

## ~ PROLOGUE ~

Monday 31<sup>st</sup> October. The water of the Regent's Canal lay like grey gloss paint poured between its grubby banks. It appeared viscous and unmoving as it clung to the hulls of a row of hardworking narrowboats, the water licking around ropes trailing over their sides and holding fast around two great baulks of timber dumped into the water and now wedged beside a bridge parapet, holding rotting leaves in the triangular pool of stagnant water it embraced. Mist curled from the surface of the canal in a pale layer of bone-chilling damp that mixed with the thick, yellow, poisonous smog choking the very life from the city. It collected beneath bridges and stopped the black holes of the canal tunnels with its evil gas, rendering these dank and claustrophobic places both hostile and virtually unnavigable. It clawed at the little windows and the firmly battened hatches of the boats, seeking out their occupants huddled inside around tiny stoves and causing even the most seasoned river dweller to draw their curtains just that bit tighter together.

'Come along, Scamp. Let's get home. I've had enough of this!' Clive Tustain urged his scraggy mongrel — a loveable, shapeless creature with a shaggy black-and-grey coat and big, flopped-over ears — to cease cocking his leg against a lamp post and hurry along. Tustain coughed following the effort to speak, and after the last painful wrack in his chest pulled a neckerchief back over his mouth and nose. His breathing was laboured and he wanted to get inside the little cabin of the *Primrose*, rub some Vick on his chest and inhale the clean, pungent scent in an attempt to unblock the tar that crawled down his throat and lay heavy in his lungs. Then he would get the stove roaring with the sticks of wood he had collected on their evening walk and settle down with a book and a good shot of whisky.

'It's a filthy one tonight!' He looked down at Scamp, who stopped sniffing some sickly-grey grass at the base of a wide bridge abutment to raise an ear before trotting on, as if agreeing that he'd also had enough of the dank and foetid night for one day. 'It's what Dickens would call "A London particular", and I'm none too particular to it, neither.'

The hairs on the back of Tustain's neck suddenly stood up as a strange, disturbing howl wavered through the thick night. It was a cold, plaintive yell that told of something unknown and unwelcome. Scamp stopped, pricked his ears and made a low growl. Tustain shivered and shook his head. Would he ever get used to those animals in the zoo? He wouldn't mind so much if they didn't sound like a small child in anguish or pain.

‘Let’s get on home. It’s not far now.’

They hurried along the damp towpath and below the massive bridges with their solid supporting pillars that carried the railway into Marylebone station, spanning the canal with a heavy and lowering presence that was exaggerated by the dense smog. Something about the thick, black void beneath, filled with the noxious air, made Tustain involuntarily duck his head, and he was secretly relieved to pass through to the other side, where he could just see a shunting engine huffing and clanging a collection of vans around the parcels and goods sheds on the far side of the canal, its exhaust muffled and reduced to a soft ‘whoosh, whoosh’. There was a deep, resonant rumble right above as a rake of brightly-lit carriages was propelled into Marylebone station, to the relief of the waiting passengers no doubt, who would now be able to escape the foul-stinking confines of London.

Tustain stepped aboard the *Primrose* and unfastened the little double doors into the galley. Scamp trotted down the steps without so much as a backward glance. ‘Hey, you’re eager to be out of it an’ all!’

He stopped and coughed again, resting a hand on the cabin roof as he hacked and doubled over, his eyes streaming and face turning red. ‘Can’t say as I blame you. Oh dear me.’ He rested a moment, then stood upright and cast his seasoned eye over his narrowboat, making a final check for the night.

The ropes were secure; his old bicycle was still in its place on the cabin roof; the tarpaulin was secured taut over the hold. The shadowy bulk of more narrowboats and a clutch of permanently-moored houseboats could be discerned immediately behind the *Primrose*, but their shapes were indistinct, swallowed up by a mix of mist, smog and night. A yellow light glowed from a window on the *Brindley & Moorhouse No 2* moored immediately aft. A plume of smoke poured from the stovepipe chimney and Tustain thought he could discern the aroma of bacon above that of burning coal.

He checked the wick of the riding light and hoped it would be bright enough to prevent anyone foolish enough to attempt to navigate the canal during the night from colliding with the *Primrose*. As he did so, a heavy train clanged and trundled out of the station and, unlike the strange sounds from the zoo, its shrill whistle, gruff chuff-chuffing and the rhythmic clickity-clacking of wheels over rail joints were reassuring. This was a familiar sound, and Tustain found it comforting, just as he loved the mournful bellow of the foghorns on the Thames Estuary. The departing train calmed his nerves, frazzled by the disturbing animal cry. Not that a seasoned boatman like Tustain was normally taken with a fit of anxiety, but even so, there was something odd in the air tonight,

something other than the stinking smog that was unsettling, and he for one would not delay a moment longer escaping from it.

He stepped down into the galley and lit the oil lamps, filling the small but impeccably tidy space with a soft and welcome light. Scamp was already curled up on his blanket, his scraggy, pale beard below the big, wet, black nose resting on his paws, eyebrows twitching as he watched his master make their narrow little home safe and warm for the night.

‘We won’t hear any more of those monkeys, Scamp.’ The dog flicked an ear, sighed deeply and wriggled into his blanket. Tustain opened the door of his burnished and carefully blacked stove and thrust the sticks of wood inside, followed by a little shovel of coal onto the glowing embers. ‘That’ll do us.’ He watched as the flames eagerly licked around the bits of painted wood. ‘Let’s turn in for the night and have a bit of a read, eh? But first, I could do with some more of this...’ He reached for the jar of Vicks Vapo Rub, but stopped before he had unscrewed the lid.

There was another cry. This was quieter and shorter than before and without that awful wailing and wavering note. But it was still a cry. Master and dog froze and looked at each other, Scamp’s ears pricked, and he rolled his eyes expressively towards the double doors.

‘Nah. It’s nothing, old boy.’

Tustain unscrewed the Vicks jar lid and inhaled the refreshing contents. The scent was clean and intense, filling his nose and lungs and helping to banish the night noises. The railway, raised above on its great bridges, soothed him with its routine rumblings and chattering buffers.

But what was that? It was a sound that Tustain would later describe as a ‘sort of a plosh’. It was a deep, solid, well-rounded noise, smoothed and cushioned by the impenetrable smog; the sort of sound that might be made by something heavy entering water.

‘Don’t tell me — some idiots are throwing stuff about again!’

Tustain heaved a deep sigh, opened the cabin doors and stepped back out onto the stern of his boat, peering fruitlessly into the opaque night. He could see little except the looming shadows of warehouses on either side of the canal, the great black bulk of the railway bridges and the pale, ineffectual glow of lights attempting to pierce the fog from the parcels shed and station behind. He listened intently, head to one side, arm resting upon the tiller. He filtered the various sounds, filing some under ‘railway’, others as ‘road traffic’, and then there was the constant low hum and whirring from the electrical generating station that occupied most of his side of the canal. He listened only for those sounds associated with the canal and its slumbering craft, trying to pinpoint the gang of troublemakers he feared was up to no good. But it seemed especially silent tonight. There were none of the hushed voices,

feet tramping on the ground and echoing under bridges, the breaking of glass or the aggressive shouts, curses and harsh laughter he knew to expect when trouble was near.

He stared at the water, watching a few ripples disturb the surface. *Primrose* rocked slightly, but already the water was stilling. Something had entered the canal, of that he was quite sure. Tustain shivered, sensing another bout of coughing was about to set in. He turned away, waving a dismissive hand in disgust, and returned below. He could see and hear nothing now; whatever it was could wait until morning.

Seated in his little bunk, snuggled beneath a mound of blankets, the coals in the stove ticking in a series of tiny sounds, he re-read his favourite passages about mud and fog in Dickens's *Bleak House*, until his head drooped and the book tumbled onto the blankets as he succumbed to sleep. But it was not to be a sweet and dreamless sleep; marred as it was by nightmare images of a drowned man and the sound of a crying baby — or was it a monkey? It would not be silenced and it cried and cried whilst a hand scratched at the bottom of the boat, trying to find a way out of the bilge by pushing up the bottom boards that covered the watery sump as Tustain and Scamp desperately fought to keep them in place, the dog snapping and snarling at the hands reaching up; yet his jaws never seemed able to gain a purchase, until the hands became curling skeins of smoke — or was it fog? — pouring between the cracks and chasing them through the narrow cabin, pinning man and dog into the far end of the saloon.

As Tustain tossed and turned in his narrow bunk trying to escape the haunting images, a real hand, its long, pale fingers splayed out as if reaching for safety, touched the narrowboat, fingertips resting gently against the black-tarred hull, a man's face staring with open eyes into the thick soup of the canal. He lay still, the sluggish water holding him in place, gently bumping his hands against the wood as his body slowly stiffened. An eel curled and twisted in smoothly slippery movements around a heavy brogue, then made an exploratory incursion into the dark opening of a sodden trouser leg.

## Chapter One

### MUCHO DE NADA

*Artie Shaw & his Orchestra*

The police officers had left their car and Black Maria van parked on Lisson Grove. This was above the short tunnel that took the canal beneath the road, and they had tramped down a set of steep and slippery access steps to the towpath before walking to the mooring of the *Primrose*. They were dressed in dark uniforms or long and equally dark overcoats and so, in the soupy mix of morning mist and smog, they looked appropriately funereal as they stood, smoked, stamped their feet and avoided looking at the corpse they had recently fished out of the filthy water.

The body in question was covered by a heavy tarpaulin that Clive Tustain had fetched from the hold of his narrowboat and it was from beneath this that a dark stain of water slowly oozed and formed into pools on the uneven surface of cinders, mud and clumps of sickly grasses.

A huddle of boatmen and their wives stood nearby, each dressed in donkey jackets, black trousers and peaked caps or in longer, but equally work-stained coats which, on the women, revealed a flash of coloured skirt at the lower edges above wool-lined, gum-booted feet. They spoke in hushed tones, their voices softened in the acrid atmosphere of the filthy November morning, but none passed beyond the tall policeman standing with his arms folded before them; indeed, his presence was hardly needed, as no one showed any inclination to be a step closer to the body now the grisly task of hauling him from the canal was over. Curiosity, however, still drew their attention and they could see their fellow boatman, Trusty Tustain, talking with the Scotland Yard detectives. They were eager to overhear what was being said, hoping to learn more about the man Trusty had found floating against the hull of his boat that morning.

Which was more than could be said for Detective Inspector Tykett of Scotland Yard. This cynical and unsentimental character appeared thoroughly uninterested, and gave the impression of being more inconvenienced than disturbed by the presence of the corpse. He had whinged at his sergeant about parking their car on Lisson Grove instead of North Bank, a road that he insisted was nearer. His sergeant had countered that North Bank served only the electrical generating station and gave no clear way through to the canal side. The debate continued to murmur along throughout their initial investigations. There was a hiatus now, in both the bickering and the act of salvaging the body, and the DI began smoking a cigarette in short, aggressive inhalations, sucking

in the smoke with a narrowing of the eyes that made it appear more a necessary chore than a pleasure. An expression of mild irritation mixed with tiredness played across his lined and blotched face. His eyes were red at the corners; his mouth was a thin-lipped line surrounded by the shadow of stubble. He had fallen into a morose silence as he gazed up at the bulk of the railway bridges and their associated abutments.

‘You think he could have jumped off there? Or could he have floated downstream?’ Tykett spoke at last, addressing the question to both Tustain and his sergeant.

‘The canal is flowing sluggish these last days, so he wouldn’t have drifted any distance.’ Tustain was tired of standing about waiting for a doctor to arrive to inspect the body and confirm what was quite obvious, so he was glad to have something to offer. ‘It should be possible to estimate the speed of the flow of the canal and so determine—’

‘—Yeah, but it looks like ’e’s conveniently got ’imself caught up near the front of yer boat,’ the sergeant butted in, stopping Tustain midflow and nodding his head in the direction of the *Primrose*.

The speaker was Sergeant Philip Sidlow, a slight, emaciated man with a grubby Black Watch tartan scarf tied loosely across his mouth. ‘We’ll ’ave to ’stablish how long ’e was in the water and for ’ow long he’d come to rest near yer barge.’

‘The *Primrose* is a narrowboat. Not the same thing as a barge, sergeant. He was at what we call the bow end,’ Tustain added quickly.

‘Both ends look the same to me. Still, whatever the craft is specifically called, there’s still the question of ’ow long the dead man has rested there, and that will, in due course, ’elp us determine at what point ’e entered the water.’ The sergeant looked at the DI, feeling pleased with his deductive powers.

‘I wonder if it matters what bridge it was.’ The DI spoke with a note of resignation in his voice. ‘He jumped, and that’s about it.’ Tykett flicked his cigarette into the grey water. ‘Bloody dumb and inconsiderate thing to do.’ There was a mocking edge to his voice.

‘You’re sure it’s suicide, sir?’

Tykett made a grimace, took a deep breath and looked at his sergeant, sighing wearily. ‘He has an empty bottle of pills in his pocket, he’s been face down in the water all night and yet we can still smell the whisky on his breath. Did he bathe in the stuff? Criminal waste of good Scotch.’ A shot of black humour from Tykett; his sergeant obliged him by turning up a corner of his mouth in an approximation of a smile.

‘Yeah, this looks like a certain way to do yourself in. Either that or he had a bad headache and overdid the pills, went for a right old knees up down the boozier, then fell in the canal on the way home.’ Tykett raised

an eyebrow. 'I can't say for sure, not until we get the post mortem report, though I'd be amazed if it doesn't confirm my suspicions. All I need is a note saying he wants to end it all to wrap this case up neatly.'

'Yeah. You're prob'ly right.' The sergeant glanced back at the mound of damp tarpaulin. 'What makes a man do that, then?' he mused, then shook his head before addressing Tustain. 'You sure you din't see nuffink last night?'

'No gangs of drunks, for a change, and everything was muffled by the smog. You could barely even hear the road traffic.' Tustain did not think these two sour-faced Scotland Yarders were going to have much time for his feeling spooked by the sounds of animals crying in the zoo, although he was starting to wonder if these had not been something else. 'Scamp! Get away!' Tustain rebuked his dog for pushing its nose under one edge of the tarpaulin.

'I thought you said you *did* hear something, and felt the boat move.' Tykett narrowed his eyes and gave Tustain a piercing look.

The boatman visibly curbed his irritation before speaking. They had already interviewed him for some time that morning whilst the sergeant made notes in his slow and pedantic handwriting. 'Like I said earlier, I looked out of the cabin in response to a sound of something entering the water, but visibility was appalling and I could see and hear nothing much, except a quiet sort of a plosh, that is.'

'So, you heard the man falling in?'

'Didn't sound like a man. More like a brick or bottle being chucked.'

'And you say there was nobody about?'

'It was like soup, and it was getting to my chest. I'd just returned from walking Scamp...' His dog looked up and wagged his tail in response to his name, '...and was not in the mood to go back out.'

Tykett pulled a face and looked away, 'I don't suppose I blame you. So if you did hear this individual going in—'

'—I am not saying I did.'

'Accepted. But assuming that *is* what you heard, then it could be he jumped off here.'

They all looked up at the bulk of the railway bridge.

'He could have jumped off any of these bridges,' added Sidlow.

Tustain nodded. 'But he'd make a bigger splash than I heard'.

There was an empty pause before Tustain spoke again, 'I've seen my fair share of these. Bodies, that is.'

'Oh yeah? Why's that?' The sergeant perked up, but the inspector rolled his eyes, knowing that a confession of murder was not about to be forthcoming.

‘I worked on the river for years before I switched over to the canal. On the Thames barges — and they really *are* barges,’ he glanced at Sergeant Sidlow. ‘Anyway, you lot were always fishing them out.’

Tykett managed a sour grin. ‘You’re not wrong there.’ He looked at Tustain. ‘This is our fifth stiff in two weeks. Not all from the water, of course,’ he shook his head slowly. ‘Jesus. We’ve had all sorts. Look, where’s that blasted doctor?’ Tykett lifted his left arm with a flourish and glared at his old, heavily-worn watch. A train trundled across the bridge above and his words were almost masked by the noise as a billowing cloud of white steam rolled over the parapet.

‘Sergeant, take statements from everyone on these boats,’ Tykett made a gesture towards the huddle of onlookers, ‘and post two of the lads here until the ambulance takes the body away. Get them to question any passers-by on the off-chance that someone saw him jump.’

The sergeant gave his DI a puzzled look.

‘I know, we can hardly see each other in this pea-souper and there’s nobody on the towpath, but it only takes one person to have seen something. I’d better go and tell his missus the bad news.’ He turned to Tustain, ‘We’ve got your statement, sir, but are you thinking of leaving the confines of the city over the next few days?’

‘I’m pottering about today along the Regent’s, but it would be very inconveniencing to remain here. I’ve a living to make, and I can’t just go stopping work on a whim.’

Tykett pulled a face, but was sympathetic. ‘We might have to ask some more questions, just formalities.’ Tykett paused a beat and rubbed his stubbled cheek whilst he considered the situation. ‘We should have the post mortem results by the end of the week, so, all being well, the coroner’s hearing should be early next week. We’ll need you to attend.’

‘If I must.’