

Title: **Episode 12: What Lies Beneath?**

Speakers: Georgie Vestey, Dead Honest & Marine Sgt Suzanne Crossley,
Northumbria Police

Interview Transcription

Georgie Vestey: How much do you know about the people before you go and do a body recovery?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: Quite often we've already looked at the incident log that comes in, so we know the surroundings, we know where that body's gone in. We get a picture of that person. We never refer to it as, "We're going to go and recover a body", we always look at it as, "We're recovering a person". That's somebody's loved one, so we always treat them as such.

Georgie Vestey: I am Georgie Vestey, and this is Dead Honest, a podcast where we talk honestly about death. Now, if there is one death profession I've always been very curious about, it's police divers. I've never understood what would motivate someone to climb into freezing, black water to recover the bodies of strangers.

Recently I travelled to the North of England to meet Suzanne Crossley, because she is in charge of the Marine Unit at Northumbria Police. Although not a diver herself, she is in the boat at every body recovery and when I ask her why, she talks about offering practical assistance, but I sense she's really watching over her team because this is dangerous work, not just physically, but emotionally.

Just to give you the heads-up, we discuss themes of suicide and drowning, which some listeners may find distressing.

I am Georgie Vestey, and this is Dead Honest.

When somebody goes missing and they're in a body of water, what is the process?
When are you called in?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: They could have been sighted entering the water, and then we will dive the point of entry, and then because we've got specific search patterns that we do, so that we know that all of that area will be covered.

Georgie Vestey: Are these search processes very similar to land base searches, it's like it follows a certain process, a grid or...?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: Yes, different patterns depending on what the state of the tide is, where we're diving from. If you're looking at the river that we dive in, it's like a scrap heap, so when you go down there you've got shopping trolleys, you've got cars that have been dumped; everything gets dumped in that river.

We've got a lifeline from the top, so your oxygen will come from the top down to the diver.

Georgie Vestey: Aside from diving skills, obviously, what else do you need to be a police diver; what personality do you need to be, to be a police diver?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: Certainly a team player without a doubt, because you're relying on your colleague for the safety of you, they've got to be switched on; they can't have things that would preoccupy them. For instance, we had a job the other day where it was horrendous conditions with the flow of the tide, the amount of debris that was on the bottom and it was a recovery. One of the officers got snagged ten times; so, every time he got snagged, he didn't know whether they were able to unravel themselves.

If you think, that's your lifeline being unravelled around something in pitch black water, so it's having that calmness to be able to deal with that.

Georgie Vestey: When you're in a black body of water, what senses are you using if you're looking for a body?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: Touch, all done by touch.

Georgie Vestey: How do you train for that?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: We train in a 7-metre tank here, so we black the officers' masks out.

Georgie Vestey: So, you get into the water and obviously touch is your main thing, but you're wearing gloves; so, how do you know you've got a body?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: One hand is usually on a line because we've got to keep a line, the search line, and the other hand is searching. When you come across a body, you feel from the top to the bottom and they have the instinct, they know. Sometimes we do have a little visibility and we've got a headtorch on, but a lot of the time they're in the dark. I think they've done it enough to know when there is a body, feeling it.

Georgie Vestey: How does that feel, do you think?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: For them, I would imagine it'll be relief that they've found it, but then they've got to think operationally how now we're going to retrieve it. Also, we've got to secure it, because nine times out of ten when we're underneath the water and there's a flow of water, which can be very strong, that body could go at any time. They probably won't have time to think about it, they will just secure that body.

Georgie Vestey: How do you secure a body?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: Either tying it to yourself or grabbing hold of it, and then indicating through the comms to the top to say that we've found them. Sometimes we'll put in another diver to assist, because sometimes the bodies will be very, very heavy. So we'll put either another diver in or they'll just bring them up on their own, and then we'll assist at the top.

Georgie Vestey: Extraordinary.

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: I think for some of these as well, it's the state of the bodies when they come out.

Georgie Vestey: How do you deal with a body that's decomposing?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: Exactly the same as somebody who'd just gone in; we treat it with respect and sensitive.

Georgie Vestey: How does it technically work? Once you've discovered a body in the water, do you put it in a bodybag in the water?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: Yes.

