If It Bleeds

Duncan Campbell

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Extract

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Chapter One

LAURIE RECOGNISED THE voice at once, although the only two words he had ever heard him utter were 'not' and 'guilty'.

Now that same, silky, north London baritone was on the other end of the telephone.

'Hello,' it said. 'My name is . . . Charles Hook.'

That would be, as the usher in court one of the Old Bailey had announced him all those years ago, Charles Edward Kitchener Hook. Charged with murder on that occasion but, over the years, with everything from demanding money with menaces to conspiracy to import cocaine. Charlie Hook or, as he was invariably described in the press, the Last of the London Godfathers.

'Am I speaking to Laurence Lane . . . crime correspondent?'

No one, apart from his poor, late father and a few half-remembered schoolteachers, ever called him Laurence.

'Yes, this is Laurence . . . er . . . Laurie Lane,' he said. 'Can I help you?'

'I wonder if we might have a – little chat?'

'Er . . . a little chat?'

A whoosh of aftershave and a shadow across the screen of his computer told Laurie that his news editor, Stark, was close by. What did they put in that stuff? Monkey glands, was it? God, it was strong. He felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to see Stark, all white shirt and shiny smile, gesturing at him, pointing towards his little glass-fronted office. Laurie gestured back, pointing at the telephone, in case Stark thought that he was only holding the

receiver to his ear as an ergonomics exercise for his left forearm. Stark flashed his spray-on smile at him once more and was gone. There was the voice again.

'Yes, I wanted to put a little – proposition to you.'

'A proposition?' Laurie heard himself saying.

'That's right,' said the voice. 'Something to our mutual advantage. But I think it would be best if we were to make a meet.'

Couldn't he have just said 'best if we were to meet'? You had 'a meet' if you were planning a robbery or to dispose of a body.

'Er . . . OK. Where do you want to . . . er . . . meet?'

Laurie could remember the sniggers in court when the police surveillance team had read out their records of a week spent following Charlie Hook across London: Simpson's for breakfast, Cafe Royal for lunch, Sheekeys for dinner, Crockfords for late-night chemin de fer. What stamina, Laurie and his fellow reporters on the press benches had thought. That trial must have been twenty-five years ago now and Hook had not been a young man even then. After all, he'd been a driver for the Krays back in the sixties. What would he be now? Pushing eighty?

'Do you know Clissold Park, Laurence?'

Clissold Park. Did he really mean that flat, unprepossessing, north London park with its tatty aviary and cramped deer park? Of course Laurie knew Clissold Park. He had taken his daughter, Violet, there when she was a toddler, a perfect place for a surreptitious fag and a read of the papers while he pretended to be performing his fatherly duties.

'There's a little cafeteria there, Laurence,' said the voice. 'They make a nice cup of tea. I'll see you there in – what's the time now? – I'll see you at two o'clock. You know what I look like, don't you, Laurence?'

Oh, yes. The aquiline nose, the suspiciously black hair, the hooded eyes and those big, trigger-happy hands. I think I will recognise you.

Chapter Two

STARK WAS NOT impressed when Laurie told him that he had to nip out to see someone about a possible story.

'We do need to talk,' said Stark. And there was something almost as ominous in Stark's tone as in Charlie Hook's. Why did everyone need to talk to him? 'We need to talk.' That was what Caz had said to him before she skipped off for her gig yesterday. Why did people do that? 'We need to talk.'

He did not want to tell Stark that he was meeting Charlie Hook. Stark would get over-excited at the fact that his crime correspondent had been summoned to the court of Old Man Hook, the notoriously tight-lipped Old Man Hook, whom the police had been circling for so many years. Hook did not talk much. One of the old school gangsters, enigmatic, disdainfully referring to his lawyers all questions fired at him by reporters as he left the Old Bailey, looking at the agency photographers as though they were something to be scraped off his black brogues before he climbed into the cream Mercedes pulling up outside to take him away from the little minor inconvenience of a court appearance on a murder charge. Nothing to say.

