

THE SHADOWS AND THE DUST

A DR JACK CUTHBERT MYSTERY

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For Elodie

*damna tamen celeres reparant caelestia lunae:
nos ubi decidimus
quo pius Aeneas, quo dives Tullus et Ancus,
pulvis et umbra sumus*

Yet the swiftly changing moons repair their losses in the sky.
We, when we have descended whither righteous Aeneas,
whither rich Tullus and Ancus have gone,
are but dust and shadow.

Horace, *Odes*, Book IV, 7
Trans. C. E. Bennett, 1914

Prologue

London: 14 September 1931

Something dark was moving in the wood. An urgent gust of wind rattled through the high branches. As some of the younger trees yielded to its force, their trunks bent, releasing a plaintive groan that might have been mistaken for a prayer. Or perhaps a warning.

The hooded figure froze, breathless in the moment, until the night settled again and recovered its silence. A wavering torch beam sought the right place and then, just as quickly, was extinguished when a light in a distant window flared.

Cloaked again in the darkness, the figure unshouldered its heavy burden and knelt. Slowly, it began to spread and part the undergrowth, clearing the way to the earth beneath. With a trowel and some effort, the topsoil was scraped back deeply enough to accommodate the package that lay by the figure's side. Tightly wrapped in cloth and trussed in twine, it could have been a bundle of clothes, or the carcass of something small – perhaps a lamb? A secret treasure, parcelled up to disguise its shape. It was none of those things, and it was all of them.

A hand reached out to break off some of the surrounding ferns and place them in the freshly dug hole. They were

arranged with care to form a soft pillow of greenery. Only then was the package placed on top. Creases in the wrapping were smoothed, and from a small bag cut flowers were taken and placed around the folds of the cloth.

Not a word was spoken in the moonless gloom. The wind had now dropped, and the only sounds to accompany this ritual were the whispering rustle in the surrounding bushes and the harsh cry of a raven.

High above, the reluctant clouds were being prised apart by the wind. There was only a sliver of moon that night, but there was enough light to reveal the shape of the bundle. In the moment before the clouds passed over again, the moonlight fell on the folds of clean white cloth, the flowers and the glint of a buckle. Handfuls of rich black earth were thrown into the shallow trench, finally concealing two small feet in white socks and polished leather shoes.

Overhead, the clouds folded back over the moon and the figure was lost again to the darkness. Out of sight, out of mind.

Chapter 1

London: 7 September 1931

The long summer days were just a memory now. Although there was still some warmth in the air, the light was a watery silver, and Jack Cuthbert knew autumn was not far away.

He checked the clock. It was still early but sleep eluded him. The warmth of the bed was comforting but its emptiness was not. He stretched across to find where he had lain and stroked the sheets still warm from his body.

He reached out to the pillow, still dented by his head, and as he did, he caught a single hair and picked it up delicately between finger and thumb. He was used to handling evidence and this was evidence of a sort. A single golden hair that was the merest shadow of his presence.

It was the last night of their holiday together and it had ended too soon. He held the hair to catch the light and then put it to his lips. Such an insignificant remnant of their summer, but he took it and placed it carefully between the pages of a small book of poems on his bedside table. He recalled the summer sun and their time with each other. He closed his eyes, allowing the memories to linger.

Whether he had fallen asleep again, he wasn't sure, but when he looked at the clock, he knew he had to get up. He threw the linen sheets from his body and felt the morning chill on his naked skin. He swung his long legs over the side of the bed and sat up, trying to clear his head and gain some equilibrium.

When he stood, he stretched and caught sight of himself in the cheval mirror. He was six foot five, lean and heavily muscled with thick black hair, and he looked more like an ancient gladiator than anyone's idea of a doctor. But this morning his melancholy made him feel his age.

He had waited so long in his life to find the kind of fulfilment the summer had brought and now to lose it again was almost too much to bear. Nothing had gone wrong, he reminded himself; on the contrary, everything had been perfect. It was just that now he had to return to reality, to his role in life, and likewise Jaeger to his. They had found in each other a depth of feeling that neither expected, but they also knew that what they felt had to be hidden.

