

One

With even the walking wounded working a double shift, it was inevitable that tempers would become frayed as the day wore on, so it was only to be expected that when Constable Bates sneezed – loudly and wetly – into his own right hand, Constable Moore’s response was somewhat less than measured.

‘For Christ’s sake, Phil, why can’t you use your bloody handkerchief?’ Moore demanded, in a voice much too loud for an enclosed space like the inside of a parked police patrol car.

Bates sniffed. ‘Sorry, Trev,’ he said. ‘I think I must be coming down with the flu.’

‘Of course you’re coming down with the flu,’ Trevor Moore agreed. ‘We’re *all* coming down with the bastard flu. But you’re not helping matters by spreading your germs everywhere, are you?’

‘Fair point,’ Bates agreed reluctantly – because it undoubtedly was.

At this time of year – November – flu was *always* a problem in Whitebridge, because that same dank, damp air which had made the town the perfect location for cotton mills had also made it the perfect incubator for the influenza virus. And, according to the copy of the *Whitebridge Evening Telegraph* which was currently residing on Moore’s knees, this *particular* year – 1973 – it was even more virulent than usual.

Moore carefully folded the newspaper, then glanced, almost apathetically, through the windscreen.

Dozens of cars – their headlights cutting a swathe through the thick darkness of the night – were approaching along the two left-hand lanes of the dual carriageway. Dozens more – their tail-lights bobbing around like demented fireflies – were travelling in the opposite direction.

‘Mind you, looking at all this traffic, you wouldn’t know there *was* an epidemic,’ he said to his partner, in a placatory tone.

‘You’re right there – folk’ll drive when they’re not fit to walk,’ Bates replied sourly.

The sound of the motor horn seemed to come out of nowhere.

Had it been a single beep – or even a series of beeps, in which one driver showed his annoyance with another – the two officers would have ignored it.

But it wasn’t.

Instead, it filled the night air like the wailings of a demented banshee.

‘That kind of behaviour’s simply not on,’ Moore said, his foot already feeling the clutch and his hand reaching for the gear stick.

The blaring grew louder, and a green Ford Cortina suddenly appeared. The headlights were on full, and the driver was weaving in out of the traffic as if he had a death wish.

‘Jesus, he must be doing at least a hundred!’ Bates gasped, as the Cortina shot past the lay-by where they were parked.

‘Bloody maniac!’ Moore said grimly, switching on the siren, throwing the vehicle car into gear, and pulling out.

The patrol car’s flashing lights and siren were already having the desired effect on the cars ahead of them. Some of the drivers had slowed almost to a standstill. Others had pulled over on to the hard shoulder. But the green Cortina was impervious to it all, and continued to accelerate into the darkness.

‘At the rate he’s going, we’ll never bloody catch him,’ Bates said, reaching for the radio.

‘We’ll catch him,’ Moore said firmly, as the speedometer needle rapidly climbed its way around the dial.

Bates clicked the switch on the radio, and was connected to HQ.

‘Bloody mad driver on the loose,’ he said, after giving his call sign. ‘He’s travelling north on the dual carriageway. He’s between Mill Lane and Piper’s Brook at the moment, but Christ alone knows *where* he’ll be five minutes from now.’

‘Very professional, Phil,’ Moore said, as he pressed his foot down hard on the accelerator. ‘Almost textbook. You’re a credit to the force.’

‘Piss off,’ Bates said, though without any real rancour.

A bend was looming up just ahead of them.

‘We’re nearly at the Piper’s Brook roundabout,’ Moore said, coaxing the maximum speed out of the engine. ‘If the sod takes one of the turn-offs before we’re round that corner, we’ll have no bloody idea where he’s gone.’

It was as the patrol car was screeching round a bend – two of the wheels momentarily leaving the tarmac – that they saw all the traffic in front of them had stopped.

‘Shit!’ Moore shouted, stamping down on the brake pedal.

The patrol car skidded through forty-five degrees, and came to a halt frighteningly near the closest stationary car.

Bates opened his door and climbed out.

A man in a heavy overcoat, standing next to his own vehicle, shouted, 'Thank God you've arrived! There's been an accident!'

