

The widespread problem of water pollution is jeopardising our health. Unsafe water kills more people each year than war and all other forms of violence combined. Meanwhile, our drinkable water sources are finite: Less than 1 percent of the earth's freshwater is actually accessible to us. Without action, the challenges will only increase by 2050, when global demand for freshwater is expected to be one-third greater than it is now.

Natural Resources Defence Council (US)

Chapter One

Courtney Kline stared into her mirror while vigorously applying a makeup brush, just a light foundation.

“Melody, are you nearly ready...? We need to go.”

Her ten-year-old daughter appeared at the bedroom door, dressed in a school uniform and carrying a satchel.

“I’m just waiting for you, Mom.” Her tone was one of frustration. The use of the word ‘Mom’ was distinctly American, conditioned by hours of TV and Social Media.

Courtney put her brush in her makeup bag along with the mascara and lipstick and zipped it up.

“Let’s have a look at you.”

Courtney held her daughter in both hands and examined her. She toyed playfully with the two frizzy bunches either side of Melody’s head: all the rage at school apparently and in keeping with her stage persona. Melody was the veteran of over twenty TV adverts. As a mixed-race child, black mother and white father, she was in great demand. Her cute face and frizzy hair had appeared on Cereal packets, toothpaste, even an internet provider advertisements as part of the new multi-cultural family, among many others. The money she earned paid for her private schooling.

“Looking good, Sweetie; come on, let’s get going.”

Courtney left the bedroom and went downstairs followed by her daughter.

She opened the lounge door, checked around and picked up her car keys from the table by the front door. The cleaner would be in later to vacuum around and do the washing and ironing. Such was the busy life of an investigative reporter.

Onto the white gravel drive of her smart three-bedroomed detached house, she walked to her Toyota SUV and the car door opened automatically. Melody was at the passenger side.

“Quick, put your seatbelt on or we’ll be late.” Melody complied, and Courtney reversed the car out of her drive and entered the flow of the morning’s rush-hour. She checked the time, eight twenty-three.

Twenty minutes later, Courtney pulled up outside the main gates of St Aidan's Preparatory School; several other mothers, and a couple of fathers were doing the same thing.

"Have a nice day, Sweetie. Sophie will pick you up tonight."

"Yeah, ok... bye Mom, see you later."

Courtney watched with pride as her daughter crossed the schoolyard and join several other girls in matching uniform.

Courtney was in the crawl heading for the city centre; to her right the majestic River Shale rolled on towards the estuary some fifteen miles downstream; its grey appearance reflecting the winter sky. She waited at one of the myriad traffic lights and watched a posse of joggers passing in the opposite direction pushing their muscles along the riverside pathway.

She could see her office in the distance, halfway up the fourteen-story skysrise which rose from the cityscape, the tallest building in Eastport. The neon sign, 'Eastport Echo' shone like a beacon in the drab early February morning.

Ten minutes later, Courtney approached the barrier of the underground carpark; it opened automatically courtesy of the number-plate recognition system. The Toyota descended into the bowels of the building and she found her allotted space.

She picked up her briefcase and laptop from the backseat and exited the car. There was a clunk as it locked behind her. Another colleague walked towards her, Maurice Jeffries, editor of the popular entertainment and celebrity section.

"Hi Courtney, how was your weekend?"

"Good, Maurice, thanks. You?"

"Yeah, thanks."

They walked together in silence towards the lift that would take them to their respective offices. Not through any animosity, both lost in their own worlds.

Her colleague pressed the call button and they waited.

“Roll on Spring, I hate the cold, me,” said Maurice in his local accent.

“Amen, to that,” replied Courtney just as the lift door opened.

Maurice pressed ‘12’ – the editorial team were based on this floor; Courtney leaned across and pressed ‘7’. The elevator moved but stopped after a few seconds at the ground floor where others who did not have the advantage of a car parking space joined.

With people alighting at every stop, it took a few minutes before Courtney arrived at her desk; or at least the one that had been allocated her under the ‘hot-desking’ arrangement. She hated it; Courtney liked her own space which she could organise to her own preferences. She took the framed photograph of her daughter from her handbag, placed it next to her laptop on the tabletop and logged in. This particular workstation was not too bad; it was close to the window and she had an amazing view of the city docks and the large ferry terminal to the east along the river. In the far distance the chimneys and towers of the chemical works dominated the view.

While her laptop updated, she walked along the middle of the open-plan office to the small kitchen area and made a coffee. As the kettle boiled, she watched her colleagues beaver away on their computers or on the phone talking to customers. The floor contained the sales team which always seemed to be busy.

Courtney was one of three ‘investigative’ reporters working for the Echo. The word distinguished them from the static reporters who would be compiling obituaries or reviewing last night’s cinema and TV.

The Eastport Echo had been a fixture in the city for almost a century and in its present location for twenty of those years when a developer decided the skyline of the city needed revitalising. As with most newspapers, the circulation had declined since its peak in the nineties but enjoyed a loyal readership and with its digital platform, was still a very viable business driven by its legendary editor, Max Fielding.

The kettle boiled and Courtney completed her coffee-making. A colleague from the sales team walked in.

“Morning Courtney, good weekend?”

“Hi, Ed, yeah, thanks. You?”

Ed Mallinder was head of sales and a renown leech; his visit to the kitchenette was not a coincidence.

“Yeah, good thanks... I’ve got a couple of tickets to the Bon Jovi concert this week if you’re interested.”

There was a casual arrogance in his offer.

“The Arena gig on Friday?” Courtney took a drink of her coffee and looked at her inquisitor.

“Yeah.”

“Sorry, I’m busy, Ed, but thanks for the offer.”

“Another time?” replied Mallinder, not giving up without a fight.

“I don’t think so,” replied Courtney. “Excuse me, I need to get on.”

She had no desire to become one of Ed Mallinder’s conquests.

Courtney returned to her desk carrying her mug and looked out at the bleak February morning. Traffic lights were brighter as they went through their sequence; stores with their illuminated frontages were trying desperately to entice the scant customers strolling the precinct this time on a gloomy Monday morning. Roll on Spring.

Courtney accessed her emails and scanned down the list. Mostly internal routine notes, but one caught her eye; it was from the Tongue River Anglers Association.

She opened it up.

‘Dear Ms Kline, I am writing to report an incident which I believe needs some publicity. Can we arrange to meet? I cannot discuss it here. You can reach me on my mobile. Please call.

Yours

Bill Laughton

Chairman

Tongue River Anglers Association'

Courtney was intrigued. She jotted the number on her notepad and made the call. It was answered straightaway.

"Hello." It was a gruff voice in a strong local dialect.

"Mr Laughton...? Courtney Kline, Eastport Echo, you emailed me."

"Aye, 'appen I did."

"You said you had a story for me."

"Aye, but not over the phone, eh?"

"Yes, ok, where do you want to meet?"

"Do you know the 'Dog and Duck' at Ellington?"

"Yes, I know it."

"Today, lunchtime...? They do nice bar meals."

"Sure, one o'clock?"

Aye, that suits... and you might want to bring a photographer. I've summat to show yas."

"Yes, ok, see you about one o'clock."

Courtney dropped the call and picked up the receiver of the internal phone on the corner of her desk. She entered a two digit number.

"George...? It's Courtney, is there a lensman free later this morning?"

"It'll have to be one of the freelance; Zach's already booked out." Zach Greaves was the Echo's chief photographer.

"What about Mike Saunders?" He was Zach's assistant.

"He's on leave... When do you need them?"

“Oh, ok.. About twelve-thirty here... or they can meet me at the Dog and Duck in Ellington at one o'clock.”

“Right, ok, leave it with me; I'll get back to you.”

Courtney continued writing up a story ready for the evening edition; it was almost finished. A fifteen-hundred word piece about the 'death' of the high street in one of the suburbs. It would appear on an inside page in the Community Section, not very sexy but of importance to local residents.

The internal phone rang.

“Hi Courtney, George. I've managed to get a photographer for you... Lara Longthorne.”

“Don't know her.”

“She's local, weddings mainly, but she has done work for us before; she's very good.”

“Yeah, ok, thanks. What's happening about meeting up?”

“She's working over that way this morning; she says she'll meet you at the pub.”

“Ok, great, thanks George; I'll get her to send you the invoice.”

“Yeah, no problem... What's the story?”

“Not sure yet, had a strange email from some Angling Association saying they had a story that needs telling; I called them, said to bring a photographer. They've got something to show me, apparently.”

“Hmm, I hope it's not another of those nutters trying to save the planet.”

“Ha, no, I don't think so, but I'll let you know... Is Max in today?”

“He's got a meeting with the mayor; he'll be in later.”

“Ok, I'll phone in on my way back; let you know what's happening.”

“Yeah, ok, Courtney, take care out there.”

Courtney dropped the call and returned to her story; another ten minutes and then she would be done. Then it would be sent to the sub-editor for proof-reading and final edit before publication in tonight's edition.

Twelve-fifteen, Courtney logged-off her laptop. She grabbed her coat and sling-bag which she always took with her when she was out working. It contained her recorder and other essentials she might need on a job.

She put on her coat as she paced along the corridor to the lift.

Five minutes later, she was leaving the underground car park and heading for her meeting. The day was starting to brighten as the car appeared from the darkness of the parking lot; the earlier murk had cleared as the temperature rose by a couple of degrees. She blinked as her eyes adjusted to the luminosity.

The Toyota eased into the traffic going east towards the docks and ferry terminal. It was heaving with trucks of every description and from every European country it seemed, making their way to the transport that would carry them to the Continent.

On the right she passed the Marina, a relatively recent development designed to improve the City's image. The jury was out whether the vision had succeeded. Yachts bobbed up and down at their moorings.

The traffic eased as Courtney left the dock traffic behind, and she was able to make better progress. The riverside buildings to the right gave way to the vista of the river, at least five miles wide at this point. The industrial landscape and the hills beyond on the far bank were visible now.

The chimneys and towers of the chemical works loomed large ahead. Trent Chemicals had been a fixture in the city since the nineteen-thirties and a valuable employer of over twelve-hundred staff. Dominated by its two enormous cooling towers, rising like Quixotian giants; it covered an area of around four square miles. There were pipes of every description, admin blocks, the research centre – which enjoyed a good reputation for innovation in the field of chemicals. It even had its own docking facility on the river. The company featured regularly in the Echo with its charitable work in the city.

Courtney looked to her right as she went by on the dual carriageway which traversed the entrance road to the plant. She noticed a large sign. 'Trent Chemicals - The Home of Biotechnology'. That was new; she hadn't been this way for a while. She recalled the announcement a few weeks earlier, beginning of January; there had been a press release. One of her colleagues had reported the story.

She looked ahead; the feeling returned. The place gave her a sense of foreboding, a prescience; she had no idea why but every time she went past Trent Island, she had the same sensation.

Ten minutes later, just before the bridge over the River Tongue that took the main road to the coast, there was a signpost, 'Swillington Village – 3 Miles'. She took the left hand turn onto Swillington Lane and then she turned right into the Dog and Duck car park. Courtney was trying to remember when she was last in Ellington, but she couldn't recollect; it had been a while. She had been there with her ex for a bar meal she suddenly recalled; she quickly removed that thought from her mind; memories of romantic tristes with Dominic had been confined to history. She was over it.

As she manoeuvred the Toyota into a space close to the main building, Courtney noticed an attractive, fresh-faced woman, dressed in black jeans, Doc Martens and a leather bomber-jacket. She had a camera slung over her shoulder and was carrying a large bag with the word 'Nikon' in black letters appended.

Courtney waved to her as she got out of her car and the woman approached. Courtney made an initial assessment, about the same age, dark short-hair, almost boyish. She was wearing expensive earrings; there was no wedding ring but a signet ring on the third finger of her right hand.

"Hi. You Lara?"

"Yes," replied the woman and extended her hand in greeting.

"Courtney Kline, Eastport Echo."

"Yes, I recognised you. Great article last week on the council's planning committee; it's about time they were brought to account, bunch of crooks the lot of them."

Courtney had definitely got a fan.

"Thanks," replied Courtney with due humility.

“So, what’s the gig?”

“Hmm, good question, I don’t honestly know. I had an email from someone this morning who apparently has an important story and wanted to chat to me. Suggested I bring a photographer.”

“Intriguing.” The photographer was looking at Courtney, carrying out her own assessment.

“Shall we go in? He arranged to meet us at one o’clock.”

They walked the short distance to the entrance. Following the floods of 2007, the pub had been completely refurbished. At one stage the water level measured six feet in the bar; there was still evidence of the disaster with repaired brickwork not yet blending in with the pre-flood masonry. The floods of the previous November, luckily, had not caused anything like the same damage.

It was an old building and, with its proximity to the river, used to be popular with boatmen and fishermen in a by-gone age. Now, the rear of the pub was a grassed area with facilities for families; it was fence-off from the footpath that ran alongside the river. There would be no-one sitting on the outside benches today.

Courtney led the way and pushed open the entrance door. There was a small vestibule and then the bar. It was in an ‘L’ shape with the far wall windowed with a view of the beer-garden and, when the tide was in, the river. At the moment it was not visible, approaching low tide. Black beams ran the ceiling with numerous horse-brasses on display, designed to give the pub an ‘olde-worlde’ feel.

“What can I get you?” said Courtney as they walked to the serving area.

“Just an orange juice,” replied Lara.

“Good morning, ladies, what will it be?” enquired mine host; an avuncular figure with a large beer-belly who looked at home in his surroundings. The pair perched themselves on a pair of stools in front of the bar.

“Two orange juices, please... Can we order some sandwiches too?”

“Sure, coming right up... Here’s the bar menu.” The landlord produced two colourfully illustrated laminated cards and handed them out.

Courtney scanned the list of snacks and then looked around the bar.

“We better wait for Bill before we order; he’ll probably want something.”

“Bill?” queried Lara.

“Yes, Bill Laughton, he’s the one who contacted me; chair of the local angling association, apparently.”

The landlord retrieved two bottles of orange-juice from the row of soft drinks and started to pour them into half-pint glasses.

“Three-eighty, love,” said the man, handing them to the girls.

“Can you start a tab, please? We’ll need some food. We’re just waiting for someone,” said Courtney.

“Sure,” replied the barman and loaded the total into the computerised till.

“He’s late,” said Courtney checking her watch and scanning the sparsely populated bar. It was one-fifteen.”

Five minutes later, a man in his sixties, dressed in ‘country’ gear, complete with flat-cap, appeared at the doorway; he resembled a squire from the nineteenth century. He looked around the bar and made eye-contact with Courtney. He approached her.

“Ms Kline?”

“Yes, Mr Laughton?”

Courtney stood up and they shook hands.

“No, I’m David Crawshaw, club secretary.” He spoke in a more refined version of the local accent, as though he frequented the gentry but was not one of them. “Bill’s not here yet... I was waiting for him outside. I don’t know what’s happened to him; I’ve never known him late. It’s not like him; not like him at all... I’ve been calling his phone but it’s just ringing out. His wife said he left at twelve-thirty. He only lives two mile away in Ryton.”

“Do you know what he wanted to talk about?”

“Yes, but he’s got all the information. He’s been compiling a dossier.” said Crawshaw.

“A dossier..? Hmm, ok... Well, we can make a start; he can join us later... What would you like to drink? We can take them over to the corner; it’s private enough.”

“Aye, ok... a beer please... I don’t know what’s happened to him. It’s not like him; not like him at all,” repeated the man.

“This is Lara, by the way... Bill said to bring a photographer.” The squire doffed his cap.

Courtney ordered the beer. “Do you want something to eat? We’re going to grab a sandwich.”

“Aye, go on then, thank you,” replied Crawshaw, still not fully concentrating.

Courtney gave the man a menu and the food was duly ordered. “Find yourself a seat; we’ll bring the food over,” said the landlord.

The three carried their drinks to the far end of the bar and found a vacant table.

Hazy sunlight streaming through the picture-window lit the area.

“Here will do,” said Courtney and they made themselves comfortable. There was no-one in close proximity.

“So, can you fill us in why you wanted to see me?” said Courtney.

Courtney took out her recorder. “You don’t mind do you?” and she switched it on before the man could reply.

Crawshaw took a swig of his beer.

“Aye... It’s ok... Well.. something’s polluting the river.”

“Polluting the river?” reflected Courtney, seeking confirmation. “Go on.”

“Aye, it was about two months ago, end of November sometime, up at Swillington lock. We had a monthly competition up there and we noticed there were one or two dead fish floating on the surface. Now, don’t get me wrong, fish do die but then over the next few days, there were more and more of them; bream, roach, dace, perch, even a pike... lifeblood of the river. Bill and me managed to net a couple so we could get an analysis done ... you know, try to find out how they died, like.”

“Ok, so what happened?” asked Courtney.

Before Crawshaw could answer a woman in an apron walked towards them carrying two plates. “Two tuna and sweetcorn wraps,” she announced.

Courtney and Lara claimed ownership. Two tortilla’s containing the appropriate filling surrounded by what looked like a meadow of greenery, two baby tomatoes and a pile of chips.

“Any sauces?” asked the woman. Courtney and Lara shook their heads and started unwrapping the cutlery from its paper napkin encasement.

“Yours is just coming,” said the waitress looking at Crawshaw.

The girls started eating; the recorder’s light was shining red.

The woman returned. “Full Ploughman’s special,” she declared and placed it in front of the squire.

Once everyone was settled, Courtney repeated the question.

“You were saying, David, about the dead fish and the analysis; what did you find out?”

“Hmm, not as much as we’d hoped; the results were, and I quote, ‘inconclusive’,” said Crawshaw with a mouth full of cheese.

“Do you have the letter... showing the results?” asked Courtney.

“No, Bill’s got it, along with the rest of the stuff.”

“What stuff?”

“Photos, letters, that sort of thing... We’ve been in communication with the Water Company for weeks.”

“Eastwold Water?” enquired Courtney.

“Aye, they’re blooming useless. We’re always onto ’em; no interest in the water quality as long as it doesn’t flood. They’ve spent millions on them new flood defences.”

“Well, we can’t blame them, after 2007; we don’t want a repeat of that.”

“No, no, you’re right, don’t get me wrong; but there’s all sorts in the river that shouldn’t be there...”

“So, what do they say?”

“They just fob us off with the usual ‘within accepted tolerance’, excuses.”

“And you don’t have any copies of the correspondence?”

“No, as I said, Bill has ’em... he was going to bring it all with him... I wish I knew where he was, it’s not like, not like him at all. We’ve been saying for ages we need to get the press involved; it’s the only way we’ll get anything done.”

“Ok, well there isn’t much to go on at the moment. Dead fish is not the most interesting headline,” replied Courtney.

“No, I can see that... But when we’ve finished, how about I take you up to the lock? You’ll see what I mean.”

“Yes, ok,” said Courtney. She turned off her recorder.

“So, what do you do, David?”

Crawshaw had consumed the last of his ploughman’s lunch and was finishing his side portion of chips.

“I’m gamekeeper for Lord Eastthorpe, on the Eastthorpe Estate, look after the birds - pheasants and partridges mainly. The river also skirts ’round the estate - feeds into the lake; there’s some nice trout up there, but we don’t see ’em down this far.”

“Wouldn’t his Lordship have an interest?”

“Aye, but the problem isn’t on his land; it’s further south. The water quality’s not too bad up there near the reservoir.”

They continued chatting for another quarter of an hour, Courtney checked her watch; it was gone two and the newspaper were paying Lara by the hour.

“Right, David, if you’re ready; you’d better show us what you want us to see.”

“Aye, right, ok... I must apologise for Bill not being here; I don’t know what’s happened to him. It’s not like him.”

“Don’t worry, we can always arrange another meeting if necessary.”

Crawshaw downed the dregs of his pint and stood up. “It’s not far, ten minutes or so.”

The girls put on their jackets and Courtney went to the bar and paid the tab, remembering a receipt for her expenses. The three walked out of the pub, acknowledging the landlord as they left the bar.

Crawshaw walked towards an ancient Land Rover; rust pock-marked the bodywork.

“Follow me; it’s not far,” shouted the gamekeeper as the engine roared into life causing the exhaust pipe to rattle alarmingly.

Lara was reversing a Mazda MX5 from its parking bay; it’s throaty engine echoing around the yard. Business was clearly going well, observed Courtney as she negotiated her Toyota from the car park and pulled up behind the Land Rover.

She checked her mirror and could see the Mazda on her tail.

They turned right along Swillington Lane into open countryside which, although not at its best in February, exuded a bleakness that gave the landscape a wild appearance, not unattractive.

The road continued to follow the river, to the right and Courtney noticed glimpses of it every so often through the trees.

The Land Rover indicated a left turn and pulled into a well-used layby; Courtney followed, and Lara pulled in behind.

Courtney could see the gamekeeper get out of the Land Rover and she followed suit. The ground was puddled in the tyre tracks of previous visitors to the parking spot. Courtney skipped the flooded pot-holes and joined the man.

Lara approached the pair carrying her camera; she had removed the lens-cap.

“It’s over here,” said the man and the three crossed over the road. The road was flanked by a line of trees and Crawshaw led them to a gap which might once have been a fishing hole. To the left, Swillington

Lock loomed above them, about twenty feet high and stretching about three quarters of the hundred metre width of the river. The black wooden gates in the middle were closed but water was dribbling through the gap where the two halves met. Beyond that was the weir which the lock bypassed to enable boats to navigate downstream to the River Shale and the open sea. The torrent over the weir was fast; water levels were still higher than usual for this time of year. The roar of the maelstrom was quite audible, even from their vantage point.

“This is what I wanted to show you.”

The currents in the river were vicious and could be seen clearly, swirling in every direction as the flow from the weir spread below the lock. The gamekeeper pointed to the eddies in the shallows; several carcasses of dead fish were floating on the surface of the water.

“I see what you mean,” replied Courtney. “Lara, can you get some pictures for me?”

“Sure.”

Lara approached the riverbank and, mindful of the treacherous underfoot conditions, carefully positioned herself against one of the trees for the shots she needed. One slip and she would be in the river. She focussed in on a group of six or seven fish, their white bellies evidence of their demise. They seemed to have been in the water for some time. Then she took pictures of the lock itself.

Crawshaw was giving a running commentary.

“This is the end of the tide; it’s freshwater here. There is a small rise, only a foot or so but most of the fishing is above the lock. It’s very dangerous here. With the currents and all, the fishing’s not brilliant.”

“What’s that down there?” asked Courtney, pointing to an outlet pipe in the distance with a metal-spiked collar about two feet in diameter and protruding from the riverbank some four feet above the water. It was about two hundred metres downstream on the opposite bank. It was difficult to make out any detail.

“That comes all the way from Trent Island; it’s overflow water from the cooling towers, we were told. That’s all we know; not used anymore.”

“Really...? But that must be at least two miles away. Why don’t they just use the Shale?”

“Well, as I understand it, the plant was a lot closer when it was built, but who knows; they’re a law unto themselves, that lot.”

Lara finished taking her shots and Crawshaw led the girls further up the road passing the lock. They reached the white lock-keeper’s cottage with its neatly tended garden. The footpath was tarmacked here and ran in front of the cottage; it was just someone’s residence now. To the right was the mechanism that controlled the lock-gates.

They continued for another ten minutes. The river dissected with one part flowing towards the weir while the main channel was backed up by the lock and was almost still.

“Look, you can see more fish... there’s a dead bream over there.” He pointed to a two-pound specimen lying on its side. “Something’s not right. I’ve been fishing this river for fifty years and I’ve not known nothing like it.”

“Hmm,” said Courtney, shading her eyes to lessen the hazy glare of the river. “I see what you mean.”

Lara was taking more shots from the riverbank.

The gamekeeper turned to Courtney. “So, what do you think, then?”

“I’m not sure... I mean, I’m no expert but it does seem something’s wrong somewhere, but I really need more information before I can go into print.”

“Aye, yes, I can see that. If only I knew where Bill was; he’s got all the evidence... Hang on, I’ll give Pauline another ring.”

He took out his phone from his trouser pocket, keyed in some numbers and pressed call. Courtney could hear the conversation.

“Pauline...? It’s David, any news from Bill yet...? No, I can understand... ok, yes, I’ll ring off in case he calls, but call me when you hear something.” Crawshaw dropped the call.

“No news, I take it,” observed Courtney.

“No, Pauline... that’s his wife, she’s really worried. It’s not like him; not like him at all.”

“Well, I don’t think there’s anything more we can do here.” She turned to Lara who was putting her camera in its case.

“Do you need any more shots, Lara? What about a picture of David backdropped by the lock?”

“Yes, ok.” She retrieved her camera and removed the lens-cap.

“Can you stand over there, David.” Lara directed a couple of shots as Courtney suggested.

The gamekeeper turned to Courtney and offered his hand. “Thanks for your time, I hope it’s not been a wasted journey.”

“No, David, it’s fine. I’ll make some more enquiries and I may need to speak to you again... Oh, and when you hear from Bill ask him to get in touch.”

“Aye, will do.”

“You better have my card...” replied Courtney, unzipping her purse, “My mobile number’s on there; you can call me any time.”

“I’ll take one, too, if that’s ok,” said Lara.

“Sure,” replied Courtney. They exchange cards.

“I’ll email the pictures this afternoon when I get back.”

“Thanks,” replied Courtney. “Let me have your invoice; I’ll send it upstairs.”

The group said their farewells and headed their own ways. Lara followed Courtney toward town until the first roundabout where she turned tight.

Courtney was in deep thought; she was light on detail as things stood and would need to make more enquiries; she was not totally convinced there was any story. She couldn’t see Max Fielding sanctioning it.

It was another twenty minutes before Courtney was back at her desk and opening up her laptop. She checked her emails; mostly routine. She picked up the internal phone and pushed two buttons.

“George...? It’s Courtney, fancy sharing coffee?”

Courtney took the lift to the twelfth floor and walked along the corridor to the office of the sub-editor. Maurice Jeffries noticed her and waved.

George Greenwood was waiting. "Come in, take a pew... no sugar, right?" He closed the door and walked to his side of the desk.

"Yeah, thanks, George." The sub-editor passed her a mug.

Courtney sat down and made herself comfortable opposite her boss.

"I wanted to have a word about my meeting at lunchtime."

"Ah, yes, the anglers. How did it go?"

Courtney described the meeting.

"Whereabouts was this again," asked Greenwood.

"Swillington Lock."

"Hmm, well my advice is to drop it... Don't waste any more time on it."

"Really...? Why?"

"Hmm... Well, it's not much of a story, is it?"

"Well something's killing the fish."

"Have you spoke to the water company...? I presume they know about the concerns."

"Not personally, no, but my contact has... they've just brushed it off... Within allowed tolerances apparently."

"There you go, then... There's no story here, Courtney. Let it drop."

"But my gut tells me there's more to this than meets the eye, George."

"Well, unless you can get more evidence, I can't see anything news-worthy and I'm not going out on a limb here."

“Ok, George, if you say so.” A passive-aggressive response, not in keeping with Courtney’s usual demeanour, which was not lost on her boss.

“Look, we have more important stories on the go at the moment. Max liked your high street piece; he’s keen you follow that up.”

Courtney left the sub-editor’s office feeling frustrated at the lack of support, but she respected Lansdown and would go along with his request.

Half an hour later there was the ping on her laptop, alerting Courtney to a new email. It was from ‘Visions by Lara Longthorne’, clearly a business name.

Courtney opened it.

“Hi Courtney,

Thanks for lunch. I’ve attached the photographs and my invoice as agreed. Let me know if I can help again.

If you fancy a drink sometime, I would like that.

Lara

Courtney read the email and considered the invitation; it was not normal to receive such a request. She would give it some thought.

The photographs were of high-quality and, as Courtney scanned the pictures of the rotting fish carcasses, her thoughts returned to the story; it would not be the end of it, she resolved.

She replied to Lara’s email, thanking her and accepting the drink invitation; she had few friends in the city.

Courtney was home for ten-to-six and Sophie was in the kitchen helping Melody with her homework.

Sophie Simpson had a unique position, a cross between a baby-sitter and a nanny, but not quite either. She picked up Melody from school and stayed with her until Courtney returned. She was a God-send and enabled Courtney to continue her career.

“Hi Sophie, hi Sweetie,” said Courtney as she entered the room and put her bag on the table. She kissed her daughter.

“How was your day, Sweetie?”

Just as Melody was going to answer, Courtney’s ring tone sounded from her bag. She retrieved the handset and pressed the accept button.

“Hello... Is that Courtney?”

“Yes.”

“It’s David... Crawshaw.”

“Oh, yes, hello.”

“I have some awful news... It’s Bill... He’s dead.”