

CHAPTER TWO

Detective Sergeant Jane Tennison was sitting at her desk in the Bromley CID office, reading the night duty detective's report about the arrest of two young men trying to break into a house in Beckenham. As she got to the part where the two burglars were disturbed, she couldn't help but laugh out loud.

'What's so funny?' Detective Inspector Stanley asked Jane as he walked in.

Jane had known Stanley since she'd joined the force and had worked with him on a number of cases, but his Christian name was still a mystery to her and, like everyone else, she just called him Stanley – or 'guv', now that he was a DI. When she had first met him, he was a long-haired, scruffy-looking undercover officer, who not only looked like a tramp, but smelt like one as well. With promotion to DI, he had tidied up his appearance and now had short combed-back hair and dressed smartly in a dark blue two-piece suit, white shirt, and Flying Squad tie with its swooping eagle emblem. Present and former members of the elite 'Sweeney' proudly wore the tie which symbolised the way its officers would swoop swiftly on armed robbers.

Jane smiled. 'Morning, Stanley. This night duty report is funny. Two lads broke into a house at two in the morning and disturbed the owner, who just happened to be a police dog handler. His Alsatian, Rumpus, bit one of them in the arse and he needed twelve stitches. The other lad jumped up a tree in the back garden fearing he was next on the dog's menu.'

Stanley laughed. 'That'll teach the little shits.'

'They're still in the cells awaiting interview and their home addresses need to be searched. Me and DC Boon can deal with—'

Stanley shook his head. 'Don't worry, I'll sort them out. The duty sergeant just informed me a coffin has been dug up on a building site in Bickley and they don't know what to do. I need you to deal with that.'

Jane was puzzled. 'Since when was that kind of incident a CID matter?'

'It's on the grounds of an old convent, which means the land might be consecrated and have other bodies buried in it.'

'I still don't see how it's a CID matter,' she said, glumly looking out of the window at the torrential rain.

'Uniform are down to minimum strength today and well tucked up with a major RTA in Widmore Road. Besides, as you've only been here for four weeks it'll give you a chance to get out of the office and do some investigation – and take DC Boon with you,' he added, handing her a page from a police memo pad with the address on it.

'I was just asking why CID, not trying to get out of dealing with it,' Jane explained. 'I've heard the term consecrated ground, but what's the legal procedure?'

'I don't know. I've never dealt with an unearthed coffin before.'

'Then that makes two of us.'

'I suggest you go speak with the foreman and see if there's a body in the coffin for starters,' Stanley said.

'And if there is?'

'Then you'll need to inform the Bromley coroner, who'll advise you accordingly. And maybe speak with the local Catholic church authority as well. They should know if it's consecrated ground or not.'

Jane looked up as a dripping wet DC Boon sauntered into the office, removing the earphones from his Sony pocket radio.

'Bloody hell, it's wet out there' he remarked as he removed his rain-sodden coat and shook the water off it, some of which landed on Jane and the night duty CID report.

‘Watch what you’re doing, Boony!’ she said, wiping the report with a tissue and unintentionally smudging it. ‘And keep your coat on, we’ve got an incident to attend.’

‘Anything exciting for a change?’ he asked.

‘We won’t know till we get there, but it involves an unearthed coffin,’ she replied, grabbing her raincoat from the coat stand.

‘Grave diggers?’ Boon asked hopefully.

‘In a manner of speaking, yes,’ Stanley smiled.

‘Have I got time for a coffee and bacon sarnie?’ Boon asked.

Stanley frowned. ‘No. If you want breakfast have it in your own time before you come on duty. I don’t like my detectives coming to work and going straight to the canteen for a bite to eat and a chat. It pisses off the uniformed officers who do three to four hours on the beat before they get their official refs break, so I expect you all to do the same. Refs at twelve or one for detectives on a nine-to-five shift in future and five or six on a two-to-ten shift.’

‘Yes, guv, point taken,’ an embarrassed Boon replied.

