



A GRIPPING SERIAL
KILLER THRILLER

PRISONER

HEATH GUNN

CHAPTER 1

'Hell' was the one-word description Detective Inspector Lomas Baxter used to describe his day as he sat with his phone pressed between his left shoulder and ear, the awkwardly shaped hard plastic digging into the top of his ear. He had a mountain of paperwork to get through, which he detested, and little chance of leaving his desk for the whole of his shift. As he spoke, his wife listened sympathetically to Lomas summarise his day on the other end of the phone. He knew that it didn't matter how bad his day might have been, after fifteen years as a policeman's wife, Heidi would let him rant, wait until he'd finished, and then, if his mood wasn't too bleak, she would talk about whatever she had called for. He paused to take a breath and realised that Heidi hadn't said much.

'Sorry I've been ranting, everything OK at home?'

'Yes, all good, I literally just called to see how your day was going, on the off-chance that you'd be there.'

Lomas hadn't been sleeping well for a few days and he guessed that she'd felt him shuffling restlessly in bed. He knew the even though she was used to it, Heidi still worried about the toll some of the cases took on him.

The red light on the base of Lomas's phone flashed to indicate an internal call from the control room and he hastily rounded off the conversation with Heidi.

'Good morning Lomas. I thought you might want to know, someone's found an arm,' said the almost robotic voice on the internal line.

'Shit, really? OK, tell me more, Jim, where and when?' asked Lomas, thinking that this wasn't a good way to escape his desk and certainly not the way he would have chosen to avoid the mountain

of filing and reports he had to check through. He glanced at the half-read report in front of him on his swamped but ordered desk, piles of neatly arranged reports stacked and grouped in case order, the downside of preferring to read printed reports instead of on a screen. Lomas dropped a crisp, stapled sheaf of papers onto the relevant pile, it landed askew as he reached for a pad to take down the information from the desk sergeant, who delivered the details in the same monotone voice as his opening line. DI Baxter scribbled down the location of the find along with the name of the person who had reported it. He finished the call, grabbed his coat from the back of his chair and made his way quickly down to the carpark at the rear of the station.

Lomas could move swiftly when he needed to, a habitual gym rat, who'd spent most of his adult life throwing weights around a local gym. He was tall and athletically built, with broad, muscular shoulders and slightly greying, neatly cropped hair. He had warm, dark-brown eyes and a healthy glow to his skin and was dressed in an immaculate navy blue suit and white shirt.

He jumped into his car, started it and spun the wheel with the heel of his right hand, firing the vehicle left onto the main road, glancing at the large hotel that stood across the road from the station. Lomas cast his mind back to when the city was a quieter place, without the seedy, sometimes stomach-churning crimes he was called to these days, or, he wondered, was it that he was just less involved in the early days? His years on the force had desensitised him to the horror and gore, and little shocked him now as it had done in years gone by.

With the light fading, he eased his car up behind a row of police vehicles parked alongside the tree-lined road, muted the gentle rumble of the engine, blipped the key fob to click the locks into place and ventured into the woods – leaves and twigs cracking underfoot as he strode towards the hive of activity that awaited him.

On entering a small clearing, he glanced around at the rotten hollowed-out logs strewn around the periphery, as if left long ago by youngsters enjoying a campfire. Lomas was greeted by a young, fresh-faced officer to whom he introduced himself as they walked through the clearing and went

deeper into the woodland. He made a special effort to be courteous to the younger, more inexperienced police officers he encountered, taking the time to listen to their sometimes nervous and elongated explanations of events and situations, remembering how insignificant he was made to feel when he was new to the job. They continued through to another smaller clearing and Lomas was led over to Tom Anderson, a foppish-looking dark-haired man in his early thirties who stood in an uneven circle of flattened grass, where he'd been shuffling and crouching to fuss the glossy black Labrador that sat obediently by his side as Lomas approached.

'Mr Anderson, I'm DI Baxter,' Lomas began as he squatted to rub the back of the canine's head. 'I understand you, or rather your dog, recovered some remains from the stream. Can you tell me how you came to be here and where you found the arm... and please, take your time.'

'Yes, certainly,' replied Tom, clearly quite shaken by his dog's grisly find. The air of confidence with which Lomas conducted himself seemed to make Tom feel immediately at ease.

'We were walking through the woods, which we do quite often. I was off in a world of my own, daydreaming I guess, when Max jumped into the stream. Again, there's nothing unusual about that, he loves the water – sometimes it's a struggle to get him out of it when it's time to go home.' A slight grin sneaked briefly across Tom's lips as he looked down at Max. 'Anyway, the next thing I know, he's bounding out of the river with what I thought at first was a branch hanging from his mouth. It wasn't until he stopped in front of me and dropped it so he could shake that I realised what it was.'

