

# ONE

## Party Politics

There comes a point in the life of a balloon when it has lost so much air that its taut, festive body becomes sagging, wrinkled and – well, frankly, sad. DCI Ron Carver's retirement party had reached that stage.

Slider cast an experienced look round the upstairs room of the White Horse and saw that the inevitable end was not far away. The young marrieds were eyeing their watches and wondering how soon they could leave. The young unmarrieds were eyeing each other and wondering how soon they could leave. The divorced and miserable were trying with increasing desperation to neck the equivalent of the gross national product of Belgium. A few career bunnies were holding the centre of the room and talking hard about Home Office initiatives and crime statistics. And a few old lags, Carver's bosom buddies, were making a lot of noise in the corner where Carver himself was getting determinedly bladdered.

Carver was a miserable bastard, who had raised resentment to an art form, and his leaving do was appropriately cheerless. The Osman Room – named with no apparent irony after some dreary character in a popular soap – had clearly been decorated by someone with terminal depression. There was a table with food – mini pork pies, scotch eggs, and the sort of sausage rolls that bend. There was drink – party kegs of beer, and a few grudging bottles of Australian *shardonay* for 'the wimmin': female police officers, and a boot-faced civilian clerk who had already done eight years hard as DS Benny Cook's mistress, with no hope of parole.

There was even a cake, a vast flat rectangle covered in rubbery fondant icing, decorated with Carver's name and two dates, as though it were his tombstone. Inside, Slider knew from sad experience, the cake would be a desiccated industrial

‘sponge’, sandwiched with a red substance in which even the most detailed DNA test would fail to find anything related to the raspberry.

It wasn’t just that Carver was retiring. Because of the cuts every borough was having to make, his departure was being made the excuse to disband his firm. It was the end of an era, as someone was bound to say – as Borough Commander ‘Dave’ Carpenter did actually say in a short, all-purpose speech delivered when he ‘popped in’. No one had expected him to find the time in his busy schedule. Slider couldn’t decide whether it was a tribute to Carver’s long service, or relief that he was going.

Carver belonged to the old-fashioned, Gene Hunt school of policing. Whatever it took to get chummy sent down, do it – just try not to leave marks. He’d had many brushes with the internal complaints system, but thanks to his golf and Masonic connections he’d always been snatched from the brink by some patron among the brass. But the times they were a-changing. When Slider and Carver had joined the Job, everyone, from the commissioner downwards, began the same way, out of Hendon and onto the beat to learn policing from the bottom up. It created a brotherhood. Now the brass parachuted in from the universities with degrees in sociology, and spreadsheets instead of blood in their veins. One could not imagine the likes of Commander Carpenter pulling Carver’s chestnuts out of the fire. Carver had known when Carpenter’s predecessor, Commander Wetherspoon (one of his greatest fans) got kicked upstairs that his time was running out.

‘You should grab the chance and go as well,’ he had told Slider at the beginning of the party, when he was still comparatively sober (his breath smelt of whisky, but he’d started early with a bottle in his room). ‘Don’t be a mug. Get out while you’ve still got some life in you.’

‘And what are you going to do, Ron?’ Slider had asked.

‘Me? I’m retiring, full stop. More time for golf and the missus,’ he’d declared smugly.

Most of Slider’s firm had left the party now, and there was a definite feeling of winding down. He’d only stayed this long to see his own people safely off, and because Joanna was working, so home was not the irresistible attraction it might otherwise have been. But enough was enough. He drained the last of his

flat beer and looked round for somewhere to deposit the plastic cup; and suddenly Carver was by his side.

'You going?' he demanded. Either he was swaying slightly or a tube train was passing under the building.

'Just off, Ron. Lovely do. I wish you all the very best,' Slider said.

Carver had reached the sad and frank stage of inebriation. 'It's a rotten party,' he said, slurring slightly. 'End of a rotten career.'

'Oh, don't say that.'

'What've they done to the Job, eh? Answer me that. Real coppers shat upon from a great height. Load o' bloody ponces in the top jobs, never walked a beat in their lives. And now there's not even going to *be* any beat.'

It was the latest pronouncement from on high: coppers were better employed in front of computers. Walking the beat never solved a crime. There would be no more of it. No more local bobby. No more *evenin' all*. No more size twelves pounding the pavement.

'It's the end of an era,' Slider said, with more sincerity than Carpenter had managed.

'You and me, we're old school. We know what's what. These bloody ponces, like Carp-Carpenter . . .' He stared at Slider, and veered off on a new tack. 'You should have got out while you had the chance. They'll be after your head now. You must have been bloody daft to go after Millichip. He won't forget it.'

'It wasn't just him. There are others.'

'He's the one that matters. Get him, you've got the lot. They gotta protect him. What were you thinking? He was gonna hold his hands up just like that? Operation Neptune, my arse! My dimpled bloody arse! He's not going down, chum, you are. He's an assistant commissioner. You must have been off your chump, accusing him. And you got no evidence, that's what gets me,' he went on peevishly. 'Nothing. One witness – a crackhead tart, say anything for a price. What made you think the CPS would wear it? You're fricking bonkers! But she won't testify – you mark my words. The fix has gone in.'