Jane was somewhat surprised by DI Stanley’s remarks, especially as he’d never been a stickler for the rules as a detective sergeant when they worked together on the Flying Squad in North London. However, she was aware that he’d ‘blotted his copybook’ whilst awaiting promotion to DI, and he regarded his transfer to Bromley CID, on the quieter outskirts of the Met, as a punishment posting.

Stanley nipped into his office and returned with an umbrella, which he handed to DC Boon with a grin.

‘You might need this. Keep me informed.’

Jane picked up the keys for the maroon Hillman Hunter CID car and tossed them over to Boon.

‘You can drive.’

He tossed the keys back. ‘Sorry, sarge, but I’m still suspended from driving ‘job’ motors after the POLAC I had last month.’

Jane frowned, remembering that he’d driven into the back of a privately owned Mercedes at a roundabout. ‘Right. I’ll drive, then.’

‘So where exactly are we going?’ Boon asked as they walked down the stairs.

‘What used to be a convent in Bickley.’ Jane then repeated what Stanley had told her.

Boon sighed. ‘And there was me thinking it might be something exciting for a change. It’s obvious why DI Stanley didn’t fancy dealing with it.’

‘I suspect the miserable weather might have had something to do with his decision to send us instead,’ Jane said.

‘And they say a good copper never gets wet,’ Boon chuckled.

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As Boon directed Jane to the site of the old convent the rain got heavier. There was a sudden flash of lightning in the distance. Boon looked at his watch and started counting the seconds. He got to five and there was a loud crack of thunder.

‘Why are you counting?’ Jane asked.

‘I’m doing a flash, bang count.’

‘A what?’

‘You take the number of seconds between the lightning and thunder, divide by five and it tells you how far away the lightning is . . . which at present is roughly a mile.’

‘A meteorologist as well as a detective,’ Jane smiled.

‘They say you should take cover if the time between the lightning flash and the rumble of thunder is thirty seconds or less.’

‘Talking of cover, where’s that umbrella Stanley gave you?’

‘Shit, I left it in the locker room toilets when I went to the loo.’

‘Why am I not surprised,’ she sighed.

‘Sorry, sarge, I’ve got a plastic bag in my coat pocket if you want to use it to cover your hair.’

Jane raised her eyebrows and shook her head in disbelief. ‘Thanks but no thanks.’

She'd only known Boony a few weeks, but found him to be polite and cheerful, though somewhat scatty. He had been a detective for two years, was in his early twenties, tall, dark-haired and good-looking. He was always smartly dressed, and Stanley felt he had the makings of a good detective, but needed guidance, which from her first impressions Jane considered to be a fair assessment. He was also a good footballer and played for the Met's first team, to the annoyance of some of his CID colleagues because his duty shifts were often arranged to enable him to play and train.

'St Mary's Lane is next right. It's a dead-end,' Boon said, putting the small London A-Z street atlas back in the glove box.

Jane followed his instructions, passing two small cul-de-sacs on either side of the road, each with six large detached houses, some of which were mock Tudor in style.

'Those houses look new and expensive,' Boon remarked.

Jane nodded. 'Looks like a lot of this area was old land that's been built on recently.'

Just past the second cul-de-sac, on the left, was a small brick-built parish church with stained-glass windows and a large double wooden door. On the church wall next to the door was a six-foot concrete statue of Christ on the cross and underneath it a large green sign saying ST MARY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH, along with holy mass and confession times. Beyond the church there was a long hedgerow and woodland.

'I can't see any convent. Are you sure you've got the right road?' Jane asked.

'I'm just going by what's written on the duty sergeant's note – that *you* gave me,' he said cheekily. He pointed down the road. 'There's a high brick wall way down there on the left, maybe the building site is on the other side of it.'

'I'll drive on a bit,' Jane said. 'There may be an entrance further down. If not, then you can nip into the church and see if there's anyone about you can ask.'

A hundred metres down there was an open metal gate leading onto a gravel drive.

‘That big house in front of us with a statue of what I assume is the Virgin Mary looks like a convent to me,’ Jane said.

