

# **THE LOLLIPOP MAN**

*Also by Daniel Sellers*

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The Devil's Smile



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*For Laura*



# 1

Wednesday 6th April, 1994

The call came while Adrian was eating Scampi Fries and waiting for Nige to finish his third pint in the Golden Lion. His satchel burst into a bleeping version of ‘Whistle While You Work’, bringing gawps of disgust from the old men hunched about the bar. He dived for the exit, wiping his orange-stained fingers on his jeans, and pulled out the phone’s stumpy aerial.

‘Adrian?’

‘Hi, Linda. Just a sec.’ The signal was dodgy so he moved to the edge of the pavement, as if that might help. It was raining hard and he hunched against it.

‘Are you still in Halifax?’ There was a note of stress in the newspaper editor’s voice.

‘Yeah, we’re still here.’

‘Is Nige with you?’

‘He’s – erm, he’s . . .’

‘In the pub, is he?’ A sigh. ‘Adrian, you don’t need to cover for him. Just go get him, will you? Then head over to Toller

Bridge. Police have found a young girl's clothes by the canal.'

'Right,' he said, momentarily stunned.

'A place called Gorton Lane.'

His fingers began to tingle.

'It's behind the old cinema. You might need to look it up.'

He didn't need to look it up. He knew Gorton Lane all right.

'They're going to give a statement at the scene . . . Adrian? Are you still there?'

'Yeah, I'm here.' Rain clouded the insides of his specs and his hair was dripping. He pushed it behind his ears. 'That's fine, Linda. I'll go get Nige.'

'I'm sending Kev to meet you there. Can you ask Nige to take *general* photos: cars, crowds, but at a respectful distance. The girl's mum's likely to be there, and we are not the *Daily Star*.'

She rang off.

Gorton Lane. Of all places.

Back in the pub, Nige was rolling another cigarette and staring contentedly into space.

'Linda wants us to go to Toller Bridge,' Adrian said, and told him why.

'Blimey,' Nige said, and downed his pint.

Gorton Lane was a cobbled street running alongside a section of the Rochdale canal in the middle of Toller Bridge. Today the cobbles were crowded with vehicles, including police cars. People gathered at the far end – a mix of police and locals, by the look of it. Adrian parked the Fiesta in the first spot he found, by the gable end of a terrace.

'You could get a bit closer to the kerb,' Nige muttered, readying his camera.



It was rich coming from Nige, who'd lost his licence for driving drunk. Adrian had started temping as an admin assistant at the *Calder Valley Advertiser* in November; when he passed his driving test in the February, just after his eighteenth birthday, Linda had quickly added photographer's chauffeur to his list of duties. Since then he'd spent part of every day ferrying Nige about the local area to take snaps, but he often had his own tasks to perform as well. Today they'd been at a clothing outlet, so Nige could take snaps of some of the summer fashions. Adrian had taken down some details using standard questions and would type these up so one of the reporters could produce an article. The clothing place was paying for a double-page advert, so it was an important task and he took it seriously.

'Should have reversed in, really,' the photographer complained now.

Adrian bit his tongue. Besides, he had plenty of other stuff on his mind.

He got out of the car and stood on the cobbles, breathing in the cold air, smelling the faint, bready smell of the canal, and waited to feel . . . anything.

But apart from a sense of unease, there was nothing. Possibly because the street looked different to how he remembered it. Shorter. Narrower. And of course it was daytime now.

But he was still unsettled.

*Act normal*, he told himself.

Nige hurried across the road to take some wide-angle snaps while Adrian headed towards the crowd, curious in spite of himself to know what exactly had been found. The girl had lived only a few streets away from here, in a red-brick terraced house that was now familiar from TV news reports.

He passed a huddle of women, whispering to each other.

Another woman joined them, saying loudly, ‘He’s gone and drowned the poor kid, hasn’t he? She’ll be lying at the bottom in the reeds.’

Adrian looked towards the half-hidden canal, its oily surface gleaming between the overgrown vegetation. He doubted there were many reeds growing in there.

‘What’s your business here, young man?’ an oldish policeman said, stepping in his way, frowning at his wet hair and, no doubt, Adrian’s youth.

