# The Blood Detective

Dan Waddell

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Extract

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*Wearing the type of lazy smile that often distinguished the half-cut from the sober, Bertie stepped out of the Prince Albert on Pembridge Road and immediately felt the icy blast of cold air on his face. It was invigorating; the rigours of a week's work, a bellyful of beer and the numbing warmth of the pub's fire had helped him forget how bitter it was outside, though word of it had been on the chapped lips of everyone who had come in for a drink. March, they muttered. Felt more like January.*

*After shaking his head to rid it of the fug of the pub, he glanced up at the clear, black sky. No fog; the wind had chased away the perennial smoke that blanketed the city at night. A nice change, he thought, to use his eyes and not instinct as he made his way home.*

*To his right he could hear the clatter of traffic on Notting Hill Gate. A man scurried past, head down, left hand holding his hat in place, the right gripping his coat across his throat. Bertie did not even button his; he did not mind the cold. He was warm-blooded. 'My little bed-warmer,' Mary liked to call him, as they closed in to form a crescent shape together under the covers. Sometimes in winter, when he got into bed, she would raise a chilly foot – she felt the cold terribly – and place it softly between his legs to warm it. Made him jump. 'Back off, woman,' he would tell her. But she would giggle and so would he. He was incapable of getting angry with her – and*

*she with him, as she would prove in about fifteen minutes' time when he stumbled into bed near midnight with the smell of booze on his breath.*

*The thought of it – the thought of her – made him smile as he started weaving his way home along Ladbroke Road. The wind was at his back, blowing towards the Dale. Bertie was glad to have left that benighted place behind. Their life had improved immeasurably since he and Mary and the little ones had moved to Clarendon Road. It might still be on the edge of the Dale but it had felt like a fresh start. For the first time in his life he felt able to breathe.*

*He crossed the road, passing the Ladbroke Arms and the police station ahead of the crossing with Ladbroke Grove, the lamp casting a halo of warming light over the few policemen standing outside having a smoke. He nodded at them as he passed. Ladbroke Grove was quiet so he crossed without pausing, turned right and made his way up the hill. At the summit he toyed with going further on and turning on to Lansdowne Crescent, or cutting across the churchyard and down St John's Gardens. He chose the latter.*

*He went to the left of St John's, its cathedral-like spire pointing a bony finger into the darkness above him. As he passed the church he noticed something moving to his right. Some poor beggar seeking shelter from the wind, he thought.*

*Then it was on him; hot, rancid breath on his cheek.*

*'What the . . .'*

*Before he could finish, the blade was stuck deep in his ribs. The noise as it left his flesh sounded like a finished kiss.*

*The figure retreated into the darkness as swiftly as it had arrived. Bertie felt little pain, just bewilderment. His hands went to his ribs; there they felt the warm stickiness of his own blood. He sat back on the ground, as if pushed. He tried to call for help, but no words came. He raised his hands to his face and saw them slicked with his own blood. God save me, he thought, his breath becoming shallow.*

*'Mary,' he whispered, thinking of her lying there, waiting for him to slip into bed so she could warm herself on him.*

*He lay back on the damp grass, aware of the smell of moist earth and the last pitiful throbs of his heart.*

*Finally, he felt the cold.*

# I

Detective Chief Inspector Grant Foster, stiff from lack of sleep, dragged his tall, weary frame from his brand-new Toyota Corolla, feeling the familiar ache of being hauled from his bed in the middle of the night. Even though he had stopped smoking six months ago he felt a pang for nicotine. Arriving at a murder scene had been one of those occasions when he would habitually spark up; part of a ritual, a summoning of will. He cracked his knuckles and sniffed the cold air.

Dawn was approaching over London and the sound of traffic on the distant Westway was evolving to a constant drone as early workers joined late-night stragglers on the road. Despite the frosty tang in the air and the last blustery breaths of the fierce wind that had blown all night, a mild warmth hinted at the first signs of spring. In less than two hours the sun would be up and the late-March day would begin. But Foster was in no mood to be optimistic. When he sniffed the air, he noticed only one smell: trouble.

Detective Sergeant Heather Jenkins, her wild black hair tied back in a ponytail, fell in beside him as they crossed the road towards the church.

'It's a nasty one, sir.' Her strong Lancastrian accent flattened the vowel of her final word.

Foster nodded. 'Certainly sounds like it,' he said, speaking for the first time. His deep, rich voice seemed to emanate from somewhere down around his boots. 'Unlike the drunk the other night.'

