

A Detective Superintendent
Henry Christie Novel

NICK OLDHAM

FIGHTING
FOR THE
DEAD

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FIGHTING FOR THE DEAD

A Detective Superintendent Henry Christie Novel

Nick Oldham



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First published in Great Britain and the USA 2012 by
SEVERN HOUSE PUBLISHERS LTD of
9–15 High Street, Sutton, Surrey, England, SM1 1DF.

This eBook edition first published in 2012 by Severn Digital an imprint of Severn House Publishers
Limited

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Oldham, Nick, 1956-

Fighting for the dead.

1. Christie, Henry (Fictitious character)—Fiction.
2. Detective and mystery stories.

I. Title

823.9'2-dc23

ISBN-13: 978-1-78010-326-6 (epub)

ISBN-13: 978-0-7278-8213-4 (cased)

Except where actual historical events and characters are being described for the storyline of this novel
all situations in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is purely
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This ebook produced by
Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire, Scotland.

‘Hope you’re not the squeamish sort.’ The white-coated, pasty-faced mortuary technician grinned crookedly at Detective Superintendent Henry Christie who, in turn, blinked, kept a stone face and said curtly, ‘Just open the drawer, please.’

‘Okey-doke,’ the technician said brightly.

The two men were inside Lancaster Public Mortuary, the squat, single-storey detached building within the grounds of Royal Lancaster Infirmary. They were standing in front of the bank of brushed steel doors that opened into the vast refrigerated unit in which the dead were stored at an optimum temperature so that they could be kept for as long as necessary.

There were two rows of square doors and behind each was a sliding metal tray on runners on which might, or might not, be a corpse. The little card slot on each door gave the game away. A card inserted with a name scribbled on it meant the space was occupied. No card meant a vacancy.

Each row consisted of ten doors and all but one had a card in the slot. Nineteen bodies: almost a full house.

From experience, Henry knew this was pretty usual. He had once been in this mortuary during a very severe winter when the place was overflowing with cadavers. Mainly bodies of old people, hit by the freezing weather, and many had been doubled up, laid on top of each other on the sliding tray. Gruesome, slightly weird, but necessary under the circumstances.

Most of the bodies that came through here were from the hospital wards, awaiting onward transportation to an undertaker. People who had died tragically, certainly, but the causes of the death already known and therefore, usually, no requirement for a post-mortem.

But this was also a public mortuary. A place where bodies of people who had met sudden, untimely, unexplained, violent or accidental deaths were brought, kept, then examined to determine the cause. If there were no further complications and the local coroner was satisfied, they would then be released back to their families.

It was also a place to which murder victims were brought.

Henry Christie knew that of the nineteen bodies in the mortuary at that moment, two had been murdered.

One held no interest for him. A female, the victim of a domestic murder, who had already been subjected to a post-mortem. The offender had been arrested, charged and remanded in custody and the dead woman was due to be collected by the family’s undertaker later that day.

Henry knew this because he was a senior investigating officer – SIO – on Lancashire Constabulary Force Major Investigation Team, or FMIT, and had overseen the investigation into the woman’s murder. Now all that remained for him to do was steer the case through the courts and do his best to get a life sentence for the bastard of a boyfriend who’d stabbed her forty-eight times because she hadn’t made his tea for him. Henry was finished with her body and she would soon be making space for the next one.

It was the second murder victim that was of interest to Henry.

‘You sure about this?’ the technician said.

Henry pursed his lips with irritation, decided to say nothing, just nodded.

‘OK then, but masks and gloves first, please. Health and safety, you know,’ he said patronizingly.

Henry fitted the surgical mask over his nose and mouth and eased his hands into the latex gloves.

with a 'snap'.

The body was behind the door on the lower far right of the unit. Henry guessed it had been moved over time. When bodies were brought into the mortuary, they were usually slotted into spaces near the double doors. If they stayed for any length of time, which was fairly unusual, they tended to get shuffled down the line, away from the door. Most bodies came and went quite quickly.

But this one had been here for over five months.

Henry glanced at the name card in the slot, which read: '*F/male. No ID. Murder Vic.*'

The technician, mask and gloves fitted, gripped the handle of the door and swung it open, then pulled out the tray with the body on it to about two feet. It was at a level with Henry's thighs.

As is the case with all bodies stored post-mortem, it was wrapped in an off-white flimsy muslin shroud from head to toe, rather like an Egyptian mummy.

'I need to see the whole body, please. Unwrapped.' Henry sensed a certain hesitation from the mortuary technician. 'And yes, I'm certain I do. And I'm not squeamish.'

'Okey-doke.'

The technician wheeled a gurney from the side of the room, adjusted the height with a pneumatic foot pump that made little farting noises and slid it into place an inch underneath the tray. He then smoothly pulled out the tray on its hard rubber runners, onto the gurney in a well-practised move. He closed the fridge unit door, but not before Henry got a quick glance inside and saw the rest of the bodies lying on their respective trays, all the way down the unit. Eighteen people, all there for different reasons – but also the same one: they shared death in common.

The gurney was steered across the tiled floor and into the post-mortem examination room.

A steel slab occupied the centre of this room. On it lay the body of an old man, dissected from gullet to groin, his body prised open, ribcage missing, all organs removed, his body cavity like a hollow cave. The top of his skull had also been sawn off and the brain removed.

The pathologist and his assistant who were carrying out this examination, their backs to Henry, were working at a stainless-steel sink and draining board. Henry saw a sliced-up heart and a mass of body organs slopped gruesomely into a pile on the board, all having been dissected and examined. Blood ran into the sink.

The pathologist was holding up the dead man's brain in the palm of his left hand, reminiscent, Henry thought, of a gore-fest version of *Hamlet*. The pathologist was slicing the brain with a razor-sharp knife.

Henry looked away, focusing on his body of interest.

The technician carefully unwrapped the shroud, revealing the corpse. Henry watched, his features still set hard behind the face mask, thinking how difficult it was to do a catch-up on what was essentially a cold case. Much better to be in at the death, he thought humourlessly. Almost six months down the line was no time to be picking up a murder investigation.

