

# CHAPTER ONE

The yellow JCB digger was backhoeing a deep trench for the concrete foundations to be laid. As Barry, the driver, started to scoop up another load of rain-sodden soil he knew, from the tension on the digger arm, the bucket had struck something solid under the ground.

Opening the cab window, he shouted to his colleague who was sitting in a large open-top dumper truck waiting for the digger to empty its next load of soil.

‘Oi, Dermot, I’ve hit something hard. See if you can make out what it is.’

Dermot did a thumbs up and slowly stepped down from the dumper truck.

‘Get a move on, Dermot,’ Barry shouted.

‘Whatever it is, it’s still under the soil. Give it a prod with the bucket so I can hear if it sounds like stone or metal.’

Barry raised then lowered the bucket. When it struck the unknown object, there was a clanging sound.

‘I reckon it’s something metal,’ Dermot said.

As Barry pulled back on the bucket the sudden unbearable screech of metal scraping on metal made Dermot wince. He frantically waved his arms. ‘Whoa, stop digging!’

Barry repositioned the bucket, so it was lower in the ground. This time he was able to pull the unknown object up so part of it was sticking out of the soil. It was still covered in dirt, so Barry jumped down from the cab into the trench and brushed away the topsoil with his hands. ‘It’s a bloody coffin!’

‘We’d better let Lee know about it. This area could be the old convent graveyard,’ Dermot said warily as he walked off.

Barry grabbed him by the arm. 'We've been digging the new foundations for two weeks now and we ain't uncovered no other coffins, so this can't be a proper graveyard, can it?'

'Better safe than sorry, Barry.'

'You'll be sorry if Lee calls the Old Bill and the site gets shut down. No work means no bloody wages. I say we dig a hole somewhere in the woodland over there and put the coffin in it. No one will be any the wiser.'

Dermot shook his head. 'You can't treat the dead like that. We have to tell Lee. He's in charge of the site.'

'Let's have a look inside first . . .'

'No way. That would be sacrilege,' a shaken Dermot exclaimed.

'If it's an empty coffin, there's no harm in moving it.'

'I told you, I ain't touching it.'

'You're frightened, aren't you?' Barry scoffed.

Dermot went to the builders' hut and returned a couple of minutes later with Lee, the site foreman.

Lee looked at the coffin and sighed. 'That's all we bloody well need.'

'I think we should move it or at least have a look inside,' Barry suggested.

'I don't know . . .'

Lee said hesitantly. 'If you do, I'm having no part of it,' Dermot said firmly.

'All right, Dermot, calm down. You two wait here while I go speak with Mr Durham. And don't touch the coffin.' Lee headed towards the walled gardens of the old convent.

Dermot waited until Lee was out of sight before walking off.

'You going back to the hut?' Barry asked.

'No, I'm going to the phone box down the lane to call the police.'

'Tosser,' Barry muttered under his breath. He watched as Dermot got in his Vauxhall Astra and drove towards the lane. Barry nipped to his van and looked in a toolbox. 'You'll do the job nicely,' he smirked as he pulled out a crowbar.

## CHAPTER TWO

Detective Sergeant Jane Tennison was sitting at her desk in the Bromley CID office, reading the night duty detective's report about the arrest of two young men trying to break into a house in Beckenham. As she got to the part where the two burglars were disturbed, she couldn't help but laugh out loud.

'What's so funny?' Detective Inspector Stanley asked Jane as he walked in.

Jane had known Stanley since she'd joined the force and had worked with him on a number of cases, but his Christian name was still a mystery to her and, like everyone else, she just called him Stanley – or 'guv', now that he was a DI. When she first met him, he was a long-haired, scruffy-looking undercover officer, who not only looked like a tramp, but smelt like one as well. With promotion to DI, he had tidied up his appearance and now had short combed-back hair and dressed smartly in a dark blue two-piece suit, white shirt, and Flying Squad tie with its swooping eagle emblem. Present and former members of the elite 'Sweeney' proudly wore the tie which symbolised the way its officers would swoop swiftly on armed robbers.

Jane smiled. 'Morning, Stanley. This night duty report is funny. Two lads broke into a house at two a.m. and disturbed the owner, who just happened to be a police dog handler. His Alsatian, Rumpus, bit one of them in the arse and he needed twelve stitches. The other lad jumped up a tree in the back garden fearing he was next on the dog's menu.'

Stanley laughed. 'That'll teach the little shits.'

'They're still in the cells awaiting interview and their home addresses need to be searched. Me and DC Boon can deal with—'

Stanley shook his head. 'Don't worry, I'll sort them out. The duty sergeant just informed me a coffin has been dug up on a building site in Bickley and they don't know what to do. I need you to deal with that.'

Jane was puzzled. 'Since when was that kind of incident a CID matter?'

'It's on the grounds of an old convent, which means the land might be consecrated and have other bodies buried in it.'

'I still don't see how it's a CID matter,' she said, glumly looking out of the window at the torrential rain.

'Uniform are down to minimum strength today and well tucked up with a major RTA in Widmore Road. Besides, as you've only been here for four weeks it'll give you a chance to get out of the office and do some investigation – and take DC Boon with you,' he added, handing her a page from a police memo pad with the address on it.

'I was just asking why CID, not trying to get out of dealing with it,' Jane explained. 'I've heard the term consecrated ground, but what's the legal procedure?'

'I don't know. I've never dealt with an unearthened coffin before.'

'Then that makes two of us.'

'I suggest you go speak with the foreman and see if there's a body in the coffin for starters,' Stanley said.

'And if there is?'

'Then you'll need to inform the Bromley coroner, who'll advise you accordingly. And maybe speak with the local Catholic church authority as well. They should know if it's consecrated ground or not.'

Jane looked up as a dripping wet DC Boon sauntered into the office, removing the earphones from his Sony pocket radio.

'Bloody hell, it's wet out there' he remarked as he removed his rain-sodden coat and shook the water off it, some of which landed on Jane and the night duty CID report.

‘Watch what you’re doing, Boony!’ she said, wiping the report with a tissue and unintentionally smudging it. ‘And keep your coat on, we’ve got an incident to attend.’

‘Anything exciting for a change?’ he asked.

‘We won’t know till we get there, but it involves an unearthed coffin,’ she replied, grabbing her raincoat from the coat stand.

‘Grave diggers?’ Boon asked hopefully.

‘In a manner of speaking, yes,’ Stanley smiled.

‘Have I got time for a coffee and bacon sarnie?’ Boon asked.

Stanley frowned. ‘No. If you want breakfast have it in your own time before you come on duty. I don’t like my detectives coming to work and going straight to the canteen for a bite to eat and a chat. It pisses off the uniform officers who do three to four hours on the beat before they get their official refs break, so I expect you all to do the same. Refs at twelve or one p.m. for detectives on a nine-to-five shift in future and five or six p.m. on a two-to-ten shift.’

‘Yes, guv, point taken,’ an embarrassed Boon replied.

Jane was somewhat surprised by DI Stanley’s remarks, especially as he’d never been a stickler for the rules as a detective sergeant when they worked together on the Flying Squad in North London. However, she was aware that he’d ‘blotted his copybook’ whilst awaiting promotion to DI, and he regarded his transfer to Bromley CID, on the quieter outskirts of the Met, as a punishment posting.

Stanley nipped into his office and returned with an umbrella, which he handed to DC Boon with a grin.

‘You might need this. Keep me informed.’

Jane picked up the keys for the maroon Hillman Hunter CID car and tossed them over to Boon.

‘You can drive.’

He tossed the keys back. ‘Sorry, sarge, but I’m still suspended from driving job motors after the POLAC I had last month.’

Jane frowned, remembering that he’d driven into the back of a privately owned Mercedes at a roundabout. ‘Right. I’ll drive, then.’

‘So where exactly are we going?’ Boon asked as they walked down the stairs.

‘What used to be a convent in Bickley.’ Jane then repeated what Stanley had told her.

Boon sighed. ‘And there was me thinking it might be something exciting for a change. It’s obvious why DI Stanley didn’t fancy dealing with it.’

‘I suspect the miserable weather might have had something to do with his decision to send us instead,’ Jane said.

‘And they say a good copper never gets wet,’ Boon chuckled.

\* \* \*

As Boon directed Jane to the site of the old convent the rain got heavier. There was a sudden flash of lightning in the distance. Boon looked at his watch and started counting the seconds. He got to five and there was a loud crack of thunder.

‘Why are you counting?’ Jane asked.

‘I’m doing a flash, bang count.’

‘A what?’

‘You take the number of seconds between the lightning and thunder, divide by five and it tells you how far away the lightning is . . . which at present is roughly a mile.’

‘A meteorologist as well as a detective,’ Jane smiled.

‘They say you should take cover if the time between the lightning flash and the rumble of thunder is thirty seconds or less.’

‘Talking of cover, where’s that umbrella Stanley gave you?’

‘Shit, I left it in the locker room toilets when I went to the loo.’

‘Why am I not surprised,’ she sighed.

‘Sorry, sarge, I’ve got a plastic bag in my coat pocket if you want to use it to cover your hair.’

