

CHAPTER 1

Charles Holborne, barrister, but presently dressed as a decorator in paint-spattered overalls, flat cap and a patched tweed jacket, jogs across Cricklewood Broadway and heads for the door of *The Crown* on the opposite pavement. He's a big man, not particularly tall but immensely broad with a bull neck and heavily muscled limbs, courtesy of a lifetime's training in a boxing gym and teenage years spent working as a lighterman on the Thames. He's never been to the famous Irish pub before, but he knows its reputation; to wear barrister's attire would likely attract comment, maybe even confrontation, so his present garb is fortuitous.

He finds his way across the forecourt of the pub blocked by two flatbed lorries disgorging their contents. Labourers in rolled-up shirtsleeves, flat caps and dirty trousers scramble over the sides and off the back, laughing, talking and jostling, most hastening towards the same pub door as Charles. These men are being dropped off where they were collected that morning to start their day's work. These are casual labourers, not even working the lump, taken on for a day here or half a day there; Charles spots pound notes clutched in more than one muddy fist.

He waits for them to precede him. These are also large men, some as large as Charles himself, and they smell of hard work and impatient thirst; it'd be impolitic to impede their progress.

He follows the last of them through the door to find his senses assaulted by a riot of Irish accents and the mixed odours of beer and meat stew. The place is heaving. Charles apologises his way through the men laughing, drinking and clamouring for attention at the bar and scans the room with a frown. He turns on his heels a full 360 degrees but is unsuccessful in locating his quarry. He stands on tiptoes with his hands on his hips, trying to look over the heads of the customers.

'Charles! Charles! Over here!'

He turns to see a hand waving briefly above the boisterous drinkers and pushes his way through to the estimated location of the hand. 'There you are, Sean,' he says, arriving at a wooden trestle table almost full of men engaged in the serious business of eating.

Detective Sergeant Sean Sloane is a handsome man in his mid-thirties with a wide brow, tousled light hair, and blue eyes set in a triangular, impish face. The two men have been

friends since Sloane investigated Charles for the murder of Henrietta, his late wife, some years before. Sloane has been reading from a beer-stained newspaper folded into quarters and has a half-eaten plate of steak and boiled potatoes before him. There are two pints of beer to his side, one almost empty.

‘I see you started without me,’ comments Charles with a smile.

‘Sorry, mate, but I was starving and —’

‘— I’m half an hour late. I needed to finish undercoating a door so I can gloss it tomorrow. Apologies.’

Sloane points to the full pint, indicating that it’s Charles’s. Charles squeezes into half a space at the end of the bench opposite, apologising to the men who have to shuffle up, and takes a long draught of ale. ‘Thanks,’ he says, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and looking up at his friend. ‘That’s better.’

‘Seen this?’ shouts Sloane over the din, pointing with his fork to the newspaper article.

Charles cranes his neck to look. The newspaper shows two black and white photographs side-by-side: a curly-haired young man with blank fisheyes and a downturned mouth, and a young woman with a masculine jaw and a thick mop of blonde hair. Underneath are two names: Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, soon to become notorious around the world as the “Moors Murderers”.

‘No. Have they been charged?’

The other nods. ‘Two murders so far,’ says Sloane in his soft Irish accent, ‘but from what I hear, they’re still finding bodies.’

‘Interesting venue,’ says Charles, pushing the newspaper back and looking about him. ‘Home from home?’

‘Not really. I slept on a floor near here when I first came over, but not after that. Then, you know, Buckinghamshire Constabulary followed by Vice. But seeing’s I’m now local, I thought “Why not?” It is an Irish institution, and I’ve been a regular ever since. And I’m careful not to advertise...’ Sloane says, dropping his voice and opening his coat enough for Charles to see that he too has abandoned his daywear. ‘I want no trouble from Fenians while I’m off-duty.’

‘How’re you enjoying S Division?’ asks Charles.

Sloane shrugs. 'It wouldn't have been my choice, but to be honest I'm just bloody glad to have a job. And to be out of Vice.'

'You were lucky.'

Sloane nods his agreement, mouth full. Framed by members of his own team for taking bribes, the charge hadn't stuck and he'd been reinstated, but the writing was on the wall. He'd never progress in Soho and as the junior member — and apparently the only honest copper — in his team, he'd never be safe. His application for a different posting went through on skates.

