

Wearing the type of lazy smile that often distinguished the half-cut from the sober, Bertie stepped out of the Prince Albert on Pembridge Road and immediately felt the icy blast of cold air on his face. It was invigorating; the rigours of a week's work, a bellyful of beer and the numbing warmth of the pub's fire had helped him forget how bitter it was outside, though word of it had been on the chapped lips of everyone who had come in for a drink. March, they muttered. Felt more like January.

After shaking his head to rid it of the fug of the pub, he glanced up at the clear, black sky. No fog; the wind had chased away the perennial smoke that blanketed the city at night. A nice change, he thought, to use his eyes and not instinct as he made his way home.

To his right he could hear the clatter of traffic on Notting Hill Gate. A man scurried past, head down, left hand holding his hat in place, the right gripping his coat across his throat. Bertie did not even button his; he did not mind the cold. He was warm-blooded. 'My little bed-warmer,' Mary liked to call him, as they closed in to form a crescent shape together under the covers. Sometimes in winter, when he got into bed, she would raise a chilly foot – she felt the cold terribly – and place it softly between his legs to warm it. Made him jump. 'Back off, woman,' he would tell her. But she would giggle and so would he. He was incapable of getting angry with her – and she with him, as she would prove in about fifteen minutes' time when he stumbled into bed near midnight with the smell of booze on his breath.

The thought of it – the thought of her – made him smile as he started weaving his way home along Ladbroke Road. The wind was at his back, blowing towards the Dale. Bertie was glad to have left that benighted place behind. Their life had improved immeasurably since he and Mary and the little ones had moved to Clarendon Road. It might still be on the edge of the Dale but it had felt like a fresh start. For the first time in his life he felt able to breathe.

He crossed the road, passing the Ladbroke Arms and the police station ahead of the crossing with Ladbroke Grove, the lamp casting a halo of warming light over the few policemen standing outside having a smoke. He nodded at them as he passed. Ladbroke Grove was quiet so he crossed without pausing, turned right and made his way up the hill. At the summit he toyed with going further on and turning on to Lansdowne Crescent, or cutting across the churchyard and down St John's Gardens. He chose the latter.

He went to the left of St John's, its cathedral-like spire pointing a bony finger into the darkness above him. As he passed the church he noticed something moving to his right. Some poor beggar seeking shelter from the wind, he thought.

Then it was on him; hot, rancid breath on his cheek.

'What the . . .'

Before he could finish, the blade was stuck deep in his ribs. The noise as it left his flesh sounded like a finished kiss.

The figure retreated into the darkness as swiftly as it had arrived. Bertie felt little pain, just bewilderment. His hands went to his ribs; there they felt the warm stickiness of his own blood. He sat back on the ground, as if pushed. He tried to call for help, but no words came. He raised his hands to his face and saw them slicked with his own blood. God save me, he thought, his breath becoming shallow.

'Mary,' he whispered, thinking of her lying there, waiting for him to slip into bed so she could warm herself on him.

He lay back on the damp grass, aware of the smell of moist earth and the last pitiful throbs of his heart.

Finally, he felt the cold.

I

Detective Chief Inspector Grant Foster, stiff from lack of sleep, dragged his tall, weary frame from his brand-new Toyota Corolla, feeling the familiar ache of being hauled from his bed in the middle of the night. Even though he had stopped smoking six months ago he felt a pang for nicotine. Arriving at a murder scene had been one of those occasions when he would habitually spark up; part of a ritual, a summoning of will. He cracked his knuckles and sniffed the cold air.

Dawn was approaching over London and the sound of traffic on the distant Westway was evolving to a constant drone as early workers joined late-night stragglers on the road. Despite the frosty tang in the air and the last blustery breaths of the fierce wind that had blown all night, a mild warmth hinted at the first signs of spring. In less than two hours the sun would be up and the late-March day would begin. But Foster was in no mood to be optimistic. When he sniffed the air, he noticed only one smell: trouble.

Detective Sergeant Heather Jenkins, her wild black hair tied back in a ponytail, fell in beside him as they crossed the road towards the church.

‘It’s a nasty one, sir.’ Her strong Lancastrian accent flattened the vowel of her final word.

Foster nodded. ‘Certainly sounds like it,’ he said, speaking for the first time. His deep, rich voice seemed to emanate from somewhere down around his boots. ‘Unlike the drunk the other night.’

Both of them had been woken when it was still dark the previous Sunday morning to attend what appeared to be the suicide of a tramp in Avondale Park. Foster, supposed to be having a weekend off, though no one had seen fit to inform those on duty, had left it to Heather, gone back to bed and tried to get some more sleep. Unsuccessfully. Four days later, he still resented the intrusion.

