

ONE

The water slapped at the banks of the river; angry, cold and with a hint of menace. It was the rain that did it, the relentless rain that came down over the last six months, only stopping for Christmas when it started to snow. He flicked the toothpick over with his tongue in one movement; five minutes one way, five minutes the other.

A man walked towards him with a giant poodle at his side, but not the man he was looking for. What the dog-walker made of this individual, sitting alone and content on a riverside bench at this hour of the morning he couldn't guess. The man strolled past without saying a word. Not many people came down here on a cold winter's morning, as the River Arun gave off a fine mist which seeped through thick clothing and chilled the bones.

A few minutes later he spotted him: Lucky out in front, the stupid Labrador as happy as a sand-boy to be out on this freeze-your-bollocks day and not lounging beside a warm hearth in his master's house. He rose from the bench, ducked behind a bush close to the river and removed a piece of liver from a bag. The dog padded along the path and, sensing his presence, turned his head towards him.

'Lucky, come here boy,' he said. 'What have I got?'

He held out his hand and on seeing the food, the daft mutt walked over to him. He gobbled the meat in seconds. If man's best friend refused to play ball, it was laced with a little something extra to increase his compliance. He reached down and picked him up, surprised at first by the weight of the greedy bugger, then turned and threw him into the deep, fast flowing current.

He waited a few seconds until the man's footsteps approached before rushing from his hiding place and shouting, 'There's a dog in the river, there's a dog in the river!'

The idiot took a few moments to react, his mushy brain still tucked up in his warm bed and not registering what this handsome stranger was saying to him.

'There!' he said again, pointing. 'Can you see it? I think it's a Golden Labrador.'

Lucky's master shook his head out of his daydream and gazed at the water. 'It looks like Lucky,' he said, edging closer to the riverbank. 'My God, it is him! Lucky! Lucky! Come over here boy!'

Amidst the turmoil of rushing, surging water the plucky pooch heard his master's shout and turned. The dog tried to paddle towards him, but against the strong current all his fine efforts were in vain, as he didn't move at all; ah what a shame.

'What can I do?' the man said to him, his face pale and anxious. 'What can I do?'

'Go in after him. The poor dog's going to drown!'

'What? Do you think so? The river's high and it's moving so fast.'

'I'll look after your jacket and call the Emergency Services. Go now, before he drowns.'

Lucky's owner stared at him for a moment before whipping off his heavy jacket and handing it to him. At first he thought he was going to dive in, but there was hesitation in his voice. 'I'm not sure, the river looks so dangerous.'

The target turned to look at the dog, leaning around a bush to get a better view. He moved behind the tilted figure and shoved him hard in the back. Lucky's owner made an ungainly splash when he hit the water and was soon whisked away by the swirling, rushing river. He was obviously a good swimmer as he didn't panic, but turned and looked around for a tree or bush to grasp, but the bank was receding from his view, the current dragging him towards the centre of the river.

For a moment, water surged over his head, submerging him and when he reappeared moments later, he was gasping for air. Bits of debris rushed past: bottles, tin cans, branches. A piece of wood whacked him on the head leaving him dazed.

He turned and walked downriver towards the bridge, whistling his favourite song, *How Long* by

Ace. With a newly acquired set of house keys in his pocket, there was a little place in King Street he wanted to search.

TWO

He collected drinks from the bar and returned to the table in the corner. DI Angus Henderson of Surrey and Sussex Police knew that Brighton possessed many trendy and modern pubs in its canon, much better hostelrys to drink in than this crappy dump, so he couldn't understand how places like this still survived.

'Cheers mate,' his companion said when a pint of chilled lager appeared in front of him. The words sounded pleasant enough but his furtive, nervous gaze didn't stop scanning the faces of fellow drinkers, even as grubby fingers circled the glass, raised it to his lips and he took a large gulp.

If Henderson wasn't facing away from the body of the pub, he would be looking around too, not for a snitch or a rival as Davy seemed to be doing, but in trying to spot some of the contraband being passed around. The pub was notorious to regulars and the police as a place where dope and burgled goods could be bought, and at this moment any number of iPhones, packets of coke, credit cards and watches would be changing hands.

'So, how are you, Davy?'

'Ah you know, Mr Henderson, ducking and diving, ducking and diving.'

'Still hanging out with the lanky bloke who always wears the Harvard University t-shirt, even though I don't think he could spell it?'

'Billy? Naw. He's bad news, a loser if ever I saw one. I keep well away from him.'

I bet you do, Henderson thought, until you want something from him. People like Davy here were all the same: greedy, grasping and self-serving. They lived in a dog-eat-dog world where everybody looked out for themselves and words like 'cooperation', 'help' and 'honesty' were found only in a quality newspaper and not in their lexicon.

