

When Anthony Rathe Investigates



Anthony Rathe appeared in the US radio series 'Imagination Theater'. Hit by guilt over a suicide, Rathe pursues his determination to find the truth, no matter how inconvenient.

By Matthew Booth

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Matthew was a scriptwriter for the American radio network, *Imagination Theater*, syndicated by Jim French Productions, contributing particularly to their series: *The Further Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*

About the book

The original Anthony Rathe stories of courtroom criminal cases appeared on American public radio, syndicated by the late Jim French through his *Imagination Theater*. *When Anthony Rathe Investigates* continues where the radio stories finished.

Prosecuting criminal cases, barrister Anthony Rathe convinced a jury to imprison an innocent man, who subsequently took his own life. Horrified at his mistake, Rathe abandons his glittering legal career, vowing to truly serve justice.

A series of cases come his way. These four stories, linked by how Rathe is racked with guilt over the suicide, explore crime from a different angle: determination to find the truth, no matter how inconvenient to the investigating officer, Inspector Cook.

The reader is invited to join Rathe in solving these complex mysteries. The first story, *Burial for the Dead*, exposes sordid family history that led to a murder in a church. In *A Question of Proof*, Inspector Cook needs Rathe to unravel an underworld murder; in *Ties that Bind* Rathe solves a crime of passion; and in *The Quick and the Dead*, modern slavery intrudes into his own personal life.

Reviews

“This had a perfect balance of deduction and soul searching to make the main character compelling. The mysteries were well written with refreshing style.” - *Bridgit Davis*

“Short form crime fiction is difficult. The author cannot rely on red herrings, a host of possible

suspects, or deeply technical sleuthing. The scene, character and plot must come immediately. The four novellas of this book are masterpieces of their kind.

“Meet Anthony Rathe, a barrister who abruptly retired from practice when a brilliant prosecution resulted in an innocent man’s conviction and subsequent suicide. He is now a shade of his former self, haunting the cemetery staring at gravestones meditating on justice. Until, that is, he is forced to consider (not investigate really) four different murders, one for each novella.

“Rathe is a handsome, wealthy, cultured, yet empathetic man who listens to his intuition. Each story is different and enjoyable, if a bit reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes written by Martin Gattiss.” - *Anonymous, USA*

“This was not my usual read but I enjoyed it. I liked the character Rathe very much. This felt more like a gentlemanly approach to crime detection. The fact that Rathe was trying almost to redeem himself from his previous behaviour made him even more appealing. Each case was self contained and fairly succinct. I enjoyed the change in pace from more grisly stories.” - *Sue Ross, UK*

“Well, this was a little different. Set in the present but written in a style that suggests a much earlier time setting. So much so that, for me, I slipped into the past and then was jolted back to the present by some mention of technology. This made for an interesting read!

“So, what we have here is four shortish stories all connected by one concept. Anthony Rathe considers himself guilty of the death of a young, troubled man who, upon being found guilty and sentenced, subsequently killed himself in prison. Rathe finds out later that he was actually innocent of the crime he was imprisoned for and so visits his grave often throughout the book and, despite assurance from the boy’s mother, still holds himself responsible. To try and gain some redemption, he makes it his mission to solve other injustices. Whether they be current or historical, he teams up with Inspector Cook and together they do their best to prove innocence, or otherwise, of several characters throughout the book.

“I am not the biggest fan of short stories but I do like anthologies and even though, with the brevity of the tale being told, there is not much wriggle room for the usual twists and turns you find in longer forms of crime fiction, I found that there was just enough for me to get my teeth into with these. Yes, they were occasionally a little bit obvious at times, but I mostly put that down to my voracious devouring of the genre rather than anything the author did.

“Slightly annoying angst aside, I did like Rathe as a character and I thought that his relationship with Cook was well done. They don’t really like each other initially but have a mutual respect for one another and it was interesting to see their relationship develop throughout the book.

“As with the relationship between the two main characters, I thought that the stories they embroiled themselves in also got better through the book. The final one being my favourite, and also the most shocking; cause and effect anyone!

“All in all, a nice anthology containing four interesting stories, played out by some well rounded characters, written in an interesting old-feeling style. Hopefully there will be more to come in the series, I’ll definitely be up for that!” - *Kath Brinck, UK*

“Great storyline with good strong characters. Very well written. I would recommend this book to anyone.” - *Stephanie Collins, UK*

“This gripping collection of detective stories is an excellent blend of contemporary and traditional crime drama. Each story is tightly plotted, exciting, and each with a satisfying twist at the end. There

is a variety to the stories, ranging from dark secrets being exposed to genuinely tragic family secrets coming to light.

