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The Departed

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HarperNorth
Windmill Green
24 Mount Street
Manchester M2 3NX

A division of
HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

HarperCollinsPublishers
Macken House
39/40 Mayor Street Upper
Dublin 1
D01 C9W8

First published by HarperNorth in 2025

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-00-871621-9

Printed and bound in the UK using 100%
renewable electricity at CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon

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For Lily

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'Ask him to return the kiss when I draw
my dying breath.
St. Joseph, patron of departing souls – pray for me.'

Prayer to St Joseph, anon, 16th century

'You carry the smell of death to your home
and it never goes away.'

A Liverpool gravedigger, 1979

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Friday 26th January 1979
Cheapside, Liverpool

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Skull. Ribcage. Collarbone.

Leigh folds her arms and leans back on the hard chair, peering at the post-mortem images through a blockade of male shoulders. The sun isn't even up yet, the sky black through the tiny window, and she has the distinct feeling she's being tortured. Firstly, dragged out of bed at 6 am on a wintry January morning and fighting her way through a blizzard to reach the Bridewell; secondly, being confronted with close-up pictures of the body of a teenager within seconds of arriving.

Click, snap, partly skeletonised hand, separated from the wrist. Click, snap, left femur, split in two.

She reaches for the reassuring presence of the Tizer can in her pocket and attempts to look at the screen without fully registering the images. Dealing with tragedy is part of her job – it's what detectives do for a living (that, and tolerate people shouting 'bizzy scum' at them) – but she's certain she comes across dead boys more than the average police officer. In the five months since she's joined CID: a teenager lying curled and lifeless at the foot of Haigh Heights, his ankle tied to a washing machine that had landed upright beside him; another wedged against the door of a toilet in a Toxteth club (this, when she was out enjoying herself); and another who creaked

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on a rope from the beams of a derelict house, toes sweeping the bare floorboards. Her detective inspector hears the words death, teenager and male, it seems, and the job is hers.

And now here she is, recovering from the surprise of being seconded to a murder enquiry, sitting in a freezing basement where a police surgeon is presenting a slide show of human remains to an audience of detectives.

'IC1,' he says, using the identification code for White European, '5 foot 9 or 10. We know he's young because there isn't any wear and tear on the bones, and there's no tooth loss, although there are cavities. I'd guess at the lower end of adulthood – between 17 and 25.'

Leigh sighs loudly, attracting a few head turns from the row in front.

'I haven't made a full report on past illnesses or past breaks and fractures as yet, but at first sight, there doesn't seem to be any marks on him, no obvious injuries.'

Leigh takes the Tizer out of her pocket. It's been sitting on the windowsill outside her bedsit all night and it's so cold it burns her fingertips. There's a fizz and a small pop as she snaps back the ring-pull, attracting more turns. One fella's head stays cranked back, his eyes sweeping the length of her. Leigh stares him out and then turns her gaze on the detectives in the front row. They all have their heads down, scribbling notes.

As the surgeon clicks the slide projector to show black, twig-like fingers, she looks around to see if she recognises anyone in the motley audience. The small room is packed, the hastily assembled squad consisting mostly of experienced old hands from Serious Crime, burly men in dark suits who look like the cast of *The Godfather* – although a young Chinese fella in the corner smiled at her when she came in. She does a head count, examining each of the 14 detectives to work out which ones are divisional CID, like herself, brought in because a cohort from Serious Crime is in Leeds, supporting the almighty cock-up that is the Yorkshire Ripper investigation.

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As far as Leigh can see, she's the only woman in the room.

'He's been in the dock building for a while,' the surgeon says. 'He's not yet dry bones but the flesh has been mostly stripped by decomposition. Advanced decay. From items found at the scene, the estimated date of death is likely within the last decade. Skeletonisation could have been accelerated, owing to the presence of rats.'

A picture of an anklebone wrapped in wire appears and Leigh imagines her brother's bones, lying undiscovered on a desolate cliff-side, being stepped over like the remains of a mountain sheep. She shivers in the donkey jacket she's wearing over her cheap suit. The blizzard is still blowing outside and a bitter wind is flowing down the stairs and through the open door. The young fella in the corner catches her eye, wraps his arms around himself, and makes a mock shiver.

'He was tied at the time of death,' the voice continues from the front, 'but by the time he was discovered some parts of him had scattered across the floor, the other bits – rib cage, part of the radius, remained in the location he was tied.'

Next to the projector, the boss is on his feet, preparing to speak. She's heard of DCI Murphy – he's a bit of a legend – a well-respected, old-school copper past the usual early retirement age. Leigh considers him from her place on the back row. He looks kindly, she thinks. She likes the Fedora hat, the crinkly face and the thick black eyebrows, and she likes the fatherly pipe he's holding in his hand.

'He didn't tie himself up,' the DCI barks at the surgeon. 'What killed him?'

Up to this point, there had been a drift in the room – whispering, chewing, swallowing, the shuffling of feet – but the boss's distinctly impatient sergeant major tones command everyone's attention.

'It looks like natural causes,' the surgeon says, admirably unflustered, 'if being tied up and left for dead is a natural cause. The wire on his wrists and ankles was tight enough to

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damage the bones, presumably as he struggled, and would have excluded escape.'

'He couldn't break free and starved to death?'

