



Chapter A

Brakes squealed. Metal crunched against metal. There was the sound of tearing tarpaulin and the car came to rest half under the lorry and half under the lorry's load which had been released by the force of the accident.

The lorry driver had sat at the junction for at least ten minutes before there was even a small break in the rush-hour traffic. The wipers were set to their fastest speed to try and clear some of the rain which seemed to be gushing rather than pouring down the windscreen. He had carefully eased the lorry out onto the main road not wishing to disturb his cargo in any way.

Some minutes earlier the lorry had pulled out of the big gateway of the army barracks where it had filled up with some of the town's finest and most pungent horse manure and the driver was understandably nervous about losing such a load.

Unfortunately for all concerned, the side window of the lorry was not equipped with wipers and the driver was unable to see the large black car bearing down on him at breakneck speed. The car driver was equally ill placed to see the lorry because not only was he handicapped by the weather but also by the heavily tinted windows of his vehicle.

Hence the crunch.

Small amounts of this horses' 'by-product' weigh little but ten tonnes of it weigh...ten tonnes. The car was almost completely flattened and it was fairly clear that whoever had been driving would have suffered a similar fate.

Despite it looking unlikely that an ambulance crew would be any use whatsoever, a call to summon help was put through to the emergency services. It was more than a little difficult for the switchboard operator to make out what the caller was saying at first and she had to get him to repeat his location several times before she could reliably send the crew on their way.

"Ever such a funny voice, he's got," she told Polly, one of the ambulance crew, over the radio. "Sounded foreign but just like he was holding his nose too. Wouldn't leave his name either. Aren't people funny? Over."

Polly had been having a very late lunch when the call came through and she now swallowed the last bit of the sausage sandwich which she had taken along with her. “Sure are. Not clear how long it’s going to take us to get there. Traffic’s appalling and this rain’s really not helping. Over.”

The journey was slower than even Polly could have imagined and she was amazed that, in spite of blue lights flashing and sirens blaring like it was the end of the world, they still did not manage to get to the scene of the accident before one of the large cars from Unwins Undertakers.

“How do they do it?” she asked Dan as they both opened their doors to leap out. Dan, however, was unable to answer because he was overwhelmed by the appalling smell which greeted them.

“What on earth is that? What was on the back of that lorry anyway?” It did not take long for it to dawn on him that the job they were about to deal with was maybe one of the most unpleasant of his career to date. “Great! I’m so glad that I agreed to cancel my leave for this, I must say.”

“One thing’s for certain,” Polly put in, “there is no way that *I* am going to dig him out of there.

“If this rain keeps up you won’t need to dig. That stuff will have completely turned into slurry in about half an hour.”

“Yes, and if the driver’s alive now, he sure won’t be after swallowing eight pints of slurry. Someone’s going to have to get him out. But who, because it took *us* long enough to get through here with the traffic?” As she spoke, they heard the sound of boots pounding behind them. They both turned to see roughly forty soldiers running towards them in formation, brandishing not guns but shovels. “Aha!” said Polly. “The cavalry’s arrived.” She was never one to miss a joke, no matter how inappropriate the circumstances.

The soldiers made short work of the digging and before long the car was exposed enough that the fire brigade were able to prise open the driver’s door like a can of tinned tomatoes.

Polly poked her head into the car and realised that the car resembled tinned tomatoes in other ways too. “There’s blood everywhere in here,” she called back to Dan. “Nasty head wound. And would you believe it, the guy was wearing dark glasses. On a day like this, he had it coming to him, I’d say. What an idiot!” Polly had been in this job for just under seven years and it had created in her, what other colleagues called a ‘sympathy bypass’.

Once the car had been opened, it didn't take long to load the patient into the back of the ambulance and they were soon nudging their way through traffic on the way back to the hospital.

In the recovery room, Doctor Dennis Dobbing, the registrar in charge that evening soon established that the patient's life was not at risk but that because of the severe blow to the forehead at the point of impact and the subsequent crushing under the weight of the 'material' it would, in his professional opinion, be a very long time before the patient recovered consciousness. It was also not possible, in his professional opinion, to estimate the amount of long-term damage caused by the injuries.

The patient, now known as Patient A, was quickly transferred to the Intensive Care Unit – mainly to free up space in an increasingly crowded Accident and Emergency department. It was a Friday evening and there was a big football-match on television. This combination always resulted in a great deal of alcohol being consumed and a great strain being placed on hospitals all across the country.

At this stage, the patient could only be named Patient A because there was absolutely nothing either on him or inside the car with which to identify him. No driving licence, no credit cards, no receipts even. Not one scrap of paper, not one thing.

The police investigating the incident, naturally pursued the matter of the car registration. They immediately put a trace on the car number plate and found that it was registered to a Mr. Zoltan Zappa of Zappa Towers.

They prepared themselves to deliver some very bad news and went round to Zappa Towers to see if they could find anyone home. The house was on a terribly exclusive road and was approached through immense black gates topped by a fearsome looking crest complete with obligatory hook-beaked eagles. A huge gravel drive led up to the rather ostentatiously large front doors.

The police banged the huge eagle doorknocker and, after a short wait, an incredibly tall man answered the door. They were so taken aback by the man's extraordinary height and imposing demeanour that trying to see the top of his head they both nearly fell backwards onto the gravel.

"Erm, good...afternoon...sorry, I mean good...evening, sir. Are we at the home of one Mr. Zoltan Zappa?" said a very flustered Constable Christine Campbell.

"I am he," boomed back the man in the deepest voice it was possible to imagine. It was difficult to tell from just those three words, just exactly where the man's accent was from. This,

however, was really the least of the police officers' problems since they had left lying in Intensive Care the man they had thought to be Mr. Zappa.

"Do you, Mr. Zappa, own a large black Range Rover, registration number ZAP 1Z?" squeaked a now trembling Constable Campbell. This was not giving the best impression possible of the local force but it was difficult for Christine to remain composed when confronted by a two metre giant who she thought to be currently in a coma.

"Dat is no longerrrr my vehicle. I have sold dis some tvelve monsss ago. Vot is dis all about, anyway?" growled back Mr. Zappa in an increasingly irritated tone.

"Your vehicle, sorry, erm, ex-vehicle has been involved in a serious accident and the driver is currently unconscious in the Intensive Care Unit of Hope House Hospital. Could you...do you think...shed any light on the possible identity of this, erm, gentleman?"

"How vood I know. I juss tol you dat I solt it von year ago ent I solt it to a dealerrr. Now please go away and leave me alone. I am a verrry busy man and do not have time for such games."

With that, he retreated into the house and slammed the door in the faces of the police officers, who did, of course, feel rather disgruntled at being treated in such an ignorant fashion but who were also incredibly relieved at having the excuse of retreating from that rather scary establishment with its more than scary resident.

Inspector Ian Irving decided that now, having let poor Constable Campbell take all the flack from a very angry Mr. Zappa, he would assume command of the situation. "Right, Campbell, well it looks like it's back to the station and back to the drawing board with regard to our nameless patient. By now, the boys should have gone over that car with a fine tooth-comb and maybe, just maybe they'll have discovered something vaguely useful."

Inspector Irving did not value highly the abilities of his colleagues in forensics but, actually, a fine-tooth comb had not been needed at all for the discovery which they unveiled to the Inspector the following day at the station.

Just as expected, when the team had opened up the boot of the car there was nothing. No bits of rubbish or empty shopping bags, but more significantly, nothing useful in case of emergency. No car-jack, no warning triangle, no blanket or box of tissues. This was becoming

more and more mysterious. Never had the team seen such a clean and empty car before; it had to be deliberate.

“Spare tyre must be under the carpet, sir”, Sergeant Spencer called out to his superior who was combining supervising the operation with drinking a large milky coffee, eating an extremely messy doughnut and telephoning a drinking pal to arrange the evening’s entertainment. He was also using the opportunity to show off to his team that he had got one of the first new-fangled mobile phones on the market.

Two of the officers in their white plastic boiler suits stood on the other side of the car watching him. “What an idiot! Look at him, the big ‘I Am’. Does he know he looks like he’s holding a brick to his head and talking into it?”

His colleague whispered back, “Maybe it *is* a brick. Ibbo would buy anything if it meant that he could flash some cash about.” There was no love lost between the Inspector and his team.

Ibbotson barked at Spencer. “Well, get the tyre out then Sergeant! Honestly, do I have to do everything around here myself?!....Are you still there, Dave? Right the Red Lion at eight, then?”

“Guv, guv, you’d better come and have a look at this!”

“What is it now, Spencer? Do you think I’ve never seen a spare tyre before? What, has it got a flat, or something? Quick run to the guy’s bedside and book him for it!”

“Not ‘a flat’ exactly, sir. More ‘a float’.”

“Listen, Spencer, *you* might be into the cryptic crosswords in the posh newspapers you read in the canteen in the desperate hope that someone will think you are intelligent. *I* on the other hand would rather have my information given to me as straightforward as possible. Now what the blazes are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the biggest stash of money that I’ve ever seen in my life, sir. It’s right here, stuffed inside the well for the spare tyre.”

The doughnut, coffee and telephone crashed to the floor as Inspector Ibbotson went dashing over to inspect this ‘stash’. This being a big car, it was a big tyre well and it was absolutely full of £50 notes. It was indeed a vast sum of money.

“Get it out, Spencer, get it out. Let’s count it!” Ibbotson shouted in his excitement.

“Don’t you think that we ought to check it over for fingerprints, traces of drugs, anything like that before we actually count it? After all sir, we *are* the forensic squad.” Sergeant Spencer, who had always had his doubts about the skill and integrity of Ibbotson, spoke with more than a hint of condescension, flavoured with a large amount of suspicion.

“Well, obviously, Spencer, I didn’t mean count it before it had been checked over. Honestly, sometimes I think you’ve just got no idea at all. I have to spell out every little thing.” With that the inspector retreated to pick up his now slightly battered phone. “Somebody clear up this mess! This place is such a tip! There’s coffee and jam everywhere. I’ll be in my office. Don’t disturb me unless you’ve got something half way useful to report like where in the hell all that money has come from.” And he left, leaving his grateful team to get on in peace with the task in hand.

It took hours to find out that there were no useful prints on the money. “These are all used notes,” Spencer told the team. “They’ve probably been through hundreds of hands by now.”

The sniffer dogs came in and found no trace of narcotics, explosives; nothing untoward at all in fact.

Naturally, the next step was to check the serial numbers on the notes to see if it was stolen loot. This was another lengthy operation because there were just so many of them and every single one had to be entered into the police computer. It was made all the more difficult by the fact that it was now the middle of the night and all the data entry clerks were, understandably, at home tucked up in bed. Sergeant Spencer was a bright lad and had many skills but, sadly, typing was not one of them, which made the task extremely laborious.

Finally at 8.30 the next morning, Spencer reached his conclusion about the stash. It seemed that this money was clean. In no way was it related to a crime of any description and it looked like it would have to be handed over to Patient A, when and if he ever recovered. Ibbotson was not going to like this and, unfortunately, he was often guilty of ‘shooting the messenger’.

“You lads better head on home now and get a good ‘morning’s’ sleep unless anyone fancies helping me break the news to the Inspector?” He looked around at the worried, silent faces. “Thought not. Well, wish me luck, anyway!”

At least Spencer knew he’d got a good two hours before he had to hand the information over because the Inspector could be relied upon never to be in the station before half ten, particularly after a night on the tiles. The sergeant was going to use that time to investigate further the small brown packet found tucked in among the £50 notes.

Down in the basement, where the station’s rather underused and dusty library was located, Sergeant Spencer had a great deal of difficulty locating the book he was looking for. He eventually found it tucked away among books on Passion (crimes of) and Pottery (antique and modern). “How could ‘Botany (a comprehensive encyclopaedia of)’ end up in the ‘P’

section?”, Spencer thought to himself. “Of course, silly me, P for plants not B for botany.” Not all the officers in the station had Spencer’s education.

The book, which Spencer had pulled off the shelf, was gigantic and, as he flicked through its seventeen hundred pages, his heart sank. Police work was really nothing like as glamorous as he had seen on the television when he was growing up. No fast cars rushing to arrest the leader of an international drug trafficking gang for Spencer. Oh no, just a trawl through some very dusty books to establish the nature of a small packet of seeds. For that is, indeed, what was in the packet – just seeds. Twenty-six seeds to be precise. Fairly large seeds but nothing extraordinary. They would actually have attracted very little attention had they not been tucked in among the one million three hundred thousand pounds of used notes in the boot of a crashed car.

Luckily for Spencer, in the encyclopaedia there was an entire section on seed identification. He trawled through the whole lot but could find nothing which exactly matched those in the packet. Either the size was not quite right, the shape was slightly off, the colour was a marginally different tone. ‘It’s no good,’ he thought ‘I shall have to take these along to the Botanical Gardens and consult an expert. Meantime, I’d better go up and give Ibbotson the ‘good’ news!’

While he was down in the basement, Spencer had lost track of time and it was already eleven fifteen when he entered Ibbotson’s office, having stowed the seed packet back in with the money for safekeeping. The inspector was not exactly pleased. He had, after all, been at his desk for all of forty minutes and had expected to be given the results of the investigation immediately. His mood was not helped by the information which was given to him.

“Right, thanks for nothing, Spencer. You’d better get back on to that case of the jewellery shop robbery. Let’s see if you can come up with something more interesting about that, eh? I’ll take this one from here and write up the report for the super,” Ibbotson mumbled between sips of the liver salts which he was drinking in the vain attempt of making his stomach feel vaguely normal.

“But, guv, there’s one more thing...”, Spencer began.

This time it was not a mumble, which Ibbotson produced, but a roar. “Did you hear what I said, sergeant? *I* will take it from here. Now, get out and do as you’re told!” Clearly Ibbotson had missed every session on the ten-week course in ‘People Management – Getting the Best out of your Team’!

Spencer knew that it was utterly pointless trying to deal with his superior when he was in this sort of mood and left briskly, allowing the door to slam just a little harder than he might

normally do. 'I do hope that that doesn't make his headache any worse,' the sergeant thought, sarcastically. 'Funny though that he should offer to write up the report. He's never done that before.' This was only a fleeting thought in Spencer's mind because he was, quite frankly, glad to have one less job to do.

Inspector Ibbotson left his office ten minutes later, having hastily compiled his report. He hurried along to the property office to pick up three extremely large bags of money. It appeared that he had to attend to a call of nature before proceeding on to Inspector Irving's office to deliver the report and the one million two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. It seems that, since the money had been depleted to the tune of fifty thousand pounds, Spencer's doubts about his inspector's integrity were wholly justified.

Having unceremoniously dumped the money and the report in Irving's office, Ibbotson headed back to his own room to call his superior and report himself too unwell to work the rest of the day. He then picked up his hold-all and rushed out but, of course, just had to pay another quick visit to the Gent's before dashing off home!