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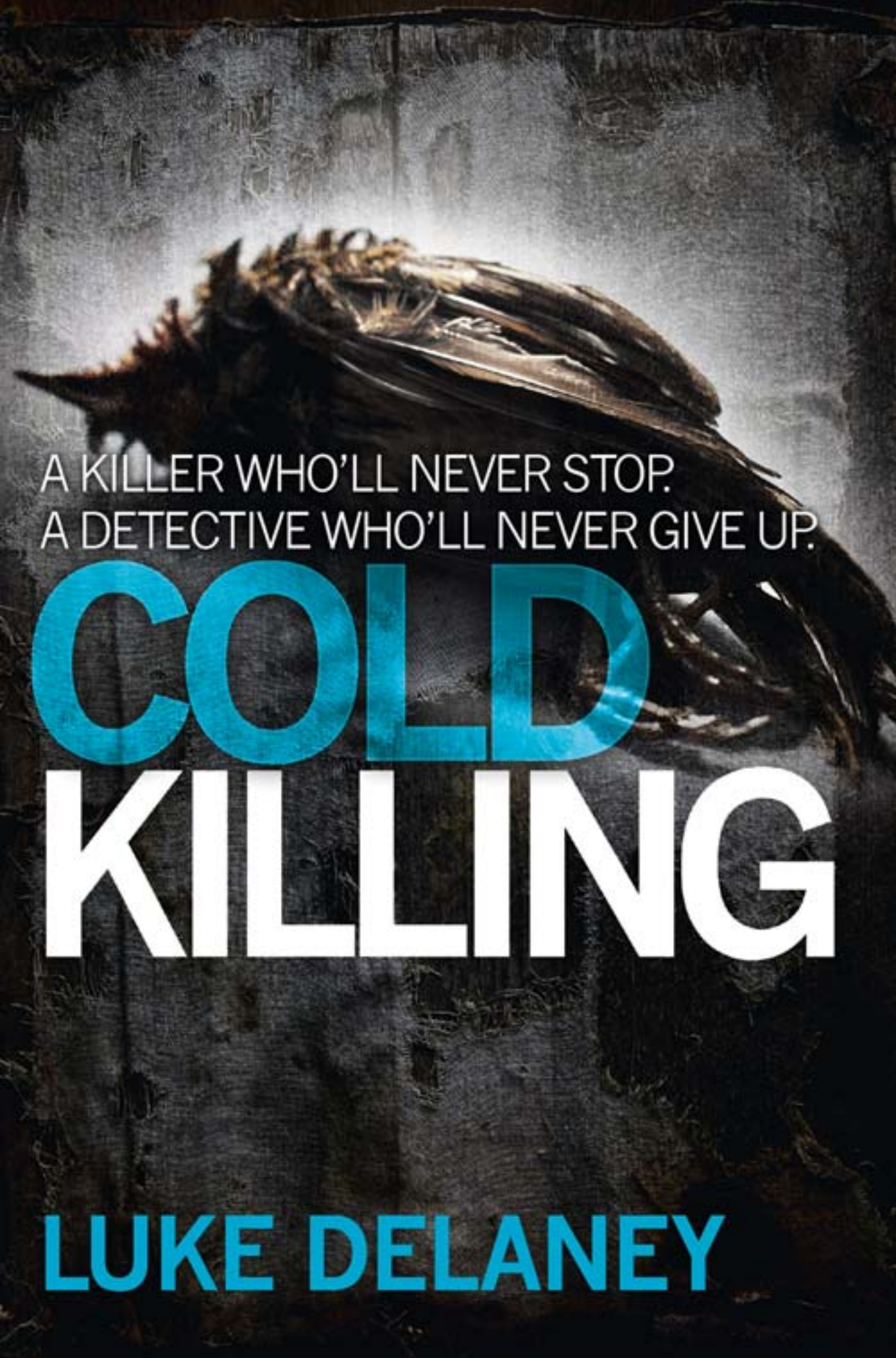
Cold Killing

Written by Luke Delaney

Published by HarperCollins

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Saturday. I agreed to come to the park with the wife and children. They're over there on the grassy hill, just along from the pond. They've fed themselves, fed the ducks and now they're feeding their own belief that we're one normal happy family. And to be fair, as far as they're concerned, we are. I won't let the sight of them spoil my day. The sun is shining and I'm getting a bit of a tan. The memory of the latest visit is still fresh and satisfying. It keeps the smile on my face.

Look at all these people. Happy and relaxed. They've no idea I'm watching them. Watching as small children wander away from their mothers too distracted by idle chat to notice. Then they realize their little darling has wandered too far and up goes that shrill shriek of an over-protective parent, followed by a leg slap for the child and more shrieking.

I am satisfied for the time being. The fun I had last week will keep me contented for a while, so everyone is safe today.

I thoroughly enjoyed the time I spent with the little queer. I made it look like a domestic murder. I've heard fights between people like him can get nasty, so I had a bit of fun with the idea.

He was easy enough to dispatch. These people live

dangerous lives. They make perfect victims. So I hunted amongst them, looking for someone, and I found him.

I had already decided to spend the evening stalking the patrons of a Vauxhall nightclub, Utopia. What a ridiculous name. More like Hell, if you ask me. I told my wife I was out of town on business, packed some spare clothes, toiletries, the usual things for a night away and booked a hotel room in Victoria. I could hardly turn up at home in the early hours. That would arouse suspicions. I couldn't have that. Everything at home needed to appear . . . normal.

I also packed a paper decorating suit that I bought at Homebase, several pairs of surgical gloves – readily available from all sorts of shops – a shower cap and some plastic bags to cover my feet. A little noisy, but effective. And last but not least a syringe. All fitted neatly into a small rucksack.

