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Perfectly Human Monsters

At twenty-three minutes past eleven Robert Weil drove his 53 registered Volvo V70 across the bridge that links Pease Pottage, the improbably named English village, with Pease Pottage, the motorway service station. We know the exact time because the Highway Agency cameras picked him up at this point. Despite the rain and the poor visibility, image enhancement of key frames clearly show that Robert Weil was alone in the front of the car.

Driving with what looks like, in hindsight, suspiciously deliberate care Robert Weil turned left at the roundabout to join the loop of road that curves around the service station and heads for Crawley proper across the second bridge above the M23. There's a tricky intersection there where traffic coming off the motorway slip road crosses traffic coming across the bridge – it's controlled by traffic lights to prevent accidents. We don't know why Robert Weil ran those lights. Some believe that it was a cry for help, an unconscious desire to be caught. Others say that he was in a hurry to get home and took a calculated risk – which wouldn't explain the sedate thirty miles per hour he was going when he went through them. I think that he was concentrating so

hard on keeping his speed legal and avoiding attention that he didn't even notice the lights – he had a lot on his mind.

We don't know what Allen Frust was thinking as he came up the motorway slip road, at right angles to Robert Weil, at an estimated fifty-three miles an hour in his five-year-old Vauxhall Corsa. The light was in his favour and so he continued bearing left and was half-way across the intersection when he hit Robert Weil's Volvo in the side just ahead of the front passenger door. Sussex Police's Forensic Collision Investigation Team determined later that neither vehicle slowed or took evasive action prior to the crash, leading them to conclude that in the dark and rainy conditions neither driver was consciously aware of the other.

The impact drove the Volvo onto the grassy verge and into the crash barrier where it stopped almost immediately. The Vauxhall, travelling at nearly twice the speed, spun several times in the wet conditions before rolling over and tumbling to crash into the line of trees further along. It was determined that while Allen Frust's life was saved in the first instance by his seatbelt and airbag, the belt unfortunately failed as the car tumbled and he was thrown against the roof, breaking his neck.

The first police officer in attendance was PC Maureen Slatt based at the nearby Northgate Police Station in Crawley. She'd been on a solo patrol less than a kilometre to the north and, despite the worsening weather conditions, arrived on the scene in less than two minutes.

Nothing kills and injures more police than attending a traffic accident on a fast road, so the first thing she did

was park her Incident Response Vehicle in the ‘fend-off position’ at the intersection with its lightbar, headlamps and hazard lights all switched on. Then, with that meagre protection from insane night-time drivers in place, she ventured first to the Volvo to find Robert Weil groggy but responsive and then to the Vauxhall to find Allen Frust limp and seriously dead. After a quick sweep of her torch to ensure no passengers had been thrown clear into the bushes along the verge, she went back to Robert Weil to see if she could help. It was at this point that PC Slatt, and I bet she got stick for that name, proved that she was a proper copper and not just a uniform hanger with good driving skills.

The Volvo V70 is a large estate car and upon impact its rear door had sprung open. Traffic cop lore is full of gruesome tales of unsecured family pets, grannies and even children being flung around the back of cars, so PC Slatt figured she should check.

She immediately recognised the smears of blood on the side panels, fresh enough to still glisten in the light of her torch. It wasn’t much blood but it was enough to make her concerned – she searched thoroughly, but there was nobody in the back of the car or in a surrounding ten-metre area.

By the time she’d finished searching, the traffic cops had rolled up in their BMW 520 estates stuffed full of barriers, warning lights and enough reflective signs to set up a second runway at Gatwick. They quickly isolated the lane and got the traffic safely moving again. An ambulance arrived soon after and, as the paramedics fussed over Robert Weil, PC Slatt raided his glove

box for his registration papers. Before the ambulance could leave, Slatt climbed in the back and asked Robert Weil whether anyone else had been in the car with him.