Heather made a noise down her nose to indicate her disbelief that Foster was still angry, not quite a snort, more a sort of reverse sniff.

‘You can’t let that go, can you, sir?’ she said.

‘Our workload is bad enough without having to poke around the cider-drenched corpse of some loser,’ he muttered without looking at her.

‘You don’t reckon that tramp is entitled to the same consideration we lavish on other people’s deaths? We don’t even know his identity: don’t you think we owe it to him to find out who he is and whether he had a family?’

‘No,’ he said emphatically. ‘But have you checked with the Missing Persons Bureau?’

She nodded. ‘Nothing that seems to fit so far.’

‘Probably yet another loser no one gave a stuff about. One less piss-stained wino for the lads on the beat to sling in the drunk tank.’

From the corner of his eye he saw her shake her head slowly.

They had reached the churchyard. Cresting the hill of Ladbroke Grove, overlooked by a crescent of handsome early-Victorian mansions, it made a curious scene. It certainly beat the council estates, pub car parks and patches of barren land where London’s murder victims were usually found. Yet he felt uneasy because, during more than twenty years on the force, he couldn’t remember another body being found on religious ground. As if that was a step too

far, even for the most psychotic. He made a mental note to revisit this thought.

Detective Inspector Andy Drinkwater, hair neatly cut, lantern-jawed with chiselled features, was waiting for them at the cordon that had been put around the entire perimeter and was being guarded by a few uniformed officers. Foster often teased Drinkwater about looking like an ageing refugee from some long-forgotten boy band: he was an obsessive gym-rat, a teetotaler and, given his clear complexion, Foster suspected, with a shudder, he might even moisturize. This morning in his knee-length woollen overcoat and gloves, he looked every inch the detective.

‘Sir,’ he said, nodding at Foster. ‘Heather.’

She smiled at him apprehensively.

‘Morning, Andy. What we got?’ Foster asked.

Over Drinkwater’s shoulder, to the left of the church, he could see forensics settling in for the long haul. A white tent had been erected over the crime scene, tape bound around the perimeter of the churchyard, while an arc light illuminated the area.

Drinkwater sucked in air between his teeth. ‘Not very nice, sir,’ he said. ‘Forensics are here. Carlisle too: he’s having a look at the body.’

Foster’s eyes narrowed. Pathologists rarely beat him to the scene.

‘He lives nearby,’ Drinkwater explained.

The three of them passed through the gate and made their way towards the tent.

‘Victim’s a male in his early thirties,’ Drinkwater said, both he and Heather scurrying to keep up with their superior’s giant strides. ‘Looks like he hadn’t been here long when two youths found him. They raised the alarm at Notting Hill, down the road, shortly before three a.m.’

‘You’ve spoken to the kids?’ Foster asked, still walking.

‘Both of them were pretty stoned. But yes, I’ve had a brief chat.’

‘How old?’

‘One fifteen, the other just turned sixteen.’

Foster shook his head; what sort of parents let their kids out in the small hours of the morning? Probably the type of dad his force arrested by the score on a daily basis, and the sort of feckless mother whose maternal instincts had been doused by years of booze and drugs. Some people aren’t fit to raise hamsters, he thought.

‘They’re not suspects in my opinion,’ Drinkwater added, anticipating Foster’s next question. ‘But they’re at the station if you want to speak with them. We’ve notified the parents. Both kids are pretty freaked out.’ He paused. ‘You’ll see why. About the only thing they did say that might be interesting is that a drunk woman, a derelict, often used the part of the churchyard where the body was found.’

‘Used it as what?’

‘A place to doss down. They referred to her as Cider-woman. Mad as toast, apparently. But they haven’t seen her for a couple of nights.’

Foster nodded slowly. ‘We need to find her.’

‘So there *are* some tramps you’re interested in finding,’ Heather interjected.

He turned and looked down at her. At over six feet, he was several inches taller than her. She was bright and spiky and he liked the way she maintained a dark sense of humour at even the grimmest of scenes. It was a vital attribute for a murder detective.

The three of them stopped. They had reached the entrance to the tent. A gust of cold wind tugged at its moorings, making the corners flap.

‘I always feel like I’m about to enter a freak show outside these things,’ Foster muttered as he climbed into the white suit. Given his height, few of them ever fitted. This one wasn’t too bad, though; nothing ripped when he put it on. ‘Come on, then. Let’s do this,’ Foster said, stretching his arms to see how much movement he had. The younger detectives followed him in.

