

The Day of the Jack Russell

Bateman

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THE DAY OF THE
JACK
RUSSELL

BATEMAN

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'No Alibis' is a real bookshop in Belfast, there is an MI5 regional headquarters nearby and (usually) a Chief Constable. One or two other places also exist in real life. However, this book is a work of fiction. While the setting may be real, the plot and characters are made up. Nothing I have written should be taken to describe or reflect on real people.

1

It was the Tuesday before Christmas Day when *The Case of the Cock-Headed Man* walked into No Alibis, the finest mystery bookstore in all of, um, Belfast.

In some ways he was lucky to get me, because with business being so quiet I had resorted to letting my mother woman the till for that short part of the day when she could manage to keep off the booze, i.e. between the hours of nine and eleven twenty-nine in the morning. If he had walked in ten minutes earlier he would have walked straight out again, because while still undoubtedly sober, Mother is not one for suffering fools or anyone gladly and she's gotten ten times worse since her stroke. She has always been ugly and mean, but she used to restrict her glares and tempers and violence and venom and sarcasm to members of her immediate family, but since the stroke she has expanded her circle of viciousness to include

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distant cousins, vague acquaintances, most other members of the human race and several dogs. Mother is wired differently to you or me. A stroke usually affects just one side of the body, but she has lost the power in her right leg and left arm, making her appear lopsided from whatever angle you care to look at her, although most people don't, and stagger from side to side like the drunk she is when she tries to walk. It is funny to watch her. When she's drinking she now only has to consume half as much as before to get legless. And half of that again usually drools out of her mouth on to her blouse, because another side effect of the stroke is the loss of all feeling in her lower lip.

But as it happened, *The Case of the Cock-Headed Man* walked in just as Mother finished. In fact, he held the door open for her as she left. Since her stroke I've had the disabled ramp removed from outside the shop, so it takes her a while to manoeuvre her walking frame and calipered leg down the high step and on to the pavement. The man with the Sidney Sidesweep and goatee beard smiled and offered her his arm and said, 'Can I give you a hand, dear?'

Mother glared at him for the briefest moment before spitting out: 'Fuckaff!'

Her diction isn't great with her face the way it is. Before the stroke she looked like she'd been punched by Sonny Liston; now she sounds like it as well.

Mother's job – she tells her cronies that she's head of customer relations, which would actually be quite

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funny if she wasn't serious – is a sad reflection on the changing face of the book trade, wherein I cannot afford to hire good and proper help, but have to rely on friends and family and idiot students to fill in for those few hours when I need to concentrate on stock-taking, e-mails, stalking my ex-girlfriend and actually *reading*. I have to know what's out there. While I am not entirely convinced by the recent vogue for Scandinavian crime fiction – who's to say if it's the author who is a genius, or his translator? Also, it's difficult to care if a Norwegian gets murdered – my customers expect me to know the authors and to be able to help them navigate to their best work. You would expect a brain surgeon to be up to date on the latest operating procedures, and you would be shocked if a butcher served you up half a pound of gristle because he didn't know any better, yet you can walk into a major bookstore and ask if Hammett's *The Glass Key* is superior to *The Thin Man* and they'd look at you like you were on day release from a secure mental hospital, which, incidentally, is something I know all about. So I need a little time each day to keep up to date, and my best time for reading is in the mornings, when I'm not so groggy from the anti-psychotic medicine I order on-line from a Good Samaritan in Guadalajara, Mexico.

It was a *really* quiet time of year in No Alibis, and not just because customers were put off by Mother's fearsome visage glaring out of the window and daring them to enter. Although books continue to make

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fantastic gifts, people no longer have the time to browse at Christmas or to ask for guidance from an expert. They go to one of the big chains and push a trolley around, piling them high and buying them cheap, like beans, or pasta, or onions, or potatoes, or rice, or tinned peaches, or fig rolls, or Tuc biscuits, or midget gems. But books are not beans. It's not all about profit. It's about the book. You have to appreciate the effort that goes into the writing of a book. The love and sacrifice. The years of torment. The long and tortured journey from first inkling of idea to appearance on a shelf. Nobody ever cared that much about the genesis of a bean. Once they finally appear, so many fine books are ignored, remaindered and pulped because they fail to find a *me*. My place in society, my role in life, is to select the finest crime fiction, and then make sure that it connects with the right people, a thankless task, particularly as there are so few right people around. No shortage of the *wrong* people. One example of the wrong people – and I have learned that you *can* often judge a book by its cover – was the bearded man approaching the counter without even the pretence of looking for a book. Despite his polite offer of assistance to Mother and his refusal to react angrily to her abuse, something about him immediately put me on edge. Perhaps it was because he wore the kind of extravagant clothes that people buy to try to disguise the fact that they have no personality.