“But the real success of these stories are the two main characters and their relationship. Rathe is a fascinating and original character, a troubled man trying to make sense of his life in the wake of a tragedy which still haunts him. Contrasted with Rathe’s private quest for redemption is Inspector Cook, a man with his own troubles, trying to come to terms with the violence he sees in his everyday life in the best way he can.

“The contrast between the two of them is set off against their mutual desire to find the truth and it forms the basis of an uneasy alliance. It is their uncertain partnership which sets these stories aside. It is not the usual detective duo combination and this amiable hostility between them is a welcome change. Rathe and Cook are wary of each other but what these stories show so well is the slow building of trust and respect between them as they investigate the crimes at the centre of these four excellent stories. A sequel can’t come soon enough.” - *Shirley Rothel, UK*

“He investigates now because he’s driven by guilt. One of his cases went badly and he can’t forgive himself. So he is going to try to find justice for those cases he’s asked to help on.

“These are short stories of several cases, all of them sad. Trying to prove who the real villain is can be hard and unrewarding but Rathe doesn’t give up. He’s trying to balance the scale and make his life feel right again.

“The stories aren’t easy to figure out but Rathe does it. I don’t think I’d like him breathing down my back either. Give it a read. It’ll make you think about life...” - *Jo Ann Hakola, Bookseller, USA*

“Four stories focus on the quest for truth and justice, no matter how inconvenient. To build up trust and tension Rathe’s private investigations are contrasted to Inspector Cook. The stories read like a classic crime story on TV, concise, and conversations to look into the investigator’s line of thought to solve the whodunnit puzzle.” - *Henk-Jan van der Klis, Netherlands*

“A good book of shorter stories featuring a lawyer after helping convict an innocent man who later committed suicide. Said lawyer - Rathe - overcome with guilt and despair finds himself continually helping a policeman in intriguing cases that help draw him out of his despair. Well written and definitely worth the read.” - *Matthew Shank, Librarian, USA*

“Anthony Rathe is a disillusioned former lawyer having left the bar because an innocent young man called Marsden, whom he prosecuted, committed suicide in gaol. As a result, haunted by guilt and shame, Rathe finds himself investigating crimes of passion where injustice is evident. ‘The Marsden disgrace’, as Rathe views the matter, is a connecting thread through the four stories in this excellent collection as he attempts to atone for his perceived sin.

“Anthony Rathe is a fascinating character who works in a solitary fashion down the narrow line between the police and the legal system. He is a wonderfully incongruous mix of the stoical and passionate. Here we have a character who is intriguing and pleasingly different from the run of the mill sleuths who people modern crime fiction. Indeed his heritage is in the tradition of the unusual golden age detective who is neither a tired policeman nor the risibly eccentric private detective. He is a very welcome addition to the raft of modern crime solvers.

“In this collection we have a quartet of stories in which Rathe solves a series of murders. I think of these as cabinet detective tales in that the mysteries are tightly plotted and cunning, while involving only a small cast of players, which works well with Booth’s rich and intense storytelling style. He is particularly good with atmosphere and Rathe’s internal monologues. The characters are expertly

drawn and psychologically accurate. While at times we are in Agatha Christie whodunit territory with the plots which challenge the reader to spot the culprit before the denouement, the literary quality of the writing adds an elegant and realistic patina to the narratives.

“One of the added pleasures of these stories is the growing uneasy relationship Rathe has with the police detective Inspector Terry Cook, a belligerent but very human copper who tolerates rather than accepts Rathe’s interference in his cases. Indeed on occasion he sometimes seeks his help, albeit begrudgingly. The two men rub each other up the wrong way most of the time, but Booth subtly reveals that there is a respect growing between them. It’s an engaging double act.

“Anthony Rathe is a new star on the crime fiction stage and this reviewer wants more, please.” - *David Stuart Davies, UK*

“This was a collection of mystery short stories, all of them interesting and quite enjoyable. Anthony Rathe leaves his legal career behind after a wrongly accused man commits suicide and takes on cases in his almost obsessive attempt to unveil the truth, help those he knows, and find a way to forgive himself for his past errors.

“The mysteries were interesting but quite short. The only downside to that is that there’s no real room for a lot of red herrings. I was pleased with failing to discover the culprit too early on for most of these stories (only one exception)...

