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Long Reach

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ONE

"We found him face down in the mud at Long Reach."

It was only 7 a.m. and you rarely see a copper in tears so early in the day. Even off-duty.

My mum looked wide-eyed at Tony Morris as he tried to get the words out, but his face collapsed like a leaky balloon, and the sentence turned into sobbing, snotty gibberish. Mum pulled Tony in by the arm. He dragged his sleeve across his eyes to try and staunch the flow of tears and get control of his voice.

"He's dead. Steve's dead."

My mum had known the instant she'd opened the door, and so had I. The feeling had been growing between us, unspoken, for days. She had just needed to hear the words and then she began to cry, throwing herself back against the wall in the hall and banging her head rhythmically against the wallpaper.

"He was down river. Place called Long Reach. Near the Dartford bridge. Looks like he might have jumped off." Tony looked at me through wet, red eyes. "I'm so

sorry," he said. "Sorry, mate. Your brother was a hero." His voice dissolved into sobs again.

The emotion hit me like a fist to my stomach, but no tears would come. Mum and Tony were clinging to each other in the hallway and I pushed past them, through the open front door and out into the wet street.

I ran across the road and over the railway bridge up to the park, past a couple of hardcore joggers and commuters heading towards the station. From the empty park I looked out over the misty outskirts of London, my breath coming in gulps. The gulps quickly turned to sobs and a loud, animal wail forced itself out of my throat.

The realization hit me that I would never see him again; breathe the smell of his leather jacket when he hugged me, catch the beer on his breath and feel his stubble on my cheek.

Never again.

I looked across at Canary Wharf, twinkling with early morning lights, and on to the Dome and the sluggish grey flatness of the river as it widened out on its way down through Kent. Looked out at the stretches of mud where they had found *my* hero, my brother.

Steve's funeral was a month later. No fuss and bother: just a simple service at a crematorium with a few words from a vicar who had never known him.

Our old man didn't even turn up. Although possibly he didn't know Steve was dead. Mum had kicked our dad out years ago, when I was only a toddler. He was always pissed apparently, drifted from job to job, until eventually

he went a bit nuts and became violent. Steve had had a big fight with him: beat the crap out of him until he'd left. I'd only met him a couple of times since, shabby and unshaven. Once he turned up to a family wedding; the other time I saw him asleep on a bench in Lewisham. I hardly knew him.

Steve had looked out for me.

It had taken them that whole month to do the post-mortem and all the paperwork. It was a nightmare, not just because of the way that Steve had died, but because officially it had been difficult to prove that he ever existed. Because, it seemed, Steve Palmer had worked on something a bit hush-hush, with various false identities, and it was hard to work out that he actually was the real Steve Palmer. It made my head ache. He was Steve. I knew he'd been light on his toes, but his aliases were new to me. A secret he'd never shared.

And then there was the coroner's verdict to swallow.

Suicide.

It struck me at the funeral that I didn't know *much* more about my brother than the vicar did. Steve was twelve years older than me, for a start; he'd always been at home when I was small, but I was just "the kid". He wasn't easy to know, but I knew he was smart. That he was the first one in our family to go to university. He'd done an industrial chemistry degree in Essex, or somewhere, ten years ago or so. I also knew that around that time he'd got into a bit of trouble with drugs, organized raves and house parties, and had got caught knocking out cannabis to other students.

According to Mum, Steve had made a deal with the police, working for them as a trade-off for a sentence. Poacher-turned-gamekeeper; feeding back information here and there, giving them leads on drug deals, illegal raves, that kind of thing.

Tony Morris had sorted it out for him.

Tony had always been there for us, as far back as I could remember; the loyal family friend. He was plain clothes or CID – as far as I knew – and he'd drop round from time to time, just to make sure Mum and I were OK after the old man went. He'd be there to reassure Mum whenever Steve went on the missing list for a few weeks.

I knew that Steve hadn't been whiter than white, and I knew he could be difficult. I just couldn't understand how he had got to a place where topping himself was the best option.

I couldn't understand and I was angry. How could he do it to me … to Mum?

We drove back to the flat in the hearse. Heavy rain drummed on the big, black roof and our breath steamed up the windows, protecting us from the stares of passers-by. I hugged Mum close to me in the back of the car. Suddenly she felt very small, as if the month grieving and preparing for the funeral had shrunk her. She'd bought sandwiches and snacks from Marks & Spencer. They didn't look anything like the ones you see on the telly: *These are not just sandwiches, these are M&S funeral-pack sandwiches, dried-up and curly in the central heating.*

They didn't seem to put anyone off, though. Tony

Morris and some of Steve's mates tucked in, cracking cans of bitter and laughing and talking in loud voices that disguised their grief.

I felt very alone.

There was no one else of my age there. Plenty of people gathered around Mum, making the right noises, but nobody seemed to know what to say to me. Tony must have noticed me standing there on my tod, looking pissed off, and he came over.

"Beer?" he said, passing me a can.

I tipped it at him and took a swig, lukewarm and metallic. Tony shuffled awkwardly.

"Been back to school yet?" he asked.

I shook my head. I'd never been a big fan of the education system and I'd had my fair share of trouble at school. I figured that being fairly average in a massive South London comp wasn't going to secure me a six-figure City-boy salary or a degree in rocket science. As soon as I could, I wanted to be off.

"Well, you've got a pretty good excuse for skiving off for a bit, I'd say."

"I'm not going back," I said.

The previous year, I had finally stopped mucking about, buckled down and done a few GCSEs. It would be fair to say I hadn't broken any records, but I had the basics under my belt. I'd done all right in maths and English, got decent grades in drama and French. But ICT was my thing. Technology came as second nature to me. I'd gone back to do an A level in it, but school was really doing my head in now.

Tony stared at his shoes. "You sure? Bright bloke like you…"

"I've had enough, Tony," I said. "It's not been a great year. I thought I might get a job."

I could almost see the cogs turning in Tony's head. "What sort of thing?"

"Dunno. Something with computers maybe."

There was a moment's pause.

"I've been thinking about you over the last couple of weeks," Tony said. "How old are you now?"

"Seventeen," I replied. I felt defensive. Where was this leading?

Tony considered a moment. "Listen, I've got something of Steve's I'd like you to see." He went over to where his briefcase was sitting on a chair and pulled out a padded envelope. "Here you go, old son," he said. "Don't show this to anyone, it's still a bit sensitive. Just have a look and let me know what you think."

He took a card from his pocket and handed it to me. "When you're ready, give me a bell." Then he grabbed me in a bear hug and when he released me I could see the tears pricking his eyes.

"I might have a job for you," he said.