‘He was absolutely terrified,’ she told detectives later. ‘Not only was he petrified by the question, but he was even more scared by the fact that I was police.’

It’s a police mantra that all members of the public are guilty of something, but some members of the public are more guilty than others. When the ambulance left for the slog up the M23 to the casualty unit at Redhill, PC Slatt was following close behind. While she drove she was on her radio recommending to the duty inspector at Force Command and Control that CID have a look. Nothing ever gets done quickly at two o’clock in the morning, so it was dawn by the time the DC from the nearby Crawley nick deemed it worth calling in his DI. They stamped their feet, cursed the early morning commuters who honked and grumbled at the delay and decided that it was worth making this somebody else’s problem. It went to the joint Sussex and Surrey Police Major Crime Team because that’s what they were there for.

It takes more than a bit of a mystery to prise a senior DCI out of his nice warm bed so when Douglas Manderly, designated Senior Investigating Officer, arrived at his office he already had a couple of luckless DCs out at the scene, a DC heading for the West Surrey Hospital to relieve PC Slatt and his office manager had powered up the HOLMES suite and assigned the operation a name – ‘Sallic’.

Little did Douglas Manderly suspect that as soon

as Robert Weil's name was entered into HOLMES it would trigger a flash I'd inveigled out of a civilian tech in technical support, which sent an email to my computer. My computer then texted my phone which went 'ping' just as me and Toby were out for a walk in Russell Square.

I say a walk, but actually the pair of us had sloped off through the thin winter drizzle to the café in the park where I had coffee and Toby had cake. I checked the details as best I could on my phone, but it's not secure enough for the sensitive stuff so we squelched back to the Folly. To save time we went round the back door, through the rear courtyard and up the exterior spiral stairs to the loft conversion above the garage. There I keep the computers, the plasma TV, the sound system and all the other accoutrements of twenty-first-century life that, for one reason or another, I daren't keep inside the Folly proper.

I'd got my cousin Obe in after Christmas to fix a master power switch by the door. It cuts off the mains to everything electrical in the loft except the lights – very ecologically friendly, but that's not why I installed it. The truth is that when you do magic any microprocessor in the immediate vicinity gets slagged and, since these days just about everything with an on-switch has a microprocessor, that can get expensive really quick. Now, a bit of experimentation on my part revealed that the aforesaid microchips have to be powered up to fail – hence the off switch. I made sure Obe chose an old-fashioned toggle switch that was stiff enough to deter any casual use. When I reached out to flip it that morning

I found it was already on. Now, I knew it wasn't me because just over a year of having my shit blown up by magic has made me very particular about these things. And it wasn't Lesley because she was currently in hospital having yet another operation on her face. I knew Nightingale occasionally sneaks up for illicit rugby, so it might have been him.

As soon as I was inside, with Toby shaking his wet fur and getting under foot, I fired up my Dell that is tasked as our AWARE terminal, fielded an email reminder that I was due to take my Officer Safety refresher in two weeks and rechecked the alert which referred me to Operation Sallic on HOLMES – which wouldn't give me access. I considered logging in using Nightingale's warrant card, which seems to have access to everything, but the powers that be had been getting twitchy over unauthorised access to databases recently. So I asked myself what would Lesley say in this circumstance, which was, *Call the incident room, duh!*

So I did and after ten minutes on the phone talking to the MCT office manager I rushed off to tell Nightingale all about it – but I made a point of switching off the master switch as I went out.

An hour later we were heading south in the Jag.

Nightingale let me drive, which was good, though he still won't let me solo in the Jag until I've done the Met's advanced driving course. I've got my name down but the trouble is that just about every officer in the Met wants to take that course and priority goes to the boy- and girl-racers who drive the response cars for

the borough commands. I had a tentative spot open in June. Until then I had to be content with being supervised as I opened up the inline-six engine and did a restrained seventy-six mph down the M23. She did it without any appreciable effort, which is not bad for a car that's almost as old as my mother.