The body was that of a teenage girl, estimated age seventeen to nineteen.

Henry cringed. It felt like he had only just wound up an investigation into the nasty murder of a teenage girl and now here he was, looking into another. It was this kind of thing that could tip an unstable SIO over the edge. Good job Henry was sound in mind and body . . . 'I wish,' he thought, and concentrated on the task in hand.

Five months in the chiller had given the girl a frosty sheen, but in no way could it disguise what had happened to her.

Beaten, strangled . . . horrifically. Henry knew the details, had them in the file, and looking at her simply confirmed what he'd already read. But he had to look, see the flesh, get a true feel for the murder. Looking at photos in a file told him nothing, gave him no sense or feeling of the crime.

The purple mark made by the ligature to half-strangle her was still deeply indented in her neck.

was believed a man's neck tie had done this. On her cheek there was also the pattern of the sole of one of the shoes that had stamped on her face, which could possibly be useful if a suspect was eventually identified.

The injuries around her head and shoulders, chest and lower stomach, where she had been kicked, stamped on and punched, could still be seen in spite of the terrible scars left by the post-mortem itself.

Her head was an appalling, distorted mess, having been jumped on repeatedly by someone wearing heavy shoes. The dislodgement of her lower jaw, broken in many places and with terrific force, her facial features smashed beyond recognition, did not stop Henry from realizing this had once been a very pretty girl.

His eyes took in all these things. His imagination worked to recreate her last moments of life. He did not like what it saw.

Then he took hold of her left arm, cold like a twig in winter, and turned it gently outwards, to inspect the many needle marks on the inside of her elbow. An addict.

And probably a prostitute, the original investigation had concluded.

That meant an individual who took risks, put herself in possibly dangerous situations and maybe Henry had heard whispered, got what was coming to her.

His nostrils dilated as he thought, 'Screw that.' No one deserves a death like this.

The technician stood back as Henry stepped around the gurney, taking in all aspects of the body. As he stood at her feet and looked up across the body, he saw that, with the jaw having been broken so badly, the girl's mouth was skewed wide open, and with her head tilted back, Henry could see the top set of her teeth, right to the back of the mouth.

He frowned and had to peer to confirm what he saw.

Then, taking his time to walk back alongside the body on the opposite side, he came back to the head.

There was a dirty laugh behind him – the pathologist and his assistant chuckling about something inappropriate, probably.

Henry angled his head slightly to try and pick up what they were saying. He grinned and bent forward to inspect the dead girl's mouth, carefully pushing back the frozen lips to expose the teeth with his fingertips.

They hadn't been a good set to start with. Misaligned, discoloured, possibly from a deprived upbringing and a poor diet, several missing from both upper and lower jaws. Henry's forehead furrowed as he racked his brain, thinking about the missing teeth, and what mention, if any, had been made of them on the file. He couldn't recall anything, but that wasn't to say it wasn't there.

The thought dissipated as he honed in on the reason why his attention had been grabbed by the girl's top set that he could see looking up from her feet. There it was.

He pushed her mouth further open, easy, but unpleasant. He heard broken bone scraping sickeningly against bone in her jaw.

He saw a gold filling in one of the molars right at the back of her mouth – juxtaposed against the poor condition of her other teeth.

Henry stood upright and pouted – though this could not be seen because of the face mask – then glanced thoughtfully across at the pathologist, who was still dissecting the old man's brain and giggling at some shared joke with his assistant, making his thin shoulders wobble.

Steve Flynn was already regretting his hastiness in saying yes to a friend in need. Not because of the task, or the reason he'd said yes, but simply because of the weather.

In the five or so years he had been resident in Gran Canaria, the most southerly of the Canary Islands, Flynn had become a diehard sun bum. Whilst respecting the ferocious power of that hot ba

in the sky, he loved being in it. He loved everything about the consistently high temperature in which he lived, from the early morning stroll to buy fresh bread rolls, to the often steaming midday heat when even he wasn't silly enough to venture out unprotected, to the long languid evenings sitting outside, eating and drinking with friends or clients from the sport-fishing boat he skippered, when it wasn't even necessary to put a thin jumper on at midnight.

It had been a long time since he had woken up shivering – since his last visit to the UK, actually. He tugged the sleeping bag more tightly around himself, not wanting to get up.

He could even see his own breath. A rare phenomenon in Gran Canaria, all too common in Britain.

But finally he knew he had to move, this being the first day of the new job he'd agreed to do. Temporarily, that is.

He kicked the sleeping bag off and sat up on the – supposedly – double bed and looked down the full length of the canal barge on which he had spent his first night back in England, following his early-hours arrival by air from Las Palmas.

He shivered and rubbed the goosebumps covering his arms, making his hairs stand on end.

It was a superbly appointed boat, however. Lovingly restored by his friend from just a bare shell. His friend now in hospital, ready to undergo surgery that day in relation to bowel cancer.

Flynn cringed at the thought. Poor guy, but at least it seemed the disease had been caught in time and a full recovery, minus a third of a bowel, was forecast.

Still feeling grimy from the travel, ducking his head he stepped into the tiny tiled wet room and showered until the hot water ran cold, then shaved and got dressed before making down to the galley where, as promised, there were bacon, eggs, bread and filter coffee.

At home, as he now thought of Gran Canaria, his usual breakfast was a croissant and strong coffee but the bacon and eggs enticed him, so a fry-up it was. He worked hard at perfection at the gas ring: crispy bacon, fried eggs with just-right runny yolks, a nice filter coffee and two slices of buttered toast. Proud of his achievement he took the plate out to the seating area on the rear deck. Though it was very chilly, he wanted to eat al fresco, the hot food contrasting wonderfully with the weather. The coffee went down well.

The canal boat was tethered about two hundred metres east from the actual start of the Lancaster Canal, which began at Glasson Dock. From where Flynn sat, sipping his second coffee, he could see all the way down that straight stretch of water to where the canal merged with the yacht marina at Glasson, beyond which was the sea lock. This lowered or raised vessels down to, or up from, the dock itself. From there the dock opened out into the estuary of the River Lune and beyond to the Irish Sea.