Both of them had been woken when it was still dark the previous Sunday morning to attend what appeared to be the suicide of a tramp in Avondale Park. Foster, supposed to be having a weekend off, though no one had seen fit to inform those on duty, had left it to Heather, gone back to bed and tried to get some more sleep. Unsuccessfully. Four days later, he still resented the intrusion.

Heather made a noise down her nose to indicate her disbelief that Foster was still angry, not quite a snort, more a sort of reverse sniff.

'You can't let that go, can you, sir?' she said.

'Our workload is bad enough without having to poke around the cider-drenched corpse of some loser,' he muttered without looking at her.

'You don't reckon that tramp is entitled to the same consideration we lavish on other people's deaths? We don't even know his identity: don't you

think we owe it to him to find out who he is and whether he had a family?'

'No,' he said emphatically. 'But have you checked with the Missing Persons Bureau?'

She nodded. 'Nothing that seems to fit so far.'

'Probably yet another loser no one gave a stuff about. One less piss-stained wino for the lads on the beat to sling in the drunk tank.'

From the corner of his eye he saw her shake her head slowly.

They had reached the churchyard. Cresting the hill of Ladbroke Grove, overlooked by a crescent of handsome early-Victorian mansions, it made a curious scene. It certainly beat the council estates, pub car parks and patches of barren land where London's murder victims were usually found. Yet he felt uneasy because, during more than twenty years on the force, he couldn't remember another body being found on religious ground. As if that was a step too far, even for the most psychotic. He made a mental note to revisit this thought.

Detective Inspector Andy Drinkwater, hair neatly cut, lantern-jawed with chiselled features, was waiting for them at the cordon that had been put around the entire perimeter and was being guarded by a few uniformed officers. Foster often teased Drinkwater about looking like an ageing refugee from some

long-forgotten boy band: he was an obsessive gym-rat, a teetotaller and, given his clear complexion, Foster suspected, with a shudder, he might even moisturize. This morning in his knee-length woollen overcoat and gloves, he looked every inch the detective.

'Sir,' he said, nodding at Foster. 'Heather.'

She smiled at him apprehensively.

'Morning, Andy. What we got?' Foster asked.

Over Drinkwater's shoulder, to the left of the church, he could see forensics settling in for the long haul. A white tent had been erected over the crime scene, tape bound around the perimeter of the churchyard, while an arc light illuminated the area.

Drinkwater sucked in air between his teeth. 'Not very nice, sir,' he said. 'Forensics are here. Carlisle too: he's having a look at the body.'

Foster's eyes narrowed. Pathologists rarely beat him to the scene.

'He lives nearby,' Drinkwater explained.

The three of them passed through the gate and made their way towards the tent.

'Victim's a male in his early thirties,' Drinkwater said, both he and Heather scurrying to keep up with their superior's giant strides. 'Looks like he hadn't been here long when two youths found him. They raised the alarm at Notting Hill, down the road, shortly before three a.m.'

'You've spoken to the kids?' Foster asked, still walking.

'Both of them were pretty stoned. But yes, I've had a brief chat.'

'How old?'

'One fifteen, the other just turned sixteen.'

Foster shook his head; what sort of parents let their kids out in the small hours of the morning? Probably the type of dad his force arrested by the score on a daily basis, and the sort of feckless mother whose maternal instincts had been doused by years of booze and drugs. Some people aren't fit to raise hamsters, he thought.

'They're not suspects in my opinion,' Drinkwater added, anticipating Foster's next question. 'But they're at the station if you want to speak with them. We've notified the parents. Both kids are pretty freaked out.' He paused. 'You'll see why. About the only thing they did say that might be interesting is that a drunk woman, a derelict, often used the part of the churchyard where the body was found.'

'Used it as what?'

'A place to doss down. They referred to her as Ciderwoman. Mad as toast, apparently. But they haven't seen her for a couple of nights.'

Foster nodded slowly. 'We need to find her.'

'So there *are* some tramps you're interested in finding,' Heather interjected.

He turned and looked down at her. At over six feet, he was several inches taller than her. She was bright and spiky and he liked the way she maintained a dark sense of humour at even the grimmest of scenes. It was a vital attribute for a murder detective.

The three of them stopped. They had reached the entrance to the tent. A gust of cold wind tugged at its moorings, making the corners flap.

'I always feel like I'm about to enter a freak show outside these things,' Foster muttered as he climbed into the white suit. Given his height, few of them ever fitted. This one wasn't too bad, though; nothing ripped when he put it on. 'Come on, then. Let's do this,' Foster said, stretching his arms to see how much movement he had. The younger detectives followed him in.