Slider felt a slight chill down the back. Carver had contacts. 'What have you heard?' he asked.

Carver didn't answer. His mind had wandered off, and he was surveying Slider with an expression usually reserved for things found on the bottom of a shoe. 'I never liked you, Slider,' he pronounced.

'And I never liked you, too, Ron,' Slider answered warmly. It didn't matter what he said now – Carver wasn't listening.

'You know what your trouble is? You never had any loyalty. It's us and them. Coppers and slags. That's it, in the Job. We stand together. But no, you thought you were better than the rest of us. Had all these fancy ideas about integ—' He belched. '—rity. Where's the bloody integrity letting some slag get off on a technicality? Rule number one,' he said, poking a forefinger into Slider's chest. 'You never. Shop. One. Of. Your. Own.'

The finger hurt. Slider gently redirected it. 'I'll try to remember that.'

'Going after Millichip,' Carver said with a disgusted shake of the head. 'He may be brass, but he's one of us, when kick comes to shove. But that's you all over. No bloody loyalty.' He swayed. Another abrupt change of tack. 'How's the wife? She not here tonight?'

'She's working,' Slider said. 'She's doing a West End show.'

Carver goggled at him in astonishment, trying to focus eyes and thought. '*Irene's in a musical?*'

'Joanna,' Slider said patiently. 'I split up with Irene years ago.'

'I liked Irene,' said Carver. 'Nice girl. Smart dresser. Not like my old cow. You know what I hate most in the world? In the whole bloody world?'

Slider couldn't guess.

'Trousers on wimmin'. What's erotic about that? Whatever happened to skirts and stockings, eh?'

'Beats me,' Slider said.

'Wimmin everywhere. Menstruating. Having babies. Menopausal. Can't get a lick of work out of 'em. And they're all wearing bloody *trousers*! No more legs. No more stockings. What's the point of it all?' Actual tears came to Carver's eyes, and eased out onto his cheeks. 'Elastic-waisted trousers. That's what mine wears. Looks like a bloody whale. Arse the size of a football pitch. And I'm retiring. You know what that means?'

His voice went right off the pathos scale. *'More time for golf and the missus.'*

A hullabaloo behind Carver resolved itself into half a dozen voices shouting, 'The cake! Cut the cake! Time to cut the cake, Ron!'

'Fuck the cake,' Carver said quietly and with great sincerity. He looked into Slider's eyes. 'Real coppers, we were,' he said. There was an instant of connection between them, and a sense washed through Slider of all that was lost when the modern world forgot where it came from; a sense of time running out for all of them. Then Carver wiped the tears off his cheeks with a forefinger, turned and walked away, his normal cocky, slightly rolling walk, to join his cronies.

Slider was left with a bolus of sympathy he didn't know what to do with. It was most unwelcome.

Monday morning began with bones. McLaren took the phone call, breaking off from hand-to-mouth combat with a bacon baguette.

'You're disgusting,' Swilley said as he sprayed crusty flakes in the attempt to say 'CID room'. 'What would your girlfriend think if she could see you now?'

McLaren put down the baton carefully, balancing it across the top of his coffee mug, said, 'Yeah, I'll hold,' into the receiver, and had the leisure to answer Swilley. 'Nat wun't care,' he told her. 'She likes a bloke with an appetite. She's only little, but she can put it away herself all right.'

'Ah,' Atherton murmured on his way out. 'A gastro-gnome.'

But McLaren was now listening to the call. He didn't generally catch Atherton's witticisms anyway. He thought wit was a description of the weather in New Zealand.

A garden contractor starting to dig out foundations for a shed had unearthed a large bone and called the police. Uniform decided it ought to be investigated and Mackay from Slider's team went out. When he reported back that he thought the bone was human, Slider sent McLaren to assist while the SOC diggers were sent for, carefully to uncover whatever else might be there.

Mid-morning, Swilley appeared at Slider's door. 'The bones, boss,' she said. 'Mackay says they're definitely human.'

Slider looked up. 'How definitely?'

'The whole skeleton's there. Doc Cameron's on his way. The builder had the sense to stop when he uncovered the first one, so there's not too much damage. Uniform's got the owners corralled in the house – yuppie couple. The husband's kicking up blazes, apparently – wants to be let go to work.'

'All right, send someone down to keep him happy.'

'I'll go, boss.'

Slider eyed her. Tall, athletic, blonde and attractive. 'No, you might inflame the wife,' he said. 'Send Gascoyne – he's got an emollient personality.'

'If you say so,' said Swilley, though Slider didn't know whether she was doubtful about the man or the vocabulary.

He returned to the sea of paperwork that these days covered his desk. It never grew any less, because every time he left the room for a moment, elves would come and deposit some more. There had always been annoying paperwork, but of recent years, what with political correctness, pressure groups and the increasing litigiousness of the British Public, it had seemed to become not an adjunct, but the whole purpose of The Job. Sometimes he made an attempt at sorting the stuff into piles, but searching for something specific just spread them out again. It was an intractable mass. There were layers at the bottom that were turning into peat.