Jane raised her eyebrows and shook her head in disbelief. ‘Thanks but no thanks.’

She'd only known Boony a few weeks, but found him to be polite and cheerful, though somewhat scatty. He had been a detective for two years, was in his early twenties, tall, dark-haired and good-looking. He was always smartly dressed, and Stanley felt he had the makings of a good detective, but needed guidance, which from her first impressions Jane considered to be a fair assessment. He was also a good footballer and played for the Met's first team, to the annoyance of some of his CID colleagues because his duty shifts were often arranged to enable him to play and train.

'St Mary's Lane is next right. It's a dead-end,' Boon said, putting the small London A-Z street atlas back in the glove box.

Jane followed his instructions, passing two small cul-de-sacs on either side of the road, each with six large detached houses, some of which were mock Tudor in style.

'Those houses look new and expensive,' Boon remarked.

Jane nodded. 'Looks like a lot of this area was old land that's been built on recently.'

Just past the second cul-de-sac, on the left, was a small brick-built parish church with stained-glass windows and a large double wooden door. On the church wall next to the door was a six-foot concrete statue of Christ on the cross and underneath it a large green sign saying ST MARY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH, along with holy mass and confession times. Beyond the church there was a long hedgerow and woodland.

'I can't see any convent. Are you sure you've got the right road?' Jane asked.

'I'm just going by what's written on the duty sergeant's note – that *you* gave me,' he said cheekily. He pointed down the road. 'There's a high brick wall way down there on the left, maybe the building site is on the other side of it.'

'I'll drive on a bit,' Jane said. 'There may be an entrance further down. If not, then you can nip into the church and see if there's anyone about you can ask.'

A hundred metres down there was an open metal gate leading onto a gravel drive.

‘That big house in front of us with a statue of what I assume is the Virgin Mary looks like a convent to me,’ Jane said.

The impressive two-storey grey stone and brick building had a five-bay front, comprising a shallow gabled entrance flanked by a bay either side, with a further gabled two-bay projection on both ends. The large bay on the right had a holy cross on top of it and a large, pointed arch, with a stained-glass window, making it look like a chapel. A high brick wall with wooden gates abutted either end of the building.

‘I can’t see any building site. Bloody Stanley’s having a laugh and sent us out on a wild goose chase just to get wet,’ Boon said.

‘There are obviously people living or working in there and, judging by the expensive cars out front, I doubt it’s nuns. If a coffin’s been dug up, it might be somewhere else on the grounds,’ Jane suggested.

Jane parked the car, then she and Boon ran through the rain to the front entrance, where two stone steps led up to the timber-panelled door, next to which was an intercom with thirteen buzzers.

‘Looks like the convent might have been converted into flats,’ Jane said as she pressed the visitor buzzer and waited for a reply.

‘Can I help you?’ a well-spoken, deep-voiced man asked as he approached them from behind.

He was tall, well-built, looked to be in his late fifties, with a rugged complexion and a dimpled chin. He had a large golf umbrella in one hand and wore an ankle-length green waxed coat. By his side was an unleashed golden retriever, which suddenly jumped up at Jane, depositing muddy paw marks on her raincoat.

The man grabbed the dog by the collar and pulled it back. ‘Heel, Bella,’ he said firmly. ‘Sorry, she’s young and I’m still training her,’ he added, as he attached a lead to the dog’s collar.



‘I’m Detective Sergeant Tennison and this is Detective Constable Boon. We were wondering if there’s any building work occurring on the grounds,’ Jane said.

‘Yes, out the back of this building down the far end of the gardens. The site access is off a lane over the back of here. Has something happened?’

‘Nothing for you to be concerned about, sir,’ Jane replied.

‘They dug up a coffin,’ Boon said casually, and Jane frowned.

‘On the site?’ the man asked, looking worried.

‘We don’t know the full details yet, sir,’ Jane told him.

‘Is this building still a convent?’ Boon asked.

‘No, all the Sisters of Mercy nuns have long gone now. The buildings have been converted into private apartments.’

‘I like how they’ve kept the outside like an old building, especially the stained-glass window there,’ Boon remarked, pointing.

The man nodded. ‘It’s a listed building, so the exterior remained as is, though obviously the stone and brickwork was cleaned up and some double glazing put in. The stained glass is original, and that part of the convent was the oratory.’

‘What’s an oratory?’ Boon asked.

‘It was the chapel used by the nuns.’

‘I bet a flat in there costs an arm and a leg,’ Boon said.

The man forced a smile. ‘Yes, the apartments are expensive.’

‘Thanks for your help, sir. Can you give us directions to the building site?’ Jane asked.

‘The temporary road leading up to it will be very muddy and you might well get stuck. It would be quicker to walk through our rear communal gardens. Please follow me.’ He wiped his wellingtons on the outside doormat, then unlocked the front door.

Boon was about to step inside, when Jane whispered to him to wipe his feet on the mat. Inside there was another large doormat which the man also used, before picking up a neatly folded towel from the floor and wiping the dog down with it.

The hallway was large with a beige marble floor and a stunning Gothic-style dark oak L-shaped staircase. Halfway up the stairs to the upper floor was a pictorial stained-glass window, the centre-piece of which depicted the virgin Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus in the stable at Bethlehem.

‘Excuse me for a moment while I put Bella inside.’ The man went over to a large arched wooden door in the right-hand corner, opened it and went inside.

Jane took Boon to one side. ‘You shouldn’t have mentioned the coffin. The residents might start worrying about dead bodies in their back garden.’

‘Sorry, sarge, but they’re going to find out sooner or later, aren’t they?’

Jane was about to reply when the man returned carrying a large umbrella. ‘Sorry, I’ve only got the one, but it’s better than nothing.’

‘Thank you,’ Jane said, taking it from him.

The man then led them to a rear entrance off the hallway where he opened the door. Outside was a vast garden with high walls and Gothic-style arches.

‘Blimey, the back garden is massive,’ Boon remarked.

‘It’s the same as it was when the nuns tended it, though we did have to do quite a bit of work to restore it to its original splendour. All the residents chip in and help maintain it. It’s absolutely stunning in the summer,’ he said proudly. ‘Follow the gravel path towards the far end and go through an arch midway on your right into the herb garden. You’ll see another arch on your far left which leads to the building site. I’ll leave the back door open, but I’d be grateful if you could slip the latch back on and leave the umbrella outside my door when you leave.’

‘It’s like stepping back in time,’ Jane remarked as they walked, the gravel crunching under their feet. ‘The nuns who lived here must have led a very peaceful life.’

‘Bit like working at Bromley nick, then,’ Boon grinned. ‘You’ve worked at some real busy stations, and the Flying Squad, so what made you want to come to Bromley?’

‘I bought a house in Chislehurst a few months ago,’ Jane said. ‘Travelling uptown to Gerald Road nick by train was getting expensive.’

‘That’s the problem living south of the river,’ Boon agreed. ‘There’s no tube trains for us to use our warrant cards on for free travel into Central London. Did you not fancy working somewhere like Lewisham? That’s a busy South London nick.’

‘Not really,’ Jane said. ‘I wanted a quieter posting so I can study for next year’s inspectors’ exam.’

Boon grinned. ‘You’ll get plenty of time to do that at Bromley.’

They followed the man’s directions to a large expanse of land with a wood and small lake in the distance. To their right were six burnt-out buildings, one of which had a rusty old school bell precariously hanging from an arched recess in the wall above a fire-damaged door. Just beyond the burnt-out buildings they saw a dumper truck, two vans and a small car parked outside a Portakabin.

‘That must be the builders’ hut over there. Looks like there’s a few people working here,’ Boon said.

Approaching the Portakabin door they could hear a man talking in a raised voice. Jane closed the umbrella.

‘It’s a fucking joke stopping everything! This is all your fault, Dermot,’ Barry shouted.

Lee remained calm. ‘He did what he felt was right. Besides, it may only be a temporary setback.’

Barry was still angry. ‘Why can’t we dig the south-side foundations? That’s well away from the bloody coffin.’

Boon was about to knock on the door when Jane stopped him, putting her finger to her mouth and leaning closer.

‘Because the police told us to stop,’ Dermot said defensively.

'Shut the fuck up, Dermot. Or I'll fill your big mouth with my fist,' Barry threatened.

Lee had had enough. 'Knock it off, Barry. I'm the site foreman, not you! Do as you're bloody well told, or you'll be joining the dole queue.'

Barry shook his head in disgust, 'I may as well piss off home then.'

'Maybe that's best for now,' Lee agreed.

Jane was about to knock on the Portakabin door when it was abruptly opened by Barry, who barged past Boon, nearly knocking him over.

'Sorry, mate, was I in your way?' Boon said sarcastically.

'Fuck off,' Barry muttered as he got in the red minivan. The wheels spun in the dirt as he accelerated away from the site.

Jane held up her warrant card and introduced herself and Boon.

'I'm Lee Holland, the site manager. Sorry about Barry. He's just worried about the site closing down and being out of work.'

Lee was in his late forties, bald, with a large beer belly and a double chin. He wore a black donkey jacket, white T-shirt, blue jeans, and Doc Martens workman's boots.

