



CHRISTOPHER FOWLER

BRYANT  
& MAY

and  
The Invisible Code

## About the Book

**The game the two young children are playing is called Witch-Hunter. Spying a woman sitting alone in a church courtyard, they curse her and wait for her to die. And die she does. Her body is found in St Bride's Church - a building that no one else has entered.**

Unfortunately Bryant & May are refused the case. Instead they're investigating why the wife of their greatest enemy has suddenly started behaving strangely, including embarrassing him at official functions. He seems convinced that someone is trying to drive her insane; she believes she's the victim of witchcraft.

There's a brutal stabbing in a London park and suddenly a connection is found between the two investigations. As Arthur Bryant sets off on a trail that leads to Bedlam and Bletchley Park, and into a world of madness, codes and the secret of London's strangest relic, the rest of the Peculiar Crimes Unit are tested to their limits.

Probing behind the city's facades, they uncover a world of private clubs, hidden passageways, covert loyalties and murder. It seems that this case might not just end in disaster - it might also get them all killed...

# Contents

Cover  
About the Book  
Title Page  
Dedication  
Epigraph  
Acknowledgements

## Part One: The Case

1. Close to God
2. Death in the Wedding Cake
3. Health Check
4. String
5. The Enemy
6. Persecuted
7. The English Disease
8. Sabira
9. Permissible Material
10. The Invisible Code
11. The Glass
12. The English Heart
13. In Coram's Fields
14. Connections
15. Ghost Imprint
16. Watching
17. Destabilization
18. Lucy
19. Method In Madness
20. A Fatal Flaw

21. Breaking Free
22. At Home
23. The Fourth Solution

#### Part Two: The Chase

24. The Escape
25. Death's Puzzle
26. The Cardano Grille
27. The Warning
28. The Strangeness Of Churches
29. Cause of Death
30. The Witch Test
31. Tunnel Run
32. Method and Madness
33. Conspiracy Theory
34. Doxies and Rakes
35. Bring it Down
36. Runaway
37. The Sickness of the Moon
38. Rough Music
39. Bloodline
40. The Thread
41. The Blood Link
42. The Rooftop
43. Low Castes
44. Conflagration
45. Dead in the Water
46. Shadow Image
47. Mr Merry
48. Final Call
49. Witchcraft
50. The Outsiders

About the Author

Also by Christopher Fowler

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**BRYANT & MAY AND  
THE INVISIBLE CODE**

CHRISTOPHER FOWLER

**For Peter Chapman**

'Money can't buy friends, but it can get you a better class  
of enemy.'

**Spike Milligan**

'It started with me. It ends with me.'

**Unnamed teenager, when asked about the history of  
London**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

'Make your leading characters younger and put in more sex and violence if you want them to be a success,' a critic warned me as I embarked on the first Bryant & May mystery. Blithely ignoring his advice I ploughed on, determined to create a pair of intelligent Golden Age detectives who are forced to deal with the modern world. I knew I'd have fun just watching Arthur Bryant trying to use a smartphone.

Luckily, there were others who always agreed with me. Simon Taylor, my editor at Transworld, is so wonderfully enthusiastic that I sometimes doubt his sanity but never his *savoir faire*. Thanks too, to Lynsey Dalladay, who has restored my faith in publishing PR. Both she and Mandy Little, my charming agent, prove it's not all standing around drinking champagne and that we can also have fun going to secluded libraries on wet winter Wednesdays.

I really hope there are further Bryant & May adventures to come, as each book is more pleasurable to write than the last. Remember, the strangest parts of these tales are true. You can uncover lots more information at [www.christopherfowler.co.uk](http://www.christopherfowler.co.uk)

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## **STAFF ROSTER FOR MONDAY 18 JUNE**

Raymond Land, Acting Unit Chief  
Arthur Bryant, Senior Detective  
John May, Senior Detective  
Janice Longbright, Detective Sergeant  
Dan Banbury, Crime Scene Manager/InfoTech  
Giles Kershaw, Forensic Pathologist (St Pancras Mortuary)  
Jack Renfield, Sergeant  
Meera Mangeshkar, Detective Constable  
Colin Bimsley, Detective Constable  
Crippen, staff cat

## **BULLETIN BOARD**

### ***Housekeeping notes from Raymond Land to all staff:***

As you know, we now have a fully activated secure swipe-card entry system on the front door. It worked perfectly for two whole days, until Arthur Bryant accidentally inserted an old Senior Service 'Battle of Britain' cigarette card into the slot instead of his electronic keycard and somehow jammed it. The engineers hope to have the system working again by Thursday.

