



THE

TWENTY

A THRILLER

SAM HOLLAND

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For Matt

PROLOGUE

THE FIRST THING he notices is cold concrete under his bare feet, gritty dust between his toes. It's dark. So dark.

He moves his head; everything spins. He blinks. Lines, corners, the edge of a table come into view: dim shapes in the gloom.

He's confused. He feels light-headed; he tries to take a long breath in, but there's something over his mouth. Sticky, suffocating. He reaches up to touch it, body tensing as his hands don't move. Can't move. He tugs at them, breath quickening.

Legs the same. Secured tightly. He's sitting up, must be a chair. But his feet are freezing, his shoes and socks are off. The air is damp, cold fog edging under his shirt, settling on his skin, making him shiver.

There's a throb from his forehead, a *thud thud* in time with his frantic heartbeat. But nothing else. No other pain.

What happened? How did he get here? Think. *Think*. But nothing comes. Just darkness, just panic. He's feeling woozy now—not enough oxygen getting through. He forces himself to stop, focus on his breathing. How he was taught. In for six seconds. Out for six. Shuddering jerks, through his nose. Too fast. Not working. He tries again, closes his eyes, counts slowly.

His heart rate subsides, his breathing settles. If he does this, if he stays calm, he'll be okay. He will.

But then he feels it. His hand is uncomfortable, something's there. Something is *in* there. Cold, hard metal. He wriggles his fingers, trying not to think about what he's experiencing. There it is again. One in his hand, one in both hands. Oh, God. No. *No*.

And his feet. There too. There's no forgetting that feeling. The foreign

body puncturing his skin, resting in his vein. He feels the familiar panic grow. The shaking. The sweats.

Don't pass out, he tells himself. Not now. Not here. Don't. Because if you do, who knows what will happen.

But his head feels light, blood draining south. What little he can see in the room blurs.

And in the moment before he loses consciousness, he hears footsteps. A handle being turned. And a door opening.

PART 1

*By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.*

—William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1606.

CHAPTER 1

Day 1 Saturday

IT'S LATE, THE bar already full when he arrives. He works his way through the throng, taking a position at the back of the room, pressed against the wall. It's loud, crowded. Just as he likes it. He can be anonymous; nobody pays him any attention—he blends into the background of similarly dressed men.

He watches, bottle of beer against his lips: preening men at the bar, shouting drunks hurling abuse, a hen party wasted and raucous. The worst society has to offer, his own shortcomings rendered unimportant in the face of such debauchery.

A blonde staggers her way to the toilets. Short skirt, wedding ring—the man leering behind unlikely to be her husband. On the other side of the room, a tweaker shifts and fidgets. He's approached, a glance around, then a quick transaction—a flick of the fingers and cash is pocketed in exchange for a good night. Someone else looking to forget.

He notices the small details; this is how he makes his way through life. He takes a swig from his beer. He resists the urge to intervene—that's not why he's there tonight.

His eyes scan the room. Something else catches, makes him stop. A black and white uniform, creating a void as he steps forward. The copper catches his eye, then lowers his mouth to talk into the radio on his shoulder.

He waits; finishes his beer. Another man comes into the bar. A big guy, dressed in plain clothes, shirt straining over his belly. The uniform points. He sighs, resigned to his fate. It was too good to be true. Another

night ruined.

The man negotiates his way toward him through the crowd. He stops by his side.

“How many have you had?” he asks, pointing to the bottle.

“Not enough. Thought you were on your honeymoon?”

“Flight back was this morning.” The man frowns. “I should’ve kept my phone off. Marsh told me to get you.”

“Couldn’t you have called, Jamie?”

“No reception in here. You know that, Boss.”

He nods slowly. Of course, he knows that. Saturday night, he didn’t want to be disturbed. Off the clock, other detectives on call. Why do they need him?

But a churning in his gut tells him why. Something serious. Something out of the ordinary. He puts the empty bottle on a table and follows his detective sergeant out of the bar.

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“DCI Adam Bishop,” he says, presenting his warrant card to the scene guard. He points to his colleague. “DS Jamie Hoxton.”

Jamie shows his ID, and they’re both waved through the cordon. The night is freezing; Adam pulls his coat tighter around him.