'Yes, looks that way.'

Leigh feels sick. The accumulation of snow-dusted people in the cramped space is giving rise to a stench of wet clothes and sweat, with top notes of aftershave, coffee, and nicotine. The fella on her right is eating a meat pie and snuffling like a pig, and the fella on her left is slumped so casually he's spilling out of his chair, forcing her to squeeze her arms by her sides.

The slide projector overshoots and the first image clicks around again: a photograph of the full corpse, laid on the slab, the shape of a person who used to be, tufts of hair still attached to the skull. Out of the bare bones, Leigh's imagination mounts its own reconstruction. She adds flesh – a covering of puppy fat then olive skin. She adds slightly crooked front teeth and dark hair which springs upright from a double crown. She keeps on adding until, in her mind, her brother James is grinning at her in his room, his camping gear laid out as on the morning he set off on his last trip.

'Are we looking at scum on scum?' DCI Murphy snaps, directing his questions at the audience. 'Or big-time crime fellas?'

As he listens to the replies, the boss takes a box of matches from his pocket, drags a match along the striker, and skims the pipe tobacco with the flame. The Godfather squad members, who have popped upright from their almost horizontal positions, respectfully wait for him to light up before responding. Their unanimous verdict: a drugs-related killing, probably revenge, money-owed, that sort of thing. Leigh watches the DCI steadily puffing on his pipe to get it going, bristling at his use of the word 'scum'. She should be immune by now but it's the type of comment that gets her goat. Instead of scum, she pictures a family waiting at home, desperate for news. She imagines a mum, dad and sister, staying up all night, waiting.

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She imagines all the things her family did when her brother didn't come home.

'Evidence at the scene,' the boss says. 'His clothes survived – denim jeans, leather jacket, a pair of sandals, size 11, and a red cap, size small. He was still wearing them. No ID, but there was a key in the pocket of his jacket, along with an empty sweet wrapper belonging to a Freddo bar, so despite the decomposition, that dates him within the last decade, we didn't have Freddo bars when I was growing up.'

Leigh puts her elbow out and sticks it into the flesh of the big fella's arm. He doesn't budge, but at least it distracts her from the memories of James, who, having been resurrected in her mind, is now pulling off the pair of ridiculous leather clogs he left behind in his bedroom. She suddenly wonders what happened to those clogs, whether they vanished when her mum took all his things to a jumble sale, whether some lad is hobbling around Liverpool in a missing boy's size nines.

'Also at the scene,' the boss continues, 'a silver pendant of a saint, initial 'B' on the back, and a peel-apart film from a Polaroid – there was no camera at the scene.'

Proceedings are temporarily interrupted by a late-comer, looking flustered and muttering that the locks on his car had been frozen solid. As he heads to the front and nods to his colleagues, he temporarily blots out the screen. The DCI puts his head down to the flame of a match in an attempt to get his pipe going again. Leigh is still engaged in a battle of the elbows, although now, the heavy fella is taking up her floor space too, his big feet splayed into the space in front of her chair and forcing her to press her boots together.

She comes around to a sea of faces looking her way. The DCI has obviously said something to her, or about her, because he's looking at her expectantly. On the screen, there is now a blurred dot of silver – a close up of the pendant recovered from the crime scene.

'Well?' he barks.

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'I don't know, sir,' Leigh says, hoping it's a lucky answer.

There is a silence, which lasts for about three seconds but seems to stretch for eternity. And then the room erupts in laughter. The only person who doesn't laugh is the young fella in the corner.

'You don't know St Joseph's the patron saint of departed souls, or you don't know your own name?' asks one of the Godfather squad detectives.

Leigh sits up straight and looks the fella in the eye. Her hands are screwed into fists, ready for a fight.

'My name is Detective Constable Leigh Borrowdale,' she says, wedging her left shoe on top of the big fella's right boot and pressing down hard on his toes.

'It will be advantageous to have a lady among us,' the DCI says, trying to steady the sniggering ship.

'What lady?' a comedian asks, swinging round to sneer at her. 'I can't see one.'

The boss belts out a list of jobs, tells them to partner up and makes his exit, trailing a line of pipe smoke behind him. As the room echoes with the sound of scraping chairs, Leigh gets that thought again, that she's being tortured; that by some strange alchemy, she's attracting the very things she tries to avoid.

For five years now, she has thrown herself at life. She has learnt the *Merseyside Police Manual of Instruction* off by heart, she has spent long nights sweating over exams, subjected her body to punishing exercise routines, and patrolled the city streets in the rain, wind, sleet and snow and, in the summer of 1976, the sweltering heat. She has filled what little spare time she has with as many activities as possible: netball, tennis, swimming lessons, ping-pong, sex with strangers. She has been on chilly day trips to West Kirby, Chester, Rhyl and the Boat Museum at Ellesmere Port. She has fought with her mother. She has endured lots of heart-stopping moments such as this one, even though she knows the body can't belong to

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James – wrong height, wrong clothes, wrong shoe size, wrong location.

Leigh stays in her chair in the emptying room, giving up, yielding to her destiny. For five years, she has tried her best to cheat fate; for five long years, she has attempted to forget her grief and live her life.

Only to find herself in this smoke-filled room, where a dead boy's bones are still on the screen, and her brother is still missing.