

the office.’

Joe turned to see that Helen had finished with her previous visitor. ‘I’m not too keen on dark chocolate,’ he said. ‘Aren’t they much good, then?’

Helen shrugged. ‘Aiming for the upper end of the market, I suppose. Posh box, sophisticated shapes, higher price.’

Joe laughed. ‘One born every minute.’

‘Are you saying you wouldn’t advertise it for them if they asked you?’

‘What, flying in by helicopter and abseiling down a building, all dressed in black like the Milk Tray guy? “All because the lady loves Voodoo”. That sort of thing?’

‘Well, would you?’

‘I don’t suit black.’

Now Helen smiled. ‘I’m not sure you’re rugged enough for a role like that, Joe.’

‘I can’t abseil, either. Mind you, I’d rather have done that than lose the *Bodystyle* sponsorship.’

Helen returned to her desk. ‘Yes, I was sorry to hear about that. Still, maybe Peter will have some better news for you this morning. Do you want to go straight up? I’ll give him a buzz and tell him you’re on your way.’

Peter Bond was pouring coffee as Joe went in. Tall and immaculately groomed, with dark hair swept back from his forehead, he had the look of a friendly GP. He was in his mid-forties and his deep, cultured voice lent him an air of authority and self-confidence.

‘Come and sit down,’ he smiled. ‘You’re milk and one sugar, aren’t you?’

Joe nodded. ‘Is this to soften the blow, Peter?’ he asked.

‘What blow?’

‘Aren’t you going to tell me *Lubos* are stopping my sponsorship as well?’

are, killing two birds with one stone.’

‘Those birds wouldn’t be penguins, would they?’ Rick already knew the reason they were here but it had taken them four hours in the train from Euston to Carlisle and a further hour in a local diesel from Carlisle to Workington Main. Happily, Derwent Park was only a short walk from the door of the railway station but the thought of another five-hour journey back to London, arriving in the early hours of Saturday morning, did not fill him with joy.

Suddenly, the noise level grew as the excitable crowd, spurred into action by the track announcer, greeted their riders for heat twelve, screaming encouragement and urging them to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Or, as one deep, West Cumbrian voice bellowed from behind Rick’s head, ‘Pull yer bloody fingers out!’

It might have been the deafening roar of the crowd; it could have been the sharp words of their team manager as they left the pits; whatever their motivation, the Workington pairing shot from the tapes and powered around the first two bends in a cloud of dust and shale. It was surprising that no water had been put on the track after the dust bowl of heat eleven but the decision paid off as Weymouth’s riders were engulfed in a fog of fine particles. To their credit, they kept up the chase for the whole of the four laps, closing in on the home riders down the straights but losing ground on the turns. The outcome was a 5-1 win, putting the Comets three points ahead in advance of the final heat.

Visiting supporters, of whom there appeared to be none – according to Rick because Brussels was nearer to Weymouth than Workington was – might still have held out the hope of getting some sort of a result until Danny Kennedy tried to dive under Robert Maxfield in a desperate move to get past. Inevitably, he brought the Workington rider down and the reaction of the crowd was so furious that the referee – who presumably had an eye on getting home alive – felt he had

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‘It’s not the timing that bothers me,’ Lou said. ‘This really isn’t the right thing to do, Dennis.’

Croker held up a hand as if to forestall any further discussion. ‘I know this puts you in an awkward position, Lou, Barnes being your boy and all. You discovered him; you’ve brought him on. That’s why I’m going to leave it to you to tell him.’

‘Thanks a lot!’

‘Now, let’s not be petty about it, Lou. I’ve never interfered with your running of the team, never questioned your decisions on track. But, as far as Wimbledon Speedway Club is concerned, that’s *my* responsibility and I have to do what’s right to protect its good name. Remember, Lou, we’re just the caretakers of this place. It has a history going right back to the birth of the sport in this country. This could hardly have happened at a worse time, could it? The fiftieth anniversary of speedway and with all the extra publicity that’s bringing us, we have to get stuck with something like this.’

Lou Statham looked hard at him for some time. ‘Have you considered for a single moment that the lad might be innocent?’

‘Of course I have – and, frankly, I don’t buy it. His story just doesn’t sound credible.’

‘And if I told you I’ve never come across anyone straighter or more honest in this sport, would that change your thinking?’

Dennis Croker sat down again and rested his hands on the desk front of him. ‘Look, Lou,’ he said, a sympathetic smile crossing his face, ‘you’re bound to believe the best of him. I understand that perfectly well, that’s why I think I’m in a better position to make an objective decision. I want you to tell him, Lou, and I want him told today. We’ll be putting out a press release tomorrow morning.’

Lou Statham’s face darkened. ‘You’ve already made your mind up, then? I thought you came here so that we could

He turned away again but Reid grabbed his arm. It was a rash move born of desperation but he simply couldn't allow the man to leave without revealing at least a hint of his guilt.

'Was it you who paid for all of your cousin's new equipment, Mr Greig?' he asked.

This time, there was a clear flash of anger in the young man's expression. 'I told you to leave me *alone*,' he said through gritted teeth, removing Reid's hand and pushing him away.

It wasn't a particularly firm push but it caught the retired investigator off-balance. He stumbled, caught his heel on the top step of the terracing and went over backwards, straight onto the table being used by *Sport-on-Tape*. The flimsy trestle gave way, crashing to the ground with Gilbert Reid on top of it and sending plastic cassette boxes flying in every direction.

Mitch Bassett managed to grab his tape recorder as he jumped to one side but could do nothing to rescue his stock. Cassettes of meetings at White City, Hackney, Reading, Canterbury and Crayford tumbled down the terracing, several to be pocketed by the amused onlookers. In the melee, Adam Greig made a discreet exit.

Mitch surveyed the remains of his trestle table, its legs splayed out and the centre cracked, the cassette cases scattered about the concrete terracing and the elderly man struggling to get himself up out of the wreckage. He held out a hand which Gilbert Reid accepted gratefully.

'I'm most terribly sorry,' the investigator spluttered as he pulled himself to his feet.

'Yeah, would you mind giving me a hand picking some of these up?' Mitch replied, beginning to gather his stray cassettes. 'Those that people haven't pocketed already!' He added in a raised voice.

'Yes, of course. I'm so sorry,' Gilbert repeated rubbing his right elbow which he could feel stiffening up already.

looks but no talking.’

‘Well, that suits me,’ Lopez grinned. ‘It all sounds like great fun.’

‘You do remember that advert was designed with Joe in mind, don’t you?’ Helen said when Lopez and Larry Holland had both left.

‘Meaning?’ Peter Bond asked, knowing already what his secretary was going to say.

‘That American isn’t good-looking enough to carry it off.’

‘Well, his face is rather more rugged than Joe’s, I’ll grant you, but—’

‘Rugged?! He’s got a broken nose!’

‘Even *Action Man* has a scar, Helen – and, remember, Henry Cooper advertises aftershave.’

‘Henry Cooper advertises *Brut!* “*Splash it all over – the great smell of Brut!*”. It’s hardly the same market is it? *Nitro* is aiming for a slightly more sophisticated clientele, isn’t it?’

Bond smiled. ‘You’ve always been a bit soft on Joe, haven’t you?’

Helen managed to avoid too deep a blush. ‘That’s not fair,’ she protested, ‘you know perfectly well I’m right.’

Her boss sighed and handed over the contracts for filing. ‘Well, on the speedway track his face will be largely hidden behind a mask and, in the restaurant scene, the lighting will be dim. Maybe it won’t matter so much.’

‘You’re an advertising man, Peter. You know that aftershave, like men’s underwear, is mainly bought for men by their wives and girlfriends. That’s who you’re selling to.’

‘You’re not telling granny how to suck eggs are you, Helen?’

‘I wouldn’t dare,’ she smiled. ‘*Nitro* certainly smells nice but I hope it’s attractive enough to sell itself without having to rely on the advertising.’