

*Seeing Huntford waiting for his wife to return.*

Would his pretty wife see something amiss ... or rather *missed*, and scream for her husband to hurry back up?

But then ...

*Then ...*

Charlie saw a movement in the woods on the other side of the lake. All the time, telling himself that he should just keep running as fast as he could.

He saw *someone* across the lake, on a level with Huntford, and tucked so deep into the undergrowth that it made him stop — something about the whole situation *not right*, not right at all.

With a gulp — he saw that the figure was holding something, and he thought, *Only one thing looks like that, but surely, it can't be ...*

The figure moved a bit again — just the tiniest movement — and Charlie now knew for sure.

*The figure was holding a rifle.*

In that moment, he saw Karl Huntford lean forward as if he too had noticed something that didn't belong with the deer and the birds and the peaceful lake.

Charlie was about to shrug the whole thing off — none of his business, some poacher maybe, intruding on Huntford's property — when he heard a sharp *crack*, producing an echo in the bowl-like depression of the valley and the surrounding wooded hills.

That sound could be only one thing: the gun being fired.

He watched as Karl Huntford's right hand jerked upwards for a second, and then the man tumbled backwards, hitting the small metal table as he did, sending the empty glasses *smashing* down to the deck.

Huntford lay still.

Charlie thought, even as he turned, to run, and even as he heard a scream from the house getting louder and louder ...

*I've just seen a man being murdered!*

And then he was racing through the woods towards his car.

The car was just where he'd left it. Charlie flung open the driver's door, quickly wedged the backpack behind the passenger seat, then — remembering at the last minute not to make a noise — shut the door as quietly as he could and rummaged in his pocket for his key.

*Stay calm, Charlie, stay calm*, he muttered to himself, trying to slow his breathing, steady his heart.

*Nobody saw you, you're just here for a walk, didn't see a thing, didn't hear anything.*

He started the engine, gritting his teeth at how loud it sounded, then backed out of the rough undergrowth, and carefully swung the car onto the trail.

It was around a mile through the woods to the Cherringham road — and Charlie knew once he was there, especially with it getting darker by the minute — he'd be safe.

*Just don't panic, don't go too fast, don't draw attention, he thought. Done nothing wrong, just out for a nice drive, nothing to see here, officer.*

Two minutes later and Charlie was feeling calmer, the old Nissan gently eating up the yards, his headlights off, the woods totally deserted, Cherringham — and safety — getting closer.

No sign of police yet.

He glanced round at the backpack and allowed himself the quick thought — *those jewels, worth a fortune!*

He reached a crossroads in the woods, and was about to drive straight over, when — seemingly from nowhere — a vehicle shot across the junction from his left, going like crazy.

He hit the brakes hard, and so did the other vehicle.

It slewed past him, missing him by inches — the driver's face a shocked blur as both vehicles froze. And then it fish-tailed back onto the trail and was gone, accelerating away in a cloud of dust.

Charlie's eyes were locked on the vehicle as it disappeared round a curve into the woods, his heart smashing in his chest again, his face dripping with sweat.

An old Land Rover, he thought, guessing the vehicle's make from the boxy shape. But the colour — in this near darkness, impossible to tell.

Had the driver seen him? He couldn't tell. Maybe. Maybe they would tell the police — and he'd be done for!

He frowned. Why were *they* driving so damn fast? In fact — what were *they* doing in the woods, out here, at this time, in this darkness?

And then Charlie Topper had a terrible series of thoughts.

All making perfect sense.

*What if that driver was the killer?*

*And what if they'd recognised him?*

*Recognised Charlie's old Nissan?*

*Guessed that he'd been at the house?*

Charlie knew that if the answer to *any* of those questions was "yes" ...

*...then he was in big, big trouble.*

### 3. Eight Months Later

Jack noticed his springer spaniel, Riley, starting to walk oddly as they hit the gangplank to his canal boat, *The Grey Goose*.

The early morning walk across the icy meadows had been without incident.

And though Jack had nearly slipped to the ground a couple of times, Riley had — as usual — shown no concern about the treacherous conditions and the bracing wind.

These last few weeks had been as cold as Jack had ever known it in Cherringham — so bitterly, relentlessly cold that even the river itself had started to freeze.

But now, he watched Riley limping and knew something was up.

Usually, at the end of a walk, Riley would have dashed up and down that plank half a dozen times, as if eager to be out of the cold as much as Jack. But now he took the incline of the plank carefully, slowly, obviously favouring his left front paw.

“Hey boy, something wrong there?”

Riley looked at Jack as if wanting to answer.

“We’ll get inside, out of the cold, then take a look, okay?”

Riley had been his dog ever since he’d come to Cherringham. In fact, Jack couldn’t imagine living here *without* Riley on the boat, always ready for walk, a run. And, on the warm days, a vigorous game of fetch.

If there was anything seriously wrong, Cherringham had a good vet, just at the far end of the town. Always good for Riley’s shots, and the occasional check-up.

Careful not to slip on the icy deck, Jack opened the door to the boat’s saloon, and Riley immediately — and uncharacteristically — went to his pillow bed, and curled up, as if hoping whatever was bothering him would just go *away*. But Jack pulled a wooden chair from his small table close to Riley and his bed, and crouched down low.

