



# THE WATER CLOCK

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*Out on the Middle Level midnight sees the rising flood nudge open the doors of the Baptist chapel at Black Bank. Earlier the villagers had gathered for a final service loaded down like Balkan refugees with suitcases and bundles. Now the water spreads across the Victorian red-brick floor; a creeping congregation, lifting the pews which shuffle forward to press against the altar rail. Finally the wooden lectern lifts and tips its painted golden eagle into the chocolate-coloured flood. But no one hears the sound, all are gone. Outside, below the flood banks, fenceposts sucked from the sodden peat pop to the surface. On what is left of the high ground hares scream a chorus from an operatic nightmare.*

*The flood spreads under a clear November moon. Cattle, necks breaking for air, swim wall-eyed with the twisting current. At Pollard's Eau, just after dusk, the Old West River bursts its bank, spilling out over the fields of kale and cabbage. A dozen miles away the lookouts in the lantern tower of Sutton church take the noise for that of a train on the line to King's Lynn. They wait, fatally, for the fields to reflect the stars, before raising the alarm.*

*Burnt Fen Farm, now a ruin, stands on its own shrinking island.*

*Philip Dryden climbs the stairs of the farmhouse in which he was born.*

*His knees crack, the damp air encouraging the rheumatism which waits in the joints of his six-foot-three-inch frame. He stops on the landing and the moonlight, falling through the rafters, catches a face as expressionless as a stone head on a cathedral wall.*

*He leans on the twisted banisters and feels again the anxieties of his childhood – welcome by comparison with the present and approaching fear.*

*Will the killer come?*

*Outside the ice creaks on the Old West River. Unheard, small voices of perfect terror rise with the approach of death. Rats dash in synchronised flight to beat the flood, crowding into the steep pyramids of winter beet.*

*Shivering, he walks through the hallway and pushes open the slatted door to the attic stairs. He climbs again to the old schoolroom where he was the only pupil. The view from the dormer window frames a snapshot of memory: his father, sat in a pool of midsummer sunlight in a blue-striped deckchair, dozing under a wide-brimmed cherry picker's hat.*

*Outside the wind brings the slow crash of a tree subsiding into the flood. A dying cow bellows and briefly, with a gust of heavenly sound, church bells ring the alarm too late from Littleport. The lightning cuts a gash across the night and Dryden sees the serried rows of waves marching south.*

*Waiting for a killer on Burnt Fen. A single, double, killer, coming.*

*On the horizon occasional car lights thread to Quanea. Locals, quitting at the nicely judged last moment, speed to the high ground. One stops, the headlights swing round, and the car idles beside the*

*Eighteen Foot Drain. A false alarm: it executes a three-point turn, a dance of light from yellow to red, leaving Dryden's heartbeat rattling. He shivers now in judders which make it difficult to hold the torch.*

*Another car on the fen. So quickly is it there his eyes struggle to focus on the headlights as they snake nearer. He's come from the south, along the drove. He's almost here and Dryden's underestimated him. Threading through the fields along the narrow banks of the lodes.*

*Half a mile away the car stops. The headlights die.*

*They sit and wait. A trickling minute passes. Then five. Sitting, watching, water rising. He's answered a message from a dead man. Dryden examines the roar of the flood for other, lethal, noises.*

*The moon finds a cloud, the wind drops, and in the sudden suffocating silence a car door closes without a slam.*

*He's coming.*



**THURSDAY, 1ST NOVEMBER**

SEVEN DAYS EARLIER



## CHAPTER ONE

Humphrey H. Holt's licensed minicab crept across the fen like the model motorcar on a giant Monopoly board. The Ford Capri was an icon – from the fluffy toy dice hanging from the rear-view mirror to the beaded seat covers. The back window was stacked with dog-eared children's books hoarded by his daughter – who had fitted the red plastic nose to the radiator and the Jolly Roger to the aerial. Emblazoned with a triple H motif the cab was, not surprisingly, rarely in great demand for weddings. It had once made up the numbers in a funeral cortège – and the family had had the presence of mind amidst their grief to ask for their money back.