Flynn knew the area well. He was a Lancashire lad and had been a cop in the county until circumstances forced him to leave. He knew Glasson Dock from being a youngster, on day trips with his parents, and when he was a cop. In uniform, very early in his service, he'd been here during the 1984 miners' strike, when Glasson came back to life as a working port, bringing in coal supplies from abroad. This had attracted striking miners and there had been a few confrontations that Flynn had been part of policing.

Then, as a detective in the drugs branch, he had once arrested a high-level drug-runner who had been using Glasson as a landing point for his imported contraband.

Now he was back to help a sick friend.

Henry Christie slouched against the outer wall of the mortuary building, sipping from a cup of coffee bought at the hospital cafe.

He was ruminating about the dead girl and what he would have to do to reinvigorate the investigation into her murder which, in more ways than one, had gone stone cold.

Obviously he had known about the murder, but at the time his mind had been on much more

pressing matters – such as the fast-approaching death of his wife, Kate, from a particularly aggressive strain of breast cancer. Although he had ostensibly been at work throughout the fight for life, he might as well not have been as his head was firmly up his arse. The girl's murder, although it had occurred in the geographical area Henry was responsible for covering, was taken on by one of the other SIOs at FMIT – Detective Superintendent Joe Speakman. But Speakman had suddenly retired not long after the girl's body had been discovered, taking everyone by surprise, and the investigation had seemed to dwindle off to nothing.

Henry had also been considering 'putting in his ticket' – retiring – but Speakman had beaten him to it. This meant that the SIO team was now down to three detective superintendents. In terms of the proposed budgetary cuts this was a 'good thing' and had been on the cards for a while. It also meant that the possibility of Henry quitting was now much more distant because whilst the force was happy to run FMIT with just three supers, and therefore increase their already crippling workload, they couldn't manage with two because if Henry went there was no one in line to replace him.

Henry was amazed to have been approached by the chief constable, begging him to stay on for 'Another year at least, eh, mate?' – and, 'Oh, by the way, you've just inherited all of Joe's ongoing cases and his other responsibilities.'

Henry had said yes, even though he'd made the chief squirm just a little bit. He could have refused and retired. No one could stop him doing that, and whatever the chief said, the force would have to manage. It always did because it had to, and Henry had never overestimated his position within it, just another disposable cog in the machinery. All that his staying on did was give a bit of breathing space for the force to train up the next few SIOs.

Also, he wasn't sure what he would have done if he had retired.

He could have drawn his lump sum and his pension and life would have been OK, but he hadn't made any plans as to how he would occupy his time. He knew he couldn't be one of those who sat around and did nothing all day, every day. Some of the time was fine. But mostly he wanted to be doing something, just hadn't quite worked out what.

Maybe another year was about right. Time to get his head around some planning . . . and see how his new 'relationship' would pan out. That had quite a bearing on everything.

He smiled at the thought of the woman who at that moment was making him very happy indeed. Nice thoughts . . .

He sipped his coffee and shivered. It was a cold morning.

A voice behind him said, 'I believe you want to talk to me about dead people and teeth?'

Midweek and Glasson Dock was quiet.

Flynn sauntered down the canal path, the yacht marina to his left on the opposite side of the canal up to the dock itself, enjoying the stroll despite the chill. He was wrapped in a thick windcheater, jeans, trainers and a scarf thrown rakishly around his neck. He could not remember the last time he had worn a scarf.

The large static caravan serving brews and snacks situated close to the swing-roadbridge spanning the sea lock was open for business. A couple of overweight middle-aged leather-clad bikers clutched mugs of coffee and exchanged pleasantries about their very hairy looking hogs parked nearby.

A double-masted yacht was in the lock and the water level was falling. Flynn watched the pleasant sight wistfully for a moment, then bore diagonally across the road to a row of buildings behind which was the River Lune. The tide was high, but Flynn could see it had begun to ebb. At one end of the road was a pub called the Victoria and at the opposite end was what used to be a pub – the Caribou – but was now converted into apartments. Between the two was a terrace consisting of houses and Flynn's destination: the chandlery.

He entered the shop, inside much more spacious than the exterior suggested, and what was Aladdin's cave of all things relating to small boats and yachts.

Flynn had entered a little corner of heaven. Boats – in particular sport-fishing boats – were his world.

In Gran Canaria he was employed as the skipper of a sport-fisher called *Faye2* and he had left her behind with reluctance to return to the UK, only because of the serious illness of his friend who owned this shop.

He approached the lady behind the counter, who was head down, frowning at some paperwork.

'I think I've died and gone to heaven,' Flynn said.

She looked up, her face instantly breaking into a smile, brightening up all at once. She came out from behind the counter and hugged Flynn, who patted her shoulder blades, and they parted with pecks on the cheeks.

'Did you sleep all right?'

'Pretty good . . . woke a bit chilly, though.'

'I know . . . sorry about that. Later I'll show you how the heating system works, and where everything else is.'

'Sounds good.'

'Steve, I know I said it last night on the way back from the airport, but we are really grateful to you. Colin could only think of you and you dropped everything to help out.'

'He's an old mate and you're a friend too, Diane. Least I could do.'

'How did you square it with your boss?'

'He likes me . . . but I've got ten days, max, then I have to get back. There's a few repeat parties booked in on the strength of my ace personality,' he said humbly. He gave Diane a wink. 'So how about me?'

'I haven't seen him today, so far, but he goes into pre-op this morning, then down to surgery, which will last two to three hours minimum . . . but he's keeping bright.' She gave a helpless shrug, then her face seemed to implode and she burst into tears.

Flynn took her tenderly in his arms and held her just tight enough so she had room to sob and get out of her system, before drawing back and wiping her eyes with the balls of her hands. She wasn't wearing make-up, so there was nothing to smudge.

'Sorry,' she apologized.

'Hey, no problem.'

She regarded Flynn critically. 'Steve, you really are a good man, aren't you?'

'Some say otherwise.'

'No – you really are.'

