

The Pie & Mash
Detective Agency

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C

CENTURY

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Monday 8 April – Present Day

Dev Hooper came home from work to find his front door hanging open.

The hallway lights were on, and Nellie’s handbag was missing from its usual spot on the banister.

‘Nellie? Nellie!’

She wasn’t in the kitchen, making one of her herby veggie stews. She wasn’t on the sofa reading, or in the bathroom peeing, or hauling laundry from the dryer in the basement.

Dev strode upstairs in his outdoor shoes, shouting: ‘Nellie? Are you here?’

Don’t be silly, he thought. Yes, it was unlike Nellie to leave the front door open, but everyone made mistakes. She must have gone out. Dev established that they hadn’t been burgled, as he’d first suspected. The TV was in its right place, and the thick cookbook on the shelf above still had his stash of cash tucked safely inside. Nellie must have taken her handbag and gone out somewhere. No need to panic. He always panicked over nothing.

In the kitchen, he poured a drink over ice, and his hand began to jitter, spilling gin on the counter. He cursed and moved things out of the way, unopened post, some papers, Nellie’s handbag . . . Nellie’s handbag?

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‘I will of course make a report, Mr Hooper, but please try not to worry. Many people who go missing turn up within twenty-four hours, with a reasonable explanation. Have you tried her phone?’

‘As I said, her phone’s here. In the handbag.’

‘Oh, right. So this isn’t like her, then? To go out without her things?’

‘No.’ In fact, Dev considered how it wasn’t really like his girlfriend to go out at all.

He’d expected flashing sirens on his driveway to throw red and blue light through the hallway, for police radios to buzz and crackle, for the footsteps of the search and rescue team to pound through the house, sounding the hubbub of the investigation opening. Instead, two uniformed officers stood in the kitchen – PC Boughton, who’d cheerily introduced herself on the doorstep, and a large, silent colleague, who hadn’t introduced himself and showed no desire to. He leaned on the countertop behind her, six foot four and silently solid, like a bouncer or a brick wall.

‘I’ll need to take some details,’ PC Boughton said. Her police hat and strands of strawberry-blonde hair framed her freckled face. She pulled a tiny notebook from her vest pocket. ‘Age?’

‘Twenty-five.’

‘Sex: female, and, uh – regular address is here?’

‘Yes, 36 Shipwell Drive.’

‘Are you worried about the missing person?’

‘Yes, very!’

She wrote that down.

‘Any particular reason to be worried? Has she gone missing before, or do you think she’s likely to harm herself or another member of the public?’

‘No! But, I mean, just because she wouldn’t hurt anyone, I still think we should worry. This is very out of character.’

‘Right . . . Oh, and what’s her name, Mr Hooper?’

‘Nellie Thorne.’

‘Pardon?’ PC Boughton didn’t write this down.

‘Nellie Thorne,’ repeated Dev.

The silent partner bristled. Dev noticed how wide the man’s shoulders were.

‘And does *Nellie* have any friends we can talk to?’ PC Boughton’s voice had changed. It was snappy, impatient.

‘Oh, well, I haven’t really met her friends . . .’

‘Have you checked any local favourite places?’

‘Um, not yet . . .’ Dev faltered. Did Nellie have favourite places?

‘Is she likely to have travelled abroad? Any other countries she has links to?’

As the more talkative officer barrelled out questions, Dev felt dizzy. All he wanted was for them to get out their long poles and search every inch of town for Nellie.

‘N-no, I don’t think she has any links to other countries, no.’

‘And I’m guessing she doesn’t have a job?’

‘Pardon?’ Where had that come from? He hadn’t said that, had he? ‘Actually, Nellie *does* have a job,’ said Dev. ‘Well, she’s self-employed. She has a little business where she buys clothes from the charity shop and then sells them on, erm, that app where you sell second-hand clothes? Depop? I think that’s it.’

PC Boughton scribbled on her pad, mouthing along: ‘No job.’ She grabbed her radio.

‘It’s a Nellie Thorne.’

Dev felt the room spin.

‘What’s a Nellie Thorne? It’s just her name. I know it’s a bit old-fashioned—’

‘Mr Hooper,’ said the officer, putting the notebook back in

her pocket, 'you should be aware that wasting police time is an offence.'

'I'm not wasting your time, I'm reporting a missing person!' PC Boughton and her colleague exchanged a look. Dev's time was up. They turned to walk away, and Dev lurched after them. 'Where are you going?'

In the hallway, PC Boughton turned to him one last time.

'I'm sorry to inform you, Mr Hooper, that Nellie Thorne is not real. Maybe you knew someone using that name, maybe you didn't, but I need to escalate this internally before we take any further action. We'll be in touch about an interview at the station.'

'Are you even going to look for her?' wailed Dev, to no reply.

The words *not real* echoed around his head as the police car crunched off the gravel driveway.

Dev was white-hot and trembling. Part of him wanted to sit on the steps by the door, but his body wouldn't move. His neighbour Ian came outside holding a suspiciously half-empty bin bag, keen to see what the police had been called for.

'Everything all right, Dev?'

'Have you seen Nellie? She's missing. I can't—I don't know what to—'

'Nellie? That the girl you've been seeing?'

Dev nodded. His mouth was as dry as a tax return.

Ian shook his head. 'Sorry, mate. Wish I could help you. You've not brought her round to meet me yet. In fact, I don't think I've ever even seen her.'

Tuesday 9 April – Present Day

‘Next slide. Unit Six, Part G: Service of Process. How to find a husband and serve him with the wife’s divorce papers.’

A week on from his promise to be a dedicated detective, Simon had arrived for class on time. He and Jane sat at their usual desk at the back of the class (or, as Simon called it, the Naughty Seats). Simon’s long legs stuck out from behind the desk. Jane’s brown curls were tied up neatly in a pair of buns. On the table she had carefully laid out her laptop, notebook and a large Minnie Mouse pen with a fluffy head.

‘I’ve figured out our detective agency name,’ whispered Simon.

‘Cool,’ said Jane quietly, with a thin smile, not looking up from her notes.

‘Well, you know how our names are Jane Pye and Simon Mash?’

‘Maybe we should talk about this later.’

‘We could be the Pie and Mash Detective Agency. Probably “pie” spelt like ham and mushroom, for googleability—’

‘Is everything alright back there?’ said the teacher sternly.

‘Sorry, all good,’ said Jane. ‘Just very interesting, the difference between tracking down ex-wives and ex-husbands.’

‘That’s right. They’re two very different beasts. And both as slippery as each other. Now, if you have any more questions on

the legal ins and outs of service of process, you can download the worksheet on my website. But now for the important stuff. Coursework.'

Jane grinned.

The teacher hauled a battered backpack onto his desk and unzipped it up to the halfway point, where the zip always jammed on the bag's frayed fabric. He pulled out a dozen stapled sheaves of freshly printed paper.

'El Capitano.' He slapped the first pack down on the desk of an ex-army captain named Alex. 'You'll be having a go at a case I cracked back in 'ninety-eight. Started as a simple background check – wait until you find the herbal cigarette pyramid scheme at the centre.'

Alex picked up the papers and started reading. One by one, the rest of Simon and Jane's classmates received their cases: a woman cheating on her husband with her dental hygienist, a serial cat kidnapper, and even a potential murder that the coroner had ruled as an e-scooter accident.

Jane couldn't help but notice the detective teacher's hands were empty as he reached the desk next to theirs. He didn't stop at the Naughty Seats but strode back to the front of the classroom.

'Right, now you've all got your assignments—'

'Um, Gavin?' said Jane, a little too quietly.

'—in this game, it doesn't pay to keep a client waiting. Speed is part of your reputation. You'll present a case update next week, and the final deadline for submission is our bonus coursework presentation session on Friday of that same week. Less than two weeks away.'

'Gavin?'

Gavin heard Jane this time and rubbed his stubble as he noticed their empty, assignment-less hands.

‘Oh. Right, yes, you two.’

He looked in his backpack.

‘Yes, bigger class number than usual this term, but I’ve actually got something, uh, very special for you . . .’ As he spoke, he unloaded several things from the tattered backpack: a vape charger, a glasses cleaning kit, a handful of GPS tags and a large ball of rubber bands.

Finally, he brought out a battered black tablet with a cracked screen. With a few dramatic swipes of his finger, he opened his emails.

‘Right, yes, a very interesting one for . . .?’

‘Simon and Jane.’

‘Yes. Simon and Jane, your case, if you choose to accept it, is the recurring disappearance of Nellie Thorne.’

‘Oooh,’ said Simon. ‘Sounds Agatha Christie-y.’

Gavin approached their desk.

‘The Nellie Thorne case is a bit of an urban legend in Kent. The story goes that every decade or so, a young woman named Nellie Thorne is reported missing somewhere in the county. And it’s an odd name, isn’t it? You don’t meet many Nellies these days. But each time, the description of the woman is nearly identical. Same age, same look, same personality, decade after decade. Hasn’t been one for donkey’s years, but back in the day kids used to think she was a ghost and would wind each other up. They’d say that if you got too close to the edge of the playground, she’d snatch you up and make you disappear too.’

‘Wow, the plot thickens,’ said Simon, although Jane thought the plot sounded pretty thin.

‘Anyway, the police have never solved it. There wasn’t any quality evidence to go on, no bodies found or any of that business. The people who reported her missing were concerned

neighbours, acquaintances and so on, nobody with useful info. The fuzz had to investigate, of course. There was a lot of pressure by the third one they looked into. But no missing persons case had ever thrown up so little evidence. It was notorious. Nowadays, most police suspect it was a hoax to waste their time, or some kind of scam.'

'Oh,' said Simon.

'Where you come in,' continued Gavin, 'is that yesterday, a bloke got in touch. Says his girlfriend is Nellie Thorne and that she's vanished. Now, you always get time-wasters in the game. Part of your job as detectives will be to screen them out. Maybe this . . .' He took his reading glasses from the chain around his neck and put them on to read the tablet screen. '. . . Dev — is part of a new generation of hoaxers. Or he could be running a scam himself, or covering up a real woman's disappearance, or anything like that. He could be a loony or an attention-seeker. I want you to find out what he's up to.'

He handed the tablet to Jane, who nudged her glasses up her nose and began speed-reading Dev's email.

'I'll forward that to you,' said Gavin. 'You don't mind sharing, do you? Sharing the one case, I mean.'

'Nope,' said Simon, 'it sounds like the perfect case for the Pie and Mash—'

'Can we have something else, please?' interrupted Jane.

'Hmm?' said Gavin.

'Well, this case is obviously a silly one. You've just told us he's probably a time-waster. But you gave Craniax a political assassination!' Jane pointed to the front row, where a leather-jacketed Hells Angel was scribbling a mind map in his Pukka Pad.

'Jane!' hissed Simon in the tone he used when she asked to try samples of wines at restaurants.

‘I’m sorry, Gavin, and I don’t mean any offence. I think the point I’m trying to make is that – well, you might get a certain impression of us from our age and from Simon’s yellow raincoat, but we’re not just silly millennials. We can handle a real case.’

‘She’s got plenty of time on her hands,’ piped up a bouncer at the next table. ‘Probably one of those stay-at-home types who watches true-crime documentaries all day.’

‘Yeah,’ said his desk neighbour. ‘Go on, Gav – give her a proper horrible murder.’

‘Excuse me!’ said Jane. ‘I’ll have you know that I’m a back-end programmer in between positions!’

‘She didn’t mean that to come out sounding like an innuendo,’ Simon added helpfully.

‘Alright! No scuffles in class! I’ll not have a repeat of Unit Three: De-escalation Exercises,’ said Gavin, for the first time projecting genuine authority.

He turned to Jane, seeming a bit taller and maybe even wider, and spoke slowly. ‘Janet, I understand that this case seems a bit more . . .’

‘Diffuse?’ offered Simon.

‘. . . A bit more wackadoodle than the others. But when you’ve been a detective as long as me, you develop a radar for those cases that are ready to unravel like a jumper when you pull on the first loose thread. There’s something here. And aren’t you jumping at the chance to take the only case that’s still open?’

Jane maintained a defiant look while she thought about it.

Gavin gestured around the class. ‘The only case in the room that I haven’t already solved?’

Jane sighed a very long sigh. ‘Alright.’

‘Good work, detectives,’ said Gavin, returning to the desk at the front of the room and unplugging his laptop from the

projector. 'Willingness, readiness, teamwork. All essential for the successful PI.'

The class packed away their things. The bouncer glared at Jane and Simon again, and Simon decided it wasn't the right time to get out the large vintage magnifying glass he'd bought on eBay. Maybe next week could be the soft brand launch of the Pie and Mash Detective Agency.