Inside, the smell of damp earth was strong, almost heady. Foster had to stoop forwards slightly, to prevent his head brushing the roof of the tent. He looked down at the corpse. His view of it was blocked by a crouching figure. All he could see was a grey trouser leg that had ridden up to reveal a gulch of pale flesh between it and the sock. The crouching man was Carlisle, the duty pathologist. He was checking the victim's pockets.

'Robbing yet another corpse, Edward?' Foster said.

The man, dressed head to foot in white, did not even look up. 'You would, too, on my salary,' he replied. Then he turned and grinned at Foster, but his eyes gave away the desperation of the scene. He stood up, revealing the corpse to Foster for the first time.

'Jesus Fucking Christ.'

'Yes, nasty business,' Edward Carlisle said in his plummy, public-school voice.

The victim was on his back. Mouth agape, thousand-yard stare; so much was common to most corpses Foster had seen. But what truly shocked him were the hands – or, rather, the lack of them. At the end of both arms were livid, fleshy stumps, jagged bone protruding.

'Very little blood at the scene,' Carlisle said.

'So he wasn't killed here?'

'No, I would say not. The body's temperature has dropped about twelve degrees, which at one and a half degrees per hour indicates he was killed around nine p.m. last night.'

'When was he found?' Foster said, his question addressed to Andy.

'Just after two forty-five a.m.'

'How about the hands, Edward? Severed post-mortem?'

Carlisle wrinkled his nose. 'Difficult to say. You'll have to wait for the autopsy.'

'Cause of death?'

'A single stab wound to the heart seems to have done the trick. The chest is also covered with several superficial cuts, some quite deep.'

'Why keep the hands?' Foster asked.

'Trophies,' Drinkwater said confidently.

It was a reasonable theory, Foster thought. His initial impression had been the same. But somehow it didn't ring true.

Heather, previously silent, piped up. 'There could have been a struggle, sir,' she said. 'The vic could have got fibre or skin under his nails. Perhaps the killer thought if they severed the hands they'd reduce their chances of being nicked.'

Another sound theory.

'Do we have an identity?' Foster asked out loud.

'James Darbyshire, according to his cards and driving licence,' Drinkwater said, reading from his notebook. 'There was a mobile, too; forensics have bagged it.'

'Good,' Foster murmured. Mobile phones were godsends to a murder investigation. 'I'll see you in a few hours, if that's OK, Edward.'

Carlisle nodded, eyebrows raised to indicate his concern at the tight schedule Foster was suggesting

in his usual matter-of-fact manner. But he knew the DCI liked to have a look at the corpse before it was sliced and diced.

The three of them left Carlisle to his work and went back outside. Dawn was breaking. Once it was fully light, a fingertip team would search the entire churchyard. All three drew a deep breath, Foster more discreetly than the others, delighted to be out in the open air, away from the body. It was after some time with their thoughts that Foster ended the silence.

'I take it we've had a scout around for the missing hands?' he asked Drinkwater, who nodded.

'No sign,' he said.

'Well, make sure we get a team checking all the gardens and nooks and crannies around here. Perhaps they've been dumped elsewhere. Let's get a dog team out here too, see if Fido can dig them up. And when it gets light, get some people knocking on doors in all these houses overlooking the churchyard. Someone might have seen something.

'Where were the kids smoking?' he asked, looking around the small churchyard.

'Across the other side. I'll show you.'

They walked around the back of the churchyard. Drinkwater pointed to a set of stone steps leading down towards a door.

'Down there, by the entrance to the undercroft.'

Foster looked at it for a few seconds. 'So they wouldn't have seen the body being dumped from here?' he asked rhetorically. 'Did they hear anything?'

Drinkwater shook his head. 'Too windy. That's how they found the body. They were after a bit more shelter to skin up, so they went round the other side out of the wind.'

Foster nodded slowly. He was pretty certain they hadn't done it. Most teenagers may be lawless, disrespectful scroats, he thought, but they rarely butcher and mutilate grown men and then walk coolly into a police station to report the crime.

'Just what is an undercroft anyway?'

'A crypt. At least, I think it is,' Drinkwater replied.

'Not any more,' Heather said. 'My mate used to come here for antenatal yoga classes; then a baby massage course after the baby was born.'

Foster turned and looked at her. Ordinarily he would have used this as an excuse to wind her up, but the scene had left him too enervated.