Philip Dryden shifted in the passenger seat as they cleared the railway crossings at Queen Adelaide, and turning up the

collar of his giant black greatcoat he eyed the cab's meter. He coughed, drawing in the damp which was already creeping out of the fields. The meter read £2.95. It always read £2.95. He could see the frayed wires hanging loose below the dashboard. The cab hit a bump and the exhaust struck the tarmac with a clang like a cow bell.

Humph wriggled in his seat, setting off concentric rings of wave-like motion in his seventeen-stone torso which he had snugly slipped into his nylon Ipswich Town tracksuit top. Somewhere, deep inside, a large length of gut cavorted.

Another bump on the drove road put the car briefly into flight before it returned to earth with a bone-shaking thud. The suspension, a matrix of rusted steel, was not so much shot as dead and buried.

The jolt dislodged the passenger side vanity mirror which dropped neatly in front of Dryden's face. He stared at himself in irritation: his imagination was romantic and he found his own face a dramatic disappointment, which was odd, as most people, and almost all women, found it striking if not handsome. But self-knowledge was not one of his virtues. The bone structure was medieval, the face apparently the result of several blows of a Norman mason's chisel into a single limestone block. Jet black hair followed the architectural design – cropped and severe. It was the kind of face that should have been illuminating an Anglo-Saxon chronicle.

He flipped up the vanity mirror and smudged a porthole in the condensation of the window. 4.10 p.m. A lead expanse of chill cloud over the fen, occasionally lit by the red and green of half-hearted fireworks. The temperature had not risen above freezing all day and now, as the light bled away, a mist crept

out of the roadside ditches to claw at the cab's passing tyres.

Dryden checked his watch. 'We could do with being there,' he said. Like most reporters he'd learnt the hard way that patience is a vice.

Humph adopted an urgent posture which produced no discernible increase in speed. The cab swept on while beside them a flock of Canada geese, just airborne, began its long slow ascent into the sky.

Two miles ahead a blue emergency light blinked – a lighthouse in the dusk. A mile away to the east the fairy lights of a pub twinkled in the gloom.

'Tesco trolleys,' said Dryden, searching his coat pockets for a pen. Instead he produced a miniature pork pie, the remnants of a quarter-pound of button mushrooms, and an untouched half-pound of wine gums.

Humph adjusted the rear-view mirror by way of answer. He'd known Dryden for two years now, since the accident which had put Dryden's wife, Laura, in a coma. Humph had ferried him to the hospital through those first critical weeks. In that time he'd learnt to let Dryden finish his own sentences. If you can have a conversation entirely based on rhetoric then they did.

Dryden kicked his feet out, irritated that the cab afforded no more leg room than the average car. Had Humph answered? He was unsure.

'I bet you. Three sodding Tesco trolleys and a hubcap. If we're lucky. Brace yourself: another Pulitzer Prize.' Dryden stretched scepticism to breaking point: it was often, wrongly, seen as cynicism.

They came to the sudden T-junction. They were common in the Fens, abrupt full-stops in the usually uninterrupted

arrow-flight of the drove roads. Death traps. Overconfident drivers, lulled by seven miles of tarmac runway, suddenly found themselves confronted by a bank, and then a ditch with ten feet of iced water in the bottom.

A signpost stood at an angle beside the road: FIVE MILES FROM ANYWHERE CORNER. Dryden laughed, mainly because it wasn't a joke.

Across their path lay the bank of the River Lark, a tributary of the Great Ouse – the Fens' central artery. They parked up, short of a yellow and black scene-of-crime tape.

As Dryden reached the top of the bank an industrial arc lamp thudded into life, picking out a circular spotlight on the ice. *Cue Torvill and Dean*, he thought.