'Do you have internet access?' he asked brusquely.

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‘Yes thanks.’

‘No, I mean, to show you something.’

‘No thanks.’

He was a pedlar with a lazy attitude to direct selling. He was trying to hock his wares by showing me a sales video at *my* expense over the internet.

He smiled whitely. ‘I understand you meddle in crime-solving.’

‘No.’

‘Oh. I was given to understand . . .’

‘I don’t meddle.’

Arrogance is no bad thing in crime-fighting, and God knows it’s compulsory in the book trade. He wouldn’t have known it, but I was quietly pleased by his presence in the shop. My reputation was clearly growing. Booksellers who use their expertise to solve baffling crimes are pretty thin on the ground. In fact, booksellers are pretty thin on the ground. Indeed, I am pretty thin on the ground, thanks to my diet, and allergies, and incurable diseases, and broken heart, and the economy. But people come to me because I am their last resort. Because the crimes against them are too difficult or trivial for the conventional forces of law and order to tackle or be bothered with. I glanced at my watch as if I had an appointment. When he didn’t immediately volunteer anything, I snapped a pleasant ‘Sorry, is there something else I can help you with?’

The smile remained fixed, like his teeth. ‘You do know who I am?’

I shook my head. ‘Nope.’

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‘You really don’t recognise me?’

He had tiny incredulous eyes and the bags under them sagged with middle age, giving the lie to his Botoxed brow. His beard was, I’m sure, perfectly fine; except I’m allergic to beards. Food festers in them. Ticks and bugs and spiders breed in them. I hate beards. I hate people who wear beards. Even false ones. Like Santa. But now that I studied him, there was something *vaguely* familiar about him. I have made many enemies in my perilous work as a crime-fighter and bookseller, and I have to admit that despite his smile, my hand sought the comfort of my mallet, one of several weapons I have taken to keeping beneath the counter.

‘Who are you, *exactly*?’ I asked, taking care to keep my voice flat, so that he couldn’t tell that I was now in a state of high alert. ‘And what do you want?’

‘You seriously don’t recognise me? But you see me every day.’

I shook my head.

‘Billy Randall?’ He pulled his shoulders back, put his hands on his hips and gave his voice a mid-Atlantic twang. ‘*I’m Billy Randall fly me?*’

He gave it a bit of a flourish and an American twang. He raised an eyebrow for added effect.

‘Ah,’ I said.

I *did* know him, after all. His head and shoulders, sixty feet wide, stared down at me from billboards in the south, east, north and west of this city of twenty-three stories. Billy Randall ran a low-cost, no frills airline

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and holiday company, Billy Randall Air, or BRA. It flew the great unwashed to cheap destinations, many of them in the Third World, most of them permanently braced for natural disaster or constantly teetering on the edge of civil war or desperately trying to recover from a crashed economy. People clamoured for his flights and holidays while at the same time despising his mugging arrogance, because quite often they were cheaper than taking a taxi and having a night out in their home city. He had a blazing self-confidence, pots full of chutzpah, and had made his millions *despite* not endearing himself to anyone. His *look at me*. The Northern Irish are quick to judge, and they dislike people who put their heads above the parapet unless they have a genuine talent, in which case they then worship them to death.

Billy Randall smiled beatifically.

‘Billy Randall, of course,’ I said, warmer now, because despite the fact that I had a growing urge to beat him with the mallet, he was rich, and I was poor, and if he was wanting to talk to me he clearly had a problem, and a fool and his money are soon parted. ‘Sorry.’

‘I wanted to show you something. On YouTube. Have you heard of YouTube?’

‘I invented it.’

‘You . . .’

‘I can’t talk about it. Litigation.’

He looked at me. He smiled. ‘Well could I show you something? Go on to the site and just type in my name.’

I turned to my PC and slowly picked out the letters. I am a recovering myopic dyslexic. There was just the

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one entry on YouTube for Billy Randall. I clicked on it and saw his billboard poster in some busy and vaguely familiar-looking part of town, with traffic flowing past. We watched it silently for twenty seconds.

