

Martín Cooper



Cold
Hillsíde



COLD HILLSIDE

Martin Cooper



Published in 2009 by Stiltjack

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This is for my sister Julie.

Not too fast
Start soft then slow build

Concertina Em drone 4 bars
Fiddle melody x2 then voice

CHORUS:

Too many battles, too many loads,
Grey with the dust of too many roads
To a bed on a cold hillside.

Too many battles, too many loads,
Old wounds carried down too many roads
To a bed on a cold hillside.

Fiddle break?

Too many battles, too many loads,
Old friends buried by too many roads
In a bed on a cold hillside.

Simon Coltraine, *Cold Hillside*

Fiddle melody ad lib

Voice:

~~"Too many"~~

"Old friends..."

"Old wounds..." etc.

Off the beat

Fade

SOUND CHECK

1

Giles, my sibling, my Mephistophilis. You lie whenever it suits you, but when you lie to me, surely you can take the trouble to make it convincing?

2

There is something warm running down my face. I lick my lips and taste salt, wipe my hand across my mouth and look. Blood, black on my fingers. The windscreen has a jagged hole in it and I can smell the fog, cold and earthy, drifting in. Although the headlights have gone out the instrument panel is still glowing and the cab of the minibus seems brightly lit compared with the dark outside. The engine has stopped but the heater fan is whirring. Behind me people are moaning. Someone starts sobbing.

1

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I am dangling in my seatbelt, suspended at what is now the top of the vehicle, which has gone over onto the driver's side. I can feel myself slipping out of the straps and I squirm round to plant a foot on the steering column and lift myself away from Tod, who is slumped below me. It looks as if he has been thrown into the door. His head is hanging at an odd angle. I twist and bend some more and reach down to grope for a pulse. Nothing. I tell myself that I am feeling in the wrong place, but I am not. I wonder if his wife has had the baby yet. Must have.

"Shit."

The women behind me were not strapped in when the bus rolled. A couple of them at least are out cold, the rest are crouched in the gaps between the horizontal seats, hugging themselves. All of them are bleeding.

"Shit. Shit. Shit."

One foot still on the steering column I edge the other onto the side of Tod's seat and freeze as a stabbing pain in my side takes my breath away. Cracked rib. But I am thinking about sparks and fuel leaks. Does diesel burn like petrol? I fumble above my head and manage to get the door unlocked. It lifts a couple of inches, but the angle is difficult and the weight of it defeats me. I slip and end crouched with one foot on Tod's shoulder. I straighten my legs anyway and heave upwards. Tod collapses beneath me but the door bangs up and I find myself supporting its weight, standing with my own shoulders outside the vehicle. I cannot move any further. I can hardly breathe.

A few moment's rest, then I brace myself more firmly and slide one hand into a pocket, looking for my mobile phone.

"Simon... No I can't bloody speak up. We've rolled the van. All hurt, and I'm pretty sure at least one dead. Get someone up here fast. If I haven't checked in by two they'll come looking. Is the tracer still working? OK then."

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It is as much as I can manage. I slide down into the shambles below and the door thuds shut, just missing my fingers. Christ, what a mess.

FIRST SET

CHAPTER ONE

1

Two birds are strutting across the grass. One for sorrow, two for... not joy, certainly. These are crows, birds of ill omen, road-side carrion eaters with scabby beaks and a knowing look. One for trouble, two for more trouble. The collie launches itself from the path, its claws scrabbling for a purchase on the gravel, but the birds hop into the air and in a couple of beats lift their dangling feet clear. The dog slows to a canter and circles as the crows drift downwind, then lunges at them again. Still no joy.

The sun is throwing long horizontal shadows across the grass and the chilling air smells of wood smoke and rot. Fallen leaves are already collecting under foot. In the valley below mist is gathering along the river, while the downs rear up again green and blue on the far side. The path curves away past a clump of birches, towards a parking area half hidden among the trees. A man is leaning against the bonnet of a car. He hears us coming

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and turns his head. The dog trots up to him, tail fanning furiously, and sniffs his trouser cuffs.

“Mr Coltraine.” Not a question. He knows who he is speaking to. “I’m DI Randall.”

“Identification?”

He produces a leather wallet, flips it open and returns it to his pocket. I pat my own pockets, fumble in my jacket and locate my reading glasses. I put them on and hold out my hand. He hesitates then takes out his warrant card again and passes it over. The DI’s ID. Photo booth likeness. Face the camera, chin up: mid-thirties probably; close-cropped hair, greying early; wide-spaced, deep-set pale eyes, the surrounding sockets rather dark. Adam’s apple sticking out. No spare flesh, skin stretched tight over prominent cheekbones.

“So you are.”

He retrieves the wallet, pockets it.

“You wanted to talk about your brother, Mr Coltraine.”

“I’ve wanted to talk about my brother for some time. Several of your colleagues have been too busy to do more than go through the motions.”

“Well, I’m sorry if it has seemed that way, sir. It’s a question of resources and priorities.”

A car lies upturned in the dark on the grassy verge of a country road. The roof on the driver’s side has been crushed leaving the machine’s mud-streaked underside canted at an angle. A wheel spins to a halt and liquid puddles under the engine. Fragments of glass glitter in the beam of one undamaged headlight. Resources and priorities.

But this is nonsense. Imagination. I did not get to see the place until a couple of days after the accident and by that time the remains of the car had been winched onto the back of a truck and hauled away for scrap. My brother’s remains likewise.

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2

Even then I was not sure I had the right spot. All I had to go by were a couple of black skid marks on the road. But how many accident sites could there be? I parked my own car opposite and got out for a closer look. There were muddy gouges in the sides of the ditch, a few shards of broken glass and a black patch where oil had soaked into the grass. Not much to mark the passing of a life.

There was some light traffic. A Land Rover slowed and I caught the pale flash of the driver's face looking in my direction. Further on it slowed again, did a sudden U turn and rolled back on the opposite side of the road, coming to rest nose to nose with my own car.

That stretch ran dead straight for a couple of miles, flanked by an avenue of beeches, huge mature trees meeting overhead and slicing the sunlight as you drove between them. 'B' road, nothing special; the link between two market towns, a bit of a rat run on school days. The chief hazards were unexpected dips every few hundred yards, each one big enough to hide an oncoming lorry.

"Need any help, mate?" The driver of the Land Rover had got out and was standing by his open door looking across.

"What?"

"The car. Need any help?"

"Oh. No, no. The car's fine. Just stretching my legs. Thanks though."

"OK. No problem." He got back into the vehicle but did not pull away immediately. I knelt to examine the ditch again. It was deep, with vertical sides. Enough to flip a car over if it put a wheel in at speed. At the bottom, a few small puddles with a sheen of oil on the surface. The pickup truck had torn up the

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grass alongside – almost gone in itself, by the look of things, trying to get close to the wreck. Some yards away were more tyre tracks. Police? Ambulance? I looked up and saw my would-be rescuer talking on a mobile phone.

I straightened, then stood at the edge of the verge, looking at the road. Giles must have been travelling fast, judging by the tyre marks. He had braked hard, but with the car under control, leaving two long, straight tracks of rubber on the tarmac. Then he must have hauled the wheel over because the tracks veered to the left.

I crossed to the Land Rover. The man sitting in the driver's seat watched me approach, still talking into his phone. When I tapped on the window he spoke a few last words and pressed the *End Call* button. I could hear his voice, though not what he was saying. He wound down the window.

"Sorry to interrupt. Do you know anything about the accident? Last Friday night, it would have been, about eleven. Car turned over round here."

"No... No, not me, mate. Sorry."

"Ah. It's just that I thought you might have driven by the next day or something."

"No. I'm not often down this way." He looked past me along the road, the way he had come.

"Right. Well, sorry to bother you. And thanks for stopping earlier."

"What? Oh... Any time."

I nodded and walked the few yards along to my own car, where I reversed up until I could clear his wing and pull away. I lost sight of the Land Rover almost immediately but when I came up out of the first of the dips I could still see it in the mirror. Another car had drawn up alongside it and my friend was leaning out of his window talking to somebody inside. Then I plunged into the next hollow.

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I came back that night. The road was deserted and I accelerated up to and through the speed limit exactly as Giles would have done. It was cold, dry and clear. No moon, no cloud cover to scatter back distant street lighting. The beech trunks glowed in the headlamps. From time to time a side wind blew leaves across the cones of light. It was like driving through the bleached rib cage of an immense whale. I caught a glimpse of skid marks, then darkness until the outskirts of the next town.

3

The dog has disappeared among the trees, off on a mission in a world of smells.

Randall is looking at me oddly.

“Well...” I grope back for his last comment. “Resources and priorities. But now the police call me. Does that mean priorities have changed?”

“It means that if you have any new information relating to the accident, we would like to hear it.”

“And why should I suddenly have new information?”

“Your brother telephoned you shortly before he died.”

“Nothing new there. I told your colleagues.”

“Where were you at the time?”

“Salisbury Arts Centre.”

“Can anyone confirm that?”

“Don’t mobile phone records include location?”

“Yes, they do. And yours confirm that your mobile was in Salisbury that Friday evening. I was wondering whether you were there too. Did anyone see you?”

“About 300 people. I was playing – we were about to go on, in fact, when he caught me.”

“A musician.” He sounds as if he is scraping something off

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the sole of his shoe.

“Yes, a musician. As I am sure your colleagues told you. What are you after, exactly? A fortnight ago nobody wanted to know. A token WPC to empathise with the grieving relatives, but don’t clutter up our nick for too long. Now you’re checking phone records.”

“You seem to be coping well with your brother’s death.”

Yes. Well enough. Except that when I wake every morning he is the first person I think of. I am shocked that after so short a time I can barely remember his face, but his voice on the phone is as clear as ever.

How’s things little brother?

This is his dog and his county. His house, his woodland, his shoreline. A small part of it literally so, the rest resonant with his life. I laid a fire last night, first one of the year. Sitting by it I thought: “Must tell Giles next time I speak to him”. Then I heard the wind rattling the window.

4

The downs ended where we lived, only half a mile from the sea. I remember how astonishing the discovery seemed. The chalk that swept along the whole of the south coast finally gave way to crumbling cliffs and shingle, right outside our house. I could look out of my bedroom window and see the tip of the coiling roots of England.

The downs were on my personal map long before I became aware of their place in the national landscape. At the head of our valley a grassy slope swept round in a tight arc, creating an open-sided bowl, sides far too steep for cultivation or even for walking, but slashed across with sheep paths. At the top, hunched against the sky on a landlocked headland, were

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shadowed contours said to belong to a Roman camp. When the fog blew in from the sea you could hear the legions marching along from Dorchester.

Giles was five years older than me, but we were farm kids, with few near neighbours. I suppose any company was better than none. Our father was a remote figure and, to me at any rate, a grim one: craggy, weathered, temper worn thin by a lifetime's losing struggle for livelihood, inherited rather than chosen. Mother I remember as silent, patient, faded. An expert at making do.

In anything less than a torrential downpour Giles and I would be out on the hills or the shingle, outlaws always. Often even then, for there were plenty of places to shelter from the weather – a barn, several ruinous huts rarely used outside the lambing season and patched up with sacks and baling twine, a couple of shallow caves down by the beach. Terribly unsafe, those caves seem now. Scarcely a winter passed without part of one of our fields sliding into the sea.

We spent a lot of time up at the camp, attacking or defending to the last man. One summer we built siege engines. The most successful was a catapult which could hurl half a house brick about ten yards. We mounted it on a set of pram wheels, then spent hours scouring the beaches for ammunition – pebbles the size of tennis balls, as nearly round as possible. The whole lot we ferried in stages up to the ramparts, where the stones were stacked in cairns ready to repel marauding sheep.

Giles had been reading about how some Roman general dealt with local resistance. When a township had been invested for several weeks both sides would naturally have suffered casualties. He put the bodies of the dead in his catapults and shot them over the wall, where they lay unburied, adding disease to starvation. The book did not say what his troops thought about it.

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We decided to look for dead rabbits. The warrens had been full the year before and myxomatosis was back, so we did not have to look far. Neither of us was very keen to handle the animal, but we managed to kick the grisly corpse onto my handkerchief and transfer it, lolling and dangling, to the catapult. Giles wound back the mechanism and sighted down the hill. He pulled the release lever and the throwing arm snapped forward. Inertia whipped the rabbit's head back and it came off, hitting the catapult frame and splattering us both with juices. The body soared outwards and burst against the hillside below, scattering maggots like shrapnel.

I think that must have been one of our last visits to the camp. The following summer Giles was old enough to buy a beat-up moped which he transformed, in a series of profitable deals, into the largest motorbike he could legally ride with L plates. I did not see much of him and in any case I had moved up to secondary school and discovered the violin. I spent a lot of time practicing.

I do recall one last outing at the beginning of September, before school term started. The current bike must have been off the road, as they often were, or else Giles was broke, or both. He considered himself too grown up now for the old games, but he scrambled up the hill anyway, burning off some banked down adolescent drive or other.

It was late afternoon. The sun was low and it had besides the yellowish tint that comes when the summer starts to turn. Everything was very clear and bright with a sharp little shadow under each grass blade. When the fog came sliding up from the shore below I had reached the first line of fortifications and Giles was about 20 yards ahead. It took both of us unawares. I felt a chilly dimming of the light and turned to catch a glimpse of a landscape across which someone had drawn a wet brush in a series of broad, melting strokes - and then only a circle of grass and a

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shredding, drifting blank just out of arm's reach.

Nothing new, of course. Only the first Channel fog of the autumn, two or three weeks earlier than usual. But I was acutely aware of the slope in front of me – if it was still in front of me – not steep enough to be dangerous but good for some nasty bruises. I sat down on the ridge of the outermost rampart and waited for Giles to come. I was facing downhill, I thought, although the earth wall fell away in both directions. I had been facing that way when the mist came up and I was pretty sure I had not turned. Or not by much. At any rate, not through 180 degrees, surely?

My sweater was already covered with a sheen of tiny droplets clinging to the wool. I tucked my knees up against my chest and tugged the jumper down over them, then pulled the neck up over my nose so that my breath warmed the space between shirt and skin. Giles would shout, I thought. Somehow I did not like to myself. The shifting roils of moisture all round me gave the impression that they were holding back something. Any number of things. If I called out, what might not answer?

Normal hilltop sounds were deadened by the fog. They were faint enough at the best of times – scattered sheep calling, the distant racket of rooks squabbling down in the valley – but now their absence was startling, a sort of silent background roar shaped by the slope of the land.

"I remember..."

I fixed my eyes on a half-dead thistle clinging to the chalk below me. Its leaves were a brownish-green with brittle white patches, but the spines were still sharp.

"...Callous bastard he was, always down on us. Dig this, clean that... Chucked his guts up on the boat, though, eh? Laugh...?"

I closed my eyes tight, but that was worse. The fog seemed to be seeping into my brain.

"...took it out of our hides after. Two sodding days in full kit, pint of

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water per man at noon... Got his up north, I heard. Arrow in the gut crossing a river, current caught his shield, dragged him in deep. Not a soul moved to help..."

Bat-squeak voices of the hills rehearsing snatches of an ancient argument.

"There were good times. Warm days... I remember berries in the thorn bushes on an autumn morning... spinners' webs in the grass. Following the Eagle knee-high through the mist..."

"...sore feet, pack chafing, water trickling down your neck..."

"...sharing a girl in the firelight, flames reflected on the branches above..."

"...sharing aching balls and dripping cock a week later..."

"Before we marched up from the south they were full of stories... Tales of ice and sleet... warriors who painted their bodies and threw themselves naked onto the shield wall... And we found a grey-green land of mist and small rain... Chalk and clay and furze..."

"And women who would smile and smile as they spread their legs, then cut your throat as you slept after."

"How not? We killed their men and fired the thatch."

"I remember. Smoke blowing in your eyes, kids and cattle screaming. Crows circling."

"But they did for us in the end. Too many towns, too many marches, too tired, too long. Sooner or later. Laying in wood for the cookhouse fires, before the weather closed in. Foraging on the edge of the trees. An arrow out of the dark."

"Half-hearted skirmish outside some piss-poor little village. A dozen smoke-filled huts and a midden. A nick on the thigh – only a scratch, but it turned bad."

"Half a lifetime holding down some godless frontier. For a lump of chalk on your belly and a square of turf on your face. Bed on a cold hillside."

"Ten thousand pounds for saving your life!" Giles grabbed me under the arms and swung me out over the drop. The fog had lifted and a Technicolor sunset blazed up from the metallic

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sea below us. I must have screamed because he dumped me back on the ground and pranced around me laughing.

“Did I give you a fright? I did, didn’t I? Ha! You were well away – cloud cuckoo land. Cuckoo! Hey – are you all right? It was only a joke.”

“Did you hear them?” I was still breathless.

“Who? Nobody here but you, me and the sheep. You need to wake up a bit – I can’t believe you didn’t hear me coming.”

“Men... soldiers... I don’t know. They were whispering. In the fog.”

“Don’t know where they’ve got to then.” He waved his arm and it was true. We could see for miles. Not a living soul. “You’ve been seeing things. Hearing things.”

We looked at one another and he must have seen something out of the ordinary in my pale face because his smile flickered. Then he plunged away down the slope, yelling at the top of his voice.

“Last one down’s a wanker,” I shouted and dived after him. It was a word I had recently discovered.

I forgot about it very quickly, until a few years ago when I was walking near the camp again, down for the weekend. The sun was setting, with horizontal strokes of cloud across an outrageous brazen sky, and the voices came back to me.

At least, I think they did. Memories gain a patina from handling and sometimes it is hard to see the original pattern at all. Is it actually the childhood faces you remember, or the photographs in the family album? Song writing can be like that. A chance remark from the past gives you the first phrase but after that the words and the melody become the memory. Well. Whether or not I heard them calling to me then, an infant Captain Cat, they were clear enough three decades later. When I got back to London I wrote a tune for them. Fiddle and voice over a low drone from a concertina. A girl I knew at the time

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told me it used to make the small hairs stand up on the back of her neck.

It still goes down well after the interval, when everyone has had a drink or two.

5

The dog is back. It flops at our feet and starts rooting for fleas while Randall too pries and probes and gives nothing away.

“Let’s walk,” I say. The dog’s getting bored.”

I lead the way across the parking area towards the woods. There is a kissing gate in the fence around the car park. I open it halfway and the dog wriggles through then disappears again. I look back and Randall has not moved. He is watching me and his eyes have a glassy look. I think he wears contact lenses. He does not say anything and in his dark suit he looks like a third crow. Three for... what? Something very bad indeed. He glances down at his shoes – lightweight brogues, not made for muddy country rambles – and follows. Perhaps the man is worried about getting his feet wet.

Once through the gate we walk in single file for a while, then, remembering that I am the one with the wellies, I step off the path onto the grass.

“Your brother had a drink problem.”

We are walking two abreast now, with me beside the track making occasional detours to avoid trees. Up ahead a heavy branch has fallen half across the path and I drop back to allow Randall through the gap.

“He didn’t have a drink *problem*. He drank because he liked it.”

“He must have liked it a lot. Did he drive afterwards?”

“No, never. He had a bad fright a few years ago, I think.

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Most of the time he either scrounged a lift or called a taxi.”

“What kind of fright?”

“No idea. He didn’t go into it.” And why should I tell you anyway?

“Spend a lot of money on fares, did he?”

“Not that much. He was good fun. People enjoyed his company.”

6

The more some men have to drink, the larger their clothes get, have you noticed?

Giles had taken a skinful, judging by the size of his trousers, which were bagging at the knees, the waistband slipping down below his belly and threatening to part company with his shirt. His jacket looked like a family hand-me-down, several sizes too big. Perhaps he would grow into it. The band had been working the guests for about an hour and now, as they ripped into *Blue Suede Shoes*, things were getting sweaty. Giles, as ever, was in a class of his own. He jigged, splay-footed, in the centre of the crowd, arms raised above his head, fingers snapping, not dancing with any particular partner but turning to face any female who came near him in the crush. A few yards away my sister-in-law Sheila was surrounded by a crowd of children, doing something which looked like the hokey cokey. I stood at the bar, nursing an orange juice, admiring the bass player’s fingering and the shoulder blades of a girl a few feet away. The three of us had tossed to see whose car we would come in. Foregone conclusion.

“So many people. How come they know so many people? I could get most of my friends into a Volkswagen.”

The man beside me was one of the few not wearing a dinner

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jacket. His pale green suit and dark shirt gave him a faintly menacing air of intellectual thuggishness, accentuated by steel-rimmed glasses.

Probably still have room for a couple of hitch-hikers, I thought.

“Young Farmers,” I said.

“Not so young any more.”

“That’s true.”

“You a friend of the groom?” he asked.

“The bride. We were at school together.”

Polly was looking amazing. She was always pretty stunning, even in the jeans, sweatshirt and Wellingtons which made up her normal workday gear, but tonight she outshone everyone. And so she should. Rich, antique cream skirts swirled around her as she danced and the deep red velvet bodice, held up as far as I could see by willpower alone, drew the light down onto honey-coloured shoulders and arms. White was for wimps, she said. She caught my eye over her partner’s shoulder and waved. Her hair was piled on top of her head and she seemed all neck and collar bone.

Damn. How did I miss out there? Not that the question had ever arisen. We had been friends since she started school, several years younger than me, and her mother had driven us the 10 miles to the nearest town each day. Plenty of affection, but no spark. One of those things.

“You’re local, then? You don’t sound it.” My neighbour was in the mood for conversation.

“We don’t all have straws in our hair.”

“Dear me. Ethnic sensitivities.”

I grinned at him. “Actually, I’ve lived in London for ages. You lose the buzz pretty quickly if you know what’s good for you. *They Lunnnon volk looks down their noses at us, Darset lads.* Nowadays I just come down to clear my lungs. My brother has

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the farm next to Polly's new husband."

"Not for much longer."

"No indeed."

Polly and her new husband Mark had, in fact, been living together for several years. He was making an honest woman of her before they both went back to Australia, his native land. I did not know him well as he had moved into the area long after I had left. Now he was moving on again and taking my friend with him. No money in British farming, he said, and I would have agreed with him, except that he seemed to have done well out of it. They had bought a part share in a New South Wales vineyard.

"You're a friend of Mark's?" I asked.

"Business associate. And I don't mind telling you that his leaving is a pain in the arse. Do you know what the new owners are doing with the land? Golf course. Cliff-top bloody golf course. I ask you!"

"Pretty impressive hazard."

"It's bloody ridiculous. Mind you, there's no danger of balls falling in the sea – the wind will carry them for miles inland."

"You seem to be taking it very personally."

"It is personal. My firm was onto a good thing there. Sorry – I run a package holiday company. We specialise in survival courses, among other things. Get in touch with your inner self by eating worms for a week. There are a couple of combes along that bit of coast which could be a hundred miles from anywhere. Not even a track leading down to them. We land the punters by sea in the middle of the night and they love it. Don't tell them about the pub over the hill until the last day."

That might explain the vineyard, I thought.

I remembered a spot on the edge of our own farm when we were kids. A short, curving valley opening out onto the shingle, overgrown woodland sheltered by the headland, good for

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nothing much except rabbits. My father occasionally talked about cutting the timber, but access was too difficult. It would have cost more to haul the trees out than the lumber yard would have paid for them. To us boys it was mainly memorable for its name: Charity Bottom. Where you going, lads? Up Charity Bottom. Ho, ho, ho. I wondered if the woods were still there. The price of timber might have risen enough by now for Giles to have it logged.

The band were taking a break. Sheila's entourage dragged her towards the buffet. Giles and Polly came arm in arm off the dance floor, heads together, giggling. Polly saw me standing at the bar and steered her companion in my direction.

"When are you going to play for us, Simon?"

"Whenever you're ready. The question is, has Matt brought his box? I haven't seen him yet."

"He's only just got here. Some tiresome client had a crisis."

Matt and I had been musical partners throughout our school-days, constants in a shifting combination of guitars, drums and occasionally voices that lasted for five years or more until A Levels left us high and dry and needing to earn a living. Since then the relationship had gradually become more formal. He gave me legal advice when I needed it. I paid him when I could. But we still played together when we had the chance.

"OK. Let's find him, then go and talk to the band, see what their plans are."

Polly transferred herself to my arm and we left Giles and his new friend trying to attract the barman's attention.

"What do you think of Sam Crawford?" Polly asked.

"Is that his name? We didn't get that far. He's pretty pissed off that you and Mark are leaving."

"He gives me the creeps. He was paying plenty for permission to run his outward-bound thingy down by the beach, but he's one of the few people I won't be sorry to leave behind."

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“What do his clients do on their package holiday?”

“Lord knows. Part of the deal is that nobody goes down there when there’s a course on. They’re supposed to be castaways, or something. I heard them charging around in the middle of the night once, when we were out lambing.”

“Really? Not fair weather campers, then?” My memories of lambing were mostly cold and wet.

“Nope. Bunch of masochists. They do clean up after themselves, I will say that for them. You wouldn’t know they’d been there. But I suppose they have to do that or the next lot would find Man Friday footprints all over the place.”

We found Matt disposing of his coat, what looked like a fat suitcase at his feet.

“Polly.” A hug for the bride. “I’m so sorry I’m late. Some malicious old biddy changing her will for the tenth time. She’s loaded, unfortunately, so the junior partner has to traipse out to her place and listen to the latest sins of her relatives. I’m surprised none of them has slipped arsenic in her sherry already. Simon.”

For me, a handshake, warm but professional. Matt looked like what he now was: a successful solicitor, becoming prosperous, still youngish to a charitable eye, but with maturity in sight. I wondered what he saw when he looked at me in my hired dinner jacket.

“I didn’t think modern firms did the ancient family retainer bit any more,” I said.

He pulled a face. “I heard that too. Remind me to apply for a job in one.”

The band had found themselves beers and were gathered in a corner. Their kit was stacked around them and power cables from the house snaked under the canvas side of the marquee and across the coir matting that covered the floor. They were local lads, Polly said, making a name for themselves round about

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but still hanging onto the day jobs. I remembered the feeling – rehearsing two or three evenings a week, playing on Saturday nights and reaping a little local celebrity. Getting through the days on dreams.

Their singer was compact and energetic in black T-shirt. He had a gymnasium physique, close-cropped dark hair and a single ear ring and he looked at our bow ties dubiously while Polly explained that we were old friends who were going to play a few tunes. His eyebrows went up even further when Matt opened the case he had lugged across the dance floor and the light caught the chrome and ivory of the accordion. I could read his mind. *What's this? Old farts' request night?*

The bass player drifted over.

"Didn't I see you at Cropredy last year?" he said, frowning at me.

"You may have done."

"That's right, I remember. You played with that Scottish lot on the Saturday afternoon. Brilliant set, it was. People were dancing in the rain. I think I bought a CD after. You're not going to play now, are you? Any chance of sitting in?"

The Cropredy gig had been the result of a chance contact while I was doing a day's session work at the BBC, incidental music for a radio drama. The fiddle player with the Scottish lot was expecting a baby the weekend of the festival. Its father was beginning to fret about being onstage with her in a field in the middle of rural Oxfordshire. As it turned out his daughter was about an hour old by the time we counted in for the first number and her head had been fairly well wetted. Privately I thought this explained a good deal of the afternoon's sparkle, but whatever the reason it was a memorable session. Sometimes things come together of their own accord, and nobody can put a foot wrong.

I left Matt and the bass player roughing out a play list and

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went to get my fiddle from the car. In the bar Giles and Sam Crawford were still talking, Crawford drawing diagrams on the counter top with his finger. Giles waved as I went past and looked comparatively sober.

When I got back the singer was feeling happier. They had decided to include a couple of Dylan songs. Could I do a sort of Cajun backing? I could, no problem. The group's drummer had unearthed a bodhran.

"Bought it from a bloke in a bar. I've been carrying it around for ages, giving it a rattle now and then. Never had a chance to use it yet."

Matt and I kicked off as we always used to when we played in the local pubs. A firm, rhythmic melody on the accordion, the fiddle sliding in after a few bars with a gentle counter-melody. Let them know we're here, Matt used to say. Give them time to collect their pints and settle down. Then a change of key and a sharp increase in tempo to get the feet tapping. We'd still been at school then, technically under age, but the old magic still worked.

So we played. Jigs and reels, now and then a slow air or blues. And, remarkably, the people danced. The not-so-young farmers and their wives, the daughters and their slicked-down boy-friends, the feed merchants and the farriers, the livestock agents and the agricultural machinery dealers; even the councillors and the magistrates and the hack from the local rag. Giles emerged from the bar, clothes miraculously re-tailored, and squired Sheila while Crawford's eyes followed him up and down. There's no beating the old tunes.

Finally, very late, Matt and I played the waltz we had written for Polly. Mark wafted her round the dim floor, through the departing fug of spilt beer, sweat and cigar smoke. Round the dim floor and out of our lives.

“He kept several cars,” Randall says. “He must have driven them sometimes.”

“Of course he did. One of them was mine, for when I came down. I usually come on the train, sitting in traffic is such a waste of time. His wife used to drive the BMW, until she left. He used the four wheel drive. If there were any others they were being renovated. There’s a kid down in the village did a lot of work for him. Brilliant mechanic, but no head for business.”

Randall stops and looks at me. I elaborate.

“Classic cars. That’s one of the ways Giles made his money. He sold a tank once, to an American collector. Found it in Eastern Europe somewhere. You wouldn’t believe the trouble he had shipping it over. Well... perhaps you would. Telephone boxes were much easier. Californians use them as poolside showers, did you know that? I daresay the smell of piss fades after a while.”

“So. Dorset’s answer to Arthur Daley.”

“Not really. Giles was good at it.”

The café was in a part of Islington which in those days was only recently gentrified, yet to become the home turf of cabinet ministers. It was newly opened, renovated in a style designed to convey intellectual smartness. Spotlights; bare sanded boards, freshly varnished; walls stripped of plaster and wire brushed down to the brick; good quality light pine furniture; piles of newspapers and magazines on a window seat. Guardian and TLS. London Review of Books and New Yorker. Sporting Life

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for the tainted breath of the real world.

Giles, in town for the day, bit into a huge sandwich, salad and cooked meats piled on grainy brown bread.

“Hm... pretty good. But their portions are too big. They’ll go bust within six months, you wait. Eighty per cent of independent food outlets last less than a year, did you know that? It’s poor portion control that does ‘em in, every time.”

I nodded towards the counter where the owner, dressed in a blue and white butcher’s apron, was busy arranging six different kinds of olive in the chiller cabinet. “Give him a few hints.”

Giles glanced up, then turned his attention back to the sandwich. “No point. He’s got a picture in his head of what he wants to do, and it isn’t make money... He wants the buzz of conversation and the smell of fresh coffee. Booker prize-winners sitting for a couple of hours over a single cappuccino. Well, he may get that, who knows.”

“He may manage to turn a profit as well.”

“Doubt it. People get their heart’s desire, on the whole. Usually it doesn’t seem like it because what they get is *exactly* what they hanker after. If they don’t get rich it’s because they don’t want wealth badly enough to go to the trouble. What they value is style or glamour or power or security... Whatever. Heart’s desire.”

“Whereas you, on the other hand...?”

“Whereas I, on the other hand, know that money is my ticket to the future. Whatever I am hungry for I may achieve without it, but money will help me keep it. If mine host were a wealthy man he could give two fingers to his landlord and his suppliers – as it is they’ll be dunning him for the cost of that smoked salmon before the end of the year. I dare say he knows all this perfectly well intellectually, but he doesn’t *believe* it. In his heart he’s settled for being the man of taste for a few weeks. He’s not prepared to beg and lie and steal for it. Come on, we’ll just have

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time for a look round before the bidding starts.”

The auction rooms were a bit of a let down. If nothing else I had expected the place to have a kind of scholarly dignity. In the event it struck me as shabby, chaotic and untidy, the rooms taking their cue from the rumpled men who appeared to pass their days rooting along the shelves of books. Seen outside a school playground some of them would have been arrested on the spot. Others had a watchfulness which reminded me more of the market stall than the country house library.

Even the building was unpromising. Yellow brick and concrete, thrown up in the 1960s in the semi-industrial wasteland behind one of the great London stations, probably plugging a bombed-out gap. The exterior was thick with traffic grime and the windows looked as if they had not been washed since the place was built. Not that it mattered. All you could see through the crusted glass were the blank backs of shelving stacks and piles of yellow newspapers.

We went down a couple of steps into a foyer with marbled floor and discreetly lit display cabinets. This would have been more inspiring, were it not for the pile of cardboard boxes in one corner, broken down flat and strapped into bundles. Down a few more steps and into the auction room proper we passed a reception desk where a girl was dispensing pieces of card with large numbers pasted on them. Giles left me to “grab one of those” and drifted off. I signed my name and took my 56.

Inside there was a smell of dust and old glue and occasionally a faint whiff of damp. The walls were covered with shelving on which books were ranked, separate lots identified by slips of pink paper with spidery pencilled writing at the top. Fifty or sixty chairs had been arranged in the centre of the room, facing a sort of raised pulpit at one end as if for a prayer meeting. A couple of people were already seated, reading their catalogues, but most were standing in front of the shelves, taking down volumes and

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riffling rapidly through the pages. This was known as “sniffing” a book, according to Giles.

“No idea what they’re looking for, though. I think it’s a sort of pose, part of their professional credentials.” He glanced at a passing bibliophile. “Along with the anorak and broken spectacles.”

This was a scouting trip, Giles said, but evidently not his first because one or two people nodded to him as he sauntered round. He stopped here and there, scanning the titles, but he did not take any of them down. If anything, he seemed to be more interested in the other dealers. Several times I saw him hover indecisively next to one or other of them and it occurred to me that he was not looking at the shelves. He was making a note of which books they had put back.

After about 20 minutes the older sister of the girl at reception appeared at a raised desk to one side of the of the pulpit and there was a general drift towards the chairs. Giles passed me a catalogue.

“Do a bit of bidding for the lots I’ve marked, but try not to get stuck with anything. I’ve scribbled in some prices – you should be safe enough if you don’t go beyond those.”

I found myself a chair about halfway back and Giles parked himself against a table at the side of the room and towards the front, from where he had a clear view of the buyers as well as the auctioneer. Four or five other men had taken up similar positions round the room. They seemed to have more of the market trader about them than most. It struck me that Giles was a trader too. Dressed for another setting, perhaps – he had come up in his best off-duty county gear: cords, brown brogues, sweater over soft, check cotton shirt – but predatory like the others. I could picture him in a harder age, rolling grain between his palms, leaning on a rail to watch horses turn and trot, glancing indifferently towards the slaver’s block.