“All in all, an enjoyable mystery collection.” - *Reviewer, Romania*

“Rathe was a defense lawyer who decided to prosecute a case. The defendant was found guilty, sentenced, then committed suicide. After the defendant’s death, Rathe finds out the defendant was innocent. Rathe is racked by guilt and leaves the bar. He becomes a reluctant investigator. The book consists of short stories on cases he investigates, interacting with a police detective. The stories and characters are well-developed.” - *Reviewer, USA*

“I really liked watching the relationship between Rathe and Cook change from Rathe being an annoyance to Cook to the latter inviting the former to a house party.

“The four stories was independent of each other but with an underlying arch to the two men’s friendship and Rathe’s outlook on his guilt. The investigations Rathe gets pulled into are all very different from each other with murder at the centre of each.

“Matthew Booth has written four interesting short stories which kept me occupied for a few hours. I didn’t want to put my kindle down mid-investigation and there were no real chapter breaks. I’d definitely read more should they be published.” - *Claire Knight, UK*

Excerpt

Editorial note

For readers outside the United Kingdom, the legal profession in England and Wales is divided into barristers and solicitors. Barristers are the senior branch, presenting and defending cases in the higher courts. Although self-employed, barristers work in groups from chambers and specialise, for example in criminal law.

Excerpt from A Question of Proof

Rathe wondered whether he had been right to insist on going there alone. Sitting in the small, windowless room, he began to feel a vulnerability which he had never experienced before. He had been in prisons in his professional capacity, but he had never felt this sense of helplessness which seemed to stir within him now. Perhaps it had been the armour of his robes and wig, or the protective shield of the legal arguments which had occupied his mind on those earlier occasions when he had set foot in such places. Perhaps now that those defences were gone, his mind had nothing to guard itself with and the fear and the horror of the compact and isolated space could work its effect upon him. He felt the urge to stand, but he resisted it, not certain whether it would help or not. Instead, he forced his brain to focus upon his purpose here and the questions which he was compelled to ask.

The meeting had been easy to arrange. Cook had ensured that Rathe would be given a private room for his interview, that the confrontation would be outside the normal hours for visiting. It had required several phone calls, but Cook had managed to arrange things as required. Rathe had promised to update Cook as soon as he left the prison, the promise being made after a series of insistent demands from the detective. Rathe wasn't sure whether it was a result of Cook's need to know what had been said or from his hope that he would not have Rathe's harm or destruction on his conscience. Whatever it was, Cook would not confess to either, Rathe knew that, but he had given his assurances that he would call and arrange a meeting with the inspector as soon as the thing was done.

It was not until the door opened that Rathe realised he had not known what to expect. How his presence there would be received was not something to which Rathe had given any consideration. With hindsight, perhaps it was better that he had not, for it meant that he had not had time to construct scenarios in his own mind. It had left him free from any perceived preconceptions he might otherwise have formed in his head, so that when the man stepped into the room, Rathe simply rose from his chair and met the man's glare with his own. They remained staring at each other for some time before slowly sinking to their chairs.

What impressed Rathe most about Harry Mack were his eyes, small pearls of blackness so deep that there was almost no white around them. They were looking at Rathe but there was nothing in them which he might have been able to call feeling. Rathe had the impression of a shark, to such an extent that he could imagine Mack's eyes rolling back into his head whenever he went in for the kill. His hair, collar length and luxuriant with grease, was a similar colour, so black it seemed to carry a blue tint, like the tail feathers of a raven. His expression was lifeless; his face had the features of a human being but nothing in them suggested anything approaching morality or emotion. Rathe might have expected cruelty or violence to be etched on Mack's face, but he could not discern even those and, somehow, the complete impassivity of the eyes and mouth was more horrible than either of them.

"Anthony Rathe," hissed Mack, his voice little more than whisper. "Rathe... Jimmy Morgan. You got him off when they tried to do him for Pete Beckett's murder."

Rathe nodded, remembering the case well enough. "I'm afraid I did."

"He reckoned you were a magician."

"He was wrong." Rathe lowered his head. "And Morgan was guilty. I knew it, he knew it."

Mack watched him, his eyes still seemingly disinterested. "Didn't stop you getting him off."

"That doesn't mean I have to be proud of it."

A slight shrug of the shoulders showed that Mack conceded the point. "I hear you jacked it all in.

The court stuff. After the Marsden kid topped himself.”

Rathe bristled. “I’m not here to talk about that.”

Mack pounced, leaning forward across the table with a feral urgency. “Then why are you here?”

“Doing a favour,” Rathe said. “For a friend.”