Inside, the smell of damp earth was strong, almost heady. Foster had to stoop forwards slightly, to prevent his head brushing the roof of the tent. He looked down at the corpse. His view of it was blocked by a crouching figure. All he could see was a grey trouser leg that had ridden up to reveal a gulch of pale flesh between it and the sock. The crouching man was Carlisle, the duty pathologist. He was checking the victim’s pockets.

‘Robbing yet another corpse, Edward?’ Foster said.

The man, dressed head to foot in white, did not even look up. ‘You would, too, on my salary,’ he replied. Then he turned and grinned at Foster, but his eyes gave away the desperation of the scene. He stood up, revealing the corpse to Foster for the first time.

‘Jesus Fucking Christ.’

‘Yes, nasty business,’ Edward Carlisle said in his plummy, public-school voice.

The victim was on his back. Mouth agape, thousand-yard stare; so much was common to most corpses Foster had seen. But what truly shocked him were the hands – or, rather, the lack of them. At the end of both arms were livid, fleshy stumps, jagged bone protruding.

‘Very little blood at the scene,’ Carlisle said.

‘So he wasn’t killed here?’

‘No, I would say not. The body’s temperature has dropped about twelve degrees, which at one and a half

degrees per hour indicates he was killed around nine p.m. last night.'

'When was he found?' Foster said, his question addressed to Andy.

'Just after two forty-five a.m.'

'How about the hands, Edward? Severed post-mortem?'

Carlisle wrinkled his nose. 'Difficult to say. You'll have to wait for the autopsy.'

'Cause of death?'

'A single stab wound to the heart seems to have done the trick. The chest is also covered with several superficial cuts, some quite deep.'

'Why keep the hands?' Foster asked.

'Trophies,' Drinkwater said confidently.

It was a reasonable theory, Foster thought. His initial impression had been the same. But somehow it didn't ring true.

Heather, previously silent, piped up. 'There could have been a struggle, sir,' she said. 'The vic could have got fibre or skin under his nails. Perhaps the killer thought if they severed the hands they'd reduce their chances of being nicked.'

Another sound theory.

'Do we have an identity?' Foster asked out loud.

'James Darbyshire, according to his cards and driving licence,' Drinkwater said, reading from his notebook. 'There was a mobile, too; forensics have bagged it.'

'Good,' Foster murmured. Mobile phones were godsend to a murder investigation. 'I'll see you in a few hours, if that's OK, Edward.'

Carlisle nodded, eyebrows raised to indicate his concern at the tight schedule Foster was suggesting in his usual matter-of-fact manner. But he knew the DCI liked to have a look at the corpse before it was sliced and diced.

The three of them left Carlisle to his work and went back outside. Dawn was breaking. Once it was fully light, a fingertip team would search the entire churchyard. All three drew a deep breath, Foster more discreetly than the others, delighted to be out in the open air, away from the body. It was after some time with their thoughts that Foster ended the silence.

‘I take it we’ve had a scout around for the missing hands?’ he asked Drinkwater, who nodded.

‘No sign,’ he said.

‘Well, make sure we get a team checking all the gardens and nooks and crannies around here. Perhaps they’ve been dumped elsewhere. Let’s get a dog team out here too, see if Fido can dig them up. And when it gets light, get some people knocking on doors in all these houses overlooking the churchyard. Someone might have seen something.

‘Where were the kids smoking?’ he asked, looking around the small churchyard.

‘Across the other side. I’ll show you.’

They walked around the back of the churchyard. Drinkwater pointed to a set of stone steps leading down towards a door.

‘Down there, by the entrance to the undercroft.’

Foster looked at it for a few seconds. ‘So they wouldn’t have seen the body being dumped from here?’ he asked rhetorically. ‘Did they hear anything?’

Drinkwater shook his head. ‘Too windy. That’s how they found the body. They were after a bit more shelter to skin up, so they went round the other side out of the wind.’

Foster nodded slowly. He was pretty certain they hadn’t done it. Most teenagers may be lawless, disrespectful scroats, he thought, but they rarely butcher and mutilate grown men and then walk coolly into a police station to report the crime.

‘Just what is an undercroft anyway?’

‘A crypt. At least, I think it is,’ Drinkwater replied.

‘Not any more,’ Heather said. ‘My mate used to come here for antenatal yoga classes; then a baby massage course after the baby was born.’

Foster turned and looked at her. Ordinarily he would have used this as an excuse to wind her up, but the scene had left him too enervated.

The three large crows cawed as they played, wheeling and tipping one after another, their coal-black feathers standing out against the watery-grey sky. Nigel Barnes, his black duffel coat buttoned tightly to his neck, which was wrapped in a woollen scarf, and his battered brown satchel strapped across his shoulder and front so it sat on his right hip, watched them from behind his black-rimmed glasses, wondering how many crows constituted a murder. He thought it was more than three.