Compared with the cold weather outside, the Portakabin was stiflingly hot. There were two paraffin heaters, the interior windows were covered in condensation and there was also an overpowering musty odour, a mixture of dampness and sweat, which Dermot and Lee seemed oblivious to. The cabin had a couple of desks and some filing cabinets and pinned up on the wall were plans for the site. The floor was covered in muddy boot prints.

'Who found the coffin?' Jane asked.

'Barry hit something hard when he was using the digger,' Lee said. 'But Dermot here was also there. They cleared the surrounding soil away so you can see it better. I'll put the kettle on while he tells you about it.'

Dermot recounted how the coffin had been uncovered, not mentioning that Barry had wanted to open it.

‘Did you find anything else which might indicate the area was a graveyard?’ Jane asked.

Lee shook his head. ‘No, not a thing. And we’ve dug out quite a large area so far. Would you like to see the coffin now or have a coffee first and see if the rain eases off?’

‘May as well see it now,’ Jane said, holding up the umbrella. ‘This should help keep the worst of it off us.’

‘It’s pretty muddy out there. Have you got any wellies in your car?’ Dermot asked.

‘Unfortunately, no,’ Jane replied.

‘I’ve got some plastic shopping bags you can use as shoe covers,’ Lee said, opening a desk drawer and taking some out.

‘They might make it more slippery as they’ve no grip, but thanks anyway,’ she replied, thinking she’d look ridiculous wearing the bags.

‘I’ll have some,’ Boon grinned. ‘These shoes were expensive!’

\* \* \*

Dermot took them round the back of the Portakabin to the building site, which was bigger than Jane had expected. At about half the size of a football pitch, it was clear that quite a few flats or houses were going to be built on the land. Jane stepped carefully through the mud, whilst balancing herself with the umbrella, but her shoes quickly became covered in the brown sludge.

Standing at the edge of the footings trench, the large grey metal coffin was now clearly visible as the heavy rain had washed away the topsoil. It was over six feet long with an inlaid silver cross on top and fresh scratch marks caused by the digger bucket. It looked old, with patches of rust.

‘Looks like it’s been in the ground for a while,’ Boon said.

‘There’s no name plate on it, though. It might be a nun, or a priest connected to the old convent,’ Dermot suggested.

‘Looks a bit big for a nun’s coffin,’ Boon said.

‘Nuns, like us, come in all shapes and sizes. The fact is, we won’t know who or what’s inside until it’s opened,’ Jane said.

‘Might save some time if we have a quick look inside now,’ suggested Boon.

‘Barry wanted to open it,’ Dermot said. ‘Then if it was empty, we wouldn’t have had to call you lot. Being a Catholic I was a bit wary, so I said best to leave it and tell Lee.’

Jane could tell Dermot was nervous and gave him a reassuring smile. ‘Don’t worry, we won’t open the coffin here. I’ll arrange for it to be taken to the mortuary where we can do it in a more controlled and dignified manner.’

‘How’re we going to get it out?’ Boon asked.

‘I can dig under the coffin with a shovel and put some heavy-duty straps around it. If I attach them to the digger bucket and lift it out you can put it in a police van,’ Dermot said, thinking they would remove the coffin in one go.

‘The undertakers will come in their van to remove it to the mortuary,’ Jane told him.

Dermot pointed to his right. ‘We’ve made a temporary road using the rubble from the old buildings we knocked down. It’s a bit bumpy and muddy in some bits, but they should be able to get their van up from the lane down the far end.’

Jane could see that the makeshift road was about a hundred metres long and a section of the woodland had been cut away to allow vehicles in from the lane.

She turned to Boon. ‘I need you to go back to the car, radio the station and ask them to inform the Bromley coroner’s officer about the coffin and request the attendance of the undertakers’ van. Give them the location of the entrance and a heads-up about the muddy conditions. See if they can arrange the opening of the coffin for this afternoon.’

‘Will do, sarge. Do you want a lab liaison sergeant to attend?’

Jane shook her head. 'It's not a crime scene. Besides, I don't think there's anything they can do to assist us here.'

As Boon turned to leave, the ground on the edge of the footings trench suddenly gave way and his feet started to slide out from under him. As he fell forward, he instinctively grabbed the nearest thing to stop his fall, which unfortunately for Jane happened to be her left arm. She let out a loud shriek as she lost her balance, dropped the umbrella, then toppled over and landed in the mud. Boon, however, managed to regain his balance and stay upright.

'For Christ's sake, Boon, what are you playing at!' Jane shouted.

'Sorry, sarge, it was an accident,' he said sheepishly as he put out his hand to help her up.

She flicked it away and got up. 'Look at the state of me. I'm covered in bloody mud.'

'I'll pay for your clothes to be dry cleaned,' he said, looking crestfallen.

'Too bloody right you will!' she barked as she shook her mud-covered hands in an effort to get some of it off. 'Do you have a sink and hot water in the Portakabin?' she asked Dermot.

'No, but there's a cold-water hose outside that's linked to the main supply up at the flats. We've got some loo roll in the cabin you can use as well.'

'That will have to do for now.'

'Can I have the brolly?' Boon asked, not wanting to get soaked as he returned to the car.

Jane headed back to the Portakabin without replying.

'I'll take that as a no,' Boon muttered to himself.

'Bloody hell, what happened to you, detective?' Lee asked.

'Her mate slipped and knocked her over. She nearly fell in the footings trench,' Dermot said as he handed Jane a toilet roll.

'You all right, officer?' Lee asked.

'Yes, thank you,' she replied, forcing a smile.

Jane did her best to wipe the mud off her coat using scrunched-up sheets of the toilet roll dipped in hot water from the kettle, but her efforts only seemed to make things worse.

'Is the land you are working on part of the old convent?' she asked Lee.

'Yes. We're building more flats,' he replied as he handed her a mug of coffee.

'Thanks. What was on the land before you started?'

'Nothing, apart from the fire-damaged outbuildings, which we've yet to demolish.'

'Do you know if the land you are building on was ever a graveyard or consecrated ground?'

'If it were, I doubt the developer would have got planning permission,' Lee said.

'Is he aware of this morning's discovery?'

'I tried ringing him at his office, but he was out at another site, so I left a message with his secretary.'

Jane removed her notebook and pen from her coat pocket. 'I'll need the developer's name and contact number, please.'

'It's Nicholas Durham. His office is in Bromley, next door to Biba's nightclub.' Lee handed Jane a piece of headed paper embossed with THOMAS DURHAM AND SON BUILDING DEVELOPERS, 27 WIDMORE ROAD, BROMLEY, TELEPHONE 014673281.

'I take it Nicholas is the "son",' Jane said.

Lee nodded. 'Tom Durham started the company, but he's sort of retired now, and Nick runs it.'

'Do the Durhams own the land or are they just doing the building work?'

'Tom Durham bought the old convent and land years ago and turned it into high-quality apartments. Now he's building some more.'

'Were you involved in the initial build as well?' Jane asked out of curiosity.



'No, I came on board after that, but I've been working for them a few years now.'

As Jane wrote some notes, Boon returned to the Portakabin. He told her he'd brought the CID car round and let her know the duty sergeant had spoken with the coroner's officer, PC Rogers.

'The undertakers' van should be on the site in about an hour, and the coffin can be opened at 1 p.m.'

Jane looked at her watch. It was 10.45 a.m. 'Where's the mortuary?'

'Queen Mary's Hospital, just off the A20 between Chislehurst and Sidcup. Not far from your house, actually.'

'A hospital? Why aren't they using a local council mortuary?' Jane asked.

'Bromley and Bexley division regularly use the hospital mortuary for suspicious deaths and murder post-mortems. Two coroner's officers work there as well,' replied Boon.

Jane closed her notebook. 'Thanks for your time and help, gentlemen. As soon as we've opened the coffin, I'll notify you of the result. In the meantime, I think it would be best if you don't do any more work on the foundations.'

'Can we do other stuff?' Lee asked.

'As long as it doesn't involve any digging,' Jane headed towards the door and Boon followed her. She turned round and looked at him.

'I want you to remain here and supervise the removal of the coffin. I'll see you at the mortuary later.'

'How am I going to get there?'

'Get a lift in the mortuary van. I'm sure they can squeeze you in the back,' Jane said, knowing very well that three people could sit in the front of the van.

Boon frowned, as if he thought this was payback for landing Jane in the mud.

Jane gave him her brightest smile. 'For the sake of evidence continuity, I need you to stay with the coffin.' She handed him the umbrella. 'Don't forget to return this to the owner before you leave.'

## CHAPTER THREE

As Jane drove up St Mary's Lane, towards the main road, she saw the small parish church they'd passed on the way to the building site and noticed the door was open. It occurred to her that if the coffin did have a body in it, she didn't have a clue what should be done concerning a reburial, and even if it was empty the coffin would probably be the property of the Catholic church. Deciding it might be worth chatting with the local priest, Jane stopped and parked the car. She took off her dirty raincoat and left it on the passenger seat before going into the church.