In the dusk the bright circle of light hurt his eyes. The Canada geese, having caught them up, flew startled through the arc lamp's beam like bombers picked out in the searchlights of the Blitz. They attempted a landing on ice downriver – a disaster of flailing webbed feet shrouded in gloom.

Dryden started listing hardware in his notebook – a sure sign he knew he might be short of facts to pad out a story. Eight vehicles were drawn up along the foot of Lark Bank. Two local police patrol cars – blue stripes down the side of Ford Fiestas, the county police force's diving unit in a smart purple-striped Cavalier with trailer, the fire brigade's special rescue vehicle, a Three Rivers Water Authority Ford van, and an unmarked blue Rover which might as well have had CID in neon letters flashing from its number plate.

Out on the river four frogmen were trying to break through the ice to attach cables to something just below the surface. One called for oxyacetylene torches and soon the

diamond-blue flames hissed, generating vertical mushroom clouds of steam in the frozen air.

What Dryden needed was a story line: and for that he needed a talking head. What he didn't have was time. *The Crow's* last deadline was 5 p.m.

He scanned the small crowd. He ruled out the senior fireman – politely known as ‘media unfriendly’ – and ditto the water authority PR who was even now smoothing down a shiny silver suit under a full-length cashmere coat.

With relief he recognised a plain-clothed detective on the far bank. Detective Sergeant Andy Stubbs was married to one of the nurses who cared for his wife. They'd met occasionally at the hospital, both keeping a professional distance. Dryden decided businesslike was best: ‘Detective Sergeant.’ It was nearly a question – but not quite. An invitation to chat.

Detective Sergeant Stubbs turned it down. ‘Dryden.’ He zipped up an emergency services luminous orange jacket. The body language shouted suspicion.

Dryden looked out over the floodlit river with an air of enthusiasm more suited to the terraces at Old Trafford. He grinned, rubbing his hands together with excitement, then he made his pitch. ‘What's all this about then, Mr Stubbs?’ A mixture of deference and jollity which Dryden judged the perfect combination. The jollity was more than a front. He suffered from the opposite of clinical depression – a kind of irrational exuberance.

‘County has put a stop on all information, Dryden. We're not quite sure what we've got. We've been out here three hours. Give me ten minutes and if nothing has come up I'll give you a statement.’

‘I need to file in twenty minutes to make copy.’

DS Stubbs nodded happily. He didn’t give a damn.

In the distance Dryden could see Humph’s cab. The internal light was on and dimly he could see the taxi driver gesticulating wildly. Humph was at conversational level in four European languages which he had learnt from tapes. This year it was Catalan. In December, to avoid Christmas, he would take two weeks holiday in Barcelona – alone and blissfully talkative. Typically he sought fluency in any language other than his own.

Stubbs appeared to have the same problem.

Dryden tried again. ‘Car then – under the ice.’ He beamed in the silence that followed as if he’d got an answer.

Out on the frosted river the frogmen were attaching four metal cables to the car roof at its strongest points, having melted the surface ice with hand-held blowtorches fed by gas lines running back to the fire brigade’s accident unit. The steel cables ran to the county police force’s portable winch, which in turn was connected by cable to the fire engine’s generator. An industrial pump was churning out hot water in a steaming gush from the bank, gradually producing a pond of slush which bubbled around the divers. Beside the single arc lamp uniformed police officers were setting up scene-of-crime lights along the bank. One of the firemen was filming the scene with a hand-held video camera. There was enough hardware for the climax of a Hollywood disaster movie – on ice.

Dryden had seen it all before. The emergency services could never pass up an opportunity to wheel out their toys and put in some real-time training. He half expected the force helicopter to *thwup-thwup-thwup* into earshot.

‘Quite a show, Mr Stubbs.’

Stubbs looked right through him. The effect was oddly unthreatening. Dryden felt better and grinned back.