It was not over; indeed Cuthbert hoped quietly that it might never be over, but it had to be discreet and interrupted, to allow them both to pursue their other, more ordinary lives. In this house, though, they could be together, for the only other person who would know did not care.

Madame Smith had been in Cuthbert's employ for more than five years, and in that time she had grown to be his confidante as well as his housekeeper. She knew Cuthbert as no one else did – he had no secrets from her, and she passed no judgement.

When he and Jaeger had been in Italy the previous month, Cuthbert had felt free, showing him the sights of Rome, teasing

him about his scandalous ignorance of the classics, walking and talking with him endlessly.

Every night had been spent in each other's arms, and Jaeger had taught Cuthbert just how beautiful love could be. Now, both men had to return to their work. It had been Cuthbert's first summer holiday since he had taken up his position as head of the forensic medicine department at St Thomas's, and he resolved now that it would not be his last. For too long, he had neglected his own happiness.

Cuthbert could already hear movement downstairs, where Madame Smith was preparing breakfast. He bathed quickly, shaved and dressed in the clothes she had laid out for him in his dressing room, and went downstairs to meet the day.

'Bon matin, monsieur. It is a beautiful day, is it not?'

'Good morning to you, madame. Indeed it is, but this holiday has made me lazy. I should have risen half an hour ago.'

She studied him and detected the hint of sadness in his eyes and understood the reason. *'Herr Jaeger, I believe, had to leave very early to catch his train. I'm afraid he left before even I had risen. He must think we are a very slovenly household not even to provide him with breakfast.'*

Cuthbert smiled at her and realised what she was doing – quietly and discreetly acknowledging his friend's overnight stay while sympathising with him at his departure.

'I do hope we will see more of him, monsieur.'

She did not wait for an answer as she swept from the breakfast room to the kitchen. She returned with a tray of fresh coffee and warm brioches. She arranged the breakfast on the table in silence, giving Cuthbert a chance to speak, which he finally did.

'I need to thank you, madame, for your kindness and your understanding. But I fear I have placed you in a difficult position,

perhaps even imposed upon you. I fully understand if you find the arrangements . . .' He searched for a word that would fit his meaning, but found none and opted for 'indelicate'.

Madame Smith was standing behind him, and she smiled before smoothing the black fabric of his jacket across his broad shoulders.

'Monsieur, you are troubled this morning because he has left for a while, but only to return to his work, as you will also be doing. He has to travel and there must always be times when you are apart. But when he comes back, I will be able to see your eyes light up again. And for that joy, I would give a great deal. I could not be happier that you have found someone to share at least a part of your life with. And, no, you have not imposed upon me in any way whatsoever. Never think that. Now, I suggest you eat rather than speak if you do not wish to be known in that hospital of yours as *le trainard*, or, how do you say, the laggard.'

He reached out, and she gave him her hand. He brought it to his lips and kissed it with the gentleness of a feather brushing her skin.

*

He walked from his home on Gordon Square more briskly than usual that morning. He found the pavements of London already strewn with the first of the fallen leaves from the towering plane trees that lined his route. He still made time, however, to buy a box of matches as he did every morning from the wounded ex-serviceman on the corner of High Holborn.

Cuthbert did not smoke and had no need for the matches, but the crippled man had a great need for his coppers. The man never looked up and merely touched the peak of his cap with one finger when he heard the pennies dropping into the small

tobacco tin on the pavement before him. Cuthbert knew there were thousands like him, and they had been all but forgotten by a world that had moved on.

When he arrived at the hospital, it occurred to him that he had never been away for such a long time since he had started working there. He had rarely taken any days off and, apart from occasional trips to other departments and institutions and his enforced sojourn in Glasgow because of the bombing earlier in the year, he had spent every other day either here, at the university or at Scotland Yard.