“Who?”

“Doesn’t matter,” replied Rathe, shaking his head. “Nobody doubts you belong in here, Mack, but somebody thinks you shouldn’t be in here because of Lenny Voss.”

Now there was emotion, but it was a scornful, guttural laugh. “Tell that to Cook, the bastard.” Rathe did not reply, but he gave no indication that Cook was the reason for the two of them talking together now. To do so would have been a mistake, and Rathe was aware of it, only too keenly. Mack continued to stare across at him. “Why send you? What’s your part in all this, Mr Rathe?”

“I’m just helping a friend.”

“Sounds to me like you can’t walk away from it; from murder, from crime, from violence. No matter how hard you try, no matter how much you think you want to.”

“I don’t think you’re in any position to analyse me, Mack. Even if you were, I don’t think it would be your business to do so.”

“I could make it my business.”

Rathe could feel his heart banging in protest against his show of courage. The blood screamed in his ears at his refusal to feel intimidated. And yet, something in his brain convinced him that there was nothing Mack could do to frighten him. The man was barely human, a mixture of brutality and malice rather than flesh and blood, and it seemed to Rathe that to be afraid of something barely recognisable as anything normal was in itself ridiculous. It would somehow seem like a betrayal of himself. “I’m sure you could, Mack, but it wouldn’t serve any useful purpose.”

That thin, humourless smile once more. “Say your piece, Rathe. I’ll try to stay awake.”

“The police say your motive for killing Voss was this supposed mutiny of his.”

Mack snorted. “Cook’s a lazy bastard. He heard that rumour and couldn’t see past it.”

“Was it just a rumour?”

“Lenny had got too big for his trousers, know what I mean? Yeah, he made noises which I didn’t like, but I dealt with it.”

“That’s exactly what the police say.”

Mack began to trace shapes on the table. “No, I dealt with it. Put him back in line. But I didn’t kill him for it. Know why? I didn’t have to.”

“Why not?”

“Because I sorted it. Taught old Lenny some of the old discipline.”

Rathe’s mind conjured up a memory of the mortuary photographs Cook had shown him. Those bruises on Voss’s chest and stomach, the injury to the left eye-socket. “You did him over.”

“Standard punishment.”

“For insubordination?”

“Disrespect,” corrected Mack. “Lenny was like a kid thinking he was bigger than he was. Kids need a slap to bring them back in line. Get what I’m saying?”

Rathe was barely listening. Instead, he was thinking about those bruises and, more particularly, about their implications. They had been recent abrasions, which meant that the attack had been no more than a few days before Voss’s death. If Mack had beaten Voss back into submission, it would have been too soon for Voss to attempt to break away again; if he still planned a coup, he would have waited for the dust of the first attempt to settle. Rathe’s mind went further: the beating was the end of the story as far as Mack was concerned. The disobedient child had been put back in his place, no more needed to be said about it. Either way, that beating seemed to Rathe to obviate any further action on Mack’s part in relation to Lenny Voss’s little bid for control. That, in turn, removed any backbone to the motive provided for Mack to have murdered Voss. Rathe sat back in his chair, his eyes adopting a distant glaze of deep concentration. He thought about Cook’s doubts surrounding the case and, perhaps more acutely than before, he found himself sharing them.

Mack watched the former barrister sitting motionless in the seat opposite him. The silence which had descended was brief but it seemed to the criminal that it lasted an age. He thought Rathe was staring at him, and for an instant, Mack’s natural fury began to rise in his gullet, but he realised soon enough that Rathe was seeing nothing beyond what was in his own mind. At last, Rathe looked back towards those cruel, dark eyes and appeared to remember why he was there at all.

“Frank Lovett,” murmured Rathe, “what about him?”

Mack’s head lowered, as though the name of the Newcastle monster was a source of pain for him. “Lenny screwed that up, no question about it. But don’t try to make no motive out of it.”

Rathe shook his head. “I’m not trying to.”

“What no one can get into their heads, see,” snarled Mack, “is that Lenny might have been a dumb bucket of horse piss but he was still the oldest friend I ever had. He might have needed a slap every now and again but I didn’t want his blood in my kitchen, you with me?”

“You did more than slap him.”