The new common room is to be used as a neutral zone for calm reflection and the sharing of information. It is not

an after-hours bar, a videogame parlour or a place where you can stage chemical experiments, impromptu film shows or arm-wrestling matches for beers.

When the fire inspector came to test the smoke detector in the first-floor corridor last week, he found a box of Bryant & May matches wedged in place of the alarm battery. Obviously only a disturbed, selfish and immature individual would risk burning his colleagues alive in order to smoke a pipe indoors. I'm not mentioning any names.

I want to put the rumours to rest about our new building once and for all. While it appears to be true that a Mr Aleister Crowley once held meetings here (and decorated the wall of my office with inappropriate images of young ladies and aroused livestock), the building is most emphatically not 'haunted'. It's an old property with a colourful history, and has Victorian pipes and floorboards. The noises these make at night are quite normal and certainly don't sound like the 'death-rattles of trapped souls', as I overheard Meera telling someone on the phone. May I remind you that you are British officers of the law, and are not required to have any imagination.

There's a funny smell in the kitchen. It might be a gas leak. Our builders, the two Daves, are coming back to rip everything out. If I find one of you dropped a kebab behind the units, you'll be on unpaid overtime for a month.

Finally, I was under the impression that Crippen, our staff cat, was a neutered tom, but this appears not to be the case as she is clearly pregnant. Can someone please take care of this? I DO NOT want anyone unexpectedly giving birth in this unit.

# **PART ONE**



## The Case

# 1

## CLOSE TO GOD

THERE WAS A witch around here somewhere.

The Fleet Street office workers who sat in the cool shadow of the church on their lunch breaks had no idea that she was hiding among them. They squatted in the little garden squares while they ate their sandwiches, queued at coffee shops and paced the pavements staring at the screens of their smartphones, not realizing that she was preparing to call down lightning and spit brimstone.

On the surface the witch was one of them, but that was just a disguise. She had the power to change her outward appearance, to look like anyone she was standing near.

Lucy said, 'She won't be somebody posh. Witches are always poor.'

Tom said, 'I can't tell who's posh. Everyone looks the same.'

He was right; to a child they did. Grey suits, black suits, white shirts, grey skirts, blue ties, print blouses, black shoes. London's workforce on the move.

Lucy pulled at her favourite yellow T-shirt and felt her tummy rumble. 'She'll have to appear soon. They often travel in threes. When a witch starts to get hungry, she loses concentration and lets go of her disguise. The spell will weaken and she'll turn back into her real self.'

She was crouching in the bushes and wanted to stand up because it was making her legs hurt, but knew she might get caught if she did so. The flowerbeds bristled with

tropical plants that had spiny razor-sharp leaves and looked as if they should be somewhere tropical. A private security guard patrolled the square, shifting the people who looked as if they belonged somewhere else too.

‘What does she really look like?’ asked Tom. ‘I mean, when she drops her disguise?’

Lucy answered without hesitation. ‘She has a green face and a hooked nose covered in hairy warts, and long brown teeth and yellow eyes. And her breath smells of rotting sardines.’ She thought for a moment. ‘And toilets.’

Tom snorted in disgust as he looked around the courtyard for likely suspects. Nearby, an overweight woman in her mid-thirties was standing in a doorway eating a Pret A Manger crayfish and rocket sandwich. She seemed a likely candidate. The first of the summer’s wasps was hovering around, scenting the remains of office lunches. The woman anxiously batted one away as she ate.

‘It can’t be her,’ said Lucy.

‘Why not?’ asked Tom.

‘Witches don’t feel pain, so she wouldn’t be scared of a stupid wasp.’

‘Can a witch be a man?’

‘No, that would be a warlock. It has to be a woman.’

Tom was getting tired of the game. Lucy seemed to be making up extra rules as she went along. The June sun shone through a gap in the buildings and burned the back of his neck. The sky above the courtyard was as blue as the sea looked in old films.

