

*No Weather for a Burial*

**Chapter 3**

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The high tide's hammered the beach, sucking great quantities of sand away and depositing all manner of vegetative debris on the tide-line, large bull kelp anchors included. The grave, probably dug to a depth of about a metre, would have been all but exposed by the time Beecham ran over it with his metal detector. What we see is the top portion of a large grey cotton-canvas bag, part of an image printed on it dully visible. The tines of a stag's antlers. A deer bag, its drawstring loosely closed. I kneel, pull apart the drawstring, lift the canvas.

'My old man used to have one of them,' Rafe says, matter of factly, 'to take the venison home.'

The corpse is face down. First impressions at such times are always a jumble of surreal intensity. The back of the head, blood-blackened and misshapen, took a violent blow, or a number of blows. The shoulders and arms in the brightly patterned T-shirt are so swollen they seem about to burst. But neither maggots nor sand weevils got to him. The drawstring must have been mighty tight. Lacking the maggot life cycle might make estimating time of death more difficult, though he's been dead a good while. A skinhead. And some kind of thin chain around the neck, a personal adornment.

I stand. Gesture. Rafe, then Faye, kneel and scrutinise.

Then we back off a bit, turn seawards for the mild onshore breeze.

'Clubbed with something blunt, hard,' Rafe says, 'the way the wound is right across the base of the skull.'

'Why in a game-hunting bag?' Faye asks.

'Transport,' I suggest. 'And they've made two mistakes already. Not everyone owns a deer bag. And the body's well preserved. William will be pleased.'

I'm referring to Dr William Doll, our dapper long-time head of the Forensic Unit. He'll be in his element. No dirt and, hopefully, no DNA-destroying agents like petrol or alcohol. Even rain washes vital evidence away. So it's a reasonable start. Not bad as murders go.

Beecham, old stager that he is, just happens to have a comforting flask of tea in his car, in which he and Woods are sitting while he makes his statement. In the time before the arrival of Forensics and the uniforms, the three of us have divvied up and scoured the area, looking for whatever might be of value. Cigarette butt, beer can, chewing gum wrapper, blunt instrument, knife, cartridge shell, name and address of killer, anything. Given the weather and the fact that the burial took place a week or more ago, we've got, as they say, Buckleys. No matter. It's procedure. And a breakthrough can turn on the most unlikely evidence.

I'm slowly walking the bush path when I hear vehicles arrive. Instructions float through the scrub. I walk out to meet them. Doll, half a dozen uniforms, and a photographer are putting on their orange and lime green forensic overalls.

'Morning, Franz!'

'Hello, William. We have a body in ex. cond. for you.'

'Good-o.' He glances about. 'I've often wondered what it's like here.'

I know what he means. William's a mad keen yachtie, with a nice Sailmaster B45 he sails from Lindisfarne, and he would have tacked his way through these waters any number of times on the way

to the Dunalley Canal and Blackman Bay, the short cut to the east coast.

‘Male, about fifty from what I can see of the face. Nice and snug in a deer bag.’

Doll raises his eyebrows. ‘Unusual. Should help you.’

‘We’re hoping.’

On the beach I watch Doll taking it all in, the distant battered and bruised low landforms, the immensity of unhappy sky above them, the wreckage of flotsam scattered along the tideline, and the sand all churned up as if nature tried to get at the grave.

‘No weather for a burial,’ Doll murmurs, as his first observation.

I just nod. And have an infant thought. If they can make a mistake like this, they can make another.

Once Doll’s carried out his initial examination and made some remarks into his recorder, the photographer gets busy. We watch. Then, after the forensic examination, uniforms get to work, carefully shovelling a moat around the grave, until the entire bag is exposed. It’s big, probably 90 by 200 centimetres, the material strong and durable, although by the faded look of the image, a large fallow stag with an impressive set of antlers, this bag’s pretty old. Four pairs of tough gloved hands carefully lift the bag by its corners, taking care not to allow it and its occupant to sag in the middle, and they just as carefully place it on a stretcher. We watch them walk away with it, disappear onto the narrow path. I look into the grave. Nothing in it. Not that I expected a calling card. Still, I get Rafe to poke around with a spade. Even smart crims do dumb things from time to time.