Mack stabbed a yellowed, grubby finger in the air. “You’re not like me, Rathe. You’re not like any of us. It’s a game to you, that’s what crime is, but for people like us it’s a way of life. Survival. For them like me, it’s kill or be killed. For them like you, life’s a game of bridge. Civilised, cosy, safe, some-thing you measure in champagne glasses and fillet steaks. To me, it’s a fight to the end, marked out with broken bottles and shattered bones. You’re sophisticated, protected by the world because it respects you for being who you are, part of the pedigree. Me? Pedigree to me is a mad dog barking in the dark. I have to earn respect and it doesn’t always come cheap. It’s anything from a warning kick in the ribs to a bullet in the face to keep things under control. You’ve no idea about any of it, because the law and rules of life mean nothing to you beyond being a game you play. So, forgive me, Rathe, if I tell you that what you understand about lives like mine isn’t worth a rat’s fart.

You say I gave Lenny Voss more than a slap, because you measure things to a different scale to me. You do it because you can. Because life fondled you with kid gloves. Well, life kicked me in the balls with steel-capped Doc Martens. You cuddled life but I had to fight it back. Lenny too, both of us had to. So, don't you dare think you understand what I did to him. I say I gave him a slap, because that's what I did. You might think it was more because it looks like more, but to me and to Lenny, it was a telling off and we both knew he deserved it. So he got it and we moved on. If I wanted him dead because of what he did, in my own backyard or with Frank Lovett, he'd be dead and I wouldn't have bothered with any form of kicking in the first place. He'd just be dead. Gone. Done. But you don't understand that, because we don't see the world in the same way."

"I'm grateful for that," murmured Rathe, unimpressed with the speech. "But, like I said, I'm not looking at what happened with Lovett as a motive for you to murder Voss. I'm asking because I want to know about that phone call on the night of the murder."

Mack's knuckles had whitened during his tirade but now he relaxed his hands, unfolding his fingers, and he leaned back in the chair as though the air had been expelled from his body. He gave a regenerative sigh and cleared his throat quietly, almost imperceptibly, before speaking again.

"You know about the meeting with Lovett, when me and Lenny went to see him. I don't need to go over that again, right? Right. I thought Lenny had ruined any chance I might have had of doing business up North. Lovett is a major player, partnership with him would have seen me and the boys right, but after Lenny's show, it wasn't going nowhere. So, I gave up hoping. But, out of nowhere, I got a call."

"From Lovett himself?"

Mack mocked the idea. "People like Frank Lovett don't do their own dialling, Rathe."

"So why did you think the call was genuine?"

"Because this kid, whoever he was, knew all about the previous meeting. Proper details, the sort of stuff only me and Lenny and Lovett himself would have known."

"Was anyone else at the meeting with Lovett?"

"Couple of his boys. No one else."

"So one of them must have made the call?"

But Mack was shaking his head. "No, they were big fellas. The sort who'd block the screen if they stood up to go for a piss in the cinema, get me? No, whoever phoned me was a kid. Soft voice, bit like a girl's. But nervy, like he wasn't used to setting stuff up. New to it all."

"So how could he have known what happened at the meeting, if he wasn't there?" Rathe's eyes had narrowed.

Mack shrugged. "The way Lenny carried on, I bet Lovett hasn't got tired of telling the story even now. Probably told all his lads what a pair of pearly clowns dared to try and play with the big boys."

Rathe was thinking once more, his eyes glazing over again, and his lips pursed. Something had been said which he knew was important, but it was eluding him. The more he tried to focus on it, the further away from him it drifted, like the litter on the breeze or a dream in the waking hours of dawn.

“So, you believed the call and you drove straight up there, to Newcastle?”

“Too good an opportunity to miss.”

“Even though the call had been made in London?”

“I didn’t know that, did I?” hissed Mack.

Rathe paused. “And you thought it wise to go alone?”

Mack sniffed with derision. “Wasn’t risking taking Lenny, was I?”

“Who knew you were going? Who knew about the call?”

A swipe of the criminal’s hand emphasised the reply. “Not a soul. Didn’t tell nobody.”

Rathe cocked his head. “No one expected you to be anywhere else?”

“Had to cancel a date with a bird, but nothing else. Didn’t tell her why.”

“Didn’t she ask?”

Mack’s grin turned into a leer. “What they don’t know don’t hurt them, Rathe. Treat them like they deserve, get me?”

Rathe felt the bitter aftertaste of disgust at the back of his throat. “Who is this lady you left stranded, Mack? Anyone in particular?”

The yellow fingers drummed against the table. “Gentlemen never tell, yeah? It’s called loyalty. And she’s nothing to do with any of this, because she didn’t know nothing about Lovett. She’s nobody, just someone to help me unwind, know what I’m saying?”

“One of many, Mack?”