He was starting to think that this was a stupid way to spend a Saturday morning when he could have been at football. He had been looking forward to seeing the Dr Who exhibition as well, but right at the last minute his dad had to work instead, and said, ‘You can come with me to the office,’ as if it was a reasonable substitute. There was nothing to do in the office. You weren’t allowed to touch the computers or open any of the drawers. His dad seemed to

like being there. He always cheered up when he had to go into the office on a Saturday.

The only other father who had brought his child in that morning was Lucy's, so he was stuck playing with a girl until both of their fathers had finished their work. At least Lucy knew about the game, which was unusual because most girls didn't play games like that. She explained that she had two older brothers and always ended up joining in with them. She didn't tell him they had outgrown the game now and spent their days wired into hip-hop and dodgy downloads.

'How about that one?' said Lucy, taking the initiative. Her brothers could never make up their minds about anything, and always ended up arguing, so she was used to making all the decisions.

'Nah, she's too pretty,' said Tom, watching a slender girl in a very short grey skirt stride past to the building at the end of the courtyard.

'That's the point. The prettier they look on the outside, the uglier they are inside. Too late, she's gone.'

'I'm bored now.'

'Five more minutes. She's here somewhere.' There were only a few workers left in the square, plus a motorcycle courier who must have been stifling in his helmet and leathers.

'It's this one. I have a feeling. I bet she belongs to a coven; that's a club for witches. Remember, we have to get them before they get us. Let's check her out. Come on.'

Lucy led the way past a sad-looking young woman who had just seated herself on the bench nearest the church. She had opened a paperback and was reading it intently. Lucy turned to Tom with an air of theatrical nonchalance and pointed behind the flat of her palm.

'That's definitely her.'

'How can we tell if she's a witch?' Tom whispered.

'Look for signs. Try to see what she's reading.'

'I can't walk past her again, she'll see. Wait, I've got an idea.' Tom had stolen a yellow tennis ball from his father's office. Now he produced it from his pocket. 'Catch, then throw it back to me in her direction. I'll miss and I'll have to go and get it.'

Lucy was a terrible actress. If the sad-faced young woman had looked up, she would have stopped and stared at the little girl gurning and grimacing before her.

'I'm throwing now,' Lucy said loudly, hurling the ball ten feet wide of the boy. Tom scrambled in slow motion around the bench, and the young woman briefly raised her eyes.

Tom ran back to Lucy's side. 'She's reading a book about babies.'

'What was it called?'

'*Rosemary's Baby*. By a woman called Ira something.'

'Then she's definitely a witch.'

'How do you know?'

Lucy blew a raspberry of impatience. 'Don't you know anything? Witches eat babies! Everyone knows that.'

'So she really is one,' Tom marvelled. 'She looks so normal.'

'Yeah, clever isn't it?' Lucy agreed. 'So, how are we going to kill her?'

## 2

### DEATH IN THE WEDDING CAKE

EVEN THOUGH THE presses of the Fourth Estate had been shifted to London's hinterlands by Rupert Murdoch, St Bride's Church was still known to many as the Printers' Cathedral. Tucked behind Fleet Street, it stood on a pagan site dedicated to Brigit, the Celtic goddess of healing, fire and childbirth. For two thousand years the spot had been a place of worship, and for the past five hundred it had been the spiritual home of journalists. Samuel Pepys, no mean reporter himself, had been born in Salisbury Court, right next to the church, and had later bribed the gravedigger of St Bride's to shift up the corpses so that his brother John could be buried in the churchyard.

St Bride's' medieval lectern had survived the Great Fire and the Luftwaffe's bombs. It still stood bathed in the lunchtime sunlight, barely registered by the tourists who stopped by to take photographs of just another London church. The building had been badly damaged in the firestorm of 29 December 1940, but had now been restored according to Wren's original drawings.

With the paperback in her hand, the sad young woman walked into the church and looked about. Amy O'Connor had been here many times before, but her visits had never brought her the satisfaction she'd hoped for. She knew little about the church except the one thing everyone knew: that the shape of a wedding cake came from its tiered spire. It was usually empty inside, a place where she could

sit still and calm herself. Her encounter with the children in the courtyard had disturbed her. It was as if they had been slyly studying her.

Before her the great canopied oak reredos dedicated to the Pilgrim Fathers stood in front of what appeared to be a half-domed apse, but it was actually a magnificent *trompe l'oeil*. A striking oval stained-glass panel, like an upright eye holding the image of Christ, shone light down on to the polished marble floor, which was laid with black Belgian and white Italian tiles.

