

The King of Crows

By
Bill Davidson



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To Fraser.

He aint heavy...but he ought to be.

Detective Chief Inspector John Dudek stood at the rendezvous point, close to the main body of officers, but maybe ten paces ahead. Blue lights washed over him as he waited, erect in his long coat; a tall, slim man, dark haired and sharp featured. An icy wind made his eyelids flicker as he stared. Otherwise, he did not move.

The university parking lot was half empty, just before term started, but it was poorly lit, and armed response was taking it slow, flashlight beams slicing the dark. Dudek recognized his old partner in the distance, Gerry Devlin, pointing with his whole arm as he directed the search.

Beyond the cars, the student's Union building was brilliantly lit, but people had stopped trying to peek out, not wanting armed police officers shouting at them, telling them to get down.

A squall of freezing rain hit Dudek's face, but he didn't take his eyes off Devlin, and so was watching when the man raised a hand and spoke into his radio, already walking before the bustle of activity started behind him.

Dudek angled quickly through the parking lot, leaving his new DC, Nathan Findlay, to catch up. Police vehicles were starting up, an ambulance being waved towards where a girl lay injured.

Dudek threaded through cars, coming to the open square in front of the Union, where Devlin was waiting. He slowed, well short of where the dead man lay, face up on the cobbles, turning to warn Nathan not to step in anything. But Nathan was already walking away, stiff legged and blowing hard. Dudek watched him for a moment, then turned back to Devlin.

“What have we got, Gerry?”

The expression on Devlin’s face was almost pained, like he didn’t know what to say, or want to say it. “One fatality, Sir. Suicide.”

Dudek looked again at the dead man, the blood around him showing up black under the lights, thinking Devlin must have it wrong.

“Suicide?”

“Looks that way.”

Dudek glanced towards where the paramedics were bundling out of their ambulance, several rows of cars back. “The girl?”

“Just a stray pellet, hit her leg. Doesn’t look like she was targeted.”

Dudek frowned and turned back to the body, trying to make sense of what he was looking at. The dead guy had been a very big man, big as Nathan, late fifties, wearing a long, black leather coat that had opened right up, framing him on the ground. Dudek thought he must have stood out, when alive.

Which was a good thing.

He had been shot in the neck, and again through the chest, a hole in there the size of a fist, jagged edges of rib showing. The back of his head was gone. The man’s eyes were open, staring up into the night, and his jaw hung loose, something in there broken. He still held a pump action shotgun in his right hand.

Looking around, Dudek could see at least three positions where somebody had been shot by something like that shotgun, given the wide fans of blood.

Faces were appearing at the windows of the Union again, people speaking into cell phones or holding them up, hopefully too far away to get a decent image, in this light. With everything else going on right now, another murder, a

shooting on the university campus no less, was the last thing he needed. Nathan, still looking pale, was back.

Dudek gave him a flat look. "We can't afford for you to be sick here."

Nathan compressed his lips. "I'm fine, boss."

He kept his eyes on his Constable as Devlin stepped closer, his voice low. "Doesn't add up, does it?"

Dudek indicated the mess, the blood splatters on the cobbles.

"Not for one suicide, it doesn't. Looks more like a shoot-out."

The nearest line of cars had been badly damaged, smashed windcreens and holes in the bodywork. Beyond them, scenes of crime officers were pulling on their suits.

Dudek looked again at the blocky Union building, noticing a second-floor window was broken, thinking maybe someone had shot at the dead man, and missed.

He turned to Nathan.

"Get a tent over this, quick. Keep these damn crows off, if nothing else."

Nathan, maybe relieved to get away, moved quickly towards where SoC were assembling their kit.

When Dudek turned back, Devlin was squatting on his heels, as close to the body as he could without disturbing anything. At one time they had been something like friends, Devlin at that time the guy who knew all there was to know about cars. Now he was the guy who knew about guns.

He pointed to a long shotgun cartridge, lying near a splatter of blood. "Look at those things. And you see the cars? The size of the holes?"

Dudek turned, seeing what Devlin meant, holes large enough to put a finger in.

“And the mess of *him*? Jesus Christ, that hole in his chest.”

“I thought Nathan was about to lose his dinner.”

Devlin wasn't listening, he was talking, working out what was in his head. “This guy, the gear he was using, Jesus. Massive shot, non-standard, magnum load. What did he think he was shooting at, a rhino?”

Dudek didn't want to tell his friend where he had gotten confused, but had to say, “Gerry. You're talking like the same gun did all the shooting. This guy was shot three times. And he's got a gun in his hand.”