“Variety is the spice.”

Suddenly, Rathe had every desire to be somewhere else. Somewhere whose air wasn’t tainted by deceit, decay, and death. Somewhere, anywhere, where Harry Mack hadn’t walked and had the opportunity to foul. He rose from the table and made for the door.

“I hope you’re not the spice of the month in here, Mack,” he said, unafraid and unaffected by the possibility of any physical comeback from the criminal.

There was no physical reprisal. Instead, Mack rose from the table and favoured Rathe with a crooked grin of spite. “More into the likes of you, I reckon, Mr Rathe.”

“Goodbye, Mack.”

“Before you go, Rathe...”

Rathe turned back to face him. He looked into the eyes of the shark once more, wondering about those lives Mack had ruined, the lives he had taken, and the damage he had done to the people who crossed his path. He thought about Shelly Voss and her fears for her son, the circle of violence which already seemed to be whirling around the boy. He thought about the countless other boys for

whom pedigree would become that mad dog in the dark and for whom respect would be a kick in the ribs, or a bullet in the face.

“What is it, Mack?”

“Just one more question.”

“Ask it quickly.”

“Aren’t you going to let me know what you say to this mate of yours, the one who sent you here?”

Rathe could hear those mad dogs barking. “No, I’m not.”

* * *

“You should have told him it was me who sent you,” said Cook.

“I didn’t think he should have had that to use against you.”

It was early evening, the time when people without murder in their lives begin to think about an evening meal. They were sitting in Rathe’s house, expensively but subtly furnished, not ornate enough for Cook to worry about breaking anything but elite enough for him to be unable to consider it a home. Music was playing low in the back-ground, a classical piece which Cook only knew as Mahler because the digital display on the music system told him it was. Cook had accepted a bottle of Italian lager, refusing the offer of a glass, and Rathe sat across from him in a luxuriant armchair with a glass of Burgundy. It had taken Rathe less than ten minutes to bring Cook up to date with the interview with Mack.

“You think I’m right then?” Cook said. “He didn’t do it?”

Rathe sipped the wine. “Well, if he did, it wasn’t for the reason put forward at the trial. I think both Mack and Voss, and all those associated with them, thought the beating was an end to the mutiny idea of Voss’s. At least for the time being.”

Cook was nodding. “And it couldn’t be the Lovett fiasco. If Mack wanted Voss dead because of that, it would have happened that day, minutes after they were embarrassed out of Lovett’s office.”

“Yes, I thought that myself,” conceded Rathe. “And there was no reason for Mack to think Voss had sent him on the wild goose chase to Newcastle, so he couldn’t retaliate against him for that, either. Besides, Mack said the voice on the phone had been a young kid. Nervy, he said, softly spoken. Does that sound like Lenny Voss?”

“Not much,” said Cook. “Doesn’t sound much like anyone I’d put with Frank Lovett either.”

“Perhaps not,” said Rathe, but it was almost to himself rather than in any formal reply to the inspector.

Cook drank some of the lager. “If we’re leaning towards Mack being innocent of Voss’s murder, we have to accept that it was him driving his car on that night. That he hadn’t lent it to some lackey for the sake of an alibi. Don’t we?”

“I think so.”

Cook leaned forward, warming to his theme. “Right, then, so Mack wouldn’t have had time to do in

Voss. By the time Voss was murdered, Mack was being caught on CCTV in his own motor chasing wild geese up the M1.”

Rathe drank some wine with a smile. “It’s good to know we’re thinking along similar lines for once.”

“I was never happy about that bloody car thing.” Cook’s words were spoken quietly, but no more forcefully because of it. “Goes to show I should always trust my instinct.”

Rathe’s gaze lowered. “It was a farce. The whole trial was a circus. When all this started, we talked about justice being blind. Perhaps she should always be blind, but she should never be stupid. You were right, Cook. People wanted Mack off the streets at any cost. It was never a question of proof. It was simply a question of convenience.”

“It wasn’t only justice which failed. It was me.” Cook’s eyes were staring ahead of him, blended with rage and regret. He stood up and paced towards the fireplace, as though he felt the confession would come more easily to him if he was moving. “I’ve been doing this for twenty years, give or take. I’ve never once knowingly done it wrong. Always tried to do the right thing, to get the result which meant the system could do its job. Never put away someone I didn’t know was guilty; never once pursued someone I didn’t think was guilty. Not till now. The Lanyon case was different. I believed Nicholas Barclay killed Richard Temple. But when you showed me I was wrong, I accepted it, didn’t I? And we got it right in the end. But this time, I was wrong. I knew there were holes in that case, I knew the defence team weren’t pulling their weight, and I even knew the Judge didn’t give much of a shit as long as Mack was put away. I knew all that and I just went with it. That makes me as bad as them.”