Amy looked around the empty pews with their homely little lampshades. If there had been any lunchtime worshippers here, they had all gone back to work now. The churchwarden was still on his break and had probably headed up the road for a pie and a pint in the Cheshire Cheese. Someone had taken over for him, and was manning the little shop selling books and postcards near the entrance.

Seating herself in one of the oak chairs arranged near the pulpit, she closed her eyes and let the light of God shine through the dazzling reds, blues and yellows of the stained glass on to her bare freckled arms and upturned face. It was like being inside a gently shifting kaleidoscope. The light divided her into primary colours. She swayed back and forth, feeling the changing patterns on her eyelids. She thought of lost love, wasted time and missed opportunities.

She was still furious with herself for losing the only man she had ever loved. She had been angry for more than two years now, and only coming to St Bride's could dull the ache of loss. If she had taken him more seriously and tried harder to help, she was sure he would still be with her.

His death had hastened the end of her trust in God, but here in the church he must have loved she felt a connection between the present and the past, the living and the dead.

She could believe that angels were watching and guiding her thoughts.

But when she opened her eyes, she found that pair of children still peering through the door at her. Where were their parents, and why were they staring?

They looked as if they were waiting for something to happen.

The church's thick walls kept it cool even in the heat of summer. The chill radiated from the stones. But now, after just a few minutes, the interior started to seem hot and airless. The light from the windows hurt her eyes. She could feel her face burning.

Suddenly aware that she was perspiring, she wiped her forehead with the paper tissue she kept tucked in her sleeve, and looked up at the drifting motes of dust caught in the sunlight coming through the plain glass on either side of the nave. Perhaps it was her imagination, but today she really did feel closer to some kind of spiritual presence in here.

The sensation was growing, starting to envelop her. Perhaps God had finally decided to make himself known, and would apologize for screwing up her life. The colours in the oval window above the altar grew more vivid by the second. Even the oak pews that faced each other across the church seemed to give off waves of warmth.

It wasn't her imagination. The church was definitely getting hotter. The light streaming through the glass was tinged crimson. The floor was rippling in the heat. It was as if the entire building had divorced itself from its moorings and was sinking down to hell.

Suddenly she felt very close to a watchful being, but it wasn't God - it was the Devil.

She twisted her head to see the children leaning in from outside the church door, still staring at her intently. And someone or something no more than a stretched silhouette

was behind them, dark and faceless, willing them on to evil deeds.

*I am going to suffer, she thought. This is all wrong. I can't die before knowing the truth.*

As the church tipped and she fell slowly from her chair, all she felt was frustration with the incompleteness of life.

### 3

## HEALTH CHECK

'YOU NEED TO start acting your age,' said Dr Gillespie.

'If I did that, I'd be dead.' Arthur Bryant coughed loudly, causing the doctor to tear off his stethoscope.

'Would you kindly refrain from doing that when I'm listening to your heart?' he complained. 'You nearly deafened me.'

'What?' asked Bryant, who had been thinking about something else.

'Deaf,' said Dr Gillespie. 'You nearly deafened me.'

'Yes, I'm quite deaf, but don't worry, it's not catching. You're a doctor, you should know that. I've got a hearing aid but it keeps picking up old radio programmes. I put it on yesterday morning and listened to an episode of *Two-Way Family Favourites* from 1963.' He coughed again.

Dr Gillespie coughed too. 'That's not possible. How long have you been coming here?' he asked, thumping his chest.

'Forty-two years,' said Bryant. 'You ought to cut down on the oily rags.'

'The what?'

'The fags. The snouts. Gaspers. Coffin nails. Lung darts.'

'All right, I get the picture.'

'The doctor I had before you is dead now. He was a smoker, too.'

Dr Gillespie coughed harder. 'He was run over by a bus.'

'Yes, but he was on his way to the tobacconist.'

'You smoke a pipe.'

'My tobacco has medicinal properties. Is there anything else wrong with me?'

'Well, quite a lot, but nothing's actually dropping off. It's mostly to do with your age. How old are you, exactly?'

'My date of birth is right there in your file.' Bryant reached forward and slapped an immense sheaf of yellowed paperwork.

Dr Gillespie donned his glasses and searched for it. 'Good Lord,' he said. 'Well, I suppose, all things considered, you're doing all right. Mental health OK?'

'What are you implying?'

