

The Betrayed

By

Roger Busby

"It's impossible," Dennis Jewel said, "even if you'd got a case of JD tucked under your arm there, I'd be telling you the same thing." Mark Fletcher placed the bottle of Jack Daniels Old No 7 he had brought along as a sweetener on the desk between them. "Dennis," he said, "what say you lock the door there, we pull a couple of glasses out've your bottom drawer and we sip a little of this amber nectar and see if you don't change your mind."

"There's no way I'm going to do that," Jewel replied, "not while we've got an operation running. You think I can conjure blokes up out of the air or something? I'm not a bloody magician, Fletcher."

Fletcher sighed. He's come to the Borough for a favour and he'd expected to have to haggle, but here was Jewel sitting on his backside just acting stubborn. "What operation trumps a murder?"

"Zatopek, you know, the lorry hi-jacking thing."

"Zatopek?"

"Don't you start," Jewel took a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and glanced wistfully at the image of a rotting lung on the packet. The only place he could light up these days was skulking in the station yard with the last of the diehards. "Some comedian up at the dream factory came up with that stupid name, something about it's got to run the distance."

"Christ," Fletcher said, "Now I've heard everything."

"Well it don't change a thing," Jewel insisted, turning the cigarette packet over in his hand. "I'm committed a hundred percent and if they get wind up the road that I'm even thinking of loaning blokes to you on the old pals act, they're going to have my balls, it's as simple as that."

Mark Fletcher regarded his friend for a moment as he marshalled his thoughts for a new gambit. Jewel was a heavily built man, solid with beefy shoulders which bulged under his shirt. He had a head of tight grey curls and his face wore a permanently perplexed expression. They were the same rank, detective chief inspector, only Jewel was a guv'nor on the Borough wide CID under the wing of the Metropolitan Police Major Crime Directorate with his own complement of detectives. He took his orders from New Scotland Yard. Normally the Borough would be only too happy to oblige on tricky investigations which stretched the limited resources of the Divisional CID but now that Fletcher wanted his help, here was his old oppo belly-aching about some Zatopek nonsense.

"Look Dennis, it's not like I'm asking for the earth, just a couple of decent blokes would do. You know I wouldn't come begging if I wasn't really up against it. I've got the big bin murder running away with me and the guv'nor already shouting the odds on overtime."

"Yeah, I see your problem, Fletch," Jewel agreed, "Sounds like you've got dead meat there all right, not many like that get cleared these days."

"That's what I like about you, Dennis, always the optimist."

"Well you've got to be a realist sometimes," Jewel said. "Sounds like it's stacked against you. If I was you, Fletch, I'd think seriously about coasting and leave those eager beavers up at dream factory to take the shit when it all hits the fan."

"Come off it," Fletcher said, "You never took a soft option in your life and I'm the same. We're just a pair of thick skinned D's at heart who happen to think clearing crime still matters, particularly a swine like this one. That's what I pin my reputation on, not ducking and diving and playing politics. And don't try to kid me you're not the same."

Jewel shrugged. "You don't get any medals for pissing in the wind these days."

"I'm talking about in here," Fletcher tapped his chest, "Call it personal satisfaction or professional pride, call it what you like. And I'm bugged if I'm going to let some lunatic who'd stick a screwdriver into a kid like that until she looked like a colander then dump her body in a recycle bin get away with it. If I start back pedalling this one I wouldn't sleep nights, and you know it."

Jewel rolled his shoulders again. "All you'll get yourself is an ulcer, my friend. Tell you what, run it by me and maybe something'll come to mind. What've you got so far?"

"Well, first off, we've got the car spotted on the street camera, old Astra. Lots of blood in the boot that's a DNA match to the vic and the back seats are missing so that could be where it happened before she was dumped. Doc reckons she was dead best part of five days before the bin men found her, so matey's got a head start."

"How about the motor, any good?"

Fletcher pulled a face. "You'd have thought so, wouldn't you. We got the owner right away and put him through the mincer. His story is he was away on holiday and left the car in the street outside his drum, and somebody must've nicked it because the first thing he knows is he comes home and there's the law beating down his door."

"Sounds like a good enough story to put him in the clear, how's it stand up?"

"That's the trouble," Fletcher said, "It's cast iron and watertight. He's got about a thousand witnesses backing up his alibi and we can't shake 'em. Looks like he's telling the truth or he's got a lot of clout somewhere to rig a thing like that."

"What's he like?"

"Tasty, CRO with form as long as your arm," Fletcher said, "Rape, indecent assault, drug dealer by trade. Complains against the police for a pastime. Hits you with harrassment if you look sideways at him. A right charmer, was one of the brothers who used to run with the Ace of Spades crew. If his story wasn't so rock solid he'd be right there is the frame. I'd have him strung up by his thumbs, but after the riots we've got to treat 'em all with kid gloves. Came down on tablets of stone."

"That's the way it goes," Jewel said, "Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime,

ha-ha, don't make me laugh. Burn down a furniture store, kick in a few shops, throw a few petrol bombs and our lords and masters are having a ginger fit. How about associates? Maybe he's got some running dogs of similar persuasion. Maybe he loaned some face his motor."

"Well if he did," Fletcher replied, "he's not about to be telling us. He's as cunning as a bare load of monkeys so we're not going to be able to pull any flankers with him or he'll just lawyer up and there'll be white forms coming down like a blizzard."

"What else've you got?"

"What would you like? Fletcher asked, "we've got hours and hours of street CCTV to wade through, a few possible witnesses to boot, and background on the girl to go through, but once it hit London Tonight the brass suddenly took an interest, leaping about trying to put on a big show of dedicated police work. Every bugger so busy hustling their image, I can see this job going right out of the window."

"Don't take it so personally," Jewel said, "you're going to lose your objectivity."

"Advice like that I can do without," Fletcher said, "Now are you going to stop playing with your fags and give me some help on this or not."

"I'd like to," Jewel softened a little, gazing reflectively at the image of the rotting lung. "Only I can't see any way I could squeeze it without some joker upstairs noticing."

"Bottom line, Dennis," Fletcher said, "Just one decent D would do me, all my blokes have been yanked off on this Weeting thing and I just need someone to watch my back."

"That phone hacking nonsense is a total balls ache all right," Jewel turned the pack over in his hands as the craving for a nicotine hit increased. He'd tried the patches, gum and even hypnosis, but the addiction of a lifetime was stubborn. "One D, eh?"

"At a pinch, yes."

"Tell you what, Fletch," Jewel said, "I've got a transferee come in from Kent who hasn't been assigned yet, bloody good detective by all accounts." A hint of a smile touched his lips, "I could maybe loan you Helen Ritchie."

Fletcher felt the blow in the pit of his stomach coupled with a sudden lightness behind the eyes. "Oh Christ, Dennis, that's below the belt."

"Best I can do," Jewel was grinning openly now, "take it or leave it. Do you want her or not?"

Fletcher groaned. "I've got no choice, have I?"

"Nope."

Fletcher reached across the desk and retrieved the bottle of whiskey. "For a low trick like that, you don't deserve my hospitality."

"That's all right," Jewel said, amused at his friend's discomfort, "I switched to gin anyway, smoother on the old tubes."

Fletcher stared at the bottle; felt like he needed a shot. "How is Helen anyway," he said, "I haven't seen her in years, not since she left the Met."

"How'd you mean?" Jewel asked, still enjoying himself, "Jobwise or what?"

"You know what I mean, Dennis," Fletcher said, "how the hell is she?"

"Well," Jewel said, "I always got the feeling something must've soured Helen way back. Oh she still looks terrific, but inside," he tapped his temple, "hard as nails...who knows what goes on in there. I just get the impression that somewhere along the line some smooth talking bastard slipped her something nasty and she's never got over it. I heard she was a sweet kid back along, but you'd know better'n me, eh Fletch, you were on the old Peckham robbery squad with her in those long gone days, weren't you?"

"Sure," Fletcher said, still staring reflectively at the bottle, "back when we were young and impressionable and everybody was breaking their neck to prove what a great thief-taker they were."

"Good times, eh?" Jewel said, "So who'd you think slipped Helen a crippler?"

"How would I know," Fletcher said, "I was only on the squad six months before I got posted to the Yard."

"Oh yeah, I recall," Jewel said, "You were a flier in those days. We used to sit here in the weeds chewing on our straws watching your career take off. First the Yard then Bramshill and all that clever stuff...you were the blue eyed boy back then, all right, Mark."

"Didn't last though, did it?"

"Oh come on," Jewel settled back in his chair, "don't tell me you're getting bitter and twisted too."

Fletcher crossed to the door and Jewel followed him with his eyes. "So how about Helen," he called after him, "d'you want her or not?"

"I'll let you know," Fletcher said as he went out.

Marian was putting the kids to bed. He knew that from the familiar noises in the house, a nondescript semi on Brunel Road just down from Rotherhithe Overground station. Mark Fletcher sat at the Ikea desk in the spare bedroom which served as his study. It was after eight when he got home from the job and he was tired to the point of exhaustion. He'd told his wife that all he needed was half an hour peace and quiet and he'd gone up to his study taking the bottle of Old No 7 with him. And after a few minutes he'd broken the seal and poured himself a drink. He nursed the glass for a moment reflecting on his thickening waist, the product of too many beers, too many snatched sandwich lunches, the unmistakable evidence of approaching middle age, then swallowed the whiskey in one gulp. Fletcher poured himself another. It was unusual for him to act in this way. Normally he would never shut himself away from his family, he had precious little time with them anyway. Neither would he dream of drinking alone, he'd seen too many go down that road, but then tonight was different. Tonight he was fortifying himself against a deep melancholy as his memory transported him back across the years and conjured up images from the past, images of Helen Richie. Had all those years really slipped by in the blink of an eye? All those years she had dwelt somewhere deep in his memory, waiting for the right moment to return and settle the score. Mark Fletcher massaged the moisture from his eyes. It all seemed like yesterday.

It was back in the heady days of his youth that Mark Fletcher, billeted in the single men's quarters of a Southwark section house, began to get the feeling that a bright young man could make a name for himself in London's Metropolitan Police Force. The old adage "in the country of the blind the one eye'd man is king" seemed more and more appropriate as he assuaged his sexual appetite on an ample diet of nurses and manoeuvred himself into the CID. It was a time of plenty, a time of golden opportunity and for Fletcher, breathing the sweet clean air of ambition, promotion to detective sergeant in record time came as a natural reward for his talents. Within a month he had engineered himself a transfer into the free-wheeling Peckham robbery squad, had moved into a stylish bachelor pad and was driving a sports car. His star was well and truly in the ascendance. The squad appealed to his vanity, the swashbuckling image of the elite crime fighter, the absence of regimented routine. He began to affect the sharp suit and allowed his hair to grow longer than regulations permitted. Brash, flashy, aggressive and conceited, that was the veneer and it gave him a glow of satisfaction when he walked into a bar for a quiet drink, a proportion of the patrons would slink away in the direction of the rear exit. In his own impressionable eyes, Mark Fletcher was a "bloody good D" who put the fear of God into the criminal fraternity. So when a policewoman named Helen Ritchie joined the squad for a plain clothes attachment, it seemed only natural in the incestuous world of "the job" that an affair was on the cards.

Helen Ritchie was a doll, no two ways about it, and plainly she had been selected for CID because she bore not the slightest resemblance to the archetype policewoman. She was petite, fine featured with a model's figure and a natural walk with pelvis thrust forward which brought a chorus of wolf whistles from building sites. She wore her coppery hair in a mass of finger curls like a burnished halo around her elfin face. Her nose wrinkled delightfully when she smiled. Her first day on the squad produced a desperate contest to see who could tempt her out to lunch. DS Mark Fletcher won by a long head. Pretty soon they were seen out regularly together driving out of town in the MX5 for evenings in country inns. After a surfeit of nurses Fletcher was enchanted, felt a fluttering sensation inside himself when they were together, a mild anxiety when they were apart. It was a unique experience. Like the time they lay together on the Habitat settee in his flat, her head cradled against his chest, Ella and Frank duetting on the hi-fi. A wave of romantic imagery suddenly

washed over him.

"Helen"

"Hmm"

"I love you."

"Uh-huh."

"No, I really do."

"What?"

"Love you."

"Oh yeah?"

"Come on, I'm serious."

"All right." Her eyes were closed as she listened to the music.

After a moment Fletcher said: "Helen, I really love you."

"How'd you know?"

"What?"

"How d'you know you love me?"

"It's how I feel, I just feel it," Mark Fletcher floundered for the right words.

"How do you feel it?"

"Oh come on."

"Mark," she said, opening her eyes and smiling as she teased him. "What on earth makes you think you love me?"

"I just know it."

"You think you love me," she said a little more seriously, "We'd need to know each other a lot better before you'd really know it."

"Oh come on Helen."

"Believe me, Mark," she said, really serious now, "you love yourself more than you love me, and when that changes, I'll know it."

"That's a pretty cruel thing to say."

"There's no sense in kidding ourselves," she said, "give it time, don't rush it."

"But I love you now."

Helen closed her eyes again. "Relax, Mark," she said, "listen to the music."

Times like this, he thought to himself, she could be infuriating, but he swallowed his injured pride and tried to imagine what it would need to convince her. He had no way of knowing that the convoluted process of female courtship required edging forward slowly, consolidating each move before surrendering further precious resources of emotion. He had no way of knowing that Helen was already enmeshed in the complicated emotional web of her gender that he had spun within her. His feelings were still too shallow for that kind of comprehension, and Helen Ritchie, playing the game dictated by her instincts would never admit it. As if that wasn't enough, sometimes the job intruded.

They were driving home from a restaurant when Helen, who had been in pensive mood all evening said, "Let's just park over there Mark and talk a minute."

Fletcher steered the Mazda into a layby and cut the engine. They sat for a moment in absolute silence.

When he could stand the suspense no longer Fletcher said: "Penny for 'em then."

Helen who had been staring out of the window turned to face him. "How serious is withholding information?"

Fletcher was taken aback. "How d'you mean?"

"In the job."

"Depends."

She bit her lip. "I mean do you switch off when you're off duty, Mark. Can you have a personal life as well?"

Fletcher smiled. "We're like the Pinkerton's, we never sleep."

"Mark, I'm serious."

"Well," he said, "You know the score as well as I do, Helen, particularly on the squad, a good D's supposed to put the job first."

"What about us?"

Fletcher shrugged. "We've done all right so far, there's no regulation says you can't live your own life" He felt a sense of foreboding, like stepping onto shifting sands. "You'd better tell me what's on your mind," he said finally.

Helen was staring out of the car window again, her face turned away from him. "How important is Bernard Goodman?" she asked softly.

Fletcher jerked upright in his seat. "What d'you know about Bernard Goodman?"

"Only that he'd a squad target."

"Jesus, Helen, that's the understatement of the year, the top brass at the Yard have been busting a gut over him for the past six months or more."

"Big deal then, eh?"

"Helen," Fletcher said, "Bernie Goodman and his little team ripped off two mill in bullion and artifacts from the vaults of the Bank of Japan in The Strand. He's not just big deal, he's the Met's number one most wanted."

"I'm the new girl," Helen said still without looking at him. "Tell me what makes him so special."

"Look, love," Fletcher said, "Bernie's a star villain, best lance man in the business. He went though the vault of that bank like butter and damn near caused

an international incident. The Japanese embassy went ballistic. Went in from an old sewer nobody knew was there, clean as a whistle, left us with egg on our face. Vanished into thin air. We never got a sniff on that job."

"I know where he is," she murmured.

Fletcher was stunned. "Say that again?"

"Bernard Goodman. I know where he is, Mark," she turned to face him, her expression sombre.

"Come on...you're kidding me."

She shook her head. "I wish I was."

Fletcher took her hand in his. "Look, Helen," he said carefully, "this is serious. Are you telling me you know where Bernie Goodman is, right now, this minute?"

She nodded.

"Jesus Christ," Fletcher exclaimed, "You'd better tell me all about it."

"It's not that simple."

"Look Helen, we're not talking about some toe-rag here you know, Goodman's a major league villain. Any D worth his salt would give his eye teeth to nail him. That's the stuff reputations are made of."

"I know," she said, "That's what worries me."

Fletcher was still holding her hand. "If you know anything about Bernie Goodman's whereabouts, you need to tell me right now."

"As you and me, or as detectives?"

"As you and me. God sakes if we can't trust each other now, it's a poor lookout."

"All right," she agreed. "It's funny how it happened, you know Mark. I mean me getting a whisper on a thing like this."

"Go on," he urged her, the hairs on the back of his neck starting to prickle, "tell me about it."

Helen frowned. "Well, when I was doing my initial training at Hendon there was a girl in my class called Carol Dunne. How she ever got past the selection board I'll never know, you could see a mile off she'd never make it. Anyway, I felt sorry for her and we became friends. Weekends I used to go and stay with her family in Devon. She was a strange girl and I got the impression she joined the police in desperation to try to bring some sort of order to her life. But it didn't work and after Hendon she did a couple of months as a pro con then packed it in. We kept in touch for a while but when she started working as a croupier in the clubs I didn't hear from her anymore and I presumed she was breaking all her old ties, one by one and I was the last. Anyway the years went by, then last week, right out of the blue she phoned me and said she wanted to see me about something important, something she couldn't talk about on the phone. She sounded so desperate I agreed to meet her, but you know, if she hadn't made the first move, I'd never have recognised her, she'd changed completely, and let's say the years hadn't been kind."

Helen paused for a moment and then continued, "Well to cut a long story short she told me she was living with this Greek and working nights as a croupier and hostess at the Desert Island Club at the Elephant. She said this boyfriend of hers was a right piece of work who'd get juiced up and knock her about then come crawling back and plead with her when he was dried out again. She said she stuck with him because he needed her and besides...."

"The Desert Island," Fletcher interrupted, "That's Danny Hood's place, a real nutter. Used to be a pretty fair heavyweight boxer before he got punchy and drifted into bad company."

"Well anyway," Helen picked up the thread, "Carol told me she was terrified because this boyfriend had got in over his head with Hood. So I told her I couldn't help unless she was more specific and she came right out with it. She told me they've got Goodman locked up in a back room at the club and they're squeezing him dry. She said the deal had started off as a hide out, but now he was a prisoner and the thing was getting out of hand."

Fletcher was suspicious. "How'd she know all this?"

"Apparently the Greek's inclined to brag when he's had a skinfull and she's scared stiff they're going to find out and do something to keep him quiet."

"Well she knows the score there all right," Fletcher said, "that's about Hood's barrow."

"She said she couldn't think of any way out, and then she remembered me and tried the phone number I'd given her way back."

"OK, Helen," Fletcher was still sceptical, "So she comes to you and spins you this yarn. What's to say it's not just some fairy tale she's dreamed up to give her man a hard time. What's her angle?"

"There's a kid," Helen said. "I finally got it out of her. She had a baby by the Greek, that's what's eating her up. Just one of our little feminine quirks."

"All right," Fletcher said, "you get her to come in and we can put something together. We're going to need a warrant and that means reasonable grounds...do you think she could handle a wire?"

"Mark," Helen said, "You haven't understood a word I've said, have you. There's no way Carol can be involved, or me either, they'd put it together in no time flat. What do you think I was asking you about withholding evidence for?"

"On a thing like this," Fletcher said, "we could get her into a witness protection scheme, safe house, new identity, new life, and you're a squad officer so you're fireproof."

Helen shook her head. "No way," she said, "That bunch of maniacs would be on to Carol like a flash and she'd be in worse trouble than she is now. You know witness protection is Mickey Mouse"

"I could go to the gov'nor, lay it on the line."

"Oh Mark, don't you see? Then I'd have to deny this conversation ever took place. She's put me in an impossible position just because I feel sorry for her. We were good friends once."

She looked so troubled that Fletcher cupped her face in his hands and kissed her lightly. "Well you got it off your chest, that's a good thing. Now you leave it to me, I'll work something out."

But the prize of Bernie Goodman, the gold robber who had outwitted the Yard's finest was too much to resist. The following morning DS Mark Fletcher called his team together for a little off the record conference. Laid it on the line for them without revealing his informant.

"The only way around this," he told them, "is to take that pillock Dan Hood out've the frame and soften him up a bit, then we hit the club and collar Goodman."

"Nick 'im official skip?" one of the DCs asked and the DCs looked at each other. "No, this one's a foreigner, we'll do it off our own bat and see how it shapes. The fewer know about this the better especially as we'll be off our manor. We'll book out on general enquiries tonight, two cars will do, oh and one of you draw a shooter, give 'em the usual rigmarole, OK?"

Working to Mark Fletcher's instructions they pulled Daniel Hood that night, sandwiched his Merc between unmarked police cars as he left the Desert Island shortly after midnight. The exchange in the New Kent Road was brief and to the point. After forcing the Mercedes to stop, the armed detective thrust a 9mm Glock through the driver's window into the face of the bodyguard behind the wheel whose eyes immediately took on a glazed thousand yard stare. Fletcher opened the passenger's door and invited Hood to step out. "Congratulations Danny," he told him, "You're the star turn for tonight."

They took Hood to an undertaker's off the Walworth Road just as Fletcher had planned and in the prep room which reeked of death and embalming fluid, stripped him naked and laid him out on one of the freezer drawers. Daniel Hood was a hard man. He had a hard smooth face drawn taut by scar tissue, a legacy of his days in the ring. His heavy body had begun to run to fat and looked strangely vulnerable stretched out on the slab. His cold eyes betrayed no emotion. Daniel Hood was accustomed to playing games with the filth.

Fletcher twisted a toe tag around his finger. "Heard you've got yourself a lodger down at the Island these days, Danny."

"What makes you think that Mr Fletcher?"

"Just a whisper, Danny."

"Someone's pulling your leg Mr Fletcher."

"Name of Bernie Goodman."

"Bernie Goodman? Never heard of him."

"And he's overstayed his welcome, Danny."

"I don't know where you get 'em from Mr Fletcher."

Fletcher gave the drawer a shove with his foot and it slid back into the freezer. He waited a moment or two and then rolled Hood out again.

"About this lodger of yours Danny"

Hood's teeth chattered when he spoke through clenched jaw. "I already told you, I don't know what you're talking about."

"You'll remember soon enough, Danny," Fletcher said and he repeated the treatment, wheeling Hood in and out of the freezer, leaving him in the ice box just a little bit longer each time. The hard man's lips were turning blue, but his eyes remained expressionless.

"See, the way we reckon it, Danny, you've had your pound of flesh out of old Bernie, now it's our turn. So how about it?"

"Get stuffed copper," Hood replied flatly.

The interrogation followed the same pattern for a while longer with the drawer carrying Hood in and out of the freezer, and finally when he could no longer feel his extremities, the hard man began to relent.

"This cock and bull story of yours Mr Fletcher, just supposing it was true, I'd be daft to admit it without some safeguards, wouldn't I?"

"We're not interested in you, Danny," Fletcher reassured him, "You know our motto, always save something tasty for another day. You're not due yet."

"So what's in it for me?"

"Insurance Danny."

"Come again?"

"You play ball with us and we won't tell Bernie's firm what a diabolical stroke you've been pulling with their main man. Because if we did... " Fletcher took the body tag off his finger and tied it to Hood's big toe..."we might have to make you a permanent reservation."

"Who put the bubble in?"

"Be your age, Danny."

Hood breathed a sigh. "All right, you've got me cold."

Mark Fletcher smiled down at him. "More like on ice," he said.

The crime squad hit the Desert Island mob handed at four in the morning and lifted Bernie Goodman with the dew still on him. It was a text book operation.

"You should've seen the poor bugger, guv," Fletcher told his DI when they returned to the station. "Squatting there in his underpants and blubbing like a baby. A few more days of that kind of treatment and I reckon he would've been a goner."

"You got a good snout on that one all right Mark," the DI told him admiringly, "do you a bit of good too."

Fletcher shrugged. "Good intelligence," he replied, "could have happened to anyone."

"Pull the other one," the DI said, "the guv'nor's delighted with you, a real feather in your cap. You could be going places on the strength."

Basking in the glory of the moment, Mark Fletcher went back to his flat to freshen up. The phone was ringing.

"Quite the little hero eh?" It was Helen's voice, sharp and brittle.

"Helen," Fletcher exclaimed, "I was going to call you...it worked like a charm...I'm just off to the Yard for a briefing so I've got to dash..."

"You bastard...you bastard Mark!" Her cry cut through him like a knife. "You rotten lousy selfish bastard," her voice started to break as pent up emotions boiled over. "I just had a call from St Thomas's A and E, they just brought Carol in, hit and run, she didn't stand a chance, dead on arrival."

Fletcher gripped the phone. "Helen," he said, "listen...I didn't..."

"You really take the prize, Mark." She was crying now. "You know that. You killed her as sure as if you'd done it yourself. You signed her death warrant you bastard. You'd stiff your own mother for a pat on the head."

"Helen, listen to me..."

"And you know what, she was carrying a note in her pocket saying to call me in case of an accident. How's that for a laugh!"

"Hey Helen, you don't think I had anything to do with that," Fletcher protested desperately. "I never even mentioned her name, or yours either. I kept you both out of it, you've got to believe that. Helen...Helen..." But he was talking to the dialling tone.

Fletcher stared at he phone for a moment, his mind in a turmoil. It must have been a coincidence, a quirk of fate. He thought of calling the traffic officers to

get details of the accident that had killed Carol Dunne, contemplating going immediately to Helen and somehow convincing her that he hadn't broken his word. He looked at his watch. He was expected at the Yard. There just wasn't time.

So Mark Fletcher seized his chance with both hands and was whisked off to NSY to join the elite brotherhood of the legendary Flying Squad. It was the sort of once in a lifetime opportunity that any ambitious detective would have happily cut off an arm for. Helen Ritchie was expendable.

Now, sitting in his makeshift study, reflecting upon a glass of whiskey with the benefit of hindsight Mark Fletcher knew it had all been a charade and that his early promise had burned out like a shooting star. Had the guilt which gnawed within him for turning his back on Helen's tragic outburst eventually eaten him away. Was that the answer? At moments like this he would concede the possibility. At moments like this he would sacrifice his home life, career, everything, for the chance to roll back the years and somehow make Helen Ritchie understand that he had no hand in her friend's death.

His wife was calling from downstairs and it was time to cap the bottle and put aside such maudlin thoughts. He couldn't change the past. Never look back, that was the hard lesson of reality. In the morning he would call Dennis Jewel and tell him to forget it.

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Brief Biography:

BUSBY, Roger (Charles). British. Born in Leicester, 24 July 1941. Educated at Bishop Vesey's Grammar School for Boys; Aston University, Birmingham, certificate in journalism, 1968. Married Maureen-Jeanette Busby in 1968. Journalist, Caters News Agency, Birmingham, 1959-66, and Birmingham Evening Mail, 1966-73. Since 1973, Force Information Officer, Devon and Cornwall Constabulary, Exeter.