

Prologue

6.44 a.m. Greenwich Pier, low tide, and Maxwell Perkins is walking his dog on the riverbank. He's not expecting to find pieces of a body. He walks on grey clay, wet pebbles and shards of glass, avoiding scraps of wood and discarded car tyres. As he lets the dog, Petra, off the lead he notices the sunlight bouncing off something on the ground. He bends down and pulls at it carefully. Yesterday, he found a medieval pin and a Roman radiate coin. Today, it's nothing more than broken links from a bath plug chain. Disappointed, Maxwell stands up and sees that his dog is sniffing at something in the mud. It's late summer. The heatwave hasn't broken and the temperature is steadily rising. Maxwell wipes away the beads of sweat from his forehead as he walks. His T-shirt clings to the folds of fat on his stomach. At 6.48 a.m., he reaches the dog and sees what has caught her attention.

'Jesus fucking Christ.'

He pulls the dog back by her collar. Adrenalin rushes through his body and his pulse beats in his ears. It's the same feeling he had yesterday when he discovered the Roman radiate coin. Inquisitiveness and excitement, which quickly disappears. Now he is overwhelmed as disgust, fear and nausea sweep over him. His free hand is shaking as he takes out his mobile phone. The phone falls among the wet pebbles. He wipes the screen against his jeans, checks that the camera is clean. He takes a picture of the severed arm.

One mile away, Heather Roszicky, an archaeology professor, is supervising a group of second-year students as they complete their fieldwork on the site of the old Deptford Dockyard. Heather leans against the riverside wall, checks her watch and sighs. It will be another four hours before the tide comes in, but she is eager to leave and return to her office. She needs to finish the final draft of her book on the decline of London river excavations before her editor makes good on her promise to kill her. She's missed her deadline twice and has already spent her advance.

A scream disturbs the calm air and Heather sees one of the students, a girl called Shui, running towards her. The rest of the students are backing away from the moss-covered rocks as Heather runs over to Shui, who has tripped over a piece of wood and fallen to the ground.

'What's wrong?' Heather asks.

Shui shakes her head and begins to cry as Heather pulls her to her feet. The students are talking loudly and all at once as they make their way towards Heather. Someone grabs her arm and pulls her towards the decaying ferry steps. Heather can feel the scream rising in her throat as she looks down into the murky pool of water and sees a headless torso among the black and green jagged pieces of wood.

Christian Matei, a kitchen fitter, is walking towards Nelson Mews, the last cul de sac on Watergate Street in Deptford. The river is not too far away, and he thinks that he hears the sound of a woman screaming but is then distracted by someone playing the trumpet, badly. As he approaches number 15, he opens the gate and throws his empty coffee cup towards the skip on the driveway.

'Shit,' Christian says in his native Albanian as the cup bounces off the side of the skip and falls to the ground. As he bends to retrieve the cup something catches his eye. Half a metre away, a swarm of flies are dancing around an object on the ground. Coffee mixed with stomach acid is making its way up Christian's throat. His vomit covers the flies that are all over the ragged and decaying flesh of the severed leg.

Chapter 1

The important thing was to stay calm. Not to let him see that he was getting to her. Again.

'Rob, I don't have time for this. I'm going to be late for work,' Henley said, grabbing her car keys from the side table.

'That's the problem, you never—'

The sound of the front door slamming shut drowned out the rest of his words, but she knew what they were.

You never have time. Your work always comes first.

Detective Inspector Anjelica Henley looked back at the mid-terraced house with the freshly painted blue door. She wondered, not for the first time, what it said about her that she was happier dealing with rapists and murderers than her own husband. She checked her reflection in the rear-view mirror. She had rushed out too quickly and hadn't had a chance to cover up the small scar on her right cheek and the dark circles under her eyes. Henley's phone cut off the latest road traffic reports from BBC London and STEPHEN PELLACIA CALLING flashed across the screen.

'Where are you?' he said, by way of greeting.

'Good morning to you too. I'm on Deptford Broadway. I'll be about ten minutes,' said Henley.

'Don't come in. I need you to make a detour. The bottom end of Watergate Street.'

'Watergate Street? What for?'

'We've got a case. A bunch of body parts have been found scattered around the area. Too early to say if they belong to the same victim or if it's more than one. Ramouter's already en route. He'll meet you there.'

Henley slammed the brakes as a moped cut in front of her. The tension returned, as quick as a click, twisting through her body. 'What do you mean you're sending Ramouter?' She tried but failed to stop the anger from coating her words. 'What makes you think that I—'

Pellacia ignored her. 'I'm emailing the CAD details to you.' Henley smashed her hand against the steering wheel. The last thing she needed was an over-enthusiastic and inexperienced detective snapping at her heels.

Watergate Street, just off the gridlocked Creek Road, was usually quiet, but now, at 7.40 a.m., front doors were open and the residents clustered outside, wondering why a stream of police cars had assembled on their road. The looming branches of the cherry trees created a canopy over the street, casting an eerie, twilight darkness despite the beating sun. Henley parked her car opposite The Admiral pub, just a few metres from the police cordon where a small crowd was gathered.

