

A Dish Best Served Cold

DI Dave Saxon tossed the bottle-opener aside - the cap still spinning across the Formica, the froth just visible at the top of the neck - and reached for the phone. *Was there no peace for the wicked?*

'Saxon.'

'Evenin' sir. Sorry to disturb you, and I know you're supposed to be off-duty. It's the call-centre.'

'Yeah. I know. Good evening. What is it this time?'

Saxon put down the bottle, pinched the bridge of his nose, and waited to hear what the evening might hold...

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The houseboat was moored a few hundred yards from the lock, the roof and decking covered by the dried-out leaves of the weeping willow that hung, like a bad haircut, over the canal and its towpath. '*Dunroamin*' - the name suggested the owner's pension had gone into paying for a lifetime's dream - was otherwise clean and well-cared for, brass fittings gleaming softly in the light of the full moon, ropes neatly coiled, lace curtains hinting at the home comforts eschewed by most of the other boats the detective had passed on his way to the scene. A little way off, a pair of bright glowing dots marked the place where an ambulance driver and his assistant were standing, enjoying a chat and a smoke. They nodded to him as he passed.

'Don't think you'll be needing us tonight, Dave, so we'll be off home... enjoy the rest of your Saturday.'

'Piss off, Gordon, or there'll be another suspicious death on the canal tonight.'

The taller man grinned and flicked away what was left of his cigarette; then the two walked off towards their vehicle standing in the nearby carpark.

DS Dean Thomas and a uniformed PC were waiting on the bank, Thomas leaning proprietorially on the side of the boat. When he saw his boss approaching, he stood up straight.

'After you sir,' he said, indicating the small open doorway with a flourish.

Saying nothing in reply, Saxon stepped on-board, bowed his head, and peered into the cabin.

'Any light in here, Dean? It's like the proverbial black hole.'

'On the left, sir. I turned it off as I didn't want to run down the battery.'

Saxon grunted and felt for the switch. A yellowing light flickered on, revealing a well-ordered living space: a small galley kitchen, a neatly made bunk, and a body slumped over a

writing desk, its face pressed hard against an open pad. The fingers still gripped the expensive fountain pen with which he - for it was a he - had been writing. To the left, there was an antique ink-holder, its silver top elaborately monogrammed with the letters *SDW*, and to the right lay an empty cutglass tumbler, complete with slice of lemon, rolling slightly as Saxon moved in to take a closer look.

Moonlight illuminated the dead man's face, and through the gloom Saxon noticed that a dribble of faintly coloured liquid, starting at the corner of the mouth and spilling onto the pad, had succeeded in blotting out whatever had been the author's final words.

Saxon adjusted his glasses and squinted at the lines of writing that covered the page, then turned his attention to the pinboard filling the space between the portholes: Post-its, reminders, newspaper cuttings, and a selection of old photographs now starting to curl at the corners.

'Looks like we've got an author... or a playwright, or actor maybe. No struggling hack though,' Saxon said over his shoulder. 'Nice pen, neat fingernails, expensive aftershave,' he added, more to himself than to DS Thomas. 'Found anything out about the bloke, Dean? Spoken to anyone yet? And come down - you're giving me the creeps. Like a flaming gargoyle or something.'

The younger man made his way down the short steps into the boat and took out a little black book, loosening the rubber band, and flipping it open.

'Well...he was found at about four o'clock - by the lock-keeper - name of Bernard Watson - doing his usual rounds before 'eadin' off 'ome-'

'*Home*, Dean. It's *home*.'

'Home, sir... before heading off *home*.'

'Better.' Saxon leant over the body and the desk, searching for any more clues to the deceased and the manner of his passing. 'And then?'

'Well, as soon as he saw the body, he belted back to his hut, or whatever they call it, to ring 999. He said he was in a panic as he'd never seen a dead body before and thought it didn't look right, so asked for the ambulance and for us. You saw the medics. They knew straightaway that he was a gonner but *they* thought it didn't look right 'n all, so they left everything where it was until we arrived. You say he could have been an actor. Don't they corpse or something?'