On a trip to the loo, to get away from it for a minute or two, he bumped into Detective Superintendent Porson, his boss, coming out, shaking his big chalky hands to dry them. 'Out of paper towels again,' he said irritably, glaring at Slider as though it were his fault. 'I hate them bloody blower things.' Slider whimsically pulled out his handkerchief, but Porson, with a stern look, advanced one hip and said, 'Get mine out of my jacket pocket.' And while he wiped his hands dry, still staring at Slider, he said, 'Got anything on?'

Slider repressed the facetious answer that sat up like a dog smelling sausage, and said, 'Human remains unearthed this morning in a garden in Laburnum Avenue.'

'Laburnum?'

'On the Trees Estate.' It was the officially unofficial name for a small development off the Uxbridge Road.

'Right. Laburnum. What sort of remains?'

'A whole human skeleton, apparently.'

Porson looked pleased, for some reason. 'Old bones. Lovely. Something for you to get your teeth into.'

'Sir?' Slider said with an effort. *Down, Fido!*

'Keep you busy,' Porson explained. 'Usefully employed and out of everyone's hair. You can't upset anybody looking into old bones.'

'You mean—?'

Porson took on a worrying hint of kindness. 'You know you aren't Mr Popular in some circles. Now *this* won't put anyone's toes out of joint. Sort it out, it's good publicity for The Job, bit of bon for you.'

'You want me to prioritize it?' Slider queried innocently.

'Get stuck in!' Porson invited, with a nod of his massive head, and strode on.

'Roger that sir,' Slider murmured. Direct order from the boss. Bye bye paperwork, hello fieldcraft. He returned via the CID room, where his minions were toiling over their various routines. 'I'll give it half an hour more for Doc Cameron to do his stuff, then I'll go over to Laburnum myself,' he announced. Eyes were raised in hope. DS Atherton, his friend and usual bagman, wasn't there – out on some business with the sergeant's envied freedom. He thought of the indignant yuppie couple and Fido grinned and wagged again. 'Hart, you can come with me.' Hart was black and sassy with a gorblimey London accent. Emollient she was not.

'Right, boss,' Hart said with a happy grin. 'Old bones. Lovely!'

Odd that Porson had used the same words, he thought.

When Slider's firm had uncovered an underage sex ring implicating many high-ups, including an MP, Gideon Marler, and their very own Assistant Commissioner, Derek Millichip, he hadn't expected to be Mr Popular. He half expected it to be buried. But the story had broken in the newspapers, so there was no covering it up. The media were all over it, as they always were in cases of celebrity sex. Glee, *schadenfreude* and prurience made a heady mix – one sniff, and newshounds bayed at the stars and lost all sense of proportion.

So a special investigation team had been set up by the Sexual Offences unit, and – the high point for Slider’s optimism – they had issued the code name Neptune. A code name conferred legitimacy on an investigation. Operation Neptune had entered the media’s vocabulary, and after the first excitement, there had been a steady updating of interest, with a piece every week or ten days to keep the show going.

But lately things had gone quiet and there had been no mention of Neptune in the papers for weeks. This was not altogether unusual when a complicated investigation was going on, but Slider couldn’t help feeling uneasy. None of his firm had been included in the Neptune Team, which had disturbed him from the beginning. It looked as though they didn’t trust him or his people. All their papers and notes had been taken away, and they had been told to keep their heads down and mind their own knitting.

The only aspect of Neptune that continued to exercise the great and good, as far as Slider was concerned, was the question of who had leaked the story to the newspapers. Officially, a witness had gone voluntarily to the press, and there was nothing anyone could do about that. But internally, the brass was convinced that someone had taken the press to the witness, and they wanted to know who. They wanted to discipline someone. They wanted revenge. The freelance journalist who started it all had decided, unusually, to remain anonymous and, in the face of police pressure, the fourth estate had closed ranks and kept it that way. Officially, nobody knew who it was. Unofficially, the grapevine said it was a female journalist newly returned from the States.

Slider was the obvious suspect for the leak, having been told over and over to back off, and having refused to. He had been in trouble before and was not liked at headquarters. Furthermore, Atherton’s current lady friend, Emily, was a journalist and, coincidentally, had recently returned from the States. It looked like a dead cert: Slider, or Atherton with Slider’s connivance, had brought Emily and Shannon Bailey together. Every member of Slider’s firm had been separately questioned, and Slider and Atherton had been called in and grilled several times.

Slider had simply said it wasn’t him and he didn’t know who it was, or even if there had been a leak at all, which was the



truth. What Atherton said he would never enquire. He had always been very down on leaks, and he did not want to suspect anyone in his own firm, particularly Atherton.

He didn't like to think that Atherton would deliberately leak the story, but he could see a scenario where, for instance, he hinted to Shannon that she go to the press, and dropped Emily's card somewhere Shannon would find it. Would that be enough for Atherton to face the IPCC and say, 'I didn't leak the story,' without blushing?