'Aw shucks,' Flynn said, breaking the moment. He gestured with his hands at the shop. 'My task . . . the one I've accepted . . . is to look after the shop whilst you're otherwise engaged . . . where do you start?'

Diane checked her watch. 'You start today . . . but I haven't got time to show you any of the ropes just now, if you'll pardon the expression. I want to be with Colin before he goes into pre-op . . . hands holding and such like . . . then stay for the operation itself.' Her face creased a little at the prospect but she held it. 'Which means I'll be back here around three, probably. Then I'll show you how it all works. In the meantime, the shop will be closed, but I'll leave you the key and you can mooch around the stock, see what we have. Just kill some time however you like until I get back.'

Henry had recognized the pathologist in the mortuary as Professor Baines, the Home Office pathologist he had known for many years now. They had often met each other over the dead, the

continued to discuss the dead over a pint or two.

~~Baines was at the mortuary to keep his hand in on more mundane matters than his usual murder victims.~~ He was performing a post-mortem on a run-of-the-mill sudden death, an old man who hadn't been seen for a few days and whose neighbours had alerted the police because of the terrible odour creeping out from his flat. This was the body that Henry had seen sliced open on the slab.

Baines had been so engrossed in his task – and impressing his lady assistant – that he hadn't even noticed Henry, but Henry had recognized Baines and asked him for some advice about the dead girl. Whilst waiting for Baines to finish, Henry had got the slightly creepy mortuary technician to put the dead girl back into the chiller then bought a coffee and killed time.

The two men were now standing either side of the tray jutting out from the fridge while Baines carefully eased open the dead girl's mouth and inspected the inside with the help of a mini Magliorini torch.

Baines was an acknowledged expert on dental pathology, having single-handedly amassed a database about teeth over a long period of time. It was a little obsession that had begun when he spent time in Bosnia with NATO, investigating and trying to ID some of the thousands of people who had been murdered and dumped into mass graves. One of the main means was via dental records which were mostly woefully inadequate. This frustration had been the starting point for Baines' database of dentists, dental practices and methods for use in pathology. His work had resulted in his being awarded an OBE for his services to dental forensics.

Henry, who had never yet had to plumb this knowledge, knew that one day all this would come in as useful as Baines peered knowledgeably into the dead girl's mouth cavity, then looked up at Henry and then at the mortuary technician.

'Sort her out and slide her back in,' Baines told the technician. Then, to Henry, he said as he removed one of his gloves, 'Time for another brew? I'll just get washed up and be ready in five. Fancy a stroll into town?'

'Alison, that's the name of this one, isn't it?' Professor Baines said to Henry, who nodded. 'Are there any others on the go?' Baines asked hopefully.

Henry shook his head and Baines seemed crestfallen. He had always been intrigued by the twists and turns of Henry's love life and been devastated when Henry had remarried his long-suffering on-off-on wife/not-wife/wife, but only because it brought Henry's tasty romantic shenanigans to a crunching halt. He had been pleased for Henry, of course, but he did enjoy a certain vicarious pleasure in Henry's romps. When Kate had died, although genuinely upset for Henry, Baines held out a hopeful return for the old ways. Unfortunately, when Henry started a new relationship that seemed serious and stable, Baines was gutted.

Henry grinned. 'She's fantastic,' he told Baines.

'And a landlady! I knew there was a silver lining.'

Henry chuckled and thought pleasant things about Alison Marsh, who he'd met a while back in Kendleton, a quiet village in north Lancashire, where she ran a country pub called the Tawny Owl.

'Is it serious?' Baines probed.

'I hope so,' Henry admitted. 'We'll see.'

The two men had walked the quarter of a mile or so into Lancaster and found a nice cafe on Thurnham Street close to the police station. They served up a Kenyan filter coffee that really hit the spot.

'The gold filling is what interests you?' Baines said, bringing the conversation back to a more professional level.

Henry was puzzled for a moment, then said, 'Now you're talking about a dead girl.'

‘She’s still unidentified, I believe.’

Henry nodded.

Baines pondered. ‘There is a possibility I could help . . . there is other dental work in there, to Older, concrete fillings, but not much left of them. Wasn’t a dental analysis done anyway?’ he asked referring to the already completed PM.

‘I’m not certain. I know it should have been, but I’m not taking it for granted.’

‘I would’ve thought Professor Broad would have done it . . . but you never know.’

‘Professor Broad?’

‘Yes, the pathologist who performed the PM on the poor girl.’

‘How did you know he did it?’

‘The stitching . . . we all do it our own way. Our little signatures, if you like.’

Henry pulled a face. ‘Fancy.’

‘So this is your case, is it?’

‘It wasn’t, but it is now.’

Flynn spent an hour familiarizing himself with the chandlery stock, enjoying every moment of it. For the past five years he had been on a boat virtually every working day, and being on the water was an integral part of his life. Although he skippered a sleek sport-fishing boat, he appreciated all forms of water craft – from the canal boat he’d spent the night on, up to the most luxurious yachts and everything in between. As a consequence he also loved all the bits that held them together and made them work, hence his appreciation of Colin and Diane’s chandlery.

Colin and Diane were retired cops in their fifties and Flynn had met them while he was still in the job. Colin had been a traffic cop and Diane had been involved in child protection. They had become good friends with Flynn and his then wife, Faye, and occasionally went out as couples, with the men talking boats all the time. Back then Colin had restored two canal barges and owned a small power boat, whilst Flynn was merely an enthusiast who helped out when he could.

Colin and Diane retired about the same time and opened the small chandlery in Glasson Dock. Colin continued to refurbish and sell canal boats, one of which was the one Flynn had spent the night aboard. It was due to go up for sale shortly but would be Flynn’s accommodation whilst he stayed in the UK.

Although he could only commit a short time to staying, Flynn hoped it would be enough to help the couple through a tough patch and assess the success or otherwise of Colin’s operation.

If the prognosis was good, Flynn knew the business would continue. If not, it would close without having really got going.

By 11.30 that morning Flynn could probably name every item of stock on the shop floor. What he did not know was how to run the shop or even how to use a till, which is what he needed to learn from Diane before welcoming in customers.