'I shouldn't be long,' said Laurie. He turned his back on Stark and almost bumped into Eva-Marie, the newly appointed young picture editor. She touched his arm.

'Oh, hi, Laurie, I was looking for you,' she said. Did she give everyone that full-on smile? Of course she did. She was twenty years younger than him. Bound to have a boyfriend. Or a girlfriend.

Maybe she was married. Which reminded him. He had forgotten to get the strings for Caz's guitar when he was in Denmark Street. Shit. She always said that he didn't listen to what she was saying. Could he zip into Soho en route to see Old Man Hook? Not enough time. Couldn't keep Hook waiting. He would tell Caz they were out of stock. But what if she rang the shop?

'Why were you looking for me?' he asked Eva-Marie. She was half-something, wasn't she? Was it half-Portuguese or half-Brazilian? That long, very black hair.

'Oh, I'm always looking for you, Laurie . . . Are you doing the story about the missing lecturer in Brighton?'

I am now, thought Laurie. She touched his arm again. He would not let his eyes drift downwards towards the hint of scarlet bra beneath her pink denim shirt. 'Yeah, but I have to see someone now.' Busy man. Important assignment. 'I'll pop up as soon as I get back.'

'Don't keep me hanging on.' She smiled. Long eyelashes. Were they real? Caz had left one of hers in the bath yesterday. He had made a joke about it which she had thought was a put-down.

'Don't worry, I won't.'

He skipped down the stairs and out into the street. Taxi. The driver wanted to tell him about his recent vasectomy and his views on cyclists. Blank receipt.

It was a weekday. Laurie had only ever been to Clissold Park on a weekend. It was different today. Fewer diffident, frisbee-playing lefties from Stoke Newington, fewer pick-up games of football between portly Turks in replica Galatasaray football shirts, fewer picnic birthday parties with crying toddlers and frazzled late parents drinking warm white wine. Laurie had not been there for probably a dozen years. He would take Violet round the deer park and try to explain why the birds were contained in a big cage. What are they doing, Daddy? Life, he had wanted to say, but she wouldn't have got the joke. Playing, darling, he said. Now she was doing her A levels. Today there were just a couple of young mothers in hijabs;

a bench-load of winos, offering broken-toothed smiles; a lonely-looking eastern European woman, staring onto Green Lanes. The sound of a siren. Wah-wah! Wah-wah! Police? Ambulance? Fire engine? As the sound of that siren faded, it was replaced by another, travelling in the opposite direction. The whole city seemed in a constant state of self-induced near-panic these days.

Old Man Hook was on time. He was easy to spot, sitting outside on a white plastic seat beneath a cheap parasol. The bearing was military, although Laurie knew that Hook's time in uniform had consisted of a couple of months in the glasshouse before a dishonourable discharge from the Coldstream Guards for smacking a couple of military policemen during a brief period of national service; Hook had been just too young to fight in the Second World War and clearly had not fancied making any significant sacrifice over Korea. Although it was summer and warm, Hook looked as though he was dressed for a boardroom meeting: pinstriped suit, pale blue shirt, regimental-style tie, neatly polished shoes, the effect only slightly spoiled by one lace being undone.

'Hi, I'm Laurie Lane.'

Hook nodded at him, as though he had just said, 'Good morning, I am the chief steward, I hope to make your voyage as pleasant as possible.' He cast his eyes towards the café, which was up a small flight of steps, with an unspoken command.

'Tea?' asked Laurie. 'Coffee?'

'Tea,' said Hook. 'Two sugars.'

Laurie negotiated his way down the steps with a cup in each hand. Hook looked at Laurie's cappuccino.

'Did you know that Charles the Second once banned coffee drinking? Didn't succeed, did he?'

'Clearly not,' said Laurie. You haven't brought me here to pass on titbits of social history, have you?

Hook looked around to see who was within earshot. He leant towards Laurie.

'OK,' he said. 'Down to business. I have heard that a little toerag

from one of the papers is planning to write a book about me. You know the kind of thing: the Last of the Godfathers. Captain Hook. That kind of crap.'