Trainee Detective Constable Salim Ramouter was standing on the other side of the tape, a short distance from the crowd. He was dressed in a navy suit, white shirt and tie and Henley could see the shine bouncing off his black shoes. He was new to the team, though not new to the force, and he still looked 'fresh' and untouched by the reality that would soon come with being a detective on the streets of London.

Pellacia had told her that Detective Sergeant Paul Stanford would be responsible for Ramouter. That he would be the one showing him the ropes, not her. Henley had been updating the information on the Crime Reporting Information System known as a CRIS report, for another case, when Pellacia had

made the introductions. Ramouter seemed taller than she had remembered; almost six feet. He had a beard which Henley thought he had probably grown in order to hide his youth.

Ramouter folded and unfolded his arms before settling on clasping his hands behind his back. She didn't like how eager and unprepared he looked, not that she was looking that authoritative. She was dressed in jeans, trainers, a Wonder Woman T-shirt and a blazer that had lain on the back seat of her car for a week. More suited to sitting in an office and not acting as the senior investigating officer on an active crime scene.

'Good morning, Inspector.' Ramouter held out his hand. Henley ignored it.

'Where's DS Stanford?' Henley held up her warrant card to the uniformed police officer who lifted the tape.

'I'm not sure. I was only told to meet you here and to tell you that DC Eastwood is on her way to the Greenwich scene with uniform and Forensics,' Ramouter replied, pulling back his hand and following Henley. They paused briefly outside 15 Nelson Mews. A couple of crime scene investigators wearing blue overalls were crouched on the ground retrieving evidence. A third stood taking photographs of the driveway.

'You do realise where we're going, right?' Henley asked as Ramouter put his hand on the gate.

'We're going to speak to Mr Matei, aren't we?'

'Yes, and when we're done, I suggest that you ask one of the CSIs for some overshoes to put on when we get to the steps.'

It was a short distance from 15 Nelson Mews to the Watergate Steps, where the road narrowed down to a cobblestoned alley. They walked alongside a community park. An older woman and a Chinese girl were standing to the side talking to a policeman.

'That's Heather Roszicky,' said Ramouter. 'She found the—'

'I know what she found.'

As they made their way down the alley, the smell of the river grew stronger. A mixture of stagnant drain water mixed with engine oil. Henley could hear the water breaking against the pebbled riverbank. A large terrace bordered Borthwick Wharf, converted from a meat processing and cold storage facility into a mixture of riverside apartments and commercial space.

Anthony Thomas, a senior crime scene investigator, appeared at the top of the terrace, pulling on a pair of purple latex gloves. Henley wouldn't trust anyone else to protect a crime scene. He was fastidious but, most importantly, he was loyal.

Henley hadn't worked with Anthony at a live crime scene for two years. A memory escaped one of the boxes in her mind: a hazy image of Anthony guiding her into a room to stand on a large plastic sheet. The goosebumps on her skin as the air-conditioning covered her in an icy chill. Not quite hearing the words that came out of Anthony's mouth as he scraped under her fingernails and combed through her hair, waiting for the evidence to fall at her feet. She felt exposed as the doctor examined her and recorded her cuts and bruises on a body map. The realisation that she was the crime – it hit her in the gut with more fire than when the knife had pierced her stomach. They had trained her to be a detective, not a victim.

'I wasn't expecting to see you out and about,' said Anthony. 'Are you coming down to have a look then?'

'It looks that way,' Henley said. She was grateful that Anthony hadn't made more of a fuss that this was the first time he had seen her in the field in two years.

'Great, it will be like old times.' Anthony pulled several pairs of blue overshoes out of a box by his feet and handed them to Henley. 'Who's your friend?'

Henley made the introductions.

'Ah, a newbie. I've got one too.' Anthony pointed to a young man who was standing stock still behind him, holding a camera. He had already zipped his blue oversuit up to his neck. His eyes darted anxiously from Henley to Anthony. 'Fun, isn't it?' Anthony said with a heavy sigh. 'I'll see you down there.'

'Come on,' Henley said to Ramouter. 'Let's see what we're dealing with.'

Henley looked down at the tattooed torso, which was at least five feet from the muddy waters of the Thames. The torso had been severed at the neck and through the thigh bones. Droplets of water glistened off the white skin. It had clearly been propped up between the moss-covered steps and the rotting, broken wood that was once part of the pier. The only thing that Henley could be certain about was that a white male, with a fondness for Manga anime tattoos, had had his legs cut off at the thigh bone, his arms at the biceps. The cuts were not clean and surgical like the severed body parts Henley had seen a few years ago. She had been frozen to the spot the first time she'd seen the separated arms, legs, head and torso, dumped under a railway arch in Lewisham. She had learned to harden herself since then.

Her calves tightened as she squatted down. The head had been cut off just above the Adam's apple. Small hunks of bone were embedded in the ridged windpipe that jutted out among shredded muscle and clotted blood. Yellowing fat and connective tissue had the look of a raw, jointed chicken that had been left out in the air for too long. Henley stood up and breathed in deeply. The wind carried the briny, rotten scent of the river. She couldn't find the compartments in her brain that she used to separate the logical and hardened detective from the damaged and not quite healed woman who was standing at the water's edge.

She stepped away and made her way back up the Watergate Steps. She tried to shake off the sharp prickles of anxiety, but she couldn't get rid of the feeling that the torso had been staged for her.