

**REMEMBER,
REMEMBER**

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For my dad

*For many things, but including
the Metropolitan Police stories,
the fruit and veg and Borough Market stories,
the 1960s London bus routes, cafés and
pie and mash stories,
and the Dave Brown stories...*

Chilhampton Chronicle

20 June 1964

Seven killed in train crossing disaster

At 9.35am yesterday, an express train hit a lorry on the automatic crossing at Wickerstead Valley. The coastbound Chilhampton Express train had travelled from London, running at 70 miles per hour, carrying some 200 passengers and weighing over 400 tons.

The lorry driver, Malcom Bring, was unhurt in the crash, telling police he had been lost and the lorry had stalled on the level crossing. Unaware of the imminent arrival of the train, he had left his lorry and attempted to use the telephone in the half-barrier apparatus to warn the signalman of the lorry's location.

Mr Bring was alerted to the train's approach by the 24-second warning.

Five passengers and two railway workers were killed and 34 people injured in the derailment.

1

Bill stood in the kitchen doorway, tiredness showing on his face. He leaned against the frame.

Instinctively, I moved towards him with my arms out. I needed a hug.

He stepped back into the hallway away from me.

‘What’s wrong?’ I said.

‘Nina, I’d rather you didn’t kiss me. I’ve just got back from a shooting. The bloke’s stomach was all over the tarmac. I’ve got blood on my shirt.’

I scrutinised the front of his police uniform, paying particular attention to the collar. Some wives and girlfriends might check for lipstick; I looked for entrails.

‘A shooting? That’s unusual. There’s something on the side of your face, just by your right ear. I hope it’s not body tissue. I was about to have a bagel,’ I said, wandering back towards the toaster. ‘Do you want one?’

‘No, thanks. I’m off to have a shower and then go to bed; I’m shattered. Tell you all about it tonight, but right now I need sleep. They only let me leave ’cos I’m at court this afternoon. What time’s Wingsy picking you up?’

As I set about making myself some breakfast, I replied over my shoulder, ‘About eight-thirty. They said there’s no rush but I’m keen to get back to normal.’

‘Well, have a good day, Nin. I’ll call you when I get up.’ He blew me a kiss. I hoped he’d washed his hands.

I listened to Bill trudge upstairs to wash the night shift's trauma from his skin before catching a few hours' sleep. I'd never been able to adjust to nights. My whole body clock rebelled against it. One of the reasons a police officer's life expectancy was so low, I supposed. I thought about calling up the stairs to tell him not to put the bloodstained black T-shirt in with the white wash, but thought better of it: he'd managed well enough for all those years on his own, before I came to stay a few months ago.

The half-hour before Wingsy was due to arrive was filled with thoughts of how I was going to find my first day back at work and how people were going to treat me. My emotions were mixed: I'd been very well looked after by both official work colleagues and friends offering unlimited support, but I was worried about going back to the police station. The Serious Crime Directorate's Murder Investigation team, with which I had been working before my time off, had made no move to get me back. I couldn't blame them. I was more trouble than I was worth.

The arrival of the postman snapped me back to full attention. Most of the post was bills and mailshots, but a postcard of two dragons on a bridge caught my attention. I smiled as I turned it over and read the back. Stan had taken the trouble to write to me. The postcard didn't say much, just the usual about the weather being great, how I'd love the cheap wine and the cruise was very pleasant. My old friend was currently in Ljubljana, clearly enjoying his retirement. But the places were beginning to merge into one. I thought that Slovenia was a landlocked country so I wasn't sure how he'd got there on a cruise, but I wasn't going to overthink it. I had enough on my mind.

Catching sight of myself in Bill's hallway mirror, I saw myself frowning. Something about the postcard bothered me. Stan had sent it to me at Bill's home address.