Flynn thought he had plenty of time before Diane came back from the hospital in Lancaster, less than five miles up the road.

Peering out through the front door of the shop he saw that the weather had brightened a touch. The smell of food being cooked at the static caravan wafted across to him, making him suddenly hungry again. A bacon sandwich called. He locked up and walked across, bought the said sandwich and a mug of tea, devouring both on one of the picnic tables in front of the caravan. Then, fortified, he set off for a walk.

His plan was to do maybe twenty minutes along the old railway track, now a public footpath and bridleway that ran parallel to the banks of the Lune all the way up to Lancaster.

Flynn enjoyed the quite desolate views north up the river, still one of the country’s finest salmon and trout rivers.

The tide had ebbed further, exposing treacherous sand, mud and grass banks and water channels and the water level receded.

He walked away from Glasson, bearing left along the footpath, seeing not another soul. He reached the old single track rail bridge at Conder Green, under which the tiny River Conder emptied into the Lune estuary. He paused here, looking inland towards the Stork, a pub by the A588, which he planned to visit at some stage during his stay. Then he turned outwards, looking west across the river.

It was a very wild, untamed location and he liked it very much.

His eyes drew back until he was looking straight down into the muddy water, flowing quite quickly away underneath his feet, like a plug had been yanked from a drain.

Which is when he spotted the body.

The body floated underneath the bridge, dragged by the fast-retreating tide, along the main channel of the River Conder. Flynn watched it, slightly mesmerized initially, as it rolled gently in the water, its limbs moving as though doing some kind of lazy swimming stroke.

At first the body was face down, head under water, but as it emerged fully from below the bridge and the tug of the tide altered, it swished around onto its back. From less than twenty feet above the water, Flynn saw it was a female, maybe mid-thirties, dressed in a short jacket and black jeans with a cut-off Wellington boot on the left foot, the right foot bare. The skin of the face was tight, white-blue, the features distorted by its time in the water, maybe even starting to rot away now. But the eyes were still there. Open.

With a gush and a slurp of the tide, the body increased speed. The legs seemed to kick, the whole body spun around so it was now heading feet first towards the Lune estuary.

Flynn cursed.

He looked at the geography between himself and the main channel of the Lune. There was even a chance the body might lodge in one of the many muddy channels. Also a chance that the tide would suck it out into the Irish Sea, never to be seen again. Or drag it back up on the next tide to be deposited somewhere completely different.

It could go any of those ways.

Flynn ran to the end of the bridge and scuttled down a short set of rusting iron steps onto the hard grass exposed by the tide fall. It was wet and soft – but not as wet and soft as the sandbanks.

He leapt across two tight channels, by which time the body was even further away. He took two more with the agility of a mountain goat and found himself on a clump of grass next to the main channel of the Conder, about three metres away from the body, just out of reach even stretching. Flynn knew he would have to enter the water if he was going to grab it.

He knew something else, too: This would not be like stepping into the warm Atlantic waters of Amadores beach, Gran Canaria.

He was right.

As he carefully eased his trainer-clad right foot into the water, holding his balance whilst feeling it sink into the slurpy mud, the sheer coldness of it hit him and seemed to swarm up the veins in his leg like a jolt of freezing electricity.

The body wafted further away.

He knew he could not hesitate, otherwise it would be gone. He trudged forwards, both feet now in the water, so incredibly cold. In a moment he was calf-deep, then knee-deep, and with his feet in the mud, it was a huge effort to actually take a step. It was like walking through molasses.

Ahead of him, the body did a quick spin.

Flynn then felt the power of the tide at the back of his legs, pushing his knees – but he forced himself on, keeping upright and walking like a toy robot as he dragged his feet.

Then the body twisted into an ugly angle and ran against a muddy bank, pausing as if to take breath. The head seemed to pop up at a loose angle and look at Flynn.

He saw his chance. He pushed himself on, trying to run before the body moved again out of reach. He lunged to grab hold of a sleeve, missed, lunged again and this time grabbed the dead woman's left hand, which felt terrible, cold, delicate and awful.

Flynn's face creased in horror, but he held on, conquered the urge to recoil, and pulled the body towards him and took hold of the neck of the jacket.

He waded back against the flow of the tide, but felt like he was losing hold, so, as unpleasant as it was, he scooped her up into his arms as though she was a corpse bride, then stumbled across the channel and up the nearest bank to lay her as delicately as possible on a grassy mound and sank down on his sodden knees alongside her.

Having gone as far as he had, Flynn thought it only right and proper to finish the job and carry the body up onto dry land, to a point where the emergency services could easily get to her. Not that she needed an ambulance now, but paramedics usually turned out to such incidents and did the job of transporting the corpse to the mortuary. The cops would definitely come, too.

She was quite light and for a moment Flynn had the horrible thought that her lolling head might drop off as he made his way from grass bank to grass bank, leaping over the narrow channels, so he cradled it in the crook of his arm to stop it flopping about.

His eyes were drawn to her face, the skin wrinkled from immersion in water. He noticed the remnants of fine white foam and mucus under her nostrils and at the corners of her mouth – one of the few external indications of drowning, though he was no expert in such matters.

Not so long ago, he guessed, she would have been very good-looking and her long black hair would have been quite spectacular. Now clods of it had fallen out and she had some ugly bald patches on her head.

'What a shame,' he breathed.

She was wearing a variety of rings on her fingers that looked expensive, he also noted. Including a wedding band.

He stumbled up to the side of the road that led to the picnic area he had been planning to wade through, and placed her gently on the grass and exhaled.

Not that he was out of breath. Five years of playing and landing big game fish, some marlin in the region of 1,000lb, and most heavier than this woman, had made him into a fit, strong guy.

He shuffled out his mobile phone and tapped out treble-nine, standing by the body as the line connected.

Her eyes were still wide open, but now they seemed to be staring imploringly at him.

Henry had mentally switched off.

Professor Baines, foolishly prompted by Henry, was now on a roll, explaining energetically to the detective about his lifelong obsession with the teeth of dead people.