As the university lecturer explained, Lomas listened intently, noting Mr Anderson's body language as well as his account of events leading to the rather unsavoury discovery. His face blushed and his head lowered slightly as he continued.

'I'm a little embarrassed to say that I threw up when I looked more closely and realised what Max had dragged from the water.'

'It's OK, Mr Anderson, there's no need to be embarrassed. It's not every day you're confronted

with this kind of situation. Tell me, you said you walk in the woods often – how often, would you say?’

‘Nearly every day. Max loves it, and I get to spend some time on my own with my thoughts.’

‘Now there’s something I’d love to be able to do – escape for a while with my thoughts,’ Lomas said, empathising.

‘I know it sounds a bit *Buddhist monk*,’ the lecturer said, mocking himself with a wry smile. ‘But having the time to immerse myself in the tranquillity of nature, with the sounds and smells of the woods, is invaluable to me.’

‘No, it sounds great to me, Buddhist monk or not.’ Lomas pressed his palms together in mock prayer.

‘So, if you’re in here nearly every day, Mr Anderson,’ continued the detective, bringing Anderson back to his line of questioning, ‘can you tell me if you noticed anything different about the area where Max came out of the water, or any of the other parts of the wood you regularly walk in?’

‘When you say different...?’

‘Well, are there any areas that have been cleared recently, or have you seen anything that doesn’t belong here... items of clothing, someone’s personal belongings, anything that’s stood out as being out of the ordinary.’

The lecturer looked thoughtful for a few seconds and the black Lab nuzzled at the side of his leg, eager to play. He reached his hand down to the top of Max’s head, instinctively messing up the sleek black mop of hair.

‘One of the things I love about the woods is that they change on a daily basis – nature evolves and regenerates, you know? These woods are a complex microcosm of life and change that exists with little outside interference from mankind, except for walkers and the odd mountain bike rider. But, to answer your question more directly, no, I don’t recall seeing anything recently that looked

either man-made or not of these woods. Sorry, that's probably not very helpful.'

'On the contrary, Mr Anderson, everything you've told me has been very helpful.' Lomas placed a reassuring hand on Tom Anderson's shoulder and led him back to the younger officer, who had stayed on the opposite side of the clearing while Lomas had spoken to Tom. A sharp cool breeze cut across the clearing as they moved and the light visibly dimmed, as if the woods were mourning the passing of its watery victim.

'If you could leave all your contact details with the officer, please, Mr Anderson, we'll be in touch in the next couple of days. Thank you for taking the time to talk to me.' Lomas turned to the officer.

'Could you take a full statement from Mr Anderson, please, but first could you ask everyone else to come here?' he requested politely.

'Speak to you soon, Mr Anderson.' Lomas waved them off as the young officer led Tom away from the scene, his canine companion bounding along beside him, lapping at his hand, hoping for a treat.

The other officers, ready and waiting for the ensuing search, appeared in the clearing as requested, the long grass folding silently under the weight of their heavy boots.

'OK, listen up. I want the whole of the woods and surrounding area for two miles up and downstream cordoning off. I want no one in or out unless I authorise it.'

His commands came as no surprise to the team, who had already begun cordoning off the area from the roadside. A nearby car park had already been sealed off and they stood awaiting further instructions clad in protective equipment so not to contaminate anything they came across.

'One more thing,' he continued before they dispersed. 'Let's try and get it sealed off before dark. I want a detailed ground search. Mobilise the dog teams. We have an arm and have to assume for now that the rest of the body is out there, hopefully in close proximity. Any questions?' – A brief

pause – ‘Thank you, carry on.’ He made his way over to the arm as the team he’d just dispatched began to set about carrying out his instructions.

Lomas was no stranger to the grotesque and often savage acts committed by the perpetrators of the crimes he had the misfortune of investigating. But every time he looked at hacked and dismembered bits of bodies, or the mutilated remains of whole ones, the first thought through his mind was that this was what was left of someone’s daughter, son, mother or father, a thought that hovered a while as he cast his eye over the stretched and bloated skin that covered the dismembered limb. He took a torch from his pocket and shone a thin beam on one end of the arm, which had been neatly and very precisely cut from its shoulder. There were widely placed finger-sized marks visible around the biceps and lower triceps. The ways in which people disposed of human life as if it were the week’s rubbish appalled Lomas, and this in itself was enough to fuel his desire to see the animals who carried out these acts caught and caged. The elbow was beaten and gouged and the thumb was twisted backwards against the wrist, exactly opposite its natural position. Both injuries could have been caused by the arm’s journey down the rock-littered stream, but Lomas knew that this probably wouldn’t be the case. The hand and fingers were relatively well preserved, nails well tended and unabused, except for the dirt and mud packed under them. Lomas hoped that when the forensic guys had finished with it they would uncover some clue to aid in the identification of the killer, either fragments of skin under the nails, or small traces of blood for DNA matching from the marks which scarred the skin of the victim – anything would help.