He'd known I'd still be here. He'd set off on his cruise two weeks ago, and clearly didn't think that I might be back in my own house by now. Bill's place was in a quieter area than my own, and that wasn't the only reason I'd been taking refuge here: I didn't fancy being at home at the moment. But I couldn't stay here forever. Perhaps it was time to regrow my backbone and face being alone again.

I gathered up my coat and bag and took a seat by the bay window, waiting for Wingsy to arrive. After months of staying at home, or, more precisely, at Bill's home, watching daytime television, trying to work out if 'I gave birth to my brother's lover' really could be true, I was ready to get cracking. Just listening to the wailing and moaning of those prepared to air their dirty linen in public was making me stupider by the day. I needed to be back earning a living, dealing in person with the types of people I'd been watching on TV.

It wasn't long before Wingsy's Honda turned into the cul-de-sac. I watched him turn one large circle in the road, the sunshine flashing across his balding head. I smiled to myself. By the time he'd stopped the car at the top of the driveway I was leaving the house, handbag over my shoulder, coat over my arm and a large grin on my face.

'What are you looking so chuffed about?' Wingsy asked as I got into the car.

I leaned across and kissed him on the cheek. 'I'm glad to be here.'

'Make sure you don't overdo it. I take it Bill's been looking after you?' He glanced across at me as I put my seatbelt on.

'Course he has. He's just finished a night shift and gone to bed. He had a bit of someone's stomach on his shirt from a shooting last night.'

‘It’s good to see that after six months of you two being together the romance is still very much alive. What are you doing for Christmas, a pantomime of *Death in Custody Through the Ages*?’

‘Just drive the car, Baldy.’

‘Nin, it’s great to have you back.’

I winked at him, and we went to work.

2

‘Nina, welcome back,’ said Ian Hammond. ‘We’re glad to see you here. Do take it easy for the next couple of days... but can you read through this file?’ Detective Inspector Hammond picked up a buff-coloured file about four inches thick and slid it across to me.

He adjusted his cuffs for the second time in two minutes. That was going to get on my nerves, but perhaps I needed to warm to him.

‘What’s it about, sir?’ I asked, mustering as much interest as I could on my first day back.

‘Well, as you already know, you’re going to be working with the Cold Case team. They come under the Serious Crime Directorate where you were working before your time off, but it’s only a temporary arrangement. The idea is to allow you to settle back in after your – er – incident.’ He smiled an empty smile and gave me a sympathetic head-tilt. I’d got used to them over the last few months, ever since someone had entered my house and tried to kill me.

‘Since I was stabbed,’ I said, watching him wince at my words, ‘I’ve gone from resting to wanting to get back to work. I am really pleased to be working with the Cold Case team. I only hope I’m up to it.’

He nodded, happier to discuss the topic now that it no longer made him feel uncomfortable. ‘You can go along in a minute to meet the rest of the team, but I think you

know most of them anyway. The file we want you to work on relates to a train crash in 1964.’ He tapped the front of the worn cover. The light caught his shiny cufflinks. A dandy DI, how quaint. ‘It’s being reviewed because it’s fifty years since it happened and information has come to light that makes it look as though it may not have been a terrible accident after all. It may have been murder. Seven people died that day, and scores more were injured. There’s a reason that you’re being put to work on this and not anything else, but I’ll let your sergeant tell you about that when you go along to your new office. Once he’s got you up to speed, you’re to read the file and review it for any lines of enquiry.’ He hesitated for a second, before adding, ‘You won’t be handling the new information. Your role will be mostly office-bound.’ Another smile attacked his mouth.

We’ll see about that, I thought.

As DI Dandy had said, I knew most of the Cold Case team. By fantastic luck, Harry Powell was to be my detective sergeant again. He had been some time ago, when dinosaurs roamed the land. My not so good luck was that the team’s other DS was Kim Cotton. We’d met when I’d had my stay on the Murder Squad. I thought that she was a great big miserable individual. Wingsy had moved over to the Cold Case team too. And yes, he might have put in a good word for me. It was what friends did for each other. At least I had him and, even luckier, Kim was currently on annual leave.

