

Micah Seven Five

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“Trust ye not in a friend,
put ye not confidence in a guide.”
Micah, Chapter 7, Verse 5

Chapter One

THERE ARE FEW better feelings in this world than the gradual realisation, somewhere between sleep and waking up, that you've got the day off.

Take that Tuesday, for example. For the previous few weeks I had worked myself into the ground and on that particular morning, the euphoria felt better than sex: the same climatic high but with none of the mess. Not that I'm an authority on that these days. Not since one, unplanned moment of madness provoked the end of my marriage. In the four months since, I had wrapped work around me like a comfort blanket; avoiding the truth, according to my friends, and suffering the consequences my mother warned me about: not eating properly, drinking too much, not getting enough sleep. Not exactly textbook traits for a policeman.

As for me, I didn't read quite so much into it. I was run off my feet; more nose to the grindstone than head in the sand, like it must be high season for homicide. And as for sex? Probably best to gloss over it. Let's just say I've been ploughing a lone furrow these past few months. I think you catch my drift.

That Tuesday, though, was going to be different. One of those stand-out days in your memory. A Kodak moment. An extra day on the end of the August Bank Holiday, quality time with my son Connor, rather than with my mobile, a bottle of Becks, and a take-away Chicken Jalfrezi for one.

I woke around eight, just long enough to drift for five more minutes before I'd have to yield to the shower and some coffee. I stretched myself out to the tip of every finger and the end of every toe and laid my head back on the cheap polyester pillow, pulling it up on either side of my face to cover my ears as the mobile started to ring. I urged it to stop, reminded it of my day off and threatened it with solitary confinement in the bedside table drawer or replacement with a 'pay as you go'. But it continued relentlessly. I had to answer.

"Munday."

As I spoke, I recognised for the first time the forty-a-day throat my mother had mentioned when we argued the previous evening. The voice on the other end carried the familiar Welsh lilt of Harry Duggan; my friend, colleague, and sergeant.

"Jack, I know it's your day off, but I've something I know you'll want to see."

I propped myself up against the pillows to offset the shock of the cold, painted wall against my back, running my hand up to shake my tousled hair into life and feeling around in the half-light for my glasses.

"Uniform has a body," Harry continued without waiting for instruction, "dumped outside a charity shop. Apparently he was found in one of the black bags left by a do-gooder over the weekend. It was only rung in a half-hour ago. I overheard the call."

I glanced down at my watch. Ten past eight. There's something about seeing a body where it was left, the whole look and smell of the scene that has always influenced my approach to the rest of an investigation. If I didn't see it for myself, it was like reading a novel without starting at the first chapter. But if I went with Harry, I would be stuffed for a ten o'clock start with Connor. I'm ashamed to admit I didn't wrestle with my conscience long enough for it to be considered a fair fight.

"Pick me up in ten. I'll call Connor from the car."

Harry arrived as I ran a black leather belt through the last loop on my Gap chinos. I pulled the leather through the elegant gold buckle and fastened the belt tight. It had been a present from Elaine. She probably hoped I'd hang myself with it now. Harry looked contemptuously around the bedsit, using his fingertips to pick up one of a stack of many empty foil boxes. This one held the congealed remains of a Lamb Pasanda and a stubbed out Marlboro Light. He pushed an overflowing ashtray to one side and moved some empty lager cans off a worn armchair.

"I see you're settling in," he commented, "you know, making it nice."

Harry, like the others, felt I had given in too meekly to Elaine and had been left in undeserved squalor. They thought she was a bitch and weren't afraid to tell me so. But then he, like the others, didn't know the real reason for the break-up. He held up both hands in mock apology.

"Just making conversation."

"Well don't," I replied curtly, pulling on a leather jacket. "Just take me to see the stiff."

Chapter Two

I LOWERED MYSELF into the passenger seat of the unmarked black Mondeo, ignoring the plastic ‘no smoking’ signs stuck crudely onto the leatherette fascia to light up another cigarette. I drew the first slug of nicotine deep into my lungs, and then coughed most of it back up again. The blue smoke that expelled from my nose and mouth met Harry full in the face as he positioned himself in the driver’s seat alongside me. There’s no-one so irritating as a reformed smoker. He coughed his disapproval. I ignored him.

“So who found the body?”

“One of the blue-rinsers that works in the charity shop.”

“What the hell was she doing there at eight o’clock in the morning?”

“Not everyone lives the way you do,” Harry commented.

“Even so, don’t you think it’s a bit early to be opening a charity shop? She must be very committed.”

“I know as much as you do.” Harry looked away to guide us into the flow of traffic on a busy morning roundabout. “I guess there are three types of volunteers; keen, very keen, and insomniacs. She probably comes somewhere between two and three.”

“Do we know anything about the deceased?”

“Nothing at all this early, only that it’s male. Uniform are already there and are holding onto everything pending our arrival.

SOCO should be there by now and the pathologist said he'd pop by."