Glancing around, Jane couldn't see anyone, but noticed the cut-out cross on top of a confessional box had some light shining through it from a small electric bulb. The curtains on each side of the box were closed. Walking towards it, she heard the muffled sound of voices coming from inside. Not wanting to disturb anyone, or hear the actual confession, she moved out of hearing to wait at the back of the church. A couple of minutes later, a young woman carrying a small baby in her arms exited the box and hurried out of the church with her head down. It was obvious to Jane she was in a distressed state and had been crying. Jane felt an instinctive impulse to ask the woman if she was all right, but realising the circumstances and surroundings said nothing.

She walked over to the confessional box. 'Excuse me, Father, I wonder if I could have a word with you,' she asked through the closed curtain.

'Please, enter the confessional box and confess your sins to Almighty God, my child,' he said with a slight foreign accent.

Jane thought he might be Italian. She wasn't quite sure what to do and, fearing she might alarm the priest, didn't open the curtain

he was behind. She stepped into the confessional booth, sat down, and held her warrant card up to the mesh.

‘Sorry, Father, but I’m not here for confession. I’m Detective Sergeant Jane Tennison from Bromley CID. I’d like to speak with you about an incident I’m dealing with.’

‘Have you found the lead that was stolen from the church roof?’ he asked.

‘Not personally, Father, and to be honest that’s not what I need to speak with you about.’

He sighed. ‘Pity. The police officer I reported the theft to thought the local gypsies might be responsible. I was hoping the lead would be recovered and save the church the cost of replacing it. How can I help you, Sergeant Tennison?’

‘I don’t wish to appear rude, but could we speak face to face outside the confessional box?’

He laughed. ‘Of course.’ Pulling back the curtain, he stepped out at the same time as Jane.

Jane had expected a small, elderly man and was surprised to see he was in his mid-thirties and about six feet tall. He was slim and handsome, with dark, swept-back hair, olive skin and almond-shaped brown eyes. He wore a neatly fitting black priest’s suit, which accentuated his athletic build, a black shirt and white dog collar. A purple stole, with embroidered gold crosses and golden tassels on each end, hung from his neck.

He held out his hand.

‘I’m Father Christopher Floridia, but everyone calls me Father Chris.’

Jane shook his hand. ‘Is that an Italian accent?’ she asked.

He laughed. ‘No, I’m Maltese.’

‘Oh, sorry,’ Jane said.

‘No apology needed. People often think I’m Italian when they hear me speak.’

Jane was relieved he wasn't offended, recalling her father once telling her the Italians, under Mussolini, had dropped a barrage of bombs on Malta in 1940. She told Father Floridia about the unearthing of the coffin at the old convent building site, and how it was being taken to the mortuary to be opened.

'I was wondering if you could help me with the correct procedure if there is a body inside the coffin, and who I need to inform within the Church.'

'I've never actually dealt with anything like that before,' he said thoughtfully. 'I'd imagine, as the coffin was found on the grounds of the old Catholic convent, there would need to be a reburial.'

'And who should I speak to about that?'

'Our South-East area bishop should be informed. He may want to inform the archbishop as well.'

'Can I have their names please?' Jane asked, getting out her notebook and pen.

'The bishop is Robert Meade and Andrew Malone is the archbishop of Southwark.'

'And how would I go about contacting them?'

'The diocese head office is at Archbishop's House in St George's Road, Southwark. The archbishop is currently visiting the Vatican, helping to organise Pope John Paul II's forthcoming visit to the UK.'

'I never realised churches in Bromley would come under Southwark,' Jane remarked.

'The archdiocese covers a wide area of London, Kent and Surrey. There are 180 parishes in it.'

'Do you know much about the old convent?' Jane asked.

'Not really. I only became the parish priest here ten months ago. I was told the Sisters of Mercy nuns lived and worked at the convent from the mid-1800s until the mid-sixties, then a local man bought it and built a load of flats.'

'Why did the Church sell the convent?' Jane asked.

‘One of my regular Sunday worshippers told me that during the early sixties the number of nuns slowly declined, and the convent became unmanageable for the few that remained. Eventually escalating running costs meant they had to move out.’

‘Would the convent land have been consecrated when it was first built?’

‘I’d have thought the church and any graveyard land would have been.’

‘Sorry if this sounds like a silly question, but what exactly is consecrated ground according to the Catholic faith?’

‘Catholic burials are steeped in tradition, with specific rules that date back thousands of years. Our doctrine requires human remains be buried in consecrated ground, or ground blessed by a bishop and deemed an appropriate final resting place by the Church.’

‘We haven’t found any indication that the coffin was in a communal cemetery,’ Jane said.

‘What sort of coffin was it?’

‘No name plate, grey metal, with a large inlaid silver cross on top and about six to seven feet long.’

‘A priest or bishop might be buried in that type of coffin. Nuns are usually buried in a wooden coffin, but that’s just conjecture on my part.’

‘Don’t worry, Father, as a detective I’m often guilty of conjecture myself. Quite a bit of digging work has already been done by the developer and no other coffins or headstones have been found on the land . . . as yet.’

‘If any nuns or priests were buried on the convent grounds then they’d probably have had a small wooden or metal cross in the ground to remember them by. Headstones are too expensive. It’s also possible any nuns who died at the convent were reburied in another graveyard on consecrated ground.’

‘Would it be local?’

‘Possibly. St Luke’s, Magpie Hall Lane, is the nearest cemetery.’

Jane made a note. ‘There’s one last thing. I wondered, if the coffin is empty, who should I restore it to?’

‘If it’s helpful, I can speak with Bishop Meade for you. I’m sure he’ll know a lot more than me about the old convent and what should be done with the coffin and its contents.’

‘I’d appreciate that. Is there a phone number I can contact you on to let you know if there is, or isn’t, a body in the coffin?’

‘I don’t know it by memory yet, I’m afraid. The presbytery is next door; I’ll go get it for you.’

‘Is it in the phone book?’

He nodded.

‘Don’t worry. I can look it up when I’m back in the office. It’s been a pleasure meeting you, Father Chris, and thanks for all your help.’

‘My pleasure.’ He smiled. ‘I look forward to hearing more about your mysterious coffin.’

## CHAPTER FOUR

As it was 11.30 a.m., and her house in Oakdene Avenue was nearby, Jane decided to nip home, have a wash, and change out of her muddy shoes and tights before going to Queen Mary's Hospital.

Jane had recently bought the two-bedroom property for £25,000. It was cheap because it needed a lot of work done on it, which, at present, she couldn't afford to do. However, she looked on modernising and decorating it as a long-term project. Above all, she was pleased to have a house of her own with a nice, if small, garden.

Arriving home, the first thing she did was phone DI Stanley.

'Where are you?' he asked.

Jane said she was at home, then recounted how Boon had knocked her over at the building site and being covered in mud she needed to change her clothes.

Stanley laughed. 'I wish I'd been there to see that.'

'Yeah, well, it wasn't funny for me. Boon's a walking disaster zone,' she replied before telling Stanley about the coffin being taken to the mortuary.

'If the coffin's empty, you've wasted job money by calling out the undertakers and arranging a post-mortem. You could have opened it at the site to save time and money.'

'I didn't feel it was appropriate to look inside it on the site,' she countered. 'What do I do if there is a body in it?'

'Under the coroner's rules, a pathologist has to do a routine examination before it can be released for burial, and they won't do it for free!' he told her.

'I'm sorry, I didn't realise that would be the case.'

'What time are they opening the coffin?'

'One p.m. I was going to go to Queen Mary's straight from here. Will you be attending the mortuary?'

‘No, I won’t. I’ve better things to do,’ he said dismissively.

‘I spoke with the local priest, Father Christopher Florida. He’s helping me regarding the correct religious procedure, and he said—’

‘I’m not interested in what he has to say! Body or no body in that coffin, hand the bloody case over to the coroner’s officer and he can deal with it,’ Stanley barked before putting the phone down.

Jane was annoyed at how disrespectful Stanley had been – not just to her but also to Father Chris, who was only trying to help. She went to her bedroom to change her clothes and looking in her dressing-table mirror noticed a smear of mud on her face. She felt mortified realising it must have been there when she met Father Chris and he hadn’t said anything so as not to embarrass her. She also knew Boon must have seen the mud and deliberately failed to mention it just because she’d told him to stay at the building site.

Having washed and changed, Jane made a cheese and tomato sandwich, which she ate with a packet of crisps and a mug of hot chocolate. Sitting at her breakfast bar, she looked up the phone number for St Mary’s church in the phone book and jotted it down in her notebook. She looked forward to meeting Father Chris again and wondered if she should call him and let him know that her DI wanted a coroner’s officer to deal with the case and not her. She picked up the phone, started to dial, then put it down, deciding she would visit him at the church and tell him personally after the coffin was opened.

\* \* \*

Arriving at Queen Mary’s Hospital Jane went to the coroner’s staff office, next to the mortuary. The cramped, rundown office had two desks facing each other and a chalkboard on the wall. On the board was a list of deceased people, cause and date of death and their fridge numbers. Jane noticed some blood-stained mortuary overalls on a



coat stand and white mortuary boots next to it, which made the room smell like a mixture of death and disinfectant. A swarthy, chubby man in his late forties was sitting at a desk typing, whilst puffing on a cigarette that was hanging out of his mouth. His brown two-piece suit was badly creased and ill-fitting. A black tie hung loosely round his neck and the top button of his white shirt was undone.