‘*Calder Valley Advertiser*,’ Adrian said, holding out his press pass. ‘I’ve brought our photographer.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Who’s in charge, please?’

‘That would be DCI Struthers.’

Adrian followed the man’s gaze and recognised the detective from the TV news, with his peak of red hair and blue raincoat, busy talking to a group of locals.

‘Thanks,’ Adrian said, moving to loiter discreetly at the edge of the crowd, from where he could watch proceedings. He had a talent for going unnoticed, being short, a bit unkempt with his longish hair, and bookish in his square specs. To many people he was ‘just some kid’ and generally no one paid him much attention – which suited him fine.

‘Awright, Gaydrian!’ cried a familiar voice, merry as anything. ‘New coat? Leprechaun green, eh?’

He glanced down at the green jacket. It had cost thirty quid in the Corn Exchange in Leeds.

‘Tosser,’ he muttered, and Kev cackled, drawing appalled looks from two women standing nearby.

Kev Simpson was the newspaper’s trainee reporter. He was three years older than Adrian and had his sights set on a career with one of the tabloids. He was skinny and lithe, with

bristly dark ginger hair and a narrow face. He made no secret of his opinion that he was wasting his time training at a local rag, writing up committee meetings and village fêtes. For the past twelve days Kev's glee at eleven-year-old Sarah Barrett's disappearance had stunk out the newsroom like a fart. Linda had lost her temper with him more than once.

'DCI Struthers is in charge,' Adrian told him.

'Already spoke to him,' Kev said smartly. 'Early bird, an' all that. Where's Nige?'

Adrian nodded to where Nige was taking photos further along the road.

'Nige!' Kev yelled, waving. 'All right, fella?'

'Linda said not to intrude,' Adrian hissed.

'Bollocks to Linda. Oh, oh – look who's here.' He nodded towards a blue sports car that had just parked. 'Only the flaming Queen of Sheba.'

A stout woman with a silver-blond bob and a fuzzy dark blue shawl over her shoulders was easing herself out of the car. Adrian recognised her at once and a sense of dread made his muscles lock round his bones. He felt faint. Panicky too. Mouth dry, he glanced along Gorton Lane to the police cordon at the main road, beside the old cinema, and tried to think of an excuse to get away.

'So she wants in on the act, does she?' Kev said. 'Always has to make it about herself. Look at her – all simpering smiles for the community.' He barked out a laugh.

The woman was Sheila Hargreaves, familiar to Adrian, and to everyone else it seemed, as the anchor of *Yorkshire Tonight*, Yorkshire TV's magazine programme, broadcast on weeknights apart from Wednesdays. Soft and motherly in appearance and demeanour, she was often called 'Yorkshire's auntie'. She had

a reputation for laying it on thick with her emotional style of interviewing.

Adrian had met her once, years ago, and he didn't want to see her again – now or any time. Unlikely though it was that she'd recognise him, he turned and stepped in behind Kev.

Sheila took herself in the direction of DCI Struthers. People watched, excitedly craning their necks.

'Good afternoon, everybody,' she said, sparing sad-but-warm smiles for the observers.

'Was it Sarah Barrett's clothes?' Adrian asked Kev quietly once she'd passed by.

'Sounds like it.' Kev licked his lips. 'Some lad found them draped on the brambles over there, plain as day. A jacket, a top and some jeans. Realised what he was looking at and told his mum and dad. I'd like to get the lad's name.'

Along the lane Sheila Hargreaves had finished speaking to Struthers and was returning their way, sad-eyed and pensive.

'How's tricks, Sheila?' Kev bellowed to her, making Adrian shrink miserably back so he was almost touching the nearest gable end.

She stopped and turned. 'Ah, Kevin,' she said distastefully. 'And how are you?'

The two had had a run-in, Adrian recalled, when Sheila was opening a village fête and Kev was there to write about it for the paper.

'Surprised to see you here,' Kev said. 'Thought you were all celebrity memoirs and cooking demos these days.'

She came close, her bright green eyes blazing. Not so soft and motherly now. Adrian sensed the crowd watching them. 'I am here to meet Sarah's mother Irene,' Sheila told Kev quietly. 'To do what I can to help.'

‘Mother Teresa in person, eh?’ Kev said, with a snort.

Adrian held onto the cold brick behind him and willed himself to become invisible.

‘Might I suggest, Kevin,’ Sheila whispered tersely, ‘that if you can’t say anything pleasant or sympathetic, then you’ve no business being here.’

‘Steady on, Sheila,’ Kev said, miffed.

And then she spotted Adrian.

‘Have we met?’ she said, peering close.

‘I’m—I’m just the driver,’ Adrian stammered.

‘And your name . . . ?’

She flashed her familiar smile, all antagonism gone. But there was an avid interest in her shrewd emerald eyes. Kev was observing his reaction curiously.

‘Adrian,’ he managed.

‘Adrian?’ Her eyes narrowed. ‘Right. Yes . . .’

She’d recognised him all right, but looked as if she couldn’t place him. ‘Well, it’s very nice to meet you, Adrian.’ Less pleasantly she added, ‘Goodbye, Kevin.’

Her gaze lingered on Adrian, then she stepped away and began to talk to a group of women standing nearby.

‘Sup with you?’ Kev demanded when they were alone. ‘Star-struck or summat?’

‘No!’ He felt himself redden.

‘Sheila’s a has-been,’ Kev snorted. ‘Except she’s the only one who hasn’t realised it.’

A new murmuring from the onlookers. Heads turned. A female police officer was coming carefully along the cobbles, guiding another woman gently by the arm. There was no mistaking the skeletal figure of Irene Barrett. Her face had been all over the TV news for the past week and a half. She looked

scared to death. She was sallow with big dark eyes.

Sheila Hargreaves swept over the cobbles to meet her and snatched up Irene Barrett's unoffered hand in both of hers. Suddenly she was embracing the woman, and the two of them were crying.

Nige appeared at Kev and Adrian's side.

'Go for it, Nige,' Kev ordered quietly.

Nige looked embarrassed, but pointed his camera and began to snap away.

Sheila Hargreaves and the policewoman led Irene Barrett to meet DCI Struthers. Adrian stayed put while Kev trailed after them, listening out for quotes that Linda would never let him use.

Adrian felt sick. This was a circus. He took himself back to the car to wait for Nige. He didn't get in, but stood outside and smoked the last of his menthol cigarettes.

A crowd of onlookers had gathered behind the police cordon at the end of Gorton Lane. People stood grimly silent, eyes on the police activity. But one of them, an old woman with curly dyed-black hair, seemed much more interested in Adrian than in everything else that was going on. She eyed him intently, her lips moving as if speaking a curse.

He turned his back and finished his cigarette.

## 2

He told Kev he had a migraine and asked him to give Nige a lift back to the newspaper office, saying he'd collect the Fiesta from Gorton Lane later.

'You better be at Barry's thing later,' Kev warned him, car keys in hand.

'I'll do my best.'

'I mean it, Gay-boy. I need someone to take the piss out of.'

Barry Tillotson, the deputy foreman of the printworks, was a racist, pot-bellied pig of a man, and Adrian had no intention of going to his retirement do at the Irish Club.

Excuses made, he hurried in the direction of Toller Bridge's main street and phoned his pal Gav from a call box, and an hour later they were in the King's Head. Gav was a connoisseur of old man's pubs and this was his choice. They weren't the pub's typical clientele – Adrian resembling a grungy student, Gav strikingly gothic with his Russian trench coat, backcombed black hair and eyeliner – but no one bothered them.

‘Decision’s made,’ Gav said, lighting a roll-up then picking tobacco off his lower lip. ‘I’m gonna leave Sunderland. I hate my course. Hate my course mates. *Really* fucking hate the people in my halls. I told my mums when I got back last night.’

‘Right. What did they say?’

Gav shrugged and beamed. ‘That it’s my choice and they’ll support me. I’ll apply to start at Leeds in autumn. You and me can rent together.’

Gav beamed and clinked his pint of Guinness against Adrian’s glass of Coke.

Nearly all Adrian’s school friends had gone to university the previous autumn, leaving him at home to resit the two A-Levels he’d messed up while his mum was ill. He missed his pals, Gav most of all. Gav was Adrian’s only friend from school who knew he was gay, though he still struggled to understand Adrian’s home life. But then their lives were very different. Gav had grown up with two mums in Hebden Bridge, the lesbian epicentre of Britain. His home was a place of acceptance and empathy. It was ironic that Gav was as straight as they came, while Adrian found himself gay and having to hide it. His mum, he suspected, would be fine after she got over the shock. His dad, less so.

But he was resigned to his situation, focusing on his future away from home, away from High Calder. Away from his past.

And things were coming together. He was on track for better grades and a place at Leeds University starting in the autumn. He imagined himself and Gav sharing a house. One of the shabby red-brick terraces around Hyde Park. Leeds would suit Gav. It was bigger, with a thriving goth scene. No one in Leeds batted an eyelid at eyebrow piercings or dyed hair on a man – even make-up. The thought of living there with his pal



conjured up an idyll of freedom; a complete displacement from stress and shame. He found himself unexpectedly welling up.

‘You OK, man?’ Gav said, eyeing him.

‘Yeah.’

Gav drew him into a patchouli-smelling embrace.

Pulling away, Adrian wiped his face on his sleeve.

‘Here,’ Gav said, and pushed a rollie across the table.

He lit it inexpertly, inflaming half the cigarette and having to blow it out, making them both laugh.

‘They think it’s him, then?’ Gav asked. ‘The Lollipop Man?’

‘Linda does. And Kev’s in his element, the wanker.’

‘After all this time? How long has it been?’

‘Seven years, four months.’

Gav eyed him. ‘Sorry. Guess I should know that.’

‘Why should you?’ Adrian said. ‘It’s my business, isn’t it? I’d love it if everyone else forgot.’

Gav drank some of his pint.

‘Why would he start again? I mean, where’s he been?’

‘Fuck knows.’ He sank deeper into the soft leather of the bench and shut his eyes. He’d lied when he told Kev he had a headache, but now one was starting, high in his shoulders and neck.

Just over eight years ago, Samantha Joseph, age eleven, had gone missing from Halifax, four miles from here. Four months later, in the July, ten-year-old Jenny Parker vanished from Wyke, near Bradford. This time there were two witnesses, who had seen Jenny being walked across a road by a man they assumed was a lollipop man. He’d worn a white coat and carried the familiar ‘Stop – Children’ sign that resembled a giant lollipop. Then, in the October, eleven-year-old Paula Sykes vanished in a suburb of High Calder. None of the children were seen again, though

items of clothing identified as theirs were found near the places they'd vanished from within a couple of weeks, stained with blood. Then in the December, a fourth child was taken, a boy this time – Matthew Spivey, age ten. He was taken away in a van from behind the old cinema at the end of Gorton Lane in Toller Bridge – but released after two hours. No one knew why he'd been let go, certainly not the boy. After that there were no more kidnappings. Just three families left with their grief and communities left with their fear. And a fourth family left traumatised but mostly ignored.

Now, just over seven years later, eleven-year-old Sarah Barrett had gone missing and items of her clothing had been found – at Gorton Lane.

It was only a matter of time before the community, the police and the media ran to ground the boy who'd spent time in the Lollipop Man's company and might recognise him again: for instance, the crime reporter-turned-TV-presenter who'd interviewed the boy at the time.

'The truth is, I don't remember a lot about it,' Adrian said. 'I didn't remember much at the time. They said it was shock. I tried to give them a description, but the photofit looked like Mr Potato Head.'

'So let them ask,' Gav said, blowing smoke. 'Tell them you're sorry but you can't help.'

Adrian looked at his hands.

'What?' Gav demanded.

'It's best no one knows.'

'Best for who?'

'For me. For my mum and dad.'

Gav nodded but looked unconvinced.

'My mum's in pieces every time she hears Sarah Barrett's

name on the news. And my dad . . .’

Gav watched him, as if sensing more was coming.

‘He didn’t cope at the time,’ Adrian said quietly, making Gav frown. ‘It’s best if . . . it’s best if I just keep out of it. And hopefully no one will make the connection – after all, I’ve got a different name now.’

He checked his watch. ‘I’d better go. Walk with me back to the car and I’ll drop you at the station.’