Avoiding the CCTV cameras that swamped the area, I watched the entrance to the club from the shadows of the railway bridge as the sound of the trains reverberated through the archways.

I had already spied my target entering the club earlier that evening. The excitement made my testicles tighten. Yes, he was truly worthy of my special attentions. This wasn't the first time I had seen him. I had watched him a couple of weeks earlier, watched him whore himself inside the club with whoever could match his price. I had been searching for the perfect victim, knowing the police would only check CCTV from the night he died or, if they were especially diligent, maybe the week before.

I had stood in the midst of the heaving throng of stinking, foul humanity, bodies brushing past my own, tainting my being with their diseased imperfection, while at the same time inflaming my already excited, heightened senses. I so wanted to reach out and take each and every one of them by the throat, crushing trachea after trachea as the dead began to pile at my feet. I fought hard to control the surging

strength within, then terror gripped me, terror like I have never felt in my entire life. Terror that the real me was revealing itself, that all those around me could see me changing in front of their very eyes, my skin glowing brilliant red, bright white light spilling from my eyes and ears, vomiting from my mouth. Heavy drops of sweat had snaked down my back, guided by my swelling, cramping back muscles. Somehow I had managed to move my legs, pushing through a crowd of squabbling worshippers until I reached the bar and stared into the giant mirror hanging behind it. Relief washed over me, slowing my heart and cooling my sweat as I could see I hadn't changed, hadn't betrayed myself.

Now the time for watching was over. It was time for my prize, my release, my relief. All was in place. All was as it needed to be. At last I saw him leaving the club. He was shouting goodbyes, but seemed to be alone. He walked casually under the railway bridge, heading towards Vauxhall Bridge. I moved quickly and silently to the other side of the railway bridge and waited for him. As he neared, I stepped out. He saw me, but didn't look scared. He returned my smile as I spoke to him.

'Excuse me.'

'Yes,' he replied, still smiling, stepping closer to the street light to better see me. 'Is there something I can do for . . . you,' he said, recognition spreading across his face. 'We really must stop meeting like this.' Yes, I'd been with him before. A risk, but a calculated one. A little more than a week ago, inside the nightclub, I'd introduced myself without speaking, making sure he saw my smiling face just long enough so he'd recognize it again. Later I met him outside. I paid him what he asked, all in advance, and we went back to his flat where I defiled myself inside him and even allowed him to defile the inside of me. The sex wasn't important, or even pleasurable – that wasn't the point of being with him. I wanted to feel him while he was alive, to understand he wasn't merely an

inanimate thing, but a real live person. I couldn't be with him like that the night I dispatched him in case I left the faintest trace of semen or saliva on his body. Being with him a week or so before would give any such evidence time to degrade and die. And of course we practised safe sex: he to protect himself from the Gay Plague and I to protect myself from detection. I'd shaved away my pubic hair and wore a full-faced rubber mask that also covered my head, stopping any head hairs from being left at the scene, as well as rubber gloves to eliminate the risk of leaving fingerprints – all of which the little queer thought was simply part of the fun. But the fun, the real fun, was yet to come and I had more than a week to fantasise about events that lay ahead.

The days had passed painfully slowly, testing my patience and control to the limit, but the memories of the night I had been with him and the thought of things to come carried me through and before I knew it he was standing in front of me, his small, straight white teeth glistening in the street lights, his oval-shaped head too large for his scrawny neck, perched on slim, narrow shoulders. His hair was blond and straight, shoulder-length, styled to make him look like a surfer, but his skin was pale and his body weak. The most athletic thing he had ever done was drop to his knees. His T-shirt was too tight and short, revealing his flat stomach, disappearing into hipster designer jeans worn to provoke the sexual urges of his peers.

I told him I needed to be with him again. I lied that I had been inside the club and had seen him dancing, that I had been too nervous to approach him then, but now I really wanted him. We talked some more crap then he said, 'You know I'm not cheap. If you want to be with me again it'll cost.'

He suggested we go to my place so I told him my boyfriend would be there, but he started rambling on about not taking people back to his flat and how last time had been an

exception, until I pulled another two fifties from my wallet and thrust them into his hand. He smiled.

We went to my car, fixed with false plates, and drove to his shit-hole in south-east London where I was sure not to park too close to his block. Telling him I didn't want to take the risk of being seen walking to his flat with him, I suggested that he go ahead and leave the door unlocked.

I waited a couple of minutes, then, as the street was empty, no one staring from windows, I walked to the flat. The block was old, cold and smelled of piss, but he had been a good boy and left the door unlocked. I quietly entered and flicked the lock on. He appeared around the corner at the end of the corridor, from what I knew was the living room. He spoke.

'Was that you locking the door?'

'Yes,' I replied. 'Can't be too careful these days.'

'Afraid someone's going to burst in on us and spoil the party?'

'Something like that.'

The excitement was unbearable. My stomach was so cramped with anticipation I could hardly breathe. Inside, my mind was screaming, but I was still wearing my nervous smile as I walked into the living room.

The whore was crouched by his CD player. I told him I wanted to clean up a little and headed for the bathroom down the hallway.

I took my bag with me and quickly, if somewhat awkwardly, pulled on the suit, the shower cap, rubber gloves and finally the plastic bags over my shoes. I looked in the mirror, filling my lungs with air drawn in hard through my nose. I was ready.

Fully prepared, I returned to the living room. He turned and saw me dressed and resplendent. He'd already removed his T-shirt, and he started to giggle, covering his mouth as if to stop himself.

He spoke to me. 'Is this how we're going to get our kicks tonight then?'

'Sort of,' I replied. 'Sort of.'