His companion for this evening was Davy Cairns, a mid-thirties petty crook whose biggest 'score' was finding a bag containing two hundred and fifty-thousand pounds in cash, the proceeds of a drug deal that ended in a shoot-out on the South Downs. Like a good criminal, he didn't hand his fortunate discovery in to the nearest police station as he knew it belonged to Trevor Frank, one of Brighton's biggest drug dealers. If he kept the money and ran off to Spain or Argentina, it wouldn't be far enough to prevent Frank finding him and removing his liver, spleen and heart and feeding the lot to two aggressive Dobermans who patrolled the grounds of his Spanish-style villa in Hove.

As a consequence of his good fortune, Frank now treated Davy Cairns like a long-lost cousin. He gave him easy jobs to do, paid him well and allowed him to attend meetings when he and his boys discussed business and future projects. Cairns was one of the DI's long-term narks. He wasn't so naïve to believe Cairns would tell him anything important about Frank's activities, as he valued the aforesaid body parts as much as the next man, but was always happy to pass to him any information which would put the proverbial boot into one of their rivals.

'So what's new, Davy?'

'Did you bring the...?'

Henderson passed across a copy of *The Brighton Argus*, an edition of the paper not sold by street vendors and newsagents, as a tidy sum lay within its pages. It didn't count as an unusual occurrence in this pub, cash passing between two punters, in fact the trade in illicit goods most likely surpassed the takings in the till. He was being discreet, as he didn't want to draw attention to his conversation with Cairns and involve the younger man in an awkward and painful bout of questioning.

Without missing a beat or changing body position, *The Argus* disappeared into a sports bag and his nark's usually taciturn mouth began to move.

‘In the last few months a load of cheap skunk has flooded into Brighton. It’s potent stuff, based on a Dutch strain. It’s all over the place in schools, the universities, you name it and if it’s not stopped now, who knows the sort of damage it’ll do to our young folk.’

Henderson tuned out. Scum drug dealers getting sanctimonious about other scum drug dealers didn’t sit well with him and was almost as hard to stomach as the chemical flavour of the beer.

‘I know some people—’

‘Who’s behind it?’

‘A couple of Chink businessmen.’

‘Names?’

‘I dunno, couldn’t pronounce them if I did, but I can tell you where they grow the stuff.’

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Henderson drove back to his flat in the Seven Dials district of Brighton in a contemplative mood. He had hoped Davy Cairns would let something slip and lead him to his boss, but the wily bastard only told him enough to take out one of his rivals. Even so, such an operation might offer a few brownie points because of late, there hadn’t been many of them around.

He climbed the stairs. He liked living on the top floor, well away from traffic noise and drunks shouting in the street about their undying love for a woman in an apartment nearby or their favourite football team. He also liked having no one above him, stomping around in work boots and playing hip-hop music at all hours. What he disliked was having to climb up there, laden with bags, or tired after a long day at the office, or heaving a stomach filled with beer and curry.

He dumped his jacket on the chair in the hall, grabbed a packet of crisps from the cupboard, and poured a large whisky into a glass retrieved from the draining board. The ten-year-old Glenmorangie single malt wouldn’t mix well with the two pints of iffy beer he drank in the pub, but what the hell. He went into the living room, cued a CD on the stereo, and slumped into his favourite chair.

During the day, the big bay window offered fine views over the gardens opposite which followed the contours of Montpelier Crescent, but not much was visible at eleven o’clock on a cold mid-week night. There wasn’t much activity either, except a couple of folks returning from a meal or the pub, and the occasional dog-walker giving their pooch the final chance for a late night leak.

Over the last few months, Henderson, a Detective Inspector with the Major Crime Team at Surrey and Sussex Police, as the recently merged group was now called, had worked on a series of stabbings, carvings and three murders, many of which were drug related. Perhaps the skunk factory mentioned by Cairns had a greater influence on the crime figures than he first suspected. He would talk to his boss in the morning and try to secure the manpower required for a raid.

Lady of the Night started at a slow tempo and soon the soaring guitar and thick bass lines grabbed him by the jugular, the ideal antidote to lift his sombre mood. The song came from the fourth album by an eighties rock band from Brighton, the Crazy Crows, thought by many to be their best, but at the time press interest had focused not so much on their musical abilities as their bad-boy antics.

They’d had a reputation for trashing hotel rooms, appearing drunk on television and radio, and bedding any woman who strayed too close, although much of it had been exaggerated by their PR company to differentiate them from other clean-cut groups around at the time. Henderson, and his brother Archie, were once in a rock band, if humping speaker stacks and driving an old rusty Transit van could be called being in a band. On one occasion, he’d taken his thirteen-year-old brother down to Glasgow from Fort William to see the Crazy Crows, the first such outing to the big city for both of them and a rock concert first for Archie.