'Problem was, you see, there was, is, no internationally accepted standard for ante-mortem dental records and there are several hundred types of dental charts used around the world . . . no consistency . . . which is where I came in and then got my gong, as it were,' he spouted proudly.

A blank-faced detective superintendent sipped his coffee.

'Symbols and designations were – are – by no means standard, and, of course, the general record-keeping of overworked dentists is pretty appalling too. And some use their own systems anyway . . . so I devised an ID database that cross-checks between all known ways of cataloguing records.'

Baines went on to triumphantly explain the intricacies of the system he had been researching and devising for over twenty years.

'Still not foolproof, of course,' he admitted. 'Human error, bent and lazy dentists and all that. But it's still pretty good and from my own research and knowledge I'm pretty certain I can already pick up some geography on what I've seen in the girl's mouth.'

Henry suddenly perked up. 'Really?'

‘Which could help to pinpoint exactly where she came from. I’d put her as Eastern European possibly Russian or one of its surrounding states. I’ll do X-rays and take a sample from the filling the gold one and the concrete ones, and look at the other dental work in there.’

‘Russian?’ Henry queried with arched eyebrows.

Baines shrugged enigmatically. ‘First guess.’

‘I’m impressed.’

Henry’s mobile phone rang before he could ask Baines the next question. His ringtone was a jaunty James Blunt number all about sunshine and making love, reflecting his currently happy state of mind.

‘Detective Superintendent Christie, how can I help?’

It was the Force Incident Manager, or FIM, based in the communications room at police headquarters at Hutton, just to the south of Preston. The FIM was the officer who contacted and turned out SIOs. Henry got a lot of calls from that source.

The FIM, a uniformed inspector, outlined the nature of the incident and asked Henry if he wished to attend.

He said yes. There was rarely an occasion when Henry refused to have a look at a dead body. He finished the call with an estimated time of arrival and looked across at Baines with a grin. Who better to be having a coffee with at such a time than a Home Office pathologist?

Henry and the professor made their way back to the mortuary where Henry climbed into his car, a Mercedes coupe, and Baines said he would follow on a short while later when he’d finished in the office. Leaving the mortuary car park, Henry was instantly on the A588 and by turning right and travelling south a few miles he was soon at Conder Green. He slowed and turned off the road in front of the Stork and drew up in the car park at the front of the pub.

From where he was, he could see activity about a hundred and fifty metres dead ahead at the railway bridge over the River Conder. There was an ambulance, a marked police car, a couple of other vehicles on the grass verge and a huddle of people.

Henry went to the boot of his car, where he always kept the bits and bats of paraphernalia that a good detective always carried. This included the water-and-windproof jacket that he hunched into and zipped up. Even in the few moments exposed to the weather here he had shivered at the cold of the bleak location.

He always preferred to approach the scene of a death on foot if possible. He thought it gave him some sort of psychological insight into what might have happened, although he had no evidence to back this up. Not that he had any reason to suspect that this death was anything more than a tragic accident and his presence at it was simply a procedural thing.

That said, he never made the assumption that any sudden death was straightforward. He always thought murder, then backtracked from there. A thought process that had been ingrained in him since the year dot – ever since his first-ever lesson about dealing with sudden deaths at the police training centre when he was but a ‘sprog’, the derogatory term used to describe probationer constables.

And death by drowning was always worth a proper look, even though few such deaths were the result of homicidal foul play, which is why he had been asked to attend. If anything was amiss, he could kick-start the appropriate level of investigation.

He had only been given sparse details.

The FIM had told him that it was more than likely the body in the water was that of Jennifer Sunderland. She had been missing from her home for three days and it was thought she might have fallen into the River Lune, close to where she lived – further upriver in the village of Halton. The night she had disappeared had been stormy, the river high and running fast from heavy rainfall up the hills, and if she had gone in she could easily have been swept away out to sea and never seen again.

The day after the disappearance the police had organized searches at ground level along the banks of the Lune accessible by foot, and with the force helicopter, but to no avail.

But the currents of the Lune estuary are unpredictable as well as dangerous. Henry had known people being washed away and never seen again, others who had been half-drowned but survived, and others whose bodies had been deposited on sandbanks one day later, or ten days later. Sometimes they were in good condition – if dead and drowned could be described as good – others rotted away, chewed by fish and in a terrible state.

There were no set rules. The river and the sea made the running. In places like this, nature was the boss.

Up to the body being found, the disappearance of Jennifer Sunderland had been treated as an urgent but run-of-the-mill ‘missing from home’ enquiry, run by the local uniformed section and overseen by the detective inspector at Lancaster section.

There was every chance it would be wound up in the same way, with the uniforms supervising the post-mortem and all contact with the coroner. Not a job for FMIT.

Henry hoped it would pan out this way: just a tragedy, but not one he needed to be concerned about.

He locked his car and started to walk towards the scene. As he came off the car park another car pulled off the main road and parked alongside his Mercedes. He did a quick check to see it wasn't too close to his pride and joy and irritably wondered why the driver hadn't stopped somewhere else in the virtually empty car park. Other than that, he didn't really give it much heed, other than to notice it was a big high-spec Range Rover with two men on board. He assumed they were going to the Stork, which was open for morning coffee.

The DI from Lancaster detached himself from the huddle of cops and paramedics and met Henry halfway. His name was Ralph Barlow.

‘Boss,’ the DI said, obviously knowing Henry, who knew every detective of rank in the county. The two men shook hands. ‘Nothing here for you, I’m afraid,’ the DI went on. He was a very experienced detective, mid-forties. He and Henry had crossed paths a few times, but Henry didn't know much about him, other than he tended to grate a little and there were various unconfirmed rumours about his gambling habits. He was a brittle, self-opinionated man who Henry tried not to dislike. That said, he was a sound detective. ‘I actually told the FIM not to bother you. I’m quite capable of dealing with drowning,’ he said grumpily.

‘Well, he did, but I’m here now . . . so I’ll just go through the motions.’ Henry understood the DI's point of view. No doubt he was eminently capable.

‘Whatever,’ Barlow muttered.