'Which paper?'

'I dunno which one, do I? . . . Could have been the *Sketch*.'

The *Sketch*?

'Er . . . the *Sketch* hasn't been coming out for years, Mr Hook. It ceased publication in the seventies.'

'I didn't mean the fucking *Sketch*. Anyway, one of those papers. It'll be a load of lies, fed to them by the Old Bill. So here's my idea. I do my own one. Right? Get it out first. It's all up here.' He tapped his majestic forehead. 'I know you need photos. I've got them. Me with Ronnie and Reggie. Me with that Maserati I drove them around in. Me and Billy Hill in Tangier. Me and Taters Chatham outside Bow Street magistrate's court. You must have been to Bow Street a few times, Larry?'

'Over the years, yes. It's not a magistrate's court any more, you know, it's been sold and turned into a boutique hotel.'

Hook stared at him. 'A fucking boutique!'

'No, a hotel.'

'I thought you said a boutique.' Hook's eyes – a pale, watery blue – fixed on him, challengingly.

'It's a . . . turn of phrase . . . just means a little, fancy hotel.' Hook's eyes left him and carried out a swift surveillance sweep. A couple, the man in a bomber jacket and jeans, the woman in a grey trouser suit and white blouse, sat down at a table behind them and appeared to be engrossed together in a newspaper sudoku puzzle.

'Anyway, Larry, here's where you come in.'

Do I correct him? wondered Laurie. Probably better not.

'Yes?'

'I need someone to write it. I didn't finish school. Not like my boys. You know my boys?' Hook pulled a wallet from his jacket pocket and opened it on the table. There were the boys in a snapshot. Crispin and Ashley. Public-school-educated slicksters.

Handsome young men. Now very much part of the family firm. Laurie had come across Crispin a couple of times. Had covered his trial on a cocaine conspiracy, of which he had been acquitted. Had even been introduced to him once in Xanadu, the club he ran in Islington, part of the Hook empire. Ashley had not been so lucky and had done time. There was Mrs Hook, too. Polly. Pale face, dark ringlets, a black-and-white snap from years ago. And two young girls dressed as cheerleaders, smiling at the camera. Granddaughters, presumably. Hook closed his wallet. 'So – what do you think?'

Oh, God, thought Laurie. I could do with the money. Clear the mortgage. Pay off the last of his father's debts. Take Caz and Violet for that holiday in Turkey he had always promised them. But what is Hook going to be like to work with? Will he take offence if I say no?

'What . . . er . . . what would you be saying in the book? Would it be like a memoir or a . . .' He wanted to say the word 'confessional' but he knew that might ring the wrong bells with Hook. 'I mean, would you go into some of the things you have been accused of? Like Barney Quick's murder?'

The eyes swung round again.

'Barney Quick was a little rat. He deserved everything he got.'

And he certainly got a lot. Grabbed outside the gym where he used to train on his way to becoming British and Commonwealth welterweight champion. Shoved into the boot of a car. Hands severed with a meat cleaver while he was still alive. Petrol poured over him and set on fire in the basement of a deserted house in Catford. Died a lingering death, lingering just long enough to scream out the name of Charlie Hook to a horrified passer-by who heard his dying cries. Laurie could still picture Quick's sister outside the Old Bailey, carrying a placard with the words 'Justice for Barney' on it and being moved on by the police, bellowing in outrage at the not guilty verdict.

'Sure,' said Laurie, as though it was accepted that Quick had only got his just deserts. 'But I think people would be interested in your . . . er . . . relationship with him.'

'My brother Ernie, God rest his soul, made Quick everything he was. He trained him, he managed him, he paid for his lodgings, he even taught him how to use a knife and fork properly. And what thanks did he get? Soon as Barney's making it in the big time, getting the big pay nights, he fucks off, doesn't he, with that . . . what's his fucking name? That fucking impresario, or so he likes to think himself. And then Quick wants to clean the slate and talk to the Old Bill. Fucking grass. No, we don't need to waste too much time on Quick. Slag.'

