

Broken Bodies

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Published by Orion

Extract

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CHAPTER 1

‘Lovely veg. C’mon missus, two marrows for the price of one. Can’t be fairer than that, can I? Eat one today an’ save the other for tomorrow!’

Daisy Lane laughed but shook her head at the cheeky stallholder’s spiel.

‘No thanks, mate,’ said her friend Vera, winking at the man.

It wasn’t fruit and veg Daisy was looking for but a second-hand book stall. Gosport market was crowded with bargain hunters and stallholders willing to give a bargain – at a good profit. Everything has its price, Daisy thought. Blaring out from the Black Cat cafe was ‘Can’t Buy Me Love’ sung by the Beatles.

‘Too right money don’t buy love, eh, Vera? What d’you think of the Fab Four?’

‘Dunno, Dais. If I was a few years younger maybe I could give you a better answer but I certainly wouldn’t kick that dishy John Lennon out of me bleedin’ bed, that’s for sure.’

Daisy linked arms with the small woman at her side whose dark hair framed her strikingly attractive, heart-shaped face. Vera’s eyes, fringed with false eyelashes, lit up as she turned her head and smiled.

‘It’s good to ’ave you ’ome again. I ain’t ’alf missed yer.’ The Californian Poppy perfume that was Vera’s trademark teased Daisy’s senses. This was her best friend.

‘I couldn’t come back before, you know that. But I was bloody glad to see you when you came to Kos. The villagers thought you was lovely.’

‘I ’ad to come to Greece to be with you, didn’t I? Couldn’t let you ’ave Eddie’s baby on yer own.’ Daisy broke away from Vera,

sidestepping as a very large, determined woman staggering beneath the weight of two overflowing carrier bags barged between them. 'Mind out, missus,' called Vera. 'You could 'ave bleedin' said, 'scuse me!' Then to Daisy in a softer voice, 'Everything all right back there?'

Daisy nodded and warmth flooded her body. Her sensible self told her that little Eddie would be fine with Maria and Aristo, her good friends. They both spoke excellent English and their Taverna Asfendiou had a telephone so Daisy could keep in constant touch. And she certainly wouldn't have left her child unless she knew for certain he would be looked after and loved by them just as much as they cared for their own happy brood. Her worrying self had wanted to get right back on the plane and return to Greece immediately she'd landed at Gatwick Airport. She didn't want to be apart from little Eddie any longer than was necessary.

She adored being with her son and living in their white stone house with the blue painted windows. The house that Eddie, the man she had loved with every fibre of her being, had bought for her. Sadness filled her heart. Being back in Gosport made her remember Eddie even more vividly. His smile, his glossy dark hair . . . why, she could almost smell the citrus tang of his cologne . . .

'Bloody cold, ain't it, Dais?'

She snapped back to the present.

'Tell you what, Vera, it's a bleedin' sight colder 'ere in Gosport for November than over there. You need your fleecy lined drawers on.'

Daisy's eyes continued searching the colourful stalls lining the High Street. She'd almost forgotten how welcoming the market was. Smells issuing from the wet fish stall reminded her of the sea, the Solent waters that surrounded Gosport and divided it from Portsmouth just a short ferry ride away. Then there was the sharp tang of disinfectant overlaid with cheap perfume coming from the household goods stall, along with a transistor radio playing 'Do Wah Diddy Diddy'. Manfred Mann was a local group and the stallholder had turned the volume up. Everywhere she heard the noise and bustle of people and the flap-flap of colourful cheap clothing swinging from market rails in the light wind.

'Look at the price of this!' Daisy stopped and picked up a can of

Johnson's Baby Talcum Powder. 'It's half the cost 'ere to what it is back home.' Daisy's heart constricted and another wave of longing for her son engulfed her.

She thought of his smile, the way he chuckled after his bath when she would wrap his chubby, talcum-powdered body in a warm fluffy towel, leaving a small corner to cover his head and face, then carefully lift up the corner and say, 'Boo!' And his face would break into a huge smile and he'd laugh, and that laughter would warm the very cockles of Daisy's heart. Then she would gaze into his big serious brown eyes, which stayed unblinking as she moved her face closer and closer to his until his eyes went out of focus and became as round as juicy brown currants, and he would giggle anew and grab at her hair.

Vera sniffed loudly and stared at her, almost, Daisy thought, as though she could read Daisy's mind.

'You calling that place 'ome now, Dais? Deserted your real 'ome in Gosport for a Greek island, 'ave yer?'

Daisy turned to Vera. 'You know I 'aven't. But because Eddie got me that little house I feel safe there and imagine, he's there with us.'

Vera made the kind of noise a camel might make as it sneezed, Daisy thought, before she said, 'Fair enough, girl, but there's been a lot going on 'ere just lately an' I might just as well let you catch up on some local news. Remember that poor girl they found dead in the boatyard a couple of years back? The one with the nail through 'er skull?'

Daisy nodded. 'The murder Vinnie Endersby tried to pin on my Eddie?'

Vera stared at her. 'The very same. They only gone an' found another woman in almost the same spot. Poor bitch 'ad needle-marks.'