The impressive two-storey grey stone and brick building had a seven-bay front, comprising a shallow gabled entrance flanked by a bay either side, with a further gabled two-bay projection on both ends. The large bay on the right had a holy cross on top of it and a large, pointed arch, with a stained-glass window, making it look like a chapel. A high brick wall with wooden gates abutted either end of the building.

‘I can’t see any building site. Bloody Stanley’s having a laugh and sent us out on a wild goose chase just to get wet,’ Boon said.

‘There are obviously people living or working in there and, judging by the expensive cars out front, I doubt it’s nuns. If a coffin’s been dug up, it might be somewhere else on the grounds,’ Jane suggested.

Jane parked the car, then she and Boon ran through the rain to the front entrance, where two stone steps led up to the timber-panelled door, next to which was an intercom with thirteen buzzers.

‘Looks like the convent might have been converted into flats,’ Jane said as she pressed the visitor buzzer and waited for a reply.

‘Can I help you?’ a well-spoken, deep-voiced man asked as he approached them from behind.

He was tall, well-built, looked to be in his late fifties, with a rugged complexion and a dimpled chin. He had a large golf umbrella in one hand and wore an ankle-length green waxed coat. By his side was an unleashed golden retriever, which suddenly jumped up at Jane, depositing muddy paw marks on her raincoat.

The man grabbed the dog by the collar and pulled it back. ‘Heel, Bella,’ he said firmly. ‘Sorry, she’s young and I’m still training her,’ he added, as he attached a lead to the dog’s collar.

‘I’m Detective Sergeant Tennison and this is Detective Constable Boon. We were wondering if there’s any building work occurring on the grounds,’ Jane said.

‘Yes, out the back of this building down the far end of the gardens. The site access is off a lane over the back of here. Has something happened?’

‘Nothing for you to be concerned about, sir,’ Jane replied.

‘They dug up a coffin,’ Boon said casually, and Jane frowned.

‘On the site?’ the man asked, looking worried.

‘We don’t know the full details yet, sir,’ Jane told him.

‘Is this building still a convent?’ Boon asked.

‘No, all the Sisters of Mercy nuns have long gone now. The buildings have been converted into private apartments.’

‘I like how they’ve kept the outside like an old building, especially the stained-glass window there,’ Boon remarked, pointing.

The man nodded. ‘It’s a listed building, so the exterior remained as is, though obviously the stone and brickwork were cleaned up and some double glazing put in. The stained glass is original, and that part of the convent was the oratory.’

‘What’s an oratory?’ Boon asked.

‘It was the chapel used by the nuns.’

‘I bet a flat in there costs an arm and a leg,’ Boon said.

The man forced a smile. ‘Yes, the apartments are expensive.’

‘Thanks for your help, sir. Can you give us directions to the building site?’ Jane asked.

‘The temporary road leading up to it will be very muddy and you might well get stuck. It would be quicker to walk through our rear communal gardens. Please follow me.’ He wiped his wellingtons on the outside doormat, then unlocked the front door.

Boon was about to step inside, when Jane whispered to him to wipe his feet on the mat. Inside there was another large doormat which the man also used, before picking up a neatly folded towel from the floor and wiping the dog down with it.

The hallway was large with a beige marble floor and a stunning Gothic-style dark oak L-shaped staircase. Halfway up the stairs to the upper floor was a pictorial stained-glass window, the centre-piece of which depicted the virgin Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus in the stable at Bethlehem.

‘Excuse me for a moment while I put Bella inside.’ The man went over to a large arched wooden door in the right-hand corner, opened it and went inside.

Jane took Boon to one side. ‘You shouldn’t have mentioned the coffin. The residents might start worrying about dead bodies in their back garden.’

‘Sorry, sarge, but they’re going to find out sooner or later, aren’t they?’

Jane was about to reply when the man returned carrying a large umbrella. ‘Sorry, I’ve only got the one, but it’s better than nothing.’

‘Thank you,’ Jane said, taking it from him.

The man then led them to a rear entrance off the hallway where he opened the door. Outside was a vast garden with high walls and Gothic-style arches.

‘Blimey, the back garden is massive,’ Boon remarked.