'I have to ask these things. No lapses of memory?'

'Well of course there are, all the time. But I know if I'm at the park or the pictures, if that's what you mean. It proves quite convenient sometimes. Birthdays, anniversaries and so on.'

'Jolly good. Well, you should make sure you get adequate rest, take a snooze in the afternoons.'

Bryant was apoplectic. 'I can't suddenly go for forty winks in the middle of a case.'

'Yes, but a man of your age ...'

'Do you mind? I am certainly not a man of my age! I'm running national murder investigations, not working for the council,' Bryant bellowed.

'Well, there's nothing wrong with your voice.' Dr Gillespie made a tick on his list. 'You could always take up a hobby.'

'What, run the local newsletter or work in a community puppet theatre? Have you met the kind of busybodies who do that sort of thing? I'm not interested.'

'That's not what I heard.' Dr Gillespie coughed again and blew his nose. 'I think I'm coming down with something. What was this about you thinking someone had been murdered by a Mr Punch puppet recently?'

'Where did you hear about that?'

'Your partner Mr May is one of my patients too. He's in very good nick, you know. Takes care of himself. He's got the body of a much younger man.'

'Well, he should give it back.'

'He's wearing much better than you.'

'Thank you very much. I'm so pleased to hear that. We solved the Mr Punch case, by the way. Beat people a quarter of our age.'

'Well done. Good appetite? Bowels?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Are they open?'

'Not right at this minute, no, but they will be if you keep me here much longer.'

'I'm almost through. How's your eyesight?'

'It's like I'm living in a thick fog.'

'You should try cleaning your glasses occasionally.' Dr Gillespie's cough turned into a minute-long hack. 'God, I'm dying for a cigarette.'

'If you need one that badly, I'll wait.'

'Can't,' Dr Gillespie wheezed, 'no balcony.'

Bryant absently patted him on the back, waiting for him to catch his breath. 'You don't sound too good. Ciggies just bung up your lungs. I bet your chest feels sore right now.'

'You're right, it does.' The doctor hacked again.

'Like a steel strap slowly tightening around your ribs. Hands and feet tingling as well, no doubt. You're probably heading for a stroke.'

'I've tried to give up.'

'Lack of willpower, I expect.'

'I know, it drives me mad.'

'Perhaps you should think about retiring.'

The doctor bristled. 'Don't be ridiculous, I'm perfectly capable of doing my job.'

'There, now you know how I feel.' Bryant was triumphant. 'Let's call it quits.'

'Fair enough. Put your - whatever that is - back on.'

'It's my under-vest. Then I have my vest, my shirt and my jumper.'

'Aren't you hot in that lot? It's summer.'

'Ah, I thought the rain was getting warmer. I need these layers. They keep my blood moving around.'

'I saw a case that was right up your street the other day,' said Dr Gillespie as Bryant dressed. 'Young woman, Amy O'Connor, twenty-eight, pretty little thing, dropped dead in a church on Saturday.'

'Where was this?'

'St Bride's, just off Fleet Street. It was in the *Evening Standard*.'

'Why do you think that's a case for us, then?'

'You run the Peculiar Crimes Unit, don't you?' said Dr Gillespie. 'Well, her death was bloody peculiar.'

After the doctor had outlined what he knew about the case, Arthur Bryant left the GP's scruffy third-floor office situated behind the Coca-Cola sign in Piccadilly Circus and set off towards the Peculiar Crimes Unit in King's Cross, to check out the case of a lonely death in a City of London church.

Bryant ambled. In Paris he would have been a *boulevardier*, a *flâneur*, but in London, a city that no longer had time for anything but making money, he was just slow and in the way. Accountants, bankers, market analysts and PR girls hustled around him, cemented to their phones. The engineers and artists, bootmakers, signwriters and watchmenders had long fled the centre. Who worked with their hands in the City any more? The ability to make something from nothing had once been regarded with the greatest respect, but now the Square Mile dealt in units, its captains of industry preferring to place their trust in flickering strings of electronic figures.

Bryant would not be hurried though. He was as much a part of London as a hobbled Tower raven, a Piccadilly barber, a gunman in the Blind Beggar, and he would not be

moved from his determined path. He was, everyone agreed, an annoying, impossible and indispensable fellow who had long ago decided that it was better to be disliked than forgotten.

And over the coming week, he would find himself annoying some very dangerous people.