The two men pause, reviewing the scene. Wind blows aggressively across the wasteland; a bridge dominates the distant view, and they stand below it, the blackened river flowing in front of them. It’s a construction site, half-heartedly sealed off with chain metal and wooden boards, a sign at an angle showing a toothy Alsatian. But there’s no security here. Nothing that works.

Adam knows the area well. Identified as a site for redevelopment, until the money ran out and the council discovered that gentrification only works if the rich actually invest. Nobody wants to live here. The view over the water is depressing; the only boats sailing past are container ships spewing diesel. So, the site lies empty, fly-tippers realizing the opportunity, the homeless taking shelter in the rubbish.

They’re handed PPE and suit up in the white overalls and gloves and masks. They walk across, toward floodlights and bustle, foot plates sinking into the mud. He doesn’t need to ask; he knows what they’re there to find. Everything points toward a body.

It’s surrounded by rubbish. An old fridge lies on its side to the left; a

mattress, stained and sodden, to the right. Numerous other crap litters the scene—empty paint pots, plastic waste, an old front door. The body lies on its back, remnants of clothing hanging on. There is no indication of gender, nothing left to identify the person they used to be.

The face is half gone, bloody flesh flapping, stark white bone visible. The darkened holes of the eye sockets stare out. Scabbed, dirty, wet. The eyeballs were probably the first to go, easy pickings. The torso is completely eviscerated—Adam can see intestines, ribs, organs. And it looks like it's moving, a churn of maggots dining on the rotting meat.

“The animals got to it before we did,” Jamie comments. Adam can hear rustling in the rubble. He shines his flashlight out, and multiple pairs of yellow eyes glare back.

He shudders. Fucking rats. “Who called it in?”

“Homeless guy.” Jamie points to a motley-looking crowd standing some distance away. “Said it was stinking the place up and they wanted it gone.”

“Glad they have their priorities in order,” Adam replies dully. “Any news on the pathologist?”

“Still waiting.”

As if on cue, they hear a bustle behind them, and a man arrives. Adam inwardly sighs. Anyone else, please, but not Dr. Greg Ross.

Even in his full crime scene suit, Adam can tell Ross feels the same.

“Have you touched the body, DCI Bishop?” the doctor asks, disapproval dripping from his every word.

“Of course not.” It's not Adam's first case, not his first dead body. “When will we know more?”

The reply from the pathologist is curt and quick. “When I'm ready.”

He bites back a retort, then gestures to Jamie. They edge away, starting their appraisal of the scene.

His DS looks across the rubble. “No security, no CCTV.”

“We're sure about that?” Adam points to the camera, a small black box near to where Jamie's car is parked. “Go check it out.”

Jamie nods and heads off; Adam's attention is caught by someone picking their way toward him. A young woman. Contrary to the rest of the crew here, she walks with a bounce in her step, her enthusiasm in stark contrast to the eerie surroundings. Curious, he walks toward her, ducking under the cordon, then pulling his hood and mask down, removing his gloves.

She smiles eagerly as he approaches, cheeks flushed. He hasn't seen her before.

"DC Ellie Quinn," she says once she's next to him. She thrusts her hand out formally in front of her, and Adam shakes it, amused. Her palm is sweaty.

"What are you doing here, DC Ellie Quinn?"

"New to Major Crimes. Was due to start on Monday but I heard something was going on. Thought I could help."

Adam has a vague memory from a few weeks ago: Jamie mentioning a new member of the team. "Where are you from?" he asks.

"Fraud, Boss. But I wanted something a little more ... exciting."

"Well, you got that." He smiles at her. She's petite, with bobbed strawberry blonde hair, pale skin and a freckled nose. Wide doe eyes that make her look like a character from a Disney movie.

She couldn't seem more out of place. Here, in the dead of night, the wind whipping through her hair, turning her cheeks baby pink. An innocent fawn unsullied by the haunt of the newly departed.

He hears movement behind him and Adam glances back to the homeless guys. Most have wandered away, but one remains; he doesn't want to lose his chance of a witness.

"Report to DS Hoxton," he says to Quinn, pointing toward the car park, where Jamie is exploring. "He'll show you the ropes. Now, if you'll excuse me?"

"Yes, of course," the girl hastily agrees, and Adam turns his attention to their bystanders.