They were the last words he spoke, although he may have said 'please' a little later. By then the blood bubbling up into his mouth made it just a gargle.

With a smooth, swift, practised hand I grabbed an iron statue of a naked Indian he kept on his side table and I used it to smash his skull, not hitting him hard enough to kill him straight away, merely to render him semi-conscious and virtually paralysed. He had been on his knees when I hit him, which was good – less distance to fall meant less noise when he hit the floor.

I watched him for a while, standing over him like the victor in a prizefight, watching his chest rise and fall with each painful, strained breath, the blood initially spurting from the wound in his head, then slowing to a steady flow as his heart grew too weak to pump it at the pressure his body required to stay alive. Every few seconds his right leg would twitch like a dying bird.

It wouldn't have been as I had dreamed if he hadn't been at least partly conscious when I went to him with an ice pick I found in his drinks cabinet. I needed him to be alive as I cut him. I needed to see him try to stop me each time I pushed the ice pick into his dying body: not stabbing frenziedly, but placing it deliberately against his pale skin before pushing the point through with a deliciously satisfying popping sound. Now and then he would reach up and pitifully try to defend himself from the torture. I told him not to be a naughty boy and continued with my work. It was a shame his brain haemorrhaging had caused his eyes to turn red, as I had wanted to contrast his blue eyes against the pale bloodied skin. Next time I'd do better.

His perforated body almost began to disgust me, to make me want to flee from the scene, but I couldn't stop yet. Not until all was as close as it could be to how I had seen it in my mind the first time I knew I would be visiting him. I would

continue with my work, despite the foul stench emanating from the holes in his stomach and intestines, the urine and excreta that were now leaking from his transformed body.

He held on for forty minutes, his eyes flickering slightly open for a few minutes at a time. When they were open I did my work, stopping whenever he passed out, unable to bear the pain or grasp his situation. I had to punch him in the face every so often to stop him calling out. Not that he could have realistically raised more than a whimper. Still, I had to be sure.

When he finally died, a slow, quiet hiss of air escaping from his lips and the breaches in his chest wall told me that my fun had come to an end. I put on a clean pair of surgical gloves and took the three hundred pounds cash I had given him earlier from his trouser pocket. I really didn't want to leave that behind. I carefully and quietly broke apart some furniture and generally arranged the room as if a violent struggle had occurred. Next I used the syringe I'd brought to draw blood from his mouth and sprayed it about the room: on the walls, over the furniture, the carpet, making spray patterns to suggest a violent struggle had taken place. Then I moved to the corner of the room I had left clean. I removed my clothes and put them inside a plastic bag and put that bag inside another plastic bag and repeated this twice more. I ensured each plastic bag was tied securely and finally put them in my rucksack. I put new plastic bags on my feet, not wanting to take the chance that I might step on a spot of blood – that sort of evidence can be difficult to explain. I put on another clean pair of rubber surgical gloves and left the living room. I would burn the lot in my garden the following evening, the safest way to dispose of such incriminating items. To burn them in a public place risked attracting attention, while burial would leave them at the mercy of inquisitive animals.

I moved quietly to the front door. I took the plastic bags

off my shoes and looked through the spyhole. Nobody about. Just to be sure, I listened at the door, careful not to let my ear press against it and possibly leave a mark like a fingerprint, which I hear can happen.

When I was totally happy I slipped out of the flat, leaving the front door open so as not to make any more noise than necessary. The statue of the Indian and the ice pick I threw in the Thames as I headed north to my hotel. The thought of the police wasting hours searching for weapons that wouldn't help their investigation in the slightest pleased me.

When I reached my hotel I slipped in through the side door next to the bar, only generally used as a fire exit. I knew it could open from the outside and had no CCTV camera trained on it. I already had the key card for my room, having checked in earlier that day. I took a long shower, keeping the water as hot as I could bear, scrubbing skin, nails and hair vigorously with a nail brush until my entire body felt like it had been burned by flames. I had removed the plug cover to allow any items washed from my body to flow easily into London's sewage system. After the shower I took a long steaming bath and scrubbed myself again. Once dry, I lay naked on the bed and drank two bottles of water, at peace now. Satisfied. Soon sleep came and I dreamed the same beautiful dream over and over.

2

Thursday morning

It was 3 a.m. and Detective Inspector Sean Corrigan drove through the dreary streets of New Cross, south-east London. He had been born and raised in nearby Dulwich, and for as long as he could remember, these streets had been a dangerous place. People could quickly become victims here, regardless of age, sex or colour. Life had little value.

But these worries were for other people, not Sean. They were for the people who had nine-to-five jobs in shops and offices. Those who arrived bleary-eyed to work each morning, then scuttled home nervously every evening, only feeling safe once they'd bolted themselves behind closed doors.

Sean didn't fear the streets, having dealt with the worst they could throw at him. He was a detective inspector in charge of one of South London's Murder Investigation Teams, dedicated to dealing with violent death. The killers hunted their victims and Sean hunted them. He drove with the window down and doors unlocked.

Less than an hour earlier he'd been asleep at home when Detective Sergeant Dave Donnelly called. There'd been a murder. A bad one. A young man beaten and stabbed to

death in his own flat. One minute Sean was lying by his wife's side, the next he was driving to the place where a young man's life had been torn away.

He found the address without difficulty. The streets around the murder scene were eerily quiet. He was pleased to see the uniformed officers had done their job properly and taped off a large cordon around the block the flat was in. He'd been to scenes before where the cordon started and stopped at the front door. How much evidence had been carried away from scenes on the soles of shoes? He didn't want to think about it.