His attention wandered from the raucous crows to the sky. The sun, he felt sure, was trying to break through the canopy of cloud, the colour of dull aluminium. But, until it did, he was stymied, the small shaving mirror in his bag redundant. He sighed and brought his gaze back to eye level.

He looked at the gravestones in front of him. How many unfulfilled hopes and dreams lay in the soil? Hundreds. Thousands, maybe. Away to his left was a glorious, tree-lined avenue of dramatic and gaudy mausoleums, a testament to the Victorian obsession with death and mourning, lurid monuments to the dead and now forgotten, where the great and the good of nineteenth-century London were laid to rest, many of them above ground rather than below. Beyond, Nigel could see the gothic outline of the Anglican chapel, beneath which lay the catacombs. He had been down there once and loved every ghoulisish second, particularly the moment when the guide conspiratorially said that if the embalmer failed to do his job, then the bodies crammed

in there often exploded, made combustible by the waste gases of their decomposition. The whole group had laughed nervously, and shuddered collectively.

Kensal Green Cemetery was a favourite spot of his, rivalled only by Highgate Cemetery for macabre splendour. The Victorians knew how to do death. Unlike us, he thought; now we burn people and have little to do with the dusty aftermath. Genealogists won't have graves to go to in fifty or a hundred years when tracing future generations, no inscriptions to locate and decipher, just like they won't have letters to read and learn from, thanks to email. Nothing is permanent any more, for all time, he thought: it's all about now.

He looked around and through the trees bowing in the wind, the tangled bushes and endless tumble of overgrown, battered graves and statues. He could see no one else. Just him and thousands of dead. It was like entering a lost world. Only the faraway hum of traffic punctuated by the sound of sirens, London's incessant soundtrack, gave an indication of the century he was in. It felt good to be out in the open air, away from the exhaust fumes of the traffic-choked streets. There were few outdoor oases like this in central London, places of silent contemplation: the other cemeteries, of course, the odd residential square with its private gardens, and a few of the smaller parks, but that was it. Nigel knew that 150 years ago this cemetery was in open countryside. That was the whole idea. The teeming, crowded cemeteries in the middle of the city had begun spewing out their decomposing bounty, and the foul, fetid odour and miasma that resulted were the cause of disease, or so the belief was. So the newer cemeteries were built out of town – the one in Brookwood had its own mode of transport to export the city's deceased, the Necropolis Railway. But soon London's

voracious appetite had swallowed the ground in every direction.

Nigel checked his watch: ten thirty. From his coat pocket he pulled a crumpled piece of paper torn from the notebook. 'Lot 103', it read. The grave of Cornelius Tiplady, Architect, 1845–85. His quest was to find whether this Cornelius Tiplady was the great-great-grandfather of his client. He wanted to see if the inscription on the gravestone mentioned some names that might link him to some of the other relatives he had found, and so confirm he had the right man. A poetic inscription might be a nice garnish to offer alongside the dry genealogical info he had unearthed, and to confirm a job well done. He needed to let people know he was back, working well. Rebuilding a business was not proving easy.

Lot 103 was off the beaten track and, as he suspected, in an unkempt part of the cemetery teeming with unruly grass, small trees and lichen, muddying his brogues as he ticked off the graves one by one. Few had escaped the ravages of the weather. He reached lot 103, took off his glasses and gave them a quick rub on the edge of his coat, put them back on and sank to his haunches.

The grave was unremarkable, standard for the time, a flat grey gravestone. No ostentation for the Tiplady family. But, as he feared, the words used to honour the deceased's two-score years had been rendered unreadable by time and decay. He could not even make out the name, bar the outline of a capital C, which did at least offer him the comfort that the burial records had been well kept and that somewhere beneath his feet lay Cornelius, or whatever was left of him. He ran his finger gently across some of the indentations, almost able to make out the other letters of the name, even if he could not see them. He noticed there was another

jumble of letters below the name, though the inscription appeared brief. A family of few words, too, it seemed. Good.

Nigel removed his bag from his shoulder, unzipped it and pulled out his shaving mirror. He had bought it when he was a student, from a barber on Jermyn Street. He stood up, stepped to one side of the grave and, trying to avoid standing on the plot next to it, angled the mirror to the sky, turning it so that any reflection of light would be cast across the face of the gravestone. He had adopted this method before, to great effect, using the reflection of the sun to cast a shadow across the lettering and so create contrast. But then he had enjoyed the benefit of sunshine. Here he did not, and it was clear after only a few seconds that it was futile. He did not have a torch to magnify the effect of the light; that would require another person, and dragging people to graveyards on weekday mornings was a difficult sell. Luckily, he knew of another, less subtle method.