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The auctioneer stepped up onto the rostrum, a middle-aged man in his father's three-piece suit, complete with watch chain and seals. He was slightly over weight, but it gave him a prosperous look. Come from a better lunch than our sandwich, probably, but no doubt the restaurateur who welcomed him to his table would be feeling the wind before long. No hammer, I noticed, rather disappointed. Instead a thing like a wooden egg which he tossed from hand to hand while he watched the last stragglers take their seats. In a corner a young man in brown overalls picked up the first lot and turned to face the buyers, holding the two books displayed in front of his chest. The younger sister was talking quietly on the telephone. The auctioneer looked towards her and raised his eyebrows. She nodded.

"Ladies and gentlemen, lot number one. Colonel James Abbott: *Narrative of a Journey from Herat to Khiva, Moscow and St Petersburg. 1843. First edition in two volumes. Original cloth.* I have five hundred pounds. Five fifty, thank you. I have six hundred... With me at six hundred... Six fifty on the telephone."

After an hour or so I had successfully failed to buy two or three dusty bundles and was beginning to enjoy myself. Bidding was an absurdly exciting game played with dead pan face and a variety of twitches. I did not see any of my colleagues tap his nose and wink but it would not have seemed at all out of place. More professional credentials, no doubt. Most of the lots had reserve prices on them, or else there were postal bids, so that the auctioneer seemed to be competing with himself half the time. Sometimes one or other of his staff got involved. Then he would announce "*In the room now...*" and a frisson would run along the rows of chairs. I wanted to jump up and down. *A thousand! Two thousand!* But I nodded and shook my head gravely and tried to look bored along with the rest of them.

Then my luck ran out. I was bidding for a lot which included a couple of Siegfried Sassoon first editions, and still well within

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the limit Giles had set, when the opposition melted away and the gavel came down.

“Sold to the gentleman in the centre for £350. Your number sir?”

I gaped at him, then held up my 56. I was aware of Giles grinning broadly on the sidelines, but managed to avoid catching his eye. I made no offer at all for the next couple of items he had marked in the catalogue.

A little later brown overalls placed an unsold book back on the shelves and turned to a colleague who handed him a large leather-bound volume which he had taken from a glass display case. The auctioneer twinkled at us.

“Now, ladies and gentlemen, one of the most important items this afternoon. A fine copy of Christopher Saxton’s *Atlas of England and Wales*. First edition, early issue, 1579. Folio, with 13 hand-coloured maps, an engraved frontispiece of Elizabeth I with hand-coloured border and the royal arms tipped in. I’m going to start the bidding at £30,000.” There was a collective sigh from the less affluent dealers who sat back, resigned to being spectators. One day.

“Will anyone give me thirty-one thousand? Thank you sir. Thirty-two thousand... Thirty three... Thirty four... Thirty five... With me at £35,000. Thirty-six on the phone. Thirty-seven at the back...”

The postal bids he had spread on the desktop in front of him seemed to peter out at around £40,000. There was a brief tussle between the anonymous buyer on the telephone and a tousled young man sitting alone in one of the rearmost seats, then, in an office somewhere on the other side of the world perhaps, or possibly only a mile away in the City, the remote buyer lost his nerve. The girl holding the receiver listened and shook her head.

“With the gentleman at the back, then, at £46,000. Will anyone give me forty-seven? Forty-seven, anyone? No? Selling, in

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that case, at £46,000.”

Eyes alert for last minute signals round the room, the auctioneer lifted his left hand to bring down the gavel. A few places along from me a thin, languid man raised a nicotine-stained finger.

“Forty-seven. Thank you. Still bidding at £47,000.” The auctioneer smiled towards the back of the room. “It’s against you, sir. No?” Another quick scan of the rows of chairs. “No more?”

“And five.”

A familiar voice from my left. Giles. Some scouting trip.

My neighbour looked irritated and peered over his glasses at my brother, who sat with one hip perched on the table, swinging his leg gently. The auctioneer seemed dubious and his staff were looking Giles over with some care. They would know him again.

“Thank you. I am bid £47,500. Do I hear forty-eight? Yes? Forty-eight from Ibsen & Church.” My neighbour was an institution, then. Giles seemed oblivious.

“And five.”

“Forty-eight, five... Forty-nine.”

“And five.”

“Forty-nine, five... Forty-nine, five... With the gentleman on my right. Will anyone give me fifty? Fifty thousand, anyone?” The auctioneer raised his gavel again, his eyes on Ibsen & Church, while that venerable partnership ground its teeth. Giles swung his leg.

The partnership nodded abruptly.

“Fifty thousand. Thank you. I am bid £50,000.” To Giles, affable but still with the faintest hint of concern: “Against you, sir. Any advance on £50,000?”

Giles studied his toecap for a second, looked blandly at my rigid neighbour and shook his head.

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“Very well then, selling to Ibsen & Church for £50,000.” And at last the gavel came down.

Within half an hour the sale was over. Buyers split into small groups, discussing prices and exchanging information about other sales. Or so I supposed. They were probably talking about where to go for a drink. I sidled along the row and found Giles.

“Well done,” he said. He did not look at all put out at my losing several hundred pounds of his money. At least, I hoped it was his money. The sale had been in my name, I remembered.

“Don’t worry about the Sassoon. We can probably split the lot with the people who were bidding against you. The rest can go to Oxfam on the way home.”

“Have you *got* £50,000?” I murmured, aware that this sort of question might not be welcome bellowed across a saleroom.

“Well, not on me, no. I could probably raise it.”

“*Raise it!* What were you going to do? Hock Sheila’s jewels?”

“You had me worried for a minute there, my friend.”

We both turned and found that we were being addressed by the successful purchaser of Saxton’s Atlas. Standing he seemed even thinner than before since he topped us both by three or four inches. He was impeccably dressed, with a light dusting of dandruff on his shoulders. One hand held a cigarette, unlit in deference to the NO SMOKING signs on every wall.

“Barry Church,” he said, extending his free hand to Giles. “No relation actually, but I sometimes pretend.”

“Giles Coltraine. Simon Coltraine. We are related. Yes, it was a pity. But 50K was my ceiling unfortunately.”

“Happens to us all from time to time. I don’t suppose you’re at liberty to say who you were buying for?”

Giles shook his head.

“Afraid not. American academic.”

“Ah, really? No, no, I quite understand. Worth a couple of thousand to keep it in the country, then. Well, it’s been a

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pleasure meeting you. I'm sure we'll run into one another again."

"I'm sure we will."

Church nodded and moved away, not looking entirely pleased at the prospect. Giles watched him.

"Did you realise that the kid at the back of the room was also working for Ibsen? I've seen them do it before. His job was to run up the price a bit and see off the riff-raff. Then our friend there steps in and makes a quick, decisive purchase. Everyone's commission is a bit bigger, everyone's happy. Except whoever Ibsen & Church, Est. 1856, are representing, I suppose. But it's probably some college library which won't give a damn one way or the other."

"You didn't have a buyer, did you?"

"Of course not. I just wanted them to know that I was a player. Let's get rid of the stuff you got landed with."

All that afternoon, I had not thought to ask him what he was hungry for.

9

"Post-mortem report said he must have put away half a bottle of gin." Randall is watching his feet, avoiding the worst of the mud.

"That wasn't like him."

"More than usual?"

"Well, no..." I consider it. "I meant the gin. He didn't like it much. He drank whisky or wine."

"Hm. The thing is, most of it was still in his stomach. Blood alcohol was only just over the limit. He must have downed the lot in – what? – the half hour or so before the accident? Not much more. After phoning you perhaps. Why did he call?"

"I've no idea. He didn't say anything special – big brother

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stuff. What's the audience like? Good luck and don't trip over the amps. That sort of thing. We used to phone each other all the time."

"How often?"

"Oh... I don't know. Couple of times a week?"

"When you were playing?"

"Sometimes. If he knew. We didn't live in each other's pockets."

"Had he been drinking that night, when you spoke to him?"

"How should I know? We spoke on the phone for two minutes. I was in a room full of people. I had other things to think about. All right, no, there was no sign of it – but I couldn't exactly smell his breath."

"It's quite difficult," Randall says. "Drinking that much gin that quickly. You have to be serious about it."

10

The call from the police came at ten in the morning. The Salisbury gig had been followed by a couple of pints with friends from the other bands, followed in turn by a curry and a long drive back to London. I had not expected to be drawing the curtains much before midday.

Instead, the sudden clamour of the phone and, only a couple of breaths away from sleep, a formal voice in my ear, sympathetic but accustomed. *Accident... Your brother...* Then cab to Waterloo and twenty minutes spent dodging weekend trippers on the station concourse. So much space above your head in those old mainline stations, great bubbles of glass and brick built to contain funnelling smoke and steam. Finally tickets and a hunt along the platforms and the train rocking interminably into the south-west. I left the lid on my coffee to stop it slopping.

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The tabloids had launched a new anti-terrorist witch hunt. The papers on the table top in front of me were full of pictures from the archives, blurred stills from CCTV cameras: young men with rucksacks full of explosives. Headlines shouted outrage at some new security failing. I did not read them. The coffee went cold.

Much later, after questions and forms and watery tea, some of the business still unfinished because of the weekend, I took a taxi out to the farm.

Mrs Sims heard the engine and appeared at the door while the driver was still struggling with the gate. She was holding the dog by its collar but let it go as soon as the car had pulled up in the yard. As I climbed out of the back seat the collie began its usual welcoming dance, bouncing stiff-legged up and down and crying for attention.

"Hello Meg. Get down. Get *down* for goodness sake. Good girl. Hello Mrs Sims."

"Oh Simon, I'm so sorry."

She had her coat on and I remembered that she only normally came up from the village on weekdays. A couple of hours a day to keep the place civilised, according the Giles. She had known us since we were kids and now her eyes were red as she reached up to give me a peck on the cheek.

"The police were round this morning asking for your phone number. I thought I'd better come up and fetch Meggie. She's had a run. Do you want me to keep her for a bit?"

"No, that's all right. Let her stay here with me for the time being."

"All right – she'll be company for you I expect. But do say if you want us to take her later on. Giles often used to leave her when he was away. Oh dear... I expect you'd like some tea."

I paid the taxi driver and followed her into the warmth of the hall, a kindly woman keeping disaster at arm's length with milk and sugar.

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"It was such a shock, police car at the front gate like that. I mean, I thought at first it must be our Georgie when I saw them coming up the path." Her son Georgie was a grown man of my age, with children of his own and a small building business, well thought of. He had been wild when he was young.

"Funny how it's always bad news. You get a policeman knocking at your front door and you don't think 'I've won the lottery!' do you?"

"What did they say?"

"Oh, only that there'd been an accident, and did I know how they could contact Mrs Coltraine. Of course, I said that she hadn't lived up at the farm for several years, and I thought she'd moved to America. So they asked if there were any other relatives, and I gave them your number."

"I'd better phone Sheila, I suppose. Nothing about the accident?"

"No. Well... They did ask if Giles was much of a drinker. I said he liked a glass, but never when he was driving. I don't think they believed me. Do you know what did happen?"

"Not really. The car came off the road late last night, but nobody else seems to have been involved. Someone spotted the wreck early this morning." I looked round. "Any sign that he *had* been drinking?"

"Not unless he washed up after himself. That wouldn't be like him."

I spent what was left of the afternoon and most of the evening walking from room to room, sitting, looking, feeling nothing much except the threat of something ready to open beneath me, like a crevasse beneath a snow bridge. Everything was tidy, normal. I expected to find a note on the kitchen table: *Welcome. Back about seven. Wine in fridge.* As it started to get dark and the central heating boiler in the kitchen came alive with a thump I drew the curtains and turned on a few reading lamps.

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The house was the one I had grown up in, transformed by Giles's occupation. I had become accustomed to the changes long ago, and in any case they had accumulated piecemeal over the years. It was only occasionally, when there was a particularly long interval between visits, that I noticed them at all. Now, with his absence hanging over everything, the whole place seemed strange.

I opened a bottle of wine – it was indeed waiting in the fridge – and sat for a while in one of the armchairs that Giles insisted were the heart of a real kitchen. I could just remember my mother working there, holding back the tide of mud, hay, cow-shit and Wellingtons with sandbags of Dettol. It was a much bigger room now, a scullery and various larders knocked through, with recessed lighting and polished wood surfaces. The chipped old Aga I remembered, a grimy cream monster that had to be fed with coal twice a day, had been replaced by another, even bigger, red and chrome and oil fired. Brown lino, patched by the back door, was long gone. For a while there had been sanded boards, then a couple of years earlier stone flags had appeared with some heating arrangement underneath, so that they were always warm.

It was a long time before I could bring myself to go into his bedroom.

I stood on the landing outside, looking at a picture on the wall. It was an old Royal Academy poster framed in ash, a water-colour of a Greenland falcon. One wing had been spread out like a specimen to show all the flight feathers, but its eye was bright and alive and wary. I drifted into my own room. It was the one I had occupied when I was a child. Giles kept it for me but it was impersonal now, boy's clutter long since thrown away. Fresh wallpaper and curtains looked odd alongside the familiar shelves and sloping ceiling. Under the new paint, though, the wooden windowsill still showed the long gouge I had burned out

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with my father's shaving mirror. My bag was unopened on the bed. In the bathroom next door there was a faint smell of Giles's aftershave and a single toothbrush.

I don't know what I expected when I finally pushed his door open. Some speaking sense of his personality. But there was nothing. Mrs Sims had passed by and everything was tidy and dusted, shirts ironed in the wardrobe, socks rolled in pairs in a top drawer. On one wall several groups of Victorian great-grandparents waited stiffly for the photographer to release them. The bookshelves were full of his favourites, old editions, some of them, probably valuable. There were also several of Sheila's books, still looking fresh from the publisher.

His reading glasses were lying on the bedside table. I picked them up and sat on the edge of the bed. He had chosen them because they made him look harmless - I remembered how he used to blink over the gold framed half-lenses. He loved to mislead.

Finally, in great, helpless, breathless gulps, the tears came.

Fairly late, I went downstairs and turned on the stereo. There was a CD already in the drive and it started automatically, filling the living room with the drone of a concertina, very soft. Then the fiddle. Then the girl's voice, phrases fading, lost in the shadows:

*Too many battles, too many loads,
Old wounds carried down too many roads
To a bed on a cold hillside.*

Giles had gone to his death with my song in his ears.

CHAPTER TWO

1

Wednesday evening, ten past nine. A draughty church hall in north London and the band are experiencing artistic differences.

“I am not singing that song and if you don’t like it you can shove it up your arse.”

Bridie is 24 years old, small and skinny with freckles and a mass of wiry red hair which she normally wears, as now, tied back in a rigid bunch. On stage she lets it loose and it flies around her head like a halo of fire. Her voice can sound as pure and clear as a cathedral choirboy’s or it can blister paint. At the moment she is in blowtorch mode.

“Bridie, it’s a great song.”

“It’s the kind of thing the men sing in Ireland to make themselves feel like romantic heroes instead of the sadistic morons they really are. Simon, you’re not going to make us do this shit, surely?”

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“Jesus Simon, what is this?”

I can see why Steve wants to sing it. He has the brooding glamour of the black Celt and he can probably already picture himself in a lager advert on TV, epitome of New York Irish cool. In fact, he comes from Kent and as far as I know his family have been hop growers for five generations. A nice tenor voice with a good range and not a bad guitarist. Not a great one.

Bridie is different. Her parents both came from Northern Ireland, mother Catholic, father Protestant. The threats started a week after they met and they left the country after her father had two ribs broken on his own doorstep. Bridie was born and brought up in Cornwall and none of the family has ever been back.

I feel old. Come to think of it, I am old compared with these two. Old enough to be the father of either of them. But only just. Len, the drummer and even older than I am, catches my expression over Bridie’s shoulder and crosses his eyes briefly. Been there, done that. When can we go to the pub? Ian, the fifth member of the band, fiddles with something electronic attached to his keyboard, not even listening.

“All right, calm down the pair of you. You’re right Steve, it is a great song.” The beginning of a smirk on his face. Out of the corner of my eye I see Bridie take a breath. “But Bridie’s right too, we can’t do it.”

“Oh, for God’s sake.” He takes half a dozen strides down the hall, swinging his guitar as if he is about to throw it. But he does not, I notice.

“Steve, if you want to do a rebel song there are plenty to choose from. I saw a couple of guys do one about Monmouth the other day. By the end of it half the audience wanted to go out and grab a pitchfork.”

“Nobody’s ever heard of Monmouth except a handful of sad old folkies.”

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“I think that’s Bridie’s point. The beatings are still going on in Ulster, whatever the politicians say. Irish rebel songs are too current. Find something that’s been... defused.”

“What, like she’s defused you? With a quick shag?”

I’ll throttle the bastard, I tell myself. Funeral thoughts have given my temper an edge. No, he’s bigger than me and half my age. *But I’ll bloody throttle him anyway*. Steve steps back. I could swear that he looks frightened.

“Actually, it’s at least six months since Simon and I last slept together.”

There is a snort of laughter from behind the drum kit, where Len is bending down to adjust one of the pedals. Thank you Bridie. I knew I could rely on your support.

2

My family did not go to church much, so I had never paid any attention to the ritual. Certainly I had not realised how exclusive it all was. Waiting for the hearse I found an old prayer book lying around the house.

Here is to be noted that the office ensuing is not to be used for any that die unbaptised, or excommunicate, or have laid violent hands upon themselves.

The church was packed.

I sat in the front pew in a Victorian twilight. Spots hidden among the scrollwork high up on the walls illuminated the painted ceiling but strengthened the gloom of vertical stone below. There were candles and I watched the play of the reflections in the brass. The air felt chilly and damp. Bridie sat beside me and held my hand and squeezed it now and then. She was paler than usual. The skin around her eyes was puffy and her lashes had a clogged look. She had refused to wear black. Instead

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she had on a long stage dress that Giles had admired, a vivid splash of brown and orange and gold.

On the other side sat Sheila. She had flown in dry-eyed from Boston three or four days after my phone call and slipped back into her old place at the farm as if she had never been away. She spoke to Matt, the police, the undertaker and one of the priests who served the church in the village, then set about drawing up lists. Guests, catering requirements, calls to make, people to see. She was good at it and I was glad to leave her to it.

I had stayed on for a couple of days and we walked round the fields and sat in the kitchen and talked, as old friends do, about the past and the future: the band, her teaching in the US, Giles as we had both known him. Not much about the accident.

“Did you see him?” she asked me once. Her voice had acquired a faint American twang.

“Yes. I had to identify him.”

“How did he look?”

“Exactly the same as usual,” I lied. He had not been wearing a seat belt. “Except that there was... nothing there.”

She nodded and poured another glass of wine.

“I’d like to come back here,” she said. “To live, I mean. I was happy here.”

“Good idea. You’ve been away too long.”

“You wouldn’t mind? You were brought up here. It was your home before it was mine.”

“I left ages ago.”

“Not until next year. In the summer maybe. I won’t be missed, there’s half a dozen hungry associate professors itching to get their feet under my desk. Can you cast an occasional eye over the place until then? Mrs Sims will keep things polished, but somebody needs to be in charge. I’ll tell Matt that you have authority to put your name to anything that needs signing. If nothing else, come down and listen to the ghosts.”

COLD HILLSIDE

3

Some of the ghosts had already called.

“Simon, how are you?”

“Andy. Come on in.”

The three men trooped into the kitchen and stood looking round uneasily. They were all in their twenties, big lads, normally pretty noisy probably, but unsure about how to behave in a dead man’s house. And who isn’t? Andy had been working for Giles for years and seemed to have been elected spokesman on that account. He pulled off a pair of woollen gloves and popped open the front of his padded jacket.

“You remember Tod I expect? You won’t know Terry, though – he’s only been around a few months.”

We shook hands. I pointed to chairs.

“Coffee? Beer?”

“No, no. We’ll only be a minute. Thanks though. The thing is... Look, I know this isn’t a good time, and it looks bad us marching in here like this, but we three need to know where we stand. I mean, we’ve all been working for Giles and now... Well, what now?”

“Don’t worry about it – I’d be asking the same question. Er... what was the deal, exactly? Were you employed by him?”

Terry spoke up: “No. That’s the problem. I mean, we worked for him, right enough, there’s no question of that, you can ask anyone. But it was all cash in hand, like.”

“Ah. Did Giles owe you money?”

Terry looked as if he would have liked to say yes. Left to himself he probably would have done, but Andy jumped in.

“No, no. Nothing like that.”

“Um... Did you owe him anything?”

“Not exactly. Except that Terry...”

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"I paid for that stuff!" Terry was looking murderous.

"Hang on, hang on. I've lost the plot here. Sit down, have a beer and explain to me how this worked."

I went over to the fridge and when I returned to the table with bottles in either hand the three of them were ranged down the other side, Terry glowering and Andy in the middle, looking anxious. Tod, who still had not said a word, kept glancing at Andy and seemed content to take his lead.

"OK then, from the top." I distributed the bottles. "What kind of stuff are we talking about?"

"Well... low-grade antiques, I suppose you could call them." Andy explained. "Not expensive, but... collectible's the word nowadays, isn't it? Tod has regular stalls at a couple of markets selling old tools, for example. You must know the sort of thing – wooden block planes, all that. I do toys – cars, old dolls and bears, my girl friend helps with those. Military medals, a lot of interest there. Anything, really."

"And Giles used to supply all these?"

"He used to find them, yes. Mostly he wouldn't handle them himself. One of us would collect them, bring them back here."

"From where?"

"Oh, sales, house clearances. People get on a bit, kids have left home so they move somewhere smaller, no room for everything... He knew a lot of people."

"I'll bet."

"Yes. Well. On paper, Giles would buy whatever it happened to be and sell it on to us, and *on paper* the mark-up would be small... but by the time it gets to the market stall it's going for cash and a decent profit and a percentage of that comes – came – back to him."

"And as much again in your back pockets, I suppose." Terry stared at me in amazement. Where else would they put it?

Tod spoke up for the first time. "But, see, he helped each one

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of us get started, and we use one of the barns here as a sort of base. I've never met anybody like him for finding the stuff in the first place. And now my wife's having a baby. I don't see how it's going to work without him."

Nor did I. Guaranteed sales, no wages bill, no National Insurance, most of the profits tax-free and as far as I could see the three lads had done the leg work. They seemed to feel that Giles had done them a favour. Remarkable.

The second apparition arrived the next morning in a red and white 2CV, wipers thrashing against gusting rain that curled like smoke across the fields. A girl got out, slammed the door and ran across the yard to the porch, all legs and elbows, holding a jacket over her head.

"Mr Coltraine?"

"You're lucky to catch me." Sheila's plane was getting in that afternoon and I was supposed to be meeting it. I had despaired of any improvement in the weather and was towelling the dog after a sodden walk along the beach.

"I saw you come back. I was waiting up the lane."

I waved her in and sent the dog to its basket.

"I'm Sharon. The boys asked me to come in and talk to you. They've put a lot of effort into this thing and they're dead worried."

She looked about 14. Curtains of long, straight, brown hair hung on either side of her face and she kept pushing them back behind her ears. Baggy black sweater, tiny skirt and, on the end of matchstick legs, an enormous pair of patent leather boots with thick soles and rows of buckles up the calf. Not a pushover. She would have bobbed upright like one of those weighted toy clowns.

"Ah. You're part of this enterprise too, are you?"

"I'm the office manager." She stared at me, daring me to comment.

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“Um... Don’t take this the wrong way... but how old are you, exactly?”

“Eighteen. Next month if you want it *exactly*. I’ve been working for Giles since I left school. Just over a year. Look, it’s difficult to explain – much easier if I showed you.”

“I’m going out in less than an hour.”

“Won’t take long. Come on, I’ll drive.”

Rocked by every gust of wind, its engine racing like a demented lawnmower, the 2CV bounced along the lane away from the village, then turned off down a track half a mile or so from the house. There had been a barn of sorts in my father’s day. Nothing very elaborate, a fodder store, humped corrugated iron roof and open on two sides. I had not been up there for years. Now it was a solid, weatherproof structure with cladding walls moulded in wide, square-edged grooves and painted a dull red. A power line looped away over soaked fields. At one end a lean-to sheltered tall double doors.

The 2CV could have been taken right inside, but Sharon manoeuvred round a large puddle and jerked to a halt under some dripping guttering. She bounded out, leaving me to grapple with the unfamiliar latch. By the time I had caught up with her she had taken a key from under a brick and was unlocking a narrow door marked *Office*.

There did not seem to be any windows, but while I stood blinking on the threshold Sharon stepped confidently into the gloom and turned on an Anglepoise lamp. I saw computer, printer, desktop photocopier; filing cabinets in the shadows against the wall. She watched me taking it all in, suddenly self-conscious.

“Can I get you anything? Tea, coffee? I brought some fresh milk up yesterday morning. It keeps for ages this time of year. I expect we’ll get a fridge up here eventually. That is, assuming... Well. Never got round to it last summer, we were so busy.”

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“No thanks, I’m fine. I really haven’t got much time.”

“Right. This is it, then.”

She swept down a row of light switches with the flat of her hand.

Not, after all, a shadowed office. A line of fluorescent tubes buzzed and flickered into life overhead and I saw that there were no walls. The whole of the interior of the barn was a single open space, with an aluminium ladder at the far end leading through a hole in the ceiling to – presumably – an upper level. Open plan had nothing on this. I was standing in a tiny, orderly oasis on the edge of a wilderness of junk.

But as my eyes began to make sense of the space I saw that this was more than the accumulated debris of a few local attics. Everything had been sorted and the floor space was divided into distinct zones. Furniture at the far end by the main doors, pictures and a few ornate but empty frames stacked along one of the walls, a block of steel workshop shelving full of china, a heap of boxes full of books.

Automatically I said: “You shouldn’t store books flat like that, the spines get twisted.”

“Yes, I know. Giles was always telling us. We’ve been meaning to put up some more shelves.”

I had heard the lecture myself, many times.

“We don’t do much furniture. A guy comes over from Bridport twice a month and takes it away. Andy’s got a mate, though, who wants to have a go at stripping. We thought we might add a workshop in the summer. Small stuff is upstairs. Coins, jewellery, watches, old pens. A bit of glass.”

“Where does it all come from?”

She reached over to the desk and handed me a glossy leaflet.

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*Immediate Cash
paid for
old jewellery, silver,
antiques, clocks, books and paintings*

There were pictures of a selection of *Antiques Road Show* items, polished and tastefully arranged, looking valuable.

Private visits and immediate cash offers.

“Who makes the offers?”

“Me. Giles did to begin with. Then he started taking me along. I’ve been doing it on my own for ages now. People trust a girl, he says. Said.”

“In those boots?”

“I’ve got some nice, sensible shoes.”

She had a point. Our Terry would get the door slammed in his face every time. And there would always be a few people who would let her in thinking it would be easy to put one over on a child fresh out of the convent. Fat chance.

“OK. Look, I have to go. You understand that in the long term it isn’t up to me? I can let you stay on for the time being, but I’m only the caretaker. The farm is Sheila’s now – I don’t know what she’ll do with it. Did you ever meet her?”

Sharon shook her head and her hair fell loose on one side. She tucked it back, said nothing.

“I’ll talk to her. I think you’ll get on. But I’m not going to bankroll you the way Giles did, and this cash in hand stuff will have to stop. I’ll want a straightforward rent for the barn. My solicitor will draw up a short lease.”

She looked delighted.

“That’s great. Giles was our... angel, sort of. You know, like

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in the theatre? Got us started. But there's a fair amount of money through the business now, enough so that we can do the buying ourselves."

I grinned at her and reminded myself that this was the girl who made immediate cash offers. I had no doubt at all that a regular monthly overhead would turn out to be cheaper than Giles's share of the profits.

I should have known that these things come in threes. I had to wait until after the funeral for the third visitation. Sheila had packed her books and flown back to her ivory tower. I had work piling up in London. It was my last night on the farm when the doorbell went.

The man was standing in the shadow of the porch with the security lights in the yard flaring behind him and at first I could not make out his face. Then he moved his head and the lamp in the hall made two flat, bright disks of his glasses.

"Simon, isn't it? You probably don't remember me. We met at a wedding a few years ago. Sam Crawford."

Back in the kitchen he took possession of one of the arm-chairs, but to start with he sat on the edge of his seat. He placed his briefcase on the floor beside him, in line with the crack between two of the flagstones.

"I thought I should come down myself," he said. "Rather than writing or phoning. I was in business with your brother and... Well, we were all terribly shocked when we heard about the accident." He looked embarrassed rather than shocked, but then, as I was finding, people did. Some muttered platitudes, some said nothing at all. I did not know which I would have done myself, or which I preferred. I made an encouraging gesture with one hand.

"Yes. Well, I sell adventure holidays, I don't know whether I told you?"

"I think so. Didn't you have a deal with Polly's husband?"

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“That’s right.” He settled further back in the armchair. “We used to camp on a patch of their land, down by the beach. Then when they left the country I came to a similar arrangement with Giles.”

“Ah.”

Crawford pulled a face. “OK, I admit it. That’s my main reason for coming. ‘Ah’ about sums it up. Sorry. But life really does go on. I’ve got bookings right through to next summer and I need to know whether or not I can honour them.”

“Sure, I understand. So... how did it go, then? What were these holidays all about?”

Crawford leaned over for his briefcase and rested it on his knees to snap the locks. He took out a couple of glossy brochures and handed one across to me.

“To start with, they’re not holidays. We get the occasional nutcase wanting to do a course for fun, but nearly all our customers are companies.”

“They’d have to be,” I said. I was looking at the back of the booklet, where there was an impressive list of fees.

Crawford shrugged. “You have to charge the sort of money corporate clients understand,” he said. “Too little and they don’t take you seriously. Some of them use the courses as team building exercises, others use them for staff evaluation, often it’s a bit of both. One firm even sends job applicants down for a couple of days as part of the interview process. I’m surprised they don’t run a mile – but presumably that’s the point.”

“And they have to live off the land?”

“They have minimum rations – no more than they can carry in their pockets. We put in an instructor, of course, and he or she trains the group in basic survival techniques. It’s standard army stuff, not rocket science. The instructor’s real job is to watch and listen and when it’s all over to provide the client with a report on each individual. Some companies like formal

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debriefing sessions with a presentation. We can set the group tasks and video its performance if that's what the client wants."

I turned over the pages of the brochure. It showed men and women, youngish on the whole, building shelters and tending fires. They looked grubby but good humoured. The weather seemed to be warm and dry.

"I'm still trying to get my head round the idea of living off the land in a corner of one of Giles's fields," I said.

"It's a bit more demanding than that."

"Why land your victims by sea?" The cover of the brochure featured a photograph taken along the length of a beach. The surf was up and a boat was riding it in. There were half a dozen people on board. The men were braced against the sides and the girls' hair was blowing in the wind.

"Presentation," Crawford said. "That's one of our big selling points. If we simply marched them down to the campsite it would be very tame. So we take them out at night from West Bay and spend an hour or so chugging round in circles in the Channel, then we land them in a Zodiac. That's a kind of inflatable..."

"I know what a Zodiac is."

"Right. This is the boat we keep at West Bay." He dug into his briefcase again and handed me a picture. It showed a squat, tug-like vessel, fifty or sixty feet long with a smoke stack and cabins amidships and a wheelhouse on top. "That's *The Hotspur*," he said. "Built in the 30s and used as a passenger ferry across Southampton Water until the late 70s. After that she worked in the Firth of Clyde. We bought her about five years ago."

"Do you know, I think I've been on her?" I said. "Long time ago in Southampton, when I was a kid. Wasn't there a pier at one end of the ferry, with a train on it?"

"No idea. I've never been there."

I experienced a flash of childhood, more than memory, gone

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before I could fix it. Kneeling on a slatted bench which hurt my bare knees and leaning over a glossy black bulwark, greasy with salt, looking down at the green splash of the bow wave. Smell of brine and diesel. Everything huge. I must have been quite young. I could not see them, but I knew that Giles was there somewhere, and my mother.

“So what do you think?” Crawford prompted me.

“A winner, obviously, if you’ve got that many bookings. What was Giles’s cut?”

“Five per cent.”

“Really? What did he have to do to earn his money?”

“Not a thing. Keep the locals at bay. So can we carry on then? To be honest, we’d have trouble finding another location now – we were lucky when Polly and her husband emigrated.”

I was still thinking about my flicker of early experience. Not that unlikely, surely? Southampton was only in the next county, sixty miles away, if that. What more natural than a day out to see the ships?

“We might be able to go another two and a half per cent,” Crawford said, mistaking my distraction for a bargaining move.

“That sounds good to me, but I’d have to talk it over with Sheila. You know that Giles’s wife has inherited?”

“Not you then? I thought she was in the States or something.”

“She is. She’ll probably be coming back some time next year. In the mean time I’m keeping an eye on things.”

He left soon after that. When he had gone I opened a bottle of wine and sat for some time at the shadowed kitchen table thinking about day trips with a mother whose features I could barely recall.

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4

At the back of the church I heard shuffling and scraping, the congregation standing as the coffin was carried in. Then white blur of surplice and the black bulk of four undertaker's men swaying up the aisle, walking in step with an odd nautical gait.

I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.

And the rest of you can bugger off. Only four? There should be six, surely? You can't get the staff. Just don't drop it, that's all.

We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away.

And he takes the best and leaves us the dross. Hard to imagine anything inside the box. The sides are so hard and enclosing. The polish on the veneer deflects the imagination. It must be terrible to live in one of those countries where the dead are simply wrapped in a cloth, to see the shape of the head and the shoulders. How shabby black looks.

The coffin was lowered onto trestles and the four men executed a prim bow to the altar, all together as if operated by the same string. Then they spun on their heels and swayed back out of sight. Another coffin this afternoon, and another tomorrow and the same the day after, and in the evenings they would go home to their suppers and play with their children, carry them on the same shoulders. In the midst of death they were in life.

One by one Giles's friends stood out to share their memories of him. Stories of his generosity, his common sense, his jokes. I had decided not to say anything, if only because I didn't think I could get through it without embarrassing myself and everyone else. And what could I possibly have told them that they did not

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already know? Better than I did, it seemed to me, as I stared at the polished wood and felt the tears drying on my chin.

Outside, the sun was shining. Sheila, Bridie and I followed the coffin as it rocked out of the porch and the rest of the congregation came blinking, a respectful distance behind us. We walked back away from the square, between hollies and lichen covered memorials, towards a newer section of the graveyard claimed from the fields behind the church. The stones were clean and straight, just a couple of rows of them so far. The grass had been given its last mowing of the year a few weeks earlier and grey lines of uncollected cuttings still lay there. Giles's grave would complete the second row. The mound of loose earth had been covered with a sheet of that green raffia matting that greengrocers use in their window displays. A light wind riffled the pages of the priest's prayer book and he held them flat with his free hand as he read.

Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up and is cut down, like a flower.

The sides of the hole were horribly neat and square as they lowered him in.