There were two marked patrol cars alongside Donnelly's unmarked Ford. He always laughed at the murder scenes on television, with dozens of police cars parked outside, all with blue lights swirling away. Inside, dozens of detectives and forensic guys would be falling over each other. Reality was different. Entirely different.

Real crime scenes were all the more disturbing for their quietness – the violent death of the victim would leave the atmosphere shattered and brutalised. Sean could feel the horror closing in around him as he examined a scene. It was his job to discover the details of death and over time he had grown hardened to it, but not immune. He knew that this scene would be no different.

He parked outside the taped-off cordon and climbed from the isolation of his car into the warm loneliness of the night, the stars of the clear sky and the street lights removing all illusion of darkness. If he had been anyone else, doing any other job, he might have noticed how beautiful it was, but such thoughts had no place here. He flashed his warrant card to the approaching uniformed officer and grunted his name. 'DI Sean Corrigan, Serious Crime Group South. Where's this flat?'

The uniformed officer was young. He seemed afraid of Sean. He must be new if a mere detective inspector scared him. 'Number sixteen Tabard House, sir. It's on the second

floor, up the stairs and turn right. Or you could take the lift.'

'Thanks.'

Sean opened the boot of his car and cast a quick glance over the contents squeezed inside. Two large square plastic bins contained all he would need for an initial scene examination. Paper suits and slippers. Various sizes of plastic exhibit bags, paper bags for clothing, half a dozen boxes of plastic gloves, rolls of sticky labels and of course a sledgehammer, a crowbar and other tools. The boot of Sean's car would be mirrored by detectives' cars across the world.

He pulled on a forensic containment suit and headed towards the stairwell. The block was of a type common to this area of London. Low-rise tenement blocks made from dark, oppressive, brown-grey brick which had been thrown up after the Second World War to house those bombed out of old slum areas. In their time they'd been a revelation – indoor toilets, running water, heating – but now only those trapped in poverty lived in them. They looked like prisons, and in a way that's what they were.

The stairwell smelled of urine. The stench of humanity living on top of each other was unmistakable. This was summer and the vents of the flats pumped out the smells from within. Sean almost gagged on it, the sight, sound and smell of the tenement block reminding him all too vividly of his own childhood, living in a three-bedroom, council owned maisonette with his mother, two brothers, two sisters and his father – his father who would lead him away from the others, taking him to the upstairs bedroom where things would happen. His mother too frightened to intervene – thoughts of reaching for a knife in the kitchen drawer swirling in her head, but fading away as her courage deserted her. But the curse of his childhood had left him a rare and dark insightfulness – an ability to understand the motivation of those he hunted.

All too often the abused become the abusers as the darkness overtakes them, evil begetting evil – a terrible cycle of violence, virtually impossible to break – and so the demons of Sean's past were too deeply assimilated in his being to ever be rid of. But Sean *was* different in that he could control his demons and his rage, using his shattered upbringing to allow him insights that other cops could only dream of into the crimes he investigated. He understood the killers, rapists and arsonists – understood why they had to do what they did, could interpret their motivation – see what they had seen, smell what they had smelt, feel what they had felt – their excitement, power, lust, revulsion, guilt, regret, *fear.* He could make leaps in investigations others struggled to understand, filling in the blanks with his unique imagination. Crime scenes came alive in his mind's eye, playing in his head like a movie. He was no psychic or clairvoyant, he was just a cop – but a cop with a broken past and dangerous future, his skill at reading the ones he hunted born of his own dark, haunted past. Where better for a failed disciple of true evil to hide than amongst cops? Where better to turn his unique tools to good use than the police? He swallowed the bile rising in his throat and headed for the crime scene – the murder scene.

Sean stopped briefly to acknowledge another uniformed officer posted at the front door of the flat. The constable lifted the tape across the door and watched him duck inside. He looked down the corridor of the flat. It was bigger than it had seemed from the outside. Detective Sergeant Donnelly waited for him, his large frame filling the doorway, his moustache all but concealing the movement of his lips as he talked. Dave Donnelly, twenty-year plus veteran of the Metropolitan Police and very much Sean's old school right-hand man. His anchor to the logical and practical course of an investigation and part-time crutch to lean on. They'd had their run-ins and disagreements, but they understood each other – they trusted each other.

'Morning, guv'nor. Stick to the right of the hallway here. That's the route I've been taking in and out,' Donnelly growled in his strange accent, a mix of Glaswegian and Cockney, his moustache twitching as he spoke.

'What we got?' Sean asked matter-of-factly.

'No sign of forced entry. Security is good in the flat, so he probably let the killer in. All the damage to the victim seems to have been done in the living room. A real fucking mess in there. No signs of disturbance anywhere else. The living room is the last door on the right down the corridor. Other than that we've got a kitchen, two bedrooms, a separate bathroom and toilet. From what I've seen, the victim kept things reasonably clean and tidy. Decent taste in furniture. There's a few photies of the victim around the place – as best I can tell, anyway. His injuries make it a wee bit difficult to be absolutely sure. There's plenty of them with him, shall we say, *embracing* other men.'

'Gay?' Sean asked.

'Looks that way. It's early days, but there's definitely some decent hi-fi and TV stuff around the place, and I notice several of the photies have our boy in far-flung corners of the world. Must have cost a few pennies. We're not dealing with a complete loser here. He had a decent enough job, or he was a decent enough villain, although I don't get the feel this is a villain's home.' Both men craned their heads around the hallway area, as if to confirm Donnelly's assessment so far. He continued: 'And I've found a few letters all addressed to a Daniel Graydon. Nothing for anyone else.'

'Well, Daniel Graydon,' Sean asked, 'what the hell happened to you? And why?'

'Shall we?' With an outstretched hand pointing along the corridor, Donnelly invited Sean to continue.