The Crazy Crows were a four-piece comprising Derek Crow, his brother Barry, Peter Grant and Eric Hannah. Derek started the band, played rhythm guitar, wrote and sang most of the songs and did his best to keep things in order. After they split, he became a successful businessman with a big house in St. John’s Wood and the ear of the new Labour Prime Minister. Henderson knew this without

resorting to the web or talking to Archie, as Derek Crow's rough-hewn features were a regular sight in the business sections of the Sunday papers.

Eric Hannah played lead guitar and his performance on the band's acclaimed fourth album was, in the DI's opinion, nothing short of brilliant. He could also be an unreliable character as he took too much dope, drank as if suffering from a permanent thirst, and found rock infamy by missing the start of the Trevor Lamb talk show as he was too busy having sex with a production assistant in a broom closet. He didn't know if Hannah still played or performed, but if his copious consumption of illicit substances in the past was anything to go by, it would be a miracle if he did.

On drums, Peter Grant. He knew Peter, as he ran a health supplement business in Brighton. In the early days, when he'd owned only one shop and the man himself served behind the counter, Henderson would pop in for a chat. At the back of the cupboard under the sink, there still lurked some bottles of energy tablets and muscle building powders, purchases he'd felt obliged to make to justify his visit.

Derek Crow's brother Barry played bass guitar. In any rock band, the drummer and bass player are the driving forces, laying down a bedrock of sound over which the lead guitar or keyboard adds melody, and makes the music shine

He also knew what Barry was doing now and why he was listening to their album and thinking about the Crazy Crows. This morning, Barry's body had been fished out of the River Arun.

THREE

The squad car cruised down the street, the slow pace mimicking a big cat waiting to pounce on an unsuspecting mouse. Inside the car, driver PC Harry 'Jake' Jackman and his partner, not the real one he shared a bed with, although if she asked nicely she could be, PC Sandy 'Saks' Atkinson, were arguing like an old married couple.

'Are you sure this is the right address, Saks?' he said, trying to sound calm as she could be a prickly so-and-so first thing in the morning, and if he rubbed her up the wrong way now, she could make it last until tea-time.

'Of course I'm bloody sure.' She grabbed the folder that was tucked down the side of the seat and flicked through the pages as if they were on fire. When she found the correct page she stabbed an accusing finger at the text. 'It says here, and I quote, 15 Oak Avenue. So Jake,' she said snapping the folder shut, 'can we please get a bloody shift on and find the place ASAP, as I'm gasping for a fag.'

'Oak Avenue did you say?'

'You heard me, Jake, don't try to be a clever dick, not today.'

'So, why did you direct me to Beech Avenue?'

The sudden acceleration of the car scattered a couple of dogs engaged in sniffing one another's reproductive organs and in one small gesture, Jake saved the world from feeding another six skanky mongrels. He turned right into Cedar Drive and left into Oak Avenue and even he would be forced to admit he found a certain similarity in the names and styles of the houses here in this part of Chichester.

'There it is,' he said, trying hard not to sound as triumphant as he felt.

He parked the car and without another word they got out and headed towards the front door. A girl aged seven or eight answered their knock, surprising as it was still term-time, but by the look of the Disney pyjamas, pale face and spotty complexion, she wasn't feeling well.

'Is your mother in, love?' Saks said in a kindly voice.

The girl turned her head and hollered, 'Mum! It's for you!'

Jake turned to Saks. 'I guess it's not tonsillitis.'

No response.

'Tell whoever it is to come in,' another voice shouted back. 'I'll be there in a jiffy.'

It was late morning but the living room felt like Jake's house at eight in the evening. The gas fire and the central heating were blazing, a large LCD television was showing some kids' programme, dirty tea cups and plates were lying around and an ironing board stood idle in the corner. In his world, all it needed to complete the scene were a few empty beer cans and an overflowing ashtray.

Valerie Lassiter came into the room wiping her wet hands on a towel and didn't seem surprised to find a couple of cops sitting on her sofa. She looked a big lady with a pleasant, ruddy face, dark brown eyes, wiry, unkempt hair, and wearing baggy tracksuit bottoms and an ill-fitting home-knitted jumper.

She collapsed into an armchair, the springs and floorboards squealing with displeasure. 'This isn't something to do with my Josh is it? He's always getting into trouble in school, but it's never involved the police before. Well, only once when he broke the window in the library.'

'They might be here to take him away Ma,' said a voice from the floor where the little girl sat cross-legged, her eyes never leaving a cartoon on the television.