Devlin looked around, the same expression on his face, like he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

“I reckon the first few shots went into the cars. Maybe he was aiming at somebody in front of them, or in one.”

He beckoned Dudek several paces to his left, pointed at a wide splatter on the cobbles.

“This looks like the first shot that hit anybody, though. You see the hair, bits of what looks like skull?”

“Somebody had their head blown off.”

“Yeah.” Devlin nodded towards the corpse, five yards away. “Him.”

That stopped Dudek. “That makes no sense, Gerry.”

“That's what I've been saying. The head shot must have happened with him on his feet, the spread of stuff back there.”

He took a long step to the side. “And this is where he was shot in the neck”

Dudek shook his head. “Can't be. Whoever was shot here, they weren't on the ground.”

“No, they weren't.”

The two men stared at each other. Dudek had to make it clear. “I mean, whoever got shot here, they were standing.”

Devlin nodded, so Dudek shook his head, like a reset. “We’re getting ourselves turned around here. What do we know, I mean for sure?”

Devlin took a moment, getting his thoughts in order, then nodded towards the corpse.

“We know the dead guy took three shots, right?”

“Ok.”

“And the last shot happened with him on his back, exactly where he is.”

Dudek looked again at the blood surrounding the body. “Right.”

“But the other two shots, the head and neck, didn’t happen there.”

Dudek, reluctantly, nodded once more. Then, showing his irritation, “What, so somebody blew the back of his head off, then picked him up, so they could shoot him again?”

When Devlin just shook his head, Dudek kept going.

“Then they drag the body across there. Shoot him a third time, and put the gun back in his hand. For what? To make it seem like suicide?”

Devlin threw his hands up and turned around, searching for an explanation. “Ok, I must be looking at this all wrong. Maybe he got into a fight with someone who had the same gear.”

“So, there could be somebody else out there with a gun set up like this one?” Dudek tapped Devlin’s body armor. “How would this stand up?”

Devlin smiled, no humor in it. “Close range? I’d be better off wearing my pajamas.”

Nathan was back, trotting, out of breath. “SoC coming now, boss. Barry Batterham.”

“Witnesses?”

“Uniform have a list, but nobody so far has seen the whole show. We’ve got a room in the Union to work from.”

Stalled for a moment, the three men stood, staring at the body. They were a mismatched group, Devlin short, stocky in his armor, with a gleaming scalp. Dudek taller, late thirties. Tall as he was, Nathan’s blonde head topped Dudek by a good four inches.

Nathan jerked as a crow dropped in a sudden flurry of feathers, scuffling amongst the mess on the ground. Devlin yelled, cursing, waving his arms, but it picked up a piece of something, dark hair hanging from it, and flapped into the air.

Dudek pointed a finger at Nathan. “Didn’t I tell you to get a tent over this?”

Once Nathan had scurried off, Dudek turned to see Devlin had dropped into a crouch, sighting his semi-automatic on the crows, milling in the air. Saw his trigger finger tighten.

“Gerry!”

Devlin dropped his gun and straightened, walking away without another word. Dudek watched him go, replaying the moment in his head and trying to work out what he had just seen.

September 1976

The first time David Haddow saw Angela Murray was in the library of the University of Dundee, his first visit since starting the second year of his course.

He entered the foyer, hit as usual by the smell of wax and paper – he thought of it as scholarly – seeing how busy it was, newly hatched students milling around, looking lost or excited, or both.

David thought back to his own first visit here, how it had seemed overwhelming and loaded with potential at the same moment. He pressed on, appreciating the feeling of competence that went with knowing how the library was set out. He had enjoyed reading the set novels the year before. Enjoyed talking about Pinter and Defoe in tutorials where he could slump in his chair, open his mouth and find his thoughts take shape and walk as he spoke.

He didn't feel the same about actual study. Or assignments. English Lit came easy, because...well, because it did. Political Science (what was he *thinking?*) didn't come easy, and he had been relieved to drop it at the end of the year.

In the end he had only just scraped through, and had been intending to take Philosophy as well as Literature this year, his words to his friend, Neil, on the subject. "See me? I'm going to philosophize like fuck."

Then, first day in, he found himself signing up for Psychology instead. Psychology. How hard could that be?

A group of first years had crowded around an imperious, gray haired librarian who was explaining the index system in low tones. David surreptitiously checked out the females in the group, settling on a girl with full lips and breasts pushing against her cheesecloth shirt. He put the album he was carrying, Stevie Wonder's *Innervisions*, on top of the cabinet and pulled out one of the drawers. Now he could pretend to flick through the cards, getting a better look.