The homeless man hesitates when he sees Adam approaching. Adam walks slowly, eye contact averted. The man's as skittish as a nervous dog, dressed in a long dirty overcoat, torn boots, a black beanie low over his eyes. Adam pulls out his packet of cigarettes, puts one in his mouth, then offers the box to the man.

The man snatches one with dirty fingers, still half turned away. Adam lights his own, then passes the lighter across, his arm fully outstretched before the man takes it.

"Was it you who called us?" Adam asks. He takes a long drag, blowing the smoke out into the cold night air.

"Yeah." The man's standing at an angle to Adam, glancing over to the homeless encampment of boxes and sagging tents under the bridge. His safety. He hands the lighter back then sucks at the cigarette hungrily.

“Adam,” he says, holding his hand out to introduce himself.

The man looks at it suspiciously, then rests the cigarette in his lips and returns the gesture. He quickly takes two steps back again.

“Harry,” he replies.

“When did you notice it?” Adam asks.

“Only a few hours ago. Jim mentioned it.” The man tilts his head to the group sheltering under the bridge. “Don’t want to get him into trouble.”

“Not at all,” Adam replies, although he mentally notes the names. “Did he see anyone? Do you guys ever see anyone hanging around?”

“Nah.” He edges further away from Adam.

“No vans? Trucks dumping rubbish.”

“Some.”

He pauses and Adam can tell he’s holding something back. “Please? Anything might help.”

Harry takes another drag, then is gripped by a bout of coughing that consumes his whole body. When he’s finished, he looks at Adam from jaundiced eyes.

“Is he ...” he starts. He looks down, scuffing his boot in the mud. “Is he dead? Should we ... A doctor ...”

“No, mate. He’s very dead.”

“But ...” He points back to the dump site. “A doctor ...”

“Sorry. A doctor can’t do anything for him now.”

The homeless man shakes his head, redirecting his gaze to the ground.

“No. I didn’t see nothing,” he concludes.

Adam accepts defeat. Even if he did share something useful, the homeless guy’s a lousy witness. A defense lawyer would shoot holes in his account in seconds.

The man gestures to the cigarette, now burned down to the butt. “Can I have another?”

Adam pulls out the pack and hands it to him with the lighter. “Here,” he says, then he digs in his pocket. He pulls out the cash he has—a few notes and coins—and passes them across. “For your help.”

The man snatches them, then scuttles away with a nervous backward glance. Adam finishes his cigarette as Jamie heads toward him.

“Did he see anything?” Jamie asks when he’s by his side.

“Nothing. I’m surprised they called it in at all. What have you done with our new recruit?”

“Ellie Quinn? Sent her off with uniforms for some house-to-house.” Jamie’s gaze drifts back to the crime scene. “She doesn’t need to see that,” he finishes. “Not on her first day.”

Adam silently agrees. He likes new blood on the team. Like Ellie, they’re keen, desperate to make their mark. But she looks so innocent. Mentally he gives her three months before she requests a transfer out. Six, tops.

Adam follows Jamie’s line of sight to the dead body. The rubbish throws amorphous shapes across the ground; it instinctively makes something in his body recoil, even from this distance.

No, they don’t want to break Ellie Quinn today.

“Any luck with the camera?” he asks instead.

“Fake,” Jamie replies. “And not a good one either—I could tell just by looking up at it. It’s a perfect dump site. No reliable witnesses, no overlooking houses. Easy access.”

Adam nods, looking out at the wasteland. The floodlights glance off broken glass, mirrors to the devastation in the mud. SOCOs are taking molds from the few distinguishable tire tracks with powdered stone, photographs already captured. He turns to Jamie. “How was your honeymoon, anyway?”

“Wonderful. Californian sunshine, white sandy beaches, blue skies.” Jamie pauses, looking back to where Dr. Ross is standing up from the body. “A bit different to tonight.”

Dr. Ross turns and gestures to them, a quick raise of his long arm. They walk back across.

“Male, thirty to forty,” he says, getting straight to the point. “Maybe. Dead no more than a few days, although I’ll know more when I get him back to the mortuary and review the entomology. Considerable damage to the soft tissues by carnivores—had a good go at his face and abdomen.”