'Shurrup you little madam. She's got it in for the boy 'cause he switches her programmes off so he can watch the music channels.'

'When I'm bigger I'm going to break his nose if he does it again.'

'I'm warning you missy.'

'No, this isn't about Josh, Mrs Lassiter,' Jake said as quickly as he could, trying to regain control of the conversation.

'My divorce just came through, so it's *Miss* Lassiter from now on. It took ages because of stupid lawyers—'

'It should be Miss Crow,' the little voice said.

'I told you to shut up and watch the telly; now do it, will you? I always hated the name 'Crow', you know, ever since I was a little girl and there's no way I want to go back to it. It reminds me of those ugly black things in the garden, peck-pecking away at worms and dead birds at the side of the road. I hate them.'

'Fine, *Miss Lassiter*, but our visit is nothing to do with your son or your divorce. We are here to talk to you about your brother.'

'My brother? Did something happen to Derek? Is it something terrible? I kept telling him he needed to stop his drinking and smoking. I said it would be the death of him.'

'Miss Lassiter,' Jake said a bit louder than intended, 'this is not about Derek but your other brother, Barry.'

'Oh him? Why didn't you say so? Me getting so het up about nothing. You nearly gave me a heart attack.'

'Sorry.'

'So what's happened to him? I mean I wouldn't put it past him to—'

'Miss Lassiter, I am sorry to inform you that yesterday morning the body of your brother, Barry Crow, was recovered from the River Arun in Arundel.'

'Wha...what did you say?'

'I said, your brother Barry drowned. Rescuers found him yesterday morning and it seems he may have gone into the water trying to rescue his dog.'

'Oh my God, how awful. How is Lucky? Is he ok?'

'No, I'm sorry to say the dog drowned too.'

She clapped her hand to her mouth. 'That's terrible, so it is. I loved Lucky.'

'Me too,' the girl said.

'How did it happen?' she asked.

Jake nudged Saks.

'As my colleague said, it appears your brother, Barry, entered the water in an unsuccessful attempt to save his dog. Local people in the town saw the body in the river and alerted emergency services. It was recovered about a mile downstream by a boatman who rowed through thick reeds to reach him and the body of the dog.'

'I need a drink,' she said. 'Can I get you folks something?'

'No thanks,' he said. 'We're still on duty.'

Saks gave him one of her looks, not because he refused a drink for both of them, but expressing her dislike for Valerie Lassiter's lack of sensitivity about her dead brother. The deceased's sister had proved to be a difficult woman to locate, as they didn't find any reference to her in Barry's house, and only when a police researcher called them this morning did they even know he had a sister.

The bottle and everything else rested on a plastic tray on the sideboard, close to hand and set out for quick access. She returned a few moments later with a glass of vodka topped up with lemonade and sat down.

'Does Derek know?' she said, after downing a large slug. If Jake drank like she did, the miserly 25ml measures they served at his local wouldn't last two minutes.

'By Derek, I take it you mean your other brother?' he asked.

'Yes.'

‘Officers are attempting to make contact with him as we speak. Does Barry have any other relatives, aside from yourself and Derek?’

She shook her head. ‘Barry’s wife died a few years back and they didn’t have any kids; couldn’t. She blamed him for shooting blanks but he said it was her fault, barren as the Gobi Desert he liked to say. Don’t bother trying to contact my ex, I want nothing more to do with the swine, nothing more.’

‘Were you and Barry close?’ Saks asked.

‘Derek’s an important businessman and needs to be told, but he’s a very busy man and difficult to pin down. I know this from personal experience because when I went through a bad patch with my ex, he’s called William if you must know, I could never get hold of him.’

‘Is there anyone else we need to inform, for example, work associates or friends?’

‘There’s no one I can think of. Barry worked on his own after the band split up and set himself up as an internet entrepreneur. I don’t know what he did, but he made a lot of money doing it. As I was saying about Derek...’

She carried on yapping about Derek; she didn’t seem to be talking to them, but giving a little speech made dozens of times in the lounge of her local pub or at the bowling club, telling anyone who would listen about Derek, her important brother.

Jake supposed if anyone in his family became famous or rich he would want to tell all and sundry about them, but not when being informed about the death of his brother. It was similar to cracking a dirty joke at a funeral. The sombre circumstances might call for it but if you did let fly, your wife would always remember her embarrassment and never let you forget it.

They left the house ten minutes later, the freeze between him and Saks thawing as they discussed the woman’s indifferent attitude to her dead brother and the genuine level of concern she expressed for the very-much-alive brother, Derek. The question which hung in the air and caused an altercation between Valerie and her daughter whenever it came up, was where were they going to bury the damn dog.