

ONE

The air in the rear saloon was heavy with the fug of sweat and beer, overlaid with the acidic reek of vomit. This surprised Chris Fletcher as he had taken the ferry between the UK and France many times before and didn't think the seas were rough tonight. Whatever the reason, this crossing didn't agree with some people and he decided to get out of their way for a bit and take some air on deck.

According to a leaflet he'd read in the past, most likely the time when his e-reader had run out of juice and his back-up paperback lay somewhere at the bottom of his rucksack, this ferry had been refurbished three years ago. By the look of the rust on the structure, the narrow walkways and the marked and scarred walls, the refurb didn't do much good as the old tub was past its best.

He wasn't a fan of ferries and looked back with affection on the days of Hoverspeed, a time when he and his father would often go to France so Dad could buy wines for the company he worked for then. To his juvenile eyes, travel had been an adventure; to walk up to that giant machine, its rear fans idling with malevolent intent and its rubber skirt slapping in and out of the waves impatiently.

When the mighty turbines started to turn, the hovercraft would rise majestically on a curtain of air and skim across the water faster than any ferry. Inside, the noise could halt conversations, the smell of fumes could make the anxious traveller sick and the bang it made when it hit some of the larger waves would scare many children older than him; but he didn't care, he loved it.

He walked to a railing, close to the stern of the ship and gazed at the lights of Dieppe, small white dots retreating into the distance. Breathing in lungfuls of salt-encased air, thick with the moisture of the fast cooling day and tinged with a hint of funnel smoke and diesel, he stood there unmoving for five, ten minutes. The sound of movement behind him broke his reverie.

'Hello Chris.'

He turned. Two men faced him. It was dark with no deck lights nearby, so he couldn't see their faces, but he could tell that one was of average height and stocky, and the other tall and thin.

'Can I help you? How do you know my name?'

'You've been blabbing your mouth off, mate,' the tall one said. He sounded young but sure of himself. The accent was London but he couldn't say where.

'What? What are you on about?'

'Don't come the fucking innocent with us,' the stocky guy said. 'We know you've been talking to people. You were seen yakking to the American investigator who's been sniffing around Château Osanne, the place where you work. Or should I say, used to work. Ha, ha.'

'How do you know? Who are you?'

'What did you tell the American?'

'I didn't tell him anything.'

'But you did speak to him?'

'What is this? Yeah, I spoke to him, but it wasn't anything--.'

'Like, you were just passing the time of day, was you?'

'No, I...I...'

Something whacked him on the back of the head and before he could catch a grip of the hand rail, his knees turned to jelly and he slumped down on the deck, warm blood dribbling down his cheek. He blacked out for a second, and when conscious again, he felt weightless, as if flying.

Chris struck the freezing water with a thump. The shock sucked all the wind out of his lungs, leaving him breathless. He clawed for air, his clothes and boots hindering his movements as they filled with water. Damn! Why couldn't he wear trainers like everybody else?

He swam and swam but still couldn't find air or relief from the dull ache building up in his lungs. He tried to swim harder, desperate for oxygen but realised only too late; his strokes were taking him down, not up.

TWO

Detective Inspector Angus Henderson, Surrey and Sussex Police Major Crime Team, signed the overtime report and added it to his groaning out-tray, the result of a decidedly productive afternoon session. He could never fathom how in the days just before he went on holiday, he sailed through admin like a hot knife through butter, while at other times it felt like walking through treacle.

Perhaps it had also something to do with him moving into a house following three years in a flat, something he hadn't done since leaving his former wife, Laura, in Scotland and relocating to Sussex. He hadn't made this move on his own, though, as his girlfriend Rachel Jones had also sold her apartment in Hove and they'd pitched in together to buy the house in College Place, so called as it was located down the hill from Brighton College in Kemptown

Rachel worked as a journalist at Brighton's main newspaper, *The Argus*, and while his job interfered more often with their social life, the start of summer was a busy time for her, with a diary choc-full of country fairs, agricultural shows and village festivals. For Angus, it was the time of the year when he looked forward to spending some weekends aboard his boat, as the winter had been dreary with rain, high winds and the occasional Atlantic storm.