Once I’d left my new DI, I made my way back to the tiny office that catered for eight of us. It coped fine for most of the week, but on Wednesdays the shifts meant that the whole office was on duty at the same time. This forced some of us to sit on chairs in the corridor. Hardly the stuff

of Jack Bauer's dreams, but never mind. The superintendent had recently returned from a three-month exchange visit to Australia to see if they had any crime, and I was to be wheeled out into the corridor once a week. Life wasn't fair, but if you couldn't take a joke you shouldn't have joined.

Approaching the office door, I slowed down: the hefty file I'd been given was in danger of slipping out of my hands. I didn't want to be chasing the best part of fifty years of paperwork along the corridor, so I paused to tuck the sheets back into the buff file. As I did so, I heard Harry say, 'I've known Nina a long time and I know she'll do it if we ask. But I don't think we should be putting her in that situation.'

I took a breath and pushed the door open with the file. 'What's that, Harry?'

He was sitting motionless in the centre of the room, the others at the banks of desks around the walls and windows of the crowded crevice. Harry had been centre stage with, no doubt, all eyes on him. They were now all on me. Me and my fifty-year-old file.

Fair play to Harry, he didn't falter. He didn't even blush, and that was no mean feat for a man with a head of red hair and pale, freckled skin to match. He held my gaze while I heard a couple of others rustling paperwork and the only person in the room I didn't know picked up a phone that I was sure hadn't been ringing and said, 'Hello, DC Sullivan speaking. How can I help you?'

I'd been warned about Jim Sullivan by Wingsy. Slimy creature, he'd said.

'Nin, I was just saying,' said Harry, getting up and pushing a chair towards me, 'that you're likely to say yes to the challenge even though it's a really bad idea and the DI said you're to be office-bound for at least the next few days.'

I said nothing.

He perched on the edge of the desk in front of Sullivan, blocking my view of him. It didn't bother me or him: he carried on his fake call. Harry twisted to his left and hit the loudspeaker button. The sound of the dialling tone came across loud and clear.

'You're such a tosser, Jim. Make yourself useful, put the kettle on,' said Harry.

Harsh but fair. Jim nipped through the open office door to the sound of sniggers.

'As I was saying,' said Harry, 'you don't have to give me an answer now and you can say no, but we've had a request from Pensworth prison via Winstanley solicitors for you to do a prison visit and speak to burglar and drug addict Joe Bring.'

I hadn't expected my DS to mention Joe's name. None of the problems over the last few months had been Joe's fault – quite the opposite. He'd saved my life, tackled a serial killer and, for his trouble, got arrested for attempting to burgle my home when the police officers he'd summoned to my door had arrived. Nevertheless, it gave me a jolt. I hated feeling as though people were avoiding talking about my stabbing, but then I wasn't always prepared for it when they did. No pleasing some people, was there?

I liked to think that I sat, impassive, taking in the information. It probably didn't happen that way. Harry seemed to take my silence as a cue for him to continue. Chattering and laughing from two of the typists walking past the doorway on their way to a break filled the room. Harry leaned to his right and, so small was the room, he pushed the door shut without getting up.

'Jim clearly lives in a barn,' he commented. 'Nina, Joe asked for you. He wants to talk about the train crash in '64. He has some information but will only talk to you.'

We've told the solicitors that Bring can't demand who visits him –'

'I'll do it,' I said. I'd had about ten seconds to weigh up whether I wanted to see Joe, assess how I'd feel about it and wonder why he wanted to see me. 'Any idea what he wants to tell me?'

'Yeah,' said Harry, leaning back, and crossing his arms across his rugby player's chest, just above his rugby drinker's beer belly. 'And we're gonna need a statement.'

'Don't we always?' I answered, tapping my foot.

'Definitely in this case, since Joe wants to tell us how seven people were murdered that day.'