They moved from room to room, leaving the living room to the end. They trod carefully, moving around the edges so as not to disturb any invisible footprint indentations left in

the carpets or minute but vital evidence: a strand of hair, a tiny drop of blood. Occasionally Sean would take a photograph with his small digital camera. He would keep the photographs for his personal use only, to remind him of details he had seen, but also to put himself back at the scene any time he needed to sense it again, to smell the odour of blood, to taste the sickly sweet flavour of death. To feel the killer's presence. He wished he could be alone in the flat, without the distraction of having to talk to anyone – to explain what he was seeing and feeling. It had been the same ever since he was a young cop, his ability to step into the shoes of the offender, be it a residential burglary or murder. But only the more alarming scenes seemed to trigger this reaction. Walking around scenes of domestic murders or gangland stabbings he saw more than most other detectives, but felt no more than they did. This scene already seemed different. He wished he was alone.

Sean felt uncomfortable in the flat. Like an intruder. As if he should be constantly apologizing for being there. He shook off the feeling and mentally absorbed everything. The cleanliness of the furniture and the floors. Were the dishes washed and put away? Had any food been left out? Did anything, no matter how small, seem somehow out of place? If the victim kept his clothing neatly folded away, then a shirt on the floor would alert Sean's curiosity. If the victim had lived in squalor, a freshly cleaned glass next to a sink full of dirty dishes would attract his eye. Indeed, Sean had already noted something amiss.

Sean and Donnelly came to the living room. The door was ajar, exactly how it had been found by the young constable. Donnelly moved inside. Sean followed.

There was a strong smell of blood – a lot of blood. It was a metallic smell. Like hot copper. Sean recalled the times he'd tasted his own blood. It always made him think that it tasted exactly like it smelled. At least this man had

been killed recently. It was summer now – if the victim had been there for a few days the flat would have reeked. Flies would have filled the room, maggots infesting the body. He felt a jolt of guilt for being glad the man had just been killed.

Sean crouched next to the body, careful to avoid stepping in the pool of thick burgundy blood that had formed around the victim's head. He'd seen many murder victims. Some had almost no wounds to speak of, others had terrible injuries. This was a bad one. As bad as he'd seen.

'Jesus Christ. What the hell happened in this room?' Sean asked.

Donnelly looked around. The dining-room table was overturned. Two of the chairs with it had been destroyed. The TV had been knocked from its stand. Pictures lay smashed on the floor. CDs were strewn around the room. The lights from the CD player blinked in green.

'Must have been a hell of a fight,' Donnelly said.

Sean stood up, unable to look away from the victim: a white male, about twenty years old, naked from the waist up, wearing hipster jeans that were heavily soaked in blood. One sock remained on his right foot, the other was nowhere to be seen. He was lying on his back, the left leg bent under the right, with both arms stretched out in a crucifix position. There were no restraints of any kind in evidence. The left side of his face and head had been caved in. The victim's light hair allowed Sean to see two serious head wounds indicating horrific fractures to the skull. Both eyes were swollen almost completely shut and his nose was smashed, with congealed blood clustered around it. The mouth hadn't escaped punishment, the lips showing several deep cuts, with the jaw hanging dislocated. Sean wondered how many teeth would be missing. The right ear was nowhere to be seen. He hoped to God the man had died from the first blow to his head, but he doubted it.

The pool of blood by the victim's head was the only heavy saturation area other than his clothing. Elsewhere there were dozens of splash marks: on the walls, furniture and carpet. Sean imagined the victim's head being whipped around by the ferocity of the blows, the blood from his wounds travelling in a fine spray through the air until it landed where it now remained. Once examined properly, these splash marks should provide a useful map of how the attack had developed.

The victim's body had not been spared. Sean wasn't about to start counting, but there must have been at least fifty to a hundred stab wounds. The legs, abdomen, chest and arms had all been brutally attacked. Sean looked around for weapons, but could see none. He returned his gaze to the shattered body, trying to free his mind, to see what had happened to the young man now lying dead on his own floor. For the most fleeting of moments he saw a figure hunched over the dying man, something that resembled a screwdriver rather than a knife gripped in his hand, but the image was gone as quickly as it arrived. Finally he managed to look away and speak.

'Who found the body?'

'That would be us,' Donnelly replied.

'How so?'

'Well, us via a concerned neighbour.'

'Is the neighbour a suspect?'

'No, no,' Donnelly dismissed the idea. 'Some young bird from a few doors down, on her way home with her kebab and chips after a night of shagging and drinking.'

'Did she enter the flat?'

'No. She's not the hero type, by all accounts. She saw the door slightly open and decided we ought to know about it. If she'd been sober, she probably wouldn't have bothered.'

Sean nodded his agreement. Alcohol made some people conscientious citizens in the same way it made others violent temporary psychopaths.

'Uniform sent a unit around to check it out and found our victim here,' Donnelly added.

'Did he trample the scene?'

'No, he's a probationer straight out of Hendon and still scared enough to remember what he's supposed to do. He kept to the edges, touched nothing.'

'Good,' Sean said automatically, his mind having already moved on, already growing heavy with possibilities. 'Well, whoever did this is either very angry or very ill.'

'No doubt about that,' Donnelly agreed.

There was a pause, both men taking the chance to breathe deeply and steady themselves, clearing their minds, a necessary prelude before trying to think coldly and logically. Seeing this brutality would never be easy, would never be matter-of-fact.

'Okay. First guess is we're looking at a domestic murder.'

'A lover's tiff?' Donnelly asked.

Sean nodded. 'Whoever did this probably took a fair old beating themselves,' he added. 'A man fighting for his life can do a lot of damage.'