‘What’s the . . . ?’

‘Wait.’

And then there was sniggering on the soundtrack as the camera followed a hooded youth carrying a set of ladders across the traffic. I say ‘youth’ because he was dressed in the teenage fashion; for all I saw of him he could have been an old man blessed with vigour.

‘Go for it, Jimbo,’ said an anonymous commentator.

The youth set the ladders against a gable wall, the tip of them just resting against the bottom of the billboard frame, and then he extended them, giving him what appeared to be an extra twelve feet or so and bringing him, as he climbed, level with Billy Randall’s forehead.

I became aware that the gauche travel mogul on the other side of my counter was no longer looking at the screen. He couldn’t bear to watch the youth take a can of spray paint from his hoody and begin to spray what slowly became an enormous cock and balls right in the middle of Billy Randall’s gigantic forehead, although he couldn’t help but listen as the accompanying giggle turned into a raucous cackle.

2

Like many provincial businessmen, Billy Randall had dreamt of transforming himself into an internationally recognised name, a Murdoch or a Branson or even a Heinz. He wanted his smug mug to be recognised in every corner of the globe, the Randall name to become synonymous with success and big bucks.

Beware of what you wish for.

Billy Randall was indeed becoming an international phenomenon, but for all the wrong reasons. Over a million people had viewed the video of the Cock-Headed Man. And the number of hits was growing with every hour that passed. People who had never heard of Billy Randall now knew him as the Cock-Headed Man. Billy Randall had gone viral, and he wasn't happy about it *at all*.

Still, every cloud has a silver lining.

'I've already tried the police; they're not interested.

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I've had all manner of security companies ringing me up and promising me this or that, but none of them local, none of them who know these streets, none of them with your reputation.'

I was positively glowing.

'I told YouTube to take it down and they did; five minutes later it was back up again. It's spreading to other sites. It has even been on cable television. I'm getting abusive e-mails from all over the world. I want this stopped. I want them found. And I want them punished. I don't want people to think they can mess with Billy Randall and get away with it. They're destroying my business. People do not want to do business with someone they can't take seriously. People may not like me, they may be jealous of what I've achieved, but they also respect me for what I've done. I know that, they've told me that. I've worked for twenty years to get where I am, I employ over two hundred people right here in Belfast, not in some fucking call centre in Mumbai. I'm not going to have it all disappear because of a couple of hooligans. I'm not going to be disrespected, not me, not Billy Randall!'

There was sweat on his brow and fury in his eyes, and I liked him a little better for it. I don't trust people who smile too much, who are always interested in what you have to say, who are too touchy-feely, or even touchy-feely at all. I didn't for one moment think that Billy Randall had built his business by smiling all the time and being nice to people, I'm sure he shouted and raged like the best of us, but he had concocted

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an image and had to live up to it every time he stepped out of his front door. This flash of anger at least showed there was a relatively normal and flawed human being behind his inflated public persona.

‘Okay,’ I said, and managed not to smile as I added, ‘but I’m not cheap.’

‘Money isn’t an issue. You can find them?’

‘Oh yes,’ I said.

‘Okay. Find them, let me know where they live, I’ll take it from there.’

I nodded, and then some more.

‘What?’ he asked.

‘What will you do to them?’

‘That’s my concern.’ And then he cracked his trademark smile. ‘Nothing *illegal* – that’s all I need! I’ll think of something, something practical. A restraining order. Something.’

I was on the verge of reminding him of the old saying, that there was no such thing as bad publicity, of suggesting that he might parlay the massive exposure he was getting into something positive, if he could just embrace the joke instead of fighting it. It could help his image and improve his business at the same time. He would be known as a man who could take a joke, instead of being one. But then I thought it was all very well saying it; I wasn’t the one who had to live with being known all over the world as the Cock-Headed Man, and also if No Alibis was going to survive the barren Christmas period, I was going to have to start earning money through some means other than

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bookselling, because for the moment, crime wasn't paying.

As Billy Randall left, Jeff arrived. Jeff continues to work for me on a part-time basis, as saving political prisoners for Amnesty International apparently doesn't pay very well. I have often thought that if Amnesty International paid its campaigners a commission they would achieve a lot more. They would also attract a better calibre of campaigner, because really, if you want to be taken seriously by despots, dictators and religious maniacs, you should at least ensure that your representatives look vaguely respectable and not like they've been dragged through a hedge backwards, and also that they are at least capable of conducting a reasonably intelligent conversation without falling back on punching the air and yelling out nonsensical slogans and making promises they can't keep. I'm still waiting for my free Nelson Mandela.