“Okay, boy — just gonna take a look at that paw, right?”

Riley kept his head firmly nuzzled into both front paws and the pillow itself.

Jack reached down, very gently unentangled that right front paw, then raised it a bit. Riley made a small noise — not of protest, Jack thought. Just a sound indicating there was some pain there.

Jack slid out his phone to turn its light on: the pad of Riley’s paw at first looked okay. But then Jack saw the problem.

A needle-like piece of wood was buried deep in the paw, and had probably been driven deeper with each step Riley had taken after picking it up.

“Ah, there we are. A splinter. No one likes those, Riley. Imagine it feels a lot worse when you walk on all fours? Won’t take a second.”

And Jack — again so gently — laid the paw back down and walked back to the ship’s small head, with an even smaller medicine cabinet, with just a few essentials.

He opened the cabinet and retrieved a pair of tweezers — always useful for when Riley picked up a tick — and a small tube of antiseptic.

Then back to Riley.

“Only take a second,” Jack said. And he lifted the paw, and, fastening the tweezers on the small bit of the splinter that protruded, *he slid it out*.

And Riley’s eyes went wide.

But he didn’t moan or growl. He was too good a dog for that.

“Now, a little something to make it feel better,” Jack said.

He unscrewed the tube, squeezed out a dollop of the ointment, and dabbed it at the entry point of the splinter. If Riley kept his outdoor ramblings to the absolute minimum, he should be fine.

Jack stood up, slid the chair back.

Riley’s response to the medical procedure was to shut his eyes.

*Time for some breakfast*, Jack thought.

There was a familiar *rat-a-tat* knocking at the *Goose’s* door. Familiar because Jack knew only one person who dropped in, and signalled it with that rhythmic pattern of knocks. Jack’s affable neighbour, friend, and someone who liked his beer and weed in equal measure — Ray Stroud.

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As Jack turned to the door, Ray, without waiting, opened it and leaned in — and Jack could see that this was no jovial visit by his stoner friend.

“Ray ... little early for you, isn’t? More of an ‘up by noon’, kind of guy? Got a job interview?”

Normally, Jack’s joke would have produced a smile.

But Ray, someone who played life loose and fast, now looked stony faced.

“Jack, I wonder if I could—” Ray looked around the boat as if checking they were alone.

*Yes, not the Ray of late nights and burning the midnight oil.*

“Yeah, Ray?”

“—have a word?”

“Sure, take a seat and I’ll—”

But Ray shook his head.

“No. I mean back at my boat.”

Jack said nothing to that. This whole thing was odd, certainly for Ray. Now the request to join him on his ramshackle boat.

“No worries, Ray. Glad to have a chat anywhere.”

He didn’t add that he was now curious exactly *why* it had to be on Ray’s boat.

But putting his heavy Barbour coat back on, and grabbing a cap, Jack nodded to his friend.

“Lead on.”

And Ray, almost as if he didn't really want to go back to his boat, turned, and walked in front of Jack as they left *The Grey Goose* for the old *Magnolia*.

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Climbing up the plank to Ray's barge was always a challenge. A piece of wobbly wood that could barely fit one person, it creaked and wobbled as Jack, at nearly a hundred and seventy pounds, made his way up.

*One of these days, he thought, one wrong step on Ray's plank, and I'll find myself in the water.*

But Ray kept bustling ahead. As Jack entered, the smell of *ganja* — as always — was heavy inside the boat, along with a few other odours of unknown origin, discernible in the fog of smoke from Ray's ancient wood-burning stove.

Ray shut his door tight, turned, and hurried to the aft end of the boat, where Jack knew there was a small sunken area where Ray — if the effort of finding his actual bed seemed too much — would often happily pass out.

But now, as Jack took the steps down, minding his head on the low ceiling beam as he did, he saw that the space was occupied ...

By a man, who looked like he must indeed be one of Ray's clan.

Longish, stringy hair. A full chin of stubble. A thick plaid shirt that could easily hide a host of drops and dribbles. Jeans showing signs of mud, paint.

The man looked up as Ray, clearing his throat (the time for a formal introduction having arrived) said, "Jack, this is one of my mates, Charlie Topper. And he says he's in a whole *lotta* trouble."

Jack nodded at this. Bent over with the low ceiling, he looked for a clean space on the tattered U-shaped settee to sit.

*Why did Ray come to me?* he wondered.

He guessed he wouldn't have long to wait to find out.

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"You can trust him, Charlie. *Go on*. Tell him all about it."

Jack watched as Charlie rubbed his bristly chin, as if still assessing the risks of talking to this tall, unknown Yank.

"It won't go beyond these four walls?" said Charlie, peering at Jack.

"Not a word," said Jack, curious as to how Ray's boat might have four walls.

"Go on, Charlie," said Ray.

"Right then. Well, here's the thing, Jack. This last week, there's stuff been happening to me. Bad stuff. Accidents ... that aren't accidents. Know what I mean?"

"Maybe," said Jack. "Explain."