Her eyes flicked across to him and he quickly focused on the card in his hand, leaning so his long, dark blonde hair covered his face. When he risked an eye again, she was giving the gray hair her full attention.

A girl he hadn't noticed before shifted at the edge of the group, and he noticed her now. She stood slightly apart, and that seemed strangely fitting. The word 'apart' actually

formed in his head before she too looked his way. This was no flick of the eyes, however. She turned to look at him and it took a full beat before he could haul his attention into the cards. He knew he was blushing and, annoyed with himself, kept his eyes down for several seconds before stalking into the body of the library.

He thought about what he would say when he and Neil got together in Rankine Hall later. Neil would probably have spoken to some new girls. Maybe, knowing him, had arranged to meet one in a bar up Perth Road. David felt itchy and dissatisfied, irritated with himself and girls in general for making getting off with them such a trial. If they fancied you, why didn't they just say?

He thought he might tell Neil about the girl, the one who was so apart, how weird she was. Everything about her was different. Whilst everyone else wore denim or cheesecloth, some tie-dyes and leg warmers in there, she was dressed not dissimilarly to the librarian. Actual slacks, polyester, and a cardigan. Short, dark hair, brushed straight.

Why would someone dress like that, who wasn't about thirty, David wondered. And then there was how she held herself. Nobody's back was that straight naturally. She had smiled as she listened, but not a happy smile, with her high tilted chin and long jaw.

She wasn't pretty, David decided, not like the other girl, but she was striking. He heard himself describing her, using that word, Neil saying, "Striking. So, she's a dog." And David, as he often did in his internal dialogues, taking the opposite view. Weird as anything but not a dog, come on, man. Striking doesn't mean dog.

He was standing with a copy of *Hard Times* in his hand, but not really looking at it. Not looking forward to reading it either; a book with such a miserable title.

The first years were being taken to the stairs that led to the lower levels and there she was, behind the librarian, but with a gap between her and the rest of the group. They felt her apartness too.

Watching her move, her posture was even more pronounced. She seemed to walk high on her toes, something approaching a bounce with each step and that straight, straight back. *Hockeysticks*.

The word came unbidden and, as these things usually did, unquestioned into his head. Her nickname at school, he'd bet.

David wondered if she was nuts. Probably going to spend all year studying and eating raw turnip in tutorials. Get a double first and become a lecturer and master of a hall of residence, like Brainiac 5, the exceptionally strange master of Rankine Hall. Getting older and weirder while the students stayed the same age.

He watched her head disappearing down the steps and wondered would she look around, even at this distance feel him watching. She didn't look.

2016

Dudek sat in a small office in the students' Union, drinking instant coffee and speaking to the first of the witnesses. This was a second-year law student, a tall dark-haired woman. He checked his notes.

"Morag, is it?"

She nodded. "Morag Jordan"

"I know you've been through this already, but bear with us."

"No problem." She looked at Nathan and smiled, "Glad to help."

Nathan smiled back, a bit too wide, a look from Dudek making him drop his eyes to his notebook, pen hovering.

"Where were you when you first realized something was wrong?"

"In here. Getting something to eat."

"What time did you arrive?"

"Six forty-five-ish. Got myself a sandwich at the bar. The place is dead at this time of year, so it was quiet."

"Where were you sitting?"

"By the window. My back to it."

"Did you see the person doing the shooting?"

"Once it started, yeah."

Nathan asked. "Ever seen him before?"

"I've been thinking about that! It might have been this guy, we called him El Perv. But I don't know if it was him."

Dudek had frowned when Nathan asked his question, but now he asked, "Who was this El Perv?"

"I only saw him once, in his car. That's what he did, see? You sometimes saw this black SUV parked out there. Sometimes the window would slide down and this big lens would come out."

"Photographing female students?"

"Well, yeah."

"So, the time you saw him?"

"I was walking towards the Union one night and I see this black SUV and I'm wondering if it's El Perv. Then the window slides down, just as I'm coming up behind it. He started taking photos and I walked right by."

"So, you got a good look at him?"

"Well, he had this huge camera and I didn't want to look *at* him, you know."

"But you think he might have been the same person?"

"He was big, and old, with lots of dark hair. A beard."

“The man out there didn’t have a beard.”

“No.”

Then she said, “The funny thing was, though, there wasn’t even anybody there. Nobody to photograph. And it was dark, not even during term.”

“When was this? You know the date?”