He put the mirror back in his bag and took a surreptitious glance around him. What he was about to do was not just frowned upon in genealogical circles, it was an offence right up there with defacing documents and licking your fingers before opening an aged manuscript. In the conservative, preservation-first world of family history it was tantamount to desecrating a grave, a subject of fevered debate in genealogical forums across the Internet.

Nigel ran his hand through his mane of black hair, pushing back the fringe that flopped over his brow. There was still no one in sight. Bugger it, he thought, old Cornelius is not going to complain, and neither are any of his family. It crossed his mind that he was standing in almost the exact spot where Cornelius's grieving widow and children would have stood mourning his death, but he managed to cast the thought out once more. Acid rain, bird shit, lichen, they had

all inflicted worse damage on the stone than the substance he was about to use. And he did not have the materials with which to make an impression of the inscription. Instead, from his bag he produced a tin of shaving foam and a squeegee.

He shook the tin and squirted several lines of foam across the face of the gravestone. With his right hand he then smeared the foam across the stone so that the entire area was covered with a thin layer. Then he took the squeegee and wiped it gently across the stone from left to right, as if it was a window. The foam came away, except where it had lodged in the crevices of the inscription.

He stepped back. Now the legend was revealed, in menthol, the best-shave-you-can-get white.

CORNELIUS TIPLADY 1845-85.

HE WAS A CONSISTENT MEMBER OF THE CHURCH,
A FRIEND OF THE LORD, EVER AN AFFECTIONATE
HUSBAND TO JEMIMA AND AN INDULGENT FATHER.

FAITH WAS TRIUMPHANT IN HIS DEATH. SWEET IS
THE MEMORY OF SUCH FOR WE KNOW THEY SLEEP
TO LIVE AGAIN.

Jemima. That confirmed it. Cornelius and his final resting place had at long last been found. He now had enough detail on his life to produce a decent report for his client. He scribbled the epitaph in a notebook and put the materials back in his bag, then took the opportunity to scour the surrounding area. There was no one, only the distant, demented cackle of the crows and the wind rustling the trees.

Before he left, he cast a guilty look at the grave, illuminated with foam. The chemicals in it could leach into the

pores of the gravestone and cause permanent damage. For the umpteenth time that morning he surveyed the grey sky. Forget the sun, he thought, what I need right now is some heavy rain.

3

Heather was waiting for Foster at the autopsy room in Kensington. It was approaching noon and he was running late, delayed by his interview with the two stoned kids who had stumbled across the body.

‘Did they see anything?’ she asked hopefully.

Foster’s face gave her the answer immediately, incapable as it was of hiding disdain. His crumpled, creased face appeared to darken, his lip curled and the mournful brown eyes narrowed. An unlamented ex-girlfriend from years ago once told him he had an ‘ugly/handsome thing going on’, a phrase he still didn’t know whether to take as an insult or compliment.

‘They could barely recognize their own mothers,’ he spat out. ‘I’ve left them with an artist. They saw a few people on their way to the churchyard. But, given the strength of the skunk they were smoking, I won’t be surprised if we get a sketch of Big Bird.’

They put on their masks, covering nose and mouth, took deep breaths and entered the pristine, stark white-tiled space. The smell of disinfectant hung in the air – almost, but not quite, managing to obliterate the underlying stench of death and decay. A couple of morticians busied themselves around James Darbyshire’s handless, naked body, supine on the dissecting table. The sternum had not yet been cut. Foster was glad; he wanted to see the body as it was when they found it, before Carlisle peeled back the skin like fruit rind to reveal the flesh and internal organs. Sometimes, when

Foster got there, those organs were sitting in metal pans waiting to be weighed or examined. He could handle death; he could stare at a corpse and learn from it regardless of the injuries it had endured. But the sawing and splicing involved in most autopsies never failed to sicken him, which is why he liked to have a look first and read about it later.

Edward Carlisle welcomed them with a quick nod and motioned for them to follow him towards the body. Foster turned to check Heather was OK; his eyes made contact with hers, but the look she gave back was impatient, as if his concern was grating.

‘Here it is. Of course, I haven’t yet rummaged around inside, but it seems clear, as I indicated earlier, that the cause of death was a single stab wound to the heart, here.’ He pointed to a two-inch slit slightly to the left of centre of the victim’s chest. ‘I’ll have more on that later. And as for the hands, I’m almost certain they were severed prior to death.’

Foster looked at Heather. This wasn’t a case of mutilating a dead body. It was torture.

