike, exercising considerable self-restraint. I was only a kid. She wouldn't let me dig, but she'd let you.' 'And Jimmy did it, did he?' 'Jimmy never strangled nobody!' said Billy angrily. Nice big smiles. Cunliffe's bouquet of creamy roses, Rosmersholm If only the swans would swim side by side on the dark green lake, this picture might turn out to be the crowning achievement of the wedding photographer's career. The offer seemed to have made him even more suspicious. 'You Strike? There was a shriek from outside as Denise was thrown aside. Tell me about this child.' Strike reached for a pad and paper, all his movements slow and cautious, as though Billy were a wild bird that might take fright. There was no need for tactful tricks with the new Mr. and Mrs. Henrik Ibsen, Rosmersholm Panting, his right knee aching. Strike used the handrail to pull himself up the last few steps of the metal staircase leading to his office. "Almost," lied the photographer. Good-looking as they were, he didn't fancy the Cunliffes' chances. He was one of those ill and desperate people you saw in the capital who were always somebody else's problem, like the traveller on the Tube everybody tried to avoid making eye contact with and the ranting woman on the street corner whom people crossed the street to avoid, fragments of shattered humanity who were too common to trouble the imagination for long. 'What's your name?' Strike asked, sitting down on the other side of the desk. "When was this?" asked Strike, still writing. That's not where they buried her, though. One bride had stormed out of her own reception. Strangled, up by the-' There was a knock on the door. Or coffee?" 'Why?' asked Billy. The photographer didn't care. 'They buried her in a pink blanket, down in the dell by my dad's house. 'On their way now.' 'Who's coming?' demanded Billy, jumping up. 'I need a piss!' said the man, tugging at his zip. 'I just need your address for my records.' Through the door came Denise's grating voice. Strangled her, they did,' said Billy, fixing Strike with his haunted eyes. I saw him do it. She was right.

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