‘It’s the same as it was when the nuns tended it, though we did have to do quite a bit of work to restore it to its original splendour. All the residents chip in and help maintain it. It’s absolutely stunning in the summer,’ he said proudly. ‘Follow the gravel path towards the far end and go through an arch midway on your right into the herb garden. You’ll see another arch on your far left which leads to the building site. I’ll leave the back door open, but I’d be grateful if you could slip the latch back on and leave the umbrella outside my door when you leave.’

‘It’s like stepping back in time,’ Jane remarked as they walked, the gravel crunching under their feet. ‘The nuns who lived here must have led a very peaceful life.’

‘Bit like working at Bromley nick, then,’ Boon grinned. ‘You’ve worked at some real busy stations, and the Flying Squad, so what made you want to come to Bromley?’

‘I bought a house in Chislehurst a few months ago,’ Jane said. ‘Travelling uptown to Gerald Road nick by train was getting expensive.’

‘That’s the problem living south of the river,’ Boon agreed. ‘There’s no tube trains for us to use our warrant cards on for free travel into Central London. Did you not fancy working somewhere like Lewisham? That’s a busy South London nick.’

‘Not really,’ Jane said. ‘I wanted a quieter posting so I can study for next year’s inspectors’ exam.’

Boon grinned. ‘You’ll get plenty of time to do that at Bromley.’

They followed the man’s directions to a large expanse of land with a wood and small lake in the distance. To their right were six burnt-out buildings, one of which had a rusty old school bell precariously hanging from an arched recess in the wall above a fire-damaged door. Just beyond the burnt-out buildings they saw a dumper truck, two vans and a small car parked outside a Portakabin.

‘That must be the builders’ hut over there. Looks like there’s a few people working here,’ Boon said.

Approaching the Portakabin door they could hear a man talking in a raised voice. Jane closed the umbrella.

‘It’s a fucking joke stopping everything! This is all your fault, Dermot,’ Barry shouted.

Lee remained calm. ‘He did what he felt was right. Besides, it may only be a temporary setback.’

Barry was still angry. ‘Why can’t we dig the south-side foundations? That’s well away from the bloody coffin.’

Boon was about to knock on the door when Jane stopped him, putting her finger to her mouth and leaning closer.

‘Because the police told us to stop,’ Dermot said defensively.

'Shut the fuck up, Dermot. Or I'll fill your big mouth with my fist,' Barry threatened.

Lee had had enough. 'Knock it off, Barry. I'm the site foreman, not you! Do as you're bloody well told, or you'll be joining the dole queue.'

Barry shook his head in disgust, 'I may as well piss off home then.'
'Maybe that's best for now,' Lee agreed.

Jane was about to knock on the Portakabin door when it was abruptly opened by Barry, who barged past Boon, nearly knocking him over.

'Sorry, mate, was I in your way?' Boon said sarcastically.

'Fuck off,' Barry muttered as he got into the red minivan. The wheels spun in the dirt as he accelerated away from the site.

Jane held up her warrant card and introduced herself and Boon.

'I'm Lee Holland, the site manager. Sorry about Barry. He's just worried about the site closing down and being out of work.'

Lee was in his late forties, bald, with a large beer belly and a double chin. He wore a black donkey jacket, white T-shirt, blue jeans, and Doc Martens workman's boots.

Compared with the cold weather outside, the Portakabin was stiflingly hot. There were two paraffin heaters, the interior windows were covered in condensation and there was also an overpowering musty odour, a mixture of dampness and sweat, which Dermot and Lee seemed oblivious to. The cabin had a couple of desks and some filing cabinets and pinned up on the wall were plans for the site. The floor was covered in muddy boot prints.

'Who found the coffin?' Jane asked.

'Barry hit something hard when he was using the digger,' Lee said. 'But Dermot here was also there. They cleared the surrounding soil away so you can see it better. I'll put the kettle on while he tells you about it.'

Dermot recounted how the coffin had been uncovered, not mentioning that Barry had wanted to open it.