For a detective sergeant of the Mid-Cambridgeshire Constabulary Andy Stubbs managed to radiate an almost complete absence of authority. His face was so undistinguished it could have been included in a thousand identity parades, and his eyes were an equally forgettable grey. His hair was short and fair, echoing the talcum-powdered dryness of his skin. He reeked of Old Spice.

Dryden fingered his collar. Stubbs's colourless coolness always made him uncomfortable. He put on his desperate face: one down from suicidal and one across from murderous. He stepped closer. 'Any ideas? I'm a bit pushed for time.'

Stubbs decided to talk, not because he could see any advantage in it, but because he liked Dryden, or more accurately he envied him: envied him his lack of order and responsibilities, his freedom, and his untied existence. And he pitied him. Pitied him for the very reason for that freedom: a beautiful wife confined to a hospital bed for the rest of her life.

'There's something under the ice,' he said.

Dryden screamed inwardly. He could see that for himself.

'And that's off the record – it's all off – OK?'

Dryden held out both hands to indicate that his notebook was back inside the greatcoat – not that that had ever stopped him remembering a good quote. 'We never spoke, Mr Stubbs.'

'The river froze last night around 2 a.m. – the frogmen say the sheet of ice was unbroken. So the car went in before then. The nearest habitation is the Five Miles from Anywhere, the pub over there. Must be a mile. They don't get much trade in winter. They've heard nothing – saw a few fires around last night – but

that's par for the course around Guy Fawkes.' As if on cue a distant percussion echoed round the fen. They turned to see a cascade of orange and red fireworks burst over the distant silhouette of Ely Cathedral, standing two hundred feet above the black peat Fens.

'Who found it?'

'Kids. Skating. You can see something clearly from above. But today's the first day they've been out on the river – so it could have been there for weeks.' Stubbs looked reluctant to go on. 'I've got no real idea what we've got, Dryden, and that's off the record too. I can't afford some damn fool quote in the paper.'

Not again.

Six weeks earlier Stubbs had responded to an emergency call relayed from county headquarters. An anonymous member of the public said a car had crashed in a field known as Pocket Park on the edge of town. It was a local landmark and the site of Ely's annual fair. By the time Stubbs got there it was dark and there was no sign of the car in the field. So he called it a hoax and went home to tea.

The following day they found the driver dead at the wheel in the next field. The coroner ruled that the victim, an eighty-four-year-old pensioner, had died instantly from a heart attack, having swerved off the main road and carried on into a ditch.

It was the local TV that crucified Stubbs. A two-man team from Cambridge caught him on his front step the next night. The house was in worst Barrett Estate Tudor. His wife, Gaynor, made the mistake of coming out to greet him with the two kids – a show of solidarity which made good TV. The news crew flooded the front garden with an arc lamp and blinded the kids, who started crying. It was just about the worst time to be asked the one question he couldn't really answer.

'Any message for the family of the dead man, Detective Sergeant?'

Fatally, Stubbs tried irony: 'We all make mistakes.'

It was a great headline and excruciating TV. Stubbs was up for a police tribunal – failing to follow proper procedure. It didn't help being the son of a former deputy chief constable. So no more quotes. And no more cock-ups – which explained what appeared to be massive overreaction to a dumped car.

Dryden was running out of time. 'No problem – all off the record. Just a short statement saying nothing is fine, but give us a clue. I've got a story to file – at the moment it looks like "mystery surrounds". Bit thin. Any idea if the driver is still on board?'

Stubbs started to answer and then they heard it: the *thwup-thwup-thwup* of the county helicopter following the Lark upriver from Mildenhall.

'Well, we are honoured.' Dryden made a mental note to get some stills off the fire brigade's video for *The Crow's* sister paper, *The Express*.

Stubbs popped some chewing gum and tugged at the overtight tie and starched white nylon collar of his shirt. 'It's a car. It must have been doing sixty to get that far out from the bank. Either the driver's in it or he got out just in time – and if he got out just in time he knew he was ditching it. So why ditch it that far from the bank? There are some fairly fresh tyre marks running to the edge, but no signs of a skid on the road. And as far as we can tell no other tyre marks at all in the last twenty-four hours.'

The detective walked off to indicate the end of the conversation. The helicopter arrived on the scene and hovered about sixty feet above the frogmen, adding its searchlight to the

blaze of electricity. Dryden checked his watch. He had another ten minutes in which to file – tops. The draught from the helicopter had taken a few more degrees off the temperature so he walked to the high flood bank, and then eastwards beside a bleak field of winter beet.

He looked out over the black water and shivered at a memory from his childhood. Another frozen river and a skating child. The sound of cracking ice and the sudden plummet into the shocking water. The colour had been extraordinary. The painfully clear blue of a winter's sky seen through the crushed white lens of the ice. He'd sunk, drifting downriver, away from the jagged circle where he had crashed through the ice. Looking up into the receding world, he had been too young to know he was drowning. He'd felt like sleeping after the first panic of the fall. Sleeping where the light was dimmer and wouldn't hurt his eyes. Below. He had been ten, and drowning, looking up into a world he didn't want to leave.

Boxing Day. He'd been given skates but told to stick to the frozen pond behind the barn. But that was dull. The channel which began by the barn led away from Burnt Fen on its tiny island and out into the secret maze of drains and ditches frozen silent in that bitter winter. He'd skated faster, faster, and finally out, with a great whoop, into the wide expanse of the river.

He still loved that place – not ten miles from where he now stood. It had been his world. He could see for ever and see no one. He hadn't been a lonely child. He had a voice inside him to keep him company. But the voice failed him that Boxing Day morning. It didn't see the thin ice where the swans had slept.

But the voice had not deserted him. As he sank, it whispered a

single word. 'Skates.' They'd been his best present. He'd sat by the Christmas tree to open the blue and silver parcel. 'Skates,' said his voice again. And he'd understood. So he pulled the laces and watched them sink into the gloom below.

He'd risen until his head bumped the ice which froze to his hair, anchoring him to the spot. He wanted to cry then, for the rest of Christmas he was going to miss. His voice had gone. Or too far away to hear.

That was the one moment he would always remember. The unhappiest moment of a happy childhood. The empty desolation of being on the wrong side of that sheet of ice, in the cold sterile water, while the fire burnt at the farm and the smell of Christmas food seeped out of the kitchen. And above him always the criss-crossed pattern of his own skates.

Humph hooted from the cab. Dryden ambled over, drained of energy by the familiar chilling memory. *The Crow* had called on the mobile and they wanted copy. Humph delivered all messages in a flat monotone – indicating indifference. 'I told 'em the police were about to issue a statement and you were holding on for that . . . another ten minutes. They'll ring back . . .'

Dryden slammed the cab door and leant on the roof with his notebook. As so often when faced with a white sheet of paper and a deadline Dryden thought about something else. He saw Humph on the steps of the high court, the decree nisi in one hand, and his daughter by the other. It was the last time he'd seen him smile.

Humph waved the mobile at him through the side window. Dryden kicked the side of the cab and began to compose a paragraph for the Stop Press. In the best traditions of British journalism it said nothing with great style.

He was steeling himself for the ordeal of filing it to Jean, *The Crow's* half-deaf copytaker, when the fire brigade's winch started to whine. As the cables took the strain he heard the ice crack. By the time he got to the bank a spider's web of silver lines had appeared across the ice. The helicopter dropped thirty feet and the downblast swept the loose ice to the banks. The car jerked up a foot, the steel frame creaking and howling under the strain. The metallic blue roof appeared, then the rear windscreen, and then the boot. By the time it reached the bank, water was pouring from two broken side windows. It came to rest on the bank top and, as the cables held it fast, the frogmen searched the inside by torchlight.

It took thirty seconds for their body language to tell him everything he needed to know. He could see relaxation in every practised movement. No sign of a driver or passengers.

Dumped car – big deal. But he got the details. A Nissan Spectre. Latest registration. No bumps, scrapes or window stickers. Road tax paid. Glove compartments empty. They put the torches on the boot and bonnet. Dryden was getting into the cab when one of the firemen gave a shout. He sprinted back, telling Humph to hold the copytaker on line.

They had the arc lamp trained on the open boot. For a second Dryden could not understand what he saw: it looked like the back of a butcher's van. Inside was what was left of a large slab of ice glistening with melted water. Inside that was a body in an unrecognisable form. It had not been cut to fit, but compressed and twisted into the space.

A great Guy Fawkes rocket burst overhead, the stark white light making the image burn into his retina.

There was one body. Male? The face stared at them – one

particular eyeball so close to the surface of the ice it reflected the blue electricity of the arc lamp back into the night. The thick, greying, corn-blond hair was matted with dried blood.

At first Dryden thought the head had been severed from its body. It lay twisted and back over its own shoulder. Then he saw the knuckle of bloodied vertebrae protruding from the neck and the thick flap of flesh that still joined shoulder to head. The sudden exposure to the heat of the lamps was melting the ice quickly, the fingers of one hand beginning to protrude along with a naked, blue-veined foot. Around the flesh streaks of black blood made the white skin look like ice cream drizzled with chocolate.

One of the frogmen was sick in the long grass. Stubbs was unmoved. In control. He called the police photographer over to capture the position of the body before the ice melted. Then he used the squad-car radio to get the pathologist, coroner's officer, and forensic team. Murder enquiry procedure.

Dryden told the copytaker the story was coming: he did that twice to make sure she'd heard the first time. Three hundred and fifty words by five-thirty. He wrote the intro and gave the rest off the top of his head. It wasn't great – but it was in time.

*Police launched a murder hunt yesterday after the butchered body of a man was found locked in the boot of a car winched out of the frozen River Lark, near Ely.*

*The police recovered the car – a new blue Nissan Spectre – from fifteen feet of water two miles south of the village of Prickwillow after children skating on the river spotted it below the ice.*

*Det. Sgt Andrew Stubbs of Ely Police, said: 'Clearly we*

*are treating this incident as suspicious. We have begun a murder enquiry and would appeal to anyone who can help with information to come forward.'*

*The police were unable to provide any clue to the identity of the dead man or the ownership of the car. Forensic experts from Cambridge were due to arrive at the scene late last night. The body was being prepared for removal to the city mortuary at Waterbeach.*

*One eyewitness to the recovery of the car, Ely taxi driver Mr Humphrey H. Holt, said: 'When they got the car out it was a block of ice. Then they got to work on it with the blowtorches. All hell broke loose when they opened the boot. It must have been a horrible sight – they were obviously distressed.'*

*Detectives will concentrate on trying to identify the dead man. It is understood that his head was nearly severed. House-to-house enquiries were underway last night to see if anyone had heard or seen anything suspicious.*

*Detectives will be hampered by the isolated nature of the scene of the crime. The nearest building is a public house – the Five Miles from Anywhere – over a mile to the east. Traffic at the T-junction is extremely rare. Field work in the area has been halted during the current bad weather.*

Dryden got the copytaker to read the story back and then checked with the news desk that he was in time. He was.

The firework display was reaching its climax over the cathedral and the sky was now a riot of lurid colour. The forensic team had got the corpse out of the Nissan and placed it on a body bag. Two medics in protective white suits were struggling to get the stiff limbs inside the plastic shroud. Dryden moved closer while

Stubbs was busy on the mobile. The corpse's feet were still visible, tucked grotesquely into the small of the back. Around one ankle was a short length of heavy rope attached to what looked like a cast-iron pulley block. And one arm hung loose. The hand was tanned and strong and on the wedding finger was a single gold band. *Somewhere*, thought Dryden, *the long wait has begun*.