## 4 STRING

‘WHY DID I have to hear about this from my doctor, of all people?’ asked Bryant petulantly.

‘It’s not our jurisdiction,’ replied John May, unfolding his long legs beneath the desk where he sat opposite his partner. ‘The case went straight to the City of London Police. They’re a law unto themselves. You can’t just cherry-pick cases that take your fancy, they’ll come around here with cricket bats.’

Bryant was aware that the City of London’s impact extended far beyond its Square Mile inhabitants. Marked out by black bollards bearing the City’s emblem and elegant silver dragons that guarded the major entrances, it contained within its boundaries more than 450 international banks, their glass towers wedged into Palladian alleyways and crooked Tudor passages. As the global axis of countless multi-national corporations, it demanded a bespoke police force equipped to protect this unique environment with special policies and separate uniforms.

‘If there’s a reason why we should take over the investigation we can put in a formal request,’ he suggested.

‘True, but I can’t think of one.’

‘How did you know about it?’

‘I picked up the details as they came in,’ said May. ‘It was kept away from us because Faraday wanted it to be handled by the City of London.’

Leslie Faraday, the Home Office liaison officer charged with keeping the Peculiar Crimes Unit in line, was under instruction from his boss to reduce the unit's visibility, and therefore decrease their likelihood of embarrassing the government. His latest tactic was to starve them of new cases.

'But you made some notes, I see.'

'Yes, I did, just out of interest.'

'Well?' asked Bryant, peering over a stack of old *Punch* annuals at May's papers like an ancient goblin eyeing a stack of gold coins.

'Well what?' May looked innocently back across the desk, knowing exactly what Bryant was after.

'The details. What are the details of the case?' He waved his ballpoint pen about. 'There, man, what have you got?'

'Look at you, you're virtually salivating.'

'I have nothing else to concern myself with this morning, unless you happen to know where my copy of *The Thirteen Signs of Satanism* has got to.'

'All right.' May pulled up a page and held it at a distance. Vanity prevented him from wearing his newly prescribed glasses. 'It says here that at approximately two twenty p.m. on Saturday, a twenty-eight-year-old woman identified as Amy O'Connor was found dead in St Bride's Church, just off Fleet Street. Cause of death unknown, but at the moment it's being treated as suspicious. No marks on the body other than a contusion on the front of the skull, assumed by the EMT to have been incurred when she slipped off her chair and brained herself on the marble floor.'

'So what did she die of?'

'It looks like her heart simply stopped. There was a lad running the church shop, but he left his post to go for a cigarette a couple of times and didn't even notice her sitting there. She was found by one of the wardens returning from lunch, who called a local med unit. The only

note I have on the initial examination is an abnormally high body temperature. The building has CCTV, which the City of London team requisitioned and examined. They know she entered the building alone, and during the time that she was in there nobody else came in. That's about all they have.'

'Where was she before she entered St Bride's?'

'She was seen sitting on a bench in the courtyard outside the church. A lot of the area's local workers go there at lunchtime. Quite a few work on Saturdays. O'Connor was alone and minding her own business, quietly reading a book.'

'Was she working in the area?'

'No. She had a part-time job as a bar manager at the Electricity Showroom in Hoxton.'

'Why would an electricity showroom have a bar?'

'They kept the name from the building's old usage. It's a popular local hostelry. There aren't any electricity showrooms as such any more, Arthur, even you must have noticed that.'

'What about her movements earlier in the morning?'

'Nobody's too sure about those. She was renting a flat in Spitalfields, had been there a couple of years. Her parents live on the south-west coast. She'd never been married, had no current partner, no close friends. There, now you know as much as anyone else.'

'Where was her body taken?'

'Over to the Robin Brook Centre at St Bart's, I imagine. They handle all the cases from the Square Mile. But you can't go near the place.'

'Why not? I know the coroner there. We used to break into empty buildings together before my knees packed up.'

'Why did you do that?'

'Oh, just to have a look around. I think I'll pop over.'

'No, Arthur. I absolutely forbid it. You can't just walk into someone else's case and stir things up.'

‘I’m not going to, old sport. I’ll be visiting an old friend. There’s a big bowling tournament coming up. He’s a keen player. I think I should let him know about it.’ Bryant rose and jammed a mouldy-looking olive-green fedora so hard on his head that it squashed his ears. ‘Want me to bring you anything back?’