'He was on the list that Tyburn gave us,' I told Nightingale once we'd mercifully escaped the terrifying traffic singularity that is Croydon.

'Why haven't we spoken to him before now?' asked Nightingale.

We'd been tracking former members of an Oxford University dining club called the Little Crocodiles ever since we'd discovered that a former wizard named Geoffrey Wheatcroft had, against custom and practice, been teaching them magic. He'd been doing this since the early fifties so, as you can imagine, there were a lot of names to cover. Tyburn – that's Lady Ty to you, peasant – genius loci of one of the lost tributaries of the Thames and Oxford graduate herself had spotted some members of this clique during her time there. She claimed, and I believed her, to be able to literally smell a magical practitioner. So we gave her list priority.

And our dead Volvo driver was on it.

'Robert Weil,' I said. 'With a W. We were working through the list alphabetically.'

'Just goes to show that there's such a thing as being too methodical,' said Nightingale. 'I presume you have been pillaging the computer records – what have you found out?'

Actually the office manager I'd talked to had emailed

me the results of their inquiries, but I wasn't going to tell Nightingale that.

'He's forty-two years old, born in Tunbridge Wells, dad was a barrister, mum stayed at home. Educated privately at Beachwood Sacred Heart—' I said.

'Day boy or boarder?' asked Nightingale.

I've picked up a smattering of posh since working with Nightingale, so at least I understood the question.

'The school's in Tunbridge Wells, so I'd guess a day boy,' I said. 'Unless his parents were really keen to have him out of the house.'

'And thence presumably to Oxford,' said Nightingale.

'Where he studied biology—' I started.

'Read,' said Nightingale. 'You read subjects at university.'

'Where he read biology, graduating with a second,' I said. 'So not the brightest banana in the bunch.'

'Biology,' said Nightingale. 'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?'

I was thinking of the Faceless Man's chimeras, the manufactured cat-girls and tiger-boys that had issued from what we'd taken to calling The Strip Club of Doctor Moreau. That and the Pale Lady who'd done away with people by biting their dicks off with her vagina dentata. And the other things in the club that Nightingale had deemed too horrible for me to see.

'I really hope not,' I said but I knew, I really *was* thinking what he was thinking.

'And after he was sent down?' asked Nightingale.

He'd gone to work for ICI for ten years before moving into the burgeoning field of environmental impact

assessments. Worked for the British Airport Authority as an environmental control officer until he was sold, along with the rest of Gatwick Airport, in 2009.

‘Made redundant last year,’ I said. ‘He was management so he got a good package and he’s currently listed as being a consultant.’

The Incident Room had been established at Sussex House on the outskirts of Brighton in what looked like a 1930s light-engineering plant converted into offices. At some point in the last thirty years the site had sprouted warehousing, a Matalan and an ASDA the size of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. It was the sort of out-of-town development that causes sober environmentally minded men and women to foam at the mouth with outrage and bite the rim of their Prius’s steering wheel but I couldn’t help thinking from a copper’s point of view it would be bloody convenient for shopping after work. In fact, given that the Brighton Detention Centre was stuck just behind it, it was convenient for the suspects as well. And there was a Big-Box Self-Storage next door which would be handy if the cells ever got overcrowded.

DCI Douglas Manderly was a copper in the modern mould, understated tailored pinstripe suit, brown hair cut short, blue eyes, an up-to-date mobile in his pocket. Sober, works late, drinks lager in halves and knows how to change a nappy. He’d be looking to make Detective Superintendent soon-ish but only for the extra pay and pension. Good at his job, I guessed, but probably not at ease with things that fall outside his comfort zone.

He was going to love us.

He met us in his office to establish his authority but stood and shook our hands in turn to evoke the correct collegial atmosphere. We sat in the offered seats and accepted the offered coffee and did about a minute and a half of the niceties before he asked us straight out what our interest was.

We did not tell him we were witch hunting, as that sort of things tends to cause alarm.