Georgie Vestey: You do?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: It depends where the body is. So, if we've located a body and we know or we are fully aware we have family up above, what we will tend to do is we will attach that body to the diver, and the diver will take that body further along the river or water where we know that we can then get a body out the water without all the public being there, the media, etc.

Georgie Vestey: Gosh, that's quite a difficult thing to manage, isn't it? I can see why your role is so important.

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: It is because I have some divers that are sitting underneath the water cuddling a dead body for five, six minutes, until we then can establish where we're going to get an exit point for that person to come out.

Georgie Vestey: That must be an extraordinary position to be in. How do you train your divers to do that?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: We don't. To be honest, I don't think you can ever train for that. I think what we need to do is talk about it, so once they've had their first one, is always the difficult one and then after that, we tend to manage that through talking about it.

Georgie Vestey: Do they feel a sense, and I've heard this from other paramedics that they feel such a responsibility, so they hold them as if it was not necessarily one of their own, but they have such respect for that person?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: I was going to say we have respect for them, and I would probably have said it's more delicate with them, because our role after we've recovered them is that we have to check the body. We check all the body, we check for ID, and we've got certain things that we need to do, because every body for us is a suspicious body until proved otherwise.

For the Coroner it's really important that we recover that body correctly and forensically, so there are certain things that we have to do before it goes into a sealed body bag.

Georgie Vestey: What do you have to do?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: We have to cover the head and the cover the hands as well, bag them. Then we have to take a sample of water and then that goes within the bag, and then we have to tag them. But prior to that we need to do a proper search just in case it is suspicious, or they have left a note on them, or there's any ID; so, that all needs to be carried out.

Georgie Vestey: How do you manage that when you've got a family nearby who are probably aware that you now have actually recovered the body of the person they love?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: I think for us, that's one of the reasons why we look to see where we're going to bring the body out. It's not for us to manage the family up there, but we try to be as respectful as we can. There's been a few families that have come down to see us after the recovery, just to say thank you, which is quite hard for us because they are quite upset. We are the last person they see as to be being with that person.

What's difficult, especially with one of them, one of the officers had said that the family spoke as if they were still alive when we recovered them, but I think that's for their own comfort, which is hard for the officers. But in a way, for us, it's lovely because it's closure for them.

Georgie Vestey: It must be a very delicate balance; on the one hand you are doing something that most people would think is a really awful job, and on the other hand it is the most important job for the family.

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: Yes, for us it's the most important job and it's upsetting, especially when I think you look into the background of why that person did what they did or the run up to it and then you piece it all together.

Georgie Vestey: How common is it for you to have a body recovery case?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: Unfortunately, it's getting more common.

Georgie Vestey: Why is that?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: To be honest, if I was to put my finger on it, whether it's social media platforms, whether it's the breakdown or the chaos within the social support system; mental health I think plays a massive part.

Georgie Vestey: Are we talking about because these are suicides?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: Yes. A majority of ours are all suicides, and I don't know how this will sound, but when we go down and retrieve a body, for instance in a vehicle, by the way that that body is in within the vehicle, we can tell whether that person really wanted to go in or not.

Georgie Vestey: In what way?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: We had a vehicle once that we found the vehicle and the person's hands were clenched onto the wheel, and the determination of that face was one that he really wanted to take his own life. Then we've had others where they've been in the vehicle where you can see them physically trying to punch the windows out.

I've got to be careful how I manage that with my staff, because it does affect some having seen that expression, knowing that really they didn't want to do it, they wanted to be pulled out; but obviously, by the time we get there, we can't get them out in time, so that's a difficult one.

Georgie Vestey: How do you do that? How do you manage the team when it's been --

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: We talk about it, either when we're coming back in the car, or if we come back and we're sorting kit out, there's a certain banter, there's a certain chat about things and it'll come out then in conversation. And I know all the personalities here, so I can pick up when I know they're not themselves. But we're really close as a team which is good.

Georgie Vestey: But with your team, as you say, you're incredibly close. I'm curious to know, when you see your team, a member of your team looking like they're burning out, what does that look like?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: You'll find they'll go quiet, or they'll be irritated, or they'll not be their usual jolly self. They'll take themselves away, they'll withdraw themselves, or one of the other officers will come to me and say, "I don't think they're right". We all pick up, we know what somebody should be like then and if they dip, and it might not be anything to do in relation to what the job is, but we're all aware and we're really good at picking up things like that.