Jeff's eyes widened as Billy Randall passed by, and then he mouthed to me while pointing after him, 'Is that . . . ?'

I nodded and quickly ushered him into the shop and closed the door. 'He's hired me to solve a case,' I said.

'Us.'

'I'm sorry?'

'He's hired *us* to solve a case.'

'No, he's hired me. You assist me. I pay you. But he's hired me.'

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'I thought we were a team.'

'No.'

'When Alison stormed out, you said I could replace her.'

Alison was the girl in the jewellery shop across the road. I'd given her my heart. And she had shoved it right back in my face. Although not before stealing my virginity. I had thought her to be warm, loving, thoughtful, caring and beautiful. Now I knew her to be cold, callous, calculating and ugly. I would never, ever forgive her. Her name is in my ledger. I have a big ledger. Once your name goes into it, it's impossible to remove. Even with Tippex.

'Nobody will ever replace her.'

'As your crime-fighting partner.'

'I don't need a crime-fighting partner.'

He snorted, and took off his jacket. This year's fashion for the young and politically aware student was a bottle-green combat jacket, ragged jeans and Lennon glasses. This year's fashion hadn't changed much in forty years. He stashed the jacket behind the counter and rolled up the sleeves of his cheesecloth shirt in what had become a regular charade by implication that he was actually going to do some work.

'So what did the Dick-Headed Man want?'

'The Cock-Headed Man.'

'Dick,' said Jeff.

'Cock.'

'He's known all over as the Dick-Headed Man.'

'Cock.'

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‘Dick.’

‘Cock.’

‘Dick.’

‘Cock.’

‘Dick.’

‘Cock.’

There was something oddly hypnotic about our exchange, and it might have gone on for ever if I had not broken the rhythm by suggesting that Jeff would shortly be out of a job if he didn’t agree with me, at which point he conceded that in future we would refer to Billy Randall as the Cock-Headed Man, although not to his face.

I did not expect the solving of *The Case of the Cock-Headed Man* to present me with too many difficulties. I had been down a similar path before while investigating *The Case of the Fruit on the Flyover*, which also involved a graffiti artist making life miserable for those he chose to pick on. The main difference here was that the stakes were higher; it had gone global. It also seemed to me that it was too late to do anything about it. The video was out there and always would be; what Billy Randall wanted was retribution.

But that was no concern of mine. I was being paid handsomely to track down the culprits, that was all.

I watched the video through several more times. Simple observation led me to conclude that it had been shot at a billboard on the Annadale Embankment. I very quickly deduced that the actual graffiti artist,

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Jimbo, was a tradesman. It was the ladders. Everyone has ladders, but usually they're only big enough to get you up to change a light bulb. These were fully extendable. They could take you right up the side of a large house and on to the roof. It seemed to me therefore that they were *professional* ladders. There was always the possibility that Jimbo and his accomplice might have borrowed them, but in re-examining the video, I noticed that Jimbo flicked the lever to allow the extension and then switched it back to secure it in its extended position without apparently looking down, suggesting an easy familiarity with their operation, which again suggested that he might do this for a living. So he could be a roofer, a decorator, a satellite installer or perhaps a window-cleaner. And one who very probably lived in the area of the Annadale Embankment, because it seemed to me that they weren't going to take the trouble of driving or even carrying the ladders across town to carry out their attack. They were going to do it close to where they lived. First of all, because it was easier. Second, if as it seemed they were doing it for a laugh, then they would want their friends to see it – they weren't going to say, hey, we did this crazy thing, and then expect their friends to travel across town to see it. They'd want to do it right on their doorstep. The fact that they'd deliberately filmed their action and put it on something as international as YouTube didn't negate the idea that they lived locally. They wanted to be admired by their pals, but also, in this networking era,

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further afield. According to the site info, the video had been posted by someone with the moniker RonnyCrabs. I presumed this was the cameraman and Jimbo's partner in crime. Ronny was quite possibly his Christian name, Crabs perhaps his nickname. I was looking for Jimbo and RonnyCrabs. Forgive me tarring everyone with the same brush, but if they were painters or roofers or window-cleaners, then I was looking for a working-class area that abutted the Annadale Embankment. I'd barely been on the case for five minutes and I was already close to cracking it.

Easy money.