An hour later, he'd finished all his admin but rather than rest and admire the heaped out-tray, he left the office and walked into the Detectives' Room. It was nearing the end of a long day for many, evidenced by drooping shoulders and bins filled to overflowing with brown plastic coffee cups and screwed up paper; so much for the Force's attempts at encouraging recycling.

DS Carol Walters looked happier than some, which meant she had either got shot of a tiresome boyfriend or had just met a new one. Henderson had been there too many times before, putting his foot in it by asking, so he said nothing. She would tell him in her own time.

'Afternoon, gov.'

'Hi Carol. How's it going with the coastguard?'

She reached across her desk for a paper buried under an untidy pile. 'It seems the coastguard, customs, the lifeboat service and everybody else who has anything to do with our part of the English Channel, are either out looking for a missing swimmer, or are tied up sorting out the freighter that ran aground near Shoreham a few days back.'

'Bloody hell,' Henderson said.

'It's not my fault, I'm only the messenger. It means I don't think anyone will be free to look at our case until the middle of next week.'

'I don't believe it,' he said banging his fist on the desk in frustration. 'They could be landing the guns tonight for all we know and the coastguard and all the rest of that shower are too busy worrying about some idiot who's probably sitting in a cafe drinking a mug of hot cocoa. How long is it since we spotted the van?'

She searched through some papers. 'The report we got from the guy at the weighbridge is dated two weeks ago.'

'Damn. We'd be in a better place if we hadn't let them get away.'

'They did crash through a closed level crossing barrier and miss getting smacked by a train by only a few feet. I'm sure you'd rather that than two dead cops.'

'Yeah, but it doesn't stop me wanting a more favourable outcome.'

'You're a tough man to please.'

'So people tell me. Is there anyone else we could use on land?'

'I don't think so, as we don't know the exact location where they'll dock. It could be anywhere along the coast, which is why we need the assistance of our sea people.'

Henderson was about to let off steam when his mobile rang.

'Yes?'

'Hello Angus, who's been pulling your chain? Don't answer that. It's the front desk here, in case you didn't know. I've got a Mr Fletcher here to see you.'

'Fletcher? I haven't got any meetings booked for the rest of the day.'

'All I know is he came in and asked to speak to a senior detective. He says it's about something important, so I thought of you.'

'Steve, you're all heart, or are you still sore over the fifty I took off you at poker the other night?'

'I'm a big boy, Inspector, I'm over it but don't think I won't win it back.'

'No chance, the way you play. Give me a few minutes and I'll come down and talk to him.'

Henderson put the phone back in his pocket and looked at Walters. 'So, there's nothing we can progress until next week?'

'Nope.'

'Right, first thing Monday, get straight on the phone and make sure they're working on this. You never know, the smugglers might be delayed. Don't forget,' he said as he started to walk away, 'the Highlands may be backward in some ways, but we get a decent phone service in Fort William and I'll be checking up to make sure something's going on.'

'Trust me gov, I'm a detective.'

'She says, as the shit hits the fan.'

Henderson walked downstairs to Reception. He pushed through the double doors at the bottom of the stairs and glanced over at Sergeant Steve Travis behind the desk. He nodded in the direction of a fifty-plus man sitting in a short row of institutional chairs, head down, looking at his hands and not at his phone as the others either side of him were doing.

Henderson walked towards him. 'Mr Fletcher? I'm Detective Inspector Angus Henderson, Major Crime Team.'

The man looked up, stood and offered his hand. 'Pleased to meet you, Inspector. I'm Dennis Fletcher.'

'Is it something quick we can discuss here, or would you like the privacy of an interview room?'

'An interview room, please.'

Henderson turned and looked over at Travis. 'Steve, are any rooms free?'

'Yep, use three. One's busy and two's being cleaned after a druggie threw up.'

'They must have been given a coffee from the machine. Thanks Steve.'

Using his pass to open the security doors, he led Dennis Fletcher into the interview room and closed the door. He decided not to have a corroborating officer present and didn't switch on the recording machines, but he could change his mind depending on what his visitor had come to tell him.