“Suspicious death?” Jamie asks.

The doctor scoffs. “He didn’t get here by himself, DS Hoxton. I’ll do the PM tomorrow. Make sure you’re there for ten.”

And he walks away without another word.

“Short but sweet,” Jamie mutters. Adam takes a long breath in.

The SOCOs gather around again, cameras capturing the scene before the body is taken away. It’s a nasty final resting place: rats and foxes abound, left out to the elements.

“Didn’t make any effort to bury it,” Adam comments.

“Perhaps the killer thought he’d be eaten and scattered before anyone found the body,” Jamie replies.

“Or perhaps he didn’t care.”

But then something catches his eye. He’d not given it much thought before, but now, with the flashes from the cameras, the glare of the floodlights, it stands out among the mess and chaos. Daubed on the side of the discarded fridge in green spray paint, three symbols: “XII.”

He squints at it. It seems out of place: perfectly straight, on a fridge fallen to its side. Directly above the victim’s head. A marker.

“What do you make of that?” he asks Jamie.

But he doesn’t wait for an answer. He starts walking, searching through the wasteland, flashlight darting around the rubbish. He hears the scatter of rats, movement in the rubble. Jamie follows his lead as his eyes scan the mess.

“There,” Jamie says suddenly. “Go back.”

Adam directs the flashlight to where Jamie is pointing. Lit up in the beam are three more letters.

He slowly lowers the shaft of light to the rubbish below. It’s debris from a building site. Pallets of wood, bricks, chunks of cement. But the numerals, they’re the same. Green spray paint. “XIV.”

“Oh, shit,” Jamie mutters next to him. “You don’t think ...”

Adam turns to the scene, to the bustling SOCOs, the uniforms, the technicians going about their job.

“Oi!” he shouts. Heads turn. Adam waves his arms until he has everyone’s attention. “Oi!”

The scene quietens, all eyes on him.

“Here.” He points toward the spray-painted markers. “Secure this area. Start excavating. And everyone else, scour the scene. Check all the rubbish. You’re looking for more of these letters.” Nobody moves, everybody stares.

“Now!” Adam shouts again, and people burst into life. He turns back to Jamie; his eyes are wild above his mask.

“The number fourteen,” he says. Then he points back to the first body. “And the number twelve.”

“You don’t think—” Jamie begins again.

“I fucking do,” Adam replies. “There are more of them.”

CHAPTER

2

THE BODY EMERGES. A shape, fully entombed under bricks and gravel, where the rats couldn't find her. Wrapped in a blanket. Baby blue check. The crime scene manager calls Adam over once she's uncovered, slowly pulling back a corner. A face is revealed. Long black curly hair. Eyes closed, features intact.

"Quite a contrast to the last one," the CSM comments.

Adam has worked with Maggie Clarke before. An efficient woman, smart, highly organized. In a different life she'd be the chair on a PTA, planning fundraisers and village fetes, but instead she commands her brood of SOCOs, blood and mud rather than cakes and dog shows. She's blunt in manner, but fast and accurate. Adam likes her. Not everyone does.

"She's almost peaceful," Adam replies.

Maggie squints at the rubbish. "If you say so." She gives him a quick smile, then leaves, her attention diverted elsewhere.

The dog unit arrives. The black and white spaniels run around in circles, seemingly confused.

"Can't they find anything?" Jamie asks.

"It's not that," the handler replies, grim faced. "It's that they don't know where to start."

Another body is found. Little more than bones: scattered, dismembered limbs. "XVI" daubed above. By the time the fourth turns up, Adam's boss has arrived at the scene. Detective Chief Superintendent Marsh stands outside the cordon and beckons with a long finger.

"It's a multiple?" Marsh asks as Adam ducks under the tape. In the harsh glow from the floodlights, Marsh's cheeks look more sunken than usual, his pallor gray. Adam nods as he pulls the crime scene hood from his head, the mask off his face. "And I thought those days were over," Marsh finishes with a sigh.

Adam pats down his pockets, then curses as he realizes he's given away his cigarettes, now regretting his altruistic gesture given how long the night's going to be. Next to him Marsh pulls out his own packet and offers one to Adam.

"Ta," Adam mumbles, cigarette in his lips, leaning forward as Marsh flicks the lighter into flame.