The department of pathology, whose forensic medicine division he headed up, was one of the finest in the country in large part because of his tireless efforts to make it so, and he had built an unimpeachable personal reputation as a police surgeon and expert witness in the metropolis. Although he enjoyed his teaching of both medical and law students, it was his work with Scotland Yard that gave him his greatest satisfaction.

Despite the words of his mentor still ringing in his ears after fifteen years, he still found it difficult to conform to Professor Littlejohn's idea of a specialist. 'The cobbler should stick to his last,' the great man had always told him, especially when he saw his interest deviating from the strictly pathological issues at hand. 'Remember, Dr Cuthbert,' he would counsel, 'we are here to provide the evidence, but how that evidence is used is up to others. We must be neutral at all times in our deliberations, and the specialist in forensic medicine is not, and never should see himself as, a detective.'

Cuthbert, however, had come to see that what he did, and the contributions he made to any case, often went beyond the merely neutral. Even at his autopsy table, he needed to be as much a detective as any officer in the field. His job was certainly to uncover evidence, but he also felt he had a role in piecing that evidence together to recover the truth of what had

happened. Of course, he was also insightful enough to know that this might all be just a convenient delusion he allowed himself in order to continue doing what he enjoyed.

*

When he entered the department, Simon Morgenthal, Cuthbert's assistant, was already working at the bench. He had been holding the fort while his mentor was on holiday, and Cuthbert had gone off confident that all would be taken care of.

Everyone in the department had been delighted when Cuthbert had announced that he would be going away for pleasure for a month during the summer, but not because they wished to see the back of him. On the contrary, he was fiercely admired and respected by everyone who worked there, not least of all by Morgenthal. His staff simply saw that a holiday was long overdue and that he badly needed a break, especially after everything that had happened to him this year.

Morgenthal had taken charge before when Cuthbert had gone to Glasgow and had managed successfully to demonstrate that the place did not fall apart while in his care. As such, Cuthbert was more than comfortable to hand him the reins for a second time.

Morgenthal was working on one of the many chemical assays that were performed in the laboratory area of the department and was giving some instructions to one of the technicians when Cuthbert appeared at his back.

'Still telling everyone what to do, Dr Morgenthal?'

'Sir, what a pleasure to have you back. How are you? How was the trip? You certainly seem to have caught the sun. Was it insufferably warm? I do hear that Italy at this time of year can be quite a trial. I've never been one myself for the heat, but Sarah is always on at me to spread my wings a little and take

to the continent. And . . . and I'm talking too much again. My apologies, sir. Welcome back.'

'It's good to be back. The whole of Italy was so disappointingly quiet in comparison.'

Cuthbert's office was accessed through a door off the laboratory area, and he found it as he had left it: tidy, ordered and spartan. Cuthbert was not one for fussy ornamentation or the bric-à-brac that often filled other people's offices. For him, this was a place of work, a sanctuary for reasoned thought and insightful discussion. He required no distractions to those ends.

On his desk, the departmental secretary had ordered his mail by date of receipt, and he sat down to make a start on it as soon as he had hung up his coat and hat. He worked through the piles of envelopes quickly and efficiently. By the morning coffee break he was up to date with his correspondence, and he invited Morgenthau to join him so he could receive a briefing on what had happened in the department during his absence.

His assistant brought a typed report of all the cases that had been dealt with in the department during the previous four weeks. Clear summaries were provided alongside a table showing case details, analyses performed and conclusions reached.

'You've been busy, Simon. And you've done an excellent job.'

'Not on my own, sir. The staff are the excellent ones, and it was all teamwork.'

'But every team needs a leader, and you are showing yourself to be just that. I am starting to regret my absence. With all this experience, I don't doubt I will be losing you soon.'

'Sir?'

'It's almost time for you to leave the nest, young man. You

can't stay here for ever, in my shadow. You must find another department to run . . . to cast a shadow of your own.'