Laurie paused. Was it his imagination or had the couple doing the sudoku puzzle moved one table closer to them? One of them appeared to be on the phone.

'The thing is, if a publisher's going to buy your . . . er . . . autobiography, I think they'll want all that sort of thing covered.'

'Oh, I'll cover it all right. I'll cover it. The point is, Larry, everyone's done it, haven't they? Look at all the books about the twins. And Frank Fraser's done his book. And Freddie Foreman. And Bobby's just done his book, what was it called? *Born to Blag*! Fucking hell. The public love it, don't they? And there's not many of us left. Most of the chaps have gone now. Billy Hill and Taters and Jack Spot and Ron and Reg and Joey Pyle. They're all going, aren't they? There's good money in this.'

You don't need the money, Laurie wanted to say.

'So . . . what you're suggesting is . . .'

'You're a writer, aren't you? That's your job. I need someone just to put it all in words. My education . . . you know, Borstal, didn't pay that much attention to writing and stuff. That's why I wanted my children to have what I didn't.'

'Couldn't one of them help you with it?'

'Oh, no, they don't like the idea, do they? They say keep schtum, Dad. But if I don't do it, this toerag will and then it'll be too late, won't it? I can tell a few stories, Larry. Me and the twins. We didn't have bathrooms in those days, Laurie, and me and the twins used to go down the Cheshire Street baths together. You never had to queue

if you were with the twins. One time there was a fucking grass down there and we had just come in from being out in the clubs all night. I had a cigar cutter with me – you know what a cigar cutter is, do you, Laurie? And—' A low-flying pigeon flopped down on the next table and distracted Hook's attention.

'Where was I?'

'With the Krays.'

'Yeah . . . Good days. I was with Jack the Hat the night before he was killed. I bet you didn't know that. Nice bloke but a chancer. Went to the twins' club with a bayonet in his hand and wearing a pair of those – what do you call them? Bahamas shorts?'

'Bermuda shorts.'

'That's what I fucking said. He arrives at their club in his hat and Bermuda shorts. No respect. I could tell you about that. He put up quite a fight, did Jack, when they killed him. Ronnie got a nasty cut when he stabbed him, you know. Got a great bandage on his hand afterwards. "What you done to your hand, Ron?" people would ask. "Gardenin'," Ronnie would say. "Gardenin'." ' Hook cackled and scanned the horizon.

'And judges I've been in front of. I was up in front of Lord Goddard once, Larry. Hanging Judge Goddard. Heard of him? Course you bloody have. Did you know that, when he sentenced someone to death, he ejaculated in his trousers? His clerk had to take a spare pair of trousers to court on days when he was sentencing. Ejaculated. How do you like that? Ejaculated!' Hook almost spat out the word and Laurie noticed a young mother hurrying her toddler past on the riverside path, beneath the chestnut trees, casting an anxious glance over her shoulder. Was that a soup stain on Hook's regimental tie? Or gravy? Blood, perhaps.

'I can tell you about all the briefs I had, too. I had the best. Georgie Carman. He defended me a couple of times. You should have heard him summing up for the jury. He was so good I almost believed him myself!' Hook cackled and spilled his tea. He leant

towards Laurie. His breath was bad. 'Great days, Larry. And it's all changing now. All the families are out of it now. Except for us. They done the Krays, they done the Richardsons, they done the Arifs and the Adams. Now it's all Russians and Turks and the Albanians and all those other countries that didn't even fucking exist before. The Lithuanians and the . . . I don't know what's . . . There's no code any more, Larry. No respect. It's a fucking jungle out there now.'

A pigeon waddled beneath their table, pecking at flakes of a discarded currant bun on the ground. Hook lashed out with his foot and the pigeon scampered off. Out of the corner of his eye, Laurie could see two young men in lightweight suits striding purposefully up the steps of the café and between the pillars of what had presumably once been the heart of an estate, a century or two ago. No sirens or frisbees or hijabs in those days.