But here was another point: there was little doubt that without the pressure from the press, the case would probably not even have got as far as being assigned a code name. Was it unfair of him to believe that Atherton was capable of breaking the rules in a good cause and lying about it afterwards with a clear conscience? Was that even an accusation? Perhaps there was another, equal standard of morality that said achieving the right outcome was more important than following the rules.

He had always been something of an absolutist about the law. It was his way of dealing with an impossible world: the morass of human fallibility; the confusion of emotion and self-justification he met every day; the cruelty, stupidity and selfishness of wrongdoers. Something had to be clear-cut. You obeyed the law, whether you agreed with it or not, because anything else was chaos.

At the other end of the spectrum lay Carver and his boys. No doubt they had started off doing what they did for the very best of motives; but he was aware out of the corner of his mind that they had slipped from that purity. All power eventually corrupts. There had been shady doings that were not for the benefit of the community. There had been sexual favours and kickbacks. There had been revenge, prejudice, self-advancement – and just plain carelessness.

The question before Slider now was, did there exist a middle way that was morally superior to either end? As Carver had said, where was the morality in letting a slag get off on a technicality? Slider had always resisted that lure, because it led to a slippery slope. If the law does not decide, who does? Whose opinion, whose judgement, is better than whose? And yet, and yet . . . Those girls. Their casual abuse. Tyler and Kaylee, dead and tossed aside like screwed-up sandwich wrappers. It hurt him to

let them down; and it hurt him more to think that perhaps he could not do his job within the constraints laid upon him by the law, by his superiors, by himself. If you could only beat corruption with corruption, the game was over.

He shook that thought away. No self-dramatising. Pragmatism was the way to go. Take it day by day, step by step. You did your best, and that was all you could do. And since he had difficulty with lying in response to a direct question, it was perhaps to the good that Atherton had done what he had done – if he had indeed done it; and better still for him, Slider, simply not to know about it, so as to be able to keep saying so with conviction.

Meanwhile, he could not help noticing the looks of dislike he got from senior brass when he happened to bump into them at Hammersmith, or the attitude of the inquisitors when he was called up yet again for questioning. Perhaps Porson was right, and these old bones might be a step on the way to rehabilitation. Of course, when Porson had told him to prioritize it, he had probably not meant Slider should go in person and do the footwork. But Slider was willing to interpret it any way that put a respectable distance between him and the festering midden of paperwork waiting for him on his desk.

Now *that* was pragmatism.

## TWO

### Posh and Vexed

**T**he Trees Estate, so called because the streets had the names of flowering trees, was built by a speculator in the 1890s. Some had terraced houses, but Laburnum had small neat semis in red brick with white trim, designed for aspiring clerks and shop assistants. With the recent London property boom, they were now highly desirable properties, with the single drawback that they had been built, of course, without garages. That didn't prevent the current owners from buying cars. The kerb on both sides was parked, reducing the roadway to one car's width, and many of the houses had had their front gardens converted to hard standing.

Number fifteen was towards the middle of the street, and the SOC sprinter and Dr Cameron's Jaguar were parked on its apron. Presumably they had removed the owner's cars and the contractor's van to make room. Uniform had got the blue-and-white tape going, had temporarily closed the road to traffic and were keeping interested residents at a respectful distance.

Slider was aware of an unusual sensation as he hunted for a parking space, and paused mentally to examine it. Ah yes, that was it: time. With a skeleton, the murder had to have happened long ago. There was no desperate race to collect clues while they were still warm and interview witnesses before they dispersed, colluded or forgot. No pressing need to canvass the neighbours, leaflet at the nearest tube station, examine CCTV tapes. The old saying, you have forty-eight hours to solve a murder, didn't apply. You could go at it in a leisurely manner. It was a refreshing change.

He and Hart stepped out into the hazy autumn sunshine. The sky was milky blue, the sweet, warm smell of pavements was in the air, and though there was a marked absence of laburnums, those front gardens that hadn't been sacrificed to the great god

Car were still bright with summer bedders in jolly primary colours. 'It's a pity we didn't bring a picnic,' Slider said.

'Boss?' Hart gave him a worried look.

'I said, it's a lovely day.'

'Yeah,' said Hart, her expression clearing. 'I'd prefer a fresh corpse, but bones is all right. Better'n the Clapp family and their thievin' bloody kids.'

'Still having trouble with them?' It was a problem family on an estate she'd been dealing with.

'Sometimes think I should just move in with 'em,' she said.

Number 15, like its neighbours, was a halls-adjoining semi, built on the enduring plan of the London Dog-leg, with the stairs straight ahead and the passage dodging round them, past two reception rooms, to the kitchen at the back. D'Arblay, the uniform holding the door, told them that the owners, the Freelings, were in the front room with Gascoyne, and the contractor, whose name was Hobbs, was in the back room with McLaren.

'I'll have a look at the garden first,' Slider said.

The house was obviously a work in progress, because the two rooms he glimpsed as he passed seemed to be freshly decorated in modern style, but the kitchen had tired melamine units, and beige wall tiles decorated with a motif of tomatoes and corncobs. The worktops, however, were littered with top-of-the-range gadgets that had yuppie written all over them. His eye was caught by a gleaming multi-function coffee machine so complex it looked as if it could have launched space probes. It reminded him he hadn't had his mid-morning tea. If the householders were friendly and open-hearted, maybe they could be induced to brew up.