'But—'

'Please don't misunderstand me, Simon. I don't want you to leave, but I would be doing you a grave disservice if I held you back. If you should wish to apply for any senior appointment, just know that you can be assured of the finest recommendation from me.'

Mixed emotions swirled within Morgenthal; he felt nowhere near ready to leave the department at St Thomas's and Cuthbert's invaluable mentorship. Everything he knew about forensic medicine and science, he had learned at the side of this man, and any confidence he had in the job he had found because of him. But now to be told that he was not only doing a good job, but a job good enough to make him eligible for a significant promotion, was overwhelming.

There was no one whose approval he craved more than Cuthbert's, and here, in this moment, he had been granted it. He could not find words to say what he was feeling for he truly did not know how he felt. All he could do was nod in acknowledgement.

Cuthbert for his part did know how the young man was feeling. He had experienced exactly the same maelstrom of confusion at the hands of his own mentor when he was encouraged to think about moving on.

'Please don't worry. There is no rush and there is still so much to do here, but I wanted you to know that I expect rather great things of you. And, of course, it will give me no little pleasure to be able to say, "Oh yes, I taught the great Simon Morgenthal everything he knows." Now, shall I get us both that coffee?'

'Please, sir. Allow me.'

Over that first week back, Cuthbert was afforded a relatively light workload due to the vagaries of crime statistics. He had often pondered if there was any science to the prediction of murder rates throughout the year but had long since given up trying to second-guess what, if anything, determined them.

He was glad of the slow start, however, for it allowed him to prepare his lectures for the autumn term and to oversee the research work that Morgenthal was doing. His assistant's work was largely chemical in basis, and he had been developing and evaluating novel assay systems for different blood components. Cuthbert knew that the future of forensic science would be molecular rather than anatomical and strongly encouraged Morgenthal in this line of investigation.

In his second week back, he was standing at the bench discussing the results from Morgenthal's latest run of experiments, which his assistant had graphed out neatly for Cuthbert to review, when his office telephone rang.

'Dr Cuthbert? Sergeant Baker, sir. Good to have you back. I wonder if you could join us on site. We have a body, sir. I'm afraid it looks like a child.'

Cuthbert sighed and took the details. He told Sergeant Baker to expect him within the hour. Morgenthal asked if he was needed, but Cuthbert assured him that he would be better employed completing his assays. At this stage, there was certainly no need for both of them to endure whatever awaited him with Sergeant Baker.

He collected his bag and checked its contents. The stout case contained his notepads, pens, gloves, an apron, sample containers and bags, identification labels and ties, trowels and brushes, a thermometer and a testing kit for soil acidity.

Everything was in order, but, before he left, he added a large soft cloth that he knew he might also need.

*

The gates of St Gregory's were already open when Cuthbert's taxi arrived. The driver took him up the long curving gravel driveway and stopped outside the imposing Victorian building.

'Shall I wait, guvnor?'

'No, thank you – I expect I'll be here for a while.'

Already, Cuthbert had spotted the figure of Sergeant Baker striding towards the cab from the woodland. Cuthbert got out, paid the driver through the taxi window and hailed the sergeant.

'Good morning, sir. I'm sorry to drag you across London like this, but—'

'But that's our job, isn't it? It's good to see you again, sergeant. If only it was in pleasanter circumstances for once. But this does look a little better than some of the places you've dragged me to.'

Cuthbert looked up at the red-brick three-storey building and then out over the expanse of lawn to the wooded areas beyond. 'What exactly is this place, sergeant?'

'Church of England orphanage, sir. Been here for years. The house used to belong to some rich family who left it to the Church around the turn of the century and since then they've used it as an institution. There's the main house, a few cottages and a pretty big estate. Twenty-five acres or thereabouts.'

Cuthbert scanned the scene and looked back at the building. It was ugly in the way that architecture of the mid-Victorian period could often be. The design was fussy, lacking style or symmetry, and it looked to Cuthbert as if it was in sore need of repair.