I pulled my mobile from my inside jacket pocket and punched in Elaine's number; our number until just a few weeks ago. Jason answered.

"Can I speak to my wife?"

I didn't feel compelled to say who it was or to share with him the reason for my call. He picked up on my reticence immediately and quickly passed the handset over. Perhaps he wasn't as stupid as I'd given him credit for. Elaine's reaction was as I had become used to: selfish, irrational, and straight for the jugular.

"Jack, I don't care what today's excuse is, but if this means I'm going to have to cancel my shopping trip, I swear I'll swing for you."

I refused to rise to the bait and this seemed to take the wind from her sails. She calmed down, and even hinted at an apology.

"Anyway," I continued, "I'm particularly pleased to see that the possibility of Connor missing out is your first concern."

"So you *are* letting us down," she replied, "again."

"Calm down. I've never deliberately let either of you down and you know it." I tried to speak evenly and rationally, which isn't always easy on an unreliable mobile with a colleague sitting inches away. "I was always there for both of you. I still would be given half a chance."

"Jack, I'm not taking a lecture from you on selfishness. You're the past master at it. How can you ever hope to be there for us while you're so wrapped up in yourself?"

"Is this where you give me all the clichéd crap about the job and policemen not being suited to marriage?"

"It's nothing to do with the job," snapped Elaine. "It would be easier for you if it was; to have something else to blame it all on. No, this is about you, Jack. It's you and relationships that aren't compatible."

I reeled a little from the attack. My defence just seemed petty and half-hearted in comparison.

“Now that’s not fair. It might have been easier to make things work if you had ever stayed at home rather than swanning around with your mates as if you were still on the pull.”

“It might have been easier to make things work if you’d have kept your hands to yourself that night.”

The bitterness in her voice was palpable. I turned towards the car window and spoke quietly in an effort to prevent Harry from hearing.

“It happened once Elaine, only once. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve apologised for it. It won’t ever happen again.”

“Too right it won’t, because I won’t give you the chance. You let all of us down that night and now you’re doing it again.”

“Who said anything about letting you down today?”

“Well why else would you call?”

“I’m just going to be a bit later than I thought.”

“This is how it starts, Jack. Every bloody time, this is how it starts. I’m going to be a bit late, and then we wait and we wait, and you never show. Well, I’m sick of waiting. So how late are we talking today; an hour, two hours, Christmas?”

She sounded defeated. I found myself worrying for her as well as for Connor. I even started to feel sorry for Jason, the flat pack lover she let move in within weeks. After all, I’d felt that low myself enough times. I didn’t only have the tee-shirt and the board game, I owned the whole bloody toy shop.

“Calm down,” I tried to reason. “I’ve got to stop off at a crime scene and then Harry will bring me straight over. I promise. I should still be with you by ten-thirty. You’ll still get your shopping trip and Connor will still get his day out. No dramas, no crises, no no-shows. Do you think you can pass that onto Connor without telling him what a bastard you think I am?”

The phone clicked.

I wound down the window further, threw out the cigarette butt that had burnt down to the filter, and slipped two pieces of nicotine gum into my mouth and chewed as hard as I could to release my frustration.

“You know you’re not supposed to smoke the cigarettes *and* chew the gum,” Harry mentioned, breaking the silence.

“Nobody likes a smart arse,” I snapped. “Just drive.”

Chapter Three

I WOULDN'T WANT you to think that it was love at first sight. I'm not a great believer in eyes meeting across a crowded room being powerful enough to melt hearts. Like most people, I expect, we started out as mates. Things must have developed faster than I remember; almost as fast, on reflection, as they deteriorated.

At the time, I was still a raw recruit at Hendon, impatient to get out on the streets and make a living from what I'd been taught. I was nineteen years old and utterly invincible in my own mind. I'll admit that lust may well have been on my agenda, but long-term commitment was certainly not. I only had eyes for my career. Elaine would tell you that I've suffered from similar tunnel vision ever since.

I wish I could recount an elaborately dramatic story about the circumstances in which we met, but I'd only be lying. And there's been enough of that going on to produce another book. We first met on a warm Friday night early in June 1983. Elaine and two of her friends had positioned themselves strategically in the doorway of the back bar of the Doctor Johnson, a tired old pub close to the training college. They quietly watched three young cadets desperately trying to impress with their prowess around the pool table. The reality, of course, was that we were as far removed as you can get from Paul Newman in *The Hustler*. As the evening wore on and their rum and cokes went down, the girls' silence began to

be punctuated by occasional comments, which tended to produce either a knowing nod or a shared laugh from within the group.

It was some days later that I learned that we hadn't all been completely unknown to each other. One of Elaine's friends, Tina, and one of my mates, Mark, had previously encountered each other late on the previous Thursday when drunken fumbling after closing time had led to Tina giving Mark an impromptu blow job in an alley round the back of Hendon Central station. As I recall, they left together again that night. Like us, they also embarked on a relationship, but theirs was even more torrid than ours and certainly more short-lived. They met briefly again for what proved to be the last time when Elaine and I were married. Soon after, Mark was killed by a hit and run driver as he ran for a bus across the Finchley Road. We told Tina but she decided not to attend his funeral. Neither of us had contact with her after that.

Of the three girls, Tina was the dominant personality. Big and brassy with more jewellery than H Samuel, she did the best she could to accentuate her assets. Her fleshy body was squeezed into (and spilling out of) a deep pink vest top that was similar in colour to the uneven flashes of red across her chest and shoulders where the sun had left its mark on the previous hot, early summer days. She chewed gum with the dedication of an Olympic sportsman and periodically ran a steel afro-comb through her wiry, bleached hair. Her equally fleshy legs ran down from the bottom of a tight, white denim skirt to black patent high-heeled shoes, topped with a delicately hung gold ankle chain.

Elaine and her other friend Linda stood very much in Tina's shadow. At that time, Tina set the tone not only for their evenings but for much of their lives as well. She dictated the where and the when, took care of all the arrangements and they, in turn, looked to her for almost every instruction. Elaine later admitted she had been taken by surprise by my interest, which, as it developed from flirtation and friendship into a relationship, seemed to anger Tina, who detected a lessening in her influence. The start of our

relationship gave Elaine the opportunity that she had needed to detach herself from Tina. I watched with no little pride as she grew in confidence, began to establish her own personality, and then stand firmly on her own two feet. She was certainly making up for lost time and I enjoyed being the catalyst for it.

That particular night, though, was all about pairing off and which of us would end up with which of them. Tina clearly had the taste for Mark. She would wait until he went down on a shot before sidling up alongside him at the table, suggestively stroking the end of his cue. At first he found it off-putting, but by the second or third time, he realised there was more on offer than the game and the chance to get one over on the lads. That left my other friend, Matt, a tall, blonde-haired rugby-playing type. He had long lost interest in the game and was leaning against the doorframe where Linda stood, draining the dregs from another pint of lager. He would later make his intentions clear to everyone by returning from the gents brandishing a vending machine pack of condoms with a sly nod and a wink in Linda's general direction. Everyone, it seemed, understood the rules. By now, Elaine stood with her back to the game, carefully studying the options open to her on the jukebox. I walked up behind her and held out a handful of coins.

“Play me something,” I suggested.

She smiled and took three pieces of silver from my palm.

“What do you like?”

“Your call. Surprise me.”

As someone who was usually swayed by The Smiths, The Jam, and Echo & The Bunnymen, “Take That Situation” by Nick Heyward probably – well, certainly – wasn't the song I would have chosen. And it was hard to disguise the fact.

“You don't like Haircut 100?”

“I've never looked good in a chunky-knit sweater.”

“So I suppose Nik Kershaw's out of the question too?”

“And Howard Jones, and The Thompson Twins, and Wham.”

She laughed; I did too. And at that point the connection was made.

We were the last to leave the bar that night. And while Mark and Tina got it on again in an alley somewhere and Matt and Linda road-tested the vending machine condoms in the back of his Ford Cortina, Elaine and I just walked and talked. I tried to argue that “Bring On The Dancing Horses” knocked “Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go” into a corner, but she was having none of it. We kissed as I walked her home, but nothing more.

The rest followed in its own good time. We started to see more of each other and soon found ourselves looking for ways of meeting away from the rest of the group, during the day as well as in the evenings. Elaine showed genuine interest in what I was doing and I was only too happy to regale her with tales of life inside Hendon and paint her fanciful pictures of the glittering police career that I believed lay ahead of me. She always indulged me, not once displaying the cynicism that, on reflection, she must have been feeling. We seemed emotionally, sexually, and socially compatible and, though I had always promised myself I wouldn't, I found myself seeing her as inextricably linked with my future.

It came as no surprise to anyone when we moved in together as soon as I graduated from Hendon. She was there to see me pass out alongside my parents and hers was the first face I looked for as I scanned the watching crowd. She told me she was proud to be there and I was equally proud to have her there.

I have asked myself since whether we then slipped inevitably but unnecessarily towards marriage and whether things would have been different if we had chosen to just continue cohabiting. I have asked myself whether the formality of marriage, the whole, serious grown-upness of it all, put us under a pressure that we could have done without. Connor's birth was certainly a source of great excitement. I remember vividly, though, as I left the hospital in the early hours afterwards, that in some way it had changed everything. No matter how hard we might try to convince ourselves, neither of

us could possibly expect to be the same people, unchanged by the experience or the expectations of parenthood. Our responsibility for this new little life simply confirmed our move into a different league.

I can't pinpoint a precise moment when it all started to go wrong. Believe me, I've thought long and hard about it, expecting one particular event to hit me like a bright light as the defining moment in our relationship. It hasn't. Maybe things don't work like that. Certainly that night may have brought things to a head, but it was a symptom rather than the cause in the breakdown of our relationship. But *when* compatibility became incompatibility is still an unknown for me.