“Actually, I do, because it was the night before I was *supposed* to go to Amsterdam. I got sick with something that exact night, knocked me flat for weeks.”

She shook her head, sorry for herself. “I’ve not been right since.”

“So, the date?”

“Oh yeah. July last year.” She pulled out her phone and scrolled. “24th.”

Nathan asked, “Anybody report this guy?”

“Nah. We just laughed it off.”

Dudek looked at Nathan, back to the girl. “Let’s get back to today. You were in the bar.”

“Yeah. And suddenly there’s this loud bang.”

“Can you put a time on that?”

“About seven. I looked up at the barman and said, ‘Was that a gun?’ Then the next thing somebody is screaming outside and there’s another bang and you could hear glass shattering. I go to look out, and the barman shouts, ‘Are you nuts? Get down!’ I dropped just as there’s another bang, then everything goes quiet.”

“So, three shots, then a pause?”

“It might only have been a few seconds. I creep under the window and the barman’s getting upset, like if I look out *he* might get shot. I peep out.”

Morag paused, blinking.

“What did you see?”

“The big guy, just standing there in his coat, with his back to me.”

“Nobody else?”

“No. He had this shotgun, like in the movies. He turns the gun and shoots himself in the mouth.”

As if that wasn’t clear enough, she mimed turning a shotgun, putting the muzzle in her mouth and pulling the trigger.

“You saw all this gunk come out his head. That’s what smashed the window, right beside me.”

Nathan, surprised, asked, “Gunk from his head smashed the window?”

“No. I guess the bullet came right through.”

Dudek nodded. “I guess the same thing. What happened then?”

“I was screaming my head off! Got down and stayed down till the Police came. Do you think I’m in shock?”

“I’m no medic. A team of councilors are arriving shortly, if they’re not here already.”

Dudek looked at Nathan, widened his eyes slightly, inviting him to ask a question. Nathan said, “Did you hear anything else?”

“Two more shots, seconds later. That’s all.”

Dudek tapped his pen, thinking. “The very last thing you saw, can you picture it?”

“He was falling back.”

“The gun?”

“He dropped it. It fell onto the ground.”

The next witness was Sally Wyatt, who had been walking away from a crunch meeting with her senior lecturer. It hadn’t gone well, and she was out. So, she hadn’t been paying attention to anything as she hurried towards her car.

She had noticed the guy in the leather coat, walking ahead of her, however. Remembered saying to herself ‘Who does he think he is, Van Helsing?’

“Van Helsing?”

“Hugh Jackman, in that film. How many full length leather coats do you see?”

“You were following him?”

“Maybe thirty yards back, up the side of the Union. He was walking fast because I was nearly running, but not catching him.”

“So, he disappeared, around the front of the building?”

“Yeah. And a few seconds later, bang! I know it’s crazy, but I just kept going.”

“What did you see?”

“He’s running, shouting. He racks the gun, just like in the films, and shoots at the fucking cars!”

“You see who he was shooting at?”

“I figured they must be legging it. I did.”

“What then?”

“He racked the gun again, and I got myself back around the corner. Started running.”

“Did you see anything come out of the side of the gun?”

“The spent shells? Yeah!”

“What color?”

“Blue, I think.”

“Did you hear anything else?”

Light dawned in her eyes and she said, “A girl, screaming!”

“Back to the man. Did you hear what he was shouting?”

“No, but he seemed pretty angry. Or scared.”

The detectives interviewed two other students, but learned little more.

When they were left alone, Dudek said, "Maybe he just didn't like cars."

"If he hit somebody there would be evidence, boss, artillery like that."

"If there's something there, Barry B will find it."

The door opened and Dave Bowen, one of the uniforms, stepped in, his expression catching Dudek's attention.

"Dave?"

"We've found somebody claims she saw the person being shot at."

"Well, get her in here. Name?"

"Wendy Lawrence. A mature student."

When he left, Nathan blew out a sigh of relief. "Finally. A break."

Dudek looked at Nathan, dead pan. "You didn't listen. Dave said, *claims* she saw, giving it some, like he thinks there's something off about it. About her."

Lawrence was tall and very thin, with a lot of hair that had once been red, thick and frizzed and almost a foot wider than her head. She was wearing a striped jumper, red on blue, over a short black dress. When she moved, her bangles clattered. She shook, even her hair, so there was fairly constant noise.

She moved quickly to the chair and sat down, staring hard at Dudek.

"Ms. Wendy Lawrence?"

She didn't reply, so he had to ask, "Are you Wendy Lawrence?"

"I told the other officer."