‘What’ve we got, then? I know the general scenario.’

‘Aye, well, looks like she went in the water three days ago and turned up today.’

‘Yeah, got that much, Ralph. Did she fall or was she pushed?’

Henry watched Barlow's mind tick this over for a second before saying, ‘Husband said she was a bit depressed, but not necessarily suicidal. No talk of ending her life.’

‘So who is she?’

‘Jennifer Sunderland . . . wife of Harry Sunderland?’ Barlow said this as if Henry should connect the dots. Instead he just looked blank. ‘Harry Sunderland, local, but big businessman? Haulage property . . . you name it.’

‘As in Sunderland Transport?’ Henry guessed.

‘One and the same.’

‘Ahh.’ Henry had seen their lorries all over the place. Not as numerous as a company like Edd Stobart, but still quite noticeable. And with a big international operation. Henry hadn't made the connection, but there wasn't any reason why he should have done. He wasn't local to this area.

'You've seen the husband, then?'

'Yeah, when she went missing. She . . . er . . . went out in the rain, never came back.'

'You happy about that?'

'Why wouldn't I be?' Barlow said shirtilly.

'No reason. Just a question I'd ask of any detective, Ralph, and expect them not to get uptight about it . . . So what's the crack here?' Henry gestured to the hive of activity.

'Guy out for a stroll spots the body swishing about in the tide and drags her out.'

'And we're sure it's Mrs Sunderland?'

'Oh, yeah . . . I knew her,' Barlow said, then stopped himself.

'You *knew* her?'

'Well, only in passing. Seen her with hubby at one or two golf-club shindigs, that's all.'

'Oh, OK.'

'Yeah, they have quite a high profile around here,' Barlow explained smoothly. 'Charities, businesses and all that shit, y'know . . . Hey, thinking about it,' he said, changing the subject, 'you know the guy who dragged her out of the water. I don't know him, but he's an ex-cop.'

By the time Barlow had said this, they were almost at the scene and Henry could see a half-covered body on the ground, feet sticking out, one with a Wellington boot on it. He had also spotted the biggest man in the group. His heart lurched slightly.

'He's the fella that was involved in all that stuff up in Kendleton a while back. The stuff you were involved in, too.'

'Oh, yeah,' Henry said. 'I know him.'

Flynn decided he'd had enough questions from the two keen young PCs now. Their eager enquiries were beginning to annoy him and because the weather was getting colder as a sharp wind increased from the west and zipped around, he was getting very cold. His trainers and jeans were soaking, as was the front of his jacket where he'd carried the dead woman. And this was all a bit of a problem because he hadn't brought a change of footwear or jeans with him from Gran Canaria. Having travelled very light, not expecting to have to wade knee-deep in unpleasant, cold, muddy water and recover bodies, he'd thought that one pair of jeans would be enough to sustain him for at least a week.

At the very least, he needed to warm up.

'Look, guys,' he said, holding up his hands, 'I've done my duty, you've got my current address, my mobile number and my details. I need to get out of these clothes, otherwise I'll contract hypothermia and you'll have another death on your hands. If you want to come to the chandlery about three this afternoon I'll happily give you a written statement . . . but first, change of clothing . . . somehow,' he added wistfully and eased his way past the bobbies.

As he walked by the rear of the ambulance that had turned up, he caught the eye of a female paramedic and she smiled at him pleasantly. But then he glanced sideways, right into Henry Christie's face.

Henry smiled grimly – very much the opposite of the paramedic. 'Mr Flynn,' he said, 'we meet once more . . .'

Flynn emerged from the gents' toilet, having spent a few minutes directing the hot-air flow from the wall-mounted hand drier downwards onto his jeans legs and socks. He had to perform a precarious dance/balancing act, lifting up one leg, then the other, in an effort to dry himself off. He had little success and came out carrying his trainers and socks and walked barefoot across the bar to where Henry Christie was sitting at a table by the roaring fire.

At Henry's insistence they had retired to the Stork for a chat and a warm.

Flynn plonked himself opposite Henry and dropped his sodden trainers on the hearth with a splash. He laid his equally wet socks on the mesh of the fire guard. They started to steam immediately.

Henry had bought each of them a coffee and Flynn took a sip of his, grateful for the warmth.

The two men eyed each other suspiciously. Their pasts were intertwined. Flynn blamed Henry for hastening his departure from the police, a grudge he had borne for quite a few years, until he worked out that his own perception was skewed by the whole sorry affair. It had really been his own paranoia that had been his downfall. Flynn had also been involved in the blood-soaked scenario at Kendleton through no fault of his own – and, more recently, had furnished Henry with some details he had stumbled across regarding terrorist activity in the UK.

Henry, for his part, had suspected that Flynn had helped himself to a share of a million pounds of a drug-dealer's money in a police raid that had gone spectacularly wrong. Since then, he'd come to believe it had actually been Flynn's then partner who'd snaffled the money and disappeared and Flynn hadn't seen a penny of it.

That didn't make them friends, though, and they rarely saw eye-to-eye willingly, and tended to grate one another when they met up, which was fortunately not regularly.

'Good coffee,' Flynn said.

'Yes.'

Henry glanced past Flynn's shoulder and clocked the two men he'd seen arrive on the car park earlier in the Range Rover. They were tucking into an all-day breakfast, as he'd guessed they would. The sight of the food made Henry feel very empty.

Bringing his eyes back to Flynn, Henry said, 'What brings you back to these parts?'

'A friend in need.'

Henry arched his eyebrows. 'Do you have a collection of people who need you to help them out?'

Flynn grinned. 'Believe it or not, I still have a few friends, and if they need help, I'll try and give it.'

'You're a real trooper,' Henry said sarcastically.

Flynn glared at the detective, feeling a reddening of the neck. 'I'm assuming all you'll need from me is a statement?' he said coldly. 'All I did was drag a body out of the drink, after all. I presume this – he indicated the coffee – 'is just a social brew between mates and not an interrogation.'

'Suppose so. And to say thanks for doing what you did. Good stuff,' Henry conceded.

'Anybody would have.'