Saxon looked up wearily.

'Not now, Dean. It's a Saturday night, my Old Peculier is going flat, and I'm knackered.'

The young policeman shuffled uneasily and consulted his book again.

'Oh, yeah, and the old lock-keeper, he's gone to hospital as he was in such a state over what he found. You know, he's old and that.'

'Did you manage to speak to him before they carted him off to St George's?'

'He said that the man, the deceased, him,' he pointed at the body, 'had had the mooring for a couple of months. Said he didn't know that much about him apart from the fact that his name was Harry and that he was a writer. Apparently, kept 'imself to 'imself and wasn't exactly popular with your regular punters, the rest of the boaters. *Bit up 'is own arse* – his words, not mine, sir.'

'Okay. Anything else? Family? Friends? Relatives?'

Thomas shook his head and shrugged.

'Problem was, he – the lock-keeper – suddenly started sort of hyper, hyper-'

'-ventilating?'

'That's it, hyper-ventilating, and turning a funny colour. He managed to tell me that he suffered from asthma and a weak heart, then sort of slumped in his chair. So, next, it was my turn to call for an ambulance, and one came quickly and took him away in a wheelchair. I think he must be up at the hospital now. He didn't look good.'

'Right. Good work Dean,' Saxon said, with a sniff. 'Good work. Give us your torch. I can hardly see a thing and that lightbulb looks like it's going the same way as its owner.'

Thomas reached into his uniform and pulled out a heavy rubber flashlight, handing it to his boss.

'Let's see what we can find out from this little display. But be careful not to touch anything. We don't want your prints all over the place.'

'Course not sir. I'm not stupid.'

Saxon half-turned, then thought better of it, and trained the beam on the papers and pictures neatly pinned to the board above the writing desk. It was gloomy, and the writing was small, but Saxon could make out just enough to start dictating selected details to the waiting policeman.

'Got your book? Right, make a note of this. Beck Theatre in Hayes, 1985; something called '*A Play in Two Parts*,' something he wrote or was in, I suppose. There's also a picture of someone suave-looking, in cricket whites, holding a cup. Him, perhaps?' He looked at the face on the table, then back at the photograph. 'Yep, I reckon that's him. Then, there's a panto, again in '85, and some clippings from the Uxbridge Observer. Got him! He's called Harry Du Val. There's a snap of him and a bevvie of beauties, dressed up in tights, sequins, and feather boas-'

'Him or the beauties, boss?'

Saxon ignored him. 'And one of them, the one her arm round his waist...' he paused and squinted closer, 'she's had her eyes blacked in, with a ballpoint pen, I think. And she's got a moustache. An old lover, perhaps? Things gone wrong?'

Thomas angled his head, pushed out a lip, and made a note.

'So,' Saxon continued, 'he's Harry Du Val. From the look of him, somewhere in his sixties. Playwright – actor, maybe?'

'And he's faced the final curtain.'

'Enough, Thomas! Right, you're going to have to make yourself useful. I'm going home to watch whatever's left of Blind Date on the box, and you're going to get up to the hospital to see what more you can get from old Bernie. Don't lose those notes, and I'll keep hold of the torch. Plenty of those back at the station. You take the Panda car and get the SOCO down here in the morning. Oh, and give me a ring later – but wait until after Match of the Day finishes. Let me know how you get on.

As Saxon stepped off the boat, he addressed the uniformed officer.

'Stay warm Steve, and if you need a leak, do it somewhere discreet. Lots of bushes over there,' he said with a sardonic smile, 'don't want you had up for flashing.'

'Thank you, Sir; and sleep tight yourself.'

Saxon saluted, turned, and walked off towards the lock-keeper's cabin.