‘Did you find anything else which might indicate the area was a graveyard?’ Jane asked.

Lee shook his head. ‘No, not a thing. And we’ve dug out quite a large area so far. Would you like to see the coffin now or have a coffee first and see if the rain eases off?’

‘May as well see it now,’ Jane said, holding up the umbrella. ‘This should help keep the worst of it off us.’

‘It’s pretty muddy out there. Have you got any wellies in your car?’ Dermot asked.

‘Unfortunately, no,’ Jane replied.

‘I’ve got some plastic shopping bags you can use as shoe covers,’ Lee said, opening a desk drawer and taking some out.

‘They might make it more slippery as they’ve no grip, but thanks anyway,’ she replied, thinking she’d look ridiculous wearing the bags.

‘I’ll have some,’ Boon grinned. ‘These shoes were expensive!’

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Dermot took them round the back of the Portakabin to the building site, which was bigger than Jane had expected. At about half the size of a football pitch, it was clear that quite a few flats or houses were going to be built on the land. Jane stepped carefully through the mud, whilst balancing herself with the umbrella, but her shoes quickly became covered in the brown sludge.

Standing at the edge of the footings trench, the large grey metal coffin was now clearly visible as the heavy rain had washed away the topsoil. It was over six feet long with an inlaid silver cross on top and fresh scratch marks caused by the digger bucket. It looked old, with patches of rust.

‘Looks like it’s been in the ground for a while,’ Boon said.

‘There’s no name plate on it, though. It might be a nun, or a priest connected to the old convent,’ Dermot suggested.

‘Looks a bit big for a nun’s coffin,’ Boon said.

‘Nuns, like us, come in all shapes and sizes. The fact is, we won’t know who or what’s inside until it’s opened,’ Jane said.

‘Might save some time if we have a quick look inside now,’ suggested Boon.

‘Barry wanted to open it,’ Dermot said. ‘Then if it was empty, we wouldn’t have had to call you lot. Being a Catholic I was a bit wary, so I said best to leave it and tell Lee.’

Jane could tell Dermot was nervous and gave him a reassuring smile. ‘Don’t worry, we won’t open the coffin here. I’ll arrange for it to be taken to the mortuary where we can do it in a more controlled and dignified manner.’

‘How’re we going to get it out?’ Boon asked.

‘I can dig under the coffin with a shovel and put some heavy-duty straps around it. If I attach them to the digger bucket and lift it out you can put it in a police van,’ Dermot said, thinking they would remove the coffin in one go.

‘The undertakers will come in their van to remove it to the mortuary,’ Jane told him.

Dermot pointed to his right. ‘We’ve made a temporary road using the rubble from the old buildings we knocked down. It’s a bit bumpy and muddy in some bits, but they should be able to get their van up from the lane down the far end.’

Jane could see that the makeshift road was about a hundred metres long and a section of the woodland had been cut away to allow vehicles in from the lane.

She turned to Boon. ‘I need you to go back to the car, radio the station and ask them to inform the Bromley coroner’s officer about the coffin and request the attendance of the undertakers’ van. Give them the location of the entrance and a heads-up about the muddy conditions. See if they can arrange the opening of the coffin for this afternoon.’

‘Will do, sarge. Do you want a lab liaison sergeant to attend?’

Jane shook her head. 'It's not a crime scene. Besides, I don't think there's anything they can do to assist us here.'

As Boon turned to leave, the ground on the edge of the footings trench suddenly gave way and his feet started to slide out from under him. As he fell forward, he instinctively grabbed the nearest thing to stop his fall, which unfortunately for Jane happened to be her left arm. She let out a loud shriek as she lost her balance, dropped the umbrella, then toppled over and landed in the mud. Boon, however, managed to regain his balance and stay upright.

'For Christ's sake, Boon, what are you playing at!' Jane shouted.

'Sorry, sarge, it was an accident,' he said sheepishly as he put out his hand to help her up.

She flicked it away and got up. 'Look at the state of me. I'm covered in bloody mud.'

'I'll pay for your clothes to be dry cleaned,' he said, looking crestfallen.