Dudek managed a stiff smile. "We just have to confirm your details, then we can get to what you witnessed."

Wendy Lawrence, forty-nine, lived in the town of Markinch, and was attending a course on person-centered counselling. When they got through that, Dudek asked,

"Can you tell me, in your own words, what you witnessed this evening?"

Her voice shook, like the rest of her. "I was already late, but didn't want to cross the square in front of the Union. It disturbs me."

"It disturbs you?"

She stared, her hair trembling and her left nostril rimmed with blood.

"It's disturbing." She narrowed her eyes. "You understand. Or you should." Then, a nod at Nathan. "He doesn't."

Dudek glanced at Nathan who widened his eyes slightly but made no comment.

"What route did you take?"

"I come by train, but take the long way around. To avoid the disturbing effects of the students' Union."

"Ah. The disturbing effects of the students' Union."

"I come by West Port and cross through all the parked cars."

She leaned in to point at a map of the campus, already on the table.

"I was here, when it started."

"About a hundred yards away."

"That's right. I saw him, the big man, coming around the corner of the building and knew something was about to happen. I'm sensitive to things."

"What next?"

"He started shooting."

“Did you see who at?”

“The first shot, no. But, then, I was *looking*, I knew somebody was there and I knew if I looked hard enough...”

She swallowed noisily. “He didn’t want to be seen. But, I saw.”

Lawrence hit the sides of her head with her palms, not soft like someone trying to remember, but hard. Hard enough so that Nathan jumped, looking uneasily at Dudek. The hair dampened the noise to a dull thud.

“You ok, Wendy?”

“It hurt to see him, and it hurts to remember.”

“Someone being shot...”

“That’s not what I mean.”

A line of blood started at Wendy Lawrence’s nose. Dudek handed her a tissue, asking could she go on.

“Can I have a drink of water?”

After gulping down most of a bottle of Strathmore Springs, Wendy nodded, telling Dudek to continue.

“What did he look like? The man being shot at.”

She screwed her face up. “It’s hard to bring the image to mind.”

Again, she hit her head with her palms and this time Nathan surprised Dudek, stepping around the table to take her arms. She looked up at him.

“Stop that, okay?”

“What?”

“The hitting. Stop hitting yourself.”

She didn’t take her eyes off his face, just nodded.

Dudek looked across at Nathan, dropped back to Lawrence. “Can you try? I can help you.”

She grimaced, but nodded.

“Was he tall?”

She glanced behind her. "Not like him. Normal height."

"Like me?"

"Shorter."

Dudek gave her another tissue and she dropped the bloody one into the waste paper basket.

"Was he young?"

A shake of the head. "Older than you."

"Sixty?"

"Maybe"

"If we give it a range. Fifty to sixty?"

"I think that would be right."

"Caucasian?"

"Yes."

"You're doing good, Wendy. Hair?"

"I can't say."

Her face looked pained, and she suddenly looked much older.

"Are you alright to keep going?"

She nodded. "Let's get this over with."

"Build?"

"Skinny. But he was wearing...bulky clothes."

"What kind?"

"A suit. Not smart like yours. Old-fashioned. Light-ish color. Far too large for him."

"How could you tell that?"

"It was obvious. He was a slight man in a fat man's suit."

"Ok. You're doing great."

The woman was shaking even harder now, and she raised her hands to the side of her head before looking up at Nathan and dropping them.

"The second shot, I saw him being hit. He was spun right around, but didn't fall."

The detectives looked at each other, then Dudek turned back to Lawrence, not smiling.

"Will you give us just a moment? I need to check something with my colleague." He came to his feet as he spoke.

"Just relax for a moment, Ms. Lawrence."

Outside the room Dudek said, "She's crazy."

"You don't think there could be anything in what she says?"

"You know as well as I do that if someone was shot with that gun..." He left the sentence unfinished. If somebody had been shot, the evidence would be splattered across the cars.

Nathan said, "We didn't ask her to pinpoint the exact position of the victim."

Dudek nodded, thinking about it. "No, we didn't. Maybe the positions were closer than we first thought. Maybe some of the blood..."

The two men looked at each other, the same thought now in both of their heads.

Nathan said, "Maybe that could account for how everything looks wrong. We're looking at the mess left by two people."

Dudek nodded, but still looked unsure. "Let's hope Barry can make some sense of it."

"Do we think the description of the victim might be real? At least it's a description."

"Of what though? Let's see where she puts them."

Nathan checked his watch, hesitant as he asked was it ok to take a minute, phone home? So Sue would know how late he might be. He held up his cell phone.