He mulled over the victims of an ongoing double homicide he was investigating in which limbs had been precisely removed and all other parts of the bodies had been found within a two-mile radius of the first. Both murders had been in the last six weeks and both had been young women; Lomas didn’t much believe in coincidence.

The next morning, as throughout the night, a team of fifty officers and a handful of local volunteers

combed the woods, the stream and the roadsides. They systematically turned every rock, probed through the vast swathes of brambles and searched the dense bushes and hedges. Yet again, it was the stream that released the next mutilated and severed limb from its watery grasp. Tucked under an overhang on the bank, about half a mile from where Tom Anderson's dog had made his gruesome find, a leg was discovered, removed just below the hip, again very neatly cut through both flesh and bone.

As Lomas arrived to join the search team, the scene at the woods was a slightly more frenetic one than he had left behind him the previous night. A transport was waiting to take the leg away, and search dogs yapped and jostled each other as they were moved towards the next search area. Alongside the dogs, a myriad of police officers gathered in groups in readiness for being dispatched to various parts of the woods. Lomas nodded a greeting to a team who were facing him as he made his way through the larger clearing, where he was joined by an older officer, tall and rotund, with a thin white beard and a ruddy complexion.

'Morning, Lomas.'

'Morning, Barney, how's it going?' Lomas glanced sideways at the copper. 'I thought you were shaving that thing off completely?'

'What can I say? The missus loves me having a bit of hair around my face.' Barney Joyce fired a wide grin back at Lomas.

Lomas smiled in return and retorted, 'Well, I suppose it looks better than the full Santa look you had going on.'

They arrived by the side of the stream, the smiles dropping from their faces. Lomas crouched by the side of a carefully preserved lower limb, its colour and distortion similar to that of the arm, with the exposed flesh at the top of the leg discoloured to a blue-ish hue. The method of removal looked at first glance to be the same, with the bone being precisely and cleanly severed. Lomas could see from the pallor of the young officer that had discovered the grisly remains that she was in a slight

state of shock. She leaned her hand against a nearby tree and breathed deeply.

‘First time?’ enquired Lomas, a distinct tone of compassion echoing in his words. His thoughts quickly raced back to his first time, like the flash of a camera in his mind’s eye, an instant image of him as a young officer, keen to impress. He’d been involved in what ended up being one of the largest manhunts in the formative years of his career. He’d been under the wing of a stocky old-school copper called Bruno, who had used a similar compassionate tone, which at the time Lomas remembered had been unexpected as Bruno generally took the piss at every opportunity. He’d spent two days solid combing through undergrowth, scouring the countryside for a missing mother of three, until, beside a seldom-used railway line, he had seen the woman’s head, eyes wide open, with a look of fear that had burned itself into his memory and had haunted his dreams ever since. He blinked himself back from his recollection with a tiny shake of his head.

‘It does get easier,’ he reassured the young woman.

She looked at him, red marks on her face from wiping away tears that had flowed freely with the sleeve of her jacket. A sadness he had seen before welled in her eyes. She pushed against the tree and stood upright.

‘Thank you, sir. I’ll be fine.’

‘If you’re sure you’re feeling OK, can you show me where you found it, please?’ requested Lomas. The woman nodded and started walking towards the stream, wiping invisible tears from her eyes and cheeks.

A scene of crimes officer followed the pair without a word and joined a colleague who was wearing a forensic protective suit and conducting a detailed search of the surrounding woodland. The air hung heavy with moisture and the earthy scent of the mossy undergrowth filled each breath.

‘Any ideas, Sherlock?’ Lomas enquired of the Forensic Pathologist, so-called because in his twenty years of forensic detection he had uncovered some completely damning evidence in cases everyone else thought were hopeless. Lomas had the greatest respect for Sherlock, real name Doctor

Alan Paisley, as he was meticulous in his work, leaving nothing to chance. The small, round-faced, balding man had added vital information to Baxter's cases on more than one occasion.

'Same guy as the other two?' Lomas added quickly, wanting to know exactly what he was dealing with and if his gut feeling was taking him in the right direction.