'Too bloody right you will!' she barked as she shook her mud-covered hands in an effort to get some of it off. 'Do you have a sink and hot water in the Portakabin?' she asked Dermot.

'No, but there's a cold-water hose outside that's linked to the main supply up at the flats. We've got some loo roll in the cabin you can use as well.'

'That will have to do for now.'

'Can I have the brolly?' Boon asked, not wanting to get soaked as he returned to the car.

Jane headed back to the Portakabin without replying.

'I'll take that as a no,' Boon muttered to himself.

'Bloody hell, what happened to you, detective?' Lee asked.

'Her mate slipped and knocked her over. She nearly fell in the footings trench,' Dermot said as he handed Jane a toilet roll.

'You all right, officer?' Lee asked.

'Yes, thank you,' she replied, forcing a smile.

Jane did her best to wipe the mud off her coat using scrunched-up sheets of the toilet roll dipped in hot water from the kettle, but her efforts only seemed to make things worse.

‘Is the land you are working on part of the old convent?’ she asked Lee.

‘Yes. We’re building more flats,’ he replied as he handed her a mug of coffee.

‘Thanks. What was on the land before you started?’

‘Nothing, apart from the fire-damaged outbuildings, which we’ve yet to demolish.’

‘Do you know if the land you are building on was ever a graveyard or consecrated ground?’

‘If it were, I doubt the developer would have got planning permission,’ Lee said.

‘Is he aware of this morning’s discovery?’

‘I tried ringing him at his office, but he was out at another site, so I left a message with his secretary.’

Jane removed her notebook and pen from her coat pocket. ‘I’ll need the developer’s name and contact number, please.’

‘It’s Nicholas Durham. His office is in Bromley, next door to Biba’s nightclub.’ Lee handed Jane a piece of headed paper embossed with THOMAS DURHAM AND SON BUILDING DEVELOPERS, 27 WIDMORE ROAD, BROMLEY, TELEPHONE 014673281.

‘I take it Nicholas is the “son”,’ Jane said.

Lee nodded. ‘Tom Durham started the company, but he’s sort of retired now, and Nick runs it.’

‘Do the Durhams own the land or are they just doing the building work?’

‘Tom Durham bought the old convent and land years ago and turned it into high-quality apartments. Now he’s building some more.’

‘Were you involved in the initial build as well?’ Jane asked out of curiosity.

‘No, I came on board after that, but I’ve been working for them a few years now.’

As Jane wrote some notes, Boon returned to the Portakabin. He told her he’d brought the CID car round and let her know the duty sergeant had spoken with the coroner’s officer, PC Rogers.

‘The undertakers’ van should be on the site in about an hour, and the coffin can be opened at one.’

Jane looked at her watch. It was a quarter to eleven. ‘Where’s the mortuary?’

‘Queen Mary’s Hospital, just off the A20 between Chislehurst and Sidcup. Not far from your house, actually.’

‘A hospital? Why aren’t they using a local council mortuary?’ Jane asked.

‘Bromley and Bexley division regularly use the hospital mortuary for suspicious deaths and murder post-mortems. Two coroner’s officers work there as well,’ replied Boon.

Jane closed her notebook. ‘Thanks for your time and help, gentlemen. As soon as we’ve opened the coffin, I’ll notify you of the result. In the meantime, I think it would be best if you don’t do any more work on the foundations.’

‘Can we do other stuff?’ Lee asked.

‘As long as it doesn’t involve any digging.’ Jane headed towards the door and Boon followed her. She turned round and looked at him.

‘I want you to remain here and supervise the removal of the coffin. I’ll see you at the mortuary later.’

‘How am I going to get there?’

‘Get a lift in the mortuary van. I’m sure they can squeeze you in the back,’ Jane said, knowing very well that three people could sit in the front of the van.

Boon frowned, as if he thought this was payback for landing Jane in the mud.

Jane gave him her brightest smile. ‘For the sake of evidence continuity, I need you to stay with the coffin.’ She handed him the umbrella. ‘Don’t forget to return this to its owner before you leave.’