A young woman arrives at the table to clear some glasses.

'You couldn't get my friend a plate, could you?' asks Sloane, indicating his own meal with his knife.

She hesitates. 'I'm not supposed to...'

'Ah, come on Kathleen,' he wheedles, 'do an old friend a favour.'

Charles holds out a ten-shilling note. The girl looks down at it, and then up at the man offering it. Her expression softens and she takes the money.

'Give me a minute,' she says, and carries the used glasses away.

'You're a shameless flirt,' comments Sloane.

'Me?' asks Charles, all innocence. 'A mere novice at the seat of the master,' he says, nodding across the table at Sloane.

Sloane shakes his head. 'All that twinkling? It was positively blinding. And she's too young for you.'

Charles smiles. He is just shy of forty but looks younger.

'Anyway, aren't you and Sally...?' asks Sloane.

'Nothing definite. She's agreed to a drink next week.'

'That's a start, then.'

Charles's meal and his change arrive and the two men eat.

'How's the building work going?' asks Sloane, between mouthfuls.

Charles has recently acquired a near-derelict three-storey Georgian townhouse in Wren Street, just off Gray's Inn Road. It's a rough area, the houses dilapidated and, when vacant, used by drug users and toms undertaking quick knee-tremblers, but over the last couple of years Charles has noticed early signs of gentrification. In Wren Street alone three or four

properties besides his own are being done up by new owners, and at least one houses a young family.

Charles is not entirely sure why he bought the property. His tiny apartment on Fetter Lane, less than a hundred yards from the Temple, is incredibly convenient, but it's been his only proper home since Henrietta died and he feels he's outgrown it. He made an impulsive offer to buy the house on Wren Street, an offer which was accepted with worrying haste. Charles is now the possessor of a mostly uninhabitable building that still requires new floorboards, wiring and plumbing, some form of central heating and complete redecoration. He reassures himself that in years to come, when the area has moved sufficiently upmarket, it might be worth a fortune.

'It's going well,' he replies, having to shout over the noise of the drinkers around them. 'The roof's been replaced and most of the old lead pipes have been stripped out. The kitchen's now functioning — sort of — but no bathroom yet. My DIY skills are a bit rudimentary, but I'm getting there.'

'Sally was your go-to interior designer, I recall?'

'Yes. She was brilliant at it.' Charles shrugs. 'I'm not naturally skilled like she was, but I think the results are okay.'

'When are you planning to move in?' asks Sloane.

'I don't know. But definitely not till it's got central heating. Maybe around Christmas if I'm lucky.'

Meals completed, Charles buys them another round, but after a few further minutes of shouting to be heard they decide to leave.

Charles follows Sloane out of the pub. He notes, in passing, money and goods changing hands, and knows that Sloane must have seen it too. He says nothing; his friend is off-duty.

They fall into step together. It's now gone eleven but the pavements are still crowded, light spills from the windows of shops and Irish accents can be heard everywhere. The two men chat as they stroll away from the crowds.

'So,' asks Charles. 'West Hendon?'

'Still finding my feet, but first impressions are okay. Most of my colleagues spend half the day in the pub and only start working when overtime clocks in, which I find frustrating, but as far as I can tell there's no wholesale corruption like in Soho.'

‘Colleagues?’

‘Friendly enough. A couple were suspicious of me at the start ’cos I was in Vice, but they’re coming round. I’m pretty much left to me own devices. How’s work for you?’

‘Busy, as always. I’ve either been at my desk or at Wren Street till midnight every night for weeks.’

‘Got anything interesting on?’

Charles smiles. He has to answer carefully. He is much in demand, particularly with the East End criminals with whom he grew up. Although over the last couple of years he’s started to develop a more “establishment” prosecution practice, many of his friends, acquaintances and clients are people with whom Detective Sergeant Sloane would have a competing professional interest.

‘Just finished an armed robbery. My guy claimed he was a passer-by.’

‘And was he?’

‘Of course. A passer-by acting as lookout.’

Sloane laughs. ‘I thought you’d risen above common or garden blaggers.’

Charles shrugs. ‘So did everyone. I was supposedly a shoo-in for silk in April.’

