

## Excerpt from Ivory Tower

SUNDAY

It was first light on a crisp Sunday morning in early autumn, and mist was rolling across the gently flowing surface of the Thames as the body was recovered from the river. In the shadow of Tower Bridge a cluster of boats formed a loose circle around the still form in the murky water. Paramedics in an Avon boat of the London Fire Brigade were painstakingly attaching a recovery sling round the corpse, their yellow hi-viz jackets bright against the red rubber of the inflatable. Nearby a second safety boat loitered, backed up by two blue-and-yellow-chequered police launches. While a handful of early passers-by looked on, one of the police boats moved in to shield the activity from view. Even so, mobile phones were being raised on the bank, their owners keen to record the gruesome spectacle.

On the nearest police launch two detectives in plain clothes leaned out to speak to the officers retrieving the body.

‘What have we got?’ the senior detective asked.

A uniformed constable turned to reply, his expression grim. ‘It’s a man, sir, just like you said.’

‘Can you check his pockets.’

They rolled the body into the rubber boat. The dead man was wearing a dark suit, a white shirt and navy tie. At first glance he seemed to be middle-aged with a full head of dark hair, greying at the temples. He was missing one shoe; the remaining one, a black semi-brogue, appeared to be of good quality. His socks were dark grey.

The constable reached into the inside pocket of the jacket. ‘No wallet, sir.’ He checked the top pocket and pulled out a business card. He read it quickly and looked up. ‘It’s him, sir, the one you expected.’

He passed the card to his superior and returned to his duties. An officer of the fire service manoeuvred the Avon boat clear of its neighbours and accelerated gently away. The detectives watched it go. The inspector looked down at the sodden card in his hand, read it and passed it to his colleague, a young DC.

‘Get it bagged up, then contact Thames Valley. The address is Oxford, but I’m given to understand he lived in Northamptonshire, the next county. They can have the pleasure of delivering the death message.’

‘Right, sir. Will do.’

As the detective inspector gave instructions to the sergeant of the river police, the DC took a transparent evidence bag from his pocket and slotted the card inside. In the gathering morning light he could see clearly the name printed on the card: Dr Ralph Lombard of All Saints' College, University of Oxford.