But first, the garden. It was a decent size for inner London, about eighteen feet wide by twenty-five long. There was six-foot high wooden fencing round the three sides, looking new and orangey, not yet faded by the weather to decent unobtrusive brown. Down the right side of the house was a passage leading to a high gate, the normal arrangement, and the only access into the garden other than through the house. The growing part of the garden was typical of the efforts of people who don't like gardening, consisting of a rectangle of lawn, an unkempt flower bed down the left-hand side, and a concrete path down the right side, scored in a clumsy attempt to make it look like crazy paving.

Beyond the side fences, all that could be seen were the taller plants in the neighbour's gardens. Over the back fence waved the top of a leylandii hedge, and behind it a glimpse of the upper parts of the house in the next street, Colville Avenue. It was an altogether more substantial building, evidently three-storeyed by the size of the dormer window in the roof. Laburnum was the last street in this particular development: beyond it the houses were from an earlier Victorian period.

The path on the right had evidently led to the old garden shed, which was now a heap of fractured wood in the middle of the lawn. Beside the heap was a wheelbarrow standing on a plastic tarp, together with some tools, a bag of sand and a bag of cement. Where the shed had stood, the forensic tent had been erected. Inside, the shed's footprint was a patch of bare earth about four feet wide and six feet long, and beyond that, between it and the back fence, was the grave. Freddie Cameron, the forensic pathologist, was kneeling beside it under the arc lamps, while a forensic digger leaned on his spade observing, in case he was needed.

'So he didn't find the body under the shed?' said Slider to Mackay, as they stood in the tent's entrance.

'No, guv. He took the old one down first, but the new one's going to be bigger, going right up to the fence, so he cleared that space and—'

'Cleared the space? What was there?'

'Plastic water butt. Empty. Then he starts digging out the foundations, and up comes this femur. He's a bit upset, the builder,' Mackay added, free of charge. 'The owners are more mad than anything.'

'I'll have a look at the grave first, before I talk to them,' said Slider.

'The Freelings have only been here ten months,' Mackay mentioned.

'Could hardly be their corpse, then,' said Hart chirpily. 'No wonder they're mad. I bet *that* weren't included in the fixtures an' fittings.'

Freddie Cameron, as always, was dapper as an otter, despite being clad in protective overalls. He gave Slider a minatory look as he approached, but Slider could not fathom what it was about.

It was quickly replaced by his usual urbanity. ‘Nice change of pace from the usual frenetic investigation,’ he said. ‘Dem bones aren’t in any hurry.’

‘I was just thinking that,’ said Slider.

He looked down over Freddie’s shoulder. The skeleton looked up at him blankly, naked of flesh and infinitely pathetic. There was something intrinsically disturbing about this huddle of bones, all that was left of a human life once nature had had its way. It made you suddenly, uncomfortably aware of your own bones, safely tucked away out of sight, as they were meant to be, but waiting in the wings, as it were, for their ultimate emergence. There was nothing cheerful about a skeleton. It was the grin that put young people wrong. With no breath of mortality chill on their neck, they could think it was a jolly thing to get dressed up as. That grin was one of God’s awful jokes. Slider had long suspected the Almighty had a somewhat warped sense of humour.

It was lying on its back, parallel with the back fence, and apart from some derangement of the right leg, presumably from the contractor’s initial contact, it looked to have been laid out tidily, as though for a lesson in anatomy.

‘What can you tell me?’ Slider asked.

‘Definitely female,’ Freddie said. ‘From the dentition, I’d say young – thirteen, fourteen, that sort of age.’

‘Oh,’ said Slider. That was not something he’d wanted to hear.

‘Probably been here twenty years at least. The bones are bare and disarticulated, no shreds of periosteum or cartilage, but they still feel relatively solid. This is a nice, dry corner, thanks to the old British Leyland there sucking up the moisture.’ He nodded upwards at the fronds of the hedge waving over the top of the fence. ‘So the rate of deterioration won’t be as fast as it would have been in wet, acid ground.’

‘Understood.’

‘So, taking one thing with another, I’d plump for twenty years, give or take.’

‘Give or take what?’ Hart enquired over Slider’s shoulder.

Freddie gave her an old-fashioned look, the sort that showed itself to best advantage over a pair of half-moon glasses. ‘It’s not an exact science. Twenty years is an opinion based on

experience. Could be twenty-five. Could be fifteen. What am I sure of? That it's not as much as fifty, not as little as five.'

'That's me told,' said Hart meekly. 'Sorry, Doc.'

'An historic case, then,' Slider said. 'Any obvious injuries?'

'No visible fractures. No trauma. Everything seems intact and undisturbed, bar the builder's work. Interestingly, there are no remains of any clothes.'

'Would there be?' Hart queried.

'Cloth, especially man-made fibre, deteriorates more slowly than human tissue,' Freddie told her. 'And it doesn't get eaten by ants and beetles and so on. It's not unusual to find scraps of clothing even after fifty years. Leather, as in shoes and belts, lasts even longer. Metal zips and buckles, longer still. Jewellery, more or less for ever. But there's nothing at all here. I'd say the body went into the grave naked.'