The light was almost gone and he was thankful of his favourite old donkey jacket. Big pockets, generous sleeves, collar you could turn to the cold night air - just the job. In the distance he could hear the sound of a jukebox, coming from the one remaining high street pub; a single car crossed the humped whitewashed bridge beyond the lock, its headlights searching the sky before dropping quickly to road-level again; a coot peeped anxiously somewhere in the reeds below his feet. Saxon made his way to the edge of the lock, stepped onto the balance-beam and made his way gingerly across the lock-gates – he never had been good with heights. Safely on the other side, he tried the door of the cabin. Locked. Dean Thomas was learning fast and no doubt had pocketed the key after the boys in green had taken Bernie to the ambulance. Saxon pressed his face to the window. Spiders had made their homes in the corner, the pane was grimy and cracked, the paint peeling and the putty loose. Clearly, Bernie was neither rich nor fastidious. Or, maybe times were tight and the canal owners, like everyone else, had been hit by the recession? He shone his torch into the interior and let the beam play on the room and its contents. Besides the threadbare sofa (newspapers, ashtray, unwashed plate) there was a simple deal table, some sort of ledger, a mess of correspondence and a couple of dining chairs. A black, 70s-style phone dangled off the hook, and at the back, a half-opened door led into a kitchenette, or toilet area, perhaps. It was dingy and dark, and nothing matched. A contrast to the boat he had just left.

Five minutes after he had arrived, he was walking along the towpath again, the air suffused with a mixture of diesel and wood-smoke: not great for an asthmatic. A short walk and he had arrived at the carpark, empty apart from his clapped-out Marina and an estate car that was rocking slightly and suspiciously steamed-up. *I'm off-duty*, he thought, then turned the key, revved up the engine, and made for home.

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His glass now empty Saxon reached for another bottle, lay back, and waited for the second game of the evening to begin. The phone rang again.

'Bollocks!'

He rolled off the sofa unhooked the phone and brought it over and placed it next to the bowl of crisps and nuts that constituted his Saturday night take-away.

'Saxon.'

'Me again, sir.'

'Dean? I thought I told you to wait until Match of the Day was over.'

'Sorry, sir, I don't like football. Didn't know what time it was on.'

Saxon took a handful of nuts and threw them into his mouth.

'Anyway,' he managed to mumble, 'what you got for me? How's the old bloke?'

'Bernie? He's fine. Everything back to normal, and they should be discharging him tomorrow morning. Still looks shaken up though, and was asking about Harry. I couldn't tell him anything, of course, but I said we would let him know anything when we were able to.'

'Okay. Did he tell you anything more about Du Val? Has anything unusual happened recently? Strangers hanging about? Arguments between the boaters? That sort of thing.'

'Nothing, as far as I could tell. But he did say that he thought Du Val's last mooring had been down in Uxbridge somewhere, and -'

'That makes sense, with the Beck being only a few miles away -'

'and, that he'd had an altercation – that's an argument of sorts, innit? – with some other boaters, and had upped sticks and moved up here.'

'Oooh!'

'Sir?'

'Cantona just hit the bar. Never mind, Dean, you wouldn't understand. So, not a popular boy then, our Mr Du Val.'

'Doesn't appear so.'

'Anything else?'

'Well, I had a very nice chat with the nurse that's looking after Bernie. Very nice, got her number, if you know what I mean.'

'I think I do, young man, I'm a detective. But remember, you were on duty.'

'Understood, sir,' Thomas replied, his grin as clear to Saxon as if he had been standing in the same room.

'Right. It's past your bedtime, and Motson's just appeared in his sheepskin.'

'Sir?'

'Don't let it worry you, Dean. I'll call you in the morning – nice and early.'

Saxon put the receiver down and closed his eyes. His kids were just going to have to wait until the following weekend. Tomorrow, he and Dean Thomas would be doing a theatre visit.

And neither would be there to enjoy the show.