Afterwards I went round thanking people for coming. I had thanked an embarrassed cousin for the third time when Bridie slipped her hand into mine and walked me away. She stood with her arms round me under the trees until everyone had gone, my dark suit the shadow to her flame.

Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts.

I met her at Cropredy, where the afternoon audience covered the hillside overlooking the sound stage, a patchwork mass of groundsheets, flags and faces. Later there would be bright

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sweaters and anoraks because the night air could be chilly, even in August. Children exhausted by the jugglers and the bouncy castle would curl up in sleeping bags at their parents' feet. The twilight would thicken with the smell of hot dogs, spicy burgers and spilt bitter and steam would rise up between the lights as they came on in food stalls round the edge of the meadow. On a good year a gravid harvest moon used to rise from behind the fenced artists-only area at the bottom of the hill and the crowd used to push to the edge of the stage to be near the music.

That was not a good year, I remember. In fact, it pissed down.

Many of the youngsters did not seem to care. On the Saturday afternoon the rain was still warm and they splashed laughing through the mud, barefoot some of them, hair in rats' tails, clothes darkened and sodden. Older and drier heads had listened to the weather forecast and come with golfing umbrellas and Wellingtons. They had been to other festivals in other wet years and knew all about camping with running groundsheets and no change of socks. The crowd was thinner than usual and the field looked like a bed on a mushroom farm, with polythene benders sprouting on all sides. One after another the bands played and people came and went between field, campsite and Portaloo. The whole weekend you could hear their chatter mixing with a background thrum of generators.

With some time still to go before our set, we were lounging in one of the trailers provided for performers. Our drummer was fidgiting with his mobile phone and moving from seat to seat trying to get a decent signal. When it came to making the call his nerve always failed him so the rest of us were taking it in turns to speak to the maternity ward 30 miles away in Oxford. Labour was progressing normally, a voice assured me. Nothing to worry about, but it could be a while yet.

Just time for something to eat, I thought. I poked through the

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pile of rubber boots by the door, but one of the crew had taken mine so I slipped on a pair at random and picked up the largest umbrella I could find. Outside there were well-churned tracks between trailers. The organisers had tried to prevent a mud bath by pouring truck loads of wood chippings along the walkways. At the security gate into the main arena they had laid down duck boards which flexed as I walked across them so that water welled up between the slats with each step. It was not long before I became aware that the boots I had chosen were a size too large for me.

I limped up the hill, keeping to the side of the field where there was an open broadwalk in front of the concession holders' trailers. Wood chippings had been liberally shovelled out here too, and it was crowding umbrellas rather than mud that made the going difficult. Every few steps I had to lower my own and duck under an awning to let someone by. I spent ten minutes in a marquee full of CD stalls, and as usual flipped through the racks looking for my own name. One compilation album, with the credit in print so small I could hardly read it. Oh well. Better than a poke in the eye.

A Japanese meal, eaten out of a polystyrene tray with a white plastic fork, then I moved further up the hill to a truck where they served better coffee. A chilly runnel of water shot down my neck. Even under the awnings there were drips everywhere. A hat, I decided. Never mind about looking silly. Everybody looked ridiculous in that sort of weather, no harm in joining them if it meant a dry shirt.

A few yards away half a dozen traders shared a large tent: a couple of jewellery makers with trays of twining Celtic ear rings in silver and copper; some racks of Indian dresses, purple and rust-red cotton with pieces of polished metal stitched into the borders; hand-made shoes, all a bit lumpy looking, but brilliantly coloured. At the far end a collection of hats covered a trestle

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table and climbed partway up the pole supporting the canvas overhead. Some of them were practical countryside headgear, the sort of thing you could buy anywhere, but they were fun hats mostly, hand-made top-heavy felt creations shaped like stuffed animals. Nobody seemed to be in charge so I picked up a fool's cap and bells and squinted at myself in a mirror attached to the tent pole. *How now, nuncle? If thou wert my fool, I'd have thee beaten for being old before thy time.*

"It doesn't suit you." In the mirror I saw green eyes level with my shoulder, red hair tucked up into a floppy tam o'shanter of blue and gold velvet patches, part Hans Holbein the younger, part Salvador Dali.

"Anyway, the bells will go rusty. You need something more practical this weather. Try that." She handed me a broad-brimmed thing commercially produced out of waxed canvas. I looked at the maker's name and at the price tag.

"More practical, and more expensive," I said.

"Well, obviously. I'm supposed to be selling the wretched things, after all."

"Not your stall, then?"

"My sister's. She'll be back in a minute. She ate something that disagreed with her. It's guaranteed waterproof. Put your head outside and try it."

I followed her over to the tent entrance. Sure enough the rain gathered into beads which ran off the brim's slick waxed surface. And her grin was irresistible.

"OK, I'll take it." I passed over several notes and received a couple of coins in return. She stuffed the notes into her pocket.

"Come on," she said. "We'll take it for a test drive."

"What about the stall?"

"Oh, the others will keep an eye on it."

Not much of a test in the end, because she took my arm and we both ducked our hats under the umbrella. We wound our

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way gradually up the hill exchanging basic information, as you do on these occasions. Her name was Bridie.

But festival promoters wait for no man.

“Look, I’ve got to go. Um... later on – a drink or something?”

“I’d like that. Go on, I’ll find you.” She patted my arm and slipped off among the milling umbrellas, like a minnow through the weeds.

I made it back to the trailer with twenty minutes to spare. I need not have hurried. In a warm, dry ward on the other side of the county the baby had arrived, pink and wrinkled “like a wee prune”, according to its exhausted mother, who had been allowed a few words on the phone. The welcome party carried us all out through the rain and onto the stage on a tide of goodwill, energy and whisky that infected the damp audience from the first chord.

I caught sight of Bridie again while we were playing, right at the front of the crowd. She had exchanged the many-coloured hat for a long, green slicker with a hood but her face was turned up into the rain as she listened and her cheeks were wet. She was not bouncing up and down like some of the others. Serious eyes moved from one instrument to the next and when I felt them on me I lost it for a second and almost fumbled an over-elaborate riff. Somehow my fingers kept moving through the cold thump of fear in my belly and the notes sorted themselves out, but it was a while before I looked in her direction again. When I did she was watching the drummer, who was high on fatherhood.

At the end of the set the people whistled and shouted as we trooped off. Sweating and laughing we gathered in the shadows round a girl in a *Jethro Tull* T-shirt. She wore lightweight headphones connected to a box on her belt and frowned at a wasp buzz in her ear.

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“Mike says we’ve got a bit of slack – another 10 minutes if you want it.”

“Tell them about the baby,” someone called out.

“Why not?” The drummer cocked his head and listened to the audience, who were still clapping. “Give them a little bit longer...” Then: “OK. Let’s do it.”

Back on stage with the crowd cheering I watched him handle the microphone, thanking everyone for braving the weather, passing on the news about the baby (louder cheers).

“And finally, thanks from all of us to Simon Coltraine on fiddle, who stepped in at very short notice. Simon.”

I tore off a double-stopped ripple of notes and bared my teeth at the hillside. Then I looked down at the front row, but Bridie was nowhere to be seen.

Afterwards the celebrations continued back in the trailer and the overcast afternoon lowered into premature evening. People stopped by with their congratulations and a good many of them stayed on to steam up the windows and track the floor with mud. Thinking of the drive to the hotel, I switched to orange juice and after a while found my own boots, picked up the silly hat and went outside.

It had stopped raining, but everything was still sodden. Lights were being switched on a couple of hours earlier than usual and some of the smaller traders were packing up. The food stalls were selling briskly, though, most of them with good-humoured queues of customers, perspiring staff handing out paper bags and plates as fast as they could fill them. The crowd was getting denser, with people drifting in from campsite and car park to mark out their places on the wet grass for the last set.

I wandered up the hill again and found the hats being packed into boxes. A large woman in an ankle-length skirt with a muddy hem looked at me blankly when I asked how she was feeling.

“Sorry, I thought you must be Bridie’s sister. Is she about?”

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“Who?”

“Bridie...? Er... Red hair...? She was wearing a green slicker a while ago, but it's stopped raining now...”

“Sorry, doesn't ring any bells. Sure you've got the right tent?”

“Um... Actually, come to think of it...”

I backed off, mumbling apologies, and she went back to her packing, smiling and shaking her head.

I stood outside for a couple of minutes, scanning the crowd, then moved away. The woman might come out and I did not want her asking me why exactly I expected a 20-year-old redhead to be running her stall. Or why I was wearing a hat she had not sold to me.

Ought I to give it back? I imagined her sitting at home, stitching away. None of the traders had had a good weekend, one sale might make a difference. On the other hand the hats were probably made in China at a factory price of a few pence each and I had paid for mine, even if the money had gone into Bridie's pocket. A neat little scam. Well... a rather mean petty theft, though executed with impressive *sang froid*, if that made any difference. But now Bridie had become one of the anonymous crowd again and all I had to show for the encounter was a hot hat. In the end, I kept it. *Caveat venditor*.

The last encore finished shortly after midnight. The hillside was lit up by the white glare of floodlights. Pale faces turned and dipped seeking out belongings, then swirled slowly towards the exits like dust motes in a jar. I said my farewells, refused a final dram and carried my fiddle case out to the car park.

As usual it took half an hour to get to the gate of the field. Cars bumped and swayed over wet grass and cow pats, and marshals in reflective coats cursed as drivers spun their wheels in the exits, digging muddy ruts even deeper. Lights flared on portable gantries at key points but for the most part the unfamiliar countryside darkness was lit by crawling, bobbing

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headlights which flashed in my eyes as they swung past.

Out in the lane things were not much better. Traffic crept in single file to the nearest main road, five miles away. People laden with bags and groundsheets were walking along both verges towards the more remote campsites, occasionally spilling into the path of the vehicles. At the bottom of the hill, by a small bridge, a caterer's van was struggling against the flow and I pulled into a gateway to let it pass.

Somebody tapped on the passenger window. I leaned over to look, then opened the door and Bridie tossed her rucksack onto the back seat. She may have seen the hat lying there.

"Told you I'd find you," was all she said.

Neither of us spoke much on the drive back to Oxford. It started raining again. The windscreen wipers thumped backwards and forwards and now and then oncoming headlights flicked across her face, scattered and blurred by raindrops on the glass. She fiddled with the radio but found nothing to her liking.

"Tapes in the glove compartment." About my only words the entire journey.

She sorted through them, stacking them in small piles on the drop-down shelf and leaning forwards against the seat belt to peer at one or two of the inserts by the dim light from inside. When she clicked a cassette into the player it turned out to be Billie Holiday. We entered the city to the weary fatalism of *God Bless the Child*.

At the hotel she made straight for the bathroom.

"Shower," she said. "Haven't had a shower for two days."

I sat on the bed and listened to her through the half-open bathroom door. I could hear her bare feet on the tiles, little humming noises as she rummaged among the complimentary soaps and shampoos, then a squeak when the water came out too cold. After a while she emerged wrapped in a white bath towel, with another turbaned round her head. She had freckles

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on her shoulders. She leaned, arms folded, against the door jamb and looked at me.

"I sing, you know."

Ab well, I thought. She nodded.

"There you are, you see. I couldn't make up my mind whether it would be better to tell you or not. Tell you, and I'm a slut on the make. Not, and I'm just a slut. But in the end I couldn't not, because it's important."

"There's nothing to be made out of me. I'm a fiddle player."

"When you start your own band you'll need a singer. That's what you want, isn't it? I saw the way you watched the guy with the mike."

Yes it is, I thought. *And it's time too*. I had been a hanger on long enough. I wanted to be the one that chose the songs, made the bookings. The one with the microphone.

"Let's hear you now then. Don't wake up the neighbours."

So she sat on the end of the bed, straight-baked with her hands in her lap like a schoolgirl doing her party piece, and sang softly, wistfully, in a voice that stopped my heart.

What is love? 'Tis not hereafter...

Later she said: "I'd still be here, you know, even if I had a voice like a frog. But I haven't. I can't help it."

6

In some pubs, when you know them well, you can tell the time by the volume of talk. The day of the week, too.

You push open the door and the noise drops on you like a blanket. A steady walking bass of voices overlaid by lighter chatter and an occasional shriek from the harpy with scarlet nails

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in the corner. Orders at the bar. *Make that two, will you?* A sudden chorused shout of laughter as a table reaches the punch line. Underneath it all the chink of glasses and the groan of pump handles and the rattle of the till. *Do you want ice?* No canned music, because the landlord has conservative tastes. Live R&B on Fridays because his wife likes a bit of life.

I hold the door for Bridie, and the talk says: “Ten o’clock, Wednesday. October, probably.”

Len heads for the bar while Bridie and I clear a litter of crisp packets from a table in a corner. Steve has slouched off on his own to nurse his resentment and Ian has gone home to adjust something or other.

“So what was this policeman after?” Bridie asks, removing a couple of empty bottles.

“I’ve no idea. Giles had a lot to drink on the night of the accident, apparently. No surprises there. But only shortly before the crash. If it made any sense I’d say Randall thought something else might have caused it.”

“Such as...?”

“Beats me. He wanted to know why Giles phoned me at Salisbury. Went on about it quite a bit, in fact.”

If Bridie has any ideas she is not sharing them. She stares past me at Len, who is edging towards us carrying three pints of beer braced together between long fingers. He sets them down, distributes them, then starts taking packets of crisps from his jacket pockets.

“There you go. Ready salted... Cheese and onion... Prawn cocktail flavour? I don’t remember asking for those.”

“I’ll have them.” I pick up the packet and tug it open. Len takes a long pull on his beer, then sighs.

“You know, we’ve got to get another bass player. The keyboard can do a lot, but it hasn’t got the attack of a proper bass. Extra voice wouldn’t do any harm, either.”

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"I thought Ian was filling the gap rather well," I say.

"He is. I'm not saying otherwise. But the sound has got to be reasonably consistent. Just now, anyone who buys the last CD during the interval is going to get it home and find that it isn't what they heard at the gig."

"Par for the course, then." Bridie chips in.

"Ho, ho. OK, we've always managed to add something fresh. But this is a little bit too radical, is all I'm saying. The people on the mailing list will be expecting the core sound to be the one we started with: not keyboard, not even, I'm sorry to say, the extraordinarily versatile rhythm section. It's voice, fiddle and bass."

"No bass in *Cold Hillside*," says Bridie. "We get requests for that all the time."

"That was a one-off. We've never managed to match it."

Bridie says nothing, buries her nose in her glass.

"Well, I'm looking round," I say.

And I am, but our kind of music is bread and butter stuff. Often no butter. Certainly no chart toppers. This has been a familiar argument over the past few weeks, ever since our bass player heard a regular salary calling and left to train as a teacher.

Just before closing, and we're out on the pavement. There is a hint of fog around the yellow street lights and a sheen of moisture over the parked cars. I button my coat. Len pats me on the back, gives Bridie a wave and ambles off. Behind us the doors of the pub thump to and fro as people make their way home. Someone is finishing a story, someone else calls goodbye. An engine starts.

"How are you feeling?" Bridie asks.

"Me? Fine."

"Come on, you know what I mean. Are you sleeping properly? You look tired."

"Oh well, dragging up and down on the train... You only

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had to do it once, for the funeral, but what with that bloody policeman...”

She touches my cheek. “Do you want me to come back to your place tonight?”

“That’s sweet of you, Bridie, but probably not a good idea. Too many sleeping tigers.”

“If you’re sure.” She smiles and kisses me quickly before I can change my mind. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

I watch her cross to her car and wait until it has started. I still find things of hers round the flat sometimes. Bus ticket in a book, hair band at the back of a drawer. There are a couple of her pictures on the wall, waiting for her to collect them. At least she has nowhere better to hang them.

7

After a restless night in a lonely bed I make coffee, shove bread in the toaster. On the radio the commentators are still busy pointing fingers. Does Britain really have its own home-grown terrorist cells or are they receiving direction and training from overseas? If there are advisers, why do the intelligence services not know about them? I am almost out of milk.

I think about the jobs to be done. A couple of hours practice, once the man downstairs has gone to work – the breaks in Bridie’s new song could do with a bit of attention. Think about accommodation for the spring tour. Bristol is close enough to drive back, surely? Exeter possibly not, but Len has friends there. If we’re staying overnight I could try to find another venue nearby. Send out some demo CDs. Check whether the photographer has put her prices up. She did a good job last time, but there might be somebody cheaper. Ask Bridie if she knows anyone. Talk to the bank. Again.

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But first phone Matt.

A brisk female puts me on hold for a minute or so, with a beep every few seconds to remind me how long I have been waiting. Then Matt's voice:

"Simon. Sorry to keep you hanging on."

"At least there was no muzak."

"Ah, we're having a bit of a debate about that. One of the senior partners wants Mozart and another wants Jelly Roll Morton. I tell them that the sound quality won't do justice to either, but I don't know how much longer I can hold them off."

"The firm moves with the times, I see."

"Indeed. And the clerks get an extra bucket of coals at Christmas. I imagine you're calling about that policeman? Have you had your meeting?"

I give him a brief resume of the encounter with Randall. Silence at the other end of the line.

"Matt? You still there?"

"Yes. Sorry. Simon, I don't much like the sound of this. You were absolutely right to wonder about it being outdoors. Very odd. In fact I'm surprised he saw you at all. I mean, we're talking about a routine road traffic accident. Sorry, not routine to you, I know, and not to me either, but from their point of view... single vehicle, no third party injuries, no big deal. If they had wanted to talk to you they would have invited you down to the nick. He was the one that wanted to meet, you said?"

"Yes. I rang them a couple of times to see if they had anything new. Got nowhere at all. I don't even know who I spoke to – some junior constable. I'd about given up when he called me."

"And he called himself, personally? No sergeant doing the legwork?"

"Um... yes. Yes, he did."

"Did he actually say he'd checked your mobile phone records?"

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I think back. As usual, when I try to pin down the words spoken they slip away.

“As far as I remember, I brought it up. He wanted to know where I was when Giles rang me. I made some smart comment about looking up the records and he said he already had.”

“Never make jokes to policemen. They don’t understand. Simon, you haven’t been up to anything I should know about, have you? Gun running?”

“Nah. No profit in guns nowadays, everybody’s got one. I’m a musician.”

“Hm. Tracing phone calls is serious stuff, you see. No police force in the country is going to go to that trouble on account of a road accident.”

“Did you get a chance to ask around?”

“Yes. He isn’t local. Seems to be attached to some sort of regional group. No idea which – they invent a new one every other week. The people I spoke to were a bit vague. He has a desk in Dorchester, but I got the impression that he isn’t liked. Not much help. I’ll keep my ears open, but in the meantime, if he wants to see you again I should be with you. Seriously.”

Personally I think this is over the top, but I make acquiescent noises.

“Oh, by the way,” Matt adds. “Since you’re there, I’ve got some stuff about the farm for you to sign. One of the neighbours has been leasing a couple of the fields and it’s up for renewal. Did Sheila say what she wanted to do about that?”

“Not specifically. General instructions to carry on as before.”

“OK, I’ll put the paperwork in the post. Did you know you’re mentioned in the will?”

“Really? I thought Sheila got everything.”

“Almost everything. Giles asked me to add a few lines a couple of months ago. I’ll be writing to you, but the gist of it is that he left you his violins. What are you laughing at?”

CHAPTER THREE

1

December is a dim month at the best of times, dark morning and evening, what little daylight there is draining away behind lowering banks of cloud. Wet shoes, damp socks, racks of clammy coats in the hallway never drying out. The central heating smells hot and dusty and leaves a gritty ache behind your eyes. As the boiler fumes and hisses you can almost hear the fur building up in the pipes, another bill biding its time.

“Are you sure you want to go down on your own?” Bridie asks.

“I’m on my own in London.”

“You know what I mean. Here you only have to pick up the phone. I don’t like to think of you rattling around that empty place. You’re still looking whacked out.”

“The pub’s full of people I went to school with.”

“Twenty-five years ago. I wish I could come with you. There

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was another bomb scare on the tube yesterday.”

Sitting in Giles's kitchen I can see her point. This is no longer the farmhouse I grew up in. Giles has rebuilt it, Sheila has tidied Giles away. The ghosts have gone. Why should the village be any different? Besides, the village is half an hour's walk away, or ten minute's drive and orange juice for the evening. For the first couple of days I sleep a lot, read, cook myself pasta with shop-bought sauce out of the freezer. Walk the dog.

It is a cold night, with a hard frost. One of those nights that catches the back of your throat and makes your ears hurt. Away from the dazzle of the yard and the floodlight that flicks on whenever anything moves, only the stars light the fields, a pin-prick-bright swarm looping overhead, failing a little in the west, where a yellow glow marks Bridport along the coast.

I stand with my back to the house for a while to let my vision adjust, but it is too cold to keep still for long and I start walking towards the sea. I do not need to see where I am putting my feet, I have tramped this way a thousand times. In the dark, too, often enough. There is a tussocky ridge of grass black between the glimmer of the gravel tracks and out of the corner of my eye I can make out the loom of the hedge on my left. I can imagine the tangle of brambles and the last remaining scatter of hawthorn berries and sloes.

The dog is away somewhere to my right, quartering the field. The sea is up ahead, over a slight rise and down the side of a stream-cut gully. I can hear the waves on the naked shingles. No big breakers tonight, only the long suck of the pebbles. The tide must be half in. Or out. I would have known without thinking once. At high tide the bottom drops away steeply with a vicious cross current but further out it flattens, yielding up rock pools and strips of sand when the water is low. Pity there is no moon. A few yards away the track turns to run parallel with the beach. There is a path somewhere here but the ceiling needs painting in

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the corner and my head hurts.

“Shit!”

“Well that’s a good sign anyway. Straight to the point. None of that *Where am I?* nonsense. I’d lie still if I were you. If the hangover doesn’t get you, the bang on the head will.”

“Who the hell are you?”

I am lying on the sofa in Giles’s sitting room. Sheila’s sitting room. The curtains are drawn, but sun slices through a chink at the top. The light from a couple of table lamps has a dissipated look. Someone has taken my jacket and shoes and thrown a blanket over me, which is slipping off.

“My name is Lewis. Local GP. Since your time, but I knew your brother well.”

A small woman with short grey hair looks at me without much sympathy, but she straightens the blanket. She is dressed in jeans and an Arran sweater, walking boots. Most un-GP-like. She sees me squinting at her feet.

“It’s my day off. I was passing.”

In fact I am looking for somewhere to be sick. She realises in time and picks up an enamel bowl, then props me while I vomit. Some of it comes down my nose. It is an extraordinarily intimate thing to have a woman hold your head while you throw up.

“Oh God!”

“I imagine so.” She disposes of the bowl and hands me a box of tissues.

“The dog was sitting by Mrs Sims’s back door this morning, waiting for its breakfast. She was worried so she phoned Georgie, who walked up to look for you. Apparently you were lying on the back seat of one of the cars in the garage, with an empty bottle of whisky and a lump on your head. Must have banged it on the door or something. Lucky you don’t smoke, he said. The atmosphere in the car was explosive.”

“Don’t remember.”

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"I'm not surprised."

"No, really. Don't remember having anything to drink yesterday. Last thing... I was walking the dog. It was bloody cold."

"I expect you came in for a warmer. You reeked of it, Georgie said."

"Can't smell anything now. Ow."

"Don't poke at your head. It's evaporated, obviously."

"And I've just puked up. Wouldn't you expect...? Sorry, that's disgusting. Where's my coat?"

She wrinkles her nose and leaves the room, taking the bowl with her. I drag myself into a sitting position and take the opportunity to probe my hair with my fingers. The lump is on the back of my head, low down, very tender but skin not broken.

Dr Lewis returns, carrying a muddy waxed jacket at arm's length. I can smell the spirit from where I am sitting.

"Oof. No wonder they called you. Could you open the curtains?"

"If you're sure you can take it. Mrs Sims is making tea."

"Mm."

The jacket reeks. Winter sunlight sweeps unforgivingly through the room and I turn the material to look at the mud marks. I sniff it here and there. It seems damp, but it is hard to tell: the greasy cotton always feels a little clammy.

Mrs Sims arrives with a tray. She says nothing, puts it on the coffee table and does not look at me once. Her mouth is tight with disapproval and I see her eyes flicker sideways at the jacket as she leaves. Nothing wrong with her nose.

"Damn. My brother could be drunk for a week and she wouldn't bat an eyelid."

"Your brother got drunk like a gentleman. He used a glass. If you don't stop fingering your head I'll tape a bucket over it."

I sit with my face in my hands while she collects her things

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and puts them in one of those fat leather briefcases salesmen use. The previous evening is blank, the sound of the sea, then nothing. I have that jolting feeling you get when you reach the bottom of a flight of stairs expecting one last step. A momentary loss of faith in ordinary things. I have done my share of boozing, but never in my life have I drunk myself into a stupor. As far as I remember. Are there thirsty demons hiding in my head?

I do not know where the idea comes from.

“Can you take a blood sample?”

“What?”

“Get it tested.”

She gives me an old-fashioned look, then shrugs and re-opens her bag.

When the two women have gone I hesitate over paracetamol, dig out some aspirin instead. Then I lie back on the sofa and let the day drift. Splitting skull recedes. Common sense creeps back, but brings no answers.

OK. So I am outside with the dog. In the dark I trip, bang my head. As I fall I spill whisky over my coat. *What whisky?*

I need to lie down, so I stagger to the nearby garage. I open the door of the closest car and collapse on the back seat, spilling more from the open bottle. *What bottle?*

Where did the whisky come from?

Good point. I haul myself up, setting my brain rocking at its moorings all over again, and shuffle out to the kitchen. The waste bucket is under the sink. I drag it out, then have second thoughts and spend a few minutes hunting for a newspaper to spread on the floor. I am in enough trouble already. When I tip the bucket up there are plenty of tea leaves, a couple of dog food cans. No bottles.

Dustbins are outside. It is still pretty cold even in the afternoon sun, but I do not have to stand around for long. I find what I am looking for at the top of the first one I check. Back

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indoors I stand it in the middle of the kitchen table and wait for it to speak to me.

Grant's. Distinctive tall, triangular outline, sloping shoulders. Not Giles's first choice, I would have thought. A quick check on the drinks cupboard reveals a selection of malts: Glenlivet, Bowmore, Ardbeg. No Grant's.

It is getting dark. I feed the dog. The meaty chunks in jelly make me feel queasy. I let her out to have a run on her own and sit at the table until I hear her scratch at the door. Then I make it an early night.

The next morning I feel much better. It is another cold, clear day and I wake to bright patches on the open curtains and sloping shadows across the end of the bed. From the pillow all I can see is the sky, with a golden con trail high up pointing the way to the Atlantic.

I eat a respectable breakfast and settle down in the sitting room to a couple of hours serious work. Scales, bowing exercises, all to the impartial tick of the metronome, slow then fast. Finally I let the notes to trip into a strathspey, the old slow dance of Scotland. The crooked rhythms spring from the wrist and the fingers on the bow and I listen to the hum of the harmonics in the wood and the wire.

After a while I go back to Bridie's new song, which I have been tinkering with for a couple of months now. She loves it and demands to be allowed to sing it, but it lacks the lift which it has in my head. Half an hour later whatever it is I hear is still missing. Maybe Matt can manage lunch.

The brisk female puts me on hold, as usual. The muzak debate is still not resolved, obviously. After a minute or so she is back.

"I'm sorry, Mr Coltraine. Mr Webster is in conference. I'll tell him you called as soon as he's free."

Pity. I will have to confront the demons on my own.

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2

Country pubs are at their best at lunchtime. This one has a long, rather narrow public bar, with a stone fireplace at either end. Log fires have been lit in both of them for most of the morning and glowing chunks of split ash are sitting on comfortable piles of charcoal. The counter, which runs the length of the room, is made of a dark oily wood and is lined with tall old fashioned pump handles, each with a clip-on badge to identify the beer. A large collection of similar badges hangs along a beam overhead. Opposite, four windows give directly onto the street and crowds of dust motes jostle in the sunlight. There are Christmas decorations, of course, but the tinsel has a pleasant patina, as if it has lived in a box in the loft for years.

The bar is empty when I arrive. A girl in jeans and sweatshirt, wiping her hands on a tea towel, comes through from the kitchen next door and ducks under the flap. She reminds me of a barmaid I loved desperately at the age of fifteen. I can still remember the golden down on her arms and the strength in her hands when she pulled a pint. But she was several years older than me, a loud, laughing flirt, and I never plucked up the courage to ask for more than a packet of crisps.

I take the first mouthful of bitter and move over to a chair by the fire furthest from the door. The dog flops on the hearthrug by my feet and rolls over with a sigh. She has been here many times before.

Come on then, demons. I stretch my legs, stare into the embers and examine my soul for secret cravings, tortured guilt.

Nope.

So where did the whisky come from?

The door at the other end of the room bangs open and half a dozen men come in. One of them is in the middle of a story,

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telling it half over his shoulder to the friends behind him. They all laugh and gather in a bunch at the far end of the bar. I recognise Georgie Sims and Terry, and one of the other faces seems familiar, though I cannot put a name to it. The dog raises her head at the sound of voices, then jumps up and rushes over to Georgie. She quivers at his feet, tail thumping, while he fusses her ears, then he nods to me and crosses to the fire.

“How’s the head?”

“Much better. I’m told I have to thank you for saving me from freezing to death – I don’t remember much about it myself.”

“Not a problem. My mates have carried me home before now. More than once.”

“Well, thanks anyway. Can I get you a drink?”

“No, it’s OK. I’ve got one in.”

“Another time, then.”

“Yeah. You staying long?”

“No, back to London tomorrow. But I’ll be down again.”

“Fine. See you, then.”

He returns to his friends and seems to be spilling my murky secret because a couple of them look me over. The dog watches him for a few moments, then collapses on the rug again. One of Georgie’s mates pulls out a mobile phone and goes out into the corridor to make a call. I’ve seen him before somewhere, spoken to him even.

I have a doorstep sandwich and another pint. In the corner someone buys another round, throws another log on the fire. Dust motes circulate. Finally, Terry says his goodbyes, raises a hand to me and leaves. Georgie goes to the gents. I put my empties on the bar and make my way out, the dog scooting through the half open door ahead of me.

I have gone a couple of steps out into the street, when a sudden thump between my shoulder blades sends me sprawling.

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I roll over, nursing a grazed palm and find myself surrounded by legs. Before I can properly stand I am shoved sideways, then back again.

“Your kind isn’t welcome around here, understand?”

Tyres squeal as a car brakes somewhere nearby.

“Oil! What’s going on there?”

It is Terry, shouting out of the driver’s window. My attackers are distracted long enough for me to get my balance. When the first one turns back to me I am ready. I grab his wrist, pull forwards and twist, then press down on the elbow joint. He shrieks and drops to his knees.

“Back off or I’ll cripple him!”

Georgie emerges from the pub door at a run. The barmaid is looking out of the window. Terry is out of the car. The dog is nowhere to be seen. Sensible animal. The three still on their feet have lost their momentum. I put a little more weight on their colleague’s elbow and he screams again.

“Nice friends you’ve got, Georgie. Does your mum know you hang out with this lot?”

I’ll tell your mum on you, Georgie Sims! Jesus, we’re back in the playground. But now I am taking a dark satisfaction in adult violence.

“All right, Simon. You’ve made your point.”

Georgie eases between us, presses me back. The man with the mobile phone crouches on the ground, clutching his arm and weeping. Snot drips from his nose. I do not remember seeing a man cry before.

“Best thing you can do is go home, OK?” Quiet but firm. Good man in a crisis, Georgie. “You listening to me, Simon? Go home. Go back to London. We’ll deal with these pricks.”

My legs have started to tremble violently and I do not trust my voice. If I say anything I will burst into tears too. I turn on my heel and walk away. Walk, not run. Through the churchyard,

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across the fields. The dog joins me, ears flat, tail between her legs, and creeps at my heels all the way back to the farm.

3

Matt is in conference again. Same receptionist, different client. I retreat to the sofa and wrap myself in yesterday's blanket, which is lying in a heap on the floor. My arms feel boneless and my legs are still trembling a little. I wanted to hurt that snivelling git, whoever he was.

All the pleasure I have ever felt in this house has evaporated. My brother's books and pictures, the trail of lavender polish left by Mrs Sims, none of it connects. This morning's buzz of satisfaction seems black and brittle. My hand hurts. I sit up and hold it under the light. Tiny fragments of gravel have been driven under the lacerated skin. The last thing I need now is an infection. I struggle up and go to the bathroom to find the disinfectant.

I lean against the sink and pour TCP over the graze, then scrub at it with a piece of cotton wool from the bathroom cabinet, gritting my teeth and trying to avoid my reflection in the mirror. Some of the dirt is stubborn so I half fill the basin with hot water, sling in a generous shot of the antiseptic and hold my hand in it to soak. The first heat has gone out of the water when the phone rings.

Must be Matt. It takes a second or so to dry my hand, avoiding the palm which has now started oozing, then I run down the stairs two at a time. The answering machine kicks in as I come through the sitting room door.

"Hello, this is Dr Anna Lewis with a message for Simon Coltraine. I've got the results of that test you asked for. Not good, I'm afraid. Off the scale, in fact. I should ease up if I were

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you. Give me a call back if you want to talk about it. I'm on..."

Well, there you go then. Forensic evidence. I nurse my hand and stare at the flashing red light on the machine. Press the button and play the message again. *Clear enough for you?* Yes.

Oddly enough, this firming up of the shambles of the last couple of days taps into a reserve of bloody-mindedness, and in a flush of sod-you defiance I go to the drinks cabinet, take out the Ardbeg and a glass. *A glass. Are you watching, Mrs Sims?* I could do much worse. The gutters of history are littered with snoring dipsomaniac bodies. I'll go to hell in good company, on a good malt.

But I cannot seem to get the hang of it. An hour later it is getting dark and I have hardly touched my third glass. Doubles, admittedly, but even so. Now that the glands are under control I find it hard to believe that I simply walked away at lunchtime. Mugged in broad daylight. Not a common occurrence in your average village street. And I meekly did as I was told and walked away, without asking any questions. What on earth was that all about? Everybody seemed to think I knew. Now they would be sure of it.

The phone rings again. This time it is Matt.

"About time," I complain. "I've been trying to get you all day."

"I know. I got your messages. I finished early and I'm calling from home now. The fact is, Simon, you've been declared *persona non grata*, I can't speak to you at the office any more."

"What?"

"Sex and drugs and rock 'n roll, old son. I was summoned into the presence of the senior partner this morning. Simon Coltraine is not considered a suitable companion for a member of the firm, kindly erase his name from your address book."

"Come on, Matt. I've had a hell of a time recently. I'm not in the mood."