‘What has interested me are these wounds here,’ Carlisle continued.

Foster and Heather watched as his hands pointed out a series of scratch marks and nicks across the chest.

‘I can only think they are the consequences of a struggle, but there are no defence wounds elsewhere, and the victim’s shirt has not been damaged.’

‘Not even by the stab wound?’

Carlisle shook his head.

‘Then he wasn’t wearing it when he was stabbed. Or when these cuts were made.’

Foster was standing to the right-hand side of the cadaver. He walked slowly, clockwise around the table, never taking his eyes off the body. When the soles of the dead man’s feet

were facing him, he stopped for perhaps a minute, his eyes fixed on the victim's torso. By this point Heather and Carlisle were more interested in Foster's perambulation than the corpse. He set off once more until he arrived back where he started. He leaned in for a closer look at the scratched and bloodied chest.

'Did you shave the chest?' he asked Carlisle, without looking up.

'No.'

Foster stepped back and examined the torso, tilting the angle of his head slightly as he did, first to the left, then to the right, then leaning over once more. He looked around the room, his eyes eventually alighting on an empty dissecting table that had been pushed against a wall to one side of the mortuary. He walked over and grabbed it, using his strength to free the table from its awkward position, and then wheeled it over to where the others stood.

Carlisle's eyes narrowed.

'Can I ask what you're doing, Grant?'

Foster held up his hand as if to say, 'Wait and see.'

Bit by bit he manoeuvred the table into a position parallel to the one holding Darbyshire's body, both edges touching, then he hauled himself on to it. He stood up and leaned over the dead man, his weight on his right leg. The table creaked under the strain.

He remained on his perch for some time, without speaking.

'Heather, get up here,' he said finally.

She hopped up beside him, while Carlisle shook his head in disbelief.

'These aren't defensive wounds,' Foster said. 'Look at the right nipple: above it is a long vertical scratch. Can you see that? Then look how it's topped with a small diagonal

nick, or looks like it is. And beneath it is a horizontal scratch.'

Heather agreed.

'What does that look like?'

She stared at the wounds. 'A number 1,' she said, certain.

'Look at the others.'

Carlisle had joined her at the other side of the table for a closer look. Foster dropped to his knees. He pointed towards the middle of the chest, his finger tracing the lines of two slanted cuts, the hairless, paper-white skin almost delicately torn.

'See how they almost reach a point?' he said. Then he indicated a barely distinguishable graze between the two lines, like a shaving nick.

'That almost bridges the gap between the two wounds. It looks like a letter A.'

Foster continued his way across the man's chest, following the outlines of each cut and deciphering a figure or letter it represented. At the end, Foster reached under the gown and retrieved his notebook from his suit pocket. He wrote down five figures: 1A137.

'These cuts were made post-mortem,' Carlisle commented.

'In which case, they were for our eyes,' Foster replied. He turned back and looked at the body for the final time. Carlisle picked up a scalpel to show what he intended to do next.

'Fill your boots,' Foster said, gesturing towards the body.

They left the room before the first incision was made.

4

All promise had bled from the day. It was just after three p.m. when the investigating team gathered for their first briefing, and already the lights were on at West London Murder Command – officially known as Homicide West – an anonymous building next door to Kensington police station. Inside, the mood was grim but determined. Foster was standing at the front, beside the whiteboard. The victim's name was written on it; beneath that were pictures of his body. The top of Foster's giant, close-shaven pate shone in the strip light.

The team had been speaking to friends and family of the deceased. Some were still out, though not Heather. At least, as far as he knew. He couldn't explain her absence.

A few more details had emerged. Darbyshire was a trader who worked at a bank in the Square Mile. He lived out in Leytonstone, the city commuter belt, with his wife and two kids.

'This is what we know,' Foster declared slowly and deliberately in his rich molten croon that demanded, and always got, attention. 'Darbyshire goes to the pub with three men at five thirty. An hour earlier, he called his wife and said he was going out with clients, but that was probably a white lie because all three were colleagues. They have four pints. One of them goes to buy a fifth. Darbyshire says he feels hot, faint. The pub is packed, cheek to jowl, so perhaps no surprise there. But he's only thirty-one and, apart from being a smoker, he's fit; he plays football every Sunday. Doc Carlisle tells me the heart looked healthy.'

‘We’ve interviewed his mates and he seems like a happy family man. His life revolved around his job, his friends, his family and West Ham United. He was liked at work, and he had no particular worries, financial or otherwise, as far as we can tell, so not much stress.’

Looking at Drinkwater, ‘Andy, chase up toxicology and tell them to get their arses in gear. I want to know what was in his bloodstream as quickly as they can. Any medication, anything at all.’

