

## Stick in the Mud

### Prologue

The young woman with short pale-blond hair was sitting comfortably as she opened the book at random at a chapter entitled *The Killing Ground* and began reading.

*Condemned on Wednesday, 12 April 1752, Jacob Pepper was led out of the notorious Clink Street prison two days later. With hands tied behind his back, he was dragged on board a river launch and rowed to Horselydown on the south bank of the Thames, opposite the Tower of London. With him were two custody officers from the Clink, two guards armed with muskets and the prison chaplain.*

*Word had spread rapidly that the infamous river pirate known as Daring Jake was to be executed, and a fair-sized crowd had gathered by the riverside. When they caught sight of the prisoner and his guards a cheer went up from the throng, and the escorting officers were at first anxious that the onlookers might be supporters of the pirate. However, the shouts soon turned to jeers, and some members of the crowd began throwing rotten fruit at the man who had become a legend of wickedness over several years.*

*The execution party alighted onto the bank. Some members of the crowd were surprised when the prisoner, the chaplain and the two prison officers mounted a small horse-drawn cart. The scaffold was, after all, barely thirty yards along the wharf. The wagon trundled over the cobbles, and the horse was guided through a wooden arch, halting once the cart was immediately below the structure. Now the purpose of the cart became clear.*

*One of the prison officers picked up a coil of rope from the floor of the cart and hoisted it over the cross-bar. At this, the crowd cheered again, and the prisoner went a deathly pale as he saw the noose dangling before his eyes. The chaplain spoke up in a voice loud enough to be heard by all, asking the prisoner if he truly repented his sins. Daring Jake made one last gesture of defiance to authority. He spat on the floor and cried out that they could all rot in Hell. At this, the chaplain began incanting prayers for the pirate's soul.*

*One of the officers slipped the noose over Jake's head and tightened the loop. Both men held Jake firmly by the arms, and one nodded at a guard who was holding the horse's collar. The horse walked on, the guards released the arms of their prisoner and Jake was left dangling on the end of the rope. No record was kept of the time it took him to die, but it was believed to be some minutes that he danced on the air while his eyes bulged in their sockets, his tongue protruded from his lips and his face turned a livid purple.*

*When his writhing ceased, the cart rolled back, and one officer bound the body in chains while the other coated him in pitch from head to foot. Independent sources from those times testified that the body of Daring Jake Pepper was still hanging there a year later, rotting and swaying in the breeze as an example to all who might contemplate a life of river piracy.*

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## The Dead

(Friday 15 June 1997)

Marnie Walker was obviously in high spirits as she walked across the car park. This did not go unnoticed by her friend and associate, Anne Price, who was sitting in Marnie's Land Rover Discovery waiting for her. They had agreed to rendez-vous at Willards Brewery in Leicester, where Marnie had a meeting with board members of the company, her largest client. Initially Anne had wondered if it was a good sign that Marnie was emerging later than the expected time of three o'clock. But Marnie clearly had a spring in her step as she spotted the Disco, gave a cheery wave and veered over in Anne's direction.

From a first floor window, one of the directors observed Marnie crossing the tarmac. He estimated correctly that she was in her early to mid-thirties. She was above average height for a woman, with wavy shoulder-length brown hair and a figure that looked good in a trouser suit. She was popular with all the directors for her clear presentations in meetings and the interiors she designed for their hotels, restaurants and pubs. They were stylish and original, but possessed a quality that would not quickly go out of fashion.

The director looked on as Marnie reached her car. He saw another woman get out from the driver's side. This one was younger, probably still in her teens. She was wearing a T-

shirt and jeans, ideal for the early summer warmth of mid-June, and had a figure that most people would describe as *boyish*. The uncharitable would say she was skinny. But in her favour, she had a pleasant face, with pale-blond hair almost sculpted to her head and sharp features.

The two of them exchanged words briefly, and the thin girl resumed her place behind the wheel as Marnie climbed in beside her.

'I think you've got an admirer,' Anne said, fastening her seat belt.

'Really?'

'Blind twitching on the first floor. How did the meeting go?'

'Fine.'

'Only fine?'

Marnie looked thoughtful. 'Fine's good, it's ... fine.'