Both men stand for a moment, silent except for the crackle of burning tobacco and sighs as plumes of smoke are exhaled.

"Not the Saturday night I had planned," Adam comments.

Marsh flicks cigarette ash onto the mud next to him. "If you're going to hide when you're off duty, Bishop, you need to find somewhere else to go. You're not a shadowy man of mystery; you're as predictable as the rest of us. Why do you go there anyway?" Marsh takes another drag. "You're not going to find the woman of your dreams at some sleazy bar full of twenty-year-olds."

"It's not like that."

Marsh snorts. "Well, whatever. Good for you, Bishop. Living your best life."

Dr. Ross returns. He nods to Marsh as he passes but ignores Adam. "Still making friends everywhere you go then," Marsh finishes sarcastically, flicking his butt to the ground and following the pathologist.

Adam watches his boss leave as he smokes the cigarette to the filter. The two older men are almost indistinguishable as they get into the crime scene gear, Ross for the second time. Both are tall and slim—although Adam knows Marsh's figure is due to a lack of food and a surfeit of nicotine and caffeine, while Ross is the paragon of fitness, clean eating, and exercise. In the distance, Adam can make out Jamie, his DS an altogether larger silhouette, happily settled with his wife of two weeks. Adam remembers what that's like: the pleasure of letting standards slip. Cozy nights on the sofa with home-cooked roast dinners and a family sized bar of Dairy Milk.

A shout from Jamie rouses Adam from his thoughts. He flicks his butt away from the cordon and goes to join him.

"That's five," his DS says. The handlers are taking the dogs home, tails wagging on receipt of their rewards.

"And we're sure that's all?"

"Isn't that enough?" Jamie replies.

Adam nods grimly. Separate sites are being constructed now:

individual crime scenes for each ugly discovery. Floodlights and figures mark each one, careful to avoid cross-contamination. Five bodies, in varying states of decay. Five people who were once someone, who loved and were loved and cared for.

But despite this, Adam feels a wave of apprehension. A small thrill of the challenge he's facing. He's dealt with more murders than he can count. Domestic violence gone wrong, pub fights ending badly, even one tragic infanticide. But nothing like this.

This is big.

Because written above all the bodies are the same spray-painted numerals. Adam doesn't need a pathologist to work it out. Number sixteen is almost fully decomposed, gnawed to the quick by the feasting rats, some bones disappeared, taken away to a hole somewhere for further attention. Number twelve—the body found today—still in the early stages of putrefaction.

Adam knows it, Jamie knows it. DCS Marsh knows it, or he wouldn't be here.

The killer is counting down.

This is just the beginning.

CHAPTER

3

BEFORE BED, SHE goes through the same routine. Check each door—chain on the front, double-lock the back. All the windows closed. Turn off the lights, one by one, but not until she is out of the room, still bathed in the puddle of light from the next. Ensure that the plug-in LEDs have come on. Reassuring and bright.

By the time she makes it to the bedroom, Phil is usually under the covers. She envies the simplicity of his life. Tonight, she can tell by his breathing that he's nearly asleep. Slow, secure, steady. She turns the nightlight on next to her bed; it's a kid's one, but what she needs. It throws stars up at the ceiling, dousing the bedroom in a cool blue glow.

She turns the main light off and gets into bed next to her boyfriend. He rolls over and pulls her close, his arm around her middle, one leg entwined with hers. Safe.

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When she wakes, she knows instantly something is wrong. She can sense the darkness, covering everything, deep and suffocating. She opens her eyes. There's nothing. Her breathing quickens. The nightlight is off; the room is pitch-black. Her hands grope outward, looking for Phil, but she only touches cold sheets.

And in a flash, she's back there. Alone, in the darkness. Sounds from outside the window: the hoot of an owl, the screech of a fox. Then something else. Something animal, but undoubtably human. A cry, a scream of pain. Anguish and fear.

She lies frozen in her bed. Her hands claw at the duvet; she blinks, trying to force her eyes to see something, anything, in the darkness. At last, she conjures up the strength to reach across to her bedside table. Her

fingers come into contact with the flex of the wire from her lamp, then the plastic switch, and she flicks it. But nothing. *Nothing*. She starts to whimper. Quiet at first, getting louder until she is screaming. Taking in great gulps of breath, then screaming again.

