

ROBERT CROUCH

DIRTY
WORK

A Kent Fisher Short Story



Dirty Work

Robert Crouch

(Kent Fisher Short Story #1)

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Dirty Work

March 2006

Most people want to kill Muriel Maltravers.

The honour will probably go to her elderly neighbour, Hope Allen, who has eleven cats, four dogs and the wildest, most overgrown back garden you've ever seen. About 100ft long and bounded by a close boarded fence, it's a dense jungle of tall grass and weeds, with the occasional tree to add some shade. In winter, most of it dies down.

In summer the garden teems with insects and bees, which encourage the seeds that blow over the fence and sprout in Muriel's magazine perfect garden. Having purchased her council house many years ago, she's modelled herself on Hyacinth Bucket, pronounced 'Bouquet', from the TV sitcom *Keeping Up Appearances*.

She refuses to be appeased. "Do you know how difficult it is to remove thistles without damaging the lawn?"

I hold the telephone away from my ear while her faux posh accent lists the species of weed that wreak havoc on her herbaceous borders. "Need I mention ground elder?"

When I began my career as an environmental health officer, I was going to clean up the environment, waging war on pollution and those who treated our world with disrespect and contempt. Instead, I'm plagued by neighbourly disputes I can do nothing about.

"There has to be a statutory nuisance before we can take action." I say this during every call she makes.

"It's a darned nuisance, I can tell you. Now my husband's seen a rat coming out of her garden. What are you going to do about that?"

I can't believe a rat would go anywhere near Hope's garden with eleven cats on the prowl, but I can't ignore it either.

I dread another visit to see Hope, despite the lovely tea and cakes she provides. "I'll see what I can do, Mrs Maltravers."

Hope's a fiery old girl with a selective memory and carpets that stick to your shoes. There's a note of the file that warns officers not to sit on the furniture unless wearing protective clothing. My boss, Archie Newton, made that mistake when he visited. It took him weeks to get rid of the smell of cat pee from his trousers and jacket.

There's taking the piss and taking it home with you.

He didn't appreciate the comment and condemned me to deal with Muriel Maltravers for as long as he was my boss.

"You did what?"

My friend and local reporter, Harry Lawson, who looks like Brad Pitt with a goatee, laughs in disbelief. "Is that allowed?"

Offenders doing community service usually carry out work that benefits the public, rather than a cantankerous next door neighbour.

"Hope lives in the middle of a former council estate, with neighbours on all sides. Her large garden affects the community – even though only one person's complaining."

He takes another gulp of lager. "You must have some influence, arranging for a gang of offenders on community service to clear the garden."

It helped that Muriel Maltravers had already complained about community service workers when they cleared the local pond in the park. Having called them a menace to law-abiding citizens with their drugs, offensive language and tattoos, she photographed one of the supervisors urinating against a tree. The photo made the second page of the Tollington Tribune, which employs Harry.

"I made sure the supervisor told Mrs Maltravers who they were too. Apparently, she ran inside, bolted the doors and telephoned the police. They did a great job though."

"The police?"

"The workers. They were so enthusiastic there were clouds of seeds, dispersing over nearby gardens. You can now see soil, raised beds, paths, and several undiscovered species of insects in Hope's garden. We found several lost footballs too, but no rats." I pause for a sip of St Clements. "I've asked Muriel to call me next time the garden's overgrown."

"What are you two smirking about?"

Retired Chief Inspector Bernie Anderson, always smartly dressed in a suit, joins our dwindling group for what could be its last meeting. In the

year since the national ban on hunting in February 2005, many of our members have drifted away as most local hunts are complying with the law. Just to be different, Bernie retired from the police and joined us.

“And to think I mustered the forces of law to keep you lot in order.” She eyes her gin and tonic with relish. “No Sarah again?”

“She’s been called out to a farm on the Downs. Looks like more dogs ran amok among the lambs.” Harry shakes his head, having reported on the issue many times. “I thought rural crime was a police priority.”

“If we could catch the dog owners, we’d do something about it.”

“Hey, Kent, perhaps your community service offenders could help.”

He gives Bernie a brief account of my dealings with Muriel Maltravers. After a hearty laugh, she removes her glasses to polish them. “That’s not a bad idea, when you think about it.”

“I don’t think the public would be happy to see offenders scouring the countryside, rounding up dogs.”

“I didn’t mean that, Harry. I meant the idea of solving a problem by teaching people a lesson.” She sets her glasses back on her nose and grins. “Now, if we could make the punishment fit the crime...”

Harry rubs his goatee while he considers the idea. “How would you punish someone whose dogs attack sheep – maul the dogs?”

“Maul the owners.” Her sly smile reveals a side of Bernie we’ve never seen before. “They’re the ones not keeping their dogs under control. We could let the farmer know who they are and where they live.”

“I can’t believe a former police officer would suggest such a thing.”

She gives Harry a shrug. “I’m exploring possibilities.”

“You could spray their cars with slurry,” I say. “Like we did with the hunt masters.”

Harry’s more pragmatic. “Why don’t we simply film them and give the evidence to the police, or post it online, like we did with the hunts. Otherwise, we could be accused of being vigilantes.”

Bernie grins. “I always wanted be a vigilante. I could have prevented far more crime that way. It’s worth thinking about, isn’t it, now that SHAG’s impotent?”

With only four active members left in the Stop Hunting Action Group, it would be great to have a new focus. It takes a few more weeks for the idea to take shape, but when it does, Harry’s in his element, giving us his vision for EnviroAngels, a new action group to tackle antisocial environmental crimes.

He's even designed a snazzy logo for social media.

Bernie studies it and shakes her head. "I'm no angel. None of us are."

"They're avenging angels," he says, his tone a little sharp.

"Why don't we call ourselves EnvirAvengers?"

The silence that greets my suggestion doesn't sound promising. Then Bernie nods her approval. "You could modify your logo, Harry, put a capital A in the middle like an arrow."

"What about Sarah? She should have a say."

Bernie gives him a knowing look. "She's definitely no angel, as you well know."

His cheeks flush a little. "EnvirAvengers it is. So, which problems are we going to solve?"

"Fly tipping," she replies. "Last week, I found rubbish strewn along a ditch at the side of the road. It was like a truck had driven along, discharging the contents of a house clearance. I reported it to your waste people, Kent, but you know the problem."

"Resources."

Downland District Council has one man dedicated to dealing with fly tipping. He rarely patrols the large rural district, relying on the public to point him in the right direction. He spends most of his time organising crews to clear the waste – when he's not answering emails, of course.

Harry loosens his tie and undoes the top button of his shirt. "Do we return the waste to the people who dumped it?"

Bernie sips her gin and tonic. "That could involve us in a lot of work. It can't be that difficult to find out who's doing it, can it? We catch them in the act, pass the video to the council and let the law deal with them. You make sure it gets in the newspaper."

Harry makes a note. "What about people who have barbecues on the South Downs? Apart from the damage it causes to the land, one of these barbecues will cause a forest fire one day."

"I've no objection to lighting one of those disposable barbecues on someone's front lawn," I say.

"Or three," he says. "That should teach these idiots a lesson."

"Don't forget people who don't clear up after their dogs." Sarah's late as usual, looking harassed with her wild, mousy hair and dishevelled jacket. "I'm happy to shovel it up and drop it through their letterboxes."

Harry chuckles. "That's one way to post a warning."

When Bernie rings the following week to say another truckload of waste has been dumped not far from her house, we meet there during my lunch break. She lives in a large cottage with a Sussex tile roof, leaded windows and the most glorious rambling roses stretching across the front elevation. While it's only mid-March, the buds are thrusting out from the bare branches.

"It's through the woods, on the old track that leads to Marshall's Farm. It's derelict now, which may explain why the dumpers chose the place. The council only cleared the last lot the other day."

"How did you spot the rubbish?"

"The lane's on my running route. I had a quick look earlier and it's someone who clears houses, I'd say. Plenty of them advertise online and on Facebook. I thought we could have a nosy before I report it to the council."

When we reach the area five minutes later, I'm surprised by the volume of rubbish, tipped along the verge for almost twenty metres. Old furniture, black sacks filled with clothes, curtains and blankets, kitchen utensils and all manner of household equipment. I'm drawn to an old sofa with bald upholstery and greasy armrests. Someone's slashed the cushions to expose the foam inside.

"Why would you do that if you planned to dump your sofa?"

She wrinkles her nose at the smell, emanating from the padding. "I'm always losing coins down the side of my sofa."

"But not inside the upholstery. It's like someone was looking for something."

"I'm not sure we're going to find anything helpful, Kent. I've checked a couple of bags and everything's old and tired. I'm keeping an eye out for syringes," she says, remembering my warnings about needlestick injuries. "But I can't find anything that tells us where the stuff came from."

"How about this?" I ease the cardboard pizza box out from under some rotting carpet. "It's from *La Dolce Pizza* at Victoria Road, Tollingdon." I open the box to reveal one slice of pepperoni, dried solid.

Bernie examines the box. "Not much help then."

"Gregory Rathbone owns the franchise for *La Dolce Pizza*. He's also a private landlord, letting out bedsits and student accommodation in Eastbourne. I don't know how he finds the time to be a councillor and deputy chair of Downland's Leisure Committee."

She pulls a packet of antibacterial wipes from her handbag. “Are you implying he might have flats filled with unwanted furniture?”

“Shouldn’t be too difficult to find out, should it?”

It takes a couple of phone calls to my colleagues in Eastbourne to identify two Victorian houses owned by Rathbone. 1 and 2 Seaview Villas stand adjacent to each other in Meads, an area to the west of the town. The houses are a couple of streets back from the seafront and have long wooded gardens. The houses have three floors, basements, and gardens that are as untidy as the refuse bins that line the front walls.

The large combined site is perfect for redevelopment.

Harry, looking for a feature that could land him a job in a larger provincial newspaper, agrees. He peers into the nearest bin and wrinkles his nose. “If you expect me to rummage for pizza boxes, you can forget it.”

I take photos of the wheelie bins to demonstrate my photographic prowess to a couple of young women who wander up, heads bent as they stare at their phones. The first is tucked inside a scarlet puffer jacket that matches her lipstick. A woollen hat covers most of her plum-coloured hair. Her black jeans match the dark look she gives Harry when he treats her to his winning smile.

“Are you from the agents?” she asks. “Only the plaster fell off the wall in the bathroom while Kylie was having a bath.”

Her friend, who has pink hair, shivers inside a flimsy jacket. Her voice is pure Cockney. “It could have killed me.”

“We should recreate the moment,” Harry says, winking at me. “My photographer, Kent, can take some shots of you in the bath while you show us what happened.”

“In your dreams, loser.” Kylie heads up the steps and aims a key at the front door. “Come on, Jill. I’m perished.”

He pulls out his press card. “I’m the top reporter for the *Tollington Tribune*, always ready to expose issues of injustice to an informed public.”

He’s the only reporter. And from the way he’s looking at Kylie, I can see which issues he’d like to expose.

Jill follows her friend through the door. “How do we know you don’t work for the landlord?”

He scrambles after them. “Would he send a reporter and photographer?”

“He sent a couple of thugs to empty the attic flat while the guys were in college. When I threatened to ring the police, they suggested we look for alternative accommodation as it was our turn this week.”

“Have you had an eviction notice?” I ask, joining Harry.

They stare at me as if I stepped out of a spacecraft.

“He’s not that kind of landlord,” Jill says. “And before you ask, we didn’t contact the police because the guy in the basement grows his own cannabis.”

“For medical reasons,” Kylie says. “That’s the kind of people who live here. We took the flat because we were thrown out of our last house. Now if you don’t mind, we’ve got some packing to do.”

As the door starts to close, I push out a hand to stop it. “The guys who emptied the attic flat must have had a van. Was there a name on it?”

From the way Jill looks at her friend, they know who it was.

Harry produces another winning smile. “They’ll never know you told us. And if you’re leaving, I can help you find a place.”

“We don’t do threesomes, thanks.”

“I meant I know some decent landlords.”

“They ask for references and deposits.” Kylie smirks. “Tell you what, if you want to meet these guys, you can move in here once we’ve gone. They’re coming over this evening.”

He’s about to speak when the door slams in our faces.

The flatbed truck pulls into the forecourt at a little after seven o’clock that evening. A couple of hefty guys, dressed in black with matching woollen hats, exit the cab, cigarettes in their mouths. They look at the house then back to the street. One grabs some black refuse bags from the back of the truck, while his mate lifts out a trolley. They have keys to the front door.

With not a single light in the building, I’m wondering if Cannabis Man has already gone. Harry, who’s unusually quiet, watches from our hideout in the bushes. Once the guys are inside, he stamps his feet to warm them and turns to me, his voice no more than a whisper.

“I’ve got the registration number so Bernie can identify the owners. I’ll text it to her and we can go for a drink in the Pilot.”

I shake my head. “We’re following the van. If it’s stolen or rented under an assumed name, Bernie’s checks won’t identify the owners.”

“They’ll soon spot us if we follow them down remote country lanes.”

“That’s why Bernie’s lying in wait for them.”

He sighs. “What if they have several sites where they dump the stuff?”

“That’s why we follow them.”

He glances at his watch, clearly wanting to be somewhere warmer. “What if they stop down a narrow lane and come for us? These guys choose remote locations for a reason.”

A light goes on in the bedsit at the rear of the ground floor.

That’s when I realise the light’s still on in the cab. The guys didn’t shut the door.

“You’re right, Harry. I’ll see if I can find anything useful in the cab.”

I’m on my way before Harry can stop me. I dash across the drive and around the back of the truck. I’m about to sneak round to the cab when I notice an elderly man and his Jack Russell staring at me from the road. When I make a gesture for him to move on, he doesn’t move. His dog cocks a leg against the brick wall.

I should go over and tell him to move on, but it might make him suspicious. Instead, I saunter down the side of the truck, checking the flaps as if I own the vehicle. When I reach the cab, the passenger door isn’t closed. I open it and climb inside. When I close the door and glance in the wing mirror, the man’s still there, watching. His dog’s lying on the pavement, panting.

The cab reeks of cigarettes, cheap aftershave and neglect. A mess of papers, sandwich wrappers and empty boxes from *La Dolce Pizza* litter the footwell. A film of dust coats the dashboard. A bulldog clip secures a wad of papers, which contains receipts for a couple of chainsaws, picks and spades, a tank of diesel, credit card slips for sandwiches, bottles of water, soft drinks, and regular orders of doughnuts. A quick look inside the glove box reveals cigarette packets, a torch, insect repellent, a box of face masks, another containing disposable gloves and the documentation for the van. I look inside the folder, but there’s nothing to identify the guys who use the van.

Another glance in the wing mirror reveals the elderly man, walking towards me.

I’m about to open the door when I notice some papers protruding beyond the side of the sun visor. It’s a receipt pad for Trevor Jones, who

specialises in house and garden clearance, no job too small. He also boasts he won't be beaten on price.

No mention of a waste transfer licence.

Then again, if he's dumping in the countryside, he won't need one, will he?

A scribbled note says, *Garden, Friday. Excavator.*

I tear off the sheet underneath and push it into my pocket.

A rap on driver's window startles me.

It's Harry, gesticulating to me. Then he's gone, running towards the road.

Ahead the door to the house opens and light floods across the forecourt. The elderly guy opens the door, illuminating the cab. "Your rear brake light's smashed," he says.

I glance at the house, aware of movement in the hall. I ease my way out and force him to step back while I jump to the ground.

"Let's go. The two guys inside are involved in criminal activities. They aren't the friendliest people, so we need to get out of here now."

"What about the brake light?"

"Later." I grab his arm to lead him away. His Jack Russell growls and bares its teeth. As it lunges for me, I jump back. Thankfully, the short lead pulls it up short, but almost drags his owner over.

Behind us, one of the men is backing through the doorway, manhandling a sofa that doesn't want to fit through. When he catches his hand on the door frame, he lets out a string of Anglo Saxon with a Welsh twang. It must be Trevor Jones. He pushes the sofa back into the hall, cursing his colleague.

The foul language shocks the elderly man into action and he follows me back to the road. His dog, still intent on harming me, pulls him along on a taut lead. When I reach the footpath, Harry drives up in his Audi. Leaning across, he pushes open the passenger door.

Back at the house, Jones spots the open door of his truck and then us. He shouts out, showing a distinct lack of imagination when it comes to expletives. Not sure whether to drop the sofa and come after us, he hesitates. The sofa lurches, almost knocking him down the steps.

He directs more expletives into the house.

"You'd better get going," I tell the elderly man. "He doesn't look too pleased."

“He won’t be too pleased when I report his brake light to the police. My son works in Traffic. That’s why I noticed the brake light.”

“It won’t be the only thing broken unless you get moving.”

The elderly man glances back and then hurries away, dragging his reluctant dog.

I jump into Harry’s car and he speeds off, stopping around the corner. “Did you find anything of interest?”

“I know where they buy their pizza.”

An hour and a half later, the truck pulls out onto the road, weighed down with furniture and a pile of black refuse bags. Thanks to Bernie, we have a home address to add to the one on his receipt paper. From the direction he takes to Paradise Drive, which cuts through the Royal Sussex Golf Club, he’s heading home, out of town or up onto the South Downs.

Are we about to discover another site where he dumps waste?

Harry hangs back, closing when we approach the traffic lights at Victoria Drive. Jones goes straight across and we only just make it through as the lights change. With more cars on the road, it’s easier to be less visible as we follow in silence. Jones takes a left at the next lights and heads out of town towards Tollington. For a moment, it looks like he’s about to visit the Brewers Arms, but he takes the road behind the pub.

Harry sighs. “He’s going home. We’re not going to hang around all night, are we?”

“Let’s see what happens.”

“They’ll be sitting inside, drinking beer. That’s what happens. The rubbish is going nowhere.”

When Jones reaches his detached house, which backs onto the South Downs, he reverses down the drive. For the next twenty minutes, he and his colleague remove rubbish from the garage and pile it onto the truck. I make notes while Harry videos.

“I’m not happy with letting them tip the stuff,” he says. “I know we need evidence so the council can take action, but it’s hardly what I had in mind when we set up EnvirAvengers.”

“You think we should empty the contents of their truck over the front garden?”

“I’d rather empty a few catering bins over the garden. I’ve smelt some real stinkers in my time. You’ll know where to find them.”

“Wouldn’t that make us as bad as them?”

“We’re taking preventative action, Kent. We show them there’s a price to pay for what they do and they stop doing it.”

“What if they don’t?”

“We switch to pig slurry.” He reaches for his mobile. “I’ll ring Bernie and tell her and Sarah to stand down.”

Bernie loves Harry’s idea to strike first. Sarah offers her trailer, which should be large enough for a wheeled catering bin. All I have to do is find one, load it onto the trailer and return to Trevor Jones’ house. I’m about to tell her you can’t move wheeled catering bins around in silence when a familiar Mercedes pulls into the drive behind the truck.

I have a better idea.

It’s past midnight when the lights go out and doors close at *La Dolce Pizza*. Situated on the corner of a commercial terrace in the heart of Tollington, it has a large rear yard, accessible from the narrow back lane or the road alongside. A man and a woman, still dressed in work tunics, leave through the main gates. He drives out and waits while she closes the gates. Once back in the car, he speeds away.

A few minutes later, I open the gates and guide Sarah as she reverses into the yard. There’s enough room to let us close the gates so no one can see what we’re doing. I unroll the carpet I brought to muffle the sound of a wheeled catering bin on concrete. I place the carpet between the bins and the large red bin.

Sarah looks it over. “Are you sure we can move it onto the trailer?”

I open the lid, surprised by only a mild smell of waste food and onions. “It’s full of waste packaging like tomato tins and cheese wrappers, flour sacks.”

She sidles up next to me and peers inside. “What about waste cooking oil? That would make a mess.”

“I’d love to pour it over his front lawn, but I don’t know what damage it would do to the soil and worms.”

“We could pour it through his letterbox.”

Her grin tells me she’s enjoying herself, as we did when we managed to misdirect the hounds with false trails. Those days may be gone, but I sense our new adventures will prove as rewarding, if not more.

Her smile vanishes when I lift the lid of the smaller brown bin, releasing the stench of rotting vegetables and meat. I’m not sure why

they use a smaller bin for food waste, but it's easier to move. I realise my mistake when hear liquid sloshing about in the bottom. The extra weight makes the bin drag on the carpet. It takes both of us to haul it onto the trailer. I secure it in position next to the empty green domestic recycling bin we brought with us. It takes a few minutes to fill this bin with waste packaging and damaged pizza boxes. I add enough so the lid won't close.

We cover the bins with a black tarpaulin and set off on the short drive north to a country house near Arlington Speedway. Sarah drives carefully and brakes gently so the liquid in the brown bin doesn't spill out. I flick through one of the veterinary magazines I rescued from the footwell, keeping an eye out for police cars. If they stop us, I'm not sure how we'll explain what we're doing.

"Harry wasn't happy when you changed the name to EnvirAvengers," she says. "Then again, he doesn't like it because you're a better leader than him."

I'm not sure why she's telling me this, so I say nothing.

"I imagine he's back home now, leaving us to do the donkey work, Kent."

"He needs to be up bright and early in the morning."

She turns the car off the dual carriageway onto Arlington Road West and puts the headlights on full beam. A few minutes later, she stops outside the entrance gate to *La Dolce Vista* and dowses the lights.

"Do you think he'll heed the warning?" she asks, turning to face me.

"Only one way to find out," I say, exiting the Volvo.

The house, set back from the road, merges into the inky black of the night. It's impossible to tell whether anyone's home until a couple of spotlights dazzle the driveway. Sarah and I pull back behind the hedge, bumping into each other. While she clings onto my arm and giggles, I peer around the hedge and spot the familiar Mercedes, parked in front of double garage doors.

No lights go on inside the house.

"A fox or badger must have tripped the sensor," she says, stepping out from the hedge. "I still think we would have more impact if we emptied the bin outside his front door, or over his car."

"The gate is probably alarmed."

"I would be if I knew what we were about to do. Are you sure it's going to be enough? I mean, it's not exactly a huge bin, is it?"

I head for the trailer. "Let's get on with it and get out of here."

It takes us a few minutes to remove the catering bin from the trailer and set it down on the tarmac outside the gate. We brace ourselves on either side of the bin.

She glances across. "You realise this is fly tipping, don't you?"

"I hope you're not going to go all moral on me, Sarah."

"I wanted to know if breaking the law excited you."

Watching Carrie Fisher in *Star Wars* excites me. "Ready to tip?"

I raise the lid and let it drop onto the back of the bin. The smell takes my breath away for a moment and then we're tipping the bin. It almost drops to ground as the liquid surges out, splashing onto the tarmac and running under the gate. The rotting contents soon follow, spilling out with a satisfying slosh. Once finished, I shine a torch over the waste. It forms a messy, smelly covering beside the domestic bins Rathbone put out earlier for collection tomorrow morning.

With the empty bin secured on the trailer, I unload the domestic recycling bin we brought and place it next to the other bins. We drive back to Tollingdon to return the catering bin to its rightful place at the back of *La Dolce Pizza*. Once everything's returned to how it was, I close the gate and turn towards my car, parked further along the road.

Sarah puts a hand on my arm. "I'm buzzing, Kent. Fancy coming back to my place?"

Her face may be in shadow, but there's no mistaking the intention in her voice. Her fingers trace a delicate pattern over my hand. "I've seen the way you look at me," she says. "Isn't it time you satisfied your curiosity?"

"What about Harry?"

She shrugs as if he's a minor inconvenience. "He's off to Fleet Street."

"He never said he'd got a job."

"He hasn't got a job, but it's all he talks about, all he's interested in. I'm not playing second fiddle to a pipe dream."

Harry told me things between him and Sarah had never been better.

"Is it over between you?"

"That's why I've missed a few meetings." She inches closer. "He was never the man I was really interested in."

She's so close I can feel her lips beside my cheek. Her excitement and desire are like static, making me tingle.

"I need to ring Harry to let him know everything went as planned."

"Not everything."

She looks into my eyes before pressing her lips to mine.

What are the chances that a reporter will show up as the local refuse collectors arrive to empty your bins at eight thirty in the morning?

Gregory Rathbone must be wondering that as his altercation with the bin men escalates.

“You have to pay to dispose of commercial waste,” the collector says. “You can’t sneak it into your domestic bins.”

Rathbone pushes his hands through his unwashed hair, looking bewildered. “This isn’t my rubbish. I don’t know where it came from. It must be kids, playing a prank.”

Harry steps forward, pointing to a box that protrudes from the recycling bin. “Don’t you own *La Dolce Pizza*?”

“Yes, but –”

“Then this is your waste,” the collector says, glancing at his watch. “You’ll need to get your own contractor to remove it.”

“This bin isn’t mine. If you check your records, you’ll find I have only the one recycling bin.”

“I take things as I see them.” The collector grabs Rathbone’s household waste bin and wheels it to the back of the wagon.

Harry gives me a nod and I take a couple of photos. Rathbone takes a step towards me, his expression menacing.

“What are you doing here? This is nothing to do with environmental health.”

I gesture to the slimy mess he’s trodden in. “We had a complaint about the smell.”

He looks down and groans. He steps away, shaking his foot, acutely aware of how bad the stench is. “You heard me. Someone dumped this here. It’s nothing to do with me.”

“But it’s from your takeaway, Mr Rathbone. Aren’t those onions?”

“I can see pieces of pepperoni,” Harry says. “You must admit, it looks like you’re trying to sneak commercial waste through your domestic collection.”

Rathbone stops wiping his shoe on the grass. He spins around, pointing a finger at Harry. “You print that and I’ll sue your paper for every penny it has. Any fool can see someone’s done this to set me up.”

“Why would someone empty a bin over your drive?” I ask.

He stares at me, the mess on the tarmac, and finally at Harry. “Who told you about this?”

“I received a tipoff from a dog walker.”

“They were worried it might attract rats,” I say.

“It did,” he says, glaring at us. “Don’t think for one minute you’ll get away with this. I don’t know what you’re playing at, but when I find out ...”

“Are you threatening us?” Harry asks.

Rathbone strolls over, looking more confident. “You were seen, poking around one of my properties in Eastbourne.”

Harry shrugs. “When someone rings to complain about living in squalor, I have a duty to investigate. And now I find you disposing of commercial waste at home to avoid paying charges. Do you think this is what voters expect from their elected members, Councillor Rathbone?”

Rathbone’s foot slides on a rotting vegetable. Somehow, with gymnastic prowess I doubt he knew he possessed, he remains upright, but shaken.

“Get off my land, you parasite!”

Harry presses the button on his phone to stop recording and walks back to his car. I remain where I am.

“Haven’t you got anything better to do, Fisher?”

“I need to make sure you’re going to clean up this mess, Councillor Rathbone, before it becomes a nuisance.”

He mutters something unintelligible and stomps back towards his house.

When I join Harry, he’s tinkering with a camera mounted on his rear view mirror. “Hopefully, I’ve filmed the whole incident,” he says, proud of his gadget. “Cameras are getting smaller and smaller. It won’t be long before you can wear one in your lapel without anyone noticing. Imagine filming a lover undressing.”

“I don’t think Sarah would be happy if you secretly filmed her.”

He grins. “What makes you think I haven’t?”

“How did it go last night?”

We’re sitting at the back of Costa Coffee in Tollington High Street, minus Sarah. Bernie’s joined us, a plastic wallet wedged under her arm as she carries a latte in one hand and a blueberry muffin in the other. Always the gentleman, Harry stands and takes the wallet, placing it on

the table. While Bernie sits, he pulls out the prints. They're grainy, but they show Trevor Jones' truck, tipping its load into a ditch.

"Well done, Bernie," he says. "You've printed the time and date on the photos."

She yawns. "When you rang to say they were on the move, I thought they'd never show. It was creepy, sneaking through the woods, but worth it." She picks up one of the photos and nods in satisfaction. "If that doesn't nail them, nothing will."

Harry checks a few more images and nods. "I think we have enough to bring Rathbone down, don't you?"

"Our evidence will allow Downland District Council to prosecute Trevor Jones for fly-tipping," I say, "but Rathbone will say he employed the guy in good faith. He'll be shocked at how they disposed of the waste, saying he'd never had used them if he'd known."

"But he did know." Frustration creeps into Harry's voice. It always does when anyone challenges his view of things. "We saw him visit Jones last night."

"That doesn't mean he instructed Jones to dump the waste in a ditch." Bernie takes a sip of her latte. "It's circumstantial at best. And don't forget, if Rathbone finds out we dumped food waste from his pizzeria over his drive, we're in the dumper."

Harry frowns. "Very droll."

"It's the payoff for vigilante action. We must remain undetected."

"Rathbone's already suspicious," I say. "He knows we were at the Eastbourne property. If we present evidence of Jones dumping furniture from the same property, he'll work out what we're doing."

"Are you telling me I can't print my story?"

"We can go for Rathbone putting commercial waste in his bins at home." Bernie glances at me for confirmation. "That will damage his reputation. And he'll have to pay to clean up the mess."

"After the trouble we went to?" Harry clenches his fists, but bites back his frustration. "Rathbone will get his mate Jones to clear the mess and tip it into a stream. Rathbone's clearing his properties so he can sell them at a profit, and dumping the contents at no cost down a country lane. And all we did is tip a few rotting vegetables over his drive. How's that making the punishment fit the crime?"

He gulps back the rest of his black coffee and gathers his pad and phone. "Now, if we cleared up the mess Jones dumped last night and

tipped it in Rathbone's swimming pool ..."

"He'd know it was us," Bernie says. "If you want EnvirAvengers to work, we have to remain invisible."

"Come on! We didn't stay up all night to mark this down as a learning experience."

I'm tempted to remind Harry he went home to bed while the rest of us took action.

Bernie's more forgiving. "You still have a story about Rathbone not paying for his waste disposal."

"It's hardly going to make the front page, is it?"

"Give it your best," I say, rising. "Why don't you print the photo of Jones dumping waste?"

"I thought you said we couldn't use it."

"Not as evidence for the council, but if an eagle-eyed member of the public spotted something suspicious last night ..."

"And just happened to have her camera," Bernie says with a smile. She hands him the plastic wallet. "You don't need to mention Rathbone. Jones will soon tell his master the moment you ring him for a comment. Rathbone will be worried he might be implicated."

Harry sighs. "Yeah, he'll be bricking himself."

"Come on, Harry," I say. "It's bound to be more interesting than the Planning Committee meeting this evening. You'll be coming with me, won't you?"

"When I could be testing out my new camera?" He laughs and strides for the exit.

Bernie gives me a quizzical look. "What's all that about?"

I shrug, wondering if Sarah lied about Harry and her.

"Why are you going to Planning Committee? Has your father applied to turn Downland Manor into a hotel?"

"Don't put ideas into his head, Bernie. He's already talking about selling off land to build a golf course."

"Could I get mates' rates for membership? Of course not," she says with a laugh. "It would be for people like Rathbone, not riff raff like me."

"Rathbone started his business career with a market stall."

"Selling what – fake jewellery?"

"False hope."

Harry posts both features on Tollington Tribune's website before lunch. I email links to an acquaintance in Eastbourne Council and ask if she's free for lunch. When she enters the Wish Tower café on the seafront, heads turn and mouths fall open. Like a bleach blonde version of Victoria Principal from Dallas, she's slim and curvaceous, with heavy makeup and big hair. Her top, short skirt and spike heels are more blousy barmaid than actress, but there's no mistaking the warmth in her smile and the cheeky glint in her eyes.

"I hope you're treating me to an all-day breakfast, lover."

Once we've eaten our food and caught up on the latest gossip, I hand her the photographs I've brought. She sips her mug of tea while she studies the images. Her eyebrows dip into a deep frown when I explain the context.

"I don't think my mother will approve, Kent. It's a bit underhand."

"A quiet word in Marjory's ear would be enough, wouldn't it?"

She considers for a moment. "You're a devious so and so. Are Downland Council going to prosecute?"

I point to the photograph. "Wouldn't you with that evidence?"

"And the Tollington Tribune plans to run the story?"

"You've seen the features this morning. They're building up to a big expose. Would your mother, or this council, want to be caught in the fallout?"

She leans across the table, looking deep into my eyes. "What's in it for me?"

"I'll treat you to dinner after the meeting."

She shakes her head. "I want a lot more than that, lover."

"I'm not sure your boyfriend would be best pleased."

"He would if I got the Senior Customer Services job at your council. A good word from the son of the local MP would carry a lot of weight."

"I don't have that kind of influence."

"All I want is an interview, lover. Get me that and I'll do the rest."

Kelly gives me a saucy wink and gets to her feet. She straightens her skirt and saunters across the café. It's not the attention she enjoys, but the deception. Not a single man watching realises how smart she is.

Harry, Bernie and Sarah remain unimpressed when we meet for lunch in the Eight Bells the following day. The pub in Jevington village remains

one of my favourite haunts, thanks to an unlikely friendship that sprang up with the owner, following my last hygiene inspection.

My boss wants to prosecute as many businesses as possible to show our masters, like Gregory Rathbone, what a good and valuable job we do. I prefer to improve businesses by working with them. It takes longer, but the results are usually permanent.

“Rathbone withdrew his planning application, did he?” Harry fakes a bored yawn. “Is that it?”

“He wanted to demolish two Victorian houses and replace them with three blocks of flats,” Bernie says, her tone stern. “He stood to make a fortune from the deal.”

“Why did he withdraw his application?” Sarah asks.

“Tree Preservation Order,” I reply. “Many of the trees in the back gardens are protected. They restrict him to building only one block of flats. But he had plans to get round that.”

Harry looks up. “Chop them down?”

I nod.

“How could you know that?”

“I found a receipt for chainsaws in the cab of Jones’ truck. I also found a note about a garden job on Friday and an excavator.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Harry sighs and glances at the others for support.

“I didn’t realise the significance until Rathbone went to see Jones. I imagine Rathbone restricted his contact to phone calls. So what made him risk being seen with a dodgy character like Jones?”

“He wanted to make sure the trees would be felled,” Bernie says.

“I imagine Rathbone would blame Jones for the mistake and then submit another planning application a few months later. That’s what I suggested to Marjory Morgan, the Chair of Eastbourne Planning Committee.”

Harry slaps me on the back, though it feels anything but friendly. “Trust you to have friends in high places, Kent. While the rest of us are running around the countryside, you make one phone call and the old school tie does the rest.”

While he likes to rib me about my family, this time it sounds resentful. “I went to a comprehensive school like you, Harry.”

“Don’t pretend you’re one of us, Kent. Your family owns half of Downland. Your father’s a top Tory.”

Bernie silences him with a look. “Thanks to Kent, Rathbone’s withdrawn his planning application. He daren’t cut down the trees either. Okay, so he can sell the houses, but he’ll make a lot less than he would have done with three blocks of flats.”

Harry stares at me. “You should still have told us. We could have a good night’s sleep instead of roaming round the countryside until dawn broke.”

“We needed to undermine Rathbone’s credibility. Once Marjory saw the features you wrote, she realised Rathbone had no regard for the law. The photographs did the damage. She wasn’t impressed by the way he evicted his tenants and emptied the bedsits either.” I pause for a sip of orange. “She threatened to expose him at committee if he didn’t withdraw his application.”

Sarah raises her glass of mineral water. “Well done, Kent.”

“Well done everyone,” I say. “It was a team effort. EnvirAvengers make their first strike.”

Harry’s the last to raise his glass. “Here’s to the next one.”

“What about all the rubbish Jones dumped near my house?” Bernie asks. “When’s that going to be cleared?”

“I know a guy who organises community service work,” I reply. “Remember the large garden he cleared for me? I’ll ask him if he can sort out your problem.”

Bernie looks horrified. “I don’t think it’s a good idea. What if I prosecuted some of the offenders he uses?”

THE END.

Thank you for taking the time to read one of Kent Fisher’s early adventures.

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Fisher mystery series and the Kindle version is currently available for only 99p.

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