'I'll check the local hospitals,' Donnelly volunteered. 'See if anyone who looks like they've been in a real ding-dong has been admitted.'

'Check with the local police stations for the same and wake the rest of the team up. Let's get everyone together at the station for an eight a.m. briefing. And we might as well see if we can get a pathologist to examine the body while it's still in place.'

'That won't be easy, guv.'

'I know, but try. See if Dr Canning is available. He sometimes comes out if it's a good one, and he's the best.'

'I'll do what I can, but no promises.'

Sean surveyed the scene. Most murders didn't take long to solve. The most obvious suspect was usually the right suspect. The panicked nature of the crime provided an

Aladdin's cave of forensic evidence. Enough to get a conviction. In cases like this, detectives often had to do little more than wait for the laboratory to examine the exhibits from the scene and provide all the answers. But as Sean looked around something was already niggling away at his instincts.

Donnelly spoke again. 'Seems straightforward?'

'Yeah, I'm pretty happy.' He let the statement linger.

'But . . .?'

'The victim almost certainly knew his killer. No forced entry, so he's let him in. A boyfriend is a fair bet. This smells like a domestic murder. A few too many drinks. A heated argument. A fight kicks off and gets nastier and nastier, both end up beaten to a pulp and one dies. A crime of passion which the killer had no time to prepare. He's lost it for a while, killed a friend. A lover. Now all he wants to do is run. Get away from this flat and be somewhere safe to think out his next move. But there's a couple of things missing for me.'

'Such as?'

'They've probably been having a drink, but there are no glasses anywhere. Can you remember dealing with a domestic murder where alcohol wasn't involved?'

'Maybe he cleaned the place up a bit?' Donnelly offered. 'Washed the glasses and put them away.'

'Why would he bother cleaning a glass when his blood and fingerprints must be all over the place after a struggle like this?'

'Panic?' Donnelly suggested. 'Wasn't thinking straight. He cleaned up his glass, maybe started to clean up other stuff too before he realized he was wasting his time.'

'Maybe.'

Sean was thinking hard. The lack of signs of alcohol was a small point, but any experienced detective would have expected to find evidence of its use at a scene like this. An empty bottle of cider. A half-empty bottle of Scotch, or a champagne bottle to fuel the rage of the rich. But it was the

image he was beginning to visualize that was plaguing him with doubt – the image his mind was piecing together using evidence that was missing as much as evidence that was present. The image of a figure crouching very deliberately over the victim. No frenzy, no rage, but evil in a human form.

'There's something else,' he told Donnelly. 'The killing obviously took place in the living room. We know he must have gone out the front door because everything else is locked up nice and tight. But the hallway is clean. Nothing. The carpet is light beige, yet there's no sign of a bloody footprint. And the door handle? Nothing. No blood. Nothing.

'So our killer beats and stabs the victim to death in a frenzied moment of rage and yet stops to clean his hands before opening any doors. After killing a man who may have been his lover, he's suddenly calm enough to take his shoes off and tiptoe out the place. That doesn't make a lot of sense.'

Donnelly joined in. 'And if our boy did stop to clean himself up before leaving, then where did he get clean? He had two choices. The sink in the bathroom or the sink in the kitchen.'

Sean continued for him. 'We've seen both of them. Clean as a whistle. No signs of recent use. Not even a splash of water.'

'Aye,' Donnelly said. 'But it's probably nothing. We're assuming too much. Maybe forensics will prove us wrong and find some blood in the hallway we can't see.'

Sean wasn't convinced, but before he could reply the uniformed constable at the front door called into the flat. 'Excuse me, sir, your lab team is here.'

Sean shouted a reply. 'Coming out.'

He and Donnelly walked from the flat carefully, keeping to the route they'd used on entering. They walked to the edge of the taped-off cordon where they knew Detective Sergeant Andy Roddis would be waiting with his team of specially trained detectives and scene examiners.

DS Roddis saw Sean and Donnelly approach. He observed their forensics suits but was not impressed. 'I take it you two have already been trampling all over my scene.' He was right to be annoyed. The book said no one into the house except the scene examination team. 'Next time I'm going to seize your clothing as exhibits.'

Sean needed Roddis on his side.

'Sorry, Andy,' he said. 'We haven't touched a thing. Promise.'

'I hear you have a dead male for me in flat number sixteen. Yes?' Roddis still sounded irritated.

'I'm afraid so,' said Donnelly.

Roddis turned to Sean. 'Anything special you want from us?'

'No. Our money's on a domestic, so stick to the basics. You can keep the expensive toys locked away.'

'Very well,' Roddis replied. 'Blood, fibres, prints, hair and semen it is.'

Donnelly and Sean were already walking away. Sean called over his shoulder. 'I'm briefing my team at eight a.m. Try and get me a preliminary report before then.'

'I might be able to phone something through to you. Will that do?'

'Fine,' said Sean. Right now he would take anything on offer.

It was shortly before 8 a.m. and Sean sat alone in his bleak, functional office in Peckham police station, surrounded by the same cheap wooden furniture that adorned each and every police building across London. The office was just about big enough to house two four-foot battered oblong desks and two uncomfortable chairs for the frequent visitors. Two ancient-looking computers sat one on each desk and the harsh fluorescent lights above painted everything a dull yellow. How he envied those TV detectives with their swivel leather chairs,

banks of all-seeing all-dancing computers, and most of all the Jasper Conran reading lamps slung low over shining glass desks. Reality was mundane and functional.

Sean thought about the victim. What sort of person had he been? Was he loved? Would he be missed? He would find out soon enough. The phone rang and made him jump.

'DI Corrigan.' He rarely wasted words on the phone. Years of speaking into radios had trimmed his speech.