Turning back to face the others, ‘He told one of his mates he was going outside for a fag – which, if he was feeling hot and claustrophobic, is fair enough. He leaves. Then he disappears. It’s almost seven p.m. The next time anyone sees him, he’s dead and mutilated in a churchyard across the other side of London.’

Foster let his words sink in before continuing, ‘At some point after leaving that pub, he comes into contact with his killer. The killer then either persuades him or forces him into a vehicle or a building, removes his hands and stabs him. Our killer is very strong, has help, or Mr Darbyshire is so incapacitated that our killer can sever his hands without too much of a struggle. He then does one other thing.’ From the desk in front of him Foster held up a picture showing what had been carved on Darbyshire’s chest. ‘He shaves his chest and then carves a series of letters and numbers. Look closely and you’ll see it says 1A137. Now the obvious question is: what does this mean?’

The question was met by silence.

‘A reference,’ someone suggested at last.

‘A crossword clue,’ came another.

This loosened them up, and a few ideas were floated.

‘A chess move,’ said one; ‘a map reference,’ said another.

‘Hang on,’ said DC Majid Khan, a young detective who

fancied himself as a comedian. 'I think that's the order for a vegetable pakora and a chicken dhansak at the Taste of the Raj in Thames Ditton.'

The rest laughed.

'We need to investigate all of those,' Foster went on, ignoring Khan's attempt at levity. 'Our killer is trying to tell us something. When we work out what, we move a damn sight closer to catching him or her.' He cleared his throat. For the first time that day he was hit by a sudden feeling of exhaustion, but he repelled it. 'The kids who found the body say there's a tramp who lives in the churchyard. Ciderwoman, or whatever. Have we managed to find her?'

The answer was negative. They knew her real name was Sheena but she had not been seen around her usual patch lately.

'She's got to be somewhere. Probably on an alcoholiday, swigging Strongbow outside Camden Town tube. Let's keep on it. Any news on witnesses in or around the church?'

Again he got a shake of the head. That surprised him in one sense: the churchyard was by no means secluded. It was on the top of a hill on a busy thoroughfare, enclosed by tall residential buildings. On paper, a terrible spot to dump a body.

So why choose it?

'I want us to go through every single piece of CCTV footage from every camera in Liverpool Street from seven p.m. last night. That's where he usually got the tube home. Who knows, maybe he made it on to one. And let's go through all the footage from Ladbroke Grove, too.'

Suddenly Heather burst through the door, breathless. Foster looked for some sign of contrition, yet saw none.

'Sorry, sir,' she said. 'Tying up the loose ends on the suicidal tramp.'

The fate of the tramp found dangling from the frame of

a park swing the previous Sunday morning had long since been superceded in Foster's mind by the Darbyshire murder. He felt a wave of anger.

'Give that bleeding heart of yours a rest. Put the tramp to one side and concentrate on this, please.'

'The least we can do is find out who he is, and who his family are. He has every right to . . .'

'Yes, he's got every right to equal consideration. But that doesn't mean he's going to get it. I wish I could find the fool who invented the concept of rights, and deprive him of them. Violently.'

Heather's eyes, never docile, blazed bright with anger. Her face was always quick to express emotion, but Foster knew she would soon calm down. Having a go at her in front of the others was not the most politic thing to do, but her mission to turn detective work into another arm of the care services occasionally grated with him.

The discussion moved on to the missing hands. A search of the scene had failed to find them, or a murder weapon. The team split into camps: those who thought they might be trophies; those who thought it was a way of avoiding detection; and a third camp who thought it was neither, that there was perhaps more to it than the obvious explanations.

'What forensics do we have?' Foster asked.

'Initially, nothing really,' said Drinkwater. 'So far, the scene tells us nothing.'

The room fell silent. It was rare for forensics to fail to provide them with a few leads. Foster nodded slowly. It was as if the body had fallen from the sky. But the lack of evidence or clues wasn't insignificant.

'What the crime scene tells us is that our killer worked very carefully, thought it through beforehand. And it confirms that our victim was killed elsewhere.'

‘Do we have any idea about motive?’ someone asked.

Foster spread his hands wide; he had been giving this some thought. ‘We can rule out mugging because there was still a fair bit of money on his body. And his mobile phone, too. Of course, we don’t know the full story of his private life so there could be something there . . .’ His voice tailed off. Foster already knew that the motive for this was one his mind had not yet considered. Something told him it was beyond the usual mundane language of murder: drugs, money, rage and envy. ‘Have we got mobile-phone records?’ he said, changing tack.