'Would you like something to drink? I recommend the water.'

'No, I'm fine.'

Dennis Fletcher had greying brown hair and sallow skin, giving the impression he didn't get out much or kept away from the sun. He looked tall, an inch or so under six foot, and thin but stooped as if carrying a heavy weight, and by the look of his craggy features, the effects of his burden were etched there.

'So, Mr Fletcher, what did you want to talk to me about?'

'Call me Dennis, please. I'm just trying to think where to start.'

Henderson said nothing. He'd drummed into junior officers the importance of controlled silences when interviewing subjects, and if one of them had been sitting beside him now, he would have made sure they didn't say a word.

Fletcher let out a long sigh. 'I reported my son, Chris, missing last week.'

'I see. How old is he?'

'Twenty-seven.'

'Ok.'

'Yesterday, I had a visit from a police lady who said a body washed up on the shore near Newhaven at the weekend was identified as him, and could I come over and confirm.'

He bent his head and sobbed.

After a few minutes, Henderson said, 'Did you identify him?'

'Yes, I did. It was him; it was my son.'

'I'm sorry for your loss, Dennis. It can't be easy losing a child. Is there someone at home you can talk to; are you married?'

'I was, my wife died two years ago.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. Did Chris have any siblings?'

He shook his head. 'He was an only one.'

'Would you like me to arrange for someone to call round to your house to talk to you?'

'That's kind of you but it's not the reason why I'm here.'

'No, what then?'

'I'm not happy with what your people are telling me about how my son died.'

Henderson remembered the 'floater,' the term used by police to describe bodies washed up on the beach, when the incident had popped up on the serials, a computerised system that listed crimes committed overnight in the region, a day or so ago. 'Floater' was a blanket description for a whole variety of deaths, ranging from those who fell off boats when drunk or in a storm, to those who got into trouble while swimming. In rarer cases, deliberate acts such as suicide, or criminals trying to dispose of a body.

This particular 'floater,' a young male, aged between twenty and thirty, had displayed all the signs of drowning and enquiries by local police in Newhaven traced his last movements to a cross-Channel ferry. The case hadn't landed on Henderson's desk as the investigating officers didn't consider it to be a crime, but as a keen sailor, Henderson took an interest in anything occurring in the waters off Sussex.

'Dennis, why do you say you weren't happy with the explanation you received about your son's death?'

'Let me explain. I'm in the wine business. I own three shops in Surrey: Camberley, Bracknell and Wokingham, and Chris, when he was younger, would help me out with deliveries and serving in the shop. At the time, I thought he was doing it just to earn some pocket money, but it turned out he was really interested in wine. When he finished his A Levels, he signed up for a course in viticulture at Plumpton College, down here in your neck of the woods, and when the course ended he went over to France to work in a vineyard and learn the ropes. He hoped to open his own vineyard one day.'

'What sort of work did he do out there?'

'He said he wanted to understand the business from the ground up, so he went as a hired hand and did anything and everything, from picking grapes to cleaning out the vats, but he loved it.'

'Where did he last work?'

'At a place called Château Osanne; it's a few miles outside of Blaye, in Bordeaux.'

'Ok.'

'For the last few months he'd been telling me things didn't look right. He said lorries were coming and going in the middle of the night and people were turning up who didn't know anything about wine and looked more like gangsters.'

'I see.'

'He called me about a week ago and said he had discovered something big, something that would

rock the world of wine, but he didn't want to say any more on the phone. He said he had some leave coming up in about three weeks' time and he would talk to me then. Two days before he died, Thursday of last week, he called. Short and sweet; he'd been fired for opening his mouth and he wanted to come home.'

'That was all he said?'

'Yes, it was our last chat together.'

'You don't have any idea what he discovered?'

'No, he didn't tell me.'

'So, you don't know if what he was talking about was a big deal, like adding anti-freeze to white wine, or something more trivial, like cheating on the declared alcohol levels on the label?'

'What you've got to realise about Chris, he is, was, a very serious boy and not prone to exaggeration in the slightest. If he said it looked like something big and important, I for one believe him.'