Rathe stood up and moved next to Cook. They stood staring out of the French windows, across the expanse of lawn which stretched out into the fading sunlight. “It’s not your fault.”

“Isn’t it, Rathe?”

“You weren’t in charge of the enquiry, Cook. You didn’t bring the prosecution’s case, and you’re not Mack’s defence team, let alone the jury. It went wrong, yes, but not because of you and you alone.”

Cook looked across at his companion. “And was Kevin Marsden because of you and you alone?”

The name, once more, struck Rathe’s heart like a knife and he felt the glands in his throat tighten with the nausea of guilt. “Yes, I think so.”

Cook drained his bottle. “Then you know how I feel, don’t you?”

Rathe turned slowly to face the inspector. “Point taken.”

“I told you I didn’t want to turn into you because of Harry Mack.”

Rathe’s eyes glinted. “Then you have to do something about it. You have to find out what really happened and put it right. Through the correct processes. That’s what you have to do.”

“Can we do that?”

“Of course you can.”

“No, Rathe, can we do that?”

And Rathe now recognised it for the plea it was, for the request for help that it had been, the unexpected display of vulnerability from Cook took him by surprise. He found himself nodding his agreement, not daring to speak in case his chosen words were misguided and he belittled the humility of the moment. Cook acknowledged the agreement with his own bow of the head and they turned back to look out over the lawns, allowing the shift in their relationship, however brief or understated it had been, to settle.

* * *

The girl eyed them both with suspicion, but it was for Cook that she reserved the majority of her dislike. She was young, barely in her twenties in Rathe’s estimation, but the heavy make-up made it difficult to be sure. Her hair was bleached blonde, a longer and straighter version of Monroe; whilst the peroxide matched the paleness of the skin, it contrasted starkly with the heightened darkness of the lashes and the livid crimson of the lips. Beneath it all, Rathe thought she might have been naturally pretty; certainly, despite the harshness of her stare, the eyes were a delicate shade of green which he thought he could never remember seeing before, and the lips were naturally full beneath their clown-like adornment. The falsity of her cosmetics was all the more gaudy next to the natural beauty which lay beneath it.

“Tell me why I should say anything to you, Cook,” she spat as he placed a Bacardi and Coke in front of her. “After you bloody well framed my Harry for murder. A right victim of yours, my Harry is.”

He pointed to the drink. “Because I didn’t frame him. And because that cost me a packet, Carla, and you don’t often get to go to places like this.”

She looked around the cocktail bar. “Nothing special. Harry takes me to places like this all the time. And he owns them all.”

Cook raised a glass of whisky to his lips. “That right? Well, like I said, you don’t get to go to places like this often. Because this one, see, is legitimate.”

“You’ve always been a bastard, Cook,” spat the girl.

“You’re not old enough to know that for sure, Carla, so tell your mouth to drown its bullshit with some Bacardi.”

It was later that same night. It had been after they had begun to go back over Mack’s interview with Rathe that Cook had thought about Carla. It had been Rathe’s comment about Mack standing up a girl in order to drive to Newcastle. Cook had known who Mack’s current piece of meat was and they had sought her out without any difficulty.

“There’s been loads of Carla Malones in the past,” Cook had told Rathe, “and there’ll be a load more in the future. Mack gets bored easily. Once he’s satisfied himself with one girl, he moves on. To him, it’s a business transaction rather than an emotional one.”

“Don’t any of them retaliate?” Rathe had asked.

“A girl retaliate against Harry Mack?” Cook had replied, the tone of his voice pouring scorn on the idea.

“So, what happens to the girls when Mack’s had enough?”

“What do you think? If they can still earn money for him, he puts them back where he found them. The streets. Assuming they’re lucky enough not to have bored him or upset him so much that he has them put in the ground or underwater instead.”

“And if they can’t earn any more?” Rathe had asked, hardly needing to hear the answer.

“Depends. If they didn’t upset him but they can’t work, they’ll be plied with drink and drugs and told to enjoy themselves. Within two months, they won’t recognise themselves or remember what got them on smack in the first place.”

Rathe had remained silent for some time. “This Carla, she was from the streets?”

“Since she was fourteen. And she’ll outstay her welcome soon enough, believe me.”