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"This is serious. One of his golf club cronies has had a quiet word. Mr Coltraine is the subject of a police investigation. Drugs are said to be involved. Naturally, I told him that this was a gross slander on one of my oldest friends and certainly actionable. That's why I'm at home. Considering my position, it's called."

I fill him in on recent events. Even Matt's lawyerly poise is shaken.

"I wonder how they got the booze into you? Makes me cringe thinking about it. Would you say somebody was trying to tell you something?"

Could be.

"Simon... Have you considered that the message might be more pointed than you realise? Filling you up and putting you in the back of a car. After what happened to Giles?"

No. And now the idea makes me go cold. Did all this happen to Giles too? Sex and drugs and rock 'n roll. I thought we had burnt that boat long ago. Oh Lord, the sins of the brothers.

4

"So what's this Scottish jaunt all about? Is the coffee on?"

Giles surged into the kitchen in a gust of March air, cold and damp and smelling of mud and frost. From the cursing outside the door I gathered that the collie had shaken itself in the passage. It scuttled in ahead of him and took refuge in a basket next to the Aga, looking wary. Giles banged around in a cupboard and emerged with a handful of biscuits which he tossed across the room one by one. The dog switched from caution to enthusiasm without missing a beat, fielding them effortlessly. Normal morning routine.

"Rights of man." I abandoned the Sunday papers, took a fresh mug from the dishwasher and poured. More bread in the

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toaster.

“Citizens’ Theatre in Glasgow is putting on a season about the trade union movement – *a musical celebration of the empowerment of the working classes*. A lot of it’s shipbuilding on the Clyde, but some people I know are taking up a play with music about the Tolpuddle Martyrs. We saw it in Dorchester last year, remember? Fiddle player sitting on the edge of the stage?”

“Yes. Very artistic. You would have done it better, I told you.”

“Well. Either they’ve come round to your way of thinking, or the other guy couldn’t make it. Anyway, my Dorset connections are still enough to get me a week’s work in Glasgow.”

“Down with the bosses, then. Poor bosses.”

Giles sat opposite me and applied Lightly Salted and Oxford Fine Cut to toast. Wedges of both, like a bricklayer trowelling on the mortar. Crumbs in the marmalade jar, shreds of orange peel in the butter dish. He took a bite, then poured milk in his coffee.

“Can you take some stuff up for me? Damn.”

Fingers busy, mouth full, a few drops of milk spilt on the table top. But I had granted a lifetime of favours. The conjurer’s hand no longer drew my eye. Not that it made any difference in the end.

“Sure, as long as it isn’t too bulky. I thought I might drive up, then stop off and see a few people on the way back.”

“Good. I’ll show you after breakfast. It’s right up your street.”

My street turned out to be three battered violin cases. The instruments inside were in even worse condition, one of them a sad pile of splinters.

“You can see why I don’t want to go to the expense of shipping them up there,” Giles explained as I sorted through the debris. It looked to me as if half the pieces were missing.

“Favour for a customer, really. He sticks them together again.

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Sort of hobby, I suppose. Anyway, it's surprisingly difficult to find old fiddles to work on. Mostly they go to the tip long before they reach this stage. When I come across one I pass it along."

"They're going to be a bit of a handful on the train up to London."

"Don't worry, I'm going up myself on Thursday. I'll drop them off at your place."

And he did. On the Thursday I had a recording session with a young Irish band. Two sisters sang and sometimes went through the motions with their fiddles: easy on the eye, but they needed someone to see them over the tricky bits. It was not a good day. The band brought a photographer with them and someone from a magazine and the girls took more trouble over their hair than they did over tuning. I sat with the session players, ate my sandwiches, read a paperback. Once by the coffee machine the woman from the magazine asked me a question and over her shoulder I saw one of the sisters watching grimly. No more bookings there.

I came home to find that Giles had been and gone, leaving four old violin cases in the hall. Four not three. The fourth one looked as shabby as the others, but more substantial. It was locked, no key. It was also heavy.

I made tea and stood looking at them, warming my hands on the mug. I could hear Bridie in the broom cupboard she had adopted as her workroom shortly after moving in, talking to someone on the phone. After a few minutes, the clatter of the receiver.

"Great, you're back. I've ordered a pizza, that OK? Twenty minutes. I'll make a salad."

"Fine. Tea's in the pot."

"Just had some. Giles called in this morning. As you see." She leaned against my shoulder, arms folded, and together we contemplated his favour for a friend.

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“I can always tell when he’s up to something. He doesn’t hang around to chat me up.”

“No.”

“Your brother’s a crook, you know that?”

“Mm.”

I was tired and, after a day of strutting ego and precious little music, rather depressed. I looked at the tatty heap and did not want to know. Giles, my sibling, my Mephistophilis. You lie whenever it suits you, but when you lie to me, surely you can take the trouble to make it convincing?

5

I borrowed a map from the hotel, and after a couple of false starts found my way across the Clyde and through the southern sprawl of the city. Under a huge railway bridge of brick and rusting iron. Turn right at the traffic lights.

On the left was a new trading estate, kit built offices and workshops surrounded by parking spaces and half grown ever-green shrubs. Hardly any paths. Nobody was expected to arrive on foot. A railway viaduct ran along the opposite side of the road for about a quarter of a mile, the arches colonised by small businesses of a more transient kind. A picture framer, someone selling terracotta pots and garden furniture, someone else pushing cut price sofa beds.

Opposite the entrance to the estate, a row of four arches had been bricked up, the facing of each one freshly painted dark red with a board reading *Arran 24 Hour Self Storage* in the centre. The fifth arch was filled by a pair of gates standing open, large enough to take a sizeable lorry. A sign said *Reception*.

Last chance. Drive on past. A couple of turns through side streets and back to the hotel room. Call up an adult movie on

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pay as you view. Sorry, Giles, couldn't find the place.

I indicated right, pulled across the traffic and drove inside, parked behind a panel van. Two men were unloading cardboard boxes onto a pallet. The arch was bigger than it looked, running back about 50 yards, almost a tunnel. It would have been wide enough to take three lanes.

I got out of the car and was looking round when a buzzer sounded and a second pair of gates rolled back in front of me. A fork lift truck was waiting on the other side. It slid forward and its driver dropped the blades and spun the wheel to scoop up the cargo from the van. Behind him the arch seemed to widen out and merge with the others. I caught sight of an underground vault filled with room-sized metal containers, stacked two high in rows. Here and there along the aisles were wheeled gantries with steps to allow access to the upper level. The arches must have supported much more than a simple railway line – a local junction, probably. The brickwork of the curving roof and walls was painted white and everything was picked out in the bright, full moon glare of floodlights mounted in cages overhead. Galvanized ducts angled between them and I could hear the hum of air conditioning equipment. The atmosphere was dry and cold, with a smell of metal and concrete dust.

Along one side of the entrance tunnel was a portable cabin, painted the same dark red as the walls outside but with the single word *Arran* in gold letters beneath its windows. I could make out lights behind slatted blinds. A door stood open at one end and I crossed over and climbed the short flight of steps.

The office inside must have taken up about half the cabin's length. Opposite me another door was marked *Private*. The room was carpeted and looked as if it had been recently furnished out of a catalogue, with a couple of clients' chairs, a scatter of climbing plants and a low table covered with the previous weekend's supplements. The greenery had not been there for

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long enough to suffer from the lack of natural light, or maybe they replaced it once a month. The desk which ran beneath the windows had a number of screens recessed into it. One contained a computer display, but two others showed changing blue-green views from security cameras.

A young man was sitting at the desk and looking out through the blinds into the loading area. As I watched he pressed a button and the internal gates slid shut behind the loaded fork lift. He was wearing a striped business shirt and a wide tie with a cartoon character glaring out of it. The jacket of his suit was hanging on the back of his chair. When he stood up he was a couple of inches taller than me and wide across the shoulders.

“Good morning. Can I help you at all?”

He had been on the customer service course. He made the eye contact and smiled the smile but I had the feeling that helping me was not the first thing on his mind. He reminded me of the men you see around politicians sometimes, the ones that face the crowd.

“Um... I’m not sure that I’ve come to the right place. I was looking for Mr Mansfield.”

“This is the place, right enough. Who should I say is here?” He picked up a telephone and spoke my name. “Mr Mansfield is expecting you. Won’t you take a seat for a moment?”

He turned back to his screens. Outside another van had arrived and the two men were moving towards its rear doors.

Mansfield, when he emerged from the inner office, was an undersized man who greeted me with lowland vowels. Like his assistant he wore a business suit minus jacket, a tie, this time minus the cartoon character, a smile minus goodwill. He held his

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head on one side as we shook hands. Shadows under his eyes and a sharp nose gave him a miniature Roman look, faintly bird-like. A crow spying a morsel in the grass, checking to see whether it was still moving.

“Good to see you Mr Coltraine. Your brother is well, I hope? You have some instruments for me, I gather.”

“Yes, they’re in the car.”

“Excellent! Gordon can bring them in.”

“On the back seat. It’s isn’t locked.”

Gordon nodded and moved behind me to the door. I could feel him pass as clearly as if I had turned to watch, like a small, furry animal feels a predator pause and saunter on. Skin-clad ancestors screamed at me.

Mansfield had no small talk. He pointed to one of the customer armchairs and I sat, unbuttoned my jacket, crossed my legs. Approved no worries body language. Outside a car door slammed. Feet on the steps and Gordon reappeared, carrying the fiddle cases. He put them down on the desk.

“Three,” he said, and shook his head slightly.

“Only three?” said Mansfield. “I was expecting four. I’m certain your brother mentioned four instruments.”

“Yes, I’m sorry about that. The other one’s back at the hotel. I seem to have mislaid the key. It must be among my stuff somewhere though – I’m sure I can find it.”

“I expect we can come up with a way to open it ourselves. Gordon can fetch it right away.”

“I don’t think they’d give it to him. It’s in secure storage, along with the band’s kit.”

Silence, while outside the fork lift truck whined back out of the vaults. Gordon moved to the door and stood with his back to it. Mansfield stared at me. I wanted to toss my breakfast. My great, great, many times great grandfather turned his eyes to heaven.

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“So. What do you want, Mr Coltraine?”

“I want you to stop buying from my brother.”

“And buy from you instead, is that it?”

“I’ve got nothing to sell. Don’t do business with either of us.”

Raised eyebrows. This seemed to surprise him.

“Why not?”

“It’s a family thing.”

“Don’t like your brother getting his fingers dirty, is that it? Afraid some of the muck will wipe off onto you?”

“To the second question, no. I am worried about the muck, though, and so should you be. You’ll be up to your armpits if you carry on like this.”

“You’re not making yourself very clear, Mr Coltraine. Clarity at this point would be a good idea.”

“How long have you been doing business with my brother?”

“Not long. This is the second shipment.”

“Whose notion were the fiddle cases? Giles suggested them, I bet.”

Mansfield inclined his head and I pressed on. “Think about it. They’ve been driven halfway round the country, left in the car overnight, left lying around my flat, left at the hotel. They’ve taken more than a week to get here. Camouflage, I expect he said? Bullshit. Why not put the stuff in a box and drive it up the M6, with a million other packages? Twenty-four hours at the most. Minimum exposure, minimum risk.”

“Know a lot about your brother’s business, do you?”

“Not a thing. I know him, though. He likes a bit of theatre. It’ll get him into trouble. You too.”

Sorry Giles.

Mansfield took a turn across the office, looking at the floor, considering.

“But can I trust you? You see my problem, Mr Coltraine.”

“I’d hardly be likely to shop my brother.”

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“It’s been known.”

“I’m delivering the shipment. As an act of good faith.”

“So you say.”

“You think it’s a set-up? If that were true I’d be asking for money, wouldn’t I?”

“Now there I think you have a point.” Another turn on the carpet. “Bring the case at eleven thirty this evening. Not here. Gordon will give you instructions.” And he was gone, back through the door to the private office. My fingers hurt. I found I had been gripping the arm of the chair.

Behind me Gordon opened the door. I could hear men’s voices outside, hollow metallic scraping noises as they hauled a consignment out of the back of a van, flat thumps as they dropped boxes onto a pallet.

“If you’ll follow me.”

Gordon walked down the steps and turned left, not towards my car but in the direction of the sliding metal security gates in the depths of the archway. They stood open. On the other side the galvanised steel of the self storage units receded like a perspective drawing. The men unloading the van stopped work. As I hesitated one of them took a few paces and stood beside my car, the other moved between me and the exit. The fork lift whirred into life and hummed towards me, blades raised to chest height. I followed Gordon.

The units were laid out like American city blocks. We took a couple of corners into the labyrinth. I thought I knew which way the exit lay but all the aisles looked exactly the same, cut by hard floodlit shadows. Each metal door had a number stencilled on it in red paint. We turned into aisle G and stopped by unit seven. The door by my side was padlocked but above my head one in the upper tier was open. The fork lift whined again. Somewhere along the way it had picked up an empty pallet, which it was now holding about a foot above the ground.

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“Get on.” Gordon said.

I stepped up onto the wooden slats. He followed and stood facing me, arms hanging loosely by his sides.

Once, many years before, sitting in on a pub session in Somerset, I had met an old fiddle-player: ex-army, ex-fairground boxing booth, ex-practically everything. His fingers were calloused, with wide, flattened ends and split nails, but they slipped across the strings like darting mice. His nose had been broken more than once, ears and eyebrows thickened and cut. During a break from the music I bought him a pint and we sat watching the lads at the bar pretending to be eighteen.

“Y’ hear a lot about the hard men who look at you with cold eyes,” he said. “S a load of balls. Practice in front of the bat’room mirror.” He took a long pull on his bitter. “The ones that worry me don’t look at you at all. Sit there quiet like, not a word. You needle them a bit and they lose it completely, all of a sudden. Nail y’ head to the bar before they know what they’re doing.” He picked up his fiddle and slid into a lament by O’Carolan.

I wondered whether Gordon practised in front of the mirror. No. I staggered as the pallet began to rise and reached out automatically to steady myself on the uprights of the fork lift mechanism.

“Careful,” Gordon said. “Don’t want to catch your fingers in the machinery.”

The pallet stopped at the upper level and Gordon nodded towards the steel container. I stepped inside and he followed, swinging the door shut behind him. As it closed I saw the raised pallet backing away. An inspection light hung from a hook in the ceiling, bare bulb encased in a loose basket of wire on the end of an extension cable. In the glare the galvanised walls seemed to be covered with metallic frost patterns. It felt cold enough. The space was completely empty, enclosed by hard, square angles.

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Unadorned metal bolted onto a framework of steel struts. The floor had been covered with a sheet of plywood, gouged in a couple of places where heavy items had been dragged across it.

“Mr Mansfield has asked me to give you your instructions,” Gordon said. “This usually includes a few words about what will happen if you don’t follow them.”

The clang as I hit the wall must have reverberated round the whole vault. Inside the container it was like sitting in a kettle drum. Gordon had his forearm across my throat and was leaning on it, not hard, but hard enough. With his free hand he reached down and drew my left arm up and away from my side until I was spread along the sheet metal like a man half crucified. The sharp edge of one of the uprights dug into my wrist.

“A great many accidents can happen on a busy site like this,” he said. “Fingers in machinery. In doors even.” Mine were about three inches from one of the hinges. Not that I could feel them. Another menacing silence and the sound of my laboured breath.

“You’ve recently released a CD, I understand?” *Shit. Everyone’s a critic.* “My neighbour has a copy. I may ask you to autograph it before you leave town. I hope you will still be able to hold the pen.”

He released me and stepped back, then pushed the door open. Outside the fork lift slid back into place.

7

I arrived at the multi-storey car park shortly after eleven, took my ticket at the barrier, wound my way up to the second to top floor, as high as I could go without coming out into the open air.

The place was deserted apart from a white Ford at the other end of the level. A man sat in it reading a newspaper by the light from the pedestrian lift. Someone had wedged the door open

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with a waste paper bin. The rest was an empty concrete desert, grimy yellow lines receding into the gloom, each parking space marked with its individual Rorschach blot of oil. I sat for a while making faces out of the nearest ones. Checked the goods on the back seat. Sat again. Bloody stupid place to meet. More movie stuff. Giles and Mansfield deserved each other.

At twenty-five past eleven I got out of the car and walked to the open parapet that overlooked the entrance six storeys below. The newspaper by the lift twitched. A van was parked in the street. It had not been there when I arrived and it had its sidelights on. There was a faint haze in the air behind it.

At eleven thirty precisely a grey Jaguar turned the corner. The man by the lift put away his newspaper. At eleven thirty-two the Jag's lights swept over the Ford and slid on towards me. It swung wide and turned, stopping across the rear of my own car, blocking my way out. Mansfield was sitting in the passenger seat, but he did not turn his head. Gordon got out on the driver's side and leaned on the roof.

"Good evening. No, stay where you are. You have the case?"

"Back seat."

He circled the Jag's boot and approached my car, keeping it between us. Checked front and back before opening the rear door.

"This it?"

I nodded. "I still haven't got the key."

"That's not a problem." Gordon straightened up, hefted the case, judging its weight. Then he crossed to the near side of the Jag, tossed it onto the back seat and stood waiting by the open door. I could not tell whether or not it was an invitation.

For the first time Mansfield tore his attention away from the view. The passenger window slid down and he stared at me.

"Give my regards to your brother. Tell him he will not be hearing from me."

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Gordon closed the rear door, nodded to me and walked round to the driver's side. At the far end of the gallery the Ford's starter turned over with a clatter and it pulled away. From far below I heard tyres squeal as the parked van did a U-turn.

I watched the Jaguar drive the length of the empty level, the concrete pillars glowing and fading in pairs as it passed. At the end it turned off to the left. I opened the boot of my own car, then walked back to the parapet and leaned out to watch the progress of the Jag's lights as it spiralled down the exit ramps. I dialled Mansfield's mobile number on my own phone, then waited until the car stopped at the exit barrier. I could see an arm stretching out through the driver's window to put the ticket in the slot. I pressed the *Call* button

"Hello?"

"Look up, Mr Mansfield."

"What?"

"Look up, Mr Mansfield."

"Who is this?"

"Just look up. Higher than that."

I could see the two pale blobs of their faces turned towards me behind the windscreen. I picked up the second violin case which I had taken from the boot and held it at arm's length above my head. Then I pitched it as far as I could out into the canyon between the buildings. The blobs followed it down as it twisted from level to level. It hit right in the middle of the street, dead on the line, and exploded in a cloud of white powder which descended on the roadway, faintly falling like snow.

When I finally got home, two days later, the first thing I saw was the angry red eye of the answering machine, blinking at me.

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Bridie was out. I pressed the *Play* button and turned up the volume. A message from the bank, then Giles's booming voice filled the empty flat.

"Ha bloody ha!"

I turned my brother down and went through to the kitchen to put the kettle on.

"You almost gave Manny a heart attack, do you know that? He was seeing Drugs Squad behind every lamp post. And he damn nearly threw the case you gave him into the Clyde. It took me twenty minutes on the phone to convince him that even you wouldn't be gormless enough to dump a kilo of coke onto Sauchiehall Street. What was it? Icing sugar? Jesus! It'll be years before I can show my face up there again."

A short pause, then a choking sound. No, he was laughing. I wandered back into the hall and tweaked the volume again, carried my suitcases into the bedroom.

"I wouldn't count on playing in Glasgow for a good while either – or anywhere north of Manchester, come to that. The Scots don't like practical jokers. I'll give you another ring when you get back."

Sex and drugs and rock 'n roll.

9

I persuade Matt to sign a truce with his partners, temporarily at least. He has a family, and besides there is a line to somebody with information running through his office. Best keep it open.

I put my coat on, then have second thoughts about going out in the dark. I take it off again and prowl round the kitchen instead. The dog returns to its basket with a disgusted grunt. I make an omelette and eat half of it. Prowl some more. This is too much. The stunt with the whisky bottle had me going for a

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while. Nice try. Then the pub. Yes, that shook me up. But this nineteenth hole tittle tattle is laughable, too much of a bad thing. I no longer care where the whisky came from. I want to know who fed it to me.

I sleep on it. Or rather, doze on it, slipping in and out of dry, brittle dreams lit by the glowing blue digits of the alarm clock, in which somebody pushes a tube down my throat and I hear Giles's voice. *How's things, little brother?*

At four in the morning I get up, make myself coffee and start searching the house.

I search systematically, room by room, starting at the top, opening every box and feeling behind every drawer. More than once I am brought up short. By a biscuit tin full of curling black and white photographs. On top is one of my mother looking startlingly pretty. By a stack of Eagle annuals, nearly a complete set. Must be worth something. How did Giles miss those? By a trunk completely full of school exercise books and reports.

At first light I am done with the attics and the bedrooms and have worked my way down to the ground floor. I stop for breakfast. Feed and walk the dog. Consider the time. I am supposed to be back in London by early evening. Bridie has left a message on the answering machine. *Don't forget, rehearsal tonight. See you later. Love.* By midday I have been through the downstairs rooms, the cellar and most of the outbuildings.

By two it is finished. Nothing.

But there should be something. Somebody killed Giles and now they want me out of Dorset as well, or at least out of this house. Perhaps he would not go when they told him to, ignored the warnings. That road led to a ditch under a beech tree, leaking oil dripping over dead leaves and one unbroken headlight pointing at the sky. I wonder where mine will end. There is something here that I am not supposed to see, something that will tell me who was responsible for Giles's death. I am going to

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find it. I make more coffee and a sandwich. Take the dog down to Mrs Sims, who is speaking to me again, but gazes at me sadly when she thinks I am not looking.

Three o'clock. Time to call for a lift to the station. Hope there is a taxi free. For no reason I remember another lift, in the rain with stubby wipers flailing. There is one place I have not yet searched. If I take Sheila's BMW afterwards and trash the speed limits on the way to London there will just be time.

10

What am I looking for?

I have no idea.

Will I recognise it when I see it?

Probably not.

Forty-five minutes. I stand in the centre of the barn and turn slowly, taking in the stacked furniture, piles of crockery, garden ornaments, tea chests full of books. The long, slow pan ends on Sharon's desk and the filing cabinets behind it. As good a place as any. When in doubt check the paperwork.

I take the cabinet on the left, nearest her chair, and start with the bottom drawer, like an old lag. Stationery. Several reams of good quality laid paper with envelopes to match. Small cash box, rattling but locked. A couple of rubber stamps. PAID. RECEIVED, with one of those dates which twiddle round. The ninth of December. Yesterday's date. Looks as if she has not been in today. Just as well.

Thirty-five minutes. The middle drawer seems more promising. Hanging files labelled M to Z, each containing a blue cardboard wallet. I slide that one closed and try the top drawer. More wallets, A to L. I pick one at random and take out a sheaf of transparent folders, a dozen or so, each containing three or

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four letters and a sheet of notes. Sharon can manage my office any day.

August 14

Dear Mrs Challacombe,

Please excuse my writing to you at what must be a very difficult time. I did not know your husband well – we met once or twice at the bowls club – but although our acquaintance was tragically short I liked and admired him immensely. He was an honest and plain-speaking man, whose views I respected.

I was unable to attend the funeral, but I hope you will not object if I ask my secretary to drop by with a small floral tribute, something to brighten your home, which must seem very empty now.

Yours in sympathy,

Giles Coltraine

Bowls? Surely not. I riffle through the other folders.

Dear Mrs Carter ...met one or twice at the Arts Centre in Bridport... Mrs Chisholm... in connection with the Lions in Dorchester... Mrs Child... the Rotary Club.

Pinned to the back of each letter is an obituary clipped from the local paper. Stan Challacombe, I gather, is sadly missed in Lyme Regis, where he captained the men's bowls team for several years.

Behind each letter is a note from Sharon. *Great reader. Look for modern firsts, esp. Graham Greene. Worked as photographer on liners in 50s. Check out trunk in garage – poss celeb pics. Grandfather clock. Bone-handled cutlery.*

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And another letter.

August 23

Dear Mrs Challacombe,

I was delighted to hear from my secretary that you are bearing up well after your tragic loss. Sharon tells me that you are planning to move to Kent to be near your grandchildren. This seems to be an excellent plan.

It occurs to me that I may be able to be of service to you. I imagine that you and your husband will have accumulated a considerable number of personal belongings over the years, far more than you could possibly take with you. I would be more than happy to recommend a reputable dealer who...

You bastard.

Twenty minutes. Try the next filing cabinet.

This one has a drawer devoted to each of Sharon's three boys. I go back to the first cabinet, take a sheet of her posh paper and copy down addresses, phone numbers. Terry has an email address. The files seem to be records of who got what, careful lists of furniture, pieces of china, bric-a-brac, sorted into date order. I flip my way back to late August. Mr Challacombe did indeed own fine first editions of *Travels with My Aunt* and *May We Borrow Your Husband?*

Twelve minutes. No time. Try the last cabinet.

It will not open.

There are already scratches around the lock. Still, it is an old model, probably bought third hand, and there are easier ways. I reach over and grasp the rear corners, tilt it towards me and walk it away from the wall, then I tilt it backwards and squat down to grope under the front corner and push the locking bar up. Bridie showed me how to do this once, at a party in the offices of a

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record company. We had both had a lot to drink and the thing nearly fell on top of me when I tilted it too far. The files made interesting reading, though. We put several of them in the post.

Eight minutes. No time.

No notes from Sharon. No collectibles. Three empty drawers, except that in the top one there is a flat cardboard box. It is blue and white and once held A4 photocopy paper. Someone has tested a ballpoint pen on it in a series of red loops and swirls. In one corner is a label, hand printed, also in red:

SIMON

I push aside a notebook and a decorated mug full of pencils and put the box down on Sharon's desk. The top clings briefly as I lift it and comes away with a faint sucking sound. I place it face down next to the box, then begin leafing through the papers inside, laying each one in the lid, careful to keep them in order.

The first is a photograph, in black and white. A young man, still in his teens, posed self-consciously, not looking at the lens but aware of it. He has blonde, curling, shoulder-length hair and a rather darker beard, carefully trimmed. He is wearing denims with a patch on one knee and a roll-necked sweater with the sleeves pushed up above his elbows. He seems to be leaning back against a rough wooden table, in the garden of a pub, perhaps. On the table is an accordion. There is an ivy-covered wall behind him and just visible to one side, a darkened window. He is holding a violin.

Next comes a series of fliers advertising concerts and CDs, some in colour on glossy paper, others more cheaply printed in black and white. A poster folded into four. Press cuttings, some from local papers, one from a Sunday supplement. There are a couple of festival programmes, several columns cut from radio listings.

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In the second photograph the man is older, heavier. This one is in colour, with a background of people passing: men in shorts, women in summer dresses, many barefoot on the grass. He laughs directly back at the camera, his hair still long but a little thinner and a good deal wilder. His face has coarsened. The vertical lines which plunge into his beard on either side of his mouth are deeper. He is in his shirtsleeves and the beginning of a belly bulges over the belt of his jeans. Next to him is a girl with red hair, also laughing but looking up into his face. He has one arm round her shoulders, the other is raised above his head as if in triumph. In his hand, a violin.

There are other pictures, most of them group shots. A band on stage: two men with their heads together over a microphone and a few feet away a girl singing into her own mike; behind them drums and a keyboard. The same band, a different stage and this time an instrumental number: fiddle and guitar, the girl a couple of paces away hitting a tambourine with the heel of her hand.

In the last photograph the fiddle player is alone again. He is not on stage, but in the foreground there are unfocused silhouettes of people listening. It is another black and white shot and he sits on a stool with a single light above his head. Cables loop past him on the floor and there is an open instrument case by his feet. He is stooped over the violin and his face is in shadow, so that it is hard to tell whether he is old or young. His right hand is held high, wrist cocked for the beginning of a stroke, the bow a bright slash across the paper, pointing into the darkness.

I had no idea Giles kept all this. He always knew when I was playing, but he never came. Perhaps he did sometimes, stood at the back without telling me, made his way to the car park afterwards among the crowd while I celebrated backstage.

At the bottom of the box there are three letters, all addressed

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to Giles and all from organisations which mean nothing to me. Albion Lettings, offices in south London. Something about clearance of properties acquired after probate. Odd. London has wide boys of its own, surely? Why send out to Dorset? The first page of what looks like a quote from a cleaning company, Salamander Cleaning Services, also in London. A letter from a travel firm, Muskrat Rambles, a little nearer home, in Bristol.

The name at the bottom of the last one catches my eye and I stop to read it.

June 15

Giles,

Possible timings for the next six months – perhaps you could confirm...

Then a list of a four or five dates, ending with 7-8 December.

...Trust the locals will make themselves scarce.

Cheers

Sam Cranford

I remember Sam. These must be his survival courses. Then I focus on the final date. Three nights ago. The night my reputation went down the tubes.

I would like to take the box with me, but if I do someone may notice that it is missing. Two minutes. No time.

Make time then. I switch on the photocopier on Sharon's desk and go to work.

CHAPTER FOUR

1

“Take them to the police.” Bridie drops the third letter onto the table and shoves it towards me with the tip of her forefinger. “It’s the sort of thing they’re good at. Show them to your Inspector.”

“Show what? Three pieces of paper. I wouldn’t have given them a second thought myself if I’d found them anywhere else. Anyway, since when have you been such a fan of the police?”

“Since about the time you got swatted by your charming neighbours.”

“They weren’t any neighbours that I’ve ever met... No, we need something more concrete before we can take these to anybody.”

“If you say so.” Bridie leans over and scoops up all three letters, then arranges them in a row in front of her, like some street corner scally setting up a game of find the lady.

“Which one first?”

The morning rush hour is beginning to build. The school run is starting and 8.30 office workers are converging on the city centre in the hope of grabbing an early parking space. It is a damp, grey morning. Paving stones are darkened with moisture and the tarmac has a greasy sheen. Bridie and I are sitting, engine running, on a double yellow line, both of us watching the pavement. I am looking for traffic wardens.

Bridie is dressed in a long, shapeless black overcoat with a scarf around her chin and her hair tucked up into a broad-brimmed hat. She is clutching an open-mouthed canvas shoulder bag, a carton of milk and a bunch of keys.

“He’s late,” I complain.

“There’s still time.” She cranes her neck to look at her watch and nearly drops the milk. “Give it another five minutes. If he isn’t here by then we’ll try again tomorrow.”

The shops have that down at the heel look that comes when most of the customers are students. There are several pubs and cafés, three bookstores, a bicycle supplier, one that sells computer games and a couple of bargain basement travel agents. All of them have Christmas decorations in their windows, reindeer silhouetted in spray-on snow, shapes pressed and folded out of silver foil. At the top of the hill a group of African students is waiting for a launderette to open and delivery boys are returning empty bags to a newsagent. The pavements are beginning to get busy, people hurrying in both directions, waiting for the lights to change, stepping off the kerb and dodging between moving cars.

A red and yellow satchel breaks cover between distant pedestrians, then vanishes again.

“There he is. Hold that.”

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Bridie hands me the milk and opens the passenger door, extricates hat, bag and keys then stretches in and takes the milk again. Before I can say anything she is gone. I watch her walk purposefully up the hill, pause to adjust the strap of her bag and arrive at a darkened travel agent's door a few seconds before the postman. He reaches her as she is fitting a key into the lock. They exchange a few words. Bridie holds the keys between her teeth, struggles to tuck the milk carton under her arm. The postman laughs and pops his bundle of letters into her bag, then continues on his round.

I indicate and pull out under the nose of a crawling bus, grind up the hill and take the first left turn, slowing almost to a halt. Before the taxi driver behind me has a chance to vent his impatience the passenger door opens and Bridie hops back in.

"Very neat," I say.

"Thank you. I thought so. Cut it a bit fine, though. The real Muskrat Rambles was crossing the road as I came round the corner."

We are heading away from the centre, moving in the opposite direction to most of the traffic and driving at a reasonable speed, though not as fast as I would like. I am scanning cars in the mirror, half expecting a flashing blue light. Bridie tucks the bag away under her feet and spreads the letters out on her lap.

"Well, now. What have we got? I shoved some of the obvious Christmas cards through the letter box. They'll smell a rat if they don't get any post at all... Hum. Junk mail: software, loans. A couple of trade magazines... A dozen or so from clients probably... Whoops, this one's got a cheque in it. Mr Batik is going trekking in Kenya, lucky chap... Letter about VAT payments...

"Ah, this may be what we're looking for. Mobile phone bill in the name of Crawford. And does he have itemised billing...? Yes he does. Calls to other mobiles, not much help. Plenty of

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texting. And half a dozen conversations with someone who has a west Dorset number.”

“Let me guess: 01308...”

“Yup. Same area code as Giles.”

“And the whole of Bridport, don’t forget. We already knew Crawford had local connections.”

“Easy enough to find out who with.” Bridie takes out her own mobile and dials the number on the bill, pausing halfway through to peer at the paper on her knee. She listens, then presses the End Call button.

“Answering machine. Woman’s voice, no name. I’ll try again later.”

“In the meantime we’d better find a newsagent with a copier and get this lot back in the post.” I check the mirror again.

“Well-educated. Mature, by the sound of it. Professional. I expect she’s on her way to a breakfast meeting.”

“Or in the bath. That phone bill had better be permanently lost at the sorting office, we can’t match the envelope. What about the others?”

Bridie retrieves her bag from the floor and rummages, coming up with a selection of envelopes of different sizes: manila, white, with window and without.

“OK, I think. They may find it a bit odd that the VAT man used a stamp. I can ring the phone company and get them to send my boss another bill. Terribly silly of me, accidentally shredding the first one.”

There it is again. Some people look suspicious taking a pot of yoghurt off the shelf in a supermarket. Bridie could pick up the entire till and the checkout girl would offer to help with her packing.

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3

My father was not a great one for yarning about his childhood, but he once told me a story about his father, my grandfather.

I never knew him. He died in middle age when my father was barely twenty, burst his heart tossing a bale of hay onto a rick. I have one photograph of him, sitting in the open with his dog. It must be a Sunday, because he is wearing a tie and a stiff collar. His coat is heavy, with the crumpled appearance that pre-dates dry-cleaning. It looks as though it might smell of camphor. The sun is throwing deep shadows across his eyes and mouth so that it is hard to tell whether he is smiling or merely squinting into the light, but the dog is bursting with love, thrusting its head up against his knees. He is holding its muzzle cupped between his hands.

Here is the story. This must have happened in 1920, or thereabouts. My father was five or six and he wanted nothing in the world so much as a wooden scooter. On his birthday it appeared, with bright varnish, red wheels and strict instructions that it was not to be taken outside the garden. First chance he got, my father rode it out of the gate and down the lane - of course he did, he was six years old. When he returned an hour or so later he found my grandfather waiting for him with an axe. One of the wheels rolled into the angle between the porch step and the wall and lay there in the sun and the rain until the paint had faded.

This explains a lot about my father, who spent his life trying to live up to the vision of obedience which he inherited that day. My grandfather is still a mystery. I sometimes wonder who took an axe to his dreams.