'They used to graze sheep here a hundred years ago,' said Hook, as if reading his thoughts. 'My grandfather could remember when there was sheep here.'

'Really? I used to come here ages ago with my daughter, when she was small.'

'How old is she now?'

'Seventeen.'

'Lovely age,' said Hook, softening for a moment, 'lovely age.' He frowned and shot Laurie a glance. 'I mean – lovely age to be. Although, when I was seventeen, I was in Borstal, Larry. I didn't have the chances your girl has. Anyway, there'll be a drink in this for you. I've had a publisher fellow on to me already. And I can tell you a thing or two, I can promise. No harm talking about some of the things I got up to with the twins because they're long gone now. They wouldn't mind. I can give the name of the one they never caught on the Great Train Robbery. And I know where Frank Mitchell's buried. You know him? The Mad Axeman.' Hook chuckled. 'And what really happened to Freddie Mills. OK? And maybe people would like to know about some of the other things I've done that they don't know about.'

'Famous . . . er . . . heists?' Maybe Hook was the one who got away in the Baker Street bank job?

'Are you fucking mad?' said Hook. 'No – my charity work.'

Oh, yes, thought Laurie, people would be really fascinated by that. Helping the blind kiddies, was it? He felt an ingratiating smile cross his face. Maybe you can put us in touch with all the old women you helped to cross the road.

'What's funny?' said Hook, suspicious again.

'Nothing . . . nothing. Would you . . . er . . . talk about the police at all? I'm sure your views on the police would be of interest.'

For years it had been suggested that the Hook family had a well-placed police source at Scotland Yard, one of the Met's most experienced officers, who had only recently retired having survived two corruption inquiries at different stages of his long career.

'You mean would I fucking spill the beans on Ginger Mulgrew?'

'Well . . .'

Hook threw back his head and laughed. 'Look, I don't know exactly what I'm going to tell you yet, Larry, but . . .' He leant close to Laurie again. What was preferable – Hook's halitosis or Stark's aftershave?

The two young men in lightweight suits had emerged from the café and were striding down the steps towards Laurie and Hook. They had the cocky look of lawyers in a slick American television series. The couple playing sudoku exchanged glances and carried on their game with a greater intensity.

'Hello, Dad,' said the two young men in unison as they arrived at the table. 'Are you going to introduce us to your new friend?'

Chapter Three

'I THOUGHT WE NEEDED to talk.'

First Hook. Now Stark. Do I tell Stark that Hook has just asked me to be his Boswell? Probably not.

'So you said.'

The smell of the aftershave was overpowering. When Gavin Stark had been appointed news editor a few months ago, Laurie had seen him unloading his personal items into his desk: a fat desk diary that looked like one of those plush, padded menus you were handed by waistcoated waiters in suburban steakhouses; that bottle of Homme Sauvage aftershave, which he slapped on so recklessly after he had been to the gym at lunchtime; photos of his wife and his two children, all beaming wholesomely at the camera. Laurie was sure that Stark had a 'baby on board' sign in the back of his . . . what would it be? BMW, surely.

Stark was giving him his sleeves-rolled-up, can-do, spray-on smile now. Laurie wanted to smack him in the face but he knew that would just hurt his fingers because he had never smacked anyone in the face before and he was aware that it was not as easy as it looked in films.

'What's happened on the missing lecturer story?'

'She's still missing.' Laurie had been working on this story for a week now. Attractive young anthropology lecturer at Sussex University had gone missing. Her boyfriend, a politics lecturer with floppy hair, had made an appeal on television asking her to let everyone know she was all right. Laurie's only contact in Sussex

police, a world-weary detective sergeant, had assured him that the boyfriend had done it and would soon crack.

'Has her boyfriend bumped her off?'

'That's what the cops think.'

'And you – what do you think?'

Can't we just get on with whatever you want to see me about? thought Laurie.

'Probably he did. Most murders are committed by people who know their victims.'