The previous year Charles prosecuted one of the country’s top judges for murder, about as high-profile a case as you can get, and his imminent promotion to Queen’s Counsel on the back of it was widely predicted. But word had been received by Charles’s head of Chambers that Charles’s name would *not* feature on the April list of new appointments, and discreet enquiries as to why he would fail to secure the coveted initials had received no response.

‘There are numerous theories why it didn’t happen. In summary, I’m too Jewish, too working-class and still too closely associated with the East End.’

‘You mean the Krays.’

‘Probably.’

‘Sorry, Charles. That must be hard. Will you apply again?’

‘I don’t know. My face is never going to fit. But it’s hard watching younger and, dare I say it, less able barristers get it.’

Their idle strolling has brought them over the railway tracks at Cricklewood Station and along Brent Terrace, parallel to the sidings. They lean on the parapet wall, looking down at the sleeping trains. Cricklewood Depot is situated beside the Midland Main Line and houses

the largest servicing depot for trains terminating in London. Its marshalling yard is huge, full of dark lines of goods wagons awaiting departure to destinations all over London and the south-east.

They watch a man walking along the side of one long goods train, testing each door. He's in almost complete darkness and can be identified only by the faint orange light cast by the paraffin lamp swinging from one hand. He reaches the end of a long line of wagons and pulls at the final door. Something about the stance of the watchman suggests that he wasn't expecting it to open, but open it does, sliding a foot or two on its runners, and faint moving light spills out of the interior.

'What do you think you're doing?' comes the watchman's voice from down on the tracks. 'You're trespassing. Get out of there!'

Charles and Sloane hear the watchman utter a sharp cry which is cut short abruptly. Sloane stands upright, immediately alert. The watchman's lamp drops to the ground, the glass smashes and its light is extinguished. The watchman can no longer be seen. The brighter light from inside the wagon also goes out, only to reappear a second later a yard lower, near the tracks. Its loom moves about, as if whoever is holding it is casting about underneath the goods wagons looking for something.

Charles turns to Sloane to find the policeman already sprinting to his right.

'Stay there!' calls Sloane behind him.

Sloane vaults a gate in the parapet wall and disappears from Charles's view as he scrambles down a flight of concrete steps towards the train tracks. Charles runs after him to the gate but pauses there, watching as Sloane reaches the bottom of the steps and runs diagonally across the rows of multiple train tracks, lifting his knees oddly high to avoid tripping over the rails. Sloane reaches the point where the watchman disappeared. Charles sees the torch illuminated again. It swings in an arc and his friend's face is suddenly illuminated.

'Police!' shouts Sloane. 'Stay where you are!'

There is indistinct movement and Sloane drops to the ground, also disappearing into the shadows. The torch is again extinguished.

Charles jumps over the gate and runs towards the goods wagon and a jumble of silent shadows and movement. Charles can't work out who is doing what to whom but as he closes in on the tableau, he sees that someone is on the ground taking a kicking.

He reaches the kicker, grabs him by the shoulder and hauls him round. He has just enough time to see something glinting in the other man's hand as it flashes towards his head, and he ducks. The fist just misses Charles, skimming the top of his hair. Charles straightens up and delivers a left-handed uppercut to the underside of the man's chin and follows up with a right to the gut. The man expels air in an audible *whoosh!* and he drops to his knees, doubled up, fighting to re-inflate his lungs.

Charles swing round at the shrill blast of a police whistle. Running footsteps approach.

'Police! Everyone stay put!'

Charles does as he's told but holds himself ready to land more blows. Sloane is now sitting up groggily, holding his face.

'Right! I'm Sergeant Hawkins, British Transport Police,' says the newcomer. 'What's going on here?'

The man Charles downed begins to scramble away and Charles lunges after him, grabbing him by the scruff of the neck, and throwing him back onto the railway tracks. He stands with his foot compressing the man's lower back into the ground.

'The man nursing a painful head,' says Charles, pointing and breathing heavily, 'is Detective Sergeant Sloane, stationed at West Hendon. We saw this one —' he indicates the man underneath him — 'attack this watchman —' he gestures at a stationary mound of dark clothes curled between the rails — 'who was checking the goods wagons. Sergeant Sloane intervened and was also attacked. I went to help out.'