‘Robert Weil is possibly connected with another inquiry,’ said Nightingale. ‘A series of murders that took place over the summer.’

‘Would this be the Jason Dunlop case?’ he asked.

Better than just good at his job, I thought.

‘Yes,’ said Nightingale. ‘But not directly related.’

Manderly looked disappointed. People have got the wrong idea about police territoriality – a full-scale murder inquiry is going to set you back a quarter of a million quid minimum. If Manderly could dump it on the Met then it would be our budget and our problem, not to mention it would improve his crime counting at the end of the year. He certainly didn’t want to assign one of his precious DCs to escort us around, but he wasn’t particularly pleased when Nightingale asked for PC Maureen Slatt.

‘That’s a matter for her line manager,’ said Manderly.

Then he asked whether, given our interest, he should be looking for anything in particular.

‘You could inform us if you discover anything out of the ordinary,’ said Nightingale.

‘Does that include a body?’ he asked.

Technically, you don't have to have a corpse to convict for murder but detectives always feel better when they've found your actual victim – they're superstitious like that. Plus nobody wants to think they might be blowing a quarter of a million only to have the victim turn out to be living in Aberdeen with an insurance salesman called Dougal.

'Are we sure there was a body in the Volvo?' I asked.

'We're still waiting on DNA but the lab has confirmed that the blood is human,' said Manderly. 'And that it came from a body in the early stages of rigor mortis.'

'So not a kidnapping then,' said Nightingale.

'No,' said Manderly.

'Where is Mr Weil now?' asked Nightingale.

Manderly narrowed his eyes. 'He's on his way here,' he said. 'But unless you have something substantial to add to his interview I'd rather you left it to us.'

Now that it was clear that we weren't going to relieve him of this troublesome case he wasn't going to let us near the prime suspect until he had that case tied up in a neat bow.

'I'd like to talk to Constable Slatt first,' said Nightingale. 'I assume that Weil's home has been searched already?'

'We have a team there,' said Manderly. 'Is there anything specific you're looking for?'

'Books,' said Nightingale. 'And possibly other paraphernalia.'

'Paraphernalia,' said Manderly.

'I shall know it when I see it,' said Nightingale.

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II

The principal difference between town and country policing, as far as I could tell, was one of distance. It was thirty kilometres back up the A23 to Crawley where Robert Weil lived, which was further than I drove in a working week in London. Mind you, without London to get in the way we made it in less than half an hour. On the way we passed the spot where the accident had taken place. I asked Nightingale if he wanted to stop, but since Weil's Volvo had already been towed we pressed on to Crawley.

In the 1950s and '60s the powers that be made a concerted effort to rid London of its working class. The city was rapidly losing its industry and the large numbers of servants who were needed for the Edwardian household were being superseded by the technological wonders of the age of white goods. London just didn't need that many poor people any more. Crawley, which up until then had been a small medieval market town, had sixty thousand residents dumped on it. I say dumped but in fact they went into thousands of sturdy three-bedroom semis which my mum and dad would have loved to have lived in, if only they could have brought London's jazz scene with them, and Peckham market, and the Sierra Leonean expatriate population, or at least the half my mum was currently still talking to.

Crawley had managed to avoid the blight of out-of-town shopping centres by the simple expedient of dumping one in the middle of the town. Beyond this were the council offices, the college and the police station, all clustered together as neatly as something from a game of SimCity.

We found PC Slatt in the canteen which was as reassuringly unimaginative as its London counterparts. She was a short, red-headed woman who filled out her stab vest like a three-bedroom semi and had clever grey eyes. She said she'd already been briefed by her inspector. I don't know what she'd been told, but she stared at Nightingale as if she expected him to grow an extra head.

Nightingale dispatched me to the counter, and when I got back with the tea and biscuits PC Slatt was describing her actions at the crash site. Spend any time around traffic accidents and you have no trouble recognising blood when you see it.