'No they wouldn't.'

'So what's the poor woman's story?'

Henry shrugged. 'Not sure. So far it's just a uniformed issue, not CID. Might stay that way, but I'll have a look at the circumstances leading up to her going missing. It could just be one of those things, a fatal slip.'

Flynn took a long drink of the coffee and set down the mug. 'I really need to get dried out properly, maybe even go into Lancaster for some new gear.'

'I'll give you a lift,' Henry volunteered.

'You're a real trooper.'

Henry cracked a smile. 'Touché.'

'But a lift back into Glasson would be helpful. I'll take it from there.'

Flynn watched Henry drive away, leaving him standing outside the chandlery. He had a tight expression on his face as he thought about Henry, then dismissed him from his mind and let himself into the shop. Although he'd considered going into the city for some new togs, he'd realized there was no need because the chandlery had a fair selection of clothing that would do just fine. It would

exactly be his favourite Keith Richards T-shirt and baggy three-quarter-length pants, but it would have to suffice.

He selected a shirt, trousers, socks and a pair of stout shoes that he packed into a large carrier bag. He thought his best course of action would be to get back to the canal boat, work out the heating system for himself, have his second shower of the day, then get changed. He would get lunch at the cafe on the other side of the sea lock – fish and chips – and get back to the chandlery to meet Diane for more induction as arranged.

Flynn locked the shop and made his way along the canal in his wet clothes.

The canal boat was still cold inside, but he managed to fettle the vagaries of the heating system, stripped off and hung his clothes over a rail and re-showered.

Afterwards, changed into his new togs, comfortable and practical rather than stylish, he sat next to the gas fire in the living area, surprised at how efficiently it had warmed up.

He sat back, flicked on the small flat-screen TV and found a news channel.

The warmth permeated him until he was glowing. Then the combination of a late-night flight, early morning arrival and the excitement of dragging a body out of the river seeped over him like an anaesthetic. He could not have stopped himself if he'd wanted and before he knew it his head had lolled forwards and he was asleep.

By the time Henry returned to the scene from dropping off Flynn, Professor Baines had arrived in his pristine E-type Jaguar.

He was at the body, squatting down, carefully examining the head. He was speaking in low tones through the side of his mouth into the barely visible microphone that looped down from his ear and was linked to a voice-activated recorder inside his jacket.

He rose as Henry arrived and stood on the opposite side of the body. They nodded at each other. Henry tilted his head, inviting Baines to speak.

'I pronounce life extinct,' Baines declared, checking his watch and reading out the time.

'I was pretty sure of that one,' Henry said.

'Needs to be said and done,' Baines said loftily.

'And beyond that?'

'Looks to be a drowning. External signs are what you would expect. She does have head injuries but they could have come after immersion. Not unusual for a drowning person to have injuries like that, especially one drowned in these circumstances. River debris, tides . . . she could easily have struck something hard.'

'But you'll be able to tell?'

Baines gave him a withering look. 'I am a pathologist.'

'So they say.' Henry turned as a crime-scene van pulled up nearby. 'A few photos, then back to the mortuary. How soon can you do the PM?'

'As soon as you get this woman identified, I'll put knife to flesh.'

THREE

After the crime-scene photographer had recorded the minimum necessary, plus a few shots of the landscape, the woman's body was bagged and heaved into the back of the ambulance. The paramedics would take her to the mortuary, even though they were not obliged to do so. They could have been awkward and insisted she be removed by an undertaker, but as usual they were helpful.

Henry and DI Barlow had a short conversation with the result that Henry said he would follow the ambulance and body, to maintain the chain of evidence just in case it became something more than a drowning. Barlow – much to his facial disgust – was told to go to the police station in Lancaster, get the 'missing from home' file and bring it to the mortuary. The details in the file, which included a photograph, would be helpful to confirm the identity of the deceased.

Behind the ambulance was a little convoy: Henry, Barlow, Baines and two marked police cars. One of the police cars stayed with the ambulance as it turned into the hospital grounds just south of the city, whilst the other, and Barlow, carried on.

The ambulance reversed up to the mortuary doors, which were opened from the inside by the professional, warned creepy mortuary technician, waiting with a trolley that he manoeuvred expertly up to the ambulance doors. The bagged lady was slid onto it and then reversed into the mortuary, the double doors then closed to keep the outside world at bay from this strange, unsettling, but vital world.

Once inside, the body bag was reclaimed by the paramedics, who washed it with a hose, then took their leave. Henry, the uniformed PC who'd come along to help and the technician looked at the drowned body.

'You want me to strip her?' the technician asked, slightly gleefully, Henry thought, snapping on a pair of medical gloves.

He nodded and Henry watched as the soaked clothing was removed. He supervised the recording and bagging of each item by the constable. The outer jacket, jeans, blouse, underwear and the single polka-dotted cut-off Wellington boot. Henry visualized the missing one to be somewhere out in the Lune estuary, maybe getting washed up further down the coast at some stage. He doubted it would ever be recovered and if it was it would probably be left where it was found. Just another item of flotsam and jetsam, of no significance whatsoever.

Once naked, all that remained was the woman's jewellery. The rings on her fingers were carefully screwed off by Henry and handed to the constable, who bagged each one separately. There were four each distinctive and expensive-looking, including the wedding ring. She also wore a gold necklace with a pendant, and bracelets on each wrist. They were described, as is usual police procedure, as 'yellow metal' – just in case they weren't actually gold.

Henry inspected each item in the clear plastic bags, held up the wedding ring and peered closely to see if it was inscribed. He saw 'To J' next to a tiny love heart etched inside the ring.

'Jennifer,' he thought.

Another ring also had an inscription. This looked like an eternity ring with 'J' and 'H' inscribed and intertwined by another heart.

'Jennifer and Harry,' he thought, a great detective's mind at work, piecing all the clues together.

There were no markings on any of the other pieces of jewellery, so he turned his attention to the body, looking but not touching. He peered closely at the crown of her skull and saw a deep cut which formed a parting in her hair, the injury Professor Baines had already noted. Henry raised his eyes and

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