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IT WAS the smell that Dan Forsyth had never got used to – but this was like nothing he'd ever sniffed before.

He wasn't bothered by the muck, the dust and the thought of what people might have put in their dustbins. It was a dirty job, yes – but someone had to do it.

He'd been doing it for eighteen years now, lugging bins up and down the street, making sure they were emptied properly, returning them to their rightful owners and putting up with barbed comments from self-centred people who weren't satisfied with the service the council provided.

Straight after a shift he'd have a shower, wash his hair and change his clothes. Initially he'd done it merely to pacify his wife; now he did it because he needed to feel refreshed. He enjoyed seeing the grime that had engulfed him during the day as it washed down the plughole.

But as soon as he was back at the depot the following morning, the smell returned as strong as ever.

He'd tried everything to get rid of it: he'd started the day wearing a surgical mask only to discard it after a few minutes because his glasses steamed up; he'd risked being the butt of his colleagues' jokes by turning up one morning reeking of a costly aftershave; and on one occasion he'd gone to work with a raging hangover after several pints and whisky chasers during a prolonged pub crawl. But still the smell wouldn't go away.

He'd contemplated making an appointment with his GP. But all his doctor would probably say was 'you've got sensitive nostrils. Live with it.'

It wasn't as if he had the enhanced smell of a superhero. He couldn't detect whether anyone was lying or if someone had a tumour simply because of the aroma they gave off.

He just happened to be the first to notice when an unusual or a particularly pungent smell was in the air.

He didn't expect anything out of the ordinary when the refuse lorry pulled into a nondescript street of terraced and semi-detached houses in the Aspley district of Nottingham. The bins were all in their proper place, lined up on the edge of the pavement, waiting to disgorge their contents into the truck.

He was rushing around more quickly than usual as big spots of rain began to fall, forcing him to zip up his council-issue waterproof even though it didn't keep him completely dry.

He almost didn't notice a black, battered, extra large suitcase. Dan knew it was the council's policy not to take anything that didn't fit inside a bin – but he preferred to use common sense rather than stick to the rules.

The suitcase was outside number 11, the home of Violet Campbell, a frail, harmless spinster who was well into her eighties. He thought it might have been a long time since she went travelling; and why would she need such a large case?

'Hey, Dan, shall we chuck it in the lorry?' one of his colleagues shouted.

'Yeah, can't do any harm. She's a sweet old lady. Probably hasn't got anyone to take it to the tip for her.'

But the closer Dan got to the case the more anxious he became as his nostrils picked up a smell: a cross between rotting fruit and raw sewage with a hint of a budget-priced perfume. He began to retch, the sickening odour lingering in his mouth and throat as well as sticking to his nasal hair.

He covered his nose with his sleeve but it made little difference. The stench grew even more sour and acerbic, forcing Dan to reconsider whether he should bother with the case. But if Violet wanted it taking away, how could he not be a good Samaritan?

He grabbed the handle and lifted. It took him most of his not inconsiderable strength to get the case off the floor.

'Bloody hell! Has she got a body in here?'

Miles Davies drove into the car park at the Cloud Centre, the name chosen for Derby Storm's impressive home venue because it was sponsored by a major IT company. It was the envy of most of the clubs in the British Basketball League.

There were few cars around during the early part of the day, so the detective inspector had plenty of freshly painted spaces to choose from as his eight-year-old motor glided over the newly laid tarmac.

He pulled up the collar of his coat as he walked the short distance to the main building, the north wind battering his face and reminding him that winter was close.

Miles sauntered up to the ticket desk which led to the basketball arena on one side and the club's Fast Break coffee shop on the other.

A smell of fresh paint took him by surprise. The centre was only a couple of years old but the owner was fastidious about making the right impression. He'd had the reception area spruced up for the new season in the team's signature colour, teal.

'Hello, Miles! Don't usually see you here during the day.'

Daisy Higgins sat upright behind the gleaming counter. With her blond hair cut delicately in a bob, crisp white blouse and elegant business suit, she looked the perfect ambassador as she welcomed everyone into the arena.

Daisy was more than just a member of the team who took a turn on reception. The owner could always rely on her to offer an astute opinion on his decisions rather than blindly following his orders. And although she was only just over five feet tall, she wasn't overawed by any of the club's huge players.

'That's normally because I don't get the chance to come over here unless there's a game on.'

Daisy checked as an ominous thought popped into her head.

'You're not here on official business, are you?'

'No, I'm on a day off. I need a couple of extra tickets for tonight. Can I swap my usual seats and get a block of five together? Some friends of mine are in town and I've persuaded them to come to a game. Should be a big crowd tonight.'

'It always is when Kingston are in town. I never got to watch them back in the 'eighties when they were among the best in Europe. But the current team's pretty good. Hopefully we'll run them close. Will you be bringing your girlfriend with you?'

'Girlfriend? Who do you mean?'

‘Tilly, of course. I thought you were an item.’

‘No, we just share a love of the sport. I think it’s never a good idea to have a relationship with someone you work with.’

There was a twinkle in Daisy’s eye which Miles couldn’t help but notice.

‘You always look good together. And I’ve seen the way she watches you. That’s not the way anyone looks at their boss. You’re a detective – I reckon it’s about time you examined the evidence in front of you. She’s smitten.’

Miles felt uneasy, as awkward as he’d been the first time a defence barrister had tried to rip apart his testimony in a Crown Court trial.

‘Uh, can I buy those tickets?’

Daisy decided not to embarrass him further and handed them over.

‘We’ve only got a handful left. Kingston are bringing a couple of coach loads with them, so it should be a good atmosphere.’

‘It’s half term too,’ said Miles, ‘so we should have a lot of kids coming. Jordan will be here, so the Storm had better play well!’

Miles’ young son normally missed evening games because he had to be up the following morning for school. Holidays though were special: Miles got to spend precious time with Jordan who loved watching basketball live.

‘Have a good day off. See you later.’

‘It’ll be a great day if we can beat Kingston.’

The driver of the refuse lorry switched off the engine, unbuckled his seat belt, opened the door and jumped down. He had the same morbid curiosity as his colleagues who crowded around the unremarkable-looking suitcase.

They were like holidaymakers delighted to see their luggage emerge from an empty airport carousel after other sunseekers had already wheeled their trollies through arrivals. The workers, though, didn't expect the case would contain summer clothes or swimwear.

A man walking a small dog loitered to try to find out what was going on. Two women, one wearing a leisure suit and trainers, the other a well-worn dressing gown over pyjamas and shabby slippers, stopped their gossiping in case they missed a tale they could pass on to the whole neighbourhood.

'Go on, Dan, open it.'

The wind was getting stronger, trying to blow away the autumn rain that was falling faster and dissuading more passers-by from stopping for a look. Despite that, Dan's hands felt clammy and sweat began to trickle down his neck.

Torn between wanting to discover what was inside the case and an aversion to the smell which caused him to retch every few seconds, Dan inched forwards.

He hoped the case contained bricks or mortar that someone couldn't be bothered to dispose of in the correct way. But why would Violet Campbell have builders' rubble in a case? It didn't look as though tradesmen of any description had been anywhere near the property in the past couple of years; and if they had, surely they'd take their debris away with them?

Dan told himself to face up to the reality of what was actually in the case. Would it be kittens? A whole litter of puppies? Some people wouldn't be able to cope if they had half a dozen extra mouths to feed. Pet lovers could quickly become pet haters when presented with the results of their animal's amorous adventures.

But he'd never seen either a cat or a dog at Violet's. And why was the case so heavy?

He knew he couldn't put off opening it any longer.

'Get back, everyone.' His words were directed at his colleagues as much as the busybodies who had no business trying to get close to the mysterious object on the pavement. Their phones were at the ready as they prepared to picture the scene for their social media accounts.

'You look like one of those contestants on *Deal or No Deal!*' said the driver and his colleagues laughed. 'Come on, get the box open.'

Dan tugged at the first clasp which clicked as it snapped open.

The second one resisted, forcing him to exert as much pressure with his thumb as he could muster before it thudded out of its fastening.

He lifted the lid which creaked open before Dan flung it back onto the pavement. He recoiled, bringing up the sleeve of his luminous jacket to protect his nose from the noxious, nauseous stink.

One of the younger members of the collection team gagged, pulled away and deposited the remnants of a full English breakfast into the gutter.

The sight disgusted everyone, yet no one could take their eyes away from the decomposing, colourless, repulsive torso.