In one of the large bay windows, his eye caught some

movement. A figure dressed in blue and white was watching him. He could not make out any details as the person had moved back from the glass and was now standing in the shade of the room. He fixed his gaze on the window, but there was no further movement and he wondered for a moment if he had imagined it.

‘And what do you have for me, sergeant? I expect it’s more than the view.’

‘Indeed, sir. Please come this way.’

Baker led the pathologist across the grass towards the woods, and as they approached, Cuthbert could see two uniformed officers only yards away under the canopy of the trees. He had expected to be led deep into the trees and through the undergrowth, but if this was where the body had been discovered, someone had done a very inexperienced job at hiding it.

Baker glanced at Cuthbert’s boots and asked if he wished to change before going in. Everyone who had met him knew about Cuthbert’s boots. He prided himself in always keeping them immaculately polished to a high mirror finish. It had, in truth, become something of a compulsion with the pathologist and he no longer tried to conquer it.

Cuthbert looked down at his shining black Oxfords and felt calmed by the gleam on the leather. But they would certainly not come out of the woods the same way they went in, so he reluctantly donned the regulation wellingtons Baker had brought with him.

‘These should fit you, sir – at least, they’re the biggest we have at the Yard. I can look after your boots for you.’

‘Thank you, sergeant, but there’s no need. I can stow them in my bag. Safer that way, I think. Do lead on.’

The morning was bright, but as soon as they went into the wooded area they found themselves in dappled gloom. As Cuthbert’s eyes adjusted to the dim light, he could see that between the uniformed officers there was some disturbance of

the soil. The rest of the ground was scattered with leaf mould, small broken branches and occasional ferns. Here, however, there was a patch of bare soil that looked recently dug over. At the end, nearest the constable on the right, some of the soil had been pushed back, and just visible were the feet of a young child wearing shoes.

Cuthbert thanked the sergeant and asked him to create a wide cordon around the area and to ensure no one entered. He asked the constables if they had touched or disturbed anything, and both knew that if they had they would soon be looking for other employment, such was the reputation of this pathologist.

‘How was the grave disturbed?’

‘The groundsman, sir. A Mr Dickson Barnaby. He lives on the estate in one of the cottages and he found the grave. He thought it might have been a badger burrowing, so he kicked some of the soil away to check and that’s when he saw the shoes. Called us right away. This was about seven o’clock this morning.’

‘Fine, sergeant, I’ll take it from here. I don’t suppose I have to tell you this might be a slow process.’

‘We’ve done too many of these for me to hurry you, sir. I know how important it is to get it right at this stage if we’re to find out what happened later. You take all the time you need, and I’ll organise everything else.’

Cuthbert smiled and nodded at Baker, glad to be back working with this particular officer. They had indeed been through many cases together, and Cuthbert’s respect for the man had only grown with the years.

From his bag, Cuthbert took his notebook and pen and started to record his observations. He would spend some time looking before he ever touched anything, knowing full well that as soon as he did, he would potentially be silencing anything the evidence was trying to tell him.

The feet protruding from the soil looked to be those of a child of about three to six years of age. There were neat ankle socks, and the shoes were brown leather, rather scuffed, with a buckle strap across the instep. The soil over the rest of the body was dark and loose and had only recently been turned. Cuthbert checked the area surrounding the shallow grave but found nothing unusual.

After noting all this, he began tentatively to remove the soil from the body. Only a few inches below the surface his small trowel scraped against fabric that appeared to be wrapped around the body. It looked like white cotton, although it was heavily stained by the sandy soil. It became clear that the child's head and body were tightly shrouded in the fabric and poking from the folds were fronds of plants. He did not immediately recognise these but, as he bent to look more closely, he could smell them. There was rosemary, and what he took to be a fern of some sort. There were others that he could not identify, but they all appeared as if they might be wildflowers. He looked about again. There were clumps of fern nearby, but there were no flowering plants in the wood that he could see.