Suddenly, she feels a body next to hers. Strong hands on her arms. A flashlight switched on and swung around the room.

“Rom! Romilly,” the voice is saying. “I’m here now, I’m sorry. There’s a power cut. I’m sorry.”

She grabs at her boyfriend’s arm and the light, her salvation, comes with him. He wraps his arms around her and holds her tight.

“I’m sorry,” Phil says again. “I shouldn’t have left you. I went to get the flashlight.” He pulls her closer, dragging the duvet up over them, cocooning them in the bed. “There, is that better?” he asks softly, and she curls up against his chest, her tears soaking his T-shirt.

She holds the flashlight in her hand, the strong stream of light illuminating the bedroom. Her bedroom. Not then, but now.

And slowly, all too slowly, she feels the panic fade. She’s safe. They’re safe, she tells herself as she slowly drops into a restless, disturbed sleep.

CHAPTER

4

Day 2
Sunday

THE SUN COMES up over the wasteland, and the crime scene teams work on. Five bodies: it's a lot to process.

Marsh left hours ago, back to his warm house and comfortable bed. Dr. Ross followed not long after.

Adam is sitting in Jamie's car, the coffee fetched by a kind PC drunk cold, Adam still clutching the empty cup. Next to him, Jamie's six-foot-three frame is slumped uncomfortably in the driver's seat. His double chin is crumpled into his chest; he's fast asleep, breathing heavily through his nose. Adam is tired too, but the addition of a constant stream of caffeine, plus the thought of what's to come, means he feels wired.

He's been gathering his thoughts, mentally preparing himself for the start of a multiple murder investigation.

A gentle tap on the car window makes him jump; he opens the door to the tired face of Maggie Clarke. Hood down, but still in her crime scene suit, she crouches next to him and smiles wearily.

"Sleeping Beauty still out?"

Adam glances over; Jamie hasn't moved. "Always envied his ability to kip anywhere," he comments. "Have you got anything for me, Mags?"

"No, and we're not going to for hours yet. There's so much here, all this trash to rake through."

"Can't you tell me anything?" he pushes.

She glances back to the crime scenes, then frowns. "Unofficially?"

He grins. "Unofficially."

"First thoughts, but this all feels very deliberate."

“How so?” Like Adam, Maggie is an old hand. Well-read in her field, Maggie is familiar with crime scenes, years of experience teaching her what’s normal, and what’s not. At least, what’s normal in these sorts of circumstances.

“The bodies were placed on their backs,” Maggie continues. “Heads next to the ...” She draws a square shape with her finger.

“Gravestones?”

“If you want to call them that, yes. Whoever placed the bodies here was sending a message.” She places a hand on his arm, then pulls herself to a stand with a wince. “I’ll call you when I have something definite. Get some sleep.”

He watches as she returns to the crime scene, gathering her unruly curls into a ponytail and pulling the hood back up.

Sleep is an impossibility.

Now, he’s ready.

He reaches across and pinches the bottom of Jamie’s nose. After a moment, Jamie snorts, then jumps awake. He looks across, blurry-eyed.

“You’re a dick, Bish,” he mumbles.

“We need to go.”

Jamie looks out to the piles of rubbish and dirt. “Go? Go where?”

“Back to the station. We have a murder investigation to begin.”

★ ★ ★

Despite it being a weekend, detectives crowd the incident room. Adam had already made the call: get whoever you can in.

There is no grumbling about being summoned on a Sunday. Most have seen the news, and the speculation from reporters is rife. *Bodies found. Unidentified. Details to follow.* No detective likes to miss out on the juicy cases, and all of them know this could be one of those.

Adam stands at the front and begins the briefing.

A hastily pulled together map of the wasteland fills the screen behind him as he updates them on everything they know. Five bodies, differing stages of decomposition, both male and female. The PMS are due to begin that morning, and Adam picks the next detective from the rota to attend the mortuary. The DC departs amid cheers and catcalls.

“So,” Adam concludes, once the noise has subsided, “let’s crack on with the basics. There is no CCTV in that area, but locate the closest cameras, especially the ones for the roads in and out. Let’s get the ANPR,