Jane introduced herself and said she was dealing with the coffin discovered on the old convent grounds.

'I'm PC Roger Rogers, the coroner's officer,' he said with the cigarette still in his mouth. A lump of ash fell onto his desk. He brushed it off and onto the floor.

'My DI has asked that the case be handed over to a coroner's officer as it's not really a CID matter,' Jane said.

Rogers raised his eyes in disapproval. 'It's not for a DI to decide what happens next, it's up to the coroner after I've appraised him of the results of the coffin examination.'

'I've got the details of the local priest who's happy to speak with his bishop and assist regarding any reburial and restoration of the coffin to the church,' Jane told him.

'Having been a coroner's officer for many years, I am aware of the necessary procedures in cases like this,' he said tartly.

Jane decided to ignore his confrontational tone. 'Has the coffin arrived?' she asked.

He continued typing. 'It's in the mortuary examination room, as is your colleague DC Boon.'

*What a pompous little man,* Jane thought, turning to walk out the door.

'No need to rush,' he said. 'The pathologist is running late.'

'Is it Professor Martin?' Jane asked, having worked with him on previous murder investigations.

Rogers sighed. 'No, it's Dr Pullen.'

She picked up on his uneasiness. 'I've not met him before. Is there a problem?'

Rogers frowned. 'She's a woman, and about to be fully registered as London's first female forensic pathologist. Personally, I think it's a bit early to let her go solo.'

Jane could tell by his tone he was a chauvinist. 'Well, there's a first time for everything. If Dr Pullen was trained by the renowned Professor Martin, I've no doubt she will be as good at the job as her male counterparts,' she said.

'That remains to be seen, love,' he smirked.

Jane had had enough of Rogers' attitude. 'I'm not your "love", PC Rogers, I'm a sergeant and that makes me your superior officer . . . and as such I prefer to be addressed as sergeant.'

'Yes, sarge,' Rogers said, with a mock salute and look of disdain, before going back to his typing.

At that moment a woman appeared in the doorway, breathing heavily and wiping a bead of sweat from her forehead with a tissue. 'Sorry I'm late, PC Rogers. I've just run all the way up the hill from Sidcup railway station.' She paused for breath. 'Bloody hell, I'm knackered . . . and there was me thinking I was reasonably fit.' She turned to Jane. 'I'm Dr Samantha Pullen, but everyone calls me Sam or Sammy.' Pullen was in her late thirties, about five foot seven, thickset, with dark collar-length bob and a straight fringe. She had green eyes, a round face and wore red lipstick, which accentuated her rosy cheeks and broad smile.

Jane thought Pullen looked rather trendy in her burgundy raincoat and matching Baker Boy hat.

'Pleased to meet you. I'm Detective Sergeant Jane Tennison from Bromley CID. Congratulations on your forthcoming appointment as a Home Office forensic pathologist.'

'Thank you, Jane. I've a couple of weeks to go yet . . . hopefully I won't screw up before then,' she added with a big smile.

Rogers stood up, took two stained mortuary gowns from the coat stand and handed one to Jane. 'Right, let's get this coffin open.'

'I'm fine without the gown, thank you,' Jane replied, putting the gown back and wiping her hand on the side of her skirt.

He shrugged. 'Please yourself.'

'I'll just nip to the mortician's locker room to get changed, then we're good to go,' Pullen said.

Jane followed Rogers to the examination room where Boon was leaning on a work surface, reading a newspaper while eating a Mars Bar.

'Food is not supposed to be eaten in here, DC Boon,' Rogers barked, scowling at the resident mortician, Jack, for allowing it to happen.

Jane thought it rather rich coming from someone who was wearing a dirty blood-stained gown that he kept in his office.

The coffin was on an adjustable examination table and Jane went and stood beside Boon. 'I've got a bone to pick with you, Boony.'

He looked alarmed. 'What have I done now?'

'It's what you didn't do.' She touched her face where the mud had been.

'Sorry, I thought you were going straight back to the station.'

'You're lucky I saw the funny side of it,' she said, half-smiling. 'But remember, revenge is a dish best served cold.'

\* \* \*

'Right, let's get started,' Dr Pullen said as she entered the room, now wearing protective clothing and carrying a clipboard and pen. 'I just need everyone's names for the records, please.'

Boon's eyes lit up. 'Nice-looking for a mortician,' he whispered to Jane.

'PC Rogers, Jack the mortician and DS Tennison I already know.' Pullen looked at Boon. 'And you are . . .?'

Boon who was still admiring Pullen's figure didn't hear her question. Jane nudged him with her elbow. He stood straighter, and puffed out his chest.

‘Detective Constable Simon Boon, Bromley CID. I accompanied the coffin from the building site to the mortuary. I am also assisting DS Tennison with this case and will perform the role of exhibits officer.’

‘Good for you, Simon,’ Pullen said with a wry smile.

‘May I say how refreshing it is to meet a lady mortician,’ he said. ‘You must have a strong stomach for this job.’

‘I’m not a mortician,’ she said, still smiling.

Boon looked confused. ‘Oh . . . are you a coroner’s officer?’

‘No. I’m Dr Samantha Pullen, a forensic pathologist.’

Boon flushed and mumbled an apology.

‘I’m so sorry, doctor . . . I didn’t realise . . . I was expecting a man . . . I mean Professor Martin.’

‘I’ll do my best to live up to your expectations, DC Boon,’ she said, not smiling anymore.

Pullen put her clipboard down on a work surface then picked up a mortuary hammer and chisel. She looked at Boon with a steely expression. ‘These should do.’

‘Do for what?’ he asked nervously.

‘Opening the coffin.’

As Dr Pullen lowered the examination table, Boon whispered to Jane, ‘Why didn’t you tell me she was the pathologist?’

‘Remember what I said about revenge,’ Jane replied. ‘And by the way, your chat-up lines are awful.’

‘Was it that obvious?’

‘Blindingly!’

‘Right, let’s unseal this coffin,’ Pullen said.

‘What’s it sealed with?’ Boon asked Pullen, but Rogers answered.

‘Metal coffins are normally sealed with a rubber gasket that goes all the way around the edge of the lid. The sealing clasps then lock the lid in place.’ He pointed to one. ‘And the rubber gasket forms a tight seal that prevents air and moisture from getting in.’

‘So, if there’s a body in there it might be in good condition?’ Boon asked.

‘Not necessarily,’ Pullen said. ‘Sealing a casket won’t prevent a body from decomposing, even if it’s been embalmed.’

Pullen undid the clasps, then put the chisel in between the two halves and gave it a knock with the hammer. To her surprise, the chisel slid in easily. ‘Looks like the rubber seal has degraded.’ She pushed the handle of the chisel down, and the top of the coffin started to open. ‘Although it may be heavier than it looks, I think this lid will come off fairly easily.’ She looked at PC Rogers and Boon. ‘Can you give us a hand to lift it off, please? The protective gloves are over there.’

Boon was worried about his clothes. ‘Have you got a spare overall?’

Jane frowned. ‘I’ll help,’ she said, putting on a pair of latex gloves.

They stood round the coffin, one at each end and two in the middle, waiting for Pullen’s order.

‘One, two, three . . . lift.’

Boon inched forward, eager to see what was inside as they put the lid on the mortuary floor.

‘Jesus, that stinks of rancid cheese!’ Boon exclaimed, putting his hand to his mouth and starting to retch.

‘Don’t be so squeamish, it’s just a dead body,’ Rogers scoffed.

‘Dead bodies don’t bother me, I just hate cheese!’ Boon retched again.

‘If you’re going to be sick, do it in the sink,’ barked a stern-faced Rogers.

Jane thought it strange the body didn’t smell of decay and rotting flesh as she’d expected. The face looked gruesome, yet fascinating. The skin was shrivelled and cracked, with a chalky white, almost yellowish colour to it with flecks of grey. There were empty sockets where the eyes had once been, but the mouth was eerily wide open revealing an intact set of teeth. The cracked and shrivelled hands were clasped together. A rosary with a small wooden cross was wrapped around the right hand.

Parts of the clothing were disintegrating and discoloured, but it was clear the body was dressed in a black ankle-length gown and black lace-up shoes. A black-and-white veil covered the head and shoulders, with a stiff white wimple under it. The wimple was tight under the chin and hung in a semi-circle below the neck. Tied around the waist was a brown cord with tassels on each end. The interior of the coffin was lined with satin, which was now covered in mildew and a dirty grey colour.

‘It looks like the body of a nun from the clothing,’ Jane remarked.

Pullen nodded. ‘I agree, though I will have to confirm it by further examination.’

Boon laughed. ‘Imagine if . . .’

‘Imagine what?’ Jane asked.

‘Imagine if it turned out to be a transvestite priest! That would raise a few eyebrows at the Vatican,’ Boon grinned. ‘Then again, maybe not.’

‘I expected a corpse that would be badly decomposed, but in fact the face and hands look almost mummified,’ Jane remarked.

Pullen was about to explain the phenomenon when a smug-looking PC Rogers interjected.

‘It’s due to adipocere on the body, which can occur in sealed coffins when no air can get in.’

Pullen picked up her clipboard and pen. ‘That’s a very astute observation, especially as it’s a condition that’s quite rare to observe.’

‘I have an excellent memory, Dr Pullen,’ Rogers replied pompously. ‘I first observed adipocere a few years ago, in a case Professor Martin was dealing with.’

‘What’s adipocere?’ Boon asked.

Pullen explained. ‘Adipocere is Latin for fat wax . . . *adipo*, meaning fat, and *cire*, wax, though pathologists generally refer to it as grave or corpse wax. Although rare, you are more likely to find it on females and the obese, due to their higher fat content.’ She

looked at Jane. 'Adipocere looks similar to mummified flesh, but it's actually quite different and varies in colour from dirty white to light brown or grey. It's also what causes that rancid cheesy smell DC Boon dislikes so much.'

'What causes the adipocere to form?' Jane asked.

'Basically, after death, fat tissue in a corpse starts to break down. Bacterial enzymes from the intestine and the environment convert unsaturated liquid fats to saturated solid fats, which causes the development of a soft waxy, soap-like material on the body. Adipocere acts as a barrier against the usual process of decomposition and in turn preserves features of the body.'

'But the hands look dry and shrivelled, not waxy or soapy,' Boon observed.

'Recent adipocere tends to be white, yellow or reddish brown. The older it is, the greyer and more solid it will become . . . as on this body. We'll need to be careful when we remove it as dried adipocere can crumble and split.'

Jane was pleased Pullen described the condition of the body in layman's terms, unlike Professor Martin who, she knew from experience, loved to play to the gallery during a post-mortem and use obscure medical jargon.

Pullen crouched down and looked at the rim of the coffin. 'I think this coffin's been opened recently.'

'How can you tell?' Jane asked.

'There's fresh indentation marks on the rim, possibly from a jemmy, plus the sealing glue has been stretched and separated . . . which would also explain why we were able to remove the lid so easily. It looks as if someone has used a crowbar to prise it open.' Pullen pointed to the marks. 'The state of the body suggests this coffin was previously airtight, and yet there are some beads of water on the rim and inside.' She dabbed her finger in a droplet and showed it to Jane. 'It could be recent rainwater.'

Jane turned to Boon. 'Do you know anything about this?'

Boon looked offended. 'No, I don't! You said not to open it, so I didn't. I also know for a fact no one went near it after you left the building site.'

'Well, someone's opened it since it was dug up,' Pullen said.

'What about the undertakers?' Boon suggested. 'I nipped to the hospital canteen to get a drink and a Mars Bar when we got here.'

PC Rogers shook his head. 'No way. I watched them unload the coffin and leave, as did Jack, who then had a cup of tea with me.'

'Dermot the builder said his mate Barry wanted to open it, so it could have been him before we even got to the building site,' Boon recalled.

'Good point,' Jane said. 'It may also explain why Barry was in a hurry to leave when we got there.'

Pullen pointed to the nun's habit. 'There's some distinct marks here that look like the outline of a crucifix . . . and two faint lines that run up towards the neck, which could be from the chain.'

'Whoever opened the coffin might have taken it, especially if it was silver,' Boon suggested.

Jane frowned. 'I think we need to have a word with Barry.'

'He's not that bright if he thought we wouldn't notice the coffin had been opened,' Boon added.

As Pullen wrote her notes, Jane asked if adipocere could help to determine how long a person had been dead.

'To be honest, this is the first time I've actually seen it in the flesh, so to speak. From my pathology training, I know adipocere can take weeks if not years to form due to different factors such as temperature, embalming, burial conditions, and materials surrounding the corpse. It's even been found on bodies that have been dead for hundreds of years. When I do a closer examination of the corpse on the mortuary table, I might be able to give you an approximate idea of physical age, though it might be worth consulting an anthropologist for a more exact—'



Rogers was quick to interject. 'I don't think an anthropologist will be necessary, Dr Pullen.'

'Why not?' Jane asked.

'Now we know it's the body of a nun, I don't see a lot of point continuing.'

'Are you telling me to stop my examination, PC Rogers?' Pullen frowned.

'The coroner will want the body handed over to the Catholic church for reburial,' he said.

'You can read his mind, can you?' Jane retorted.

'I'll phone him and seek his opinion,' Rogers replied smugly, then left the room.

'He really is an objectionable little prick,' Pullen remarked.

'I couldn't agree more,' Jane added, surprised but also pleased with Sam's candour.

'Is that dried flower petals on the chest and forehead?' Boon asked, pointing to the body from across the room because of the smell.

'They look more like shreds of fabric,' Pullen replied, using tweezers to lift a piece off for closer examination. 'I'd say they are bits of satin . . .' She noticed something odd. 'Jane, could you pass me the magnifying glass from the table, please.'

Pullen held the magnifier over the piece of satin. 'There appears to be a tiny fragment of a fingernail embedded in it.' She put the satin and nail in a small container before delicately lifting the left hand of the body. 'Thankfully, the adipocere has preserved the hands and the fingernails are still attached,' she said, examining one of the hands with the magnifier.

Jane noticed a look of concern on Pullen's face. 'Is there something wrong?'

'The fingernail on the left index finger is broken . . . same on the third finger . . . and there appears to be a tiny bit of satin attached to a broken nail tip.' Pullen moved round the coffin to examine the right hand.

Jane was pretty sure she knew what Pullen was thinking. 'Boony, help me turn the coffin lid over,' she said, grabbing one end.

'What are you looking for?' he asked.

'I want to see the condition of the satin lining.'

'The right hand on the body has a broken fingernail and the others are worn down to the fingertips,' Dr Pullen informed them as they gently turned the lid over.

The mouldy white satin lining was torn and hanging loose at the head end. Jane gently brushed it to one side, revealing deep fingernail scratch marks on the interior metal.

'Oh my God, she was buried alive!' Jane exclaimed. 'Her mouth must be wide open because she died gasping for air.'

Pullen looked closely at the scratch marks and torn satin, then pointed to a strand. 'There's a bit of fingernail just there.' She used the tweezers to pick it up then looked at Jane. 'I'd like to treat this as a suspicious death and carry out a full post-mortem.'

Jane nodded. 'I agree, and I'm sure the coroner will concur when he hears what we've found.'

'I don't mean to sound silly, but could she have been buried alive by mistake?' Boon asked.

'It's possible but highly unlikely,' Pullen said. 'There was a case from my medical studies which has always stuck in my mind. In the early 1900s Essie Dunbar, who was thirty, suffered a severe epilepsy attack. It was so bad she passed out and everyone thought she was dead. Even her doctor couldn't detect a pulse. For religious reasons the funeral was arranged for the next day and the body was put in a burial coffin. Essie's sister, who lived out of town, arrived after the coffin had been covered in soil, and demanded the body be removed so she could see her sister one last time. When the coffin lid was opened, Essie sat up and smiled at everyone around her . . . no doubt frightening the crap out of them at the same time.'

'No way,' a disbelieving Boon grinned.

‘Apparently it’s true, and then she lived for another forty-seven years.’

‘So, if our body was deliberately put in the coffin when she was alive, murder could be hard to prove,’ Jane remarked.

‘As strange as it may sound – and excuse the pun – but the hand of God might help us here,’ Pullen replied.

‘I didn’t take you as the religious type, Sam,’ Jane said.

Pullen laughed. ‘I’m not. The last time I was in a church was at my sister’s wedding, eight years ago. It’s the adipocere that might help us. It sometimes preserves the soft tissue and internal organs, thus allowing a pathologist to identify internal injuries on the body. She may have been attacked, knocked unconscious and then sealed in the coffin, so I want to do some X-rays on the body and skull for any fractures before we remove it for a full examination.’

Jane looked at Boon. ‘Go tell Rogers what we’ve found and make sure he tells the coroner and asks for a full post-mortem.’

‘It will be my pleasure, sarge.’

‘I think it may be advisable to have a lab liaison sergeant present and take photographs before the body is examined any further,’ Pullen said, removing her latex gloves.

‘I’ll call the lab sergeant after I’ve deflated Rogers’ ego,’ Boon smiled.

‘See if you can get DS Paul Lawrence to attend,’ Jane said.

‘Any particular reason?’ Boon asked, clearly wondering if she had a soft spot for Lawrence.

‘I’ve known him since I joined the Met and he’s the best at what he does when it comes to forensics and murder. Something tells me this case isn’t going to be straightforward, so his knowledge and experience may prove invaluable.’

‘Looks like a dull day at Bromley just got exciting,’ Boon remarked as he hurried out of the room.

‘You’re right about DS Lawrence being good at his job,’ Pullen said. ‘I’ve met him a few times whilst assisting Prof Martin, who

also rates him highly. Paul is a very nice man.’ She hesitated. ‘Do you know if he’s single?’

Jane wasn’t sure what to say as Lawrence had confided in her he was gay and lived with his boyfriend. ‘Paul’s not married, but he’s in a relationship with someone.’

‘Is it serious?’

‘As far as I know . . .’

Pullen sighed. ‘That’s a shame. I was thinking of asking him if he’d like to go for a drink sometime.’

\* \* \*

A smug-looking PC Rogers was on the phone as Boon entered his office.

‘I’ve some knew info for you about the—’

Rogers put his hand over the mouthpiece. ‘Can’t you see I’m speaking to the coroner?’ he growled, before resuming the conversation. ‘Yes, sir. I’ll write the death up as natural causes on my report and contact the Catholic archdiocese office in Southwark so they can arrange a reburial of the nun.’

Rogers was about to put the phone down when Boon grabbed it from his hand.

‘Sir, it’s Detective Constable Boon from Bromley CID—’

Rogers reddened. ‘What do you think you’re doing!’

Boon ignored him. ‘Dr Pullen has found evidence that suggests the nun was alive in the coffin, which means she might have suffocated to death. DI Tennison would like your permission to treat the death as suspicious and also asked if Dr Pullen could carry out a full forensic post-mortem examination.’

As Boon informed the coroner of Pullen’s findings, Rogers’ face turned pale and he slumped back in his chair. Boon handed the phone to Rogers, whispering, ‘He wants a word with you . . . and he don’t sound happy.’

As Jane walked in, a glum-looking Rogers was putting his rain-coat on. 'I take it DC Boon has updated you?'

Rogers said nothing as he trudged out of the room and Jane looked to Boon for an explanation.

'Coroner said he wanted to see him pronto in his office.'

'I wouldn't want to be in his shoes, but he's only himself to blame. We OK for a full PM?'

'Yeah, and he's happy for Dr Pullen to do it as long as Prof Martin agrees. Shall I give him a call first then ask for a lab sergeant to attend?'

'Yes, please, and I'll update DI Stanley,' Jane said, lifting the phone receiver on another desk.

'Do you think he'll form a murder squad?' Boon asked.

Jane shrugged. 'Depends on the outcome of the full post-mortem and X-rays.'

'Surely the coroner will want further inquiries made to ascertain who she is and when she died,' Boon suggested.

'Yes, but that doesn't mean we'll be making them,' Jane said.

'Why not? We were assigned the investigation so surely we should continue it.'

'I agree, but more senior officers may not. If there's no other post-mortem evidence to justify a murder investigation the coroner may NFA the case, and return the body to the Church.'

'I hope it is a murder,' Boon said.

'Well, don't get your hopes up. Like I said, even if it is you may not be on the investigation.'

'I know I've not been a DC long, but this would be a good case for me to gain more experience,' Boon said, looking hopefully at Jane.

Jane remembered the excitement she felt on her first murder investigation. 'If they do form a squad, and I'm on it, I'll recommend you be part of the team.'

His eyes lit up. 'Thanks, sarge.'

Jane then rang DI Stanley.

‘We found the body of what appears to be a nun in the coffin . . .’

Stanley was quick to interrupt. ‘Well, no surprise there then.’ He sounded like he was in a bad temper. ‘Hand the case over to the coroner’s officer then get back here pronto. I need you to deal with an indecent assault allegation against a local councillor and take a statement from the victim.’

‘I’m sorry, but I’m tied up here at the mortuary,’ Jane told him. ‘The coroner wants the death treated as suspicious and a full post-mortem done.’

‘On what grounds?’ Stanley retorted.

‘The death may not have been from natural causes,’ Jane said, then recounted her observations and Dr Pullen’s comments.

‘She was buried alive? Bloody hell, I wasn’t expecting that. What about the body – any idea how long she’s been dead or who she is?’

‘No to both at present, but the Church might be able to help us. The full PM should tell us more about her age and when she died, and we might find something in the coffin to give us an indication of who she is.’

‘So, you haven’t started a full PM yet?’

‘No, we’re waiting for a lab sergeant to attend and Prof Martin’s permission for Dr Pullen to do the PM.’

‘I thought you said a pathologist was already there?’

‘Yes, but . . . she’s not quite fully qualified yet.’

‘Then her initial conclusions could be wrong.’

Jane was getting irritated by Stanley’s attitude. ‘She explained her suspicions to me and pointed out visual evidence to back it up. I think she’s right and the nun may have been murdered.’

‘You’re not a pathologist, Tennison . . . and Pullen is a rookie. Personally, I think it best if Prof Martin does the PM.’

She sighed. ‘You’re beginning to sound like PC Rogers.’

‘Who’s he?’

‘The coroner’s officer dealing with the case.’

‘Oh, so he agrees with me?’

Jane waved her hand at Boon who was still on the phone. ‘Have you spoken to Prof Martin yet about Dr Pullen doing the PM?’ she whispered.

Boon nodded as he put the phone down. ‘Yep, he’s happy for Doc Pullen to do the PM and said to ring him if she needed his assistance or advice. DS Lawrence is already working on a murder in North London, so another lab sergeant will be allocated this case and be with us shortly.’

Jane smiled and did a thumbs-up. ‘Prof Martin is happy for Dr Pullen to . . .’

‘I heard what Boon said,’ Stanley interrupted.

Jane smiled. ‘Well, the Prof obviously has faith in her ability and judgement . . . unlike some people.’

‘I’ll be with you in half an hour. Don’t start the PM without me,’ he added and banged the phone down.

## CHAPTER FIVE

While Boon went to the hospital canteen to get a sandwich, Jane looked in the *Yellow Pages* for Father Florida's phone number and called to update him about the discovery of the body, but there was no answer. She jotted down the number in her notebook and was about to return to the mortuary examination room when Pullen walked in. Jane told her that the coroner wanted a full post-mortem and Professor Martin was happy for her to do it, and if she needed his assistance to call him.

'Thanks, Jane,' she replied nervously.

'You don't look pleased.'

'I know it sounds silly,' Pullen sighed, 'but I feel like a schoolkid about to do my first recorder solo on stage.'

Jane smiled. 'You'll be fine. Believe me, Prof Martin wouldn't let you go solo if he didn't think you were up to it. Plus the audience will be much smaller.' Jane added, 'Are you going to do the X-rays in the hospital radiography department?'

Pullen shook her head. 'For health reasons they won't let me, due to the state of the body. But it turns out they have a mobile X-ray machine on site and the radiographer is doing them as we speak. I had a quick look in the nether regions of the body and can definitely say it's a female. I also measured her height and she's only five foot two.'

Jane frowned. 'That's a small body for a big coffin.'

Pullen nodded. 'The coffin is just over seven feet long.'

'Father Florida thought a nun would normally be buried in a wooden coffin,' Jane said.

'The plot thickens,' Pullen said, raising her eyebrows.

The more Jane engaged with Sam Pullen, the more she liked her down-to-earth attitude and affable personality. Jane told her about



PC Rogers' *faux pas* with the coroner and Sam said he had it coming and deserved no sympathy.

Jane was making a coffee for the two of them and had her back to the door when she noticed Pullen look towards it. Thinking it was Boon she put a teaspoon of instant coffee in another cup.

'Can I help you?' Pullen asked.

At the door was a handsome black man in his mid-thirties with short afro hair and a smooth complexion. Dressed casually in dark grey Farah slacks, a blue-and-white striped shirt and wool-len jacket, his clothes accentuated his slim body and muscular frame.

'Believe it or not, I'm actually here to help you,' he smiled. He spoke with a London accent.

Jane thought the voice sounded familiar and, looking at the reflection in the window in front of her, instantly recognised her former colleague from her days on the Flying Squad. She felt a rush of affection on seeing him, yet at the same time a mixture of anxiety and guilt, wondering how he would react on meeting her again, nearly two and a half years since the day he had been shot and nearly killed by an armed robber.

'Hi, Lloyd,' Jane said.

His smile widened with a look of delight. 'Bloody hell, Treacle Tennison . . . long time no see.' He gave her a hug and kiss on the cheek.

Jane instantly felt more at ease. She'd got used to being called 'Treacle' and knew he only used it as a term of endearment.

'Treacle Tennison?' Pullen said, looking at Jane for an explanation.

'We used to work together at the Sweeney. "Treacle" was my nickname on the squad. It comes from the cockney slang: treacle tart – sweetheart.' She turned to the newcomer. 'It's good to see you, Lloyd. How are you?'

'I'm fine – and all the better for seeing your lovely face again.'

'I'm Dr Sam Pullen.' Pullen put her hand out and he shook it.

‘Sorry, rude of me not to do the intros first. Pleased to meet you, doc. I’m Detective Sergeant Lloyd Johnson. I’m here to assist you with the body in the coffin.’

‘Has the coroner sent you as a replacement for PC Rogers?’ Pullen asked.

Lloyd laughed. ‘No, I’m your laboratory liaison sergeant. Anything you need forensic-wise, I’m your man.’

‘Oh, right, I didn’t realise . . .’

‘Don’t worry, doc, it surprises everyone. Unfortunately, there were no white lab sergeants available, so you’re stuck with me.’

Pullen looked embarrassed. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t mean to sound offensive.’

He grinned. ‘You didn’t . . . I was just joking. I’m actually very proud to be the first black lab sergeant, though I’m still on trial in the role under the excellent tutelage of Paul Lawrence.’

‘Is he here with you?’ Pullen asked hopefully.

‘Not today. He’s busy on another job and let me go solo on this one.’

Jane could see Pullen was disappointed, even though she was smiling.

‘Well, I’m pleased to meet you. And so far we have two things in common. I’m the first female forensic pathologist and also on my first solo case.’

‘Well, we’d better look after each other and make sure we don’t mess up. I’ve heard a lot of good things about you from Paul Lawrence and believe me, he doesn’t hand out compliments easily.’

Pullen blushed. ‘I was fortunate to have Prof Martin as my mentor, as were you with DS Lawrence.’

Lloyd nodded. ‘That’s for sure.’

‘I’m just making a coffee – would you like one?’ Jane asked, holding up a cup.

‘I wouldn’t say no,’ he said.

Pullen picked up two of the coffees. 'I'll take one through to the radiologist and see how he's getting on.'

'She seems a nice lady,' Lloyd said when Pullen had left the room.

'She is. Sam's got a good sense of humour – unlike some pathologists I could name. You still take milk and two sugars?'

'You've a good memory Jane. How have you been keeping?'

'Fine, thanks. I'm working at Bromley now and studying for the inspectors' exam.'

'You'll pass that with flying colours. I always said you'd go far in the job. Bit of a schlep from your flat in Marylebone to Bromley though, isn't it?'

'I'm living over this way now. Oakdene Avenue in Chislehurst.'

'The posh stockbroker belt, eh? So, found yourself a rich young man yet?' he grinned.

She laughed. 'There's nothing posh about my place. It's a little semi that desperately needs a shedload of work done on it . . . which I can't afford right now. And I've no time for romance with all the studying I'm trying to do.'

'You need to get out a bit more. Let the bees come to the honey pot. Whoever nabs you as a missus will be a very lucky man.'

'What about you? How you been since, you know . . .?'

Lloyd could see she was having difficulty asking the obvious.

'I got shot in the chest? I told you when you visited me in hospital that it wasn't your fault, Jane.'

'I should have visited you more. It's just that every time I saw you, I felt responsible for what happened,' she said, hardly able to look him in the face.

Lloyd sighed. 'I missed your visits, but I knew that was why you stopped coming.'

Jane felt close to tears. 'I nearly got you killed. If I'd just stayed in the OP that day, then it would never have happened.'

'Rubbish. Every time a Flying Squad officer does a pavement ambush, they know they risk being shot. If it wasn't that time, it could

have been the next. DCI Murphy knew you suspected he was bent . . . all he needed was an excuse to get rid of you, and being there when I was shot gave him what he needed. He twisted what happened to suit his purpose, Jane. Thankfully, you and Operation Countryman got him in the end and now he's behind bars where he belongs. His life is now in danger every day and I have no sympathy for him.'

'Yeah, but I alienated a lot of people assisting Countryman's investigation and setting up Murphy for a fall. To be honest, studying for the exam wasn't the only reason I requested a move to a quieter station. My name was mud in a lot of places. A colleague nicks a seasoned villain or solves a complex crime and they instantly become a great detective. I help arrest and convict a colleague who organised armed robberies and I'm a grass for snitching on one of my own. Where's the sense in that?'

'You've got to move on for your own sanity, Jane. I know the Flying Squad officers were glad to see Murphy go down and they respected and admired you for having the balls to do it. Ignore what the halfwits say and do what you do best – being a bloody good detective. Anyone who disses you is only jealous of your abilities. I heard Stanley is the DI at Bromley now. Has he been giving you a hard time about Murphy?'

'No, not at all. In fact, he's never mentioned it,' Jane said.

'Good. That's probably because he knows you did the right thing. You think you get it rough? Try being in my skin, woman!' he said in a thick Jamaican accent, making her smile.

Jane had never worked in uniform or in the CID alongside a black officer until she met Lloyd on the Flying Squad. There were no black officers at Bromley. She knew that despite efforts to encourage black and other ethnic minority applicants to join the police force, the response had been poor. Many in the Afro-Caribbean community believed, with good reason, that if they joined the police they would be subjected to racism within the force as well as opposition and hostility from their own community.

Lloyd took a sip of his coffee and put his notebook and pen on the desk. 'I take it you're dealing with the body in the coffin?' She nodded. 'Right, give me a rundown on what's happened so far.'

Jane brought Lloyd up to speed with details of the case. As he closed his notebook, Boon walked into the room eating a sandwich and carrying a brown paper bag.

'Where have you been?' Jane asked him.

'Sorry, sarge, I got delayed giving a nurse some advice regarding home security.'

'More like chatting her up, knowing you, Boony,' Lloyd said as he turned round.

'Bloody hell, Teflon, how you doing, mate?'

'Not bad my friend . . . and you?'

'Good, thanks. I'm working a really interesting case with DS Tennison. It looks like it could be a murder.'

'I know, she just told me all about it.'

'DS Johnson is assisting us as the lab sergeant,' Jane told him. 'So how do you two know each other?'

Boon spoke with a mouthful of sandwich. 'Teflon was helping coach the Met football team until he got himself shot. Then his wound got infected, and he ended up with sepsis, which damaged his liver and kidneys . . .'

Seeing that Jane was shocked by this new information, Lloyd raised his hand. 'I'm sure Sergeant Tennison doesn't want to hear all the gory details, Boony.'

'We all thought you was a goner at the time, mate,' Boon continued, ignoring the hint. 'I even heard they called a priest in to give you the last rites.'

'That's rubbish. I'm fine now and hope to be back coaching again soon.'

The mortician put his head round the door. 'The radiologist just finished developing the X-rays and Dr Pullen is ready to start the post-mortem.'

As they left the room, DS Johnson sidled up to Boon and tapped his arm. 'I'd prefer to be called Lloyd now, Boony. Teflon was a Flying Squad nickname, which doesn't really go with my new role as a lab sergeant.'

'No problem.' Boon nodded. 'Personally, I always thought Teflon sounded a bit racist.'

As they entered the mortuary room Pullen was examining an X-ray on an illuminated viewer.

'Found anything interesting, doc?' Boon asked as they gathered round the viewer.

'This is a close-up X-ray of our victim's upper throat region,' Pullen explained. 'If I get too technical, or you don't understand anything, let me know.' Using a mortuary scalpel, Pullen pointed to a small bone at the top of the throat on the X-ray. 'This little horseshoe-shaped bone here is called the hyoid bone. It helps support our tongue movement and swallowing. The dark line just here is a small fracture of the hyoid, which indicates trauma to the neck. Although a fracture like this can occur in road traffic accidents or as the result of a contact sports injury, it is most commonly associated with strangulation.'

'A manual strangulation?' Jane asked.

'Or a ligature may have been used.'

'There may be some fibres deposited on her neck and headdress from a ligature. I'll take some tapings. We might find something to help identify the type of ligature used,' Lloyd said.

Boon looked confused. 'If she was strangled to death and put in the coffin, then how did the scratch marks get on the inside of the lid?'

'Good question, DC Boon. However, you don't have to be strangled to death for the hyoid bone to fracture,' Pullen said.

'So, she could have been strangled to a point of unconsciousness, put in the coffin, then regained consciousness,' Jane suggested.

'And in a state of sheer panic scratched the lid before suffocating to death,' Boon added.

‘That’s what I thought at first . . . until I saw this.’ Pullen replaced the X-ray with another one and again used the scalpel blade as a pointer. ‘This is the top section of the spine, which is made up of small bones known as the vertebrae, which protect the spinal cord and nerve roots that run through them. We refer to the top vertebra, where it joins the skull, as C1, the next C2, then C3 and so on. Can you see the tiny shaded triangular shape in between the C3 and C4 vertebrae?’

‘Is her spine broken?’ Lloyd asked.

‘Severed possibly, but I can’t be certain until I dissect the neck and examine the spine,’ Pullen said. She then held the scalpel blade just below the triangular shape on the X-ray and the similarity to the tip of the blade was obvious.

‘She was stabbed with a scalpel!’ Boon exclaimed.

‘The X-ray images are smaller than the real thing, but yes, she may have been stabbed. The object in between the vertebrae could be the broken tip of a knife blade.’

‘If her spinal cord was severed would it have caused paralysis?’ Jane asked.

Pullen nodded. ‘Yes. A cervical vertebrae injury in the C1 to C5 section is the most severe. In the worst cases all communication between the brain and body, below the injury, would instantly be cut off, including the ability to breathe properly, which would lead to a terrifying death.’

Jane looked shocked at the thought. ‘Her assailant must have strangled her, then put the body in the coffin thinking she was dead and secured the clasps . . . which would explain the scratch marks.’

Pullen agreed. ‘If she was originally put in the coffin on her back then a rear entry wound that high up on the spine would suggest she sat up or was let out before being stabbed. It’s also possible the killer heard her cries for help and opened the coffin to stab her.’

Boon let out a long sigh. ‘That poor woman. What kind of person could do that to a nun?’