'Oh,' said Slider again. His mouth turned down at the implication, but he said neutrally, 'It's quite a shallow grave, isn't it?'

'Amazing how often they are,' said Freddie. 'Idiot mentality – out of sight is out of mind. Like sweeping the dust under the carpet. If you can't see it, it doesn't exist.'

'You'd think they'd worry about someone digging it up by mistake,' said Hart.

'I'm slightly surprised that it wasn't disturbed at any point,' said Freddie. 'Urban foxes weren't as prevalent twenty years ago as they are now, but they were around, and there are still dogs and cats and rats that can dig. But apparently there was a rain-water butt standing on top of it. Perhaps that protected it.'

'Perhaps it was meant to,' Slider said.

'Well, I'll get the remains back to the lab and do some more investigation, work out the height, make a record of the teeth, see if there's anything more I can tell you. Worth taking a DNA sample?'

'There'll have to be an official identification at some point,' Slider said. 'If we can find anything to match it against.'

'Right. I'll get one off, then.'

'Garden contractor' was too grand a description for Jim Hobbs: it appeared he was a one-man band, and only did small jobs, clearing overgrown gardens, putting up fences and building walls,

laying patios and so on. He was a big man in his late fifties, weathered face, grizzled hair, and enormous hands, thick-fingered, scarred of knuckle, wooden from long and cruel exposure to cold and wet. He lived in Acton, where he had once had a larger enterprise employing several men and undertaking full garden makeovers.

‘But you can’t get the help nowadays,’ he said. ‘Kids don’t want to do physical work. Sooner muck about with computers. Every time I get myself a boy, he only lasts a couple of weeks. I can do without that aggro. So I reckon I’m better off on my own.’ He offered the first, tentative smile, as if he wasn’t sure it was all right to smile at a policeman, or in the presence of death. His eyes were pale blue and direct. ‘It’s my semi-retirement, if you like.’

‘More time for golf and the missus,’ Slider murmured.

‘S’right,’ Hobbs said. ‘D’you play golf?’

Slider avoided that one. ‘How do you know the Freelings? Have you worked for them before?’

‘No. I’ve never worked in this street before, though I did do a job in Magnolia last year – that’s two streets over. But I’ve started putting an ad in the local freebie paper, and Mrs Freeling give me a ring from that.’

‘When was that?’

‘Be – what? – two weeks ago. Two weeks last Saturday. Wife took the call. Mrs Freeling said would I take down an old shed and put up a new one, and Judy – the wife – put her in the diary. Never met her till today. I got here just before seven – I like to start early when the light’s good. And before the traffic starts. They were having their breakfast. They let me in down the side gate, I took down the shed – well, it was falling apart, prac’ly came down on its own. They said they didn’t want the water butt or the slabs—’

‘Slabs?’

‘Butt was standing on two old concrete slabs – to level it, I s’pose. It must’ve been connected to the guttering round the shed at some point, but there was no pipe going into it when I got here, and it was empty.’

‘Right. Go on.’

‘Well, I put ’em on my van. I can always find a use for ’em.



Then I started digging and up come the bone.’ A look of distress crossed his broad features. ‘Straight away I thought it looked like a human bone. Too big for a dog to’ve buried it. What a life!’

Slider concurred. Hobbs seemed a straightforward bloke whose involvement was purely coincidental. He had already given his contact details to McLaren, who had been in the middle of taking his statement. Slider told him to finish it and let Mr Hobbs go. The gardener looked hugely relieved, but with a hint of disappointment. Slider supposed it made a nice change of speed to be at the centre of a drama – even one twenty years out of date.

The Freelings – Toby and Nicola – were smart young people in their early thirties which, if Freddie was right about the length of time the body had been underground, ruled them out from the start. Toby Freeling apparently hadn’t thought that far, because he was seething with the self-righteous indignation of someone who thinks they are about to be blamed for something they didn’t do.

‘Look here,’ he attacked Slider as soon as he appeared, ‘it’s completely outrageous to keep me here like this. This whole thing has got nothing to do with me. I’ve got important meetings I’m missing.’ His smart phone, clutched in his hand, rang, and he gave it the distracted look of the owner at one of those small, yappy dogs that are constantly demanding attention.

Slider studied him while he answered it. He was slim and of middle height, in a sharp suit, with an expensive textured haircut, and enough designer stubble to have housed a clan of very picky field mice. His face missed being handsome by only a few degrees. Probably if he had smiled it would have made it. His wife was smaller, pretty, very dark of hair and eyes, and in a flowered print dress; she appeared to be slightly pregnant.

‘If I lose business because of this I shall sue!’ he resumed when he’d finished the call.

‘Keep your hair on, sir,’ Hart answered him. ‘It’s a serious thing, turning up human remains in your garden. We gotta do everything by the book.’

He gave her a furious look and was about to retort but the phone rang again and distracted him.