When I finally made the decision to quit home I was

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determined to leave nothing unfinished behind me. I put off my departure several times, waiting for a moment of achievement, tasks completed, plans fulfilled. It never arrived. I was being paid a farmhand's wages and doing the work of two. There always seemed to be one more job. On a bad day there were ten. I had become so much a part of the place that I hardly needed instructions. If my father wanted something done he would grunt over the breakfast table.

"Hedge a bit of mess, up by Mallard's Piece."

"I'll take a look at it."

Giles, of course, was going his own way, making contacts, doing deals. No blistered fingers or aching back there. If the farm had any future, it lay in my hands.

Meanwhile, friends were settling down, careers were being established. A few of my school contemporaries had already emerged from libraries and lecture halls for their second long university vacation. I saw them sometimes during the summer months, blinking in the light and staring about as if the Dorset lanes had grown smaller. Matt had settled into the routine of solicitor's clerk. One couple had even got married, though without much option, the way I heard it.

It was late autumn by the time I stood at last on the platform at Dorchester. My father had listened to my explanations and my promises without a word and only the dogs had seen me off. The clocks had already gone back and although the working day was barely over the yellow sodium lights from the station car park gleamed on the bright tracks. Beside me were a fibre suitcase, a rucksack and my fiddle case. In my pocket I had the address of a friend studying at the London School of Economics, whose floor I was planning to sleep on, and a very short list of phone numbers.

"Something to read on the train."

I turned and found Giles behind me, holding a bundle

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of newspapers.

"Thought somebody should make sure you caught it. Less likely to have second thoughts with me scowling at you from the platform."

"Thanks. How's the old man?"

"Changing the oil in one of the tractors."

"I did both of them last week."

"Yes. How are you off for cash?"

"I've got a couple of hundred." It had seemed like a lot of money when I was scraping it together. With my ticket in my pocket I was already beginning to feel hungry.

"Not enough. Here's another five." He handed me a fat envelope. "Bank it, don't leave it under the mattress." A mattress, I thought. I should be so lucky.

"Can I give you some brotherly advice along with it?" Giles went on.

"Go on, then."

"Don't get a steady job."

"Um... Are you sure you've got that right?"

"Well, wash dishes if you have to. Sweep the streets. But don't take on anything that's going to engage your attention. Don't get sucked in. Remember why you left home."

He had to shout the last sentence over the screech of the train's brakes as it ground in behind me. Carriage doors swung open before it had stopped. A couple of regulars jumped down and headed for the taxis. I helped a woman with a buggy and threw suitcase and violin into the empty seat. Giles handed up my rucksack. He waved and turned towards the exit, not waiting for the train to pull out. I leaned back against the prickly upholstery, inhaled the familiar rolling stock smell of damp and dust and old cigarettes and listened to the thump of doors slamming along the platform.

I did wash dishes in the evenings. During the day I hung

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around studios looking for session work. I drove a minicab for a while. For three summers running I humped bricks on building sites – which is where I met Len, although that is another story. I did eventually pay Giles back too.

4

After dark the City is a haunted place. Built for crowds and hustle with footsteps and traffic noise echoing down glass canyons, it holds its breath at nightfall: a few pigeons, the occasional taxi cutting through, black bin liners outside sandwich bars waiting for the morning garbage trucks. Offices on New York and Tokyo time are chattering misfits between darkened floors where cleaners and security men do their rounds.

At least there are places to park. We leave the car on a single yellow line and cross the street in a long diagonal. Bridie is power dressing tonight. In black tailored suit, cream blouse and heels, and carrying a briefcase given to me long ago and hardly used since, she looks as if she works for someone who owns half Shoreditch. I walk one step behind in my interview suit.

The offices we are aiming for are a generation old, squared, functional concrete with marble facing on the ground floor. They have had a makeover, though. The street number stands out from the slab above the foyer doors in stainless steel characters a foot deep: One99. I wonder how many lunches it took to come up with that.

This night raid is the outcome of some intensive telephone research, including several calls to Salamander Cleaning Services in Bridie's harassed PA voice.

Terribly sorry to pester you like this before Christmas... let us down rather badly and I need to have another contract in place for the New Year... perhaps you have some literature you could fax through? ...and

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possibly the names of some existing clients, if you could? ...about 10,000 square feet of open plan, plus boardroom and executive suite of course ... prefer your staff to have experience in IT areas... Oh, a year initially, I should think...

Meanwhile I am running the Salamander letterhead through the scanner and buying a cheap laminator from a nearby office supplies shop. The resulting ID cards seem authentic enough to me. The security guard in the foyer appears to think so too because he hardly looks at them.

“Greenboro’ Investments, you say?”

“That’s right, floors ten and eleven. Our operatives should be up there now.”

“Mm. But I’ve got nothing here about you.” He thumbs through the sheets on his clipboard. On the other side of the hollow space a young man in jeans and T-shirt is buffing the marble floor with a rotary polisher. He swings the machine from side to side in ponderous arcs, stopping now and then to whip the trailing cable out of its path. We listen to the motor whine and pause, whine and pause.

“Well it *is* supposed to be a surprise.” Bridie smiles at the guard. “Obviously we don’t announce ourselves. That’s the way quality control works – our people know we may turn up at any time, but they don’t know when. We have to be particularly careful at this time of year. Everyone’s easing up a bit.”

The guard looks self-conscious.

“I spoke to Greenboro’s HR Manager this afternoon. Marcus said he’d leave you a note.” Bridie allows the merest hint of a threat to creep into her voice.

“Marcus...?”

“Flynn.” Bridie slides a blurred fax across the desk. I am proud of that fax.

“I could ring him at home, I suppose. But it’s a bit late.”

The guard grumbles and shuffles some more papers, but he is

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going to let us in. He tells us about the responsibilities of his job. We nod, shake our heads, sign his book.

A colleague is summoned to escort us through the building. He emerges from one of the lifts buttoning his jacket. Bridie's heels click loudly as we cross gleaming black and white rectangles to meet him. I am bracing myself for more explanations, but our minder shows no curiosity at all. He holds the door for us, presses buttons and stares up as winking numbers count off the floors.

The doors stumble open at floor ten.

"Lifts are on a key at night, OK?" The guard says. "You'll have to phone down when you're ready to go. I'll come and get you. Any extension, just press 666." He is already loosening his tie as the doors close.

We are in a carpeted space now, with armchairs covered in pale leather. A Chinese woman with a small trolley of pots and sprays is watering plants and wiping their leaves. In front of us is a reception desk and behind it a long panel of frosted glass with the company name picked out on it in flowing script. Through the clear spaces of the letters I catch jigsaw glimpses of an office: grey hessian-covered partitions, monitors, paperwork.

"Now what?" Bridie whispers.

"Pump the cleaners. Anything you can get about their firm. Where else do they work? Are they ever asked to do anything unusual?" I think for a moment. "Does anyone else ever come into the offices while they're cleaning? They must have access to all kinds of stuff, and all night to read it in. You start with her and I'll try inside. Watch out for supervisors, there has to be at least one around."

There is a door at one end of the panel behind the desk. I step through and the glass swings to behind me. This is a less public space. Businesslike, but not open to scrutiny in the same way as the reception area. There are no plants out here and more

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clutter. Each workspace has a few personal items: a coffee mug, Christmas cards pinned to the partition. A few have fluffy dolls perched on the monitors. At the far end two young men are working, one emptying bins, the other pushing a vacuum cleaner.

“Hello?”

I thread my way towards them between the desks.

“Excuse me? Could I have a word?”

They both continue cleaning, ignoring me. I backtrack a few paces, bend and flip the switch on the electric socket the vacuum cleaner is plugged into. Silence rings through the office. Both turn and look at me but neither seems surprised to see me. They must have known I was there. I have no idea how they feel about this stranger who appears at one in the morning, hands carefully in sight, smile hanging rather crooked on his face. Alert, certainly. Friendly, frightened, defensive? God knows.

“Hi. Sorry to bother you – I know you’re busy. I was wondering if I could talk to you about the company you work for. Salamander Cleaning Services.” No reaction.

“How long have you been working for them?” Silence. “Are you in this building every night?” Silence again. “Perhaps you go somewhere else as well?” Still nothing. I am starting to babble.

Both have dark hair and sallow skin. Foreign workers, maybe?

“Er... Vous parlez Français? ...Español?” No reply. Just as well, because I certainly do not.

“Can I help you?”

A man is standing beside a pair of double doors on one side of the room, about 40 feet away. There is a green exit sign above them, a fire escape presumably, with stairs to other floors. He has the same dark hair and blocky features as my two quiet friends but he is better dressed in a new and expensive looking leather jacket. Not working clothes. Perhaps this is the

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supervisor. He starts walking towards me, but because of the desk layout he has to make a detour towards the reception end of the office. As he turns back in my direction I see Bridie appear through the glass door behind him. She stops and watches.

“Hello there.”

I flash my ID card while he is still too far away to be able to make out the details.

“Just down from Head Office on a spot check. Everything’s looking pretty good so far.”

The supervisor halts about six feet from me, hands in jacket pockets. He tilts his head to one side and examines me while I flounder. Behind him Bridie picks up a clipboard from one of the desks and advances down the aisle. The vacuum is still silent. I glance over my shoulder. The two cleaners have not moved. They must have seen her but they are still looking on blankly. Neutral, then: not on my side, but not about to help their boss out either.

“I don’t think the keyboards are being cleaned properly,” Bridie says loudly, ticking a series of boxes on her clipboard. “They should be wiping down the telephone handsets too, but I can’t see any sign of it. Have they got the new antibacterial tissues we sent round last week?”

The last question is directed at the supervisor who jumps and backs up against a large plastic paper recycling bin. It makes a hollow booming noise as his heel hits it. Bridie stops beside me and looks at him sternly, pen poised.

“You should have received a month’s supply on the tenth of December. They were going to be stored on-site during the trial. Don’t tell me you’ve used them all already? Those wipes are bloody expensive.” She makes an exasperated tutting noise and ticks another box.

It is not working. The supervisor recovers his poise and

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gives her a cocky look.

“Bullshit.”

Out in reception lift doors rumble open. Two dark uniforms move on the other side of the frosted glass. He turns and walks towards them, slowly, flaunting his cool. I take Bridie by the elbow.

“Stairs.” I nod towards the fire exit and we sidle away. Not fast enough. Now the security men are on our side of the glass.

“Hey! Stay where you are!”

Bridie and I break into a run and burst through into a bare concrete stairwell lit by fluorescent panels on each landing. Tubular metal handrails go up and down.

“Up,” I say, dragging her to the left.

“If we go up we’ll be stuck.”

“We’re stuck anyway. They’ll be expecting us to go down.”

We take the steps three at a time. Behind us there is a crash as someone trips over a vacuum cleaner.

The floor above belongs to the same company, but this is executive country, divided into offices rather than open plan. The carpet is thicker, there are paintings on the walls and plants everywhere. The Chinese woman is here with her trolley, misting and polishing, and we slow to a brisk walk. She looks up at Bridie but like her colleagues on the floor below she gives nothing away. We reach the lifts and I stab at the down button. Nothing happens.

“We need a key.”

The pursuit seems to have fallen behind. They must have tried going down first, but any time now they will realise that there is nobody ahead of them and backtrack upwards. The Chinese woman watches us as we panic.

“I told you we should have gone down.”

“They’d have caught us by now. At least we’ve put some space between us. Would there be another set of emergency

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stairs, do you think? Must be, surely?"

"They'll probably split up to cover them. We're hardly dangerous-looking and they've got all night."

"Maybe we could skip past them..." I glance over Bridie's shoulder. The Chinese woman is still watching us, spray bottle in one hand, cloth in the other, but when she sees me looking she pushes the cloth into the pocket of her apron and with her free hand touches something on the top shelf of her trolley, sliding it forward an inch or so.

A lift key. Of course, the cleaners must have them. She would not be able to get her trolley up the stairs.

Bridie and I stand side by side feeling the floor drop away under our feet as the lift descends. The numbers over the door flicker downwards. From moment to moment I expect to feel a jolt as we are brought to a halt by waiting security men, but nothing happens. We come to a shaky stop on the ground floor. The doors slide back. The foyer is deserted. The polishing machine has been abandoned. Behind the main reception desk a uniform jacket is slung over the back of the chair. Just to muddy the waters I lean over and pick up the guard's book and we sign ourselves out, then we walk to the door. My feet are screaming at me to move faster, but Bridie seems perfectly relaxed. It must be the heels.

Crossing the street to the car and forcing myself not to look back I wish we had parked a bit closer, directly outside for preference.

"You must have made a big impression on that woman," I say. "What did you tell her?"

"Nothing at all. I asked about the cleaning company, as we agreed, and she blanked me completely."

"Same with my two. You know what they reminded me of? Prison trusties. Do you suppose they understood English at all?"

We have reached the car and I pop the locks. Bridie is about

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to open the passenger door when she freezes.

“Oh my God! I’ve left the briefcase behind. I must have put it down in the office when I picked up that clipboard.”

“There’s no way we can go back for it.” I glance across the road. There is still no sign of movement in the foyer, but I want the car to be well out of sight before anyone can associate it with us.

“Did you put anything in it?”

“It was a prop, I didn’t even open it. How about you? It was your case.”

“Don’t remember. I don’t think I’ve ever used it... Can’t be helped. With luck it’ll lie around for weeks before anyone notices it.”

5

I was in New Hampshire when my father died. It took me two days to get back and when I arrived machines were doing his breathing. Air was moving in and out of his lungs, blood was circulating, but he was dead for all that.

We were in the States making a programme for Radio 2 about fiddle contests. A very American phenomenon, I have always thought, particularly the junior heats: twenty nervous kids waiting for their turn to climb up on stage and thrash through some reel or other while a panel of judges awards points for the twiddly bits and the parents glower at one another. Little league baseball with strings. The settings are superb, however. The best contests are small town events, part of a local livestock show or country fair with races, carnival rides and demonstrations by the volunteer fire department. The sun shines, the cola flows and the smell of ribs drifts across the fields. In the evening there are fireworks.

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As a professional I was not allowed to play, and in fact I had difficulty getting into the country at all. Why couldn't an American fiddler do the job, the Musicians' Union wanted to know. The producer explained that I would not, in fact, be playing anything until we got back to England and even then it would only be to demonstrate the basic, no-frills tunes, explain the styles and analyse some of the licks. On American soil I would be observing and advising, no more. In the end I had to leave my instrument at home and we hired a US musician, for the look of the thing. Karl turned out to be a little, brown man with white teeth and eyes that disappeared when he laughed. He lent me his second best violin and taught me Texas style.

We spent a month and a half driving from state to state in a camper stuffed with recording equipment and musical instruments, taking in a couple of contests a week if we could, staying at motels while we were on the road and keeping people in the neighbouring cabins awake into the small hours with stories and laughter – though more than once they strolled over and joined in.

At the competitions themselves we usually stayed with one of the organisers. In New Hampshire we were at a house in the woods, surrounded by mile upon mile of maple, birch and granite. The country was full of deer, with moose and bear crossing over from Canada in the winter. Farmers had to lock their tools away at night, our hosts told us, because in the dark porcupine would climb down from their nests and gnaw at the wooden handles for the salt. The trees went on forever, laced with streams and lakes and soaked in a sense of slow time which you do not often find in America. The whole state was criss-crossed by crumbling stone field walls left over from the days before the prairies were opened up, when New England fed the country.

The house was near the top of a hill. At five in the morning

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on what turned out to be my last day there I was having trouble sleeping and was sitting out on the veranda in jeans and sweater, watching the clouds flow along the river valley below in the grey dawn. Our host found me, handed me a telephone on the end of a long cord, made coffee while I talked and backed his truck out of the barn while I packed. He drove me 50 miles to the nearest airfield and I caught a tiny commuter flight to Boston, hanging in the new, bright sky above breakfasting suburbs, each house with the blue staring eye of a swimming pool in its yard. That was the first deathbed I travelled to.

6

Albion Lettings is silent, dark, deserted. What else would you expect on Christmas Day?

The band has dispersed to its respective partners, parents and children, but I have turned down dinners cooked by Len's wife and by Bridie's mum to spend the morning parked in a Wandsworth side street. A hundred yards or so ahead of me, on the other side of the road, are the Albion offices: a converted corner shop in red turn of the century brick with white woodwork, fresh enough to be free of traffic grime. Inside there are probably high ceilings with mouldings round the light fittings blurred by coat upon coat of paint, and picture rails vanishing behind magnolia partition walls.

I have driven past several times during the last couple of days. By nine in the morning the lights are on and by six in the evening they are off, but I have yet to see anyone go in or come out. Perhaps they have all gone home for the holiday and left the lights on a timer. They are on now. There are shop windows looking onto the street on two sides, but both are blanked by white vertical blinds. The door, which is on the corner, has

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elaborately patterned frosted glass in its top half, above a brass letter box. Difficult to see through even with your face against the pane.

I pour another cup of coffee and steam from the Thermos throws a plume of condensation on the windscreen.

There is a small yard at the back of the shop with a high wall on the pavement side. It has broken glass embedded in the mortar along the top. By now, though, I am pretty sure that the house opposite my parking place is empty for the day. The blank bulk of the building crosses most of the end of the shop yard but there is a short stretch of wall alongside the front path. Also high, but no glass on top, plus a convenient leg up from the stone work round the porch. Should only take a few seconds, provided I time it right. I have been telling myself this for the past half hour.

I screw the top of the flask down tightly and wedge it upright between the seats, then clamber out. The quick tattoo of the central locking sounds very loud along the deserted pavement. I cross the road and as I close the gate behind me I take a last quick look up and down the street. Turn. Run two steps towards the door. Foot on a jutting piece of fancy carving. Hands up to grab. Jump and push and I am lying with my gut rather painfully across the top of the wall. Lean sideways and swing one leg up, heave and sit astride for a moment. And over. Just in time I see a couple of dustbins beneath me and give myself an extra shove off from the brickwork to land awkwardly beyond them. No harm done. No broken bones, not much noise. No faces in the windows above me, no twitching curtains.

The yard contains nothing of interest. The dustbins are empty, apart from a pair of black bin liners. The ground is flagged and moss is growing in the corners. There is a large flower pot by the back door containing a brittle dead geranium and about a dozen old cigarette ends.

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There are windows on either side of the door, but I can see nothing in the darkened rooms beyond. One might be a kitchen, the other has a blind pulled down. There is an air freshener on the sill inside - could be a bathroom. I am rather surprised to find that they are old fashioned sash windows, with no added security that I can see. A narrow electrical screwdriver fits into the gap between top and bottom. After a bit of a struggle I push the catch to one side. This is far too easy. They must get turned over once a week at least. I check that the dustbins are in position to boost me back over the wall in a hurry, then slide up the lower window and crawl in.

As I thought, a kitchen. Cooker, fridge, kettle, electric water heater on the wall over the sink, very faint smell of pine disinfectant. The fridge is ajar, no light inside, switched off at the mains. The sink is dry. Cupboards are clean and lined with waxed paper, but otherwise bare, cleared for the holiday. I crack the door open and peer out into the hall, where a single lamp is burning at the foot of a flight of stairs. No sound, no movement. I give it a couple of minutes but there is no heavy hand on my shoulder, nobody demanding to know who I am. Eventually I slide through and turn to close the door behind me. The bulb in the hall throws a wedge of yellow light across the floor and I experience one of those bizarre twitches of recognition. *Village hall*. I have played in hundreds and they all have a kitchen like this one: clean, antiseptic, owned by everyone and no-one.

It takes me about ten minutes to cover the building, very cautiously at first but with increasing confidence. There is nobody here. The staircase is clean, recently decorated, carpeted in hard-wearing charcoal grey cord matting and almost warm, although the radiators are off. The bulbs in the hall and on the landings of the two floors above have round, white paper shades which diffuse the light pleasantly. The shop front has been

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converted into an office and is full of the usual clutter: desks, telephones, filing cabinets. Above, on the first floor, there is a large, square room with windows on two sides. Here there is a long table and about a dozen chairs, all new, mass produced by an office supplier. Two small rooms at the top of the building are both empty.

I go back downstairs and shut and latch the kitchen window, meaning to let myself out of the front door, which is fastened with a simple Yale. Presumably all the local hoods have been in for a look and know there is nothing worth nicking.

Out in the hallway I am about to move through to what was once the shop when I hear something, very faint. A sort of musical beeping. It only lasts a few seconds, but it seems to be coming from... where? The staircase? The space under the stairs is boxed in with wooden panelling, painted white. There is no obvious door, but now that I am looking for it I can see a crack along the floor at the bottom of one section and a faint scuff mark in the carpet. I try the screwdriver again, slide the blade into the crack, then twist and pull, and it opens easily. On the floor inside is a slim grey box. A tiny light on the front flickers in the gloom as the hard drive spins. No monitor or keyboard, but a trailing wire leads to a phone socket.

I must have heard it dialling out. A daily housekeeping call perhaps? Too much of a co-incidence. I have tripped something, a pressure pad under the carpet or some kind of switch on one of the doors. Now it is calling for help.

I stand and quarter the hallway, searching for traps. Finally I look up at the ceiling, and there it is, perched on the picture rail in a corner, a small white rectangle not much bigger than a matchbox with a round black hole in the centre. Smile please. Time to go.

I duck back into the cupboard and pull the cable out of the wall. Probably much too late, but you never know. I close the

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panel and walk quickly through to the shop where I stand listening, half expecting squealing tyres outside.

Nothing. Christmas morning in Wandsworth. Stockings with MP3 players in the toes, crumpled wrapping paper and needles on the carpet under the tree. The new bikes will be out soon, but for the moment Dad is still in his dressing gown. I open the door and step outside. I have in mind pulling it to behind me and giving it a little rattle to make sure the latch has caught, as if I own the place. But I stop and stand for a moment thinking, then step back inside.

This should only take a minute or two. Just hope I've got that long.

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There was nowhere to park at the hospital. There never is. Staff were overflowing into the bays intended for patients and relatives. Visitors were leaving their cars in residents-only spaces along the narrow streets nearby. A couple already had tickets under their wipers at ten in the morning. I cruised around for twenty minutes then headed for the multi-storey in the centre of town and walked back. I was about a quarter of an hour late.

The main reception area seemed dark after the bright sunlight outside, but not particularly cool. Wide automatic doors had been locked open and folk were moving in and out. Old people, some of them in those clunky, four-wheeled chairs that hospitals provide and one or two being pushed by partners who looked older and frailer than themselves; brisk, confident people, staff probably; people hesitating, looking around, dressed for a visit but not sure where to go; and sad little groups, new patients, silent and apprehensive, surrounded by resolutely cheerful family. Ambulances came and went outside. The wide corridors,

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brightly painted, every junction bristling with direction boards pointing to this ward, that department, smelled of floor polish and food. I hate hospitals.

There were several rows of plastic bucket seats bolted to the floor and Sheila was sitting in one of them. She stood when she saw me, a tall woman with strong features and brown-blond hair. She always dressed in plain clothes, long skirts in dark colours which emphasised her height, no patterns. I think her grandparents had been Quakers. She had the look of someone focused on an interior world.

“How is he?” I asked.

“Still in intensive care, but breathing on his own now. They’re talking about moving him to a side ward.” She kissed my cheek and gave me an assessing look. “You OK?”

“No. Giles back yet?”

“I haven’t even been able to speak to him. I’ve left messages at all the numbers he gave me, but half the time nobody knows English and the rest of the time I can’t get through at all. It’s a bloody mess.”

Giles had tiptoed through the wreckage of the recently collapsed iron curtain and was somewhere in eastern Europe, intent on loot. Bad timing, but as I kept telling myself, not his fault. How could he have foreseen our father out on the slope of the downs, the too-tight turn of the tractor and the crushing weight rolling down? But bad timing for all that.

“So. You’ve been in here on your own every day?”

“Pretty much. Mrs Sims has been in a couple of times, and Polly. Matt phoned to see if there was anything I needed. The doctors say there’s nothing they can do, Simon. There’s too much brain damage. He wouldn’t be alive at all if someone hadn’t seen the accident from the road.”

Upstairs the nurses on duty repeated the message. Your father is as dead as anyone can be who is still breathing. To start

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with, Sheila said, they had urged her to talk to him, hold his hand, rub his feet, anything to attract the attention of a mind drifting beyond reach. But he was long gone even then. It was hard to tell whether all the activity was not in fact for her own benefit. Staff on that ward cared for the grieving as much as for the dying.

At least the tubes and pumps had been removed. He had a bandage round his head and a purple and yellow bruise on one cheek and he lay there flat on his back, hands by his sides, with a ridiculous pair of white stockings on his feet. Something to do with circulation. It was the most unnatural sleeping position I had ever seen, like a princess in a fairy story waiting for a lover's kiss. I remembered kissing him when I was a child and the unexpected bristles on his cheek. If we had been alone I might have tried again.

While we stood beside the bed he yawned, a huge, relaxed swallow of air, and smacked his lips. I turned to the nurse but she shook her head.

"It's a reflex," she said. "Newborn babies do it. It doesn't mean a thing, I'm sorry."

That afternoon they moved him to a side ward, a room of his own effectively, since the three other beds were empty. That evening and through the night Sheila and I talked more than we ever had before, unselfconsciously across my father's silent body. I was jet lagged and couldn't have slept. She seemed to be running on some inner fuel of her own.

"So how did you and Giles ever get together?" I asked her. "I've often wondered. You don't mind my asking, do you? You seem an unlikely combination."

"Of course not." She smiled. "We met at an auction. I was finishing my PhD thesis on Hardy and one of the lots included some of his letters. No great revelations, but they'd never been published and there were some lovely little drawings, cartoons

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really, done when he was courting his first wife. They'd cost a fortune now, quite a lot then. I couldn't spare much money but I was determined to have them. I'd raised the biggest loan I could afford, more than I could afford, and sold my car.

"And then this horrible man outbid me. He stood at the side of the auction room, leaning against the wall, hands in his pockets, not even paying much attention. Every time I made an offer he'd give this irritating little nod and the price would go up another fifty pounds. I went higher than I should have done, but in the end I had to stop. I was so angry.

"And the next morning they arrived in a parcel. I still don't know how he found out where I lived. A tenner to one of the auction room staff, I expect – that's how he gets things done."

"Don't you mind?"

She looked down at my father's hand which lay outside the covers in front of her, then touched each of his fingernails one by one with her own middle finger.

"Yes. He'll come back from this trip with a suitcase full of icons or something. And he'll show them to me and tell me about the people he bought them from and make me laugh. But all the time I'll be thinking about the families who cherished these things for generations, prayed to them and gave them up for a handful of hard currency. He'll be thinking about who he can sell them to and how much profit he'll make. Yes I do mind." She sighed. "He can be kind, though. Really he can."

"He gave me my first violin, did you know?" I felt oddly guilty. Illogical, what had I done? "He found it in a junk shop in Bridport and swapped it for some piece of furniture he was hoarding. I must have been... ten or eleven? Something like that. I've no idea how he knew I'd take to it. The old man thought it was a complete waste of time."

I looked down at him, feeling guilty again. Whichever way you turn there's something. How can you save everyone?

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At about four in the morning my father's breathing became harsher. It rattled as if he were snoring, but with a gasping struggle. We listened, expecting every inhalation to lapse into silence, but it went on and on. After a while I went out to the nursing station.

"Do something. Please."

A few minutes later a young man in blue pyjamas appeared, stethoscope flopping out of one pocket. He gave my father an injection, went away again. At once the breathing became easier, quieter, and as we waited it slowly, slowly became fainter and was gone.

I went over to the window and looked out over the town at the pale green wash of the dawn. Behind me Sheila whispered farewell to the departing shade.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Sorry you didn't see your grandchildren. We've tried, really, but... Well... one day."

How did she know what needed saying, after only a few years? I had nothing after a lifetime. I might have played something, but he wouldn't have cared for that.

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"And he never once asked me where it came from. Interested in the problem, but apart from that no curiosity whatsoever. You would have been bursting to know what was going on."

"I know. Weird. Shh, he's coming back."

Bridie's laugh turns into a cough as the bathroom light clicks at the other end of the hallway and Ian pads into the lounge. As usual when he visits my flat, he has taken his shoes off at the front door. Bridie and I have discussed this and come to the conclusion that it is a mark of deference traceable back to a house-proud mum. He regards me as a grownup.

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Bridie has her feet up on the sofa, I am sitting on the floor. The curtains are drawn against the fag end of the winter afternoon. Empty glasses and plates have been stacked to one side and Ian's laptop is on the coffee table, fan whirring. He folds up onto the floor in front of it and shakes the hair out of his eyes.

"Anyway," he says. "It was making an internet connection and uploading files to a website."

Yesterday the band played a midweek gig at a pub in Putney. Today it is gathering its resources for a big New Year's Eve booking at the weekend, which means watching TV and eating and drinking too much, like everyone else. Except for Ian, who has been taking apart the stolen Albion Lettings computer.

"Can we have a look?" Bridie asks.

Ian sits cross-legged and lifts the laptop onto his knees. I slide over and lean one elbow on the seat of the sofa to watch. He runs a web browser, keys in the URL and taps the return key. A rapid musical beeping, familiar by now, a pause and a twittering conversation between two black boxes. Then a dialogue window:

ENTER PASSWORD:

"This is the one. It's a secure site. That's as far as we're going to get, I suspect," he says.

On the off chance I lean over and type in "PASSWORD", hunting and pecking with one finger. You never know. Press return.

ENTER PASSWORD:

"Shame. There must be a way of figuring it out." I am of a generation that expects quick results from technology.

"Pity we don't know more about who we're dealing with." Bridie is more practical. "We could have tried wife's name,

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children's birthdays, all that."

"We know where I found the PC. How about 'Albion'?" I suggest. Ian taps.

ENTER PASSWORD:

"OK. The names on the other letters I got from Giles's filing cabinet. 'Salamander'?"

ENTER PASSWORD:

"Muskrat Rambles'?"

"Someone's a jazz man?"

"Apparently."

ENTER PASSWORD:

"Try 'Crawford'," Bridie says.

ENTER PASSWORD:

"What else do we know? Crawford's mobile number? Does a password have to be a word?"

ENTER PASSWORD:

"Try just 'Muskrat'."

ENTER PASSWORD:

"This is ridiculous. It could be anything. We might as well enter our own names." I lean over again and stab at the key-

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board. “BRIDIE.”

ENTER PASSWORD:

“SIM... Oops, sorry.” Bridie giggles and joins the game while Ian leans back to give us room. “SIMON”.

The dialogue box disappears and a swarm of thumbnail icons populate the screen. The filenames underneath them mean nothing to me.

0512251023.jpg
0512251024.jpg
0512251025.jpg
0512251026.jpg
0512251027.jpg
0512251028.jpg

“Woo! Lucky break.” Bridie is excited.

“That’s impossible. How could my name be...” The game is suddenly much less amusing. “What *are* all those?”

“The ‘.jpg’ on the end means that they’re graphics,” Ian explains. “JPEG gives reasonable compression without losing too much definition. Could be all sorts of things – photographs, scanned images, you name it.”

“Could we see a few?”

“I suppose. We haven’t got a very fast connection. Why don’t you get broadband?” He double-clicks on the first icon.

Estimated time remaining 4 min 35 sec...

I watch the seconds counting down for a while, then get to my feet, gather up the dirty crockery and carry it out to the

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kitchen. Put the kettle on and open a new packet of coffee. When I come back Bridie and Ian are staring at the screen. I lean on the back of the sofa and look over their shoulders.

The picture is in black and white, or rather grey and darker grey, and coarse grained, breaking up into crazed patterns of squares.

"It's you," says Ian.

It certainly is, caught in profile staring intently at something off camera.

He looks at his watch.

"Oh, Hell. I've got to go – I said I'd meet Dee at half past. Do you want to hang onto the laptop? Let me have it back tomorrow?"

At the front door he hops on one leg then the other, slipping his feet back into his trainers, nods and smiles at my thanks then disappears down the stairs taking the steps two at a time.

"Have you ever had a conversation with Dee?" I ask Bridie. "I only ever see her at gigs."

"Couple of times. I don't think they've been together all that long. She's a sweet little thing. Bosses him about something rotten."

"I wonder what they talk about?"

"Don't be catty. I think they shag a lot."

"Fair enough."

We contemplate my portrait on the screen.

"So that gadget at the Albion offices wasn't just detecting movement and sounding the alarm," I say. "It was taking pictures."

"Looks like it." Bridie flips the display back to the ranks of icons. "And the filenames are dates and times, see? Year, month, day... It was taking a shot a minute whenever you walked into view."

"This needs thinking about. Drop the line for now, we can

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always dial up again.”

I go back to the kitchen, make the coffee, return to the living room with two mugs which I set on the floor between us. Then I sit and stare at the wall for a while. In front of me my desk, between two windows looking down into the street, is littered with paper. Neglected correspondence, publicity leaflets, photographs, proofs of CD inserts. The reading lamp, heavily shaded, soaks everything in a strong, creamy light. Another world.

“Did I tell you that we’ve got a late booking for the Sidmouth Festival? Someone pulled out.”

“That’s great! Next year we’ll be first choice.”

“Could be a busy summer.” I watch Bridie shut the laptop and unplug the power lead.

“It must mean something,” she says. “Your name must be the password to that website for a reason. If not, I swear I’ll buy a lottery ticket every week from now on.”

“Mm. Maybe it’s Giles.”

The desk light is reflected like two tiny flares across the green of Bridie’s eyes and I can see the whites all around. She sits with her chin up, waiting for me to continue.

“No, no. Before he died, I mean. This may be something he set up months ago.” I am thinking of the box of fliers and photographs, on the lid there too, my name. I seem to have been more in his thoughts than I ever dreamed.

Bridie relaxes. “Why would he do that?”

“The letters in the box didn’t belong. They were put there deliberately. Hidden there, maybe, or even left on purpose for us to find. They’re pointers, a message if only we could decode it. This may be more of the same.”

“I don’t know. Password SIMON... I’d have expected something more devious.”

“My name was on the box as well.”

“No, the whole thing’s silly. SIMON is rubbish security. As a

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message... Well, of all the websites in all the world, why should you log onto this one?

Why indeed? But I do not like the alternative explanation at all.

"You're right. Let's go back to the beginning. We know that Giles was involved in something illegal."

Bridie laughs. "Just the one thing?"

"One big thing. The police asking questions are not your neighbourhood plods. Whatever local deals he had going, I think there must have been one big project which caught their attention."

Bridie lies back. Her freckles have faded a little, as they always do in the winter. Another world. I lean over and kiss her cheek. She smiles, not opening her eyes.

"What was that for?"

"Reality check. So. It seems likely that he had a partner, or partners."

"Duty free cigarettes, that's supposed to be big nowadays."