Georgie Vestey: What attracts those divers to climbing into black freezing water to look for dead bodies; why would you choose to do that as a job?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: A majority of my team here, including me, it's trying to get that loved one back to the people who they have been lost to. One of the frustrating things with the job is that, if we have an innocent person and we know they're in the river and we go out either on the boat looking for the body or if we've got an area where we think they are, we will dive it.

Then if something else comes in, which is a higher priority, that's really hard for us, because we know the families are still there looking for them.

Georgie Vestey: Tell me about the last family you had to do that with?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: Last year, it was quite high profile; there was loads of social media around a gentleman going missing and we had people going up and down the river looking for them. They couldn't understand why we couldn't find him. At the time, there was a lot of jobs coming in, and then I had to meet with the family and they wanted to know when we could get him back.

It was difficult trying to explain to the family, "It's not an exact science, I can't tell you. These are the guidelines and when he's likely to come up, but I can't guarantee it". I could feel as if they thought I was their answer and I wasn't, and that made me feel I think a little bit, what's the word? Useless probably, and I was thrilled to bits when we found him. And I was there on the recovery, which I was so pleased about. But at the time when I walked out of that room, I felt totally useless.

Georgie Vestey: When you talk about the guidelines, what are the guidelines that you're referring to?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: We say that if a body goes into the water, we're talking about probably 26 to 28 days they will appear, so they will come up to the top of water; but if nobody sees that person they'll go back down again. It's when they go back down again, then we may never retrieve them.

Georgie Vestey: What's the most unusual recovery you've had to do?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: Probably unusual because of where we find them. I think, because where we think they've gone in and then where they turn up, sometimes you think, "How have they got there?" We've had people go in and come in four months later; some of those people will come up and look the same and some will come up and within a week look completely different.

Georgie Vestey: It's a very inexact science.

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: Very, very.

Georgie Vestey: What are the cases for your officers that you think they find the most difficult cases?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: I would have probably said it's obviously children, and that one affected the team immensely when we had a drowning of children; that was two girls who had gone in the water and when the services got there, they had drowned. But we had all of the parents on the bankside screaming and really shouting at the officers.

Georgie Vestey: Why were they shouting?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: Because they were saying we should jump in the water and get the children.

Georgie Vestey: Why couldn't you; what was the...?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: Because of the time we had to kit up; we couldn't just jump in the water, so we kitted up and went in. It was a recovery at that point by the time we got there, rather than a rescue, because it had gone beyond that point. But you'll find that some families in the heat of the incident ongoing will be very emotional and will lash out at anybody.

Georgie Vestey: Can you think of a case that when you retire, it will be the one case that will stay with you, that you will always remember?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: Yeah, we had a case where elderly gentleman had parked his car at the end of the bridge and he put loads of bricks in his backpack and he jumped in the river. The reason why he did it was because he thought he was dying of cancer, and he had gone through the treatment, etc, and then we found out that that day as he did the jump, he got the results to say it was all clear.

That's really sad because we found him in situ with the bag attached, and that was really sad because that could have been totally avoided.

Georgie Vestey: When was the last time you cried?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: I cry every week; I'm very sensitive. I am emotional and I don't hide the fact that if I had a family that was crying, I would cry with them; but that's my personality, that's me.

Georgie Vestey: What has this job taught you about grief?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: I've probably learned to manage the person that's grieving. What I mean by that is that we have to be very mindful when a person loses somebody, they're vulnerable to be lost themselves. Sometimes we don't address that and I think it's something to be really mindful of, how you manage that grieving person.

Georgie Vestey: What has the job taught you about love?

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: It can be hidden. What I mean by that is, we've had people who we've found who on the face of it had, or they thought they had, no relationship with their family, until they're lost. Then you find out that the family loved them, but just didn't tell them.

Ours is probably the gloomiest job in the force.

Georgie Vestey: But you love it.

Sgt Suzanne Crossley: But I love it, I wouldn't change it for the world, no.

[Georgie Vestey](#): I'd like to thank Suzanne Crossley for sharing her thoughts about her role. If you think your friends may find this interesting, then please share it or rate it on your favourite podcast platform as it really does make a difference.

If you want to get in touch, then you know I'd love to hear from you. You can find me on Twitter at [Dead Honest Talk](#) or through my website, [DeadHonest.com](#) until next time.



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