'Interesting,' said Stark. Meaning either 'I know that' or 'I couldn't care less'. He gave Laurie his firm-but-fair look and licked his lips. Why was it that when women licked their lips it was sexy but when men did they looked like Hannibal Lecter?

'Now, I've been meaning to have this little chat for a week or two . . .' Laurie noticed that Stark was fiddling with a blue folder.

'Mmm,' said Laurie.

'It's just, as you know, with all of the challenges we now face in—'

'An integrated, multimedia, internet world . . .'

'That sort of thing . . . Well, I don't know how long you've been on the crime beat, as it were . . .'

'Twenty-two years – as it were.'

'Right. Well, it's just that, with things changing so fast on that front – you know, cyber fraud, computer crime, identity theft, intellectual property stuff, corporate shenanigans, cross-border trafficking – the old bang-bang coverage of crime is maybe getting a bit dated. I mean, there aren't that many bank robberies any more. It's all being done on the internet. Well, it seems that we may need a new sort of approach . . .'

The two men stared at each other.

'Another thing is, Laurie,' Stark continued, 'we do really need people who are happy to make full use of all the new tools at our disposal. You know, pod-casting and blogging, taking the old camera

out on a job . . . As you say, the integrated, multimedia, internet world. Look, to cut to the chase: we just feel that maybe now there's a window of opportunity both for you and for someone perhaps more digitally, you know, savvy . . .'

'Sounds more like a defenestration than a window of opportunity,' said Laurie. Did Stark know what defenestration meant? 'Are you sacking me? Making me redundant? What is it you're trying to say?'

'Good heavens, no,' said Stark, waving someone away who was hovering at the glass door of his tiny office. Laurie turned round to look. It was the newsdesk secretary, Linda, who had been at the paper on and off for more than thirty years, once married to the paper's now dead and departed Los Angeles correspondent and now nicknamed the Merry Widow because she had had flings with a couple of the younger, hipper reporters. She did not catch his eye. 'No, no. We are just looking at moving some of the pieces on the chessboard.'

'So I swap from being a bishop to a pawn, do I?'

'Not at all. Anyway, I would have said that the crime reporter's job was a knight, rather than a bishop, no? No, what we were thinking is, how does motoring correspondent sound?'

'You are kidding. I don't even have a bloody car.'

'You're not banned, are you?' A flicker of dismay crossed Stark's unlined face. Laurie wanted to ask him if he used a moisturiser.

'Not at all. Clean licence. I just got fed up with the local toerags breaking in every six weeks and stealing my *A-Z* and my Lucinda Williams tapes.' Stark did not know who Lucinda Williams was. Not many people did.

'Well, the great thing about this job is that you will always – always – have a car at your disposal. And a nice new one at that, room for all the . . . you're married, aren't you?'

'I was when I left home this morning, certainly.'

'You see, things are so competitive now. And, well, to be blunt,

you haven't been bringing in a lot of front-page stuff recently. Talking-point stuff . . .'

Should he tell him that Hook wanted to unburden himself? But the younger Hooks had not seemed that thrilled at the prospect. Would they persuade the old man not to go ahead? Better not mention it at all.

'Look, I know fuck-all about cars.'

'That might be just the sort of thing the readers would like – a motoring correspondent who's on their side, doesn't hide behind all the jargon, just gives it to them straight.' Stark gave him his head-prefect-meeting-the-member-of-the-royal-family smile. Maybe if I hit him with the side of the fist, like they did in *The Sopranos*, it won't damage my fingers, thought Laurie.

'And what if I refuse to move? You know, you could say this was . . . well, it's constructive dismissal, trying to make someone do a job they're not equipped to do.'

Laurie watched Stark's glance shift to the blue folder.

'Well, there was one other thing I wanted to talk to you about . . . Um, expenses.' Stark opened the folder and slid out what Laurie recognised as months of past expenses forms and receipts. Stark continued, picking his words carefully, forensically.