'It glistens when you shine the torch on it, don't it?' she said. 'I thought there might have been another casualty in the car.'

It's quite common for people who've been involved in car crashes to escape from their vehicles and wander away in a random direction even with severe injuries. 'Only I couldn't find a blood trail and the driver denied there was anyone else in the vehicle.'

'When you first looked in the back of the vehicle did you notice anything odd?' asked Nightingale.

'Odd?' she asked.

'Did you feel anything unusual when you looked inside?' asked Nightingale.

'Unusual?' asked Slatt.

'Weird,' I said. 'Spooky.' Magic, particularly strong magic, can leave a sort of echo behind it. It works best with stone, less well on concrete and metal and even worse with organic materials – but strangely well with

some varieties of plastic. It's easy to spot the echo if you know what you're looking for, or if the source is very strong. It's where ghosts come from, by the way. And it's a bugger to explain to witnesses.

Slatt leaned back in her chair – away from us. Nightingale gave me a hard look.

'It was raining,' said Slatt finally.

'How did he strike you?' asked Nightingale. 'The driver?'

'At first, like every car crash victim I've ever met,' she said. 'Dazed, unfocused, you know how it is – they either babble or go catatonic. He was a babbler.'

'Did he babble about anything in particular?' asked Nightingale.

'I think he said something about the dogs barking but he was mumbling as well as babbling.'

Slatt finished her meal, Nightingale finished his tea and I finished my notes.

I drove as PC Slatt directed me past the train station, over the tracks and through, as far as I could tell, the Victorian bit of Crawley. Certainly Robert Weil's house was a stumpy detached brick Victorian villa with squared-off bay windows, a steep roof and terracotta finials. The surrounding houses were all Edwardian or even later so I guessed that the villa had once stood proudly in its own grounds. You could see the remnant in the big back garden that was currently the focus of a cadaver dog team – on loan from International Rescue, I learnt later.

PC Slatt knew the PC on door duty, who signed us

in without comment. The house was big enough that its owners hadn't felt the need to knock down all the intervening walls and had, recently I thought, restored the decorative moulding. The dining room had been abandoned and overrun by their children, aged seven and nine according to my notes, and was treacherous with toys, broken xylophones and DVDs that had come adrift from their cases. The kids were staying with friends but the wife remained. Her name was Lynda, with a Y, with faded blonde hair and a thin mouth. She sat on the sitting-room sofa and glared at us while we searched her house – the locals were looking for bodies, we were looking for books. Nightingale took the study. I did the bedrooms.

I did the kids' rooms first, just on the off chance that something interesting was hidden amongst the Lego Star Wars stickers, the Highway Rat and some slightly sticky colouring-in books. The eldest already had a laptop of his own in his room although, judging from its age, it looked like a hand-me-down. Some kids have all the luck.

The parents' bedroom had a fusty unaired smell and not much in the way of interest to me. Real practitioners never leave their *important* books lying around, but you pick up pointers. The key is unlikely juxtapositions. Lots of people read books about the occult, but if you find them alongside books by or about Isaac Newton, especially the long boring ones, then hackles are raised, flags hoisted and, more importantly, notes made in my notebook.

All I found in the bedroom was a dog-eared copy of

the *Discovery of Witches* under the bed along with the *Life of Pi* and *The God of Small Things*.

‘He hasn’t done anything,’ said a voice behind me.

I stood up and turned to find Lynda Weil standing in the doorway.

‘I don’t know what you think he did,’ she said. ‘But he didn’t do it. Why can’t you tell me what he’s supposed to have done?’

It’s good policing, when you’re engaged in other tasks, to avoid interacting with witnesses or suspects and especially with those individuals that might straddle both categories. Besides – I didn’t know what her husband had done, either.

‘I’m sorry, ma’am,’ I said. ‘We’ll be finished as soon as we can.’

We were finished even sooner because a minute later Nightingale called me downstairs and told me that the Major Crimes Team had found a body.