The hospital and the meat market occupied the same small corner of central London, the saviours and purveyors of flesh. In Queen Square, the doctors lurked like white-coated gang members, grabbing a quick cigarette before returning to their wards to administer health advice. Not far from them, in Smithfield, the last of London’s traditional butchers did the same thing. Both areas were at their most interesting before 7.00 a.m., when the doctors were intense and garrulous, the butchers noisome and amiably foul-mouthed.

Dr Benjamin Fenchurch’s parents had been among the first Caribbean passengers to dock in Britain from the SS *Empire Windrush* in 1948. He had spent his entire working life in the St Bartholomew’s Hospital Coroner’s Office. Over the decades, he had become so institutionalized that he hardly ever left the hospital grounds. He owned a small flat in an apartment building that was so close to his office he could see into it from his kitchen window. He ate in the St Bart’s canteen and always volunteered for the shifts that no one else wanted. Perfectly happy to cover every Christmas, Easter, Diwali and Yom Kippur, he actively avoided the living, who were loud and messy and unreliable, and always let you down. Bodies yielded their secrets with far more grace.

It seemed to Arthur Bryant that this was not a healthy way to live, and yet in many ways he was just as bad, preferring the company of his staff to the world beyond the unit. Working for public-service institutions had a way of making conscientious people feel as if they were always

running late. They spent their lives trying to catch up with themselves, and Fenchurch was no exception.

Threading his way through a maze of overlit basement corridors, Bryant reached the immense mortuary that served both the two nearby hospitals and the City of London Police. In the office at the farthest end, Fenchurch was at his lab desk, hunched over his notes, lost in a world of his own.

Bryant cleared his throat.

'I know you're there, Arthur. You don't have to make that absurd noise. I know the sound of your shoes.' Even after all these years, Fenchurch had retained his powerful Jamaican accent. He removed his glasses and raised a huge head of grizzled grey hair.

Bryant was surprised. 'Really? My Oxford toecaps?'

'Nobody else I know still wears Blakey's.' He was referring to the crescents of steel affixed to Bryant's toes and heels that saved leather and ruined parquet floors. 'I haven't seen you since that disgusting business with the Limehouse Ratboy.'

'Yes, that was rather nasty, wasn't it?' Bryant looked around. 'All by yourself today?'

'Do you see anyone else? My assistant's off having a baby. I mean it's his wife who's having the baby. Why he has to be there as well is a mystery to me. It's a simple enough procedure. So, what have I done to deserve a visit?'

'Amy O'Connor.'

'Oh yes. Thought you might be sniffing that one out. Very interesting.'

'That's just what I thought.'

'Pity it's not your jurisdiction.'

'It should have been. She died in a church. Part of our remit is to ensure that members of the general public aren't placed in positions of danger. If people can't trust the sanctuary of a church, what can they trust? But I'm not

here in an official capacity. I thought you might like some company. Here, I brought you some sherbet lemons.'

Bryant rustled the corner of a paper bag. Fenchurch sniffed. 'Not much of a bribe, is it?' He fished inside and took one anyway.

'We're playing the Dagenham Stranglers at the Hollywood Lanes Saturday week. I'll put you on our team.' For some peculiar reason, bookish Bloomsbury was the home of two decent central London bowling alleys.

'I thought you'd been banned after that incident with the nutcases.'

'New ownership. Don't think you should call them nutcases.' Bryant sucked ruminatively on a sherbet lemon, clattering it loudly against his false teeth. Last year he had fielded a team of anger-management outpatients to play in a bowling tournament against a group of Metropolitan Police psychotherapists. The outpatients had proven to be sore losers. One of them had tried to make a psychotherapist eat his shoes before knocking him unconscious with a bowling pin. 'Have you carried out a post-mortem yet?'

'Last night. I'm afraid it's going to be an open verdict.'

'Why so?'

'You know I'm not allowed to tell you.'

'Oh come on, Ben, who am I going to tell? I'm old. Most of my friends are either dead, mad or on the way out.'

'How's John?'

'Well, he's fine, obviously. And he's not a friend; he's the other half of my brain. I'd discuss it with him, I admit, but it would go no further.'

'Promise?'

'Cross my hardened heart.'

'To be honest it's a bit of a puzzler, and I could do with some feedback. She had a slight contusion to the orbital frontal region, but was otherwise clean of any marks.'