'Could you hazard a guess?'

'I've been racking my brain, I assure you, but no, nothing jumps out. I mean the château where he worked is a mid-level vineyard, modern in its methods and with a state of the art bottling facility, but not one of the big players by any means.'

'If we can return to your original statement. You said you didn't feel happy with the explanation you received about how he died. What did you mean by that?'

'The police officer I spoke to said he fell from the deck of a cross-Channel ferry.'

'It happens more often than you think, Dennis, especially if people are larking around and alcohol or drugs are involved.'

'He didn't do drugs and didn't drink much either, and he'd made the journey hundreds of times, as he accompanied me whenever I went to see suppliers and wholesalers. He knew the dangers of falling over the side, as I'd told him over and over, even from an early age. No, Chris didn't jump and he didn't fall, he was pushed. My son was murdered, Inspector Henderson. Murdered for what he knew.'

THREE

Henderson threw his legs out of bed and sat there for a moment trying to clear his head. He couldn't do this in his old flat in Seven Dials, as the sash windows leaked air and his bedroom in the morning could be bitterly cold, even with the heating on. Dawdling, even with the impediment of the severest hangover, didn't come as an option.

'What time is it?' Rachel said from somewhere beneath the duvet. At least that was what he thought she said, as her voice sounded muffled and croaky.

'Six-thirty.'

'What day is it?'

'Oh, a harder question this time, Ms Jones. Thursday, I think.'

No response. He walked towards the en-suite bathroom, careful to avoid the assorted rubbish scattered over the floor, an aborted attempt at emptying packing cases last night that had ended when Rachel pulled the cork on a bottle of wine.

He switched on the shower, set it hot and stepped inside the steam-filled cubicle. Initially, he'd been reluctant to move in with Rachel, not because he didn't love her, he did, but being a DI in Major Crime meant at times he would be working a big case. When this happened, all his energies would be focused on the investigation and not her. It had bugged up his marriage to Laura, and he was damn sure he didn't want the same thing happening again.

What changed his mind was the house. They both liked the idea of living in Kemptown, and one day while out walking they'd seen the three-bedroom mews house in College Place in an estate agent's window. No way could he or Rachel have afforded it on their own, and while he wouldn't say it was the main reason they'd moved in together, without doubt it provided the spark that fired up his inertia.

He dressed and headed downstairs. More debris, packing cases, bubble wrap and lots of things he didn't recognise. He tried to ignore them all and made a pot of tea. He took a cup up to Rachel but all he received in return was a grunt emanating from a mass of untidy hair.

One of the joys of being in this new place was the garden. His old flat was on the top floor of an apartment building, and while it overlooked a communal grassy area, it didn't offer any privacy. The expanse of greenery at the back this house was small and wouldn't require giving up half of his weekend to mow and maintain, but big enough for a table and chairs and a few flowers around the edge. This being Brighton in early May, the sun was shining. He carried his bowl of granola, topped with muesli, and a mug of tea out to the table and sat down.

It was a beautiful spot, on an elevated position overlooking the tops of houses lower down the hill. From where he was sitting, he could smell the sea and hear the cawing of the chip-thieving seagulls that were always awake before him, almost drowning out the light chirping of blackbirds and sparrows in the trees and rooftops nearby.

He understood now why arty types liked to settle in this part of Brighton, as it was replete with twee shops, interesting pubs serving real ale, and a variety of good restaurants. To him, that all paled into insignificance against the pleasure of basking in the sun in your own space and listening to the sounds of the city as it stretched and rubbed its eyes from sleep.

He finished breakfast, sat back and shut his eyes. He didn't feel tired or hung-over, surprising after a late night, a few beers and half a bottle of wine. He was thinking about a question someone had asked him at a party a few nights back, did he think crime novels reflected reality, when he felt a tickle on his face that made him jump. Warm lips smelling of toothpaste enveloped his.

‘Good morning, Detective,’ Rachel said.

‘Good morning to you too.’