They’d done it with a wicked bit of policing too. I was seriously impressed. The MCT had CCTV footage of Robert Weil heading out through the Pease Pottage roundabout and off down the ominous sounding Forest Road – so called because it ran along the central axis of St Leonard’s Forest, a patchwork of woods that covered the ridge of high ground that ran from Pease Pottage to Horsham.

Prime body dumping country, according to PC Slatt, easily accessible via footpaths and forest tracks and not covered by speed cameras. Wherever he’d gone, Robert Weil hadn’t returned to Pease Pottage for over five hours so he could easily have been anywhere in the

forest. But they'd caught a break because Lynda Weil had phoned her husband at nine forty-five, presumably to ask him where the hell he was, and that allowed the Sussex Police to triangulate the position of his phone to a cell just short of the village of Colgate. After that, it was just a matter of checking the appropriate stretch of the road until they spotted something – in this case tyre tracks from a Volvo V70.

The grey overcast was darkening to countryside black when we arrived at the murder site. There wasn't a proper turn off, so I had to park the Jag further up the road and walk back.

PC Slatt explained that the landlord had only recently blocked off the entrance to an access route through the forest here.

'Weil probably remembered the turn off from a walk in the area,' she said. 'He hadn't planned on it not existing any more.'

Important safety tip for serial killers – always scout out your dumping locations before use. We had to clamber over an artificial hillock made of sticky yellow mud and discarded tree limbs, because the marginally visible path was still being checked forensically.

'He had to drag the body,' said PC Slatt. 'It left a trail.'

'He doesn't sound very prepared,' I said. The rain was making silver streaks in the beam of my torch as I shone it back to guide Nightingale over.

'Perhaps it was his first kill,' he said.

'God, I hope so,' said PC Slatt.

The path beyond was muddy but I walked with the confidence of a man who made sure he packed a pair

of DM boots in his overnight bag. Town or country, it doesn't matter, you don't want to be wearing your best shoes at a crime scene. Unless you're Nightingale, who seemed to have an unlimited supply of quality hand-made footwear that were cleaned and polished by someone else. I suspected it was probably Molly – but it might have been gnomes for all I knew, or some other unspecified household spirit.

On either side of the path were stands of slender trees with pale trunks that Nightingale identified as silver birch. The gloomy stand of dark pointy trees ahead were apparently Douglas firs interspersed with the occasional larch. Nightingale was aghast at my lack of arboreal knowledge.

'I don't understand how you can know five types of brick bond,' he said, 'but you can't identify the most common of trees.'

Actually, I knew about twenty-three types of brick bond if you counted Tudor and the other early modern styles, but I kept that to myself.

Somebody sensible had strung reflective tape from tree to tree to mark our path downhill to where I could hear the rumble of a portable generator and see blue-white camera flashes, yellow high-viz jackets and the ghostly figures of people in disposable paper suits.

Back in the dim and distant past, your victim was bagged, tagged and whipped away to the mortuary as soon as the initial photographs were taken. These days the forensic pathologists stick a tent over the body and settle in for the long haul. Luckily, back in civilisation it doesn't take that much longer. But out in the country

there's all sorts of exciting insects and spores feasting on the corpse. These, so we're told, reveal ever so much information about time of death and the state the body was in when it hit the ground. Getting it all catalogued can take a day and a half and they'd only just started when we arrived. You could tell that the forensic pathologist wasn't happy to have yet another random set of police officers interfering with her nice scientific investigation. Even if we were good boys and wore our noddy suits, with the hoods up and masks on.

Neither was DCI Manderly, who'd got there before us. Still he must have reckoned the sooner we were started the sooner we'd be gone, because he immediately beckoned us over and introduced us to the pathologist.

I've been racking up some corpse time since I joined the Folly. And after the hurled baby and the Hari Krishna with the exploded head, I'd thought myself toughened up. But, as I've heard experienced officers say, you never get tough enough. This body was female, nude and caked in mud. The pathologist explained that she'd been buried in a shallow grave.

