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Kate lives on the English side of the Welsh Marches with her husband and her Border terrier.

Also by Kate Charles

A Drink of Deadly Wine
The Snares of Death
Appointed to Die
A Dead Man Out of Mind
Evil Angels Among Them
Unruly Passions
Strange Children
Cruel Habitations
Evil Intent
Secret Sins
Deep Waters

False Tongues

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Marylebone House

First published in Great Britain in 2015

Marylebone House
36 Causton Street
London SW1P 4ST
www.marylebonehousebooks.co.uk

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-910674-05-5
eBook ISBN 978-1-910674-06-2

Typeset by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Manufactured by Jellyfish
First printed in Great Britain by CPI
Subsequently digitally printed in Great Britain

eBook by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

*To quote Abraham Lincoln, 'All that I am,
or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother'*

*In loving memory of Kathryn Lucile Fosher
1922–2013*

Acknowledgements

As ever, I am indebted to a number of people for their encouragement and sharing of expertise. They include Suzanne Clackson, Deborah Crombie, the Revd Dr William Dolman, Ann Gray, Sharon Jones and Marcia Talley. I'm also grateful to Gladstone's Library for providing a wonderful writing space, and to my two agents, the late Dorothy Lumley and the amazing Nancy Yost.

Dramatis personae

In Cambridge

Callie Anson	Deacon
Tamsin Howells	Her friend, a deacon
Val Carver	Her friend, a deacon
Nicky Lamb	Her friend, a deacon
Adam Masters	Her ex-fiancé, a deacon
Scott Browning	Deacon
Jennifer Groves	Deacon
Margaret Phillips	Principal of Archbishop Temple House theological college
Hanna Young	Margaret's secretary
The Revd Dr Keith (Mad Phil) Moody	Lecturer in theology at Archbishop Temple House
John Kingsley	Retired priest

In London

The law

Sgt Mark (Marco) Lombardi	Family liaison officer, engaged to Callie Anson
DI Neville Stewart	Homicide detective
DS Sid Cowley	Neville's sergeant
DCS Idris Evans	Neville's boss
Dr Colin Tompkins	Pathologist
Danny Duffy	Computer expert
PC Dewi Jones	Uniformed officer
Sgt Salome (Sally) Pratt	Custody officer
Hereward Rice	Coroner
Walter Kendrick	Solicitor
Ray	Mortuary attendant

The press

Lilith Noone	Reporter for the <i>Daily Globe</i>
Rob Gardiner-Smith	Editor of the <i>Daily Globe</i> , Lilith's boss

Other Londoners

Peter Anson	Callie's brother
Serena di Stefano	Mark Lombardi's sister
Angelina and Chiara di Stefano	Serena's daughters
Brian Stanford	Vicar, Callie Anson's boss
Jane Stanford	Brian's wife
Dr Richard Frost	Anaesthetist
Miranda Frost	A & E surgeon
Sebastian Frost	Their teenage son
Hugo Summerville	Teenager
Tom Gresham	Teenager
Olly Blount	Teenager
Lexie Renton	Teenager
Georgie Renton	Lexie's younger sister
Becca	Teenager
Josh Bradley	Teenager
Paul Bradley	Josh's father
Iris Bolt	The Frosts' cleaning lady
Wendy Page	Parishioner of Brian Stanford
Philip Page	Wendy's husband, a churchwarden
Liz Gresham	Friend of Wendy Page
Giulia Bonner	Friend of Serena di Stefano
Emilia and Enrico Bonner	Giulia's children
Geoff Brownlow	Mark Lombardi's flatmate

Others

Charlie and Simon Stanford	Brian and Jane's twin sons, at Oxford
Ellie Dickinson	Simon Stanford's girlfriend

CHAPTER 1

Revisiting the past was a bad idea. Callie Anson knew that – especially given her own recent past – but there was something irresistible about the invitation she'd received.

It had arrived in the post not long after Christmas, among the late greetings cards and the glut of January sales catalogues, and had sat on her desk for about a week before she'd done anything about it. She'd opened the envelope, read the invitation, thought about it, then . . . postponed a decision.

Deacons' Week at Archbishop Temple House, her old theological college in Cambridge. A time when those in their first year of ministry were bidden to return to the familiar precincts of the college to share problems and insights gained, to be reunited with friends and colleagues, with tutors and staff. A 'facilitator' would run the sessions, and these get-togethers had proved in the past to be beneficial experiences for those who took part. All deacons were strongly urged to attend, though of course attendance wasn't mandatory. It would take place in the spring, just after Easter.

Beneficial? Maybe . . .

Callie might have postponed her decision even longer if Tamsin Howells, one of her best friends during her time at Archbishop Temple House, hadn't phoned her out of the blue.

'Well?' Tamsin demanded. 'Are you going?'

'I . . . haven't decided,' admitted Callie. 'Are you?'

'Probably. Depends on who else goes, of course. I haven't returned my reply slip. I'm waiting to see.'

'But how will you know who's going?' That, in a nutshell, was the problem. Callie would love to see Tamsin again, and her other friends Val and Nicky. Some of the staff, and certainly her tutor. But not Adam. Definitely not Adam.

Tamsin chuckled. 'Facebook, of course. I've posted it as an event, and invited everyone from our year. I've asked them to RSVP. But the trouble is that hardly anyone has yet. Scott Browning said "yes" straightaway – he wouldn't miss it, of course. But none of our friends. Including *you*,' she added accusingly. 'I suppose no one wants to commit themselves until they know who else is going.'

‘A bit of a catch-22,’ said Callie. ‘Actually, I don’t really do Facebook.’
‘You don’t do Facebook?’ Tamsin’s tone of disbelief could not have been more profound if Callie had said that she didn’t believe in God.

‘I’ve never really got into it.’ She knew that Tamsin lived and breathed Facebook, but Callie had too many things on her plate to spend the time necessary to get heavily involved in online social networking. Real life, she’d decided a while ago, was more interesting. Especially since Marco had become such a big part of her world.

‘I can’t imagine not doing Facebook. It’s the first thing I look at in the morning, and the last thing at night.’ Tamsin chuckled again, wryly. ‘I suppose you’re going to tell me I ought to get a life, right?’

It was exactly what Callie had been thinking, but decided it was better not to go there. ‘It all depends on what you mean by a life, I suppose.’

‘Well,’ said Tamsin, ‘Nicky still hasn’t seen the light. If that’s what you mean. But I continue to live in hope.’

Hope was a good thing, Callie acknowledged to herself. Especially for a clergyperson. One of the big three: faith, hope, charity. She wasn’t convinced, though, that all the hope in the world would do Tamsin any good when it came to Nicky, and she was aware that her next words sounded lame. ‘I guess you never know.’

‘Well, Nicky says he’s going to Deacons’ Week, anyway. So I suppose that means I’ll go. Unless he changes his mind or something.’ Tamsin sighed. ‘And *you*. Get on to Facebook, woman. It’s about time you entered the modern world.’

Callie had a sermon to write, but the gauntlet had been thrown down, and she couldn’t resist the challenge.

Facebook. It *was* time she entered the modern world, and proved that she could be as much of a dysfunctional time-waster as the next person, she said to herself as she logged on, delving deep in her memory for her password. She’d created an account months ago, at Tamsin’s urging, but had never bothered to visit it since then.

Her home page was a poor thing, barely deserving the name. Instead of a photo there was a one-size-fits-all silhouette of a woman’s head. Her profile consisted merely of her name and ‘London’.

Yes, among all the other things that had piled up – requests to be her friend and reports on the daily activities of the few friends she’d already acquired in that short-lived burst of tepid enthusiasm – there was an invitation from Tamsin to attend Deacons’ Week at Archbishop Temple House.

Callie clicked on Tamsin's name and was taken to her home page.

How, she wondered, did Tamsin find time to do her actual job? After all, there were only so many hours in a day, and Tamsin was a curate like Callie, with a parish to serve and a vicar to keep happy. Her vicar must be much less demanding than Brian Stanford, and her parishioners must be singularly without problems and needs. Clearly Tamsin had not exaggerated the scope of her activities on Facebook, which were truly prodigious. She had in excess of five hundred friends, with whom she evidently kept up a constant correspondence in the form of public 'wall' messages. There were probably private messages as well, and who knows what other methods of communicating with her vast network.

Callie couldn't help smiling at Tamsin's profile photo: it captured her so well. The word that summed up Tamsin was 'round'. Baby-blue eyes, round as saucers; bouncy blond curls; chubby cheeks; a body that was all curves. Tamsin wasn't exactly fat, but her short stature, combined with the generous size of her breasts – like over-inflated balloons – gave the impression of someone who would never win the Weight Watchers' Slimmer of the Year prize.

And yet to judge Tamsin by her appearance would be to vastly underestimate her. She was a woman of great intelligence and profound insights, as Callie had discovered very quickly at theological college. In their little circle of friends in their tutor group, Tamsin was undoubtedly the cleverest. People *did* underestimate Tamsin, all of the time, to their own cost.

Did Nicky underestimate Tamsin? On the whole, Callie didn't think so. She clicked through from Tamsin's home page to Nicky's.

Nicky Lamb looked utterly angelic in his profile photo, dressed in cassock, alb and his deacon's stole – butter wouldn't melt, Callie's mother would have said tartly. Again, appearances were deceiving. It wasn't that the Reverend Nicky Lamb, curate of St Ninian's Church, Brighton, was wicked. On the contrary, he was a good man with an integrity so deep that other people often found it daunting. But Callie knew that he had the most trenchant sense of humour she'd ever encountered. Much of it was self-deprecating, which took the edge off its sharpness. Yet he could cut the pompous down to size with just a few well-chosen words. And there had been plenty of pomposity resident at Archbishop Temple House, where Nicky Lamb had not always been the most popular of ordinands.

Except with Tamsin, of course. Tamsin adored Nicky unreservedly, and had done so from the beginning. Ignoring common sense and the

counsel of her friends, Tamsin lived for the day that Nicky would return her feelings. The trouble was, as Callie well understood, the train was never going to stop at that station. No, Nicky would be a far better match for her brother Peter. Callie had sometimes thought about introducing the two of them, during those frequent – if brief – periods when Peter was between boyfriends, except that it seemed vaguely disloyal to Tamsin. And probably a certain recipe for disaster, she acknowledged to herself.

Tamsin might not have a hope in hell, but that didn't stop her from taking a job in an adjoining diocese to Nicky's, so that she could travel to Brighton on her days off and spend time with him. They were good friends, Tamsin had explained to Callie. And if that's all it was ever going to amount to, it was better than nothing. Or so Tamsin reckoned.

Val was the one who thought Tamsin was crazy. 'Doesn't she realize?' she'd said so often to Callie. 'It's just not going to happen. And it's keeping her from meeting other people. Men, I mean. Straight men. Men who might conceivably marry her.'

Marriage was a subject which loomed large in Val Carver's mind. She'd been single when Callie and the others had met her, during that first week at college, and like the rest of them she seemed focused on her vocation to the priesthood. But it turned out that she had a secondary focus as well, and before the end of their first year she'd been sporting an impressive engagement ring. The lucky man was Jeremy Carver, the chaplain of the college; they had married last summer, during Val's final term.

Callie clicked on Val's name and was taken to her home page.

Val's expression looked smug, Callie decided. Not surprising, as she'd managed to achieve the two things she'd set out to capture: a clerical collar and a husband. Her relationship status was proudly proclaimed – 'Married to Jeremy'. And in the space for religion she'd put 'Deacon in the Church of England – to be priested next summer'.

She was an unlikely femme fatale, thought Callie as she studied the photo. Val was as angular as Tamsin was round, tall and flat-chested, with long, straight, mousy hair and square-framed spectacles. She looked like the quintessential schoolteacher – which is what she'd been, of course, before theological college and ordination. Val had been one of those women who'd always known she wanted to be a priest, but even though she'd come of age after that had become possible for her gender, she'd had the misfortune to be part of that generation which had been sent away by the ordination selectors and told to get some 'real world' experience before training for the ministry. She'd felt fairly bitter about

it at the time, she'd confided to Callie, yet she'd served her time in the classroom with determination, if not distinction. And now, like the rest of them, she was almost there: a deacon, on the verge of being a priest.

Val might not be as prodigious a user of Facebook as Tamsin when it came to the quantity of friends, but she was more disciplined in the matter of organizing and posting her photos. Callie clicked on the list of Val's photo albums and discovered that there were a number of them, from 'wedding' to 'ordination' to 'parish activities'.

There was even an album devoted to snapshots from her theological college days, and Callie was surprised to find that she was tagged in quite a few of them. Val Carver, Tamsin Howells, Nicky Lamb, Callie Anson: they were there in various combinations, often without Val, who had been wielding the camera – devouring pizza at a favourite cheap eatery, lounging in the common room and even punting on the Cam.

Punting, Callie remembered that afternoon very well. A glorious day in April, during their first year. It had been so unexpectedly beautiful, after a long rainy spell, that they'd been drawn to the river, its banks lined with a profusion of blooms – daffodils, crocuses, hyacinths in their thousands.

'Let's hire a punt,' Nicky had suggested impulsively, and in spite of Val's reservations about his abilities, he had demonstrated quite a surprising facility for punting. The photos showed him handling the pole with a smug grin, while Tamsin gazed at him with wide-eyed admiration and Callie looked apprehensive.

What a lovely day it had been. Cambridge in the spring: there was nothing more glorious. Callie felt an uncharacteristic swelling of nostalgia in her throat – nostalgia for that day, that place, those people.

Deacons' Week was scheduled for April, after Easter.

She would go, Callie decided. If her boss Brian were amenable, she would go.

Brian hadn't been keen. Lukewarm, at best, Callie recalled several months later, as she packed her case.

Her request had caught him a bit by surprise, and Callie suspected that he wanted to run it by his wife Jane before committing himself irrevocably to any particular position.

'It's after Easter,' Callie had pointed out. 'And it's only five days.'

Brian tented his fingers together and regarded their tips. 'But we generally go away after Easter. Janey and I. To Wales. We can't really leave the parish unattended, can we?'

Last Easter she hadn't been there, Callie wanted to say to him. And all of the previous Easters. Evidently he'd left the parish unattended plenty of times before. Why was it different, now that he had a curate? 'It's only five days,' she repeated. 'I wouldn't be away on a Sunday.'

'And who would pay for it?' Brian asked, changing tack. 'There's no spare money in the parish budget to subsidize your little holidays.'

Callie made an effort to control her frustration. 'It wouldn't be a holiday. It's continuing ministerial education. CME. The diocese budgets money for that, I've been told. And if necessary I'd pay for it myself,' she added.

It had worked; Brian had eventually agreed that she could have the time off, as long as the parish didn't have to fund it.

But now that the time had come, Callie was having second thoughts.

Why had this ever seemed like a good idea? she asked herself as she contemplated the clothes she'd laid out on her bed.

Would people be wearing their dog collars and clericals? Or would it be more casual and informal, with the sort of clothes – jeans and sweats – that they'd worn as students? She would hate to be caught out either way, so she'd better be prepared for either eventuality. And maybe she'd need something smart in case they laid on a posh dinner.

Callie folded up an oversized college T-shirt – to sleep in – and tucked it into her case, then checked her sponge bag to make sure it contained everything she needed – the last time she'd used it was when she'd had to move into the vicarage for a few weeks. Thank goodness that particular experience was behind her. Her flat above the church hall, re-roofed after a storm had made it uninhabitable, felt like home to her, and it was so good to be back.

All the while that she was packing, a black and white cocker spaniel watched her every move from her position near the door with an expression that Callie interpreted as both accusatory and miserable. 'Oh, Bella,' she said, crouching down to stroke the dog's soft ears. 'Are you afraid I'm going to sneak out and leave you?'

Something else to feel guilty about, she told herself. Poor Bella. During Callie's weeks of enforced residence at the vicarage, she'd had to find a temporary home for Bella with her friend Frances Cherry in Notting Hill. Now, all too soon, Bella would be returning to Frances' for a few days. She'd be well looked after, if not thoroughly spoilt, but Callie felt bad about it all the same.

Her mobile phone rang in her bag and she scrambled to retrieve it, pressing the button to answer the call as she registered that it was her brother.

'Hi, Sis,' said Peter's breezy voice.

'Hi.' She took the phone away from her ear for a second to check the time display. 'I don't have too much time to talk right now,' she said. 'I have to finish packing, then take Bella over to Frances', and then catch a train.'

'Packing? Train?' Peter echoed.

She sighed. 'I told you. I'm away this week. Cambridge.'

'Oh, that's right. Meeting up with your chums.'

'Well, that's not really what it's about,' she protested.

'Whatever. Will what's-his-name be there?'

Adam. Peter had never liked him, and refusing to call him by name had always been his way of letting her know that. 'I sincerely hope not,' Callie said with feeling. She had monitored the replies to Tamsin's Facebook invitation, and Adam was down as a 'no'. 'And nice as it is to talk to you, I've really got to go.'

'Hang on a second,' Peter said. 'I can save you a bit of time. You won't have to take Bella to Frances'. I'll look after her this week.'

'What?'

'The thing is, Sis,' her brother went on in a remarkably cheerful voice, 'Jason and I have split up.'

'Oh, Peter, no!' It wasn't the first time, and with Jason's known predilection for chorus boys, Callie had privately expected the break-up much sooner.

'Don't sound so upset,' he said. 'I'm not. Mutual consent this time. We just haven't been getting on, and it was time for me to move out.'

'So you're ...'

'Homeless again,' he chirped. 'And on my way to Bayswater, even as we speak. I'm in a taxi. I'll be there in ... oh, ten minutes at the most.'

Callie's heart sank, remembering the last time. She recalled it all too well: the wet towels on the floor, the dirty crockery in the sink ... 'But you *can't* stay here,' she protested. She'd only just moved back in and reclaimed her home. It wasn't fair!

'It won't be for long. Just a few days. I have my eye on a flat, so it's just a matter of some paperwork,' Peter said smoothly. 'And I'll be doing you a favour, Sis. Looking after Bella.'

'All right,' she capitulated, knowing she didn't sound very gracious about it. 'But you *have* to be out when I get back at the end of the week.'

'Done deal. See you in a few,' he said, hanging up.

Callie sighed, surveying her flat. Her lovely cosy flat, with everything just the way she liked it. That wouldn't last five minutes with Peter in residence.

But Bella would probably be happier in her own home, she told herself. Trying to inject some enthusiasm into her voice, she stroked Bella's ears and said, 'Uncle Peter's coming to take care of you. Won't that be nice?'

Her case was packed and she didn't have to take Bella to Frances'. That gave Callie a few spare minutes to check the invitation list one more time. She went to her desk and switched her computer on, navigating to her bookmarked Facebook home page.

The list was much the same as the last time she'd looked: in the 'yes' column were various names including Tamsin Howells, Val Carver and Nicky Lamb. But one name had been added at the bottom of the list. Adam Masters was now a 'yes'.

Callie caught her breath and uttered a single word which the average man in the street would not believe could ever pass the lips of a clergyperson.

Interlude: Facebook

DarthVader474 to RedDwarf287:

U make me sick u little wanker. U need to die. Y dont u just kill urself & save us the trouble?

CHAPTER 2

If there was anything that Detective Inspector Neville Stewart hated more than being woken out of a deep sleep by an emergency call, it was for the phone to go when he'd just managed to fall asleep after a bout of insomnia.

To be fair, it didn't happen that often. There weren't too many criminal incidents in the middle of the night that couldn't be dealt with by a more junior policeman – a detective constable or a detective sergeant, or even a beat officer. Traffic violations, drug busts, vandalism, drunken rowdiness: Neville need not be called from his bed for any of these.

But murder was something different.

And this murder was literally in his professional backyard: on the open common ground called Paddington Green, behind the police station.

A late dog walker had discovered the body – just the other side of the walk from the churchyard – and because of its proximity to the station it hadn't taken long for the police to reach the crime scene and cordon it off with plastic tape. As it was a Sunday night, though, and Easter to boot, few officers were on duty. When Neville arrived, feeling hard done by, the scenes of crime team was just beginning to assemble near the square bulk of the church and the photographer hadn't got there yet. Neither had Neville's sergeant, DS Sid Cowley, but at least the police doctor was there and had made the necessary examination to ascertain death.

It was to him that Neville naturally gravitated for a quick rundown of the state of play.

'He's dead, all right,' Dr Tompkins said with characteristic brusqueness. 'Stabbed. In the neck.'

Neville felt a chill like icy fingers on the back of his own neck. It was spring; the day had been warm, but that didn't mean it didn't cool off quite substantially at night. At least that was Neville's story, and he intended sticking with it. 'Do we know who he is?'

Colin Tompkins shook his head. 'Young lad. On his own. He might have some ID on him, but we've left him for you to have a look.'

Neville nodded approvingly; the less mucking about with the crime scene and the body, the better. ‘Murder weapon?’ he asked, falling in with Dr Tompkins’ terse speech pattern.

‘Knife. No sign of it yet.’

Another one, then. Neville closed his eyes and sighed. There had been so many of them lately: young men, little more than boys, killing each other with knives. What a waste. What a bloody, stupid waste.

Callie had very nearly changed her mind and stayed at home. Before the night was over, she wished she had.

Adam was a complication she had certainly not counted on. Spending the better part of a week in proximity to him – and in such emotive, evocative surroundings – was the last thing she needed at this point in her life. Just going back to the place they’d met was difficult enough to contemplate, let alone with him there.

It wasn’t too late to change her mind, she’d told herself, breathing deeply to control her panic. After all, Adam had changed his, virtually at the last minute. The success of the week didn’t depend on her being there. Tamsin would miss her, and Val and Nicky, but they’d get on fine without her.

Then Callie remembered Peter. He was on his way; he’d be here in a few minutes. To stay.

It was impossible. She was *not* going to share her flat with Peter again. Peter here on his own was bad enough; for her to be here with him just wasn’t going to work.

She had to go to Cambridge. There was no alternative. No backing out now.

A bloody, stupid waste.

Neville looked down at the body in the feeble light of his hand-held torch, then crouched down for a closer look and swallowed hard. He wasn’t squeamish; he’d seen enough violent deaths in his time that he knew he shouldn’t be affected like this. But this was just a kid. Just a lad, with a tangle of dark curls and downy cheeks that had probably never seen a razor. He’d expected some street-hardened gang member, thick-set, covered with tattoos and scars from previous fights. This boy wasn’t like that. He was tall and slender, clean, well-dressed. And so young.

He was someone’s son.

Somewhere, perhaps not far away, his parents were wondering where he was. Wondering why he hadn’t come home from an evening out with his mates.

The police photographer had arrived and was supervising the setting up of lights to illuminate the crime scene. 'Let's get on with it,' Neville muttered, mostly to himself, but the photographer heard him.

'Keep your hair on, mate. We're working as fast as we can.'

'Yeah, yeah,' Neville rocked back on his heels, then stood up.

The photographer threw a switch and suddenly the body on the ground was exposed in a glare of bright white light, lying in a pool of darkening blood.

'Jesus,' Neville said.

In addition to the stab wound in the neck, there was blood round the boy's mouth, difficult to see in the dark but now clearly visible. Neville turned to the doctor, who was still hovering nearby, and pointed down. 'What's that about, then?'

'His tongue,' said Dr Tompkins quietly. 'Looks like it's been split. With a knife.'

'Jesus,' he repeated with feeling. 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph.'

Travelling by public transport on a Sunday – let alone a holiday – was seldom a good idea, Callie recognized belatedly.

She'd spent longer talking to Peter than she'd planned, certain that the break-up with Jason was hitting him harder than he was willing to admit, then she'd made the mistake of taking the Tube to King's Cross rather than grabbing a taxi.

Services on the London Underground were greatly reduced at Easter, she discovered. In fact, the Circle Line wasn't running at all, due to engineering works, so she had to take the Bakerloo Line from Paddington to Baker Street. Once there, she lugged her case up twenty steps, round the corner, up the escalator and a few more steps to the Metropolitan Line platform only to see the tail lights of the departing train disappearing into the tunnel, and when she checked the electronic board for the next service, she was dismayed to see that there wasn't even one listed.

The platform was deserted; everyone else had made it on to the train. At least that meant she could sit down to wait for the next one, Callie told herself, dragging her suitcase to one of the plastic chairs bolted to the wall. She got out the envelope with her ticket and checked the time of the Cambridge train, synchronizing her watch with the electronic display board on the platform. If the Tube train came within the next ten minutes, she ought to make it.

The Tube train didn't come. A few more people rushed on to the platform, looking hopeful or desperate. An unshaven man with a can of

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