'Mr Corrigan, it's DS Roddis. You wanted an update for your briefing?' Roddis didn't recognize any ranks above his own, but his powerful position meant he was never challenged by his seniors. He decided the forensic resources assigned to each case, and it was he who knew the right people at the right laboratories across the south-east who could get the job done. Everybody, regardless of rank, respected his monopoly.

'Thanks for calling. What you got for me?'

'Well, it's early days.'

Sean knew the lab team would have done little more than get organized. 'I appreciate that, but I'd like whatever you've got.'

'Very well. We've had a cursory look around. The entry and exit point is surprisingly clean, given the nature of the attack. And the hallway was clean too. Perhaps we'll find something when we get better lighting and some UV lamps. Other than that, nothing definite yet. The blood spray marks on the walls and furniture have me a little confused.'

'Confused?' Sean asked.

'Having seen the victim's wounds, I'm pretty sure the blow to the head all but killed him and it certainly knocked him down. I have a blood spray pattern on a wall that would be consistent with a blow to his head with a heavy object.'

'So what's the problem?'

'If the victim was prostrate when the other injuries were

inflicted then I would only expect to find small, localized sprays, but I've got numerous others, over the carpet, broken furniture, up the walls. They're not consistent with his wounds.'

'Then he must have other wounds we haven't seen yet,' Sean suggested. 'Or maybe the blood is from the attacker?'

'Possibly.' Roddis sounded unconvinced. 'No obvious murder weapon yet,' he continued, 'but it will probably turn up when we get into the search properly.'

'Anything else?' Sean asked, in hope more than expectation.

'There are plenty of corres: address books, diaries, bank books and so on. It shouldn't be too hard to confirm the victim's identity. That's it so far.'

Sean may not have particularly liked Roddis, but he valued his professionalism. 'Thanks. It'll be a help in the briefing. Might keep the team awake.' He hung up.

Reclining in his chair, Sean stared at the lukewarm cup of coffee on his desk. What would it mean if the splash patterns didn't match the wounds on the victim? Had the killer been badly injured himself and the blood sprays came from his wounds? He doubted it, especially if Roddis was right about the victim being all but taken out with the first blow to the head. And if he was knocked down with the first blow, then what the hell were the other injuries about? The answers would come, he reassured himself. Wait for the full forensic examination of the scene, the post-mortem of the victim. The answers would come. They always did.

He stood and looked out of his window down at the station car park. He saw DS Sally Jones outside furiously smoking a cigarette, laughing and joking with a couple of girls from the typing pool.

He watched her, admiring her. A five-foot-three bundle of energy. Her slender athletic legs contrasted with her slightly stocky, masculine upper-body. He tried to remember if he had seen her fair hair not tied back in a ponytail.

He loved her ability to connect with people. She could talk to anyone and make them feel that she was their best friend in the world, and so Sean sometimes used her to do the things he would find impossible to do well. Speaking with grieving parents. Telling a husband his wife had been raped and murdered in their own home. Sean had watched in awe as Sally told people unthinkable things and then half an hour later she would be laughing and joking, puffing on a cigarette, chatting with whoever was close enough. She was tough. Tougher than he would ever be. He smiled as he watched her.

Sean wondered why she was still alone. He couldn't imagine doing this job and then going home to an empty house. Sally told him she was clearly too much for any man to handle. He had often tried to sense some sorrow in her. Some loneliness. He never could.

He checked the time. She was going to be late for the briefing. He could call out the window and warn her, but he decided it would be more fun to leave it.

He walked the short distance along the busy, brightly lit corridor: doors on both sides; old and new posters pinned and stuck to the walls, uniformly ignored by passers-by all too single-mindedly trying to get to wherever they were going to stop and take notice of someone else's appeals for assistance. He reached the briefing room and entered. His team continued to chatter away amongst themselves. A couple of them, including Donnelly, mouthed a greeting. He nodded back.

The team was relatively small. Two detective sergeants – Sally and Donnelly – and ten detective constables. Sean sat in his usual chair at the head of a rectangular wooden table, the cheapest money could buy. He dropped his mobile phone and notebook in front of him and looked around – making sure everyone was there. He nodded to Donnelly, who understood the cue. They'd been working with each

other long enough to be able to communicate without the need for words.

'All right, people, listen up. The guv'nor wants to speak and we've got a lot to get through, so let's park our arses and crack on.' The murmuring faded as the team began to sit and concentrate on Sean.

Detective Constable Zukov spoke. 'D'you want me to grab DS Jones, boss? I think she's having a smoke in the yard.'

'No. Don't bother,' Sean told him. 'She'll be here soon enough.'

The room fell silent, Sean looking at Donnelly with a slight grin on his face. They both turned to the briefing room door just as DS Sally Jones came bursting in. There was a low hum of stifled laughter.

'Shit. Sorry I'm late, guv.' The hum of low laughter grew. Sally swatted one of the constables across the head as she walked past. He threw his hands up in protest. 'I told you to come and get me, Paulo.' The constable didn't answer, but the smile on his face said everything.

Sean joined in. 'Afternoon, Sally. Thanks for joining us.'

'It's a pleasure, sir.'

'As I'm sure you've all worked out, we've picked up another murder.' Some of the team groaned.

Sally spoke up. 'We're only in summer and already we've had sixteen murders on this team alone. Eight still need preparing for court. Who's going to put those court presentations together if we're constantly being dumped on?' There was a rumble of approval around the room.

'No point moaning,' Sean told them. 'All the other teams are just as busy as we are, so we get this one. As you're all no doubt aware, we don't have a live investigation running so we're the obvious choice.'