'Only twelve centimetres deep,' she said. 'The foxes would have had her up in no time.'

There was no sign of staging. So Robert Weil, if it had been him, had just dumped her in the hole and covered her over. In the harsh artificial light she looked as grey and colourless as the holocaust pictures I remember from school. I couldn't see much beyond the fact that she was white, female, not a teenager and not old enough to have loose skin.

'Despite the sloppy burial,' said the pathologist,

‘there’s evidence of forensic countermeasures, the fingers have all been removed at the second knuckle, and of course there’s the face ...’

Or lack thereof. From the chin up there was nothing but a pulped red mass flecked with white bone. Nightingale crouched down and briefly got his own face close enough to kiss where her lips had been. I looked away.

‘Nothing,’ Nightingale said to me as he straightened up. ‘And it wasn’t *dissimulo* either.’

I took a deep breath. So, not the spell that had destroyed Lesley’s face.

‘What do you think caused that?’ Nightingale asked the pathologist.

The pathologist pointed to where the top of the scalp was traced with tiny red furrows. ‘I’ve never seen it in the flesh, so to speak, but I suspect a shotgun blast to the face at close range.’

The words ‘Perhaps somebody thought she was a zombie’ tried to clamber out of my throat with such force that I had to slap my hand over my mask to stop them escaping.

Nightingale and the pathologist both gave me curious looks before turning back to the corpse. I ran out of the tent with my hand still over my mouth and didn’t stop until I cleared the inner forensic perimeter where I could lean against the tree and take my mask off. I ignored the pitying looks I got from some of the older police outside – I’d rather they thought I was being sick than that I was trying to stop myself from giggling.

PC Slatt wandered over and handed me a bottle of water.

'You wanted a body,' she said as I rinsed my mouth out. 'Is this your case?'

'No, I don't think this is us,' I said. 'Thank god.'

Neither did Nightingale, so we drove back to London as soon as we'd stripped off our suits and thanked DCI Manderly for his co-operation – Nightingale drove.

'There were no *vestigia* and it certainly looked like a shotgun wound to me,' he said. 'But I'm minded to ask Dr Walid if he might like to come down and have a look for himself. Just to be on the safe side.'

The steady rain had slacked off as we drove north and I could see the lights of London reflected off the clouds just beyond the North Downs.

'Just an ordinary serial killer then,' I said.

'You're jumping to conclusions,' said Nightingale. 'There's only the one victim.'

'That we know of,' I said. 'Anyway, still a bit of a waste of time for us.'

'We had to be sure,' said Nightingale. 'And it does you good to get out into the countryside.'

'Oh yeah,' I said. 'Nothing like a day trip to a crime scene. This can't be the first time you've investigated a serial killer.'

'If that's what he is,' said Nightingale.

'If he is then he can't have been your first,' I said.

'Unfortunately true,' said Nightingale. 'Although I've never been the one in charge.'

'Were any of the famous ones supernatural?' I asked,

thinking it would explain a great deal.

‘Had they been supernatural,’ said Nightingale, ‘we’d have ensured that they were not famous.’

‘What about Jack the Ripper?’ I asked.

‘No,’ said Nightingale. ‘And believe me there would have been relief if he had turned out to be a demon or some such. I knew a wizard who’d assisted the police investigation and he said that they’d all have slept far sounder knowing it wasn’t a man doing such terrible things.’

‘Peter Sutcliffe?’

‘I interviewed him myself,’ said Nightingale. ‘Nothing. And he certainly wasn’t a practitioner or under the influence of a malicious spirit.’ He held up a hand to stop me asking my next question. ‘Nor was Dennis Nilsen, as far as I could tell, or Fred West or Michael Lupo or any of the parade of dreadful individuals I’ve had to vet in the last fifty years. Perfectly human monsters every one of them.’