'That's fine, then.' Anne looked at the controls in front of her and took a deep breath before turning the ignition key. The Disco was like a truck compared with her Mini. She looked sideways at Marnie. 'Home, James, and don't spare the horses?'

Marnie hesitated. 'Did you find a good bookshop?'

'Yes. This is a university city.'

'Can you find your way back there?'

'I think so.'

'Then let's do that. I need some reading matter.'

While Anne manoeuvred her way through the traffic, Marnie phoned home on the mobile. The call was answered by her lover, her *fiancé*, Ralph Lombard – to be precise, Professor Ralph Lombard of All Saints College, Oxford – who was working on a research paper on his latest hot topic, the economic situation in the Far East. Marnie told him they should be home within an hour or two, and Ralph promised to have a meal ready for them. He was one of the brightest academics of his generation and knew how to take a hint.

In little more than ten minutes Anne had retraced her journey back to the bookshop and then took another ten minutes finding somewhere to park.

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Anne caught up with Marnie at the till and cast an eye over the voluminous carrier bag filled with books that Marnie heaved onto the back seat when they regained the car.

‘Next stop Ikea?’ said Anne with a deadpan expression.

‘What for?’

‘A new bookcase?’

Marnie nodded. ‘Perhaps I did get a little carried away. Shall I drive us home?’

Anne was grateful to hand over the keys and ride shotgun. The thought of steering through city traffic when the schools were turning out did not appeal. She asked if she could look at the books Marnie had bought and dragged the bag onto her lap as they drove off.

The variety of Marnie’s purchases surprised her. There were a few novels of the kind people bought at airports to take on holiday, predictably some art and design books, two books on the history of London and the Thames, plus a further two books about ... pirates.

‘*Pirates?*’ Anne said. ‘Since when have you been interested in them?’

‘I have hidden depths.’ Marnie pulled up at a red light.

‘But seriously,’ Anne persisted.

‘Tell you later.’

‘Okay.’ Anne noticed that one of the books dealt with river pirates, the other about the myth and reality of pirates in the Caribbean. She flicked open the former. ‘Can I have a look?’

‘Go ahead.’

For the next few miles the car plodded from one hold-up to the next. Anne normally got car-sick if she tried to read while on the move, but she was able to peruse the book without discomfort. It told the story of piracy in the port of London around the eighteenth century. Trade was then so brisk and the port so busy that vessels could be tied up often for weeks on end, waiting to unload. They were an easy target for thieves.

Anne found herself immersed in the tale of one man, Jacob Pepper – known as *Daring Jake* – a notorious gang leader in the mid-1700s. They broke into one ship after another and amassed a fortune in stolen goods: carpets, tapestries, brandy, rum, port, silks and silver, spices and gold. They struck at dead of night, off-loading booty onto their own boat. Anyone who got in their way was likely to be murdered and thrown into the river.

‘What a scurvy mob,’ Anne murmured, ‘especially their leader.’

‘Who was that?’ Marnie asked between gear changes.

‘This pirate ... *Daring Jake Pepper*. I wonder what became of him.’

‘Probably came to a sticky end.’

Marnie was right.

So successful was Daring Jake, and so elusive, that the port authorities offered a substantial reward for his capture. Jake was eventually betrayed by one of his own crew. Brought to trial and confronted with his crimes, Jake had no credible defence to offer, and was condemned by the testimony of his betrayer. There was only one sentence possible. Anne read on. The account of Daring Jake's hanging left her enthralled and appalled in equal measure.

'... cut across country, I think, and go down the A5.'

Anne looked up in surprise. 'What? Sorry?'

Marnie glanced at her. 'You okay? I was just saying, I don't think it's a good idea to head for the M1 with all this traffic.'

'No,' said Anne, her voice flat.

'What's the matter?'

'I was just reading about that river pirate.'

'Daring Jake? What about him?'

Anne grimaced. 'He was hanged and his body ... *ugh!*'

'Where was that?'

'In London, some place called ...' Anne consulted the text. '... Horselydown. I've never heard of it before.'

'Well, you may be hearing about it again,' said Marnie, 'and sooner rather than later.'

Anne closed the book on her lap. 'It's a horrible story.'

'A sticky end?' said Marnie.

Anne thought of Daring Jake's slowly rotting tarred body, hanging for weeks, months, perhaps longer.

'Very sticky,' she said.