'I would think so, but I can't be positive until I've done more,' replied Sherlock, his warm brown eyes a gateway to an immense bank of knowledge. Sherlock's noncommittal answers were strangely reassuring to Lomas; he only ever stated facts when he had absolute proof, and the detective liked that, as he knew that when Sherlock was sure, there would be no room for contradiction.

'I do know that both limbs have been cut with something different to the other two bodies. Possibly a meat cleaver or a large sharp knife, but definitely not the surgical saw that was used on the others,' he added. As the two men spoke, there came word via an out of breath officer who had run to find Lomas – the next grim find was the right foot and ankle. Both were disconnected from each other; both were in similar condition to the earlier finds.

'The deep, dark lines found just above the ankle bone indicate a ligature of some description. This dent in the back of the heel will probably show that she had been tied tightly to a chair, judging by the depth of the indentation,' said Sherlock to Lomas upon examination of the foot, motioning to a concave indentation in the heel.

'The apparent dislocation or breaking of the joint is similar to the other two, Lomas,' added the doctor.

'So, it's a serial we've got then, Doc, you think?' asked Lomas.

'It does look that way. I'll try and give you more later, OK?' said Sherlock in a tone which Lomas was only too familiar with.

'I know, I know,' replied Lomas, holding his hands to his temples. 'Let's get this one caught quickly, before we have a long line of body parts for you to examine.'

'Do you think it could be Titia Matthews? she's a woman in her thirties, been reported missing

for a little while, so far nothing on her.’ Titia had been the subject of a missing person investigation for nearly four weeks and despite trying to track her through friends and relatives, and retracing her last known steps, Lomas’s colleagues hadn’t come up with anything.

‘Yeah I heard about that. It could be, maybe when we find more of her, we’ll have more of an idea.’

The other body parts followed in quick succession over a three-day period. All had been removed in the same fashion at various joints, with ankles and wrists broken, all in similar states of decomposition, slowed down by the cool freshwater stream. The last piece of the victim to be found was the head, uncovered from undergrowth three-quarters of a mile from where the first arm was fished from the stream. It revealed, as Sherlock had predicted, a woman, in her late thirties. She had blonde hair, and deep blue eyes set back into what was now a battered and decaying face. Her top front two teeth had been viciously ripped from her skull with what Sherlock observed as being something like pliers, and there were sharp fragments left behind in the victim’s gums. Most striking and prominent of all was the word ‘PRISONER’ neatly engraved in the forehead of the woman. In large capital letters, the word started from the left temple, arcing across the head, and ended at the right temple. After a detailed examination, Sherlock reported that it was highly likely that the victim was alive during both the dental extraction and the engraving.

‘The press are having a field day with this hatchet man, Lomas, I really need some kind of progress,’ was the first sentence that greeted him on the forty-sixth day of what had now become a triple murder investigation.

‘Three in six weeks, Lomas. What are we doing?’ The voice was cold and demanded respect, and an answer. Marie Carlton had been a police officer for the same length of time as Lomas and had been his DCI for two years. A tall slender woman with short-cropped dark hair and steely blue eyes,

which penetrated even the hardest of criminals when she interviewed them. She was well spoken and extremely well educated, and she carried herself in a surefooted manner, commanding the respect of her staff and peers.

‘Well, ma’am,’ began Lomas, as his focus moved to DCI Carlton, ‘we have an ID on the third woman, and downstairs they’re prepping her for a formal ID.’

‘Relatives here?’ asked Marie.

‘Yes, her husband – I’m talking to him in an hour.’

‘Does he know yet?’

‘No, not yet, but I’m sure he suspects. The name hasn’t been released to the press yet, but they’ve been giving regular updates through the local news. How do you want me to use the press on this one?’

‘Speak to the husband. Then, as long as he gives consent, let’s get some pictures out there and descriptions of where and when these women were killed and disposed of, but not full disclosure. See if we can shock up a public response, with the detail retained for later.’

‘OK.’

‘Do you have any more leads?’

‘No, not as yet. Sherlock’s full report will be with me by one o’clock. I’ll have him get a copy to you, yes?’

‘Yes, please, can you keep me informed? I’ll arrange a press conference for tonight – you’ll be there, Lomas?’

‘Yes, of course I will.’ It almost went without saying that he would be present at the press conference. He’d been told he had a calm reassuring air, which relatives found comforting and colleagues found supportive, it also meant he rarely escaped a press conference. With that, Lomas turned on his heels and went on his way to the incident room to give a briefing.