She sat down on the chair opposite. With hair brushed and teeth cleaned, she looked her normal self, an inquiring, nosy journalist, eyes alert for the next story, if only the Pooh Bear pyjamas and fluffy pink dressing gown could be ignored.

‘Now we’ve moved in together, can I expect a cup of tea in bed every morning?’

‘Perhaps madam would like some bacon and eggs to go with it?’

‘That would be nice.’

‘Fat chance.’

‘I thought so.’

‘What have you got on today?’

‘Let me think. Yes, I’m going to see the organisers of the Henfield Show. My boss has moved there and thinks the place could do with some publicity. What about you?’

He told her about his meeting the day before with Dennis Fletcher and his suspicion that his son’s death may not have been an accident.

Rachel’s face crumpled. ‘It must be awful, losing an only child.’

‘Horrible. Children are not meant to die before their parents.’

‘So you think there must be something else to his story – otherwise we wouldn’t be talking about it?’

‘Now, now, put your pen and notepad away. I didn’t say I found anything suspicious about his death, it was his father that said it.’

‘Is it common, to have grieving parents disputing the cause of death?’

‘No, not often. I’ve known many relatives unable to accept it when someone close to them is killed; maybe this is part of the same thing.’

‘I hope you’ll investigate his claims. You wouldn’t want to leave the poor man heartbroken and accusing you of not taking his allegations seriously.’

‘Don’t worry,’ he said standing up and stretching, before leaning over and giving her a goodbye kiss. ‘If I did, journalists like you would be on my case and I would never hear the end of it. See you later.’

In part, their justification in moving to Kemptown and taking on such a large mortgage was that they would be closer to Hollingbury where they both worked. At the time, Henderson was based at Sussex House, and a few streets away Rachel worked at *The Brighton Argus*. *The Argus* was still there, but Sussex House was now closed, a victim of budget cuts introduced by the Government to help meet their deficit targets. They could have pulled out of the move to Kemptown, but by then they both loved the house.

His team were now located in Malling House in Lewes, a myriad of buildings tucked behind a Grade 1 listed Queen Anne building that served as Sussex Police Headquarters. His people were in a refurbished area, a more spacious working environment than Sussex House, where peeling paintwork and damaged walls were starting to make it look its age. The downside of the move was it brought them closer to the top brass, as the Chief Constable and all his ACC’s were based there.

This morning he headed along Lewes Road in the general direction of Malling House, but before getting there, turned into Woodvale Crematorium, the home of Brighton and Hove City Mortuary. He parked the car at the rear of the Mortuary, a place exuding the air of a domestic bungalow, reinforced by the view over terraced houses in nearby Gladstone Place.

If the building looked normal, even suburban on the outside, what went on inside was far from it. Any death deemed violent, unnatural, occurring in state custody, or if the cause of death was unknown, ended up in here at the end of the pathologist’s razor-sharp scalpel.

Most people who were regular viewers of police dramas and CSI-type television programmes were aware that one of a pathologist’s jobs was to remove a victim’s organs, examine and weigh them, but

Henderson suspected few people knew why. It looked to be an academic exercise, the results published in dusty journals and only read by a few fellow scientists, but the truth was more prosaic.

The month before, Henderson was responsible for investigating the case of a woman strangled to death during a vigorous sex session with her boyfriend. He was questioned and after admitting his part in killing her, was arrested and charged with manslaughter. A few days later, an examination of the heart during the post-mortem, revealed a congenital defect and it was this that had killed her, not the scarf tightened around her neck by her boyfriend to increase her sexual pleasure. He was subsequently released and would face no further charges.

Henderson rang the bell and mortuary assistant Marie Starling let him inside. She was a small, intense woman with bright red hair and various metal piercings on her face. While Henderson had never seen her in normal clothes, he suspected her arms and legs would be covered in tattoos.

He donned a pair of clean overalls and hat and walked into the brightly lit area where the head pathologist, Grafton Rawlings, had his back to him, leaning over a bench and writing notes.

'Hello Angus,' he said, without turning round, 'I'll be with you in a jiffy.'

'No problem.'