'Tell me something I don't know,' Bates said, as he weaved in and out of the parked vehicles, heading towards the large road island that the driver they were chasing had clearly failed to negotiate.

The Cortina had mounted the island and crashed into a massive oak tree which stood in the centre of it. Its bonnet had buckled, and there was steam rising from it.

'Bloody tree!' Bates muttered.

They should have cut it down when they were building the road, he thought. They *would* have cut it down if the anorak-and-green-Wellingtons brigade hadn't protested that it was four hundred years old, and so had historic importance.

Historic importance!

When all was said and done, it was still no more than a lump of wood, and if nature nuts *really* felt the urge to look at trees, well, there were thousands of the buggers in the Whitebridge area

Bates heard a puffing, wheezing sound at his side, and realized that Moore had caught up with him.

'We'll have to get the feller out of there,' Moore gasped. 'And quickly – before the bloody thing blows.'

'If we *can* get him out,' Bates said.

By the time they reached the car, small flames were already starting to lick what was left of the bonnet.

They could see the Cortina's driver now, slumped over the steering wheel. But he *was* wearing a seat belt – so there was a good chance that he would have survived the crash.

Please God, let the bloody door not be jammed shut, Moore prayed silently, as he reached for the handle.

For a moment it looked as if he had wasted his prayer, because when he pulled, nothing happened. Then, with a metallic groan, the door swung open.

As Moore reached inside, he felt a huge wave of relief sweep over him – and then a blinding rage quickly took its place.

'You stupid bastard!' he shouted at the slumped-over driver. 'You stupid, irresponsible, *dangerous* bastard!'

The driver groaned, and muttered a single word.

‘What did he say?’ Bates asked.

‘Sounded like “lane”,’ Moore replied.

But then again, it could just as easily have been ‘rain’ or ‘pain’ – and whatever it was, it didn’t matter now.

Moore unfastened the seat belt and placed a hand under each of the driver’s armpits.

Don’t move him! warned a voice in his head. Wait for the paramedics to arrive. *They’re* the professionals. They’ll be able to get him out without doing further damage. Wait for them!

‘Can’t bloody wait,’ Moore told the voice, as he watched the flames growing bigger and bolder by the second. ‘Leave the feller where he is, and he could be burned to a crisp by the time the paramedics arrive.’

He hauled the driver from the car, and the moment he was clear, Bates grabbed his legs, so that at least now he was horizontal.

‘Where shall we take him?’ Bates asked.

‘As far away from here as possible,’ Moore told him.

A small crowd had gathered on the edges of the traffic island, and a few people were even advancing towards the wrecked car.

‘Get back, you bloody idiots!’ Moore screamed. ‘It’s about to blow!’

But it didn’t.

Not then.

In fact, the two policemen and the victim had almost reached the patrol car when there was a huge explosion behind them and the sky turned red.

‘Lay him on the ground,’ Moore said urgently. ‘Now!’

‘Why should we—?’ Bates began.

‘Just do it!’ Moore barked.

They lowered the injured man on to the road, and Moore immediately huddled over him.

Around them, small pieces of shattered glass fell through the air like sharp-edged raindrops. Chunks of metal, some of the size of a man’s leg, hit the asphalt and bounced several times before settling. And still the boom of the explosion lingered – if only in the eardrums of those who had been too close to it.

There were new sounds now – the demanding scream of several police sirens, the wail of at least one ambulance.

Moore straightened up.

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‘Let’s take a look at him,’ he suggested. ‘Got your torch?’

Bates nodded, and shone the beam on the injured man’s face.

‘Bloody hell, it’s ... it’s ...’ he stuttered.

‘It’s Chief Superintendent Kershaw – that’s who it bloody is,’ Moore said.

He knelt down again, and put his mouth close to the injured man’s ear. ‘Can you hear me, sir?’ he asked softly.

The chief superintendent opened his eyes.

‘Where’s Elaine?’ he groaned.

‘What was that, sir?’ Moore asked.

‘Elaine,’ Kershaw repeated, making an effort to sit up, and then falling back again.

‘Who’s Elaine?’ Moore asked.

‘My wife,’ Kershaw groaned. ‘I don’t know where she is. I can’t find her anywhere.’