Slider turned his attention to the wife. She was placatory where her husband was angry, and answered Slider's questions the more eagerly for his rudeness, which had her flicking anxious glances at him as he snapped into the phone. She confirmed what Hobbs had said, that she had rung him in consequence of his entry in the small ads. She was a nervous and discursive witness, and Slider eased her along patiently, gathering that she had wanted to use a different firm but that her husband had vetoed it on grounds of cost and found the Hobbs advertisement himself.

He'd obviously been half-listening because, ending the call at that moment, he chimed in with confirmation.

'It's only a small job. No point in using a big VAT-registered contractor for something like that and getting screwed, cost-wise. Nicky wanted to go with the firm the garden centre recommended. I said no bloody way! They'll have fixed it so they get a kickback – and who do you think ends up paying for that?' He glared at his wife. 'The poor bloody customer!'

'I just thought—' she began weakly.

'You never do think, that's your trouble. Look here,' he addressed Slider. The phone gave a text message warble, he glanced at it and cancelled it. 'Look here,' he began again, giving Slider a firm, straight look as though trying to close a negotiation, 'that body can't be anything to do with us. We've only lived here eight months.' *Ah*, thought Slider. *He's got there at last.*

'Nine,' said Mrs Freeling, anxious to be exact. 'Nearly ten.'

Freeling ignored her. 'It's a skeleton, isn't it? So it must have been there longer than that. I mean, it takes – what? – years to, er, skeletonize. You can't pin it on us.'

'I'm not pinning anything on anyone, sir,' Slider said. 'I'm just making preliminary enquiries.'

'Well, can't you damn well make them and get out of our hair so we can get on with our lives? My wife's pregnant, you know.'

It was a fine non-sequitur. 'That's exactly what I'm hoping to do, sir,' Slider said, at his most emollient.

Hart caught his eye questioningly, and he knew what was on her mind. Where there was one body there might be others. The shadow of Fred West hung around in the back of the mind when female remains were discovered. Thank God these houses had

no cellars. But the whole garden and ground floor would have to be scanned, and if anything showed up, excavated – which would necessitate the Freelings moving out.

Freeling's phone had rung again, and he had answered it, a modern rudeness Slider did not like, so he was saving, in order to relish it more, the news he was going to enjoy delivering – that they were a long way from being out of the Freelings' hair.

The Freelings had bought the house from the Barnards, an older couple – Freeling estimated in their late fifties. Slider had got him to turn his phone off at last, but he kept casting it fretful glances. 'We only met them once, when we first came to look at the house, but they just seemed like ordinary, respectable people.'

'How long had they owned the house?'

'I don't know. I never asked. But a long time, I think – the kitchen was very tired. Well, all the decorations were tired. As you can see.' He waved an arm towards the hall, to indicate the rest of the house. 'We've only just started putting it right. Have you *seen* the kitchen?'

It was a rhetorical question, but his wife opened her mouth to answer, and shut it again quickly when he glared at her.

'Do you know where the Barnards went?'

'No. Why should I?' He was growing indignant again.

'I think,' Mrs Freeling said hesitantly, 'the agent said somewhere in Ealing. He thought they wanted somewhere with a garage. The parking here,' she said apologetically to Slider, 'is very difficult. We had to put our cars out this morning so the builder could come in.'

'He doesn't want to know about parking,' Freeling snapped at her. 'We don't know where the Barnards went, all right?'

It didn't matter. They could find out from the estate agent or the land registry, or if necessary the Electoral Roll.

'And have you done anything in the garden?' he asked. 'Have you worked out there, planted anything, dug anything up?'

'Nothing, except replacing the fence. It's just as you see it now, except for the shed, which only came down this morning. We haven't had time to do anything yet. We're not really keen on gardens, anyway.'

'But you prioritized the fence?'

‘Security. It was in a terrible state, sagging all over the place. Anyone could have just pushed their way through it.’

‘And the shed?’

‘That was practically falling down. But I wanted a bigger one, anyway. I paint,’ he added, with a hint of self-importance. ‘Watercolours. I find it relaxes me after a hard day at work. I need a bit of quiet time to myself to wind down after dealing with clients all day, so we’re putting up a studio for me.’

Mrs Freeling gave an eager, affirming little nod. Slider thought she’d probably be glad to have him go down the garden instead of hanging round the house bullying her. He wondered idly if the new shed would have a door that locked. From the outside.

‘The water butt that stood beyond the shed – was that yours?’

‘No, that was there when we moved in. I didn’t want it – we don’t intend to have any plants to water. We’ll probably be getting rid of the grass – replace it with a polypropylene-polyethylene mix artificial turf. It’s more practical and more hygienic. We’ve got a kiddie on the way – the garden’s going to be his play space and we want it to be safe. It’ll be—’

He stopped himself with a sudden thought. His wife made a small noise of distress and they exchanged a look which Slider could interpret easily enough: our precious child, to have to play in a garden where a corpse was buried?

He wouldn’t give odds on their selling the house and moving somewhere else before the baby was born. In this age where everyone died in hospital, people were squeamish about dead bodies.