“She tried to call me twice already.”

Dudek had to look away. Couldn’t even glance at Nathan as he said, sure, be quick. He watched him as he walked out of the building, though and his hand went to his own phone, knowing it was way too late to do anything about that now. About two years too late.

Wendy took a long time over the plan, finally placing her finger close to where the man in black was still lying. “Here’s where he shot his gun.” Her finger moved to edge of the parking lot, “And this is where the other man was.”

Later, after Lawrence left, Dudek shook his head.

“Couldn’t happen. Our shooter hit somebody there, it would be obvious.”

Nathan tapped a finger on the plan. “But where she put the gunman. Right on the money.”

September 1976

Neil Kerr had hurried back to his room in Rankine Hall of Residence and, first day of term, was already studying. He had done well in his first year, third best overall, and wasn’t about to let that slip. His score in Anatomy had been less than dramatic and that little shit Bob Marjoram had beaten him by a mile.

Moving suddenly, he hopped noisily off the bed and dropped to the floor, popping fifty quick press ups. He stood and took a few deep breaths, thinking David might be back soon and not wanting to be caught working out. Then, he

flopped back onto the bed, dragged his shoulder length hair into some sort of order, and re-opened the book.

David's father, who taught math at their old school, had told him the best way to make something stick was to go at it immediately after the lesson. Telling him this whilst handing a tea tray into David's room.

David, as usual, grabbed the tray then all but shooed his father out, slumping back before the television, Starsky and Hutch running up a stairwell.

"Why do you do that, with your old man?"

"Do what?"

"He comes up here with toast and everything and you chase him away."

"You want to hang out with my dad?"

"I'm just saying he's ok for an old guy. Into his sounds and everything."

"Yeah, if you like..." He pointed at the screen. "David Soul. Seriously."

"He's into The Who."

"Come on, he has singles by The Carpenters!"

Neil shook his head. Until he hit fourteen, David had no discernible interest in music. Had gone through a series of obsessions, lasting a year at most; tennis, Subbuteo, even the Air Training Corps. During his ATC year, he hammered cleats in the heels of his shoes, and took to marching rather than walking.

By fifteen, he was a muso. A hippy. Neil could annoy him these days, just by mentioning the Corps.

In those few years, though, David had built up a surprisingly large collection of albums, and, this time, there was no sign of the obsession disappearing. Even more surprising, given that this was David, he had developed a truly impressive knowledge of modern music.

That night in David's room, Neil, not wanting to get into a musical argument he wouldn't win, said simply. "He's ok for a teacher. That's all I mean."

David just looked at his friend, who had to say, "Don't start in about what it's like having your dad teaching at your own school."

Neil had taken the math teacher's advice and, every chance he could, put in some study on the day's work before David got back to the halls and sought him out. He even studied steadily across the summer break, getting to grips with cardio and renal.

Thinking about home, Neil wondered again about his sister Rachel and David. Something had happened between them, but neither was admitting to what. Neil was sure they hadn't actually *done* it, certain that David hadn't ever done it, but something had occurred. Maybe just a kiss, but for his sixteen-year-old sister and David, with his incapacitating shyness around girls, that was still serious.

He shook that away and tried to refocus on the function of the liver. David needed a girlfriend, and surely, this year, it would finally happen. David, though shorter than Neil, was six feet even. He had naturally wavy hair, dark blonde, that came over his shoulders and everybody said he was a good looking boy. Something like Bowie before Ziggy, when he still looked something like a hippy.

Neil himself wasn't just tall, he was *big*, not a fashionable look. He no longer had to look up when he spoke to his enormous Father. A police chief-super, in his uniform the man looked like he could blot out the sun.

Neil was struggling to concentrate. Out in the hall, a girl kept laughing in that loud way that demanded attention and somebody was playing Velvet Underground at volume. Neil sniffed, thinking somebody had lit a joint. All of which

seemed strange. Last term, the Master of Rankine Hall, Brainiac 5, would have been all over that, roaming the corridors, keen to stamp his weird authority on the new intake.

His attention was taken by a sudden spray of rain, rattling against the window, and he stood to look outside.

The summer had been nothing short of amazing. Hot day after hot day, full weeks of unbroken sunshine even in Neil's Northern hometown of Aberdeen. David's dad had said the only other year that came close was 1975, the year before. Two exceptionally long hot summers, one after the other, in Scotland, how about that?