As he brushed the soil away from under the small, shrouded corpse he saw that it had been laid on other plants that were still green, and the head was supported on a mat of fresh fern leaves.

The state of the plants, combined with the loose appearance of the overlying soil, told Cuthbert this was certainly not an old grave. If it had been dug in the last forty-eight hours, that might be the limit of it. Of course, that did not necessarily mean the child had died in the last two days. He would only know that when he was able to examine the body in the mortuary – a task he was already dreading.

While Cuthbert was working at the grave, Baker was making a start on his questioning of the orphanage staff. As he had mentioned to Cuthbert, he had already spoken briefly to Barnaby, the groundsman who had found the body, but had told him he would require a fuller statement later. First, however, the sergeant wanted to speak to whomever was in charge of the orphanage, to get some measure of the place. He had been informed that he would need to speak with the mother superior as it was an order of Anglican nuns who ran St Gregory's.

He rang the heavy bell pull on the house porch and waited for someone to answer the door. He did not have to wait long. The large door with its ornate stained-glass panel was heaved opened by a small woman who looked excited to welcome him in. He held out his warrant card and said, 'Detective Sergeant Baker, miss. I need to speak with the mother superior.'

'Oh, we know who you are, sergeant. Come in, come in. This is a terrible thing, is it not? And I haven't even introduced myself. Sister Hilda - I'm one of the sisters here at St Gregory's. I take care of the little ones. Please come into the reception room, and if you'll just wait, I'll go and tell the reverend mother you are here. Oh, what a to-do, and today of all days as well.'

'Sister, what do you mean by that?'

'Just that we are preparing for our visit from our parish priest, Reverend Henshall. Everything's already at sixes and sevens, and now this.'

But before Sister Hilda could rush off to the mother superior's office, they both heard the slow squeaking of rubber-soled shoes on polished linoleum coming towards them.

The mother superior almost glided along the passage.

She would have been unremarkable if it had not been for her calling. An otherwise average woman leading an average life. But here in the order she had put her years to a very different use. For the service of her God and for the sake of the other sisters in her charge, she had put aside every natural feeling. She had been elected by those sisters on three consecutive occasions as their leader, and she discharged her duties with fairness, if not warmth.

Her blue gown was tied at the waist by a thick black rope made of silk, which bore three heavy knots on the free-hanging ends. These symbolised her three sacred vows: poverty, chastity and obedience. As she passed the large wooden crucifix hanging on the wall, her hand came to her chest and the wooden cross she wore around her neck. She touched it and then clasped her hands again beneath the blue scapular she wore over her gown. Her wimple and tight-fitting coif of white cotton were topped with a simple white veil which hung to her shoulders.

‘Welcome to St Gregory’s, sergeant. That will be all, Sister Hilda – please return to your duties.’

The small woman composed herself, clasped her hands and bowed her head solemnly towards the mother superior, then scuttled away, keen to share the news of the detective’s arrival with anyone who would listen.

‘Thank you for seeing me, sister . . . my apologies, reverend mother.’

‘Please do not concern yourself with our titles, sergeant. But rather like your profession, I imagine, there are those who think such things matter.’

The sergeant listened as she spoke, trying to place her accent, which was certainly not from London. He also observed her closely. When she finished speaking, she stood in silence, only intending to speak further when she was spoken to, only intending to answer exactly the question she was asked. There

was nothing unnecessary in anything she did. Everything was measured, calm, the sergeant thought, even her breathing.

‘I’m sure you will be aware by now, reverend mother, that this morning we uncovered human remains in the grounds. We will need to speak with everyone who works here, but I thought it would be useful if I could first orientate myself. Could you tell me a little about St Gregory’s?’

She sat in the chair by the window and placed her hands in her lap. ‘Won’t you sit down, sergeant? Here in the light.’

Baker took out his notebook and sat down opposite her.