At that moment, another uniform, PC Lawrence, poked her head round the door. ‘Doc Cameron’s just going, boss. He’d like a word.’

Slider excused himself, leaving Hart and Gascoyne to start the statements.

Freddie was still outside, his back to the tent, staring absently around him at the garden. In the bright summer sunshine, he looked tired, as though under some strain.

‘There was nothing underneath the skeleton when we moved it,’ he said. ‘I don’t think it can have been disturbed at all from the time it was first planted. I’ll get it back to the lab and do

some more examinations, but I doubt there's much more I can tell you. Length of time it's been there is always going to be an estimate within wide parameters. My personal judgement.'

'I understand,' said Slider.

'Speaking of personal judgements . . .' He looked around, checking there was no one near enough to overhear.

'What's the joke, Freddie?' Slider prompted.

'Concerning Operation Neptune,' Freddie said. 'Have you heard anything recently? Do you know how it's going?'

'No. It's all gone quiet,' Slider said.

'Suspiciously so?'

'Why do you ask?'

Freddie looked uncomfortable. 'I've heard via the grapevine that they've called in another forensic pathologist to have a look at Kaylee Adams.'

'What for?'

'Who knows? But would it be paranoia to assume it's to second-guess me? I can't see why they would need a second opinion if they were happy with mine.'

It made ominous sense to Slider. 'That's bad,' he said. There was good reason to be paranoid when you knew everyone was out to get you.

'There's worse,' Freddie said. 'The FP they've called in is Sir Maurice York.'

'The Home Office pet?' said Slider. He was the establishment's go-to forensic expert, whose fame had spilled out of technical circles and onto the street, thanks to two popular books and a television series. It didn't hurt that he had a chiselled face and a mane of swept-back silver hair, and a voice so mellifluous you could have spread it on buttered crumpets for Sunday tea.

'The very same,' said Cameron. 'The Home Office has used him before to debunk evidence they wanted debunking. Hence the knighthood.'

'But surely he wouldn't falsify his report?' said Slider. 'Aren't there rules about that sort of thing? Couldn't he be thrown out of the Captain Marvel Club?'

'It's not a matter of falsifying,' said Freddie. 'There's always an element of opinion in these cases. I told you at the time it was my opinion Kaylee Adams had fallen. That was how I read

the post-mortem signs. But another pathologist could read them differently – and given York’s history, I’m afraid he’s going to come up with an extremely persuasive narrative that explains exactly how those injuries are consistent with a hit-and-run incident. Otherwise,’ he went on as Slider began to speak, ‘why are they calling him in? Not just to confirm my findings, given what he charges per hour, and our current budget restraints.’

Slider met Freddie’s eyes. It was what he had been afraid of from the beginning – but it hadn’t happened at the beginning. ‘But who’s trying to quash it?’ Freddie shrugged. It did no good to say it out loud. People at the top had been fingered. If there *was* something going on, that was the obvious place to look. ‘And why now?’ Slider went on fretfully. ‘Why not before?’

Freddie had evidently given the matter some thought. ‘Letting some of the steam out, would be my guess. If they’d had a fight about it at the start it would have got the newspapers even more worked up. It would have looked like a cover-up. Now the story’s gone cold and nobody’s interested . . .’

‘*Why* aren’t they interested, that’s the question,’ Slider said. ‘Why have the broadsheets dropped it?’

Freddie shrugged. ‘Not my province. Maybe they know more than we do. And I could be wrong about the reason for York being called in. There could be a perfectly innocent explanation.’

Yes, there was an explanation, Slider thought, but not an innocent one. The fix had done it, just as Carver said. Whatever his source of information, whether it was a Masonic thing or a nineteenth-hole thing, or just the product of an overactive imagination, he seemed to have been right on the money.

‘Damn them,’ he said quietly, but with feeling.

‘Don’t get involved,’ Freddie said. ‘That’s my advice.’

‘I’m too far down the food chain to get involved,’ said Slider. ‘They won’t ask *my* opinion.’

‘Well, don’t go to the press,’ said Freddie, with the hint of an ‘again’ at the end of the sentence.

Slider looked at him. ‘It wasn’t me. I told you that.’

‘Of course you did, old boy. I believe you. I just mean, let it go. I’m more impugned than you, if it comes to that.’

‘But it makes me mad.’

‘You’re jumping the gun. Maybe I’ve read it all wrong. Maybe

they're preparing the case and they think York will look better in court than me. I just thought you should be warned, that's all. And now I'm off. Love to Joanna.'

'Yes – love to Martha,' Slider responded absently. He stood where Freddie left him, brooding, watching without seeing as the SOC team started their visual search, marking time, waiting for the GPR – Ground Penetrating Radar – equipment to show up.

Then Hart came out. 'Done 'em. Rude git, that Freeling, him and his bloody mobile! I give him the full street, accent and attitude, just to wind him up. It was fun.' She gave him a curious look. 'What now, boss?'

Slider came to. 'Back home,' he said. 'Nothing more for us here until we know the extent of it.'

'How many bodies, you mean?' Hart queried, with relish.

'Don't be ghoulish.'

'Can I help it if I enjoy my job?' she said.