Now Neil, watching rain spatter the leaded window, felt a chill draught on his bare arms. From where he stood, he could see a huge stretch of the river Tay over the roofs of sizable old houses. The river, over a mile wide and widening fast as it emptied into the North Sea, was gray and roiling today. It was called the Silvery Tay, and he had seen it many times shining like burnished metal, almost blindingly bright in the sun. However it looked that was where his eye was drawn and held, whenever he stood here.

David was worse, tending to pause here and stand for many, many minutes, silently staring out of this window. He'd do that whether he was stoned or not.

Sometimes the great river could be as flat as glass, or as blue as the sky, or green and storm tossed. Neil had seen it home to slow moving ice-floes or brightly colored yachts. It might be gray and flat under rain or wild and foamy in a gale.

The grounds of Rankine Hall sloped down to a stone wall, ten feet tall, behind which was Perth Road, one of the main arteries into Dundee center.

Neil watched now as cars slid by, their sound muted, then a motorbike blatted past and a group of crows launched

noisily into the air from the huge monkey puzzle tree, only twenty yards from the house.

Rankine Hall was a poor fit for a student residence. It was, Neil believed, hundreds of years old, built by a fat factory owner called Rowland Rankine, whose likeness still glared out from his portrait above the stairs. Whenever David caught sight of the painting, he would say the same thing, "Look at that miserable old bastard."

Three flights tall, with high, steeply peaked roofs, most of the hall's windows were high and narrow, with stained glass top panels. Large rooms had been partitioned into chilly bedrooms, much taller than they were wide, but the most striking internal feature was the staircase, six feet wide with a banister of gleaming walnut.

Now the grand hallway was lined by plastic domed payphone kiosks and Rowland Rankine's portrait was protected from felt pens by Perspex.

This September, every tree in the expansive grounds was crammed with rackety crows, forever launching into the air, like a feathery explosion.

2016

It was nearly midnight when the detectives left the Union. The journalists had only departed after Dudek agreed to give a short statement, speaking to a local television camera. Brief as it was, he had the feeling that, Mackie, the boss, would take it badly.

The body was gone, but the numbered markers and tent remained, behind Police tape. Two uniforms, bulky in their Hi-Viz, stood at opposite corners of the cordon, looking chilled in the wind.

As Dudek watched, two young men, probably students, definitely drunk, approached and were waved on. They went, but one mimed pulling out a shotgun and shooting the other, who staggered back in slow-mo at every shot.

The detectives walked through the near empty parking lot to their unmarked Ford Focus. Dudek opened the door but stopped when he saw the way Nathan was standing, turned to see what he was looking at. A black SUV, alone in the far corner. Dudek looked back at his Constable, shrugged and closed the door.

They reached the car and walked around. A late model VW, black, tinted windows. Dudek leaned close, shading his eyes. "What do you think?"

"Well. It might be his. Or it might be somebody else's."

Dudek gave him a flat look, pulled on a latex glove and tried the door. It opened with a clunk and the interior light came on. He opened it all the way. Leather interior, on the passenger seat, binoculars, food wrappers and a can of coke.

"What does this remind you of?"

Dudek leaned in, flicking open an unmarked cardboard box open to show blue magnum shells.

While Nathan called it in, Dudek walked around and opened the glove box, coming out with an insurance document.

"Neil Kerr. Arthurstone Terrace. Here's something else, a bill from...Glen Property. His landlord maybe?"

Nathan broke the connection on his cell phone. "Yeah, Neil Kerr is the owner."

Dudek nodded absent mindedly, looking at the box of oversize shells. "I think we've got the name of our shooter."

September 1976

David returned from his first English lecture, skimmed his folder into the corner and wandered upstairs to Neil's room.

It was obvious that his friend has been studying, as usual, and as usual had slid the textbook under the bed when David knocked. The Who were on the turntable, Daltry shouting about his mother's squeeze box, but David avoided comment, restricting himself to a cool look at the album cover.

He glanced out of the window, but the river was hardly visible behind a rising mist, so he threw himself on the only chair and asked had Neil scored yet.

Neil shook his head, "The skinny guy that used to sell his own weed has dropped out."

Then he leaned forward to peer at his friend. Finally, he nodded. "You're looking unusually philosophical today, my good man."

David raised his eyebrows. "No, I'm not, actually. I'm looking..." he waved his hand airily as though reaching for the word. "...really rather psychological."

Neil straightened, surprised. "You're kidding me. You signed up for psychology?"

"Naturally."

Neil stared at him for several seconds. "This is because you saw some babe in the psychology queue, isn't it?"

"Not at all. What would you use philosophy for anyway? It's just playing at being a smartass."