Drinkwater told him they had retrieved the last ten calls dialled, received and missed from Darbyshire’s mobile phone. Most of them had been identified as friends, family or work-related. The only call made or received after seven p.m., when Darbyshire was last seen in the pub, was to a number: 1879. The time dialled was 23.45.

‘Have you spoken to pathology?’ Foster asked.

‘Carlisle reckons that Darbyshire was dead by then.’

‘Any theories about that number?’ It sounded to him like it could be for message retrieval, or the number for the network.

‘We rang it, from several different networks. All of them went dead,’ Drinkwater said.

It seemed the whole room reached for their mobile phones and starting staring at their keypads.

‘What sort of phone was it again?’ Foster asked.

‘One of those slim, dinky ones with the flip-up screen. Clamshell. Girl’s phone. Khan’s got one,’ Drinkwater added, with a smirk.

So had Foster. A murmur of amusement went round the room.

‘Seven, eight and nine are on the same row,’ said Khan,

examining his own keypad. ‘They easily could have been pushed accidentally. Where was the phone?’

Drinkwater looked into the middle distance; with his left hand he patted his left suit pocket, while his right tapped lightly on the right-hand side of his chest.

‘Inside breast pocket, right-hand side,’ he said eventually. ‘If the key guard wasn’t on during the struggle, if there *was* a struggle, or after he was killed and the body was being moved, the buttons might have been pushed. The dial button, too.’

‘Sounds the likeliest option,’ Foster agreed. ‘But stick the number up on the whiteboard. Get back in touch with his wife and his bank; see if this number means anything to them. It may be the start of an account number, or a PIN number. We need to know.’ Foster rubbed his face, then ran his right hand over his head. ‘Darbyshire had drunk only four pints. He would’ve been merry, not arseholed, so how did the killer get him off the street in the first place? A 31-year-old man isn’t easy to lure into a car. Unless you’re giving him a lift. We have to accept the killer may have had some help. How many hits did we get, Andy?’

Earlier that afternoon they had fed details of the murder into the computer to sift through suspects who had been cautioned, charged or convicted of stabbings and were out on the streets.

‘About two thousand,’ Drinkwater said.

Each of them would be checked out in the coming days and weeks. A fair bit of mystery surrounded the workings of a murder inquiry, but most of it was simply a long, methodical slog.

‘Find out how many had, have had, or still have cab or minicab licences,’ Foster ordered. He clapped his hands together. ‘The rest of you know what comes next,’ he added, winding things up. ‘We need to crawl all over James

Darbyshire's life: his movements, his habits, his daily routine. Scour his credit cards and bank details; interview his friends, relatives, girlfriends, boyfriends and colleagues; check his emails; look at what sites he visited. Any porn, anything a bit dodgy, then I want to know.'

The team got up, a few stretching, some starting conversations while others hit the phones.

'Can I say something, sir?'

The hubbub died down. It was Heather, her face still reddened from anger. Foster's first thought was that she may publicly challenge him for having slapped her down when she arrived late for the meeting. But he knew she wouldn't be that stupid.

'Go on,' he said.

Everyone turned to look at her.

'I must have missed your discussion about the letters and numbers carved on the victim's chest,' she explained. 'But I've got an idea about them.'

Foster realized the colour in her cheeks was not anger, it was excitement. 'Yes?'

'Have you heard of genealogy?'

He thought for a second. He knew it; old people filling the last few days before death came knocking by tracing their dead relatives.

'Yeah,' Foster said. 'Bloody stupid hobby.'

A few of the others laughed.

'Whatever,' Heather said, ignoring them. 'My mum traced our family tree a few years back. But you sort of need to leave the house, and the best place to do it is in London, not Rawtenstall. She came down to see me and we went to this place in Islington where they have loads of indexes for birth, marriage and death certificates. Place was heaving; no room to swing a cat.'

Get to the point, Foster thought. 'Where does it fit with the Darbyshire killing?'

'When you want to order a certificate, you have to fill in a form. On that form you have to give the index number of the certificate you want. You follow?'

'Go on.'

'The index numbers are like the reference we found; a mixture of letters and numbers.'

Foster could see some of the others nodding their heads, murmuring assent. It sounded a better idea than the ones proposed in the meeting.

'How are you going to check it out?' he asked.

'My mum gave up on it. She thinks London is a den of iniquity and depravity and won't come down again. Anyway, she hired some guy who does it for a living and got him to do it for her. Turned out we come from a bunch of peasants. Nothing juicy. On the way over here, I gave her a call. She still has his number.'

'Give him a call, but don't spill any details over the phone. Arrange to meet.'

They had nothing, Foster thought. This might be the break they needed.