Hawkins looks down at Sloane. He's still sitting on the track but is holding something out to be inspected. Hawkins inclines his head to inspect Sloane's warrant card.

'You all right, sergeant?' asks Hawkins, offering a hand to haul Sloane up.

Sloane nods, struggling to his feet. 'I'm not sure. I think he hit me with something. I've got a lump on my face the size of a duck's egg.' He speaks indistinctly, through clamped jaws.

'Yes; a knuckleduster,' says Charles, pointing at his prisoner's right hand. The heavy brass weapon glints in the dim light.

'Take your foot away, sir,' orders Hawkins.

Charles hesitates but complies. A low moan escapes from the watchman. Charles turns to the sound and crouches. He helps the bundle of clothes turn over. The watchman's not a

young man and he looks dreadful. His breathing is ragged and blood pours from a hinged flap of flesh hanging from his temple.

‘I think this man needs an ambulance,’ says Charles, looking up at Hawkins.

‘Your name, sir?’ asks Hawkins of Charles.

‘Charles Holborne. I’m Sergeant Sloane’s friend.’

‘Well, I’ll take it from here, sir, if you don’t mind.’

‘Call an ambulance, sergeant,’ grimaces Sloane through clenched teeth. ‘Do you have a personal radio?’

‘Don’t make me laugh. I’ll have to go back to the office.’

Hawkins pulls the attacker to his feet, and Charles gets to see him properly for the first time. He appears an unlikely candidate for violence. Shortish, chubby and balding, he wears a heavy overcoat and thick-rimmed spectacles. He looks like a bookkeeper. ‘I’m arresting you on suspicion... Oh!’ Hawkins pauses for a very long five seconds. Then he turns to Sloane. ‘I know this man, Sloane.’

‘Good. Then you can fuckin’ nick him for trespassing on the railway, assaulting a watchman, and assault with intent to resist arrest.’

There’s a further puzzling moment of hesitation from Hawkins.

Hello; what’s going on here? wonders Charles.

‘Don’t tell me my job thank you, sergeant. This is my patch.’

‘Well if you won’t arrest him, I shall,’ says Sloane. He takes a step forward and is so unsteady he almost falls. He lowers himself to the trackside and sits.

Hawkins turns to the man. ‘Don’t run off. Got it? I mean it.’ The man nods briefly. ‘And you,’ he orders Charles, pointing at the watchman who is now sitting up trying to staunch the flow of blood down his face, ‘stay with Herbert.’

Hawkins beckons for Sloane to follow him and without waiting moves back down the line of wagons until he’s out of earshot. Sloane stands and staggers after him.

Charles focuses on the injured watchman. ‘Lie down, chum,’ he says, and he takes a blood-saturated handkerchief from the man’s loose grip and applies it to the deep cut on his head. The man is mumbling indistinctly, and Charles lowers his head to hear but still cannot make out what the old boy’s saying. A heated whispered conversation starts between the two police officers further up the track.

There is a sudden noise from behind Charles and the bookkeeper takes off, sprinting across the tracks towards the staircase.

‘Hey!’ Charles shouts at Hawkins. ‘He’s legging it!’

After what seems to Charles to be a deliberate pause, Hawkins breaks into an unconvincing attempt at chasing. Sloane sinks back to the trackside, holding his face. The bookkeeper has disappeared up the steps before Hawkins is halfway across the tracks. The sergeant slows, stops, and retraces his steps.

‘What the hell —?’ starts Charles.

‘Don’t worry. I know where to find him,’ says Hawkins. ‘That was Billy Gervaise. One of the Greene Grasses.’

Charles isn’t convinced. ‘You could’ve caught him. He just assaulted two men with a knuckleduster! One of them a policeman! Sean?’ he calls, but Sloane is on his hands and knees and looks incapable of standing unaided, let alone supporting Charles.

Hawkins bends to lift Herbert to his feet. ‘Come on, chum. Let’s get that cut looked at.’ He drags the watchman upright, props him under his shoulder and moves off towards the lights of the railway buildings, half-carrying Herbert, whose legs are not working properly. ‘I’d get your pal to a doctor, if I was you,’ he says to Charles over his shoulder.