"Maybe."

I stare at my cluttered desk again. Underneath it the waste paper basket is overflowing. Next to it, also on the floor, an unread fax curls off the machine. How long has that been there?

I begin again. "So, Giles... dies. Assume these partners still need, I don't know, *access* to the farm. With Giles gone they must have been wondering what was going to happen. But his widow flies back to the States immediately after the funeral, leaving the place empty. Relief all round: false alarm, business as usual – whatever the business is.

"Then out of the blue Giles's little brother turns up, starts hanging round the place, talking to the locals. The partners decide to scare him off. They try two direct attacks, both with interesting frills intended to shake him."

"Did the frills work?" Bridie asks.

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“Oh, yes. Instead of helping me, people I’ve known all my life were staring at me as if I were some kind of leper. Anyway. The brother returns to London with his tail between his legs. For the partners it’s back to normal.”

Bridie grins. “Wishful thinking. A week later the brother’s talking to the help at Salamander Cleaning Services, and a week after *that* he turns up on the security cameras at the Albion offices. Bit of a blow, I should say.”

“Right. Now, what do they think? They can see that I have stumbled across Albion and Salamander somehow, but it must be obvious that I’m blundering about. They need to find out what else I know. They’ve caught me on camera and the PC has gone. Presumably my next move will be to dial up their website myself, see what happens.”

“They change the password to something you may guess.”
Bridie sits up.

“Well, not quite. It doesn’t actually matter whether I manage to log on or not. As things turned out, we did, but it was a fluke. There was nothing there, did you notice? If the filenames showed the dates on which the pictures were taken the only shots there were from Christmas day.

“What they are interested in is the passwords I try to use. Those will tell them a lot about how much we’ve discovered. We had Albion and Salamander. Now they know we also have Muskrat.”

“That can’t be right. If it doesn’t matter whether you succeed in logging on or not, why change the password?”

“That’s the disturbing thing. Someone knows all about me. They know what I’m doing. They can see me following two steps behind and they want me to know they don’t care.”

Bridie starts packing the laptop into its bag. “Whatever they’re doing, by now they’ll certainly know where you live. Get

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your toothbrush, I think you'd better spend New Year at my place."

CHAPTER FIVE

1

The books are in a pile in the middle of the floor. Not a neat stack ready for packing or shelving, but a broken-backed heap, covers splayed like crushed wings. The pages have been ripped out of some of them, others are wrenched and twisted but the strength of the binding has saved them. The contents of the drinks cabinet have been poured over the pile and pages which have not been torn are sticky with sherry and wine. A cast iron doorstep has been pitched into the television screen and there are shards of glass everywhere. Pictures and upholstery have been slashed. The sofa's intestines are hanging out, pale gobs of stuffing spilling onto the carpet. Curtains have been pulled down, rails and all. A large vase has been smashed against the mantelpiece with such force that the marble itself has chipped. Christmas decorations have been ripped to pieces.

Len is standing in front of the fireplace with a book in one

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hand and a child's toy in the other. A rabbit, I think. It is hard to tell because it has no head. He is pale and his hair seems greasy, full of grey. Shaving, he has missed a patch of bristles in the hollow under the corner of his jaw. It would not normally matter, but now he looks shabby and old. A policeman is talking to him, waiting for an answer.

The sudden chaos is like a blow and I stop in the doorway.

"Jesus, Len."

Bridie picks her way through the mess and hugs him. He looks at me over her shoulder and I am sure he does not recognise us immediately but he automatically puts one arm round her. The mutilated animal perches grotesquely beside her head. I was right, it is a rabbit.

"Simon. Simon... thanks, mate. Thanks for coming... It's, er, not good, is it?"

"And you are, sir?" The policeman has his notebook ready.

"Friends. Len phoned us – about the same time as he called you, I should think."

"I shall need names and addresses."

I provide them while Len closes his eyes and rests his chin on Bridie's head. Then he comes back to life.

"Listen, Bridie, Jenny's upstairs, do you think you could...? There's a WPC with her, but a friendly face..." He looks at the waiting constable. "Not that the police... I mean familiar, you know...?"

"So you and your wife arrived home at about 4.30?" The policeman watches Bridie leave, then picks up where he left off.

"Uh... Yeah. That's about right. The boys were still at their gran's, thank goodness. Jen went on up to the front door while I paid off the taxi, but I had the key so she stood on the step waiting for me and we were talking loudly up and down the path. You know, 'Come on, I'm freezing...', that kind of stuff. Then I unlocked the door.

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“The hallway looked perfectly normal. I mean we took our coats off, hung them up, said something about putting the kettle on. Jen went down to the kitchen and I came in here. And there was this. But I didn’t have time to take it in, because there was this bloody great yell from the kitchen. Then I’m running through to the back and I can hear footsteps outside going down the side of the house and the gate banging...”

“How many?”

“What?”

“How many people? From the footsteps, could you tell?”

“Oh. No, not really. More than one. Not a whole gang of them. A couple, maybe. Anyway, when I got to the kitchen it was like this, complete bloody mess, everything tipped out onto the floor. The back door was open and there was Jen clutching this huge carving knife.”

“Had she actually used it?”

“No, of course not.” Len attempts a smile for the first time. “But she was certainly thinking about it. I don’t blame them for running.”

“Hm. Well, let’s say that she surprised them and they escaped through the back door.”

I am beginning to like this policeman. The questions continue for a while, but he already has the essentials. His colleague comes downstairs and they prepare to leave, promising a further visit the following day. I walk with them to the door.

“What are the chances?” I ask.

“Of what? Finding the blokes who did it? Getting back the stuff they nicked?” He is older than I first thought and looks tired. “About zero on both counts, I’d say. Your friends have been lucky. The buggers had only just started, one in the kitchen and one in the front room by the look of it. Upstairs hasn’t been touched. Places I’ve seen have been left with baths overflowing through the ceiling and obscenities

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scrawled across the walls in shit.”

The WPC nods. “Your friend’s wife says she saw them disappearing out of the back door as she stepped into the kitchen. If she’d arrived a few seconds earlier it could have been a very different story. They’ve been lucky. Tell them.”

Going back to the living room, I decide not to. Not yet, at any rate. This is not the time. Len is still standing where I left him, looking defeated.

“They want a list of what’s missing,” he says. “How the hell do I know what’s missing? Look at it. I can hardly tell what half this stuff is. I haven’t got the energy.”

“It’ll be easier if we clean up a bit,” I say. “You make a start on the books. Any that are undamaged can go back on the shelves. Stack the rest over there. I’ll get a dustpan.” It does not much matter what we do, it seems to me, as long as we do something.

A couple of hours later things are better. Len has agreed to move everything that is damaged out of the house entirely in the hope that what is left will appear to be relatively normal. He has found some large plastic recycling boxes and the books are in those, piled in the garden shed. The wreck of the television set has been dumped. Blankets have been thrown over eviscerated sofa and armchairs. Pictures have joined books. I have swept up the broken glass, sponged the carpet and moved a rug in from the hall to cover the worst of the stains.

The room still looks whipped, though. The shelves are two-thirds empty, the hooks vacant on the walls. Windows are naked to the darkness outside and plain, cream-coloured woollen blankets drape the furniture.

“Jen’s asleep,” Bridie says, coming downstairs. “She’s pretty upset. I don’t think it’s running into them in the kitchen, so much as... She says she feels like she’s been raped.”

“I want to kill something,” says Len. “Let’s go down the offie

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and give one of those little turds a good kicking.” There are benches opposite the local off licence and kids from round about hang out there in the evenings.

“You think it was them?”

“They’ll do. I’ve spent the best part of twenty years doing this place up. Somebody’s got to pay.”

“Well, stick it to the insurance company.”

He snorts and the moment passes. I am surprised he can be so restrained. This house has been a refuge to me for nearly as long as I have been in London. I look at the destruction and feel sick.

When I first met Len the building was still semi-derelect, although by then he had already owned it for a couple of years. The whole of the red brick terrace, which backed onto Hampstead Heath, had been allowed to run down - since the war, probably. There were cracks in the walls and beetles in the floors. He had bought the end property cheaply with his share of the profits from the only hit record his name ever appeared on. The band turned out to be one-shot wonders and their manager was too surprised to bank the money for himself.

We ran into each other on a building site in Tooting. I was humping bricks to pay the rent. He was there to learn plumbing. Nobody knew what to make of him, a tall, lanky figure with hair in his eyes and a perpetual roll-up, always dressed in black. One of the chippies claimed he’d seen him on Top of the Pops, but he did his share of the work and he bought his round on Fridays.

In the years since then the place has blossomed into a rich, warm haven of wood and fabrics and smoky colours, Len doing most of the work himself, patiently learning the skills one by one. By now the rest of the street has been gentrified and the pavement is lined with Audis and Mercs, so that the house at the end of the terrace has a pleasantly raffish look. The first time I

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went to a party at Len's place the guests were a bizarre mixture of bricklayers and rock musicians and many of both still drop by.

Bridie goes down to the corner shop for tea bags and milk and we all take a break before starting on the wasteland of the kitchen. Len hugs the mug and looks round.

"They want a list of what's missing," he repeats. "But d'you know, now we've cleared up a bit I can't see anything. Plenty broken, nothing gone."

"What about your kit?"

"No, that's all down in the hut. First thing I checked." Len rehearses in a heavily soundproofed shed at the end of the garden and keeps most of his instruments there. "It's as if smashing stuff was the point. Not stealing it."

2

It is obvious now. With a clutch of albums behind me I can look back and see that none of us had a clue when we made that first one. The blind leading the short sighted.

I hired the studio for the weekend and the recording went on late into the evening on Saturday. We had rehearsed for as long as we could in our usual church halls, but playback is a different matter. Ian and I took turns to sit behind the desk with the sound engineer, watching everything he did, and between tracks everyone crowded into the booth and argued.

"I still think you should bring me up a bit more. Bridie's swamping the whole thing."

"Her voice is supposed to dominate, Steve. You're providing texture in the chorus."

"Bass line's still not right, Chris. In the bridge there, you need to hold back very slightly on the second beat of each bar. Bom... *bom* ba-ba-ba bom... See what I mean? Can you give it

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another go?"

Chris, still our bass player at that time, smiled amiably and shambled back to the microphone. He was a tall, rather plump young man, with a slow moving sleepy look, shirt permanently hanging out, hair on end. He put on a pair of round Lennon glasses and peered at the manuscript paper spread out on the floor.

"From the second verse, OK? Quiet, you lot. We'll be doing the whole track again in a minute."

"Aw, do we have to?"

"Yes."

More of the same the next morning. By mid-afternoon on Sunday all the songs were as good as they were going to get. Steve, Chris and Ian were starting to become jaded and I sent them packing. The engineer went off to deal with paperwork. Bridie and I hung about while Len dismantled his kit. He had brought a battered old concertina along, unused so far that weekend. I picked it up and started idly squeezing out lingering chords.

"Can you play this thing?" I asked him.

"Yeah, about. Don't ask me to do a hornpipe."

"Let's try something, then. Leave all that for a minute."

I pulled some creased sheets of music paper from my fiddle case and handed one to Bridie.

"It's a sort of... lament. Home gone, friends gone, time passing, getting old."

"Ah. Usual stuff, then."

"Right. I've been tinkering with it on and off for ages. Can you get the melody from that? The last section's a bit different – the fiddle comes up there and you do a counter thing in the background."

Bridie went off into a corner and started humming to herself. I passed Len a sheet.

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“You start it off. Very quiet E minor drone. Then I come in, then Bridie. Look OK?”

“Only one way to find out.”

We tried out different sections, played rather tentatively through the whole thing, re-wrote part of the introduction, played it again. Then I started the machines running and we did it for real.

The studio was dark apart from the shrouded lights over the music desks. Bits of equipment loomed in the half light. Instrument stands, a stack of speakers. And I could feel them listening from behind the hardware, leaning on their shields, squatting against the wall, head down and bone-weary, smelling of sweat and leather and mud.

*Too many battles, too many loads,
Grey with the dust of too many roads
To a bed on a cold hillside.*

At the end we sat in silence for a couple of seconds, then Bridie laughed and whispered:

“Wow.”

We left that in on the album. Not much more to say, really. After that we ran out of money.

3

It is a clear, crisp January morning and I decide to walk up to Len's place. I usually do unless I have a lot to carry. Only twenty minutes. It takes that long to find somewhere to park.

I am back at my own flat now, after a week on Bridie's sofa. Coming out of the front door, I glance as usual at a house two or three doors down from mine, still covered with scaffolding

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erected before Christmas. The builders are excavating the drains and the narrow front yard is heaped with yellow clay. They have tracked the mud out across the pavement to a skip stationed crookedly by the kerb. This is half full of lath and plaster from the ceilings they tore down a few days ago. Locals have added several bin liners of rubbish and a collection of paint cans and twisted bicycle wheels. The cooker which appeared yesterday has vanished again during the night.

The man who lives below me worries about the scaffolding. Anyone with access to the flat roof could make their way along most of the street. Even during the day they could probably manage it unnoticed behind the parapet. I think my neighbour is fretting too much. The builders are careful to take their ladders away when they are not on site, and in any case I am on the top floor, so I should be the one biting my nails. This is London life, get used to it.

I take the road opposite which leads north up a hill, past a chapel, Baptist I think. I see the congregation on Sunday mornings, strong, handsome black women for the most part, beautifully dressed, hats and all. I often open my windows to hear the singing. JESUS LOVES YOU, according to a poster, in white letters a foot high on a scarlet background. I walk on by.

There is a junction at the top of the hill. The baker on the corner has his back doors open and heat rolls out as I pass. One of his lads is stacking metal trays of loaves. The cross street is thronged with a small market. The traders are wrapped up in padded jackets and woollen hats, with knitted fingerless gloves so that they can still twirl paper bags and handle change. A couple of them wave as I pass.

Beyond the market is an estate of low-rise flats. For reasons now lost in the murk of local politics they were not sold off during the 80s and 90s. Covered balconies run along each of the four levels and front doors open onto them at intervals. Here

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and there push chairs and children's bikes lean against the railings. On the second floor there is a washing machine. I pass through a couple of barren squares. The grass is cratered and tracked but prettier than usual this morning, with a scattering of frost.

Then a Victorian church and over a busy road. Up ahead is another junction, with a road that runs parallel to the edge of the Heath. Len's terrace is about a hundred yards along on the left. I turn the corner. Outside the end house a man is leaning against the bonnet of a parked car, arms folded, looking at the ground. As I come closer he hears my footsteps and looks up, but I already know who it is.

"Mr Coltraine."

"Detective Inspector Randall. You're a long way from home."

"I get about. As you see."

The door on the driver's side of the car opens and a woman gets out. She is bundled up in a black sweater and a denim jacket, but she looks quite slight. She has straight, dark hair swinging on either side of a small chin and flat cheekbones.

"This is Detective Sergeant Mellor," says Randall. "ID Sergeant. Mr Coltraine likes to see ID."

She holds up her warrant card, but the car is between us and I cannot make out a thing.

"I'm visiting friends," I say, nodding towards the house. "They were burgled yesterday. Are you interested in the victims of burglaries, Inspector, as well as car accidents?"

"I'm interested in all your associates, sir."

"Associates? I seem to be slipping down the social ladder. First I'm a witness, now I have associates. What's next? Accomplices?"

"I don't know. Have you anything in mind that might require accomplices?"

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Randall is looking me in the eye, poker faced. Policemen do not have a sense of humour, according to Matt. I wonder. Does he know about our efforts during the holiday? How could he?

"My solicitor has advised me that he should be present if I speak to you again."

"That's up to you, of course sir. Mind you, your solicitor is 200 miles away. Perhaps we could go for another walk. On the Heath, maybe? I'm sure your... friends won't miss you for half an hour."

"My solicitor was also curious about your preference for fresh air."

"This is Matthew Webster, I take it? Of Cummings, Blicckett and Jones in Beaminster?" He *has* been checking. "I'm sure I can find an office to hold our conversation in if you wish, Mr Coltraine. But you will find the open air more congenial, I assure you."

We walk along the street for a number of yards until we come to an opening where a footpath leads between houses towards trees. Signs tell us not to ride our bikes and remind us to clean up after our dogs. Sergeant Mellor locks the car and follows a few paces behind. There is a chicane of metal barriers to stop cyclists who cannot read, then head-high wooden fencing on either side. The fence on the right smells of creosote. Some late maintenance carried out over Christmas. A single streetlamp on a concrete post halfway along the passage is glowing feebly against the daylight.

We emerge through another set of overlapping barriers onto Hampstead Heath. An avenue of naked London planes lines a broad path leading to the top of the hill. Most of the frost has gone, but there are still white patches here and there in hollows overshoot by the sunlight. Silvered lines behind solitary trees are being whittled away as the day moves on. Another path breaks off to the right and skirts a running track. There are signposts

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pointing to refreshments, toilets, tennis courts. Randall sets off up the hill and I follow.

“So what *is* your interest in the burglary?” I ask, lengthening my stride to catch up with him. My breath puffs on the air.

“Don’t give a toss about it,” he replies. Then, over his shoulder: “What do we know about the burglary at number eight Roderick Terrace, Sergeant?”

“999 call at 16.52 yesterday.” Mellor trots a few paces to come up on my right. “Entry via the kitchen window. Interrupted by owners of the property returning unexpectedly at about 16.30. Intruders escaped through the back door as the owners came in the front. Small amount of damage, not much taken.”

“Peanuts,” says Randall.

“Not to my friends.”

“Insurance will pay the bills, surely? No. I am curious about you, Mr Coltraine. Specifically, I would like to know where you were and what you were doing on the night of September 14 last year.”

“What on earth for? That was months ago. I was here in London, probably. I’d have to check my diary.”

“And October 26?”

“Same again. I think. We had a gig in Southampton round about then.”

“How about December 7?”

I thought the dates sounded familiar. They are the last three listed in Crawford’s letter to Giles. December 7 was the night of my adventure with the whisky bottle. There is no way I am going to share that with this smartarse.

“Mr Coltraine? December 7?”

“I was in Dorset.”

“At you brother’s farm?”

“Yes.”

“Alone?”

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“Yes.”

“Like pulling teeth, isn’t it Sergeant?” Randall waits for a moment to see whether I am going to elaborate, then sighs. “All right. What did you *do* at your brother’s farm on the night of December 7?”

“Ate, read, listened to music. Walked the dog.”

“What *time* did you walk the dog?”

“How should I know? Dogs are always wanting to go out.” Out of the corner of my eye I see Mellor smile, but she drops her head at once and her hair swings forward to hide her face.

“Before you ate?” Randall persists. “After you ate? Last thing before you went to bed? All three?”

“All right. I remember taking her out last thing. I think it was last thing. Elevenish, something like that.”

“About eleven o’clock. And did you see anything unusual, hear anything unusual?”

“No.”

“Nothing at all?”

“Nothing at all.” Which is true. Sort of.

We are near the top of Parliament Hill. In a hollow on the far side people are flying kites. We cannot see them but gossamer lines curve up from behind the trees. A couple are delta-winged stunt kites which make a ripping sound as they bank and dive. Randall gestures to a path which will take us across below the brow of the hill and back down to the tennis courts.

“Last time we met, Mr Coltraine, we spoke about your brother’s business activities. Buying and selling, you told me. You mentioned books, classic cars...” Randall pauses, then, as if he cannot believe what he is saying, “...telephone boxes.”

I nod.

“Even allowing for the normal amount of under the counter dealing,” Randall continues. “It seems to me that he had an unusually high standard of living for someone in his line. In my

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experience, the serious money is only ever made by specialists. And precious few of those. They normally have a lot of capital behind them. General traders are always small beer.”

“I told you before, he was good at what he did.”

“Not that good. And in point of fact, I don’t think he had as much money as he pretended until, what? Three, four years ago? Enough for many people, certainly. But he did like to flash it around, didn’t he?”

“Inspector, my brother is dead.”

“Yes, he is, and we mustn’t speak ill. Pity we can’t say the same for his business. Tell me about his business, Mr Coltraine. I think you know far more than you’re letting on.”

“You said it yourself. Books...”

“Oh, do me a favour, please! Do I have to start trawling through bank accounts? I would prefer it if you’d save me the trouble. Your brother owned a farmhouse in Dorset – getting to be one of the most expensive counties in England, according to the supplements. Land. Four cars in the garage. All from selling telephone boxes?”

“He inherited the farm from my father.”

“Yes, he did. And he spent thousands on it afterwards. No credit, mind you. Cash down every time. No mortgage. No debts. Tell me about his business, Mr Coltraine.”

I stop walking and turn on him. “I’ve had enough of this. I don’t have to answer questions. I don’t even know who you are. You pop up at opposite ends of the country, flash your warrant cards around, but you might be a pair of moonlighting parking attendants for all I know. What part of the police force are you with? What’s *your* business?”

Mellor looks surprised. She thought I knew. Randall studies his shoes again, considering.

Then: “Tell him, Sergeant.” And he walks on.

Mellor watches his receding back for a moment, then turns

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to me.

“The Inspector and I are attached to an Immigration Crime Team,” she says. “Police and Immigration Service mainly, but Customs, the Foreign Office and the security services all have fingers in the pie. We investigate organised crime. As the name suggests, our particular brief is illegal immigration. In this case, people trafficking.”

4

The Dorchester Show is serious.

Every year there is a funfair, with a carousel. The carved horses are drenched in scarlet and gold leaf and swoop round on their poles. Children laugh and dads clench their teeth, while brothers and sisters too tiny to ride stare and point. There are food stalls and beer tents. Piglets doze between the teats of titanic, coarse-haired, lethargic sows. Terriers yelp and lunge. Hawks glare with mad, yellow, exiled eyes. Fastidious ponies pick their way between the cow pats.

But this is froth. Everywhere you look, moving through the dawdling, gawping crowds, there are serious men. Some wear long stock coats and caps. Their poker gaze moves slowly from animal to animal and the lines in their faces are from calculation, not laughter. Others sweat in tweed jackets, ties and cavalry twill, even on the warmest day. They move briskly with papers in their hands, nod, point and give instructions.

In the traders' tents the stallholders strive to catch your eye, willing you to stop and talk. It does not matter what they are selling - wine, cheeses, tastefully mounted photographs of your children - all they want you to do is stop. That done you will find it hard to move on without surrendering a piece of your life. Name, number, sign up to the mailing list. A taste now, a case

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later. Their need is so powerful you take a card, promise to ring and move away feeling guilty.

Outside, machinery towers over the fairways, gleaming in primary colours, red and green and yellow. Nobody takes your elbow here. The customers know what they want and the salesmen know who is going to buy. Their meetings are about the detail: extras, discounts, maintenance contracts. They have probably been going on for weeks and both sides know each other well. They retire together into hospitality tents, pour, add ice.

To locate Giles, all I had to do was follow the sound of the cubes clinking.

"Simon, you found us. Well done. Meet Hugo. This is my brother Simon, just off the train."

I shook hands with a middle-aged man in a dark blue suit. His shirt had wide pink stripes and a white collar, and every now and then his jacket swung open to reveal tycoon braces. He fetched glasses and more ice and I wondered how he had managed to find his way across the showground without getting crap on his Oxfords.

"What can I give you, Simon? Wine? G&T?"

"Straight tonic," Giles interrupted. "He'll be driving later on."

I grimaced at Hugo. "Looks like I'm designated."

The tent belonged to an estate agent, a familiar name but not one I had ever had dealings with. Adverts in the Sunday papers did not give prices. If you had to ask, you could not afford it. An area in front was cordoned off, with two or three tables under broad sunshades and shrubs in pots scattered about. A young man in shirtsleeves and red waistcoat hovered discreetly, drawing a cork now and then. As I watched he unhooked the length of white rope across the entrance to admit another couple. Hugo seemed to be expecting them.

"Here we go," he said and fixed a smile to his face.

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The woman was about thirty and not conventionally pretty. Her mouth was wide and her nose pointed and when she laughed she showed a slight gap between her front teeth. She had something, though. Like the Wife of Bath, I thought as I watched the waiter watching her. Hugo could hardly keep his hands to himself. He pulled out her chair, offered to take her coat, conjured up glasses, poured wine. She thanked him, said she would keep her jacket on for the time being, asked for water, all in a pleasantly husky voice. Her possibly husband was much older, the wrong side of sixty, I thought. He looked fit, though, with a genuine tan and teeth which, if not his own, had cost a small mortgage. His suit made Hugo look shabby. They settled themselves at the table next to ours, within earshot.

Giles was sitting with his back half turned towards them. He sorted through a selection of brochures spread on the table between us and as if we were in the middle of a discussion said:

“...this looks more promising.” He pushed one towards me. “I saw it on Hugo’s desk earlier. Don’t think he wanted me to read it, but I twisted his arm.”

I picked up the glossy folder and saw a photograph of a large, four-square Palladian house with stables off to one side and a beech-lined drive curving up to the front door. *Now what? I thought we were going to talk about borrowing a few thousand to get the album finished.* Giles smiled and gave me a familiar look. *Earn your keep.* I opened the brochure.

“Eight bedrooms? What do you want eight bedrooms for?” When in doubt, ask questions.

“Look at the drawings in the back.” Giles took the prospectus from me and turned a few pages. “There you are. I think you could get two studios into the stable block, three if you converted these outbuildings as well. The house could provide accommodation when people came down to record.”

The woman at the next table glanced in our direction. Giles

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was folding the brochure to get the plan of the property on top and as he did so the photograph of the house flipped briefly across her line of sight. She looked away and asked Hugo to repeat something he had been saying.

Ab. OK, I can run with that. I made a show of examining the paperwork.

"I don't know, Giles. Seems to me it's going to fall between two stools. Small to medium-sized bands are the bread and butter of the recording business, and they're all trying to keep costs down. If they stay overnight at all it'll be in a B&B somewhere."

A well-worn routine from when we were much younger. Giles and I would prop up a bar and he would try to flog me something. I used to make cautious, sensible, *boring* replies to all his sales talk until the drinkers around us could not stand it any longer.

"Come on, Giles. If the speed limit's 70 why do I need a bike that will do 120?"

Funny how people's minds work. If I had been dead keen they would not have taken much notice, thought *mug* and ordered another pint. But there was something about my reluctance, coupled with the possibility that I might be persuaded, that started the competitive juices flowing. Six times out of ten a complete stranger would butt in and end up buying the thing for half again what it was worth.

"You might reel in a top line band, what, once or twice a year?" I said. It was all coming back to me. "And then the place wouldn't be nearly large enough for the hangers on. Can you imagine one of the big mobs cramming themselves into eight bedrooms? With crews like they have even the roadies expect en suite."

"No, no, you haven't got the point." Giles leaned closer and dropped his voice a little. Just enough to draw attention to what

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he was saying. "This is not going to be for the hangers on. It's going to be exclusive. A place to come to work in peace and quiet."

"Give me a break. That lot don't run on peace and quiet."

"They do sometimes. Everyone does. And that's where you score. They use the London studio and then this is offered as something special, a sort of retreat."

Oh Lord, now I've got a London studio. "Now look, I started out as a session player, and basically that's what I am still..."

"That's it. A working musician. They respect that. When word gets round that you're running this place they'll take it seriously."

The woman at the next table glanced in our direction again. *Please God, don't let her have anything to do with the music business. I'll never work again.*

"I don't know, Giles," I said. "It's too ambitious. What we need is a farmhouse, with maybe a couple of cottages if you want to follow up the accommodation bit. Apart from anything else, a place that size is going to need live-in staff. Also, it's bound to be listed. We'd have no end of trouble getting the work done and it would cost a bomb."

There were signs of movement at the next table. Hugo's neck was pink and his body language was reluctant, a little embarrassed. Not the dense hooray he seemed, I thought, and I wondered whether he dressed like that when he was off duty. He held the woman's chair then excused himself and came over to our table.

"Mr Coltraine," he said to me. "I'm terribly sorry but I'm afraid we're not going to be able to continue our discussion this afternoon. My clients here are on a rather tight schedule and they've asked me to show them a particular property."

"Oh. Well, that's a pity. I was hoping to look at one or two places myself." I rose and shook his outstretched hand.

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“Perhaps tomorrow?” he said. “I’ll tell my secretary to block out the whole morning.”

“There’s no hurry I suppose.” I looked at Giles. “Tomorrow morning OK for you?”

The waiter unhooked the perimeter rope, replaced it behind them, brought a fresh bottle of wine to our table, more tonic for me and a bucket of ice. We poured, sipped, watched half the county go by.

“Thanks,” Giles said. “Well done.”

“Like riding a bicycle.” I said. “Who were they?”

“He’s a defence contractor. Crows nests for battleships or something. They got married about six months ago, now they’re looking for a country place.”

“Novelty beginning to wear off, then.”

“Possibly. It’s all a favour for Hugo.”

“Nothing in it for you?”

“Well, he’ll owe me one, naturally. Nothing major, but handy to have in reserve. That’s the way it works.”

The other half of the county passed in the sun.

“So,” Giles said. “You need more cash to get this album finished. What happened? Did you get the sums wrong?”

“I suppose.” I thought about it. “Actually, no, not really. I had the sums all worked out but we started too soon – there never was going to be enough money.”

Giles snorted. “So you went ahead anyway, just hoped for the best.”

“Didn’t have much option. The band were working well together, lots of gigs coming in, good repertoire – a nice mix of covers and original stuff. Everyone had projects of their own, so we were banking a good percentage of the fees.”

“But...”

“But. It’s all about dynamics. From the financial point of view we should have waited another year, but everything was

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balanced right and it wouldn't have stayed that way. We needed to make the album, I can't explain it better than that."

"I don't understand why you didn't sign up with one of the record companies. You must have had offers, surely?"

"A couple," I admitted. "But it's my band. I want to keep it that way."

Giles nodded. "Good. Fifty thousand do you?"

"Plenty." Much more than we needed, in fact, and I felt a faint fluttering of alarm.

"If you're going to borrow money, make sure you borrow enough. Basic principle."

"Another one? How many are there?"

"Loads." Giles grinned at me. "Here's one more: never spend your own money when you can spend somebody else's. You're doing the right thing."

"Mm. When do you want it back, and what's the interest?"

"It's an investment, not a loan. Twenty per cent of the first five albums."

"Oh no, nothing doing."

"Why not? You should feel flattered that I have so much confidence in you."

But I did not. What I felt was foreboding.

5

"So how come you aren't in irons somewhere?" Bridie wants to know. "In the deepest cell under Paddington Green?"

We are sitting outside an Italian café in a road leading up to Primrose Hill. The day is still clear and dry but the streets are full of shadows again and the cold is creeping back. High over our heads the chimneys may be catching the last of the sun, but down here lights are coming on in shop windows. Most people

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are choosing tables indoors and behind us the window is fogged with condensation. Polystyrene cups keep the cappuccino hot.

“Pass. Randall seemed to lose interest. He may have been trying it on, pretending to know more than he did in the hope that I would trip over my own feet. Devious bastard.”

“Do you suppose Giles really was involved in something like that?”

“Huh. What do you think?”

“I take it that’s a yes.”

The road is wide here, with little traffic. What cars there are park end on to the kerb. This and the clustering cafés and restaurants give the place a Parisian feel. The pavements are broad and uneven and above the shops balconies look down on passers by. People are beginning to draw their curtains.

“Come on, let’s go up on the hill before it gets dark.” I feel the need to be moving. “Bring that with you.”

I ease the plastic lid back onto my cup and a little gush of brown froth wells up through the pinhole in the middle. We sidle between a van and a Mini and cross the road, skirting a greengrocer’s display that is spilling out onto the paving. Two women with green tabards over sweaters are tidying up boxes and carrying them back into the shop. A string of taxis is coming up from Regent’s Park, turning off to follow the contour of the hill, and we hover for a few seconds on a traffic island before crossing to a gate in the railings.

At night my favourite route to the top of Primrose Hill is along one of the paths that follow the gentle slope at the back. As you approach the benches on the crest of the hill the lights of the City and the West End burst on you suddenly. During the day it is best to climb the steep face overlooking Regent’s Park. It is worth the effort. In the foreground is the park itself, then BT Tower, London Eye, Westminster, St Paul’s and the pinnacles of the City, with Canary Wharf in the distance beyond.

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And swirling around and through it all is the sound of the traffic and the people, millions of them, going about their business as they have done without a break for hundreds of years, through fire and blitz and terrorist atrocity.

Bridie and I sit on a bench and prise the lids off our coffees again. The trees below stretch up through the blue and grey dusk and eddies of mist slide over the grass. The lights are coming on in offices and houses and, dimly at first, along the footpaths.

"It's not going to go away, is it?" Bridie says.

"No."

"I mean, it was a good laugh, crashing the offices and all that. It didn't seem serious. But it is."

"Mm."

"You could walk. Just leave it. That's what they want, isn't it? This... gang. Is that really how the police refer to them? It seems so melodramatic."

"They probably think of themselves as entrepreneurs," I say and she laughs.

"But you *could* drop it," she persists a minute later. "It's not as if we've found out much. *You* could go away. Let it all carry on happening to other people."

I consider this. I could. Never go back to Dorset, never see Matt or Sheila again. Exchange cards at Christmas and a week after missed birthdays until they lose my address. That is what happens when people die. Personal alignments change. They would be saddened, but not surprised. I could forget the downs and the chalk and the shingle. Let the people I grew up with go on thinking of me as an evil scumbag. I could forget humiliation on my hands and knees in the village street. Stop wondering what happened to Giles.

"No you couldn't," Bridie says. "Let's go home."

Fifteen minutes later we turn into my street. Scaffolding is still in place, mud still tracked across the pavement. Grease-

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flecked kitchen cabinets have been added to the rubble in the skip. I turn into the corner shop to get some milk.

"Hey, man, where've you bin?" The owner, Khaled, rings up the sale, produces change. "You missed all the excitement."

"What was that?"

"Those idiot builders down there thought they'd bust a gas main. Some guy passin' by swore he could smell it. They was all out of there like shit out of a donkey, man. You should've seen it."

"And had they?"

"Nah. False alarm. But they had the gas company out and everythin'. When they got here the guy who said he could smell it had done a runner. Bunch of plonkers if you ask me."

Bridie and I continue to my front gate, where she has left her car.

"Drink?"

"Just ten minutes, then I've got to get going."

I open the front door, pick up the post, riffle through it and drop a handful of envelopes on the mat outside the ground floor flat. Bridie follows me upstairs.

"Is Len going to be all right, do you think?" she asks. "How were they today?"

"Well, I couldn't spend as much time there as I planned, what with bloody Randall, but I'd say they're going to be fine. Jen's cheered up a bit. And their boys think the whole thing's a hoot, apparently. They got a ride in a police car this morning. Len says most of the damage is superficial, and he thinks he may be able to get new carpet for the whole of the ground floor out of the insurance company."