'The audit people . . . um, they found one or two . . . um . . . anomalies in your expenses, er, Laurie,' said Stark. He waved away another hovering shadow at the door. This time Laurie did not turn round to see who was there.

'There's a receipt for a meal at the . . . er . . . Badger's Den in Limehouse on February the fifteenth . . . one hundred and twenty pounds . . . But then you were at a Police Federation special conference in Scarborough on the same date. Then there's a taxi fare from Scotland Yard to the office supposedly, for fifteen pounds, and another taxi receipt which seems to have come from the same book of receipts . . . Now, of course, no one's accusing you of . . . fiddling expenses. That would be a very . . . damaging accusation. But, as I say, the audit people have brought

it up and we are obliged – by law, I think – to check this through.'

Laurie and Stark exchanged a long stare.

'What I think you're saying is, if I refuse to go quietly, you'll make sure you find something shady in my exes and that everyone in the business will know that I'm being investigated for defrauding the company. But if I give up being crime correspondent and start writing about gear boxes – do they still have gear boxes? – then any "anomalies" will be quietly shelved.'

There was a second exchange of stares. Stark shifted his gaze only when there was a rattle at the door. Laurie used the moment to get up. 'Can I think about it overnight?' he said as he stood by the door.

Stark nodded happily.

Laurie wandered back to his desk, switched on his screen and scrolled through his emails. An Ethiopian prince wanted to offer him £10 million for doing nothing but sharing the details of his bank account. Leaving-party invitation from one of a wave of redundant colleagues. Insult from reader. Pedantic point from reader. Pedantic point from colleague. Request for loan from Nigerian diplomat temporarily discommoded. Russian woman seeks husband. Ukrainian woman seeks husband. Press release from the Association of Chief Police Officers.

His office neighbour – was there some word for that? Cell mate, perhaps? – appeared. Guy, the environment correspondent, a young man with short dark hair, the beginnings of a beard and startling blue eyes. There was something odd about his appearance.

'Is tweed jacket and tracksuit bottoms a new look or are you doing this for a bet?' asked Laurie.

Guy shot him a wounded look.

'What's happened?' Laurie persisted. 'Where's your trousers?'

Guy looked round to see if they were being overheard.

'Look, don't tell anyone this but – I went out for a run at lunchtime, changed in the gents, you know, in the shower room.

Came back after my run and – someone had flushed my trousers down the lavatory.'

'What?' Laurie could not stop himself laughing. 'A whole pair of trousers? It wouldn't go down, would it?'

'They didn't go down all the way, they got stuck . . . Anyway, trousers are plural not singular.'

'Eh?'

'You said "it" wouldn't go down. Trousers are plural.'

'I think you'll find that they're singular on top and plural below. I said a "pair of trousers". That's singular . . . anyway.'

'What are you guys talking about?'

Laurie and Guy turned round to see Linda, the newsdesk secretary.

'Someone's flushed Guy's trousers down the loo . . . Don't laugh!'

It was too late.

'God, I told you not to tell anyone.'

'Well, I think you should try and find out who did it, Laurie,' said Linda. 'If you're a proper crime correspondent . . .'

'Ah, there you have struck a nerve, but yes, you're right. We should try and solve this . . . flush out the miscreant.' Laurie sniggered. 'Maybe it can be my last case.'

'What do you mean?' asked Guy.

'I think this is a conversation for the pub.'

Linda shot him a sympathetic look.

'What are you on about?' said Guy.

'I'll tell you about it. It'll put your trousers into perspective, I promise you. Got time for a pint?'

'I guess so. I'll go and see if my trousers are dry. I put them on the radiator.'

'I'm not having a drink with you if you're wearing trousers that have been round the U-bend, for God's sake.'

'All right, all right, I'll leave them here overnight. Are you coming too, Linda?'

'Not tonight, thanks.' She smiled. 'Got a date.'

Laurie and Guy headed down the corridor towards the lifts. As one lift opened, Eva-Marie, the picture editor, stepped out. That smile again. Laurie watched as she walked off down the corridor and tried to look as though he was not gazing at her legs.