

AG BARNETT'S MYSTERY SINGLES



THE INCREDIBLE FONTAINE

—◆—
Pinned

Modern

CASE No.1

AG BARNETT

Pinned

The ball hit the pins with a sound like someone dropping a wardrobe down a staircase. Seven fell. The eighth wobbled, considered its options, and stayed upright.

"Got to pick it up for the spare," said Dave Newlands, who liked to point out things that were obvious.

"Thank you, Dave."

Barry didn't pick it up. He collected his pint from the scoring table, ate a chip, and watched Lane 6's pin-setting machine grind through its cycle. Kingpin Bowl on a Thursday night. Twelve lanes, a handful of regulars, and a chip fryer that hadn't been cleaned since the last century. The carpet was the colour of dried blood. The seats were orange plastic. The place smelled of hot fat and the faintly chemical tang of rental shoe spray.

Helena was in the seating area behind Lane 4, reading a property assessor's report with a highlighter and the expression of a woman who had seen better leisure facilities and could prove it with data. She was here for work. A hospitality group had asked her to look at three venues in the area, and Kingpin Bowl was one of them. Barry was here because Helena was here and because Thursday was open night.

He had brought his own shoes. Helena had looked at them in the hotel room and said nothing, which was

worse than saying something.

Gordon Lyle killed the music.

He stood by the ball return on Lane 1, hands in his pockets, and waited for people to look at him. He was a big man, Gordon. Sixty-one years old and every one of them earned.

"Right," he said. "I'll keep this short."

He kept it short. He was selling the building. Kellway Developments would be turning it into housing and retail. The league would finish out the month. He was sorry, but there it was.

For a moment the only sound was the pin-setting machines cycling through their work, indifferent to the news.

Then Mick Doonan stood up.

Mick had managed Kingpin Bowl for fifteen years. Barry had spoken to him at the counter earlier, a big man with the steady authority of someone who kept the place running. That steadiness was gone now. He was shaking. His hands, his jaw, the vein in his neck.

"You're having a laugh," Mick said.

"I'm not."

"Fifteen years, Gordon. You promised me—"

"I know what I promised."

Audrey Vickers stood. She didn't shout because she never

shouted. Barry had met her at the scoring table. She was seventy, precise, and organised the Thursday bookings. "Gordon," she said. "You might have mentioned this before we reorganised the entire fixture list."

Barry ate another chip and watched Tina Lyle come around the counter in her trainers. Odd, that. She'd been in her work shoes all evening, the hard-soled ones that clacked on the parquet. Now she was in white trainers, quiet on the floor. She stood at the edge of the group with her arms folded, watching her father carefully.

Gordon held up both hands. "I'm going to check on the pinsetter. Give you all a minute."

He walked towards the back corridor. Nobody stopped him. Mick was still shaking. Audrey was still standing. Tina went back behind the counter without a word.

The bowling resumed, or tried to. Nobody's heart was in it. Dave Newlands threw three consecutive gutters.

Twenty minutes later, Mick went to find Gordon.

The shout came from behind Lane 8. Not a word. Just a sound. Then the pin-setting machines stopped. All of them, at once. And the silence that followed was the loudest thing Barry had ever heard in a bowling alley.

* * *

Gordon Lyle was dead. Crushed by the pin-setting machine on Lane 8. The safety interlock had been manually overridden.

Mick came through the back corridor door the colour of old cement. He stood in the doorway and said, "Don't go back there," and that was enough. Dave Newlands called 999. Someone started crying.

Barry sat down next to Helena in the seating area. She had put the property report away.

"How bad?" she said.

"Bad."

She nodded and closed her bag, and that was that.

Mick sat on the bench by Lane 8. The man who shouted at everything, at the lane oiler, at the scoring glitch, at the vending machine that ate fifty-pence pieces, had nothing to say. He stared at his hands as if he'd never seen them before.

Audrey was organising. "No one goes behind the lanes. Sit down, all of you. Dave, is the ambulance coming?"

Tina was behind the counter. She had filled the kettle and was lining up mugs with steady hands. Tea. She placed a mug in front of Mick without speaking, squeezed his shoulder, and moved on to the next person.

Everyone handles shock differently, Barry thought. Some people cry. Some people organise. Some people make tea.

* * *

"Terrible thing," said Dave Newlands, sitting down beside Barry with the settled air of a man about to say quite a lot

about a terrible thing. "Gordon, though. I mean, he was always going to upset somebody, wasn't he?"

"Was he?"

"The money, I mean. Maureen, that's Mick's wife, she told Sandra at the post office that Mick put twenty thousand into this place over the years. His own savings. On Gordon's word."

"That's a lot."

"And Audrey." Dave leaned in. "You know she lent him money? Years ago, when he nearly lost the lot. Thousands. He never paid it back."

Barry looked across at Audrey, who was straightening a stack of scorecards on the scoring table. "I didn't know that."

"Nobody did. She doesn't talk about it. But my Sandra heard it from—"

"I can imagine."

"Well." Dave sat back. "Just saying."

Barry drank his pint and said nothing.

He looked at Tina. She was handing a mug to Audrey now, speaking quietly. Audrey took it and patted Tina's arm.

* * *

The police were forty minutes away. Something about a

staffing issue and a motorway accident. In the meantime, the bowlers of Kingpin Bowl sat in the seating area and talked, because that is what people do when something terrible has happened and nobody has told them to stop.

Barry went to the bar for another pint. The barmaid, Julie, poured it without being asked. She was mid-forties, with a permanent expression of mild exhaustion and a gift for remembering what people drank without remembering their names.

"Terrible business," Julie said.

"It is."

"Mick says he was at the bar when Gordon went out back. Getting a round in."

Barry looked at her.

"He wasn't, though," Julie said. "The bar was dead from half eight. I remember because I was watching the telly." She nodded towards the small screen behind the bar, which was showing a property programme on mute. "Nobody came up until after the shouting."

"Where was Mick, then?"

Julie shrugged. "Ask Mick."

Barry took his pint back to the seating area. Audrey was sitting alone with her handbag on her lap. She opened it for a tissue, and Barry, who happened to be looking — Barry was always happening to be looking, it was what Helena said he was good at — saw the letter inside. White envelope, typed address.

The header on the folded paper was visible: *Hargrove & Penn, Solicitors*. And beneath the letterhead, one word caught the light before Audrey closed the bag.

Property.

Audrey dabbed her eyes with the tissue, folded it precisely, and placed it in her cardigan pocket. She did not look at Barry. Barry did not look at her.

The picture had become complicated. Mick had the rage and the knowledge and a fifteen-minute window he couldn't account for. Audrey had a loan Gordon never repaid and a solicitor writing to her about a property.

* * *

By the time the police arrived, the regulars had already tried and convicted Mick Doonan.

Barry listened to them do it from the scoring table at Lane 4, where he sat with his empty glass and Helena's highlighter, which he was turning end over end between his fingers out of habit.

"Had to be Mick," said Phil Tucker, who came every Thursday without fail. "You saw him. He was beside himself."

"He was angry," Barry said. "That doesn't mean he did anything."

"He knows those machines inside out. He maintains them."

"He does."

"And where was he? Fifteen minutes, nobody saw him."

Barry looked down at Mick's shoes, visible beneath the bench where he sat with his head in his hands. Black rubber dust on the soles. Fine, even, the sort that came from the maintenance walkway behind the lanes, where the floor was rubberised for grip.

It did look like Mick.

Barry was still turning this over when Tina sat down beside him.

"Are you all right?" she said. "I know you don't really know anyone here that well, you've only been coming a couple of weeks. Must be strange."

"I'm fine. How are you holding up?"

Tina shook her head. The slight smile was there again, the one that seemed to arrive by default. "Doesn't feel real yet. He'd gone back to sort out the jam on Lane 8. He was always doing that." She paused. "Fiddling with the machines, I mean. You know what he was like."

"I do," Barry said, though he didn't really.

Tina squeezed his hand, stood up, and went to make more tea.

At the next table, Audrey was talking to Sandra Newlands. Barry heard her say, quite clearly: "I told him what would happen if he went through with it."

Sandra's eyes went wide. Audrey didn't notice, or didn't care. Her voice was measured, precise, and entirely certain.

Barry watched her carefully. He was good at watching people. Helena had told him that. It was what made him a decent magician, she said. Not the hands. The eyes.

* * *

Barry rang the police liaison officer from the hotel room at eight o'clock the next morning. Helena was in the shower. He could hear her humming something he couldn't identify, which meant she was in a good mood, which meant the property assessments were going well.

The liaison officer was a DC called Marsh. He was polite and slightly puzzled about why a magician from Wolverhampton was ringing him about a murder at a bowling alley.

"The jam on Lane 8," Barry said.

"What about it?"

"Gordon Lyle told the room he was going to check on a pinsetter. That's all he said. He didn't say which lane. He didn't mention a jam. Your officers told the group he was found behind the lanes, but the detail about Lane 8 and the specific fault only came out after the scene was examined."

"That's correct."

"Tina Lyle told me her father had gone back to sort out the jam on Lane 8. She said it as though everyone knew. But nobody knew, because nobody had said it."

There was a pause. Barry could hear typing.

"There are three people with reasons to want Gordon Lyle dead," Barry said. "Two of them look obvious. The third made tea."

He heard Marsh stop typing. "Go on."

"Mick Doonan. He was furious, he disappeared for fifteen minutes, he knows the machines, and there's black rubber dust on his shoes from the maintenance walkway. It looks damning. But Mick's fifteen minutes were spent in Gordon's office. The light was on. Someone mentioned it during the evening. If you check the office, you'll find shredded receipts in the bin. Mick was skimming from the till. The sale of the building would trigger an audit. His rage wasn't about loyalty. It was about being caught."

"We found the shredded receipts this morning," Marsh said.

"The rubber dust on his shoes is from a routine stock check behind the lanes earlier that evening. Before Gordon's announcement. Mick was back there legitimately. He's a skimmer, not a killer."

"And Audrey Vickers?"

"Audrey lent Gordon money years ago. He never paid it back. She has a solicitor's letter in her handbag from Hargrove & Penn about a property. She said, 'I told him

what would happen if he went through with it.' It sounds like a threat. It's not." Barry paused. "The solicitor's letter isn't about the bowling alley. It's about her own house. She's arranging power of attorney for herself. And 'I told him what would happen' was a prediction, not a threat. She told Gordon the league members would all walk out. She was right."

"You're certain?"

"Ask her to show you the letter. She'll be reluctant, but she'll show you. It's private, but it's got nothing to do with Gordon."

Marsh was quiet for a moment. "Which leaves Tina Lyle."

"Which leaves Tina Lyle. She changed her shoes during the evening. She was in hard-soled work shoes all night. After Gordon's announcement, she switched to white trainers. Quiet on the parquet. Quiet on the maintenance walkway."

"Dressed for it."

"She was calm after the death. Not in shock. Calm. She made tea, she comforted people, she spoke to everyone with the steady composure of someone who already knew what had happened. Because she did."

"The computer behind the counter," Marsh said. "We've pulled the browser history. The AMF pinsetter manual was opened at 6:47 p.m. Specifically the section on the safety interlock override."

"Before Gordon's announcement."

"Before Gordon's announcement."

Barry closed his eyes. The trick was clear now. Mick was the flash. The rage, the shouting, the disappearance, the rubber dust. All real, all visible, all pointing the wrong way. Audrey was the secondary misdirection. The loan, the letter, the sharp words. Both of them drew the eye.

Tina was the quiet hand. She changed her shoes, walked behind the lanes in silence, overrode the interlock, created the fake jam to lure her father into the machine, and came back to the counter to make tea. She knew it was Lane 8 and she knew it was a jam because she'd set both.

"There'll be a life insurance policy," Barry said. "On Gordon. Taken out in the last six months. Tina as beneficiary."

"We're checking."

Helena came out of the bathroom in the hotel dressing gown, towelling her hair. She looked at Barry sitting on the edge of the bed with the phone in his hand and the expression he wore when something had settled into place.

"The bowling alley?" she said.

"The bowling alley."

She sat down beside him. "The daughter."

"How did you know?"

"She made tea for nine people and didn't spill a drop. Her

father had just been killed and her hands were perfectly steady." Helena folded the towel. "I notice hands."

Barry looked at her. She looked back. After all these years, she could still surprise him.

"Thank you, Mr Holt," Marsh said on the phone. "We'll be in touch."

Barry hung up. Helena was already reaching for her property report and her highlighter.

"Breakfast?" she said.

"Breakfast."

They went downstairs together, and Barry did not think about bowling alleys or pin-setting machines or a young woman making tea. He thought about breakfast, and about Helena, and about the show he had booked for Saturday in Norwich, where he would stand on a stage and make things disappear and nobody would get hurt.

* * *

Tina Lyle was arrested on Friday morning at her flat above the bowling alley. She was charged with the murder of Gordon Lyle. The safety interlock override on Lane 8 was confirmed as manual. A life insurance policy for eighty thousand pounds, taken out in March, was recovered from Tina's bedroom. Mick Doonan was cautioned for theft. Audrey Vickers continued to organise the Thursday night bowling from the social club on Marsden Road, where the carpet was cleaner but the

chips were not as good. Barry performed in Norwich on Saturday evening to an audience of forty-three, which Helena said was a strong turnout for a venue that seated two hundred.