

THICKER THAN WATER



Adrian O'Donnell

Prologue

Luke Woods stood with his back to the mould-spotted shower wall. Three racist thugs had just walked in fully dressed and ready for trouble, one holding a broken metal bed leg in his right hand, once hidden inside a rolled up white towel but now fully exposed and exuding menace.

“We told you to get yourself moved from the wing, what’s wrong with you? This wing is run by white people for white people,” one of them said, his voice booming around the room unafraid of who might hear. Luke moved forwards and hurriedly made a grab for his own towel to cover himself up, but it was too late. A thick set skinhead with ugly tattoos covering every inch of his muscular arms grabbed it, along with his tracksuit which was sitting on an old, soap-stained, wooden slatted bench.

Standing naked and vulnerable, Luke cursed to himself about how life had got to this stage, his mind buzzing as to how he could call for help. The only route out was blocked and this whole area had become a no go zone for staff to patrol. It was futile to try and cry out for the officers, as from the safety of their own wing office he knew they wouldn’t hear a thing. The warm water continued rolling from his shoulders unnoticed as it managed its own escape down a filthy drain hole. The other two prisoners who were just frightened onlookers in the shower area got dressed hurriedly, racing back onto the prison landing before trouble struck. Only one person stayed, a much shorter Nigerian boy named Chris. At five foot five, he was short in stature for an eighteen-year-old, but his solid muscle mass made up for his lack of height. He stood, dressed only in blue prison shorts, and stepped in between Luke and the thugs.

“You fuck with my friend, you need to take care of me too.”

The three boys looked at each other. “Ok, if you want to be a hero, you can die like a fucking hero.” The leader, a young thug named Shamus McCann jumped forwards, the bar smashing into Chris’s forehead. He dropped instantly onto the wet tiled floor, unmoving. Luke stared down in disbelief, blood seeping out from a long deep split in Chris’s scalp, the white fragments of skull washed clean by the hot water forming a grotesque scene. A thick red river merged into the soapy suds creating a delicate pattern seen all too frequently in the steamy shower room of this stinking shit hole of a prison.

Luke bent down, feeling for a pulse. “He’s dead, you’ve fucking killed him.” He looked accusingly at the three thugs, expecting to see some kind of reaction or guilt.

They didn’t care; instead McCann came forwards again, smashing the bar into Luke’s leg, the bone shattering with a sickening crack as he fell in a heap, screaming in agony. He could hear a distant alarm bell sound as the thugs casually walked out, dropping the bed leg and disappearing back onto the landing. The last one to leave turned around and mockingly said, “Try kicking a ball now when they put that leg back together, you mug. Tell them you need to move wings.” The door swung shut seconds before health care staff raced in with their emergency bags.

Chapter One

Six Months Earlier

Jake and Luke Woods, seventeen-year-old identical twins stood in the December freezing rain as it came sheeting over the Reading FC training ground in the small village of Sonning, Berkshire. They didn't care about the cold, or the fact that it was New Years Eve. It had taken them five years since moving over from Jamaica to be able to train with the first team and this was their chance to shine.

Jake's hundreds of goals scored for the youth teams, and Luke's ability to defend at the other end of the pitch had quickly brought them to the attention of the coaching staff. This could be the year they finally got to run out onto the pristine pitch in front of twenty-four thousand supporters. At least that was the plan. Another more pressing plan was also on their minds, what to do for New Year's eve. An invitation to the pub in town, or welcoming in 1997 at a friend's house party? Which one would it be? Luke tossed a coin as they dried themselves in the changing room. "Heads the pub, or tails the party," he said as the coin spun in the air.

The Snooty Fox pub in Newbury's main street was jumping, the long narrow bar having the reputation of a place that never seemed to close. Music bellowed out through the door as the twins entered, spotted straight away by a group of friends congregating at the far end by the pool table.

Dave Shipton, a stocky little boxer stood and met them with an enormous smile. He had become friends with them both at school. People who knew things thought that he was going to be a boxing star and the signs were looking good with an impressive amateur record building up behind him. A few promoters were looking to sign him, and one had offered him a debut fight at the MEN Arena on the same bill as Rick Hatton. As always Dave was cool and calculated and he was still undecided as to whether he was ready for the step up in class.

"Are you two drinking tonight?" He asked as he headed towards the bar with them.

"No mate, we have a game tomorrow, but we're here until the end whatever." Luke was the one with the self discipline, Jake was the opposite, and sometimes the devil sat on his shoulder whispering sweet nothings in his ear.

"Anyway, I thought that you were in training for a fight?" Luke added. Dave laughed. "No mate, I haven't decided what to do yet, my old man wants me to wait another year." The DJ seemed to whack up the volume, almost drowning out the conversation and he had to shout to make himself heard. "The promoter phoned and offered me three grand for the fight last night, but I've told him that I want five and it's a deal."

Jake looked around, and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm having one Luke, even if you lot are drinking coke." At the bar he noticed a girl standing alone, he didn't recognise her but the smile she offered was the only invitation he needed. Standing beside her he gave his bar order before looking her in the eye. "Hi, I'm Jake, are you alone?"

She gave a sigh. "No, afraid not." She pointed over to a group of drunken guys sitting around a table. "My boyfriend and his arsehole mates have been drinking all day. I'm so bored with them," she continued, rolling her eyes as she spoke. One of the drunks looked up and noticing Jake, he stood up unsteadily and pushed his way through the crowd before grabbing the girl in a bear hug. "Oy, piss off and find your own girl," he told Jake before staggering back to his friends and a table full of beer bottles. Brushing him off the girl looked back at Jake.

"Sorry about that, normally he's a nice man, but when he gets with this lot....." Another shout went up from the table and she gave a further look of displeasure.

"I have to go - my name is Chloe by the way, nice to meet you." Jake nodded and gave his biggest come and get me smile.

"Maybe chat later?" She half nodded before turning to leave.

Taking the drinks over to his brother and friends, Luke gave him the eye before whispering into Jake's ear. "Yes I know, I saw her. She's fit, but those guys she's sitting with are cussing you. We better drink up and get gone, I can smell trouble."

Almost before he finished the sentence a fight broke out at the far end of the bar. It was Chloe's table again and bottles crashed onto the floor and chairs were tossed across the bar before security staff came running in and escorted the drunks out. Luke nodded towards them. "See I told you, just trust me brother. Drink that beer, we're going."

Putting their jackets back on, to the disappointment of their friends, they forced their way back out through the dancing crowd and over the broken glass, until the winter air outside persuaded them to find a cab instead of the usual walk home. The large market square was still busy with diners insanely eating outside under heat lamps that would melt an ice cap, the chatter reaching all corners of the square as the smell of seared steaks drifted around on the cold breeze. Luke looked around for a waiting cab but the rank was empty, the exhaust from the last remaining car still hanging around the edge of the car park they frequented.

"Are you hungry Jake? We could have a long wait." He looked around at the options for a takeaway.

A small Kebab shop close by, normally empty at nine thirty was packed and Luke saw why. Chloe was standing outside while the rest of her party were arguing with the shop owner over the price of a bag of chips. She spotted the twins and walked over, pressing her number into Jake's hand. "After tonight I'm done with him. Maybe phone me sometime?"

Just then the shop door burst open, her boyfriend running towards them. "I fucking told you," he yelled, squaring up before throwing a wild punch towards Jake. The pair tussled, Jake trying desperately to avoid a fight but the ferocity of the attack made that option impossible. Grabbing onto his jacket, the drunk bundled Jake over a hastily abandoned dinner table, plates and glasses crashing to the floor as more clients sped away from the fight. An older man possibly in his sixties screamed at Luke to "Fuck Off," as the plates on his table hit the floor spilling the food onto the wet cobbles.

Luke looked up at him, wanting to apologise but the intensity of the violence was growing as once again he tried to separate Jake and the drunk.

"Jake, leave it. Let's go home."

The drunk sneered, "Yeah, both of you fuck off back to where you came from." He punched Jake again, the blow deflecting off his shoulder before Jake responded with a full punch to his face, splitting the man's nose instantly. Bending forwards for a second the man watched the blood drip down onto a pile of food on the ground as Jake stepped back, looking for a way to leave. He had no time to move before the drunk sprang forwards again as a girl's voice from the distance screamed for them to stop.

Another roar went up as the twin's friends appeared, Dave leading the charge, and soon ten men were fighting before the sound of a police van winding its way down the busy high street made the crowd disperse. All except one guy, the drunk boyfriend. He stood looking accusingly at Jake, before putting his hands down to his own stomach where a large serrated steak knife protruded from his blood stained shirt an inch above his belt, a dark red stream flowing over his dirty jeans. Seeing the knife, Luke moved to help him as the man fell to his knees placing his bloody hands on Luke's white jacket, leaving a red smear from chest to waist before falling face down onto the wet cobble stones, dead.

Everything fell silent before havoc erupted.

A shout came from the inside the restaurant where one of the diners who had fled inside pointed out Luke and Jake to the approaching police officers.

"It was them, I saw them stab the lad, the one in the white jacket started the trouble."

Luke put his hands up. "I haven't done anything, he must have fallen on the knife in the fight."

In a haze of slow motion confusion they were surrounded by police officers, the flashing blue lights from the van casting an eerie glow over the watching shocked faces. Radios crackled as an ambulance raced to the scene, a police sergeant taking control.

“Get these two searched and into the van. Cordon off the area and find out if any of the customers saw the killing,” he ordered his men. Jake looked at him in horror before glancing back at the body on the ground.

“No, he can’t be dead, no one stabbed him.”

The slam of the van door abruptly cutting them off from the chatter of the excited crowds brought them back to reality as faces from the street tried to peer in towards the killers, the outside noise replaced with a constant hum of radio traffic from the unseen police officers in the front.

The boys sat silently in the back of the police van, the handcuffs digging into their wrists before Luke finally broke the silence. “What happened Jake? I saw you fighting and the next thing he is stabbed.”

Jake looked up, eyes filled with tears. “I honestly don’t know, you had hold of him while he tried to hit me. We all fell on the table and the next thing I saw, he was wiping blood down your jacket.”

Luke stammered, trying to hold back the fear that was gripping his stomach. “I know, it was all madness but I didn’t see the knife at all. This is fucked up, all I did was try and protect us both from that drunk guy. The CCTV will show that we didn’t stab him. That old man shouting that he saw us do it, what the fuck was he going on about?”

The sudden halt of the vehicle stopped the conversation as the van pulled up outside the police station. A team of officers wearing forensic suits waited for the order from the person in charge before opening the doors and leading them into the harsh white lights of Newbury Police Station. A young looking inspector stood by the custody desk waiting for them.

“You’re going to be placed in separate cells, but first my staff are going to take your clothing from you for evidence. They will be returned to you once the investigation is complete. Do you understand?”

They both nodded before being led separately to different areas of the building, neither one thinking of looking backwards to see what was happening to the other, both caught up in the magnitude of what was happening. Luke arrived at his cell door, a blue paper suit waiting for him on a hard bed. The young male officer who had accompanied him spoke to him gently.

“We need all of your clothing Luke, then put on the suit. You can have your own clothes to wear when your parents come to see you.”

In a daze Luke nodded. “When will that be?” he asked, his voice trembling as he tried to control his terror. The officer put his hand on Luke’s shoulder in a gesture of his kind nature.

“If you give us your home number, I will ask them to bring some things down for you. After your court appearance tomorrow you will get a chance to talk to them.”

Luke gasped in shock, realising he wasn’t going home any time soon. “This is getting out of control, we haven’t done anything. The guy has had an accident somehow.” He ran his hands through his hair in disbelief. “Shit this is crazy.”

The officer didn’t change the tone of his voice as he explained the situation to the frightened boy.

“Luke, a man has received fatal injuries in a fight with you and your brother. He was stabbed in the stomach and has died as a result. You need to understand how serious this is.”

Luke’s knees buckled slightly before he regained some control. “I know how serious it is but we haven’t done anything. Why will no one believe us?”

Just then, the door opened and two more officers entered the cell.

“We need your clothes Luke, place them in the bags and we will seal them and then we all sign this label.” The officer pointed to a white label, already covered in writing. As though in a daze, Luke dropped all of his clothing into separate paper bags, signing each time it was sealed. Eventually he was just left in the forensic suit given to him on arrival as the two officers left without another word.

“Now what?” Luke asked, more from confusion and shock than anything else.

“Everything will be sent for examination,” the officer explained, “and you and your brother will remain for questioning and will appear before the Magistrate tomorrow. You are going to be charged with murder.”

“Fucking murder? No way!” He tried to call out to Jake but there was no reply. A hundred metres away in the same police station Jake was facing the same nightmare.