Six metal tables were laid out, all scrubbed clean and sanitised, ready to receive the day's unfortunate visitors. Dotted around were whiteboards to note the findings of any post-mortem for all to see, but they too had been wiped. The expanse of grey metal, the white tiling on the walls, the pristine clean floor, gave it the look of a hospital operating theatre, but there could be no mistaking the smell; a variety of disinfectants trying without much success to mask the scent of death.

'Right Angus, I'm finished,' Rawlings said as he signed something with a flourish. The pathologist was thirty-eight with a mop of black hair hidden beneath his cap, a dark, tanned face from being called out in all weathers and being a keen sea angler, and the spiky growth of a man who would have to attack his face with a razor three times a day to look clean-shaven.

'How did the house move go?'

'Very well I have to say, nothing's broken. Mind you, it's not all unpacked.'

'My wife and I moved house four years ago, and there's stuff out in the garage, untouched and still in the mover's original boxes.'

'There's hope for me yet. When we're settled, you and Serena must come round for dinner.'

'I'd like that. Give me a shout when you're ready to receive visitors.'

'Sure.'

'You said on the phone you wanted to take a look at Chris Fletcher?'

'Yes. Have you completed the P-M?'

'I finished it last night. Do you want to see him?'

'If I could.'

Rawlings nodded at Marie, standing behind Henderson. She walked to the bank of four drawers lining the wall, looking like a giant's filing cabinet, and opened it. Inside, the corpse of Chris Fletcher. With a care and delicacy belying her rough looks, she transferred the body from the drawer to one of the scrubbed benches.

Dennis Fletcher had told the DI that his son was twenty-seven, and this was apparent from his trendy haircut, unblemished teeth and the pile of modern clothes, tagged with his name, lying to one side. The Police Constable who handled the case had found the lad's wallet in his jacket pocket, hence the speed of identification, a job made many times more difficult if he had spent longer in the water.

With the report in one hand and pencil in the other, Rawlings pointed out the key items of interest.

'Classic drowning scenario, would you say?' Henderson asked when the pathologist had finished speaking.

'I would. His lungs were filled with water, there was water in his pleural cavities, diatoms in his tissues. I have no doubt he drowned. I understand he was crossing from Dieppe to Newhaven and

hearing this only confirms my belief that the victim must have fallen overboard.'

'The one question I have, is did he jump or was he pushed?'

'I wondered why you were taking such an interest in this particular one. Your question may be answered, or at least narrowed down, if your enquiries reveal the victim exhibited suicidal tendencies and eye witnesses saw him climbing a rail.'

'True. Is there anything else you've spotted that I should be aware of? I can tell you haven't told me everything.'

'I was saving the best for last,' Rawlings said, his face deadpan.

He tilted the dead boy's head and with his pencil parted his hair.

'How did he get that?' Henderson said, a strong element of surprise in his voice.

'He could have hit something on the side of the ship on the way down, but I think it unlikely as these sorts of vessels, to my knowledge, don't have much in the way of extraneous equipment.'

'You're right as it would affect streamlining and get knocked off the next time the ferry tried to dock.'

'I next surmised he might have struck something in the water, but when I analysed the wound I couldn't find traces of algae or any marine organism that might be expected to transfer from an object which had been in the water for some time.'

'Still, he could have smacked his head on a bulkhead and, feeling dazed, fell overboard, or maybe he had been in a fight.'

'Possibly, although not likely given the position of the wound at the back of the head and the depth of the indentation, but Angus, that's for you to decide. Take a look at this, it might help you make a decision.'

Rawlings reached down and lifted an arm, and there, faint against the alabaster-coloured skin, Henderson could see bruises, the shape indicative of a gripping hand. 'It's the same on the other arm,' the pathologist said.

Henderson drove to Malling House, deep in thought. The death of Chris Fletcher was bothering him. His purpose in coming to the Mortuary had been to tell Dennis Fletcher that his fears were unfounded; his son's death, no matter how tragic it might be, was an accident. However, what he saw of Chris's head injury and the bruises to his arms had convinced him otherwise. The difficulty now was persuading his boss to allow him to investigate.