We reach the top of the stairs. I fumble the key into the lock and turn it. Shove the door open with my shoulder. And stop. In the hall, in the middle of the floor, is a briefcase.

Bridie looks past my arm. "Have you got a new one?" she

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says. "What on earth for? You never used it."

"No," I say. "I mean, no I haven't got a new briefcase."

"It looks like the old one."

"I think it is the old one."

"But I left that..."

"Yes, you did. Let's go back down and see if Khaled will let us use his phone."

6

The explosives expert who clammers out of the back of the unmarked blue van in front of my house looks like a tethered blimp. He wears a hugely padded vest which starts high under his chin and narrows down to a strap fastened between his legs, more stuffing round his arms and thighs and a helmet with a thick plastic visor. This is raised as he bobs down onto the pavement. It projects from his forehead like a duck's beak. Under his helmet he has on a headset with a stalk microphone. A cable trails behind him, paid out by one of his colleagues. Radio signals can trigger detonators, I learn later.

The small gathering of journalists and hangers-on at the end of the street stirs to attention as he clicks open the front gate and mounts the steps to the front door. The last thing we see is his hand going up to flip down his visor.

He appears to be keeping up a running commentary for the benefit of fellow experts in the van. From where Bridie and I stand on the opposite side of the road I can see one of them putting on a pair of headphones. His face is lit dimly from below as if by an instrument panel. Nothing happens for about twenty minutes. In the press pack a shoulder-held television camera focuses upwards on my sitting room windows, then pans down and zooms in our direction. I step back into the shadow of the

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uniformed policeman who has been assigned to keep an eye on us.

The man in the van removes the headphones, stretches and climbs out. He takes out a packet of cigarettes, puts one in his mouth and starts searching his pockets for his lighter. He is still looking when his colleague emerges from the front door, helmet in hand now. His head looks absurdly small on top of the bulky body. He nods at his partner and mutters something.

“Aw Jesus, a bloody hoax,” says our guardian PC. The Michelin man must hear him because he changes direction and rolls over to where we are standing.

He leans close. “I like hoaxes,” he says. “A false alarm never killed anyone yet.”

7

“What I don’t understand,” the policeman says, “Is why exactly you should jump to the conclusion that someone had left a bomb in your flat. People don’t, as a rule.”

“Don’t jump to conclusions, or don’t leave bombs?” I say. He scowls at me.

“We weren’t entirely wrong, were we?” says Bridie. The three of us look down at a scatter of Polaroids on the table between us. They show an open briefcase, from several angles. It is empty, apart from a yellow Postit stuck to the inside of the lid. One of the pictures is a close-up of the note. It says:

BOOM!

Khaled has been having the time of his life. The street has

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been closed off, neighbours evacuated from houses on either side and the man downstairs has come back from work to find his home a war zone. Now, well after midnight, things have returned more or less to normal, except that my flat is littered with dirty cups, some of them with cigarette ends drowning in dregs of instant coffee.

"You admit that it is your briefcase." We have covered this ground several times.

"Yes. But I lost it. Before Christmas."

"Where did you leave it?"

"If I knew that it wouldn't be lost."

"You didn't report it missing."

"No. It wasn't worth much. There was nothing of value in it."

"It did contain your address, presumably."

"Presumably."

"But nothing to suggest that your flat might be worth breaking into?"

I spread my hands. "It isn't worth breaking into."

"Let alone bombing." The policeman has the air of a goldfish rounding the curve of its bowl and recognising the sunken galleon. "Is there anyone who hates you sufficiently to plant a device in your flat? Do you have enemies?"

"No. I think I'd know if I did."

"Then why, when you saw the briefcase, did you immediately think 'bomb'?"

"Because that's what people do nowadays. It shouldn't have been here. It certainly shouldn't have been sitting in the middle of the hallway. I wasn't about to flip it open myself. What was I *supposed* to do?"

"Are any of your friends practical jokers?"

"I don't know anyone mad enough to fake a gas leak so that they can shin up a bunch of scaffolding in the confusion. Let

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alone crawl along the roof and break the bathroom window to get in.”

“No.” He has had enough, gets to his feet and scoops up the photographs, turning them so that they are all the same way round. “And frankly, Mr Coltraine, the only thing that stops me running the pair of you in right now is that someone does seem to have been mad enough. Two people, in fact. One to distract the builders, the other to do the climbing. We’ll continue this tomorrow.”

“I liked the Michelin man better,” Bridie says a few minutes later, starting to clear up the debris.

8

Bridie stays the night and chastely shares my duvet. I wake half an hour before the alarm clock sounds and feel the feather touch of her breathing on my back. She is off early, booked to record an advertising jingle.

I finish clearing up, answer several phone calls with “No comment” and eventually leave the receiver off the hook. The man below has written me a stiff note and left it on the stairs. The hacks have been doorstepping him too. At this rate I will have to leave London as well as Dorset.

The front door buzzer goes in the hall. I lean down to the grille and press the speaker button.

“Piss off. I’ve got nothing to say.”

“This is Sergeant Mellor.”

“Sorry. Come on up. Don’t let any of the vultures in.”

Mellor is still wearing the denim jacket she had on yesterday. Different sweater, though: red today. She looks round with what appears to be genuine curiosity – not something I am used to in policemen. I seem to have met a lot of policemen recently.

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I say as much to her and she turns away from my bookshelves. "Coincidence, do you think?"

"Unlikely."

"You're probably right." She smiles. "Still, you're off the hook on the explosives thing. For the time being. The press are losing interest, too. Only a couple of guys sitting in their cars now – their editors will find them something else soon. The rumour last night was that you had some kind of bomb factory up here."

"What's the word today?"

"Practical joke turned sour."

"Your boss's doing, I suppose?"

"Well. He had to invoke somebody with more clout, but essentially, yes."

"Why?"

She drops into an armchair. "What do you know about people trafficking?" she says. "In general terms, I mean. As a member of the public who listens to the news."

"Where's Randall?"

"Gone back to Dorset. What do you know about people trafficking?"

"Is this going to be a long session?"

"Could be."

"I'll make some coffee."

I go out into the kitchen. I drink too much coffee. Only ten in the morning and this will be my third. The ritual is the thing. Grind the beans. Pour half an inch of water over the grounds and leave them for a few seconds to swell. Addictive behaviour, all of it. The aroma-rich steam mists the sides of the cafetière and I lean forward to catch it in my nostrils. Rituals hold the days together sometimes.

Mellor is sitting where I left her, but she has been watching me through the open doorway.

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“Black’s fine, thanks,” she says, and takes a mug. “Well?”

“Not a lot.” I sigh. “OK, then. Families camping in container lorries, clinging on through the Channel Tunnel under railway carriages. Headline stuff.”

“And wrong. The poor sods under the trains are do-it-yourself illegals. Traffickers are something else. Friendly enough to start with – people with contacts, people who can help. Their victims start the journey willingly. They believe they’ll find work at this end and money to send back, or they’re relieved to escape whatever it is they are running away from. They’re grateful.

“Then they arrive in this country and find themselves between the millstones. They’re intimidated, starved, raped; forced into pornography, prostitution and manual labour, with the ring keeping all their earnings. They’re terrified of the pimps and gang masters that own them, terrified of going to the authorities, terrified of reprisals against their families at home. Many of them have left their own countries illegally in any case, so there’s no help there. We’re talking about slavery, alive and well and living in a street near you.”

“Come on, people would notice.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you? The men who call the numbers they find on cards in phone boxes, you’d think they would notice. When they get up to the room and find a half-starved girl with no knickers, no English and wheals across her back. But they’re after something a bit more kinky than their wives will put up with, so they close their eyes. Of course people notice. They don’t care.”

“How did you get into this line of policing? Do you mind my asking?”

“My father taught English in Hong Kong. Not that it’s any of your business. My mother was Chinese, so were most of the children I played with. I grew up speaking Cantonese.”

“Must be useful.”

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“Yes. I always knew I’d come back to England eventually, so did my friends. They were very jealous. I used to say ‘back’ to the UK and talk about ‘going home’ even then, when I’d never set foot in the place. Then when I was about eighteen we finally did fly home. I fitted in: went to university, got a job, lost touch. That’s the way it goes.

“A few years ago I ran into one of my Chinese friends in Manchester. She’d made it to England the hard way. HIV positive, OD’d on heroin. So many old fractures the pathologist lost count.”

“Did they catch whoever was responsible?”

“No. The only name we had fell out of a window.”

“Before you found him, or after?”

I catch a flash of anger in her eyes, but she decides not to hit me.

“Let me tell you about my friend,” she says. “Her name was Ling – that means ‘tinkling pieces of jade’. I used to go to her house sometimes. I loved it. I was the only one, you see, but she had brothers and sisters, cousins, aunts – the place was full of people coming and going.

“She had an uncle who liked to touch her. She pointed him out to me once. He was an ordinary man, quite young, not bad looking. He laughed a lot. When she was little it didn’t matter much. It was nothing out of the ordinary. He would stroke her hair, sit her on his knee. But it went on for years and as she got older she liked it less. She started avoiding him, but she couldn’t manage it all the time. In public, with the rest of the family around, she couldn’t always find an excuse. He used to stand behind her, close.

“Anyway, I went back to England. Ling’s uncle knew that this was what she dreamed of too and he started making promises. He was very convincing. Sometimes she swallowed back her bile and let him put his hands on her. Eventually he bought the

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tickets. He handled all the paperwork, immigration, all that. He looked after her passport. When they arrived here he kept it. She was locked in a flat, beaten, raped by his friends. Towards the end she was having sex with a dozen or more men a day.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I know. The stories are all the same. Every one unique, but all the same. “

“So. You feel guilty because she followed you here?”

“Of course not. Your brother was a trafficker.”

“How do you know?”

“One woman got away. She had done a couple of years at university in her own country. She was a bit of a radical and she fell foul of the authorities. She wanted to be a geologist and thought she might be able to study in England. When she got here she realised what was happening to her and gave the bastards the slip in London.

“She’d travelled on a container ship, she told us. Transferred to a smaller vessel in mid-Channel, then come ashore in an inflatable, at night with half a dozen others. On a shingle beach. Then they were driven for several hours in a minibus with the windows blacked out. They knew nothing about the geography of the UK, had no idea where they were, but there was some kind of hold up and it was beginning to get light by the time the bus started. There was a small scrape in the covering on the window next to her seat. From the road she saw chalk.”

“Sussex?” I suggest.

“No. The journey took too long. It had to be west Dorset. We started looking for known criminals along that part of the coast with more money than they could account for, also access to the beach and recent trips abroad, especially to eastern Europe or the Far East. We couldn’t find any likely candidates among people who already had form, so we broadened the search a bit. Your brother ticked all the boxes.”

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“Circumstantial,” I say. “Giles can’t have been involved in something like that. People would have known about it. The organisation would have to be vast.”

“As a matter of fact the gangs are usually small, based on a family, often. They operate in informal networks: one lot recruits the victims and organises transport, another group smuggles them ashore at this end and sells them on to a third for exploitation, like merchandise. Slavery, I told you.”

“I can’t see it. In any case, my brother is dead.”

“Aren’t you curious about that? It was no accident, you know. We don’t know why he was killed. He may have had enough. If he was threatening to quit the others might have decided to close his mouth permanently. Or his death might have been the outcome of an internal power struggle of some kind. That happens sometimes – one gang moves on another.”

“This is fantasy,” I protest. “Have you been to that part of the coast? It’s lined with caravan parks and families from Birmingham getting a week away during the school holidays. Cafés, amusement arcades and souvenir shops. They sell things made out of shells, with ‘A Present from West Bay’ painted round the bottom. And you want to plonk an international conspiracy down in the middle of it.”

“What *would* you believe? Dinner jackets and Aston Martins? You’re the one with the fantasy. Crime is sordid and cheap and small, this one more than most. We got one of the gangs into court last year. They operated out of a Chinese takeaway in Swansea. There was a launderette on one side and a bookie’s shop on the other. They made millions, in between dishing out prawn crackers and special fried rice.”

“I’m going to have to think about this.”

I let my head fall back onto the cushions and stare at the ceiling. Mellor leaves me to it. After a minute or two I hear her pick up the used mugs and take them out to the kitchen. The tap

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runs. The coffee grinder grinds. Outside the traffic mutters as usual, people go about their business.

“Drink up.” Mellor nudges my fingers with a hot mug. I take it. Drink up. My fourth.

“Must be a shock,” she says.

“Not really. Maybe that’s the problem.”

We sit in silence, drink some more.

“So you and Randall believe I’m involved as well, do you?”

“Actually, no.” She takes another sip. “Not yet, anyway.”

“What?”

“Randall claims you’re OK.” She raises her coffee in a toast. “Congratulations. Mind you, I don’t think he likes you much. He prefers everyone to have a nine to five job and a payslip at the end of the month. He’s hungry, you know? Clawing his way up. He doesn’t understand people who have enough talent to step aside and ignore the power games. To him that’s creepy.”

“There are power games everywhere,” I say, remembering the band.

“I’m sure. Anyway, he thinks you’re OK. He also thinks that the trafficking is still going on and that the people your brother worked with are trying to involve you, whether you like it or not. He says you’re being groomed.”

“That’s ridiculous. Apart from anything else - and that’s a pretty big anything, mind you - what have I got to offer them?”

“Don’t undersell yourself. You’re intelligent, you’ve got organisational skills. You don’t sit around, you go for it. You can think on your feet – have to be able to, I should imagine, to be a performer. People do what you tell them.”

“Of course they do.” I am remembering the band again.

“I doubt whether you have to raise your voice much, and I bet you get what you want in the end. You’re your own boss, you can travel without causing any raised eyebrows. Even if you don’t own it, you still have access to your brother’s farm.”

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“Ah. Now we’re getting to it.”

“And you’re not squeamish. You’re a lot like your brother in that respect.”

I look at her sharply. “You don’t agree with Randall, do you?”

“I’m the other way round. I like you, but I don’t think we can trust you. Still, he’s the boss.”

“So what’s next? Lock me up?”

“Goodness, no.” She puts her mug on the floor and leans forward, elbows on knees.

“We want you to accept the offer, when it comes. You can express a few scruples, if you like. They’ll expect that, that’s why they’re going to all this trouble to soften you up. The bomb thing. Any time now they’ll offer you a carrot to go with it.”

“Do you have a stick too?” I ask.

“Well, if you don’t play along I don’t see how we can keep the anti-terrorist lot off your back for much longer. They might even find some evidence, who knows?”

“Carrot?”

“You find out who killed your brother. That’s what you really want, isn’t it?”

“You’re not very squeamish either, are you?”

Soon after that, she leaves. I have a couple of days in which to make up my mind, then a number to call. I think about sticks for a while, then phone Len.

“Not too bad,” he says. “Insurance assessor’s been. Carpets, curtains, books, pictures, kitchen contents, it all mounts up. We may do well out of it, in the end. Don’t recommend it, though.”

“Great. Hey, remember that old briefcase of mine that you borrowed?”

“Er... Yeah, vaguely.”

“You didn’t leave anything in it, did you? It’s just that I’ve lost it. I never used to empty it and there was all sorts of stuff inside. Could any of it have been yours?”

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“That was months ago. What did I need it for? Meeting with the planning people, was it? I may have left a couple of letters in it, I suppose. Nothing important. Don’t worry about it.”

We chat about the band, arrange to meet for a drink, and I ring off.

So Len’s address could have been in the briefcase when Bridie left it behind at the offices Salamander were cleaning. If any of their workers were illegal immigrants, Mellor’s slave labour, no wonder they were unhappy about us talking to them. Perhaps Len’s break in was another taste of the stick.

I seem to be lying to everyone nowadays. To the police, naturally. To Matt, by omission at least, I should be keeping him up to date. Now to Len.

9

“But I don’t see the problem. All you’ve got to do is listen to him. If he’s rubbish tell him so and that’s the end of it.”

We were sitting in the kitchen, wine bottle between us as so often before. Giles was leaning sideways in his chair, one arm slung over the back, the other stretched forward, wrist resting on the edge of the table. He was twisting his glass round and round and the condensation running down its sides was leaving dark swirling spirals on the wood.

“You keep telling me you need a new bass player. Here I am, offering you a possible and you don’t want to know. Where’s the difficulty?”

He had picked his moment well, he always did. After a long weekend my bag was packed and waiting by the door. The taxi to the station had been ordered and would be arriving at any moment. *No time to argue. Just say yes.*

“How come you’re taking such an interest? You never have

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before.”

“I told his father I’d put in a word.” Giles smiled into my eyes.

“And his father is...?”

“Nobody you know. A business contact. I thought you’d be pleased. What’s the matter? Worried about the kids coming up behind you, treading on your heels? People gave you a leg up when you were starting out, didn’t they?”

“Of course they did. I’m wondering what’s in it for you.”

“Hah! And I thought I was the cynical bastard in this family. I’m simply doing the guy a favour, OK?”

“Does your friend *want* his son to be any good?” There was a subtext somewhere, but I could not put my finger on it.

“Well, no,” Giles admitted. “I think he’d prefer you to tell him he’s crap.”

“And if he turns out to be a genius?”

“Oh Lord! Give the kid a job and sod his old man.”

The trouble was that the kid would not be a genius. He would probably be mildly talented. Was I supposed to dump on him anyway? If he was not quite talented enough, should I give him a chance he could not handle, just to spite his old man? Giles was right, though, people had listened to my playing, given me an opportunity. Their motives were probably as tangled as mine. A chance was a chance.

“I’ll think about it.”

“I’d hoped you would do more than that. I’ve baled you out before. That bloody band of yours wouldn’t exist by now without my money.”

“Which you’ve had back, and more.”

“Nevertheless, you owe me one.”

I was furious. It was not the prospect of being caught up in another of my brother’s schemes. That was a familiar feeling and, to be honest, not an unwelcome one. We were still out-

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laws together. Perhaps it was some more obscure sibling thing, a sense that lines had to be drawn. *This is where sharing stops.* Music was mine, not something to be spun into one of Giles's intrigues.

"Well you can stuff it. I will not have you using my band to further one of your sordid little cons. Not now, not ever. Have you got that?"

The taxi's horn sounded outside. That was the last time I saw Giles alive, and we parted in anger.

SECOND SET

CHAPTER SIX

1

The carrot is a long time coming.

I talk it through with Bridie before phoning the number Mellor has given me. Bridie is not impressed.

“What’s the worst the police can do?”

“Lock me up and throw away the key?” I suggest.

“Rubbish. You reported what you thought was a genuine threat. And you were right. The fact that it was exactly that, a threat and not an actual attack, makes no difference at all. Someone broke into your flat and left the briefcase with a clear message that next time it would be the real thing. Boom. You’re the victim, not the bomber.”

“Yes, but they can’t see why. This is not a rucksack on the underground, it’s personal. In their minds that means I’m a villain too, it’s some sort of gangland thing. Mellor hinted that if they couldn’t find any evidence they’d make it up.”

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"She'd never get away with it!"

"Really?"

"Tell her you'll go to the papers. The Sundays would jump at a tale like that."

"With Giles cast as the wicked stepmother? I'm not going to make excuses for him, but I'm not going to drop him down the latrine either. What about his friends? Mrs Sims, Sheila?"

"I've got a bad feeling about this."

My feeling is as bad. But if I tell Mellor where to put her threats, that still leaves Giles's old partners. What choice will they give me? The authorities may offer some shred of protection.

"Look, we're no worse off than we were before. Better off, in fact. We now have official sanction for the kind of snooping we were doing anyway."

"I don't call that much of a sanction. How do you know they won't put you away with the rest of them, in the end?"

"Plus..." I raise my voice and talk down her protests. "Plus, we have a lot more information than we did before Christmas. We have the what, now we need to work out the who." And then? When I know who killed Giles, what then?

I phone Mellor, while Bridie sits on the window sill and glowers. I get another number and a list of instructions.

"Let us know the moment they get in touch with you. Until they do, check in daily at twelve minutes past two. If we don't hear from you we'll assume they've made contact. Always use your mobile and call from somewhere crowded. Halfway down Oxford Street would be ideal."

"Are you going to be watching?"

"If we are, you won't know."

For two weeks I go about my business. We play three or four small gigs and mingle at the bar during the interval as usual. Dee has taken over the table of CDs which we have for sale but the

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rest of us still hang around to help out and talk to the punters. Bridie jumps every time someone asks me for my autograph.

Each afternoon I follow orders and phone at the appointed time. Once I am in Oxford Street, but usually it is from a supermarket car park or outside an underground station. Every day the same neutral male voice answers:

“Any contact? OK, call tomorrow.”

When I am a few minutes late I receive a passionless reprimand:

“Call tomorrow. At the time arranged, please.”

After a few days I start trying to engage him in conversation, make him laugh, anything to get a reaction, but the voice might as well be the speaking clock.

“Tell me, do you enjoy your work? Is there job satisfaction in being a spook?”

“Call tomorrow.”

2

I am working at a studio off the Tottenham Court Road, rehearsing and recording three or four hours every morning for a week. I have played there often before and on the way home I slip into my normal routine of coffee in a sandwich bar followed by visits to a couple of speciality record shops. After that I usually detour through one of the music megastores on the way to the Underground.

It is raining and the place is crowded, vibrating to something with a machine-made beat. By the doors the carpet is tracked with dark footmarks which fan out and fade down the aisles towards the various departments: chart, rock, jazz, classical in the basement, folk upstairs somewhere under the roof. The atmosphere is warm and a bit muggy, in spite of the open doors

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and the wintry day outside. Stepping in, customers plunge through a rippling curtain of hot air which traps the moisture on their clothes and wafts it away among the lights and the racks of merchandise.

I pick out two or three CDs, one of which I played on, though I do not get a credit. I take them to the checkout desk, watch the assistant swipe my card, key in my PIN. She puts the receipt in the carrier bag along with my selection and I make my way towards the exit nearest the Tube station. I reach the doors and as I pass between the flat, vertical paddles of the store's security system, the alarm goes off.

A uniformed security guard steps in front of me and smiles.

"Not to worry sir. The wretched thing's always going off for no reason. Could I check your bag?"

"Sure." I hand it to him. "Receipt's in there somewhere."

He takes out my CDs. There is a slip of paper between them.

"Yes, here it is." His expression does not change. "Did you buy all three of these recording here, sir?"

"Yes, of course. Just a moment ago."

A young man wearing a sweatshirt with the store's logo printed on it presses a sequence of buttons on the back of the security scanner and the alarm stops.

"It's just that there are only two items on the receipt."

"That can't be right."

Shoppers are glancing in our direction as they pass. The guard points at the rectangle of paper.

"Only two items, you see?"

"It must be the wrong receipt."

"Dated today. Time: three minutes ago. Perhaps it would be better to discuss this in the office, rather than in public." He gestures towards a door marked *Staff Only*. The smile has gone now.

On the other side of the door a switch is thrown and

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the glamour of the store flickers out: no more posters and spotlights, no bright colours or stainless steel. Fluorescent tubes hum on the edge of hearing, lighting the block walls of the corridor with a cold glare. Pipes and cables are slung above our heads and curve away round a corner ahead. Everything is painted grey, chipped and scraped at about waist height. One or two people hurry past, not bothering with a second look, or even a first. As we move deeper into the building we meet a boy in a dark suit pushing a metal trolley stacked with boxes. It cannons off the satin finish as he manoeuvres to let us pass.

The office is pleasant enough. Black wooden desk, flat packed from some warehouse on the North Circular; filing cabinets along one side; no window, but the waste bin has been emptied and the carpet looks clean. The wall above the cabinets is a coat of many colours, layered with fliers for gigs and albums, pinned haphazardly on top of each other. The ones down against the wallpaper are probably classics. The security guard nods to me and leaves.

None of the filing cabinets will open. I sit behind the desk on a hard plastic chair. After a while I test the drawers but they are locked too. I do not bother to try the door handle. I have memorised the bands on twelve of the posters, starting top left up by the ceiling, before I hear footsteps outside and the click and scrape of a key.

“Hello Simon.”

We sit in the back of the taxi while it makes its way westward, jinking down side streets and through one-way systems. I stare forward through the sliding glass partition at the meter and at the back of the driver's neck. Look out of the window. London

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slides by. Buses, other taxis, nylon-suited cyclists. People with and without umbrellas bunch at crossings and surge across as the lights change. We lurch down side streets of white-fronted houses and black railings, lined with parked cars. I think about ending my career in a warehouse with easy access to the river.

“Don’t you love black cabs?” Crawford says. “The next best thing to invisible. Thousands of the things about, all exactly the same. They go where they like and nobody gives them a second thought. The worst that can happen is some bloody tourist tries to flag you down on a wet night.”

The driver catches my eye in the mirror and does not smile.

“Sorry we had to hustle you back there,” Crawford goes on. “We didn’t want to outstay our welcome.”

I quit the shadowed backstage of the world of record promotion the way I came in, along a shabby corridor and out through the *Staff Only* door to bright lights and driving rhythms. Crawford led the way. I followed with the uniformed guard treading on my heels. His body language had changed and he no longer called me “sir”. The security scanners stayed silent as we passed between them.

In the Oxford Street drizzle Crawford strode to the kerb and a taxi drew up immediately without a hail. A woman with several carrier bags in each hand made for it, but the guard stepped in front of her and shook his head and she fell back looking surprised, then angry. I was feeling angry too. I shifted my weight onto my toes. Beside me an unfriendly voice said:

“Don’t give us a hard time. Get in the cab.” It was the driver, out of his seat to assist his fare. He reached past me and opened the door and I climbed in behind Crawford. As we pulled away I saw the guard remove his cap and fade into the crowd.

We turn into one of the parks. On the other side of the partition which separates us from the driver I hear a phone ring. I watch him press buttons and answer, then he reaches back

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behind his head with one hand and slides the glass aside.

“Terry,” he says. “Needs to know the handover point for tonight.”

“Pick a number,” Crawford says to me. “One to six.”

“What?”

“Come on, one to six. Any number will do.”

“Four.”

“Four it is.” Crawford nods to the driver, who slides the partition shut, weaving one-handed between a couple of cyclists as he does so.

“So,” Crawford says, dismissing the darkening pavements. “Albion Lettings. Salamander Cleaning Services. You’ve had a busy Christmas, Simon. I can call you Simon, can’t I?”

“No.”

“Did you and your friend break into my office as well? You seem to know a lot about my business.”

“Did *you* break into *my* place?”

Crawford laughs. “Boom! You liked that? I thought it would amuse you. We’re quits now, Simon, wouldn’t you say?”

“That depends.” I hesitate. *You can express a few scruples if you like.* But Crawford will not take scruples seriously, he does not appear to have many himself. What will he take seriously?

“On?” he prompts.

The truth, perhaps. “It depends on how much you know about my brother’s death. If you had any hand in it, we’ll never be quits. Not now, not ever.”

He stares at me for several seconds without saying anything, then nods.

“I can see that. But your brother’s accident – if it was an accident – had nothing to do with me. In fact it was bloody inconvenient. I’d like to know what happened that night too.” He smiles. “I don’t expect you to believe me, of course. But perhaps you will when we know one another better. “

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I ignore this. "I wouldn't have thought Giles would be interested in the travel business."

"There's travel and travel. Tell me about Albion Lettings etcetera. What made you pick those firms in particular?"

"You were sloppy about tidying up. I found a couple of letters."

"Ah?" The way he says it makes me feel sorry for whoever was given that job. "And did you draw any conclusions from your researches?"

"The staff of Salamander Cleaning Services are not British," I say, and wish that Mellor's briefings had been a little less graphic. On no account should I appear to know more than I could reasonably have figured out from our raids on the three companies. "I don't think they spoke much English. They certainly didn't want to talk to strangers. I'd guess they were illegal immigrants."

"Mm?"

"Put that together with your so-called adventure holidays, and I'd say you've been bringing them into the country, landing them at my brother's farm in Dorset, then providing them with work in London on the black. Albion I'm not sure about."

Then a door opens in my head and I see new passages branching into the dark.

"They'd need to have somewhere to live, though, wouldn't they? A tame lettings agency would be useful. No worries about paperwork. And once you have an address you're halfway to ID... Am I getting warm?"

Crawford is looking at me as if I might be lunch and I wonder whether I have said too much or too little.

"You know, you're quite good at this," he says. He may that moment have decided to drop me down a manhole.

"The break-ins were bloody childish," he goes on. "You were lucky to get away with those. Though, come to think of it, it

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doesn't hurt to have a few lucky people around... Who said that?"

"Napoleon said something like it."

"Hm. Didn't do him much good in the end. You improvise well, that's what I'm getting at. Come and work for me."

"I've got a job." It is a shock, even though I knew it was coming.

"Do both. They might fit together nicely. Come and be my eyes and ears in Dorset. There'd be money in it. I know you're not interested in such things, but... quite a lot of money, actually."

4

The tide is a long way out. It will be turning in an hour or so, but we expect to be gone by then. There is a bright nail clipping of moon, but the stars are blurred over by haze, thickening off-shore. I turn my head to face along the beach and wait for the humped shapes of the shingle in front of me to build in the corner of my eye. After a few moments I think I can make out a darker, meandering strip, the tangle of seaweed and litter that marks high water.

Behind me one of the men from Bristol flicks on a torch, illuminating a splash of pale brown and grey pebbles. Some are veined with white quartz.

"Bloody stones," he says. "I damn near dislocated my knee last time. Hurt like hell."

"The old smugglers used to tie boards under their feet," I say. "Same principle as snow shoes. Don't put the light on, it makes it harder to see anything afterwards."

"What am I supposed to do then?"

"Stand still, let your irises open properly. Look past anything

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you want to focus on. The edges of the retina are more sensitive than the centre.”

“You don’t say.” He switches the torch on again and stumbles towards the sea.

The beach slopes gently at first, then a few yards below the high water line it falls away, dropping four or five feet in the space of two. When the tide is in it is treacherous, particularly as a strong current scours along the shingle under the breakers. Knowing what to expect, I edge forward and slither down, suffering nothing worse than a handful of grit in one boot. I hear a curse and a rattle of stones as my associate slides down on his backside.

Below is a wide stretch of sand. The horizontal beam of the torch casts into relief a criss-cross pattern of frozen ripples carved by the surf. Strips of water glint among corrugated shadows.

“OK, lights off now, “ a voice calls from behind.

The torch goes out and for about ten minutes there is nothing but the shush of the waves up ahead and the rich, rotting smell of weed. The dark of the headlands begins to loom around us. Then in the distance I hear the edgy growl of a trail bike and from the top of a low cliff to our right a single headlight shines out to sea. On... two, three... off... two, three... on... two, three... off. For a few minutes more we stand staring out over the dark of the water. Behind me someone breathes out heavily and folds himself deeper into his anorak.

A little to the left and somehow lower down than I had been looking for it, a tiny spark flashes in reply.

A couple of people start running across the sand. I go more carefully and by the time I reach the shallows the muffled buzz of an outboard motor is nearly on top of us. It cuts out and the flattened, rounded prow of an inflatable slides at knee height out of the night and runs up onto the beach.

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“Show a light there, somebody. Carefully.” Crawford’s voice. One of the men turns his torch downwards with his hand over the lens to give a fleshy, reddish glow.

“Right, ladies. Follow the light,” Crawford says. “Do you understand me? Follow... the... light.”

Whether they understand or not, it is clear what he wants them to do. Shadows creep forward from the stern of the boat, stepping over seats and stooping to feel along the sides. The ruddy fingers move back away from the water and they follow, Crawford behind them. There are cries of dismay when we get to the edge of the shingle. They cling together for a few seconds, until one of the figures breaks away and tackles the slope on all fours, rear in the air, sliding down a couple of times before she makes it to the top. The rest follow.

We reach the turf that borders the beach and regroup, then move along the edge of the stones until we come to a path leading inland. The men spread out round the central huddle in a practised manoeuvre, two in front, two behind and one on each flank. As we follow the track the sides of a gulley rise around us and a couple of torches come on. Someone behind us keeps his fixed on the women’s feet. They are wearing trainers and jeans, some of them soaked to the knee with patches of damp sand where they have stumbled.

Soon we are among the trees and our escort closes in. The women are walking more confidently now, moving ahead in single file, but the pool of light on the ground has the effect of creating a wall of darkness on all sides. Half-seen shadows step wide over fallen branches.

We come to a clearing. “Two of you stop off here and start setting up the camp,” calls Crawford. “The rest keep going.” There is some mumbling from behind me. “No. You can have a break when you get to the bloody top.”

A half circle of threadbare brambles has populated part

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of the space between the trees. Opposite us a tumble of rhododendrons have retained their leaves. The man in front pushes his way into a gap and the women follow. The path begins to lead upwards, working diagonally across the hillside. Up ahead I see the light of a torch pause then waver back towards me and I realise that it is taking us up the slope in a series of zigzags.

Charity Bottom. I have a sudden vision of daytime woodland, summer foliage cascading downhill, sunlight dappling through. At any moment we will rise above the tops of the trees growing on the valley floor. I can remember leaping down here, taking perilous shortcuts across the switchbacks of the path, digging the sides of my shoes into the peaty ground to slow my descent. If I stop now, when dawn comes I ought to be able to look out through bare branches, across to the other side of the valley, brown and grey with a tiny silver nick of sea showing at the end.

The men walking on our flanks have closed up, defeated by the slope. We are all climbing in a row, the women in pairs, escort between them. Suddenly the woman in the lead turns off the path and bounds downhill. The two men ahead of me leap after her, taking their torches with them and leaving the rest of us momentarily blinded. A light stabs forward along the path from behind me and I see that another of the women is scrambling up the hillside, hands grabbing for roots, feet slipping in the mud.

“Stop her!” Crawford yells. When I do nothing he dives past me and with a short, leaping run upwards seizes her by the ankle. The pair of them slide back down to the path. Below us I can hear crashing in the undergrowth then a man’s voice swearing and a woman’s squeal of pain.

When they return she is hanging between the two men, who are gripping an arm each. As soon as she feels the torchlight around her she bursts into life again, wriggling and screaming

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insults. I do not recognise the language, but I can guess at most of the words. Crawford pushes past two of the other women who are looking on numbly, grabs a handful of hair and yanks her head back. Her lip is cut and a trickle of blood is running down her chin.

“How many times do I have to tell you morons?” he yells at the larger of the two holding her. “Not in the face!”

“She nearly had my eye out,” the man whines.

“Her eyes are worth a bloody sight more than yours. Do something to keep her quiet, then get moving.”

One of the men spins her round and holds her hands behind her back, while the other pulls out a knife and cuts the toggle off the drawstring in the bottom of his anorak. He slides the cord out, ties her thumbs together and shoves her on up the hill. At the sight of the knife she stops cursing.

We are nearly at the top. The trees thin out below the headland, I remember, to be replaced by scrub and then by an open space with a long burial mound in the centre. Giles and I tried to excavate it once. He was convinced that there would be treasure inside, but in the end we were defeated by the amount of soil that needed shifting to get at it. The tomb is still there. It has lasted a couple of thousand years – why should another few decades make any difference? We skirt it and troop back along the brow of the hill away from the sea. There should be a gate, I remember. Yes, there it is, and on the other side a minibus waiting. As we approach, Tod climbs out on the driver’s side and comes to meet us.

I slide open the door and help the women in. The one who made a break for it in the woods comes last, the man who recaptured her holding her arm.

“You can untie her now,” I say.

He looks back at Crawford, who shrugs and nods. Released, the woman moves forwards, massaging her thumbs, and I put

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out a hand to her. She jerks away, spits and mounts the step to join her friends. Crawford laughs.

I close the door, take out my handkerchief to wipe the gob of spittle and blood off my coat and wonder stupidly how I can persuade her between Dorset and London that I mean her no harm. Tod opens the passenger door.

"Where are we going?" he calls to Crawford.

"Three."

Tod nods. "Better get moving," he says to me. "Fog's coming in."

5

We are crossing the hills east of Bridport, a shortcut from the coast across to the Yeovil road, planning to head north and east to London. It is one in the morning, not crow black because fog surrounds us like a shifting slate-coloured wall, but dark enough. I cannot see a thing, but I do not need to. As we grind in low gear up the long, curving road along the side of the downs I can follow the grassy slopes in memory. Pitted and tussocked, they fall away on our left then rise sharply again to ramparts on the other side of the valley. *Last one down's a wanker.*

The legion will be cold tonight, I think. Not that any of our passengers will witness anything, even if the entire Roman army marches past. The windows of the minibus are covered with plastic film, reflective on the outside, opaque inside. I glance back. Four of the six women are asleep. Two hold hands and stare at the blank glass seeing landscapes of their own.

"Slow down," I snap, not for the first time.

The road is narrow with no markings. There are passing spaces at intervals on the left, overlooking the drop. During the summer tourists pull up for the view, which seems to stretch

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right down into Devon. In the mist we can only see three or four yards ahead. Tod has the headlights dipped and is following the verge, but whenever we draw alongside a lay-by the grass vanishes into the murk leaving us adrift. He flicks the lights onto full beam, dazzling both of us, then veers to the right as the edge of the road appears again.

“Do you want me to get out and walk in front?” I suggest. “Just till we get to the top. It’s only about quarter of mile.”

“No I don’t. I know where I’m going. I’m from round here too, you know.”

Maybe that is the problem. The locals know all about marching footsteps in the fog. *Sore feet, pack chafing, water trickling down your neck.* The old straight path down to Dorchester crosses the road at the brow of the ridge somewhere not far ahead.

“How’d you get mixed up in this business, Tod? Doesn’t seem like your kind of thing.”

He grunts. “Needed the money. There’s not much in antiques during the winter. Terry said he’d fix me up with a driving job.”

“Did you know what you were getting into?”

“Look, it’s none of my business if people want to come over here to work. If they can avoid all that visa crap, good luck to them. I just drive.”

So the answer is no. As far as he is concerned the women in the bus are simply making use of a back door into Britain. There is a tradition of dodging the revenue in this part of the country centuries old. Brandy, people, what is the difference? I wonder how many more of the lads I know, even grew up with, are involved on the periphery, shutting their minds to suspicions. Terry, I think, knows exactly what he is doing. It could be that the antiques are a front as far as he is concerned, an excuse to be around Giles’s place. Andy and Sharon, I am pretty sure, know nothing about the trafficking at all.

We are passing the summit by now and the crossways that

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marks the old Roman road. Tod seems to relax a little as we leave it behind, but he is still going too fast, scanning ahead for the next turnoff. A signpost leaps out at us and he brakes, then swings to the right. There are murmurs of protest from the back as the bus rocks from side to side. This is little more than a track, surfaced but ridged in the centre with grass thrusting up through the tarmac. We are driving across some kind of heath and the turf on either side blurs into the gloom with no hedges or fences to navigate by.

"They're not true, you know," I say.

"What?"

"The stories about the legion marching through the night. Made up by a couple of drunks who ran into a sheep."

Tod turns his head in my direction and laughs. "I know that. But you must admit, it's creepy. Oh God! What...?"

In front of us two grey figures rear up out of the vapour. Eyes flash yellow in the headlights. Great branched horns sprout from the head of the foremost shape, which seems to loom over us, a trick of the dark. Herne the Hunter in search of lost souls.

Deer! I think and grab for a handhold. Tod sees something else entirely, because he yells and pulls the wheel hard over. The minibus swerves to the left, throwing us all in the opposite direction. There are cries and a couple of thumps from the back and I hear a grinding noise from somewhere underneath as parts gave way in the suspension. For a moment the near side wheels feel as if they have left the road entirely, then the front wheel on the driver's side grounds in a hidden ditch and the whole vehicle executes a half somersault.

At least we missed them, I think, and my head hits the dashboard, window frame, ceiling. Some bloody thing.

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6

There is something warm running down my face. I lick my lips and taste salt, wipe my hand across my mouth and look. Blood, black on my fingers. The windscreen has a jagged hole in it and I can smell the fog, cold and earthy, drifting in. Although the headlights have gone out the instrument panel is still glowing and the cab of the minibus seems brightly lit compared with the dark outside. The engine has stopped but the heater fan is whirring. Behind me people are moaning. Someone starts sobbing.

I am dangling in my seatbelt, suspended at what is now the top of the vehicle, which has gone over onto the driver's side. I can feel myself slipping out of the straps and I squirm round to plant a foot on the steering column and lift myself away from Tod, who is slumped below me. It looks as if he has been thrown into the door. His head is hanging at an odd angle. I twist and bend some more and reach down to grope for a pulse. Nothing. I tell myself that I am feeling in the wrong place, but I am not. I wonder if his wife has had the baby yet. Must have.

"Shit."

The women behind me were not strapped in when the bus rolled. A couple of them at least are out cold, the rest are crouched in the gaps between the horizontal seats, hugging themselves. All of them are bleeding.

"Shit. Shit. Shit."

One foot still on the steering column I edge the other onto the side of Tod's seat and freeze as a stabbing pain in my side takes my breath away. Cracked rib. But I am thinking about sparks and fuel leaks. Does diesel burn like petrol? I fumble above my head and manage to get the door unlocked. It lifts a couple of inches, but the angle is difficult and the weight of it

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defeats me. I slip and end crouched with one foot on Tod's shoulder. I straighten my legs anyway and heave upwards. Tod collapses beneath me but the door bangs up and I find myself supporting its weight, standing with my own shoulders outside the vehicle. I cannot move any further. I can hardly breathe.

A few moment's rest, then I brace myself more firmly and slide one hand into a pocket, looking for my mobile phone.

"Simon... No I can't bloody speak up. We've rolled the van. All hurt, and I'm pretty sure at least one dead. Get someone up here fast. If I haven't checked in by two they'll come looking. Is the tracer still working? OK then."

It is as much as I can manage. I slide down into the shambles below and the door thuds shut, just missing my fingers. Christ, what a mess.

It seems to take hours. Finally headlights crawl out of the fog, on top of us almost before I see them. Doors slam. Footsteps and torches outside. The emergency exit at the back of the van creaks open, then a jumble of voices.

"Oh, God. Help me pull her out..."

"Someone get the ignition..."

"This one's dead."

"Leave her, then."

"Driver's had it too."

"Him as well. How about Coltraine?"

"He'll live."

"OK. Give him a blanket and get something hot into him, but tell him to stay where he is."

Behind me someone is scrambling over the seats. Warm fabric is thrown round my shoulders and a steaming Thermos cup appears under my nose.

"Only tea, I'm afraid, but better than nothing. Anything broken?" Sergeant Mellor waits while I angle my head for drinking.

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“Rib, I think. Cut head. Could have been worse.”

“We’re going to take the women with us, it’s too good a chance to miss. It will look much better if you stay where you are.”

“I’d figured that out for myself.”

“Good. We’ll get done as fast as we can, then you can put in your call. We’ll leave the two bodies, but the others all got away, OK?”

“What, even the unconscious ones?”

“We can’t leave them, they all need medical attention and they’ll be no use for weeks. God knows what would happen to them.”

“Drop one a quarter of a mile down the road.”

“Bit of a turd, aren’t you?”

“It’ll look funny if they can’t find any of them.”

“I’ll ask Randall. Careful, don’t smudge your bloodstains.”

“Piss off.”

She starts to clamber towards the lurid torchlight and the voices and the swirling mist at the rear of the bus but I call her back.

“Mellor. Take the tracer, they may check again.”

“Where did you put it?”

“Where you said, front driver’s side wheel arch.”

She consults. “It’s dropped off. Must have come loose in the crash.”

“If it’s still working it must be lying around in the road somewhere.”

She consults again. “They can’t see it. We haven’t got time to look properly. Don’t worry, if we can’t find it they won’t.”

I groan and slump back into my niche. Shadows busy themselves outside and draped figures stumble forward through the foggy headlamp beams ahead. Doors slam again. The blanket is twitched away and someone takes the cup from me.

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“We’re done. Make your call.”

7

More lights. More voices.

Mellor hasn’t come back, has she? She must be mad. They’ll be here any minute. Still propped in the tilted seat, half hanging by the seatbelt, I try to twist myself round to warn her.

“Get back in the car. Get out of here. You don’t even know which direction they’ll be coming from. Get off the road.”

That is what I mean to say. Fortunately it comes out as an incoherent mumble and Terry doesn’t understand a word. He backs out of the bus’s emergency door and I hear him passing on the bad news.

“Simon’s conscious, sort of. Covered in blood though. Tod’s spark out. Only one of the women left, and I think she’s dead. The rest have done a runner.”

Another voice shouts instructions:

“You two! Take the Land Rover on along the road. Turn a lamp on the fields if the fog lifts. They can’t have got far.”

“We could have driven right past them in this,” says Terry.

“Fine. Thank you. Look on the bright side, why don’t you?” Crawford. He should be on his way to Bristol by now. He must have turned back the moment he got my call.

“Get Simon and Tod out of there.” He rattles off more orders. “Have you got something to put round them until the others get back? Hell, the blankets are on the front seat of the Land Rover. Give Simon your jacket, Tod can have mine.”

“What about the girl’s body?”

“Better take it with us. We’ll weight it and drop it off the boat.”

Terry tries to untangle me from the seatbelt and eventually

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cuts the webbing, taking my weight as I slide to the floor. We clamber back towards the door, edging round the head rests of the now horizontal seats and stepping wide over gaps left by shattered windows. I breathe through clenched teeth, hugging my ribs, and have no difficulty in holding my tongue.

Outside, Crawford takes over and settles me on a log a few yards away while Terry goes back.

“What happened?”

“Couple of deer in the fog.”

“Come and look at this.” Terry has appeared again. “I think he’s dead too.”

I sit with my head between my knees while they go off together. Time passes. I must blank for a while, because when I look up the Land Rover is back and parked behind the bus, its headlights shining into the wreckage. Two men are manhandling a long bundle in the awkward space. A second bundle lies nearby, wrapped in tattered blue fertilizer sacks and bound with nylon twine. Terry and Crawford are standing in the road, arguing.

“You can’t toss Tod off the boat as well.”

“Have you got a better idea?”

“Well...” Terry looks angry. “What about his wife? If he vanishes like that she’ll think he’s dumped her.”

I seem to have done Terry an injustice. I did not think he had that much imagination.

“What do you want to do? Invite her along?”

I heave myself to my feet to go over and back Terry up, but something on the ground by his boot catches my eye. Silver and round, about the size of a five pence piece. I must be concussed, because it flashes in the headlights like a beacon. The tracer. I stagger between them, one foot treading the silver disc into the mud. That last shortened turncoat step brings me up with my back to Crawford. I babble something. Anything.

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“Terry, it’s got to be done.” My speech is still slurring. “Body in a car wreck is bad enough, police ask questions. Body without the wreck and they’ll be all over us.”

He looks disgusted. “So much for the nice guy crap. You’re as big a bastard as he is.”

“We’ll work something out,” I say. “Get her some money.” But he has turned away to help lift the bundles into the Land Rover.

8

“I hope you’re not going to make a habit of this. I can do without these late night calls.”

I am sitting at the kitchen table in my shirtsleeves, while Dr Lewis mops at my scalp with a swab of cotton wool.

“It’s drying nicely. I’ve put in three stitches. You won’t have to have them taken out, they’ll be absorbed and the loose ends will drop away of their own accord. If they start weeping, get somebody to look at them immediately. You’ll need to rest that rib for a couple of weeks.” An icy trickle of water runs down my cheek.

The room is beginning to warm up, which is just as well as my bloodstained shirt is open and the bandage round my chest is not keeping out the chilly air. The house has not been heated since Mrs Sims’s last visit three or four days ago and a deep cold seems to have settled into the walls. Dr Lewis packs up her kit.

“Get that strapped up properly as soon as you can. A&E in Dorchester will do it, or your own GP if you’re going back to London. You’ve got my number if you need anything.”

She nods to Crawford and lets herself out of the back door. Crawford starts opening cupboards. “Is there anything to drink?”

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“Tea and coffee over there,” I say. “There won’t be any milk, though. Mrs Sims brings some when she’s expecting me down.”

“I had in mind something stronger.”

“Beer and wine in the fridge, I expect. Spirits in the cabinet in the sitting room.”

Crawford puts his head out of the kitchen door and looks up and down the hallway, then wanders off. I can hear him opening and shutting things. I ease myself out of the chair and walk a few paces, buttoning my shirt, then I raise both arms to shoulder height and swivel my neck. Not too bad. I should still be able to play.

“OK, then, this is the story.” Crawford returns with whisky and two glasses, pours a generous shot into one and gestures towards me with the bottle. I shake my head.

“You were on your way here in a hired car, right?”

“I always warn Mrs Sims when I’m coming down.”

“OK, so it was an impulse thing. You were on your way somewhere else, just passing. I don’t know, make something up for God’s sake. You rolled the car up on the hill, where the bus went over. Don’t invent anything for that bit, keep the fog, the deer, all that. Terry found you, brought you here, then towed the car. The insurance company are dealing with it. Leave me out of it.”

“What about the bus?”

“Terry knows some people with a scrap yard. They’ll crush it. Out of sight, out of mind.”

“And the police?”

“Don’t worry about the police.”

“If you say so. That leaves the girls.”

“Yes. Well, not much we can do about them.” Crawford loses some of his bounce. “We’ll keep trying until daylight but we can’t very well mount a house to house search. Looks as if they made off over the fields, we found a trainer not far from the

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road.” He swirls the whisky in his glass and looks down into the tawny vortex. “It’s times like this I miss having Giles around.”

My expression must tell him something, because he laughs.

“You thought this was my deal and I brought your brother into it? I wish. No, when I met Giles it really was adventure holidays all the way. All the way down the pan, in fact. I’d sunk every spare penny I had into the *Hotspur* and I was beginning to discover that the corporate clients I’d been banking on had better things to do with their trainees than send them out to sleep in the mud.”

“The brochures looked impressive.”

“Didn’t they just? They cost plenty too. I’ve still got a room full back at the office.” He throws his head back to swallow the remaining whisky and pours some more.

“No, your brother had the ideas and the contacts, I had the transport and needed the money. It takes two in any case. Nowadays I seem to spend all my time on the motorway.” He shrugs. “Well. Don’t worry, the girls won’t want to draw attention to themselves if they can help it. Best thing for you would be if we never see them again.”

“What?”

“Well, you’re the only person they can identify.” He leers at me. “Not bad for your first time out. It’s not usually this exciting. Next time you can drive.”

9

“And no more gadgets,” I say. “Your little gizmo could have dropped me right in it.”

We are sitting in a car parked in a side street near Parson’s Green in west London. It is raining again, a fine, cold, drenching drizzle which has soaked my coat on the short walk from the

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Underground station, picked at random by sticking a pin into a tube map. The windows are misting up. Mellor is in the driver's seat, arms folded, frowning at the yellow corona which surrounds the fuzzy shapes of the streetlamps.

"No need now," she says. "If you're going to be driving, you can tell us where you're going."

"Not ahead of time," I warn her. "Tod didn't get his instructions until the women were loaded. And there'll be someone with me, I expect, so it may be difficult to get in touch. How are the girls, anyway?"

"Pretty good, considering. Cuts and bruises mostly. One broken wrist, but not a difficult fracture, apparently. They're shaken up as much as anything. They had no idea what was going on when we snatched them from the van and for a long time they couldn't understand what had happened to the woman who was killed – didn't believe us when we tried to explain. No body to show them, of course. As far as they were concerned the chalk had opened and swallowed her up."

I can understand that. I have been having nightmares of my own. I see a long bundle wrapped in blue and knotted with twine. It is weighted at the foot and hangs upright in the water while it sinks slowly towards the silted sea bed. As it turns the writing on the fertilizer sacks, black on blue, is dappled with faded sunlight from far above. It falls into the dark and I see the plastic twitch.

"We'll start talking to them next week," Mellor continues. "With luck we'll be able to get something our Continental colleagues can use – where they were recruited, where they were taken on board ship... they must have things in common."

"Why are we doing all this? You know Crawford's passing off the landings as survival courses, can't you just walk in on one?"

"Tried it already. Two of our people gatecrashed accidentally – a couple out on the beach in the moonlight, looking for a quiet

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place. They found a bunch of guys sitting round a campfire, brewing up something disgusting in a tin can. Later on, one of our men enrolled on the course. He claims to have lost half a stone. They saw us coming. We don't know how."

"Anything this end, here in London?"

"Not yet. We've checked the record store, taxi firms, the company that supplied the security guard," Mellor ticks them off. "Crawford must have been watching you, ready to invent some kind of charade as soon as he saw a pattern in your movements which he could exploit. You don't lead a well regulated life – that's why it took him so long.

"The woman who normally works in that office has gone on maternity leave. Forget her, they only needed her desk. The security guard was from an agency. Nobody can get hold of him, so we'll assume he was in on it. You'd need a couple more people I should think. A tight team, experienced, good at improvising. Four minimum. You didn't get to meet the others."

"They bring the women to London." I am talking to myself now, as much as to Mellor. "Always to London, whatever happens to them after that. The next network takes over here. There are six meeting points. 'Pick a number', he told me. 'Any number from one to six.'"

"They'd have to be similar," says Mellor. "Wouldn't you say? You couldn't switch between them that casually if they were all different. What are there six of round here?"

"Tube stations? Supermarkets, cinemas, bookshops, do-it-yourself warehouses? Lots of corporate chains have identical branches."

"They would have to be open all night. A car park would be good."

"Motorway service stations. Crawford said he was spending half his life on the motorway."

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“That’s not bad. But what we need to know now is where the women go after that. If we just stop the landings, the job’s only half done. That’s what we want from you next.”

The rain stops while we are talking. After the meeting I decide to walk a bit, catch a train at Fulham Broadway. It is not very late, the pubs are still open, but the streets around Walham Green are deserted, cut off by a random eddy of city life. Cars which could have turned right out of New King’s Road keep going instead, heading on towards Putney Bridge. Couples about to open their front doors and step out onto the pavement pause to call up the stairs to a child. Drunks in bars have one more for the road. The moment extends and silence, or what in London passes for it, trickles along the gutters and soaks with the last of the drizzle into the cracks between the paving stones.

I reach the edge of the common and strike out along the path across the grass. The pools of light thrown from the lamp posts do not meet. Passing through the shadows between one and the next I am struck by the quiet, and then by the feeling that I am not, in fact, alone. Someone is watching, always. Crawford? The police? Someone else? I stop in the safe dark and turn a full circle, examining distant windows, walls, trees. There is nobody there. Is this how Giles lived?

But there is a row of cars waiting at the traffic lights, fumes roiling in the air between them. A bus turns out of Wandsworth Bridge Road, followed by a taxi. A couple of girls totter across a pedestrian crossing, clinging to one another and giggling. The eddy breaks up and the London night flows again. I walk on past a fenced off children’s playground. Two figures are sitting hunched on the roundabout, features lost in the their hoodies. Their shrouded heads turn as I pass.

CHAPTER SEVEN

1

Kentish Town resists the middle classes. The shabby-arty-radical crowd press north from Camden and to the west dinner table talk is of schools, yoga classes and weekend cottages, but in Kentish Town Road greasy spoon and launderette still straddle the Northern Line as it loops towards High Barnet. We meet in a flat over a hardware shop.

The street entrance is pinched between a display of brassware and the swirling lights and noises of an amusement arcade. There is a column of sooty plastic door bells, some with faded cards tacked alongside them. The one I press has a label typed greyly on a manual machine. Does anyone still use those? I see them in charity shops now and then. *First Floor Front*. Each letter o is a clogged blob. I press, wait, press again, then give the door a testing shove. It is not fastened.

A short, narrow hallway, no openings on either side, and

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stairs ascending steeply. The treads are bare wood. There is a landing at the top, dimly lit, with a couple of doors and a dog leg of stairs leading further up. The place smells of damp newspapers spread under lino. As I reach the landing one of the doors opens and Mellor nods to me.

“On time. Well done.”

“Good to see you too.”

The room is Spartan. There is a divan bed covered with a red tartan travel rug, a couple of coats thrown across one end. Opposite is a white melamine wardrobe and a drop-leaf table folded flat against the wall. The only other furniture consists of four chairs, all different, set in a semi-circle with a fifth at the centre, its back to the fireplace. Heavy curtains are drawn across the only window. They are a little too long, reaching right down to the floor, the last few inches concertinaed and grimy. A stainless steel sink in the corner has a one-person mini cooker on the draining board. The sliding door of the cupboard underneath is half open, revealing a bottle of bleach. A single light hangs from the centre of the ceiling: an energy saving bulb, wrapped in a parchment shade.

The place in the middle is obviously mine, so I sit in the only other vacant seat, on one side of the gas fire. Mellor's, apparently, because she scowls at me and drags the remaining chair to a position opposite. On my right, Randall leans forward and rubs at a speck of dust on this shoe. His neighbour is a youngish man who sprawls in a tattered armchair, long legs stretched in front of him. He is still wearing a shabby raincoat over a more expensive suit and seems transfixed by the Lowry print hanging above the mantelpiece. Beyond him, an older man sits with his hands clasped across his belly and examines me over gold rimmed glasses. His suit looks pricy too, but it is crumpled and his trousers bag at the knees. He would probably be more at home in a cardigan. No-one introduces us. We wait in silence.

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Matchstick people scurry to and fro.

Randall opens the meeting.

“Tell us about Crawford,” he says.

I sense a tangle of interests criss-crossing the space between us. I am here to brief representatives of the Crime Team on what I have discovered about the people trafficking operation. They are here to get a look at me. Randall is here to demonstrate that progress is being made, but I am not sure that progress is at the top of everyone’s agenda. Speaking is like pushing through strands of cobweb on a September morning. They snatch and cling.

“I still don’t know all that much. Late thirties, single as far as I know, runs a travel business in Bristol. I think he was straight until the trafficking thing came along, but he took to it like a duck to water, so maybe not. No principles to speak of. I don’t think he’s very clever.”

“Explain,” the younger man interrupts, eyes still on the painting.

“Well... I don’t mean he’s stupid. Far from it. He’s got his wits about him. He’s... fly. Wide awake, looking for the main chance, but always reacting. Never really in control of events.”

“Unlike your brother.” The younger man turns his attention from the Lowry for the first time. He has blue eyes: pale, chalky blue, almost grey. He waits for a moment but I have nothing to add.

“I find it interesting,” he says. “The way personality colours events. Things you tell us about Crawford could be also be said of your brother, but somehow he was more than merely *fly*. Or perhaps I’ve got that wrong? I never met him, you understand.”

“It’s not a word I would have used.”

“No. So what’s the difference between these two? They’re both on the make. Either one of them would walk over his grandmother if the price was right.”

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I glance at Randall. No help there.

“Crawford looks inward,” I say. “He’s always thinking about the effect events are going to have on *him*. A lot of the time he’s only two steps away from panic.”

“Whereas your brother faced outward, confident that he was untouchable. There’s another way of putting that.” I hold his gaze. Say nothing. Show nothing. His eyes belong in the other man’s face. They are ancient. Ancient and cold and judging. They linger for a moment, then turn back to the picture. “He didn’t give a fuck.”

“Where do the women come from?” Randall asks after a few seconds.

“Eastern Europe,” I say. “There have been some from the Far East, from what I’ve heard, but at the moment they’re coming from the former Soviet satellites.”

“All women?”

“Not at first, apparently, but recently, yes. I haven’t seen any men yet.”

“Children?”

“No.”

“Speak English?”

“Not as far as I can tell.”

“How often do they make a landing?”

“Once every six weeks or so, weather permitting. They’re not fussy about cold and wet, but the beach can be difficult in an onshore wind.”

Randall stops and looks towards the older man, who has shifted in his chair. Nobody speaks as he pushes his glasses up his nose and examines the back of one hand, rubbing as if he is trying to remove a fleck of paint.

“Take us through the routine,” he says. “Tell us how it works. Not just places and dates – give us your impressions.”

“Well...” I stop to think. “A bit of background first, then.”

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He nods and I summarise what I have managed to piece together.

“Crawford runs his survival courses every six weeks. Some of them - I don’t know, maybe ten per cent of them - are the real thing. Genuine customers if he can get them, shivering in shelters made of branches and gutting genuine rabbits. The company keeps a biggish boat at West Bay. The public routine is for half a dozen clients go out in it after dark and come ashore along the coast a bit. They have some basic rations, but their brief is to fend for themselves.”

“On your late brother’s land.”

“That’s right.”

“Locals know all about it?”

“It’s no secret.”

“What do they think?”

“They think the clients are mad. They think that Crawford’s a genius for separating them from their money.”

“Does he take part in the courses?”

“God, no. He only comes down when there’s a run, to supervise. I don’t think he likes it much, he’s not an action man.”

“Mm. All right. We’re getting a bit ahead of ourselves. A few of the... er... survival holidays are genuine, then.”

“Yes. Oddly enough, the genuine ones seem to coincide with visits from the authorities.” I look at Randall, but he is examining his shoe again.

“Are the local police in your confidence?” the older man asks him.

“Not any more.”

“I’m sorry, do go on.”

“Well. Most of the courses are fully booked if anybody wants to go on one of them,” I continue. “What really happens is that a group of Crawford’s boys drive down from Bristol in a minibus. Two or three of them are dropped off at the beach,

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while the rest go on to West Bay and board the boat as if they were clients. It's called *The Hotspur*. They sail shortly after dark, but instead of killing time for a couple of hours out of sight of land as they're supposed to do, they rendezvous with whatever ship is bringing the women down the Channel. The women are transferred – I've no idea how, I haven't been out yet. *The Hotspur* brings them all close inshore and they land in an inflatable. The women hop straight into the bus and head east, leaving the lads to camp in the woods for four or five days. The activity on the beach lasts for twenty minutes or so. Less probably. Nobody asks any questions because they think it's another bunch of crazies doing their thing.

"The odds against local people noticing anything must be quite high," says Randall. "They'd have to be on the beach at exactly the wrong moment."

"Yes." Walking the dog, for example.

2

"You told us earlier that Crawford panicked easily," the younger man says. Outside in Kentish Town Road it is getting dark.

"No. I said he was always two steps away from panic. Not the same thing. In fact that's the engine that drives him. In a crisis he's clear-headed and decisive. I've never seen him actually lose it – I'd be surprised if he did."

"How did he react to the bus crash you were involved in? To the disappearance of the women?"

"At the time he was confident, on top of things. The next day, when there was still no sign of them, he started to get worried. He went back to Bristol that evening and left a couple of his lads to carry on looking. They hung around for about a

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week. After that things went quiet. We began to wonder..."

"We?"

"Terry and myself. I was up and down to London, in London most of the time. I touched base with him when I came down."

"Friendly, are you?"

"Not really. I don't like him much."

"Interesting, isn't it, the distinctions you make? Here are three men, all engaged in a trade that is, by any standards, utterly despicable. Yet you dislike one, have a soft spot for another and are intensely loyal to the third. Your brother died."

"Yes."

"In a car accident."

"Yes."

"Was it an accident?"

"No."

"Any evidence?"

"Not yet. I'll find it."

"You see where I'm going with this, I suppose?" The ancient eyes are on me again. "I'm trying to satisfy myself, in my own mind, that you do give a fuck. I have to say you haven't convinced me."

"I don't have to convince you. What you see is what you get. Take it or leave it."

These four are like vampires. They would drain me if they could, sitting in this dusty room where the dim, yellowish light does not change even though the streetlamps are coming on outside.

No-one says anything for a couple of beats, then the older man stirs again and resumes. "So. How many runs have you been on?"

"Two so far." I gather my thoughts. "The first was a fiasco, as you know. The second time, I was told to drive the minibus back to London – a new one, of course. The original was

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wrecked. The hand-over points are motorway service stations, four round the M25, one on the M3 and one on the M1."

"What happened to the bus when you'd finished with it?"

"I left it in the street. In the morning it was gone."

"It's registered to Crawford's company," says Randall. "They also use it openly at the end of each course, to pick up the happy campers."

"So you've driven it to London. Can you tell us anything about where the women were taken?"

"No. The service station was just up the M1. I don't know if that meant they were going further north. We stopped at the edge of the car park, well away from any security cameras. We waited ten or fifteen minutes then someone pulled up alongside. There were three cars altogether, at intervals."

"Numbers?"

I shake my head. "No lights, mud on the plates. I could only get a couple of letters."

"Makes?"

"Mondeo, Fiat, Vauxhall. Silver, white and black."

They all look at Mellor, who purses her lips. "Not enough information."

The older man smiles at her, then takes a handkerchief out of his sleeve, removes his glasses and polishes them. He turns back to me.

"You're waiting in the car park. A car pulls up next to you. Then what?"

"The driver gets out and comes round to the side of the bus..."

"The driver doesn't speak to you?"

"No. Straight round to the door."

"Would you be able to recognise the driver again?"

"Shouldn't think so, the lighting isn't very good."

"Male? Female?"

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“Female. A couple of the women get out, all three get into the car and off they go.”

“Just like that?”

“Pretty much. I found it strange myself. I think you have to remember that generally the worst that has happened to them so far is a bit of seasickness. Things are not as bad as they feared they might be. The fact that they are going in pairs is reassuring, the fact that the new driver is a woman. There’s even an element of excitement.”

3

“Where do we go from here?” Randall asks.

“That’s entirely up to you,” the older man replies, removing his glasses and folding them to put them in their case. “You’re the operational people. Our function is advisory.”

“That’s what I’m asking for. A bit of advice.”

The older man stands, arches his back and rubs it, then picks up his coat from the divan.

“Then I’d say that you’re moving forward,” he says, inserting one arm into its sleeve and groping for the other. The younger man leans over and helps him.

“Thank you. But not nearly fast enough. You have confirmation of Crawford’s role, all well and good. When you’ve finished questioning the women you... erm... rescued, you’ll know more about where they came from, how they were recruited and so on. That will go down well with our European friends. The ships bringing them down the Channel can’t be very big if they’re being transferred at sea – that’s traumatic at the best of times if there’s much of a swell. It may lead somewhere. But over all, well... At the moment it’s rather like the people in that thing.” He nods towards the picture over the fire-

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place. "A bit thin. We know nothing at all about what happens to the women when they reach London – if indeed they end up in London. That will not please our masters in Whitehall at all. They do tend to focus on the domestic."

"We could move on Crawford."

"Yes, that might be for the best. If you do no more than cut off the tail, though, you may find another one grows. Six months from now trade could be as brisk as ever. And he does seem to get to hear about your plans, doesn't he? There's a loose mouth somewhere."

"Not in my team. From now on we'll make a point of keeping the locals out of the loop." Randall sees me listening. "Mellor, shouldn't you be briefing Coltraine for the run on Wednesday?"

"Already done, sir."

"Send him on his way, then. I'll call you later."

Outside it is dark and most of the shops are closed. A few youngsters are playing the machines in the arcade next door, to the sound of sirens, gunfire and explosions. A plump man in black shirt and leather jacket is lounging in the doorway, chewing. I catch a glimpse of gold chain at his neck. He eyes Mellor as we emerge from the entrance to the flats. On the other side of the road a bookshop is still open. Through the window I can see a couple of young mothers choosing something suitable with their toddlers.

We linger for a moment on the pavement.

"What on earth was that all about?" I ask. "They didn't get anything out of me that you hadn't asked already. Who were those characters?"

"Think of them as auditors. We're spending a lot of money without much to show for it. Looks like they're tightening the screws on Randall."

"They didn't seem impressed with my efforts. I'd just as soon

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not bother if that's all the thanks I'm going to get."

"Mm. I wonder. It may be that bringing you on board was a bit of private enterprise from Randall. If so, he's probably getting a bollocking right now." We separate to allow a push chair to pass between us.

"Wednesday, then?" she says. "Don't forget, we need as much warning as you can give us."

"Don't hold your breath."

"No. Good luck."

4

"I cannot believe that you are doing this," Bridie says.

"What choice have I got?"

We are sitting in a wine bar. Dark wood, mirrors and large mounted black and white photographs of Paris in the 1950s: slim people at café tables, leaning, arguing, gesticulating, making love, distanced by style but still elegant, still alive. Bridie has eaten two bowls of olives and there is only an inch left in the bottle.

The evening's band practice, our last before we go on a warm-up tour, has been tense. We are all over-rehearsed and anxious. I know perfectly well that it will drop away the moment we step in front of an audience, but Ian does not want to leave Dee behind, Len is worried about carpet layers who will have to work without his supervision and Steve is Steve. Still, it is only two weeks. A short dry run round half a dozen small West Country venues. The real thing, in a month or so, will last for six.

Bridie and I have problems of our own.

"Every time you make one of those bloody runs that's another half dozen women condemned to... God knows what awful crap."

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"If I didn't do it, someone else would."

"Yes, but you *are* doing it. Not someone else."

"Only twice. And the first lot got away. They wouldn't have done if I hadn't been there."

"Another lot tomorrow. Where will they be in a week's time? Simon Coltraine's responsible for that, not some stranger."

"Well. Instead of being so sanctimonious, perhaps you could come up with some ideas."

"Can we have another bottle?"

"Only if you sleep on the sofa. You've already had too much to drive." I fetch the bottle from the bar. A third bowl of olives. We sit in silence for several minutes. Bridie stares over my shoulder.

"It happens more often than you'd think."

"What does?"

"Not the knife at the throat stuff, thank Christ... but every Sunday morning there are girls who wake up with stuff crusted on their thighs. They have too much to drink the night before, or they think: *This is a sweet guy*. Then there are the ones who find themselves half a mile up a pitch-black country road with no idea how to get home. Or the doors are locