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The Bone Field

Written by Simon Kernick

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THE BONE FIELD

Simon Kernick

THE BONE FIELD



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Day One
Tuesday

One

The whole thing started when a young man took his girlfriend of a few months on a trip to Thailand.

This was way back in 1990, in the days when Thailand was still in the process of being 'discovered' by backpackers, and mass tourism, with its big hotels, and stag and hen parties, and five-star yogic spas, was pretty much unheard of. The young man's name was Henry Forbes. He was twenty-five years old and a lecturer in Humanities (whatever that is) at Brighton Polytechnic, as the University of Brighton was called in those days. His girlfriend, who had just finished her last year at the same place, was called Katherine Sinn, but I remember from reading about the case at the time that everyone referred to her as Kitty.

Kitty Sinn. I always thought it was a nice name.

Anyway, the trip was to last two months, beginning just over

a month after the end of Kitty's final exams. We know for a fact that they arrived in Bangkok on the afternoon of Sunday, 29 July 1990 because they were recorded entering the country by Thai immigration, and their passports were stamped. They stayed two nights in Bangkok before taking the overnight train down to the resort of Phuket, where they spent four days at the Club Med on Kata Beach. They were remembered by the staff as a polite, quiet couple who kept themselves to themselves and who seemed very much in love. From Phuket they took a taxi to the Khao Sok National Park, site of Thailand's oldest rainforest, a two-and-a-half-hour drive north, hoping to see some wildlife as well as the spectacular limestone karsts for which the area is famous. They stayed at what at the time was the park's only guesthouse, arriving there on Sunday, 5 August.

There were only four other guests there that night: an Australian couple in their sixties and two young Dutch backpackers. All the guests remembered Kitty and Henry having dinner in the restaurant before retiring to their bedroom, where later that night they had a blazing row that was so loud that the guesthouse owner, a local man called Mr Watanna, had to intervene and threaten them with eviction if they didn't quieten down. According to Henry's later statement, the row had been over a former girlfriend of his and had got out of control, culminating in him slapping Kitty, something he claimed was totally out of character.

The following morning the row clearly hadn't been resolved because Kitty asked Mr Watanna to drive her to the coastal town of Khao Lak, offering him five hundred baht in payment as long as he didn't tell Henry where she was going. She said she needed

time to think. Henry tried to stop her leaving, apologizing profusely, at one point getting down on his knees and literally begging her to stay. But, by all accounts, Kitty was adamant and she left with Mr Watanna.

According to Mr Watanna, he dropped her off outside the Gerd and Noi Bungalows near the main beach at Khao Lak, where she intended to get a couple of nights' accommodation while she pondered her next move. He then drove straight back to the guesthouse, arriving approximately four hours after he'd left.

For the next three days, Henry remained at the guesthouse, hardly venturing outside his room as he waited for Kitty to return. These were the days before mobile phones and the internet, so when someone was out of contact, they were definitely out of contact. When she didn't come back, Henry persuaded Mr Watanna to tell him where he'd taken her.

Henry then called the Gerd and Noi Bungalows, only to be told Kitty hadn't been staying there. Worried now, he paid Mr Watanna to take him to Khao Lak, and spent the day searching the town and its handful of hostelries for Kitty, which was when he discovered that she hadn't been staying anywhere else round there either. Finally he called Kitty's mother but she hadn't seen or heard anything from her daughter. That was when Henry contacted the Thai police to officially report her missing, while her mother contacted the police in England.

An alert was put out to police stations across the southern Thai peninsula to look out for her, but still she didn't show up.

Kitty was a very pretty girl, petite and dark, with a sweet, almost childlike face. According to both staff and students at the

poly she was a lovely person who even volunteered for the Samaritans in her spare time, and she came from a wealthy, respectable family. In other words, she was a newspaper's dream, and her disappearance in what was then considered an exotic and far-flung country where a lot of British youngsters were heading attracted a huge amount of media attention both in the UK and beyond.

Suspicion quickly fell on Mr Watanna who was the last person known to have seen Kitty alive. He was arrested and interrogated by Thai police. There were even claims by his lawyer that he'd been beaten and tortured. The police were under huge diplomatic and media pressure to get a result and doubtless they in turn put pressure on Mr Watanna, who was held in custody without charge for more than two weeks. But with nothing linking him to any foul play, and no sign of a body, he was eventually released.

Finally, with Kitty missing close to a month without any confirmed sightings, and having been interrogated several times himself by the Thai authorities, Henry returned home, where he was questioned at length by officers from Sussex CID. But, because of the circumstances of the disappearance, he was never considered a real suspect. He took an extended leave of absence from the poly citing emotional stress, and didn't return to his job until the following year.

In the meantime the investigation had steadily faded into the background as other stories muscled their way on to the news pages, and there were no new confirmed sightings. People just lost interest. But the mystery element remained – the fact that no trace of Kitty was ever found, nor any record of her leaving Thailand. It was as if she'd disappeared into thin air. Many

people – and I have to admit I count myself among their number – assumed that Mr Watanna was responsible. He may have been happily married with no criminal record, and there may have been no evidence linking him to the murder, nor any changes in behaviour to suggest he might be carrying the emotional burden of having killed someone, but even so, he was the most obvious culprit. He died in 1997, at the comparatively young age of forty-six, having never managed to rid himself of the black cloak of suspicion. If he'd had any knowledge of what actually happened to Kitty, he took it with him to the grave.

And so life moved on and, I'll be honest, I hadn't read, heard or even thought anything about the strange disappearance of Katherine 'Kitty' Sinn for years until, more than a quarter of a century after she went missing, I got a phone call out of the blue from a lawyer called Maurice Reedman saying he represented *the* Henry Forbes – his emphasis, not mine – and telling me that he had information that might be of interest to the police.

And so here we were in the dining room of Reedman's grand period house just outside London, Henry and him on one side of a big wooden table, me alone on the other.

Henry Forbes had the look of a man weighed down by the world. His face was pale and sagging round the edges, the lines deep and unforgiving, the black hair I remembered from those old photographs now grey and thinning. He looked every inch his fifty-one years. His eyes were narrow and suspicious, and a thin sheen of sweat clung to his forehead. He also couldn't seem to sit still. Reedman, on the other hand, must have been at the wrong end of his sixties, and looked every inch the plump, well-fed

lawyer with his expensive three-piece pinstripe suit, its waistcoat straining against his ample girth, and small, perfectly manicured hands. His grey hair was thick and lustrous. All told, he was far too dapper for a man called Maurice.

I kicked off proceedings. 'You asked to see me, Mr Forbes?'

'I did. I've read about you, DS Mason, and I trust you. So does Mr Reedman.'

I didn't say anything. It was 8.30 p.m. and I hadn't eaten.

Henry sighed. 'What I've got to say . . .' He paused, placing his hands on the table and staring down at them. One finger began to drum a nervous beat on the wood. 'I have a secret.' He glanced at his lawyer, who nodded. 'It concerns a possible murder.'

I opened my notebook. 'Well, you'd better tell me then.'

It was the lawyer, Reedman, who spoke next. 'I asked for this meeting in my home because I'd like it to be off the record. Now I'm aware that this is an unusual request but hear me out. I've spoken at length to my client and I firmly believe he has information that will be of great relevance to you. However, his information will incriminate a number of very powerful individuals, and may, to a lesser extent, incriminate himself. So, in essence, he's not willing to make an official statement until he and I have assurances that he will receive the full protection of the law, including a new identity, and immunity from prosecution.'

'You know as well as I do that I can't offer immunity from prosecution, Mr Reedman,' I told him.

'Exactly. Which is why I want this conversation off the record. Then you can go back to your superiors, tell them what we tell you, and they can decide whether they want to help my client. If

they don't, he will say nothing and there will, I promise you, be nothing you can do about it.'

I frowned, not liking the threat in Reedman's tone but curious about what Henry Forbes knew.

'I explained to you on the phone earlier about who my client is, didn't I?' continued Reedman. 'He was Katherine Sinn's boyfriend, the man who reported her missing in Thailand in 1990.'

'And is this about Kitty Sinn's disappearance?'

'Is this off the record?'

'Effectively this conversation's off the record anyway, you know that. We're not in a police station, and your client's not under caution, so nothing said here is admissible in a court of law.'

'Can I ask you not to take notes?'

I sighed and closed the notebook. 'OK, but as long as we get to the point of this meeting. I'm hungry.'

Reedman sat back in his chair, putting his manicured hands together and steepling his fingers. 'This meeting is about Katherine Sinn, yes. As you may or may not be aware, unidentified human remains have been dug up in the grounds of a private school in Buckinghamshire.'

I'd seen something on the news about the story the previous week. The school, running low on funds, had sold a parcel of land to developers to build houses on, and when the first bulldozers had broken ground they'd turned up human bones belonging to a young woman. It was currently Thames Valley's case and, as far as I was aware, they hadn't ID'd the woman yet, or released details about how or when she'd died.

'My client believes those bones belong to Katherine Sinn,' said Reedman.

This, as you can imagine, was something of a shock to hear, since the last time she was seen – and it seemed from the records that there'd been a number of witnesses who'd seen her – Kitty had been more than six thousand miles away from Buckinghamshire.

I looked at Henry. 'Is that right, Mr Forbes? Are they Kitty's bones?'

Henry swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. 'Yes,' he said. 'It's her.'

'So how did she get there?'

'She was murdered.'

'By you?'

'I want immunity before I say anything else.'

'I told you, I can't offer immunity for murder. If you were responsible, it's in your best interests to tell me now.'

'I didn't kill her. I promise. I'm not a killer.'

He took a deep breath, a thin bead of sweat running down his forehead, and Reedman cut in. 'But my client is in a position to identify the individuals who did kill Ms Sinn.'

Henry looked at me. 'These are very powerful people. They have friends. They can get to me. And they would kill me if they knew I was here talking to you. I need immunity, a new identity. Protection for the rest of my life. If I get that then I'll give you something huge, I swear it.'

'That's why we need to make a deal that suits everyone,' said Reedman.

Henry seemed genuinely terrified, but then in my experience a lot of people scare easily, particularly when they know they're in trouble. At the time I doubted the powerful people he was talking about were really all that powerful, or capable of doing Henry any harm.

Which turned out to be a very big mistake on my part.

'It doesn't work like that,' I said. 'We need to know what Mr Forbes knows before we even start talking about deals.'

'I'm afraid not, DS Mason,' said Reedman, putting a hand on Henry's arm – a clear gesture for him to stop talking.

I kept looking at Henry. 'I could arrest you right now for obstruction of justice.'

Reedman shook his head decisively. 'On what grounds exactly? You agreed to have this conversation entirely off the record. Now, you have some bones that will inevitably turn out to belong to Katherine Sinn, but that's all you'll have. It won't actually change a thing regarding my client. At the time of Katherine's disappearance there were a number of witnesses who said that he couldn't have killed her. His story has always held up under the scrutiny of both the Thai and the British authorities, and will continue to hold up. There will be no evidence connecting him with the bones. And, after twenty-six years, almost no chance that there will be any evidence connecting anyone else to them either. You'll be at square one, and that's where you'll remain. Unless . . .' He held up a finger and eyed me closely. 'Unless you can make a deal that will protect my client, allow him to be treated leniently by the courts, and give him a completely new identity under the witness protection programme. Then he will tell you all

he knows. Now, we need to move fast on this, DS Mason. I strongly believe that Mr Forbes is in real danger. So, please, why don't you call your boss and see what he, or indeed she, has to say?'

'Give me something I can use,' I countered. 'Something that will make it easier to sell a deal.'

'This deal sells itself,' said Reedman firmly.

'It doesn't,' I said.

Henry stood up, walked to the window and took a couple of deep breaths, then walked back. 'I think there'll be another body buried in the same place as Kitty,' he said. 'There may even be more than one.'

'Henry,' snapped Reedman, 'sit down and stop talking now.'

'I know they'd killed before Kitty and it wouldn't surprise me if they'd carried on killing afterwards.'

'Henry!' Reedman shouted.

I glared at Henry, tempted to reach over the table and wring the truth out of him. 'How the hell do you know that? Because this isn't some little game. We're talking about murder victims. If you know something and you don't tell us, we will dig up every last aspect of your past and we will find out what you did, and you'll be locked up for a very, very long time.'

Henry looked like he was about to burst into tears. 'I didn't kill anyone, I swear it.'

Reedman reached across and pulled his client back down into his chair. 'Just make the call, DS Mason,' he said. 'Please.'

I got up, wondering what I was getting into here. 'I'll be five minutes,' I said, and went out through the front door, leaving it on the latch.

The night was chilly – it was still only mid-April – and clear. Reedman's large detached home was set in a narrow stretch of greenbelt land just inside the M25 between RAF Northolt and Gerrards Cross, with fields to the back and front of the property. You could hear the drone of the traffic on the M25 and the stars were obscured by the wall of light to the east, but there was still something comfortably rural about the place. The house itself was set in about an acre of grounds with a long driveway leading down to wrought-iron gates, and was probably worth the best part of £3 million. But then you rarely come across a poor lawyer.

I walked slowly round the side of the house and pulled out my phone, dialling my boss at Homicide and Serious Crime Command, DCI Eddie Olafsson, or Olaf as he was universally known behind his back. For the last six months I'd been working for one of the Metropolitan Police's Murder Investigation Teams, based out of Ealing, having moved across from Counter Terrorism Command where I'd spent much of the previous fifteen years. Things had ended badly for me in CT and I'd been suspended for close to four months before finally being given a second chance as a detective sergeant in Olaf's team, having been told in no uncertain terms that he was one of the very few DCIs who'd have me. When I'd told Olaf earlier about Reedman's call asking me to meet up with him and Henry Forbes, he hadn't been keen for me to go, given that we already had a big enough caseload, but he'd agreed because he was old enough to remember the Kitty Sinn case.

As luck would have it our team were on twenty-four-hour

callout all week so I wasn't disturbing Olaf on a night of gallivanting, and he answered on the third ring.

'So, did Henry Forbes have anything interesting to say?' he asked me.

I told him that he had claimed the remains found in the school in Buckinghamshire the previous week were Kitty Sinn's, and that he could name several people involved in her murder. 'And there's something else too. He says there may be other bodies in there.'

'Are you sure he's not yanking your chain, Ray?' boomed Olaf, who had a very loud voice.

'No. He's telling the truth. And he's scared too. He says the people responsible will kill him.'

'And he didn't give you any details about how Kitty Sinn got all the way back from Thailand without being spotted, even though her face was all over the papers, and ended up buried in the grounds of a boarding school?'

'No, nothing. His lawyer's keeping him on a tight leash. He doesn't want Forbes to say anything until he's got him round-the-clock protection and a new identity, plus a deal which means he won't serve any prison time for perverting the course of justice or anything like that. But the thing is, he must have been heavily involved in her murder otherwise there's no way he'd know where she was buried.'

Olaf made a low growling sound that I'd learned was his version of a sigh. He was a man who could do nothing quietly. 'That's what I'm thinking too,' he said. 'Well, the good thing is, it's not our problem. It belongs to Thames Valley. I know the SIO

running the case. I'll give him a call now and tell him what you've just told me, and they can take it from there.'

'Aren't you intrigued as to what happened to Kitty Sinn?'

'Sure I am. But not so much that I want it added to our caseload. I'd rather read about it in the Sunday papers.'

I was about to ask how best to handle the immunity issue when I heard Maurice Reedman's front gates open with a loud metallic whine. A black 4×4 drove through them, moving very slowly, with its headlights off.

Straight away my alarm bells rang. You only drive like that when you don't want to be heard or seen.

I was a good thirty yards away, round the side of the house, so I stepped into the shadow of an apple tree and watched as the car, a BMW X5, made its way down the driveway. The rear windows were blacked out but there were two men in the front. I couldn't make out their faces from where I was standing. Then I realized they were wearing ski masks.

'Oh shit,' I hissed into the phone. 'I think we may have a problem. Unidentified car just drove in with no headlights and men with ski masks inside. Can you send backup straight away. And make sure it's armed.' I rattled off Reedman's address.

'Don't do anything stupid, Ray,' said Olaf, still booming. 'Help's on the way.'

I ended the call and flicked the phone on to silent, knowing I had to act fast. As the car pulled up in front of the house, I ran out from behind the apple tree, keeping close to the hedge at the rear of the property so I was out of sight, making for the conservatory doors. I had maybe thirty seconds to get Forbes and his lawyer

out the back before the men in the ski masks came through the front. The rear garden was only about fifteen yards long and ended at a low back fence with open fields beyond. It was a possible escape route.

My heart was beating hard as I reached the conservatory doors. I heard the BMW doors closing round the front of the house and remembered that I'd left the front door on the latch. These guys, whoever they were, could just walk in.

I slipped inside, moving fast through the conservatory and the kitchen, not wanting to shout out in case the men in ski masks heard me. As I emerged into the hallway, I could hear Henry Forbes and Maurice Reedman talking animatedly. It sounded like they were arguing but I couldn't hear what was being said.

And then, when I was only a few yards away from the dining room, I heard the front door handle being turned.

I darted into the nearest room as the door opened, knowing I was too late. I could still hear Henry and his lawyer talking, seemingly oblivious to what was about to happen.

I cursed the fact that I was unarmed. For two years after an earlier attempt on my life I'd been one of the few police officers in the UK authorized to carry a firearm at all times, but this right had been taken away from me after my last major case for CT. Now all I had was my warrant card and some stern words, and somehow I didn't think that was going to do either me or anyone else much good right now.

I heard footsteps coming down the hallway, only a few yards away from where I was hiding. The room I'd darted into looked like a library with bookshelves lining two of the walls, and aside

from a heavy glass ashtray on a coffee table next to a reading chair there was nothing I could use as a weapon. I stayed still, barely a foot from the door, prepared to ambush anyone who came through it, knowing there was really no more I could do.

I could hear the intruders talking in hushed tones out in the hallway, their voices barely a mumble.

Then I heard the dining-room door open and cries of shock and surprise coming from Henry and Reedman.

'Hands in the air, now!' yelled a voice.

Loud. North London accent. Potentially an IC3. I slipped the phone from my pocket, opened up the microphone app, and pressed record.

Very slowly, I put my head round the door. My view of the dining room was partly obscured by the staircase banister, but I could just about make out part of a masked man through the thin crack in the doorway. Muffled voices came from inside and questions were being barked by the gunman I'd just heard speak. His voice was deep and resonant and I was pretty certain I'd recognize it again, but I was too far away to hear what he, or anyone else, was saying.

I needed to get closer if I was going to record them, but I knew I'd be an obvious target if I came out into the hallway, especially with the front door wide open. There might be other gunmen outside, although I was probably a target in here too. For all I knew, either Reedman or Henry might have already told them I was here.

I felt a powerful urge to run back the way I'd just come, leap the fence, and wait in the adjoining field for reinforcements to

arrive, but I stopped myself. It felt like the coward's way out and, whatever else my faults, I'm no coward.

I took a step into the hallway and held the phone at arm's length, hoping to pick up the gunmen's voices.

For a few seconds, I didn't move.

And then two shots rang out, loud in the confines of the dining room, and Reedman cried out in pain.

I knew it was him because the next second I heard Henry crying and begging for mercy, his voice becoming increasingly hysterical. My whole body tensed. They were going to kill him too. I've been a police officer a long time. Before that, I was a soldier. I'm used to standing up for the little guy. And now I was going to have to stand by while a man with a secret over a quarter of a century old took it to the grave with him.

The gunman who was giving the orders yelled at Henry to shut up, and he immediately did. There was a long pause, then I heard more muffled talking.

I took another step into the hallway.

The first gunman said something to Henry. It sounded like 'last chance to live' but I couldn't be sure. And then he said something else too, but his voice was quieter now and I couldn't make out any of it.

Henry stammered something in reply, which turned into a pleading wail at the end, and I knew that this was it, he was about to die, and that he knew it too. He started to speak again but his words were cut off by another three gunshots, a double tap followed a couple of seconds later by the coup de grâce.

It was over.

And that was when I heard it. The first haunting wail of a siren in the far distance.

I could hear the two killers moving about in the dining room and it occurred to me that I should try to tackle them as they left the room. It was possible I could get hold of one of the weapons. I've been in firefights before and come out on top. But self-preservation stopped me. It was too risky.

And yet I was tempted. God, I was tempted. To hit the first of those cowardly bastards as he left the room, give him a taste of his own medicine.

I heard the whump of a fire starting within the dining room, and almost immediately smelled smoke.

The siren was getting louder now, and it had been joined by a second. The idiots were going to get themselves caught without my help if they hung around much longer.

'Go, go, go!' I heard the main gunman shout as smoke began to billow out of the room.

I retreated a couple of steps and was just about to dart back behind the library door when a third man in a mask appeared on the front doorstep, only a few yards away from me.

'Oi!' he yelled, just as a man with a shotgun came running out of the dining room.

Adrenalin burst through me as I ran back inside the library, having the presence of mind to shove the phone in my pocket. I heard the one on the doorstep tell the other gunmen where I was and to hurry up, that the cops were coming. They were in a rush now. I had to hope they'd make mistakes.

I grabbed the ashtray from the table and swung round as the

guy with the shotgun appeared in the doorway. I threw the ashtray straight at his head and dived out of the way as he pulled the trigger.