‘We are members of the Order of the Divine Fellowship. Our Mother House is in Northumberland, but we have outposts throughout the country. Here at St Gregory’s, we are a small community dedicated to the care of the orphans in our charge. We have a small domestic staff: a cook, a cleaner and a laundress. As for those in holy orders, apart from myself we have two sisters – Sister Margery and Sister Hilda, whom you have already met. We also have a novice sister, Mary Frances.’

‘Yes, Sister Hilda seemed quite upset by the events. I understand you are preparing for a visit from the local parish priest.’

‘Sister Hilda is rather talkative. We can do nothing else but bring the weaknesses of our human nature with us when we take the veil. Here in the convent, where people are trying to give their best to God, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Devil makes it his business to be active and ever present.’

‘And the children?’

‘We have some sixty-two children aged between three and twelve years of age in our care. Any younger orphans are cared for in St Anselm’s, another of our homes; and older children are housed and taught useful skills in St Barnabas’. We fulfil the middle years, but I like to think the most important.’

‘Are any of your charges unaccounted for, reverend mother?’

‘So it is a child, then. No, sergeant. We in holy orders may

be criticised for many things, but losing our children is not one of them. All are safe.'

Baker was taking careful notes of everything she said and wondered how much she knew about what had been discovered.

'How did you find out about the body?'

'Mr Barnaby came to inform me immediately after Lauds, our first morning prayers. It was I who instructed him to telephone the police. He made the call from my office just after seven o'clock this morning.'

'And what did he tell you?'

'Exactly what he told you, I'm sure. That he had discovered something quite dreadful near the edge of the wood and that he feared it may be a dead body, possibly a young child.'

'Do you and the other sisters all live in the building?'

'Indeed. Our cells are here, as are our communal and worship areas, along with the children's dormitories, playrooms and dining hall.'

'And have you seen anything unusual in the last week or so? Anything out of the ordinary, strangers in the grounds?'

'Our lives here are contemplative and inward-looking when they are not attending to the worldly needs of the children. I expect much that goes on in the world passes us by.'

The sergeant thanked her for her time but made it clear that he would need to return to interview the other staff and sisters and that he may well have further questions for her. She simply bowed her head in silent acknowledgement, rose and walked him to the door.

'If I may make one request, sergeant. When you identify the poor child, may we know the name, so we may more usefully pray for his eternal soul?'

It was Baker who nodded in silence this time, unsure of committing himself to any such request.

Outside, Cuthbert was already packing up his things, and had left the graveside for the edge of the wood. Sergeant Baker was coming back across the grass as the pathologist was changing out of the police wellingtons and into his boots. Before Cuthbert put them on, he could not help giving them a buff with the large, soft cloth he had wrapped them in.

‘Do you need anything, sir?’

‘No, sergeant, I think I’ve done just about all I can for the time being. I need the remains lifted and transported to St Thomas’s. With all the usual precautions, of course.’

Baker, who knew Cuthbert’s requirements well, would make sure that the grave contents were first photographed and then removed intact and in their entirety, before being taken to his department.

Cuthbert was brushing some soil from his trousers where he had been kneeling at the graveside and casually asked, ‘Are you a family man, sergeant?’

Baker did not answer immediately. Cuthbert saw him swallow before he made to answer and regretted his rudeness.

‘Sergeant, please forgive my ill manners. Your private life is none of my business.’

‘No, it’s not that, sir. It’s just that I’d like to be. We want a family, but we’ve been trying so long that it doesn’t look like it will ever happen. Just not meant to be, I suppose. No one’s fault – just the way of things, sir.’

‘Forgive me. I really had no right to ask.’

‘Really, sir, it’s no matter. What about you? Do you have any little ones, sir?’

‘I’m afraid not, sergeant. How wonderful it must be to be a father, though. But, like you, I’m not sure it’s meant to be, either.’

‘Doesn’t make it any easier though, does it, sir? I mean, look at the little mite lying there alone in the ground. What kind of person could possibly do such a thing?’

‘That, sergeant, is exactly what we’re going to find out.’