Sean was prepared for the grumblings. Police officers always grumbled. They were either moaning about being too busy

or they were moaning about not earning enough overtime. It was a fact of life with police.

He continued. 'Okay, this is the job. What we know so far is our victim was beaten and stabbed to death. At this time we believe the victim is Daniel Graydon, the occupier of the flat where we're pretty certain the crime took place. But his facial injuries are severe, so visual identification has yet to be confirmed. We are treating the flat as our primary crime scene. Dave and I have already had a look around and it's not pretty. The victim would appear to have been hit on the head with a heavy object and that may well have been the critical injury, although we'll have to wait for the autopsy to confirm that. The stab wounds are numerous and spread across a wide area. This was a vicious, brutal attack.

'It is suspected the victim may be gay, and the early theory is that it was probably a domestic. If that's the case, then the killer himself could be hurt. We're already checking the hospitals and custody suites on the off chance he was picked up for something else after fleeing the scene. I don't want this to get complicated, so let's keep it simple. A nice, neat, join-the-dots investigation will do me fine.'

Sean looked towards Sally.

'Sally, I want you to pick four guys and start on door-to-door immediately. That time of night, beaten to death, someone must have heard or seen something. The rest of you, hang fire. The lab team is looking at the victim's personal stuff, so we'll have a long list of people to trace and chat with soon enough. I don't expect it to be long before we have a decent idea who our prime suspect is.

'Dave. You go office manager on this one.' Donnelly nodded acknowledgement. 'The rest of you check with Dave at least three times a day for your assignments. And remember,' Sean added, 'the first few hours are the most important, so let's eat on the hoof and worry about sleep when the killer's banged up downstairs.'

There were nods of approval as the group began to break up. Sean could sense their optimism, their trust in his leadership, his judgement. He hadn't failed them yet.

He prayed this case would be no different.

It was almost 1 p.m. and Sean had spent the morning on the phone. He'd told the same story a dozen times. To his superintendent, the Intelligence Unit, the Gay and Lesbian liaison officer, the local uniformed duty officer, the Community Safety Inspector. He was sick of telling. Sally and Donnelly had returned for their meeting and sat in his office. Sally had brought coffee and sandwiches, which Sean ate without tasting. It was the first thing he had eaten since the phone call from Donnelly early that morning, so he was happy just to get something into his stomach.

Between bites they talked, all of them aware they hadn't a moment to waste on a proper lunch. The first days of a murder inquiry were always the same – so much to get through and so little time. Forensic evidence degraded, witnesses' memories faded, CCTV tapes would be recorded over. Time was Sean's enemy now.

'Anything from the door-to-door, Sally?' he asked. 'Give me good news only.'

'Nothing,' she replied. 'I've still got guys down there knocking on doors, but so far all we're being told is that Graydon kept himself to himself. No noisy parties. No fights. No problems. No nothing. Everybody says he was a nice kid. As for last night, nobody saw or heard a thing. Another quiet night in South London.'

'That can't be right,' Sean argued. 'A man gets beaten to death within a few feet of what, four other flats, and no one heard it?'

'That's what we're being told.'

Sean sighed and turned towards Donnelly. 'Dave?'

'Aye. We've managed to make copies of his diary, address

book and what have you. I've got a couple of the lads going through that now. Expect to be informed about next of kin pretty soon. No boyfriend yet, though. No one name coming up over and over. I'll be sending the troops out to trace friends and associates as and when we have their details. Oh, and the Coroner's Officer has been on the blower. The body's been moved from the scene and taken to Guy's Hospital. Post-mortem's at four p.m. today.'

Sean's mind flashed with the images of previous post-mortems he'd attended as he pushed what was left of his sandwiches to one side.

'Who's doing it?'

'You've got your wish there, boss. It's Dr Canning. Anything more from the forensics team at the scene?'

'Not yet. Roddis doesn't reckon they'll be finished until about this time tomorrow, then as usual everything gets sent to the lab and we wait.'

A young detective from Sean's team appeared at the door holding a small piece of paper pinched between his fingers. 'I think I've found an address for the parents.' The three detectives continued to look at him.

'I'll take that, thanks,' Sally told him. The young detective handed her the note and backed away from the door.

Sean knew his responsibilities. 'I'll come too. Shit, this is gonna be fun. Dave, I'll see you back here at about three thirty. You can take me to the post-mortem.'

'I'll be here,' Donnelly assured him.

Sean tugged his jacket on and headed for the door, Sally in pursuit. 'And remember,' he told Donnelly, 'if anyone asks, this is a straightforward domestic murder. No need to get anyone excited.'

'Having doubts?' Donnelly managed to ask before Sean was gone.

'No,' Sean answered, not entirely truthfully. For a second he was back in the flat, back at the scene of the slaughter,

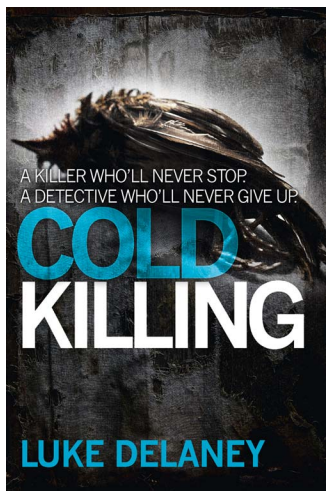
watching the killer moving around Graydon's prostrate form, but he saw no panic or fury in his actions, no jealousy or rage, only a coldness – a sense of satisfaction.

Donnelly's voice snapped him back. 'You all right, guv'nor?'

'Sorry, yes I'm fine. Just find me the boyfriend – whoever he is. Find him and you've found our prime suspect.'

'I'll do my best.'

'I know you will,' Sean told him as he watched him stride back into the main office.



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