The ashtray hit him in the face and he stumbled backwards, putting a hand up to his nose and giving me a split second to charge him. I grabbed the shotgun with both hands, shoving it to one side as he pulled the trigger a second time, sending shockwaves up my arms. At the same time I drove my body into him, sending us both crashing out of the door and into the side of the staircase. I tried to headbutt him but he moved his head to one side, and I caught a glimpse of a thin white scar at the base of his neck running towards the collarbone. His skin was golden brown – mixed race or Asian – but I hardly computed this fact as I tried to stop him from tripping me up.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see a taller gunman, the one who'd been questioning Reedman and Henry, pointing a semi-automatic pistol at me, but it was clear he couldn't get a good shot in without risking hitting his friend, and I was hanging on to the shotgun like grim death. I think the third gunman was shouting something but I'd been temporarily deafened by the shotgun blast so I had no idea what it was.

My assailant was strong and wiry and he gave me a hard shove, sending us both stumbling back into the library. I hit the bookshelves with a bang and a couple of books fell on my head. He shoved the length of the barrel against my neck, using it to throttle me. It felt burning hot from the discharge of shot but I ignored the pain, lashing out wildly, knowing I was fighting for my life.

I managed to push him back and we struggled wildly in the

middle of the floor. The shotgun went off again and this time the force of the discharge knocked me backwards. One hand slipped from the weapon, and the next second my assailant had slammed the stock against my jaw.

This time I lost my grip entirely and fell to the floor, hitting the shelves en route.

I lay on my back, looking up.

The gunman in the ski mask looked back down at me. I noticed then that his jacket had ridden up above the gloved hand revealing the edge of a black, sleeve-like tattoo on his left forearm. I didn't really look at it though. I was too busy looking at him. He stared back down at me, breathing heavily, his eyes very big, very dark and very cold. The end of the barrel was only a few feet from my face.

I was filled with a leaden feeling of resignation. Death has never been too far away from me, right from my earliest days, so it came as only the smallest of surprises that it had come for me now.

He smiled beneath the ski mask and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

He looked momentarily confused, and for a second neither of us moved. Then my survival instinct and training kicked back in. Using my hands to push myself up, I lashed out with my foot, kicking him in the shin, and tried to scramble to my feet.

This time he wasn't hanging about. He kicked me in the gut, sending me sprawling again, then turned and ran out of the door.

The smell of smoke was getting stronger. It reminded me of a time long ago when I'd been trapped in a house fire, and the terror I'd felt then. I had to get out.

Feeling battered and bruised, I got to my feet and stumbled

out into the hallway, the buzzing in my ears beginning to subside enough that I could hear more sirens, closer now.

The front door was wide open, and as I watched, the black BMW made a rapid three-point turn on the front lawn before roaring off up the driveway and out of view.

I felt a desperate urge to run straight out into the fresh air but the need to gather evidence, or at least preserve it, stopped me and instead I ran back into the dining room, pulling up my shirt to shield my face from the worst of the acrid black smoke.

Maurice Reedman was propped up against a glass cabinet on the other side of the table, his eyes closed. He'd been shot twice in the face. Henry Forbes was lying on his back on the floor on the opposite side of the table to where he'd been sitting earlier. His upper torso was on fire where accelerant had been poured over him, yet there was no fire anywhere else in the room, meaning he'd been targeted specifically. The flames were already beginning to die down – the human body doesn't burn especially well and it was clear that Henry's assassins hadn't used much fuel – so I ran into the downstairs toilet, grabbed the hand towel and placed it under the cold tap. When it was wet enough, I went back in and threw it over Henry's upper body, crouching down and using my hands to pat out the fire, conscious that there was a slight chance he was still alive.

But as the fire died and I felt for a pulse, there was nothing. Henry's blackened face was expressionless and his eyes were closed. There was a hole in his forehead, and two more in his chest. He was gone.

And so was his secret.

Wrinkling my nose against the stench of burned flesh, I stood back up and looked down at his corpse. It seemed the fire had been concentrated on the right side of his upper body. His shirt was partially burned away and the skin beneath was charred and blistered, but something caught my eye. It was a marking on the underside of his upper arm that appeared to be part of a tattoo. Half of it had been burned away, but I could see that at one point it had been a black star-like shape, with three curved lines inside it.

Two things immediately struck me as a little odd. One, the tattoo was in a place on his arm where it would almost certainly never have been seen, even by him. And two, he just hadn't seemed like the kind of guy who'd have tattoos.

I pulled out my phone and crouched down to take a quick photo of it before getting back to my feet and walking out of there, needing to get away from the sight and smell of the bodies.

Which was when I heard frantic shouts of 'Armed police!' coming from the doorstep.

The cavalry might have arrived but, not for the first time in history, they were a few minutes too late.