'Like she was a druggie?'

'No. Well, she was that an' all, but these was like holes in 'er skin. All over her body. An' they found a nail 'ad been driven into one of 'er titties. And she'd been strangled.'

'How come you know all this?' Vera was always a mine of information on what went on around Gosport, thought Daisy. Bit

like the *News of the World* but Vera's interpretations were usually spot on.

'Gloria told me. She said it was a new girl from the Forton Road brothel. She'd only been there a few weeks.'

'Ave they got anyone for it?'

'Nah.'

'If you ain't buyin', ladies, move away from me pitch. You're blockin' me goods from the view of me potential customers...'

Vera turned to the luckless stallholder.

'Shut your gob, Timmy Jenkins. You ain't 'alf the costermonger your father was. I knew your daddy when...'

Daisy pulled Vera away so that the rest of her words were lost in the noise of the crowd, but still Vera managed to slip away from Daisy's grasp and yell back at the man. 'And I've changed your stinkin' nappy!' The red feather on Vera's hat wobbled ferociously as, with a last look at Timmy's crimson face, she said triumphantly, '*That* told 'im. 'Is father used to come round to me every Friday night regular as clockwork for a quick one.'

Daisy put her hand up to her mouth to stifle her laughter. 'Vera, you are funny, you know everyone, 'specially the blokes.'

'Well, when you been on the game most of your life you get to see all sorts of people,' replied Vera. 'Certainly these turds round 'ere.' She waved her arm, jangling with jewellery at the wrist, to encompass the crowds.

The bitter scent of chrysanthemums and winter foliage coming from the flower stall ahead couldn't quite smother Vera's perfume, but Daisy was revelling in it, and in being with Vera. The street vendors' cries were music to her ears. There was nothing like this in Kos, she thought. The sky above was a clear, icy blue and both women were dressed for the cold.

Or rather Daisy was, with a black scarf wound warmly around her neck and her black belted wool coat tied firmly at her waist. Vera wore a suit the colour of holly berries, its skirt so tight she could only take small steps on her five-inch heels. The blouse beneath was of black silk and low cut so that the swell of Vera's breasts was on show for all the market to see.

'No wonder you're cold. Why don't you cover up a bit more?'

'I'm like the market traders, Dais. Got to set out me stall.' She

glanced down at her neat figure with all its curves in the right places. Vera had the eyes of every man with breath in his body looking at her. 'See what I mean, Dais? You either got it or you ain't. And while I 'ave, I'll make the buggers gag for it!' Vera waved at the bloke on the pot stall.

Daisy yanked on Vera's arm to stop her dawdling and laughingly pulled her further into the crowd. 'When you catch pneumonia don't ask for my help,' she said.

Vera suddenly stood stock still. Daisy looked at her small, pained face. 'What's the matter? You got a face like a bag of spanners.'

'If I was really poorly, you would 'elp me, wouldn't you, Dais?' Daisy realised that beneath the bold exterior her friend was as vulnerable as she was. She took a deep breath.

'Vera, next to my little Eddie, you are the only person in this world I truly care about. I would trust you with my life and my son. And with my last fucking breath I'll keep you as safe as I can.' She looked into Vera's eyes and saw they were swimming with tears. 'Don't you fuckin' start that! I couldn't bear it if I made you cry.' Then, more briskly, 'C'mon, you daft old tart. We got a red-haired bloke to find.' She grabbed Vera and pushed her ahead through the shoppers

The stallholders, too, were muffled against the bitter weather. Daisy knew they had arrived at four in the morning to unload iron bars and erect stalls on their pitches. The street lamps and a heavy white frost had been their only light to help them set up in readiness for the day's hard work. Fingerless gloves and layer upon layer of shapeless clothing and endless cups of tea from flasks kept the traders warm as they unloaded boxed goods from vans.

'There he is, Dais!' Vera pointed ahead. 'Yoo, hoo, Bri,' she called. She tottered towards the second-hand book stall. The man finished serving an elderly lady with four popular romance novels, grinned at Vera, and then unexpectedly popped another slim volume into the woman's open shopping bag.

'For good luck, darlin', he said. The old woman smiled up at him.

'God bless you, son,' she replied.

'Hello, Vera.' His eyes quickly moved towards Daisy who had to peer upwards because Bri towered above her. She saw the instant recognition in his sea-green eyes even though they'd met only for a fleeting moment once before. That had been when Bri had lounged against the jukebox eating a bacon sandwich in Bert's Cafe. He had been one of Eddie's henchmen. Daisy's heart thumped against her rib cage.

Eddie, she thought, why did you have to go out that night? If only you'd stayed with me, you'd be safe now.

'Hello, Daisy.' Daisy pulled herself back from her grief. Now Bert's Cafe belonged to her and she was back in Gosport to avenge Eddie's death. She hoped that finding Bri could be the start of a union that would bring about the downfall of Roy Kemp, the gangster who had killed her man. She took Bri's outstretched hand which was firm and warm.

'Hello,' she said. When he let her go she casually glanced at his stall. She wanted to gain the measure of the man before she put her plan to him. He'd worked with Eddie, had liked Eddie – and Eddie had trusted him. Vera had said good things about Bri Deveraux. But Daisy had, after all, met him only once.