Cook had known Carla would be in one of Mack’s bars, because she was almost never seen anywhere else. She wouldn’t let an inconvenience like Mack’s imprisonment get in the way of her enjoying free drinks on the sole basis that she was invited into the criminal’s bed every night. Mack wouldn’t have minded her being out without him either, Cook knew that. If she was in one of Mack’s clubs, he would have loyal eyes on her and any one of the punters would know who she was. There was no danger of her doing anything she shouldn’t as long as she stayed in one of Mack’s places, so he could rest easy. Which is why it had been difficult for Rathe and Cook to prise her away. In the end, it had been Cook’s threat of arrest which had done it. He didn’t care: there would be no reprisals if what Carla could tell them would help get Mack out. As he thought it, Cook felt a twist of repulsion in his stomach at the filthy obligation he felt on account of his personal instincts and conscience. The things he felt he had to do just so he could sleep at night.

Carla took a long drink, her eyes bulging at the taste. “Jesus, that’s more than a double, isn’t it?”

“No,” drawled Cook, “but it’s not watered down like Harry’s probably is. So drink it slowly.”

“Fuck off,” she spat.

Rathe felt it was time to intervene. “Miss Malone, I think it’s probably best if we don’t take up too much of each other’s time. It’s pretty clear that none of us wants this interview to last longer than it has to.”

She looked at him initially with the same glare of contempt which she had reserved for Cook, but his voice changed her expression and those green eyes became warmer. “I don’t often hear men talk like you. Lovely, it is.”

Despite himself, Rathe felt his cheeks glow and the hairs on his neck rose slightly. “There are just a few questions we’d like to ask,” he said with an embarrassed grin.

“You could recite the bloody drinks menu and I’d get it on me,” she drooled with a short, sharp cackle. “I bet you sound right seductive on the phone.”

Cook hissed. “You wouldn’t know what to do with him unless he slapped you about a bit first, Carla, so lay off.”

The warmth in her eyes froze over once more. “I told you to fuck off, didn’t I?”

This time, Rathe slammed the table with the palm of his hand. “You can both do that if you’re going

to go on like this. We're here with a common goal and that's to get the truth about what happened to Lenny Voss so that we can help Harry Mack. We can't do that if we're going to end up in the playground every time one of you speaks."

For a moment, it occurred to Carla that she might be able to make a joke about the eroticism of Rathe's fury, but she thought against it. His eyes had grown darker and his lips had tightened into a taut whipcord of anger. She looked across at Cook, who was now drinking to hide his own abasement, and she decided that whoever this man, Rathe, was, he ought to be kept on side. She had never seen Terry Cook cut down so quickly and so effectively before.

"All right," she replied. "Say what you've got to say and let me go."

Rathe took his time in formulating his questions. The bass line of the music of the bar drummed in his head and he seemed to be hearing it for the first time, as though his outburst had somehow awakened his senses, as if his explosion of anger had broken apart all the jumbled facts of the case in his head and now they were falling back into their correct places in time to that incessant, banging rhythm. And, in that moment, he thought he saw with the sharpest clarity to date, the truth behind the murder of Lenny Voss.

He became aware of them both staring at him and he realised that he must look like a simple child, unable to form words but making every effort to do so. "You were due to meet Harry on the night of Voss's murder, is that right?"

Carla nodded. "He was meant to be taking me to his new restaurant. Not even opened yet, but Harry wanted me to have the first meal ever cooked there. He's cute like that."

"I wouldn't say cute," Cook felt compelled to say.

Rathe ignored him. "What reason did he say for changing his plans?"

"Business," shrugged Carla, as though there was never any other reason for a change in Harry Mack's plans. "Something came up, something urgent."

"Did he say what?"

"No. Never does."

"So you have no idea what this urgent meeting was about?"

Carla rolled her eyes. "I've said, haven't I?"

"Weren't you angry, though?"

"A bit," she purred, "if I'm honest. I was looking forward to my dinner for one thing."

Rathe leaned forward. "And for another thing...?" Carla's eyes drifted from his to her glass, but the battle was short lived and Rathe's intense stare won the war. "Maybe I didn't like what sort of business Harry was talking about."

Cook sneered. "You know what sort of business Mack's into, Carla." Rathe was smiling, but his eyes were filled with a dark understanding. "She doesn't mean business for money. Do you, Carla? You mean business for pleasure." A pause. "Who was she?"

Carla began to pick at one of her scarlet, false nails. “I don’t know.”

“But you have suspicions?” pressed Rathe.

“Sort of.”

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