"Last year. You saw that Ingrid girl, Dutch or something, signing for Political Science. Joined up and never spoke to her once."

"She left after the first term. Went back to...Dutchland or wherever Dutch people come from."

“Well, just don’t do Geography.”

“I got an A in my geography O level. I’ve just chosen to forget it all to concentrate on psychology.”

Neil shook his head and David had to ask himself, why did I choose psychology?

Neil seemed to be in an odd mood, surprisingly pissed off at David for joining Psychology, like it was anything to do with him. Over the summer, it had felt as though Neil was never far from being irritated with him. Still, it hadn’t stopped him from spending most of his time at David’s house, even if they were just watching *The Six Million Dollar Man*.

David seldom visited Neil’s house, despite the attraction of his sister, Rachel, who could make his insides turn to liquid with a glance. But, despite the kiss last summer, the one *she* had started by the way, both boys were much more comfortable at David’s. The Kerr house was always dominated by the heavy presence of his father, whether he was there or not.

When he was there, it seemed the thing to do to talk in whispers and stay out of his way. His tread was heavy and his breathing always sounding loud, like it was hard getting his lungs to inflate against the weight of his chest.

One day in August, Neil had said his dad was an alcoholic, throwing it out there like it was nothing, not fooling anybody. David replied that he’d never seen him drunk. It’s not like that, said Neil. He’s just constantly half in the bag.

Then he said, he’s a scary old bastard.

David asked, did he ever get, you know, violent. Neil’s response took a second or two and when it came it was a cantilevered “No-o.” Like it was two words. David didn’t push.

Now, with Rod Stewart replacing The Who on the turntable, David pushed off.

Back in his room, he chose Soft Machine 1 from his line of albums, not their best but still a work of significance, and, with it tucked under his arm, walked to the refectory. He got talking to a large pink student about the Softs, and ended up playing poker with him and two law students. They played until almost ten, smoking and drinking Nescafe, by which time David had won more than seven pounds and the atmosphere was getting tense. The law students had brought a couple of records from their rooms, *Year of the Cat* and Chicago, for God's sake, which they swapped about on the turntable. David eventually took Chicago off mid 'If You Leave Me Now'. That didn't help the atmosphere one bit.

Walking back to his room, the main noise was the wind, which was really getting up, and the background croak of crows. He could hear students speaking in their rooms, a bit of music in there too, but nobody playing anything at volume.

The deeply strange house master, Dr Bernard, invariably known as Brainiac 5, had already had his dampening effect, he guessed.

Although, now that he was thinking about the Brainiac, he realized that he had barely seen him creeping his way around the building. Hadn't noticed him gardening in the grounds, one of the man's obsessions. Last year, if he wasn't lecturing, he seemed to be out there pretty much every day, staring at students as they came and went in that intense, unsettling way he had.

Letting himself in, David crossed to the window and stared into the blustery darkness. The grounds were dark, Perth Road a line of orange streetlamps and the little towns on the far side of the river a scattering of lights, crawling up in the hill. Sometimes those lights would be perfectly reflected

in the river, but today the whole scene was in violent movement, trees being whipped around.

David pulled the ratty curtains closed and rubbed his arms. He sat, then hopped back up to lock his door. Last year, in this same wing, he seldom locked up. He harbored no real hope, but would still fantasize about girls from nearby rooms, opening his door in the early hours, smiling shyly as they came in.

This year, he was embarrassed to admit, he felt scared. He pulled off his jeans and brushed his teeth noisily at the wash basin. Then he turned on the bedside lamp and picked up the Dickens, but couldn't read. Instead, he put Paul Simon on the turntable, down low.

With 'Kodachrome' bumping nicely along in the background, David switched the lamp off, curled into a ball, and listened while the wind dropped, and the album came to its end. The building had quietened, but the crows croaked on. What were they doing out there? They should be curled up in their little crow beds.

Time passed, the wind dropped and even the crows gave it up. Now it was properly quiet, the main sound his own breathing, and still he was scared. So scared, that he slipped his hand out and turned his bedside light on. For a while he lay like that, listening, and then the thought occurred that his window wasn't locked. He frowned, thinking why would that matter? It was fully fifteen feet off the ground and, last year, he had sometimes slept with it open.

It made no sense, but the fact of the unlocked window grated at him. He swung his legs to the floor but did not stand. He wanted to lock the window, but didn't like the idea of his shadow being visible against the curtain.

Another thought then, that the bedside lamp made his room stand out like a beacon to anyone looking from outside.