‘Right, people, listen up,’ he began. ‘We now have three dead women, all dismembered and, it would appear, tortured pre-mortem. He’s starting to enjoy himself. We know this because the level and type of torture is escalating and becoming more inventive. He’s starting to experiment with different means of dismemberment, and our latest victim has an engraving on her forehead, which is a word, not just the patterns as on the heads of the first two women, who both had symmetrical shapes scraped into their skin.’ He motioned towards two pictures, both of battered heads, one with intricate squares and the other with star-type shapes carved into the skin.

‘Now we have the word “prisoner” engraved across the forehead. In six weeks we have had three women brutally murdered and we have no reason to believe he won’t do it again. Now, what do we know about these women? Well, they were all young, attractive, professional white women, aged between twenty-three and thirty-eight. They were all of a slight build and they were all tortured and partly dismembered while still alive, then completely within a four- to eight-hour window post-mortem.’

‘Pete...’ Lomas signalled towards one of the officers sitting at the front of the briefing. ‘How are we doing on background?’

‘Well, we have no known drug or gambling habits or connections. All the friends and relatives of the first two check out, and I’m just waiting to get started on the latest victim’s family and friends, sir.’

‘OK, what about regular habits – pubs, clubs, visits to the gym?’ enquired Lomas.

‘Nothing unusual so far, but we’re checking all the people they came into contact with, daily, weekly and monthly.’

‘OK, good. Any questions?’

‘Just one, sir,’ said a calm, quiet voice from the back of the room. ‘Do we have any ideas about the kind of man we’re looking for yet?’ The question came from DC Drew Taylor, a petite woman in her early twenties; she was a talented young officer with an enquiring mind who had contributed

a great deal to the case so far. Her background checks were assiduous and the interviews she'd carried out with members of the victims' families were sensitive yet thorough and searching. Lomas viewed her very much as a growing asset to his team and a voice worth listening to.

'Yes, Drew, we have an idea.' He motioned to a tall, thin, ghostly looking figure, who until now had stood silently in the corner.

'Doctor Redman, one of our forensic psychologists, has been analysing the evidence we have so far and has built up an initial profile of our man. Doctor Redman... ' Lomas said, prompting him.

'Thank you.' The doctor cast an intense gaze over the people gathered before him in the briefing room, the bright fluorescent light glinting from epaulette numbers. He lowered his chin towards his chest, tilting his head forward, his deep-set, dark eyes almost overshadowed by his high brow and thick, dark eyebrows. His lank dark brown hair, which framed his face, brushed the collar of his brown suit, which seemed to hang as if two sizes too big all the way down to his scuffed and unkempt shoes.

'From the evidence you have gathered to date, I believe the man you are looking for is likely to be in his mid to late thirties, as he has a level of patience we would be unlikely to come across in a younger man, this is coupled with the physical strength needed to carry out the attacks. He may be unemployed, which allows him the freedom he needs to move around at times that suit him, will likely be intelligent and well read, with some kind of medical training, and possibly has a history of maternal abuse. He has an interest in a less mainstream or traditional religion, as some of the shapes carved on the heads of the first two victims are believed to be of pagan origin. One in particular' – he gestured towards the first picture on display – 'is similar in shape to a symbol called the Elven Star. This was a seven-pointed star found in some branches of the faerie tradition of Wicca and serves as a reminder that seven is a sacred number, representing seven pillars of wisdom. Similarly, in Kabbalah, seven is linked to the sphere of victory, so while there is nothing definitive here, it does give us some idea of the likely spiritual leanings of our killer.' Dr Redman paused and looked

out on a combination of intrigued and blank faces that stared silently and attentively back at him. He continued. ‘The word “prisoner” is often used as an expression of one’s own feelings of repression, or possibly a message regarding the control and power he has over his victims. He will, without question, strike again, and the frequency and severity of the attacks will increase as he gets better practised and more accustomed to his work.’

‘His work?’ asked Drew.

‘Oh yes, he now sees this as his work. Just as your work takes up the vast majority of your waking thoughts and attention, so his endeavours do for him.’ Redman left the end of his sentence dramatically as if for maximum effect on his audience and then slid back half a step and eased his head back slowly, like a tortoise retreating into its shell.

‘Thank you, Doctor,’ Lomas said as he stepped forward to retake control of the briefing, which he wound up with a list of instructions and his usual clap of hands. The team dispersed quickly with a purposeful rumble of conversation as officers exited the briefing room.

‘Drew.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I’m going to inform the third victim’s husband in about half an hour. Can you be in the car park ready. I’d like you to come along for this one.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Thanks for reading this excerpt. If you’ve enjoyed this first chapter, the full book will be coming soon.

Head over to my website and join The Gunn Club, for release date info

<http://heathgunn.com/index.html>