Bri had set the tables to make the most of the space within the twenty-foot pitch. The canvas sheet covering his stall was raised and pegged so the punters had an all-round view of the books. *From Russia with Love* by Ian Fleming, books by the up and coming Catherine Cookson, and Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Cruel Sea* were treasures Daisy spotted, and at the back John D. Macdonald's Travis McGee mysteries. Bri knows his stuff, Daisy thought, noticing that if it rained the sheets could be let down quickly to protect the stock. Bri must have sensed Daisy's thoughts for he said,

'Wet books don't sell.'

'How did you know that I was thinking about your stock?'

He laughed and briefly his eyes held hers.

She gazed at the titles, most of them by popular authors, all stacked for easy customer selection and very reasonably priced.

'Lovely selection,' she said.

'Glad you approve.'

Books were her weakness and she knew she could have browsed

for ages. But his bookstall wasn't the reason she had searched for him.

Freckles rode the bridge of Bri's nose, and his skin was tanned and weathered from being in the open air. He wore blue jeans and a navy wool donkey jacket around which a dark blue canvas money bag was tied. A polo-neck sweater kept his throat warm and a knitted navy pull-on hat almost hid his vibrant hair. Almost, but not quite. His hair was as red as a fox's brush.

He took the money offered by an elderly man from a leather half moon flip-up purse. Bri slipped the crime novel into a brown paper bag and held it out. The man was struggling with stiff fingers to fasten shut the purse.

'Ta, mate,' Bri said, waiting patiently.

Without warning Daisy and Vera were pushed aside.

'Oi!' shouted Daisy, colliding with Vera who careened into a freestanding wire rack containing more best-sellers. Suddenly Bri was out of his pitch and chasing through the crowded market. Vera, upright on her high heels, again tried to straighten her hat. Its feather had slid sideways across her face.

'Has 'e got 'im?'

'You fucking bet he 'as.'

'The little toe-rag.' This last from the opposite stallholder, a woman dressed more for warmth than fashion with a thick woollen hat pulled well down on her blonde hair which fell to her shoulders.

The frail old man was gripping on to an upright metal pole on the stall. He was shaking but was being comforted by the blonde, who'd left her flower stall and produced a stool for him to sit on. She had also picked up the circular metal book stand.

Out of the commotion further down the market, Bri appeared, firmly clasping a struggling, swearing, stringy-haired blond boy by the scruff of his zipped windcheater.

Bri marched him up to the old man.

'Thanks, Jacky,' said Bri to the flower seller. He gave her a grateful smile as she wrapped the old man's hands around a warm mug of dark brown tea. Daisy saw Jacky colour up.

'God bless you,' said the old man.

Daisy couldn't fail to notice that Jacky had the hots for Bri and he'd have to be thick as a bleeding plank not to know it.

In a calm voice Bri spoke to the wriggling kid, who couldn't have been more than ten years old.

'What you gonna say?'

From the boy's agonised face, Daisy thought Bri might have been squeezing the lad's neck a little too firmly.

'Go on,' Bri insisted. The hesitant reply came quietly.

'Sorry, mister.'

The old man stared at the lad. The boy's sullen gaze dropped from the man and he looked up at Bri.

'Go on,' urged Bri. The lad put his hand in his pocket and the purse emerged. The old feller's eyes lit up.

'That was the last of me pension in there,' he said softly.

Bri squeezed the boy's neck. 'Oww!' came the strangled cry. 'I said sorry! You got cloth ears?' He reluctantly handed the man the purse.

'Say it an' mean it.'

'I'm sorry.' The lad looked into the gutter. Daisy saw the old man smile.

'Thanks, lad,' he said. The boy shifted from one foot to the other then stumbled as, without warning, Bri let him go, giving him a short sharp clip around the ear with his other hand to send him on his way.

'Don't let me catch you around 'ere again or it'll be the police I tell next time.'

The lad scrambled up then disappeared in the crush of shoppers.

'Thanks, son,' said the old man.

Bri smiled at him. 'No worries.' He grinned at Jacky, who shrugged and went back to her own stall to serve a customer.

Vera nudged Daisy's arm.

'Good bloke, eh, Daisy?' Daisy nodded.

The old feller had finished his tea and left, clutching the paper bag containing the book he'd paid for and another, a free gift. Daisy said, 'You shouldn't go giving your stock away even though that was a real nice thing you did for that old bloke.'

'Weren't nothin'. I don't like injustice, that's all.'

'Ave you got any Monica Dickens?' Several punters were now

clamouring for attention. Bri had to go to the back of the stall to find some copies of the requested author's books before serving a young woman with a crying baby in a pushchair. She'd picked up a couple of romantic novels.

'E's got a livin' to make,' said Vera, tugging at Daisy's arm and nodding towards Bri. 'Let's come back later.' Bri must have heard for he shouted across at Daisy,

'It's even busier this afternoon. Fancy a drink in The Black Bear on the corner? Around eight this evening?' Daisy grinned back at him and waved goodbye.

'See you, then.'