

BIRDMAN

Mo Hayder



BANTAM BOOKS

LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

1

North Greenwich. Late May. Three hours before sun-up and the river was deserted. Dark barges strained upstream on their moorings and a spring tide gently nosed small sloops free of the sludge they slept in. A mist lifted from the water, rolling inland, past unlit chandlers, over the deserted Millennium Dome and on across lonely wastelands, strange, lunar landscapes – until it settled, a quarter of a mile inland amongst the ghostly machinery of a half-derelict aggregate yard.

A sudden sweep of headlights – a police vehicle swung into the service route, blue lights flashing silently. It was joined moments later by a second and a third. Over the next twenty minutes more police converged on the yard – eight marked area cars, two plain Ford Sierras and the white transit van of the forensic camera team. A roadblock was placed at the head of the service route and local uniform were detailed to seal off riverside access. The first attending CID officer got onto Croydon exchange, asking for pager numbers for the Area Major Investigation Pool and, five miles away, Detective Inspector Jack Caffery, AMIP team B, was woken in his bed.

He lay blinking in the dark, collecting his thoughts, fighting the impulse to tilt back into sleep. Then,

taking a deep breath, he made the effort, rolled out of bed and went into the bathroom, splashing water onto his face – *no more Glenmorangies in standby week, Jack, swear it now, swear it* – and dressed, not too hurried, better to arrive fully awake and composed, now the tie, something understated – *CID don't like us looking flashier than them* – the pager, and coffee, lots of instant coffee, with sugar but not milk, no milk – *and above all don't eat, you just never know what you're going to have to look at* – drank two cups, found car keys in the pocket of his jeans, and, bolted awake now on caffeine, a roll-up between his teeth, drove through the deserted streets of Greenwich to the crime scene. There his superior, Detective Superintendent Steve Maddox, a small, prematurely grey man, immaculate as always in a stone-brown suit, waited for him outside the aggregate yard – pacing under a solitary streetlight, spinning car keys and chewing his lip.

He saw Jack's car pull up, crossed to him, put an elbow on the roof, leaned through the open window and said: 'I hope you haven't just eaten.'

Caffery dragged on the handbrake. He pulled Rizlas and tobacco from the dashboard. 'Great. Just what I was hoping to hear.'

'This one's well past its sell-by.' He stepped back as Jack climbed out of the car. 'Female, partly buried. Bang in the middle of the wasteland.'

'Been in, have you?'

'No, no. Divisional CID briefed me. And, um—' He glanced over his shoulder to where the CID officers stood in a huddle. When he turned back his voice was low. 'There's been an autopsy on her. The old Y zipper.'

Jack paused, his hand on the car door. 'An autopsy?'

‘Yup.’

‘Then it’s probably gone walkabout from a path lab.’

‘I know—’

‘A med-student prank—’

‘I know, I know.’ Maddox held hands up, stalling him. ‘It’s not really our territory, but look—’ He checked over his shoulder again and leaned in closer. ‘Look, they’re pretty good with us usually, Greenwich CID. Let’s humour them. It won’t kill us to have a quick butcher’s. OK?’

‘OK.’

‘Good. Now.’ He straightened up. ‘Now you. How about you? Reckon you’re ready?’

‘Shit, no.’ Caffery slammed the door, pulled his warrant card from his pocket and shrugged. ‘Of course I’m not ready. When would I ever be?’

They headed for the entrance, moving along the perimeter fence. The only light was the weak sodium yellow of the scattered streetlamps, the occasional white flash of the forensic camera crew floods sweeping across the wasteland. A mile beyond, dominating the northern skyline, the luminous Millennium Dome, its red aircraft lights blinking against the stars.

‘She’s been stuck in a binliner or something,’ Maddox said. ‘But it’s so dark out there, the first attending couldn’t be sure – his first suspicious circumstances and it’s put the wind up him.’ He jerked his head towards a group of cars. ‘The Merc. See the Merc?’

‘Yeah.’ Caffery didn’t break step. A heavy-backed man in a camel overcoat hunched over in the front seat, speaking intently to a CID officer.

‘The owner. A lot of tarting up going on around here, what with the Millennium thing. Says last week

he took on a team to clear the place up. They probably disturbed the grave without knowing it, a lot of heavy machinery, and then at oh-one-hundred hours—’

He paused at the gate and they showed warrant cards, logged on with the PC and ducked under the crime-scene tape.

‘And then at oh-one-hundred hours this a.m., three lads were out here doing something dodgy with a can of Evostik and they stumbled on her. They’re down at the station now. The CSC’ll tell us more. She’s been in.’

DS Fiona Quinn, the crime scene co-ordinator, down from the Yard, waited for them in a floodlit clearing next to a Portakabin, ghostly in her white Tyvek overalls, solemnly pulling back the hood as they approached.

Maddox did the introductions.

‘Jack, meet DS Quinn. Fiona – my new DI, Jack Caffery.’

Caffery approached, hand extended. ‘Good to meet you.’

‘You too, sir.’ The CSC snapped off latex gloves and shook Caffery’s hand. ‘Your first. Isn’t it?’

‘With AMIP, yes.’

‘Well, I wish I had a nicer one for you. Things are not very lovely in there. Not very lovely at all. Something’s split the skull open – machinery, probably. She’s on her back.’ She leaned back to demonstrate, her arms out, her mouth open. In the half-light Caffery could see the glint of amalgam fillings. ‘From waist down is buried under pre-cast concrete, the side of a pavement or something.’

‘Been there long?’

‘No, no. A rough guess’ – she pulled the glove back on and handed Maddox a cotton face mask – ‘less than a week; but too long to be worth rushing a

special. I think you should wait until daylight to drag the pathologist out of bed. He'll give you more when he's got her in the pit and seen about insect activity. She's semi-interred, half wrapped in a dustbin liner: that'll've made a difference.'

'The pathologist,' Caffery said. 'You sure we need a pathologist? CID think there's been an autopsy.'

'That's right.'

'And you still want us to see her?'

'Yes.' Quinn's face didn't change. 'Yes, I think you need to see her. We're not talking about a professional autopsy.'

Maddox and Caffery exchanged glances. A moment's silence and Jack nodded.

'Right. Right, then.' He cleared his throat, took the gloves and face mask Quinn offered and quickly tucked his tie inside his shirt. 'Come on, then. Let's have a look.'

Even with the protective gloves, old CID habit made Caffery walk with hands in pockets. From time to time he lost sight of DS Quinn's flagged forensics torch, giving him moments of unease – this far into the yard it was dark: the camera crew had finished and were shut in their white van, copying the master tape. Now the only light source was the dim, chemical glow of the fluorescent tape the CSC had used to outline objects either side of the path, protecting them until AMIP's exhibits officer arrived to label and bag. They hovered in the mist like inquisitive ghosts, faint green outlines of bottles, crumpled cans, something shapeless which might have been a T-shirt or a towel. Conveyor belts and bridge cranes rose eighty feet and more into the night sky around them, grey and silent as an out-of-season roller coaster.

Quinn held a hand up to stop them.

'There,' she told Caffery. 'See her? Just lying on her back.'

'Where?'

'See the oil drum?' She let the torch slide over it.

'Yes.'

'And the two reinforcing rods to its right?'

'Yes.'

'Follow that down.'

Jesus.

'See it?'

'Yes.' He steadied himself. 'OK. I see it.'

That? That's a body? He'd thought it was a piece of expanding foam, the type fired from an aerosol, so distended and yellow and shiny it was. Then he saw hair and teeth, and recognized an arm. And at last, by tilting his head on one side, he understood what he was looking at.

'Oh, for Christ's sake,' Maddox said wearily. 'Come on, then. Someone stick an Inci over her.'

2

By the time the sun had come up and burnt off the river mist, everyone who had seen the body in the daylight knew that this was no medical-school prank. The Home Office duty pathologist, Harsha Krishnamurthi, arrived and disappeared for an hour inside the white Incident. A fingertip search team was corralled and instructed, and by 12 p.m. the body was being freed from under the concrete.

Caffery found Maddox in the front seat of B team's Sierra.

'You all right?'

'There's nothing more we can do here, mate. We'll let Krishnamurthi take over from here.'

'Go home, get some kip.'

'You too.'

'No. I'll stay.'

'No, Jack. You too. If you want an exercise in insomnia you'll get it in the next few days. Trust me.'

Caffery held his hands up. 'OK, OK. Whatever you say. Sir.'

'Whatever I say.'

'But I won't sleep.'

'Fine. That's fine. Go home.' He gestured to

Caffery's battered old Jaguar. 'Go home and *pretend* to sleep.'

The image of the rich-yellow body under the tent kept pace with Caffery, even when he got home. In the new whitish light she seemed more real than she had last night. Her nails, bitten and painted sky blue, curled inwards to the swollen palms.

He showered, shaved. His face in the mirror was tanned from a morning near the river, there were new sun crinkles around his eyes. He knew he wouldn't sleep.

The accelerated-promotion new blood in the Area Major Investigation Pool: younger, harder, fitter, he recognized the resentment coming from the lower ranks, he understood the small, grim pleasure they took when the eight-week standby rota circled back to B team, coinciding neatly and nastily with his first case duty.

Seven days, twenty-four-hour standby, wakeful nights: and slam straight into the case, no time to catch a breath. He wouldn't be at his best.

And it was looking like a complex one.

It wasn't only the location and lack of witnesses that muddied it; in the morning light they had seen the black ulcerated marks of needle tracks.

And the offender had done something to the victim's breasts that Caffery didn't want to think about here in his white-tiled bathroom. He towelled his hair and shook his head to free the water in his ears. *Stop thinking about it now. Stop letting it chase its tail around your head.* Maddox was right, he needed to rest.

He was in the kitchen, pouring a Glenmorangie, when the doorbell rang.

'It's me,' Veronica called through the letterbox. 'I'd've phoned but I left my mobile at home.'

He opened the door. She wore a cream linen suit and Armani sunglasses tucked in her hair. Shopping bags from Chelsea boutiques clustered around her ankles. Her postbox-red Tigra convertible was parked in the evening sun beyond the garden gate and Caffery saw she was holding his front-door key as if she had been on the point of letting herself in.

‘Hello, sexy.’ She leaned in for a kiss.

He kissed her, tasting lipstick and menthol breath spray.

‘Mmmmm!’ She held his wrist and drew back, taking in the morning’s suntan, the jeans, the bare feet. The bottle of whisky dangling between his fingers. ‘Relaxing, were you?’

‘I was in the garden.’

‘Watching Penderecki?’

‘You think I can’t go in the garden without watching Penderecki?’

‘Of course you can’t.’ She started to laugh then saw his face. ‘Oh, come on, Jack. I’m *joking*. Here.’ She picked up a Waitrose carrier bag and handed it to him. ‘I’ve been shopping – prawns, fresh dill, fresh coriander and, oh, the *best* muscatel. And this—’ She held up a dark green box. ‘From Dad and me.’ She raised one long leg like an exotic bird, and rested the box against her knee to open it. A brown leather jacket nestled in printed tissue. ‘One of the lines we import.’

‘I’ve got a leather jacket.’

‘Oh.’ Her smile faltered. ‘Oh. OK. Not to worry.’ She closed the box. They were both silent for a moment. ‘I can take it back.’

‘No.’ Jack was instantly ashamed. ‘Don’t.’

‘Honestly. I can swap it from stock.’

‘No, really. Here, give it to me.’

This, he thought, kneeling the front door closed and

following her into the house, was the Veronica pattern. She made a life-altering suggestion, he rebutted it, she pushed out her lower lip, bravely shrugged her shoulders and immediately he became guilty, rolled onto his back and capitulated. Because of her past. *Simple but effective, Veronica.* In the six short months they'd known each other, his worn, comfortable home had been transformed into something unfamiliar, crammed with scented plants and labour-saving gadgets, his wardrobe bulging with clothes he would never wear: designer suits, hand-stitched jackets, silk ties, moleskin jeans, all courtesy of her father's Mortimer Street importing company.

Now, as Veronica made herself at home in his kitchen – the windows open, the Guzzini buzzing, peanut oil sizzling in bright green pans – Jack took the whisky onto the terrace.

The garden. Now there, he thought, unstoppering the Glenmorangie, there was perfect proof that the relationship was on a tilt. Planted long before his parents had bought the house – full of hibiscus, Russell lupins, a gnarled, ancient clematis – he liked to let it grow each summer until it almost blocked the windows with green. But Veronica wanted to trim, prune and fertilize, to grow lemongrass and capers in painted pots on the windowsills, make garden plans, talk gravel paths and bay trees. And ultimately – once she'd repackaged him and his house – she'd like him to sell up, leave this, the little south London crumbly-bricked Victorian cottage he was born in, with its mullioned windows, its tangled garden, the trains rattling by in the cutting. She wanted to give up her token job in the family business, move out of her parents' and get started on making a home for him.

But he couldn't. His history was embedded too deeply in this quarter acre of loam and clay to pull it

out on a whim. And after six months of knowing Veronica he was sure of one thing: he didn't love her.

He watched her through the window now, scrubbing potatoes, making butter curls. At the end of last year he had been four years in CID and slacking – treading water, bored, waiting for the next thing. Until, at an off-the-rails CID Hallowe'en party, he realized that wherever he turned, a girl in a miniskirt and strappy gold sandals was watching him, a knowing smile on her face.

Veronica triggered in Jack a two-month-long hormonal obsession. She matched his sex drive. She woke him at six each morning for sex and spent the weekends wandering around the house in nothing but heels and sorbet-bright lipstick.

She gave him new energy, and other areas of his life began to change. By April he had Manolo kitten-heel marks in his headboard and a transfer to AMIP. The murder squad.

But in spring, just as his drive towards her faltered, Veronica's agenda swerved. She became serious about him, started a campaign to tether him to her. One night she sat him down and in serious tones told him about the big injustice in her life, long before they had met: two of her teenage years taken from her by a struggle against cancer.

The ploy worked. Brought up short, suddenly he didn't know how to finish with her.

How arrogant, Jack, he realized, as if you not leaving might be compensation. How arrogant can you get.

In the kitchen she tucked her thin, asymmetric chin down onto her chest, her tongue between her teeth, and ripped a sprig of mint into shreds. He poured a shot of whisky and swallowed it in one.

Tonight he would do it. Maybe over dinner—

* * *

It was ready in an hour. Veronica switched all the lights on in the house and lit citronella garden candles on the patio.

'Pancetta and broad-bean salad with rocket, prawns in honey and soy sauce, followed by clementine sorbet. Am I the perfect woman or what?' She shook her hair and briefly exposed expensively cared for teeth. 'Thought I'd try it out on you and see if it'll do for the party.'

'The party.' He'd forgotten. They'd arranged it when they thought that ten days after standby week was a good, quiet time to throw a party.

'Lucky *I* haven't forgotten, isn't it?' She pushed past him, carrying the Le Creuset piled with baby new potatoes. In the living room the French windows were open onto the garden. 'We're eating in here tonight, no point in opening the dining room.' She stopped, looking at his crumpled T-shirt, the dark feral hair. 'Do you think you should dress for dinner?'

'You *are* joking.'

'Well, I—' She unfolded a napkin on her lap. 'I think it'd be nice.'

'No.' He sat down. 'I need my suit. My case has started.'

Go on, ask me about the case, Veronica, show an interest in something other than my wardrobe, my table linen.

But she started pushing potatoes onto his plate. 'You've got more than one suit, haven't you? Dad sent you that grey one.'

'The others're at the cleaner's.'

'Oh Jack, you should have said. I could have picked them up.'

'Veronica—'

'OK.' She held her hand up. 'I'm sorry. I won't

mention it again—’ She broke off. In the hallway the phone was ringing. ‘I wonder who that is.’ She speared a potato. ‘As if I couldn’t guess.’

Caffery put his glass down and pushed his chair back.

‘God,’ she sighed, exasperated, putting the fork down. ‘They’ve got a sixth sense, they really have. Can’t you just let it ring?’

‘No.’

In the hallway he picked up the phone. ‘Yeah?’

‘Don’t tell me. You were asleep.’

‘I told you I wouldn’t.’

‘Sorry to do this to you, mate.’

‘Yeah, what’s up?’

‘I’m back down here. The governor OK’d bringing in some equipment. One of the search team found something.’

‘Equipment?’

‘GPR.’

‘GPR? That—’ Caffery broke off. Veronica pushed past him and walked purposefully up the stairs, closing the bedroom door behind her. He stood in the narrow hallway staring after her, one hand propped up against the wall.

‘You there, Jack?’

‘Yeah, sorry. What were you saying? GPR, that’s Ground Probing something?’

‘Ground Probing Radar.’

‘OK. What you’re telling me is—’ Caffery dug a small niche in the wall with his black thumbnail. ‘You’re telling me you’ve got more?’

‘We’ve got more.’ Maddox was solemn. ‘Four more.’

‘Shit.’ He massaged his neck. ‘In at the deep end or what.’

‘They’ve started on the recovery now.’

‘OK. Where’ll you be?’

‘At the yard. We can follow them down to Devonshire Drive.’

‘The mortuary? Greenwich?’

‘Uh huh. Krishnamurthi’s already started with the first one. He’s agreed to do an all-nighter for us.’

‘OK. I’ll see you there in thirty.’

Upstairs, Veronica was in the bedroom with the door shut. Caffery dressed in Ewan’s room, checked once out of the window for activity over the railway at Penderecki’s – nothing – and, doing up his tie, put his head round the bedroom door.

‘Right. We’re going to talk. When I get back—’

He stopped. She was sitting in bed, the covers pulled up to her neck, clutching a bottle of pills.

‘What are they?’

She looked up at him. Bruised, sullen eyes. ‘Ibuprofen. Why?’

‘What are you doing?’

‘Nothing.’

‘What are you doing, Veronica?’

‘My throat’s up again.’

He stopped, the tie extended in his left hand. ‘*Your throat’s up?*’

‘That’s what I said.’

‘Since when?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Well, either your throat’s up or it isn’t.’

She muttered something under her breath, opened the bottle, shook two pills into her hand and looked up at him. ‘Going somewhere nice?’

‘Why didn’t you tell me your throat was up? Shouldn’t you be having tests?’

‘Don’t worry about it. You’ve got more important things to think about.’

‘Veronica—’

‘What *now*?’

He was silent for a moment. ‘Nothing.’ He finished knotting the tie and turned for the stairs.

‘Don’t worry about me, will you?’ she called after him. ‘I won’t wait up.’

3

Two-thirty a.m. Caffery and Maddox stood silently staring off into the white-tiled autopsy suite: five aluminium dissecting stations, five bodies, unseamed from pubis to shoulders, skin peeled away like hides revealing raw ribs marbled with fat and muscle. Juices leaked into the pans beneath them.

Caffery knew this well: the smell of disinfectant mingling with the unmistakable stench of viscera in the chill air. But five. *Five*. All tagged and dated the same day. He had never seen it on this scale. The morticians, moving silently in their peppermint-green galoshes and scrubs, didn't appear to find this unusual. One smiled as she handed him a face mask.

'Just one moment, gentlemen.' Harsha Krishnamurthi was at the furthest dissecting table. The corpse's scalp had been peeled from the skull down to the squamous cleft of the nose, and folded over so that the hair and face hung like a wet rubber mask, inside out, covering the mouth and neck, pooling on the clavicle. Krishnamurthi lifted the intestines out and slopped them into a stainless steel bowl.

'Who's running?'

'Me.' A small mortician in round glasses appeared at his side.

‘Good, Martin. Weigh them, run them, prepare samples. Paula, I’m finished here, you can close up. Don’t let the sutures overlap the wounds. Now, gentlemen.’ He pushed aside the halogen light, lifted his plastic visor and turned to Maddox and Caffery, gloved, splattered hands held rigidly out in front. He was handsome, slim, in his fifties, the deep-polished wood-coloured eyes slightly wet with age, his grey beard carefully trimmed. ‘Grand tour, is it?’

Maddox nodded. ‘Have we got a cause of death?’

‘I think so. And, if I’m right, a very interesting one too. I’ll come to that.’ He pointed down the room. ‘Entomology’ll give you more – but I can give you approximates on all of them: the first one you found was the last one to die. Let’s call her number five. She died less than a week ago. Then we jump back almost a month, then another five weeks and then another month and a half. The first one probably died Decemberish but the gaps are getting closer. We’re lucky: not too much in the way of third-party artefacts – they’re pretty well preserved.’

He pointed to a sad loose pile of blackened flesh on the second dissecting table.

‘The first to die. Long bones tell me she hadn’t even turned eighteen. There’s something that looks like a tattoo on her left arm. Might be the only way we can ID her. That or odontology. Now.’ He held up a crooked finger. ‘Appearance on arrival: I don’t know how much you saw in the field, but they were all wearing make-up. *Heavy* make-up. Clearly visible. Even after they’ve been in the ground this long. Eyeshadow, lipstick. The photographer has it all covered.’

‘Make-up, tattoos—’

‘Yes, Mr Maddox. And, thinking along those lines, two had pelvic infections, one a keratinized anus, plenty of evidence of drugs use; endocarditis of the

tricuspid valves. I don't want to jump to conclusions—'

'Yes, yes, yes,' Maddox muttered. 'So we're saying they're toms. I think we already guessed that. What can you tell us about the mutilations?'

'Ah! Interesting.' Krishnamurthi edged in next to a cadaver, beckoning them to follow. Caffery thought, not for the first time, how like a side of hung meat the skinned human body is. 'You can see what I've done is to bring the second TA incision in tight, missing the one our offender did and avoiding the breasts so I could biopsy the incisions and get a look inside to see what's going on in there.'

'And?'

'Some tissue has been removed.'

Maddox and Caffery exchanged glances.

'Yes. It's roughly consistent with a standard beta mark breast reduction procedure. Stitched up, too. I suppose it's significant that your offender hasn't bothered with this decoration on the smaller-breasted victims.'

'Which ones?'

'Victims two and three. And let me show you something interesting.' He beckoned them to where a mortician was stitching up the crumpled torso he'd taken the intestines from. 'The nail scrapings look dismal – and the very strange thing is I can't find any signs of a struggle. Except for on this one. On victim number three.'

They gathered round the corpse. It was small, as small as a child, and Caffery knew that for this accidental resemblance, rational or not, she would be set aside in the team's considerations.

'She weighed in at forty kilos, that's not much more than six stone.' Reading Caffery's mind Krishnamurthi said, 'But she wasn't an adolescent. Just very petite. Perhaps that's why the breasts were not mutilated.'

‘The hair colour . . .?’

‘Hair dye. Hair degrades very slowly. That aubergine colour – it won’t have changed much since death. Now, look.’ He pointed a wet black finger at a scattered pattern on the wrists. ‘It’s difficult to distinguish from the normal lesions of decomposition, but these are actually ligature marks. Ante-mortem. And a gag around here on the face. On the ankles, too, chafing, bleeding. The others died as cool as ice; they just’ – he held out his hand and mimed cresting a summit – ‘just *tipped* over the edge there. Like falling off a log. But this one – this one’s different.’

‘Different?’ Caffery looked up. ‘Why different?’

‘This one struggled, gentlemen. She fought for her life.’

‘The others didn’t?’

‘No.’ He held up his hands. ‘I’m coming to that. Just bear with me, OK?’ He rolled aside a triple-beam balance and moved on to the congested, swollen body of the first victim discovered. ‘Now.’ He looked up, waiting for Maddox and Caffery to follow. ‘Now then. This we’ll call number five. Dreadful state, really, no doubt the head injury was post-mortem, done by heavy machinery, your guess of the bulldozer sounds about right. Gives us big problems identifying her. Our best hope’s prints, although there again we encounter problems.’ He lifted up a hand and gently pushed the skin back and forward. It moved, jellied and thick, like the skin on a pudding.

‘See that slippage? Not a hope in hell of getting a straight dead set. What I’ll have to do is flip the skin off and print.’ He lowered the hand. ‘She was a user, but her death was instantaneous, not an OD, none of the usual oesophageal and tracheal artefacts, no pulmonary oedema.’ He rolled the body gently onto its side and pointed to a greenish collection on the

buttocks. ‘Most of what you’re seeing is putrefaction. But under it you can see black blood pricks?’

‘Yes.’

He rolled the body back. ‘Scattered hypostasis. She was moved after death. There’s more on her arms, even, rather unusually, in her ankles.’

‘Unusually?’

‘You’d see that in a hanging victim. Blood drifts downward into the feet and ankles.’

Caffery frowned. ‘You said the hyoid’s intact.’

‘It is. And from what’s left of the neck I can guarantee this was not a hanging.’

‘Well?’

‘She was in a standing position for some time. Post-mortem.’

‘*Standing?*’ Caffery said. ‘Standing?’ The image made him uneasy. He turned to Maddox, expecting explanation – an easy reassurance. But it wasn’t there. Instead Maddox narrowed his eyes and shook his head. *I don’t know*, he was saying, *don’t look at me for every answer*.

‘Maybe she was propped up,’ Krishnamurthi continued. ‘I can’t see any whitish areas to indicate how – the putrefaction is too advanced – but she might have been suspended under her arms, or wedged somewhere so she was upright. Some time soon after death, when the blood was not yet viscid.’ He paused. ‘Mmmm, hm. I missed that.’

‘What is it?’

He bent in and gently tweezered something from the scalp. ‘Good.’

‘What’s that?’

‘A hair.’

Caffery leaned in. ‘A pubic hair?’

‘Maybe.’ Krishnamurthi held it to the light. ‘No. That’s a head hair. Negroid. It won’t be any use for

DNA except mitochondrial, there's not enough follicle on it.' He carefully bagged the hair and handed it to the mortician for labelling. 'I've already pulled some blond hairs off three of the victims. They're on their way to Lambeth.' He moved to the next table. 'Number two. She died fourteen or fifteen weeks ago. Five eight, age maybe thirty. The fingers are desiccated, but we'll still get a good dead set; there's an excellent chelation tissue builder on the market. Gelatine. Swells the tips up. Normally for that we'd take the hands off and do it at Lambeth, but' – he leaned in to Maddox – 'since the fuss over the *Marchioness* I've stopped taking hands off. Do it right here in the pit, awkward or not.'

He moved on to the next table where a large white carcass lay, cracked down the centre and unfurled. A cobwebbing of silvery white fascia shimmered between the blue ribs, the bleached blond hair had been wetted and smoothed back off the clean forehead. The throat too was split wide, revealing a glimpse of a milky chord. 'Victim four, gentlemen.'

Caffery lightly touched the ankle. 'Good.' A tattoo, surprisingly clear, centimetres above the tarsal bone. Bugs Bunny. Trademark green-topped carrot.

'You say no OD artefacts?'

'That's correct. No trauma either.'

'So how did they die?'

Krishnamurthi held up a stained finger and smiled slowly. 'That's where I've got an idea. Look at this.' He gently inserted his fingers into the neck cavity, carefully opening the throat wider, inching aside the trachea and oesophagus, until the spinal column showed slippery and grey. 'This man is so clever, but not as clever as I am. If you drain off enough cerebrospinal fluid from down here' – he straightened and tapped his lower back – 'instant death, hardly a mark.'

Even your standard lumbar puncture has to be done very, very carefully; take too much of that stuff and whoopee, your patient hits the deck. Now these subjects've got about the right amount of CSF in the spine and no puncture wounds on the back. So I'm wondering if he cut out the middle man and went direct' – he nudged the calibrated scalpel in the opening between the vertebrae and carefully excised a small amount of the white myelin caul – 'to the brain stem itself.'

'The brain stem?'

'That's right.' Krishnamurthi made a second incision and bent in to look. 'Hmmm.' He carefully manipulated the scalpel and muttered to himself. 'No, I'm incorrect.' He frowned and looked up. 'This wasn't done by *removing* CSF.'

'No?'

'No. But there *has* been something invasive here. You see, Superintendent Maddox, the brain stem is a very delicate structure. You would only have to get a needle in the medulla oblongata, wiggle it about and every physiological function would crash to a halt – just as we're seeing with these subjects.'

'Instant death.'

'Exactly. Now, I'm not seeing the extensive damage you'd expect with that, but it doesn't mean something wasn't *injected* in there. It wouldn't have mattered what – even water could do it. Subject's heart and lungs would have simply stopped. Instantly.'

'And you say that except for number three none of them struggled?'

'That's what I said.'

'Then how?' Caffery rubbed his temples lightly. '*How* did he keep them still?'

'My guess is once you get stomach, blood and deep tissue analysis back from toxicology you'll find

something had them tranquillized.’ He cocked his head. ‘One would have to assume they were semi-conscious when that needle went in.’

‘Right.’ Caffery folded his arms and tilted back on his heels. ‘Lambeth needs to test for alcohol, Rohypnol, barbs, mazis. And those—’ He nodded to a victim’s forehead. About a centimetre below the hair-line he could make out a horizontal line of faint ochre marks. ‘Those things on her head.’

‘Yes, odd, aren’t they?’

‘They all have them?’

‘All except number four. They extend all the way around the head. Almost a perfect circle. And they’ve a very distinctive pattern: a few dots, then a slash.’

Caffery bent a little closer. *Dot dot dash. Someone’s joke?* ‘How were they made?’

‘No idea – I’ll work on it.’

‘How about this suture material?’

‘Yes.’ Krishnamurthi was silent for a moment. ‘It’s professional.’

Caffery straightened up. Maddox was looking at him with clear grey eyes over his mask. Caffery raised his eyebrows. ‘Now isn’t *that* interesting?’

‘I didn’t say the *technique* was professional, gentlemen.’ Krishnamurthi peeled off his gloves, tipped them into a yellow biohazard bin and crossed to a sink. ‘Just the material. It’s silk. But the incision didn’t extend to the xiphoid process. Pretty crude. The beta breast incision, that’s the classic surgery technique taught in med school.’ He picked up the yellow bar of reen soap and lathered his arms. ‘He’s taken the fat from almost the right place, and the incision is very clean, done with a scalpel. But the stitching – not professional. Not professional at all.’

‘But if I guessed our offender had a grasp of the rudiments, you’d say—?’

‘I’d say you had a point. A good point. He was able to find the brain stem, which is remarkable.’ He rinsed his hands and pulled off the visor. ‘Well. Do you want to see what he did before he sewed them back up?’

‘Yes.’

‘This way.’

Drying his hands, he led them into an anteroom where the small mortician was chewing gum and cleaning the intestines at a porcelain scrub sink: holding them under a tap and rinsing the contents into a bowl. He carefully inspected the inner and outer linings, checking for corrosion. When he saw Krishnamurthi he laid the intestines to one side and rinsed his hands.

‘Show them what we found inside the chest cavities, Martin.’

‘Sure.’

He tucked the gum in his cheek and picked up a large stainless steel bowl covered with a square of brown paper. He removed the paper and held the bowl out.

Maddox bent in and jerked his head back as if he’d been slapped. ‘Jesus.’ He turned away, pulling a clean, monogrammed handkerchief from his suit pocket.

‘Show me?’

‘Sure.’ The assistant held the bowl out and Caffery gingerly peered over the edge.

In the stinking stew at the bottom of the blood-spattered bowl, five tiny dead shapes huddled together as if trying to keep warm. He looked up at the mortician. ‘Are they what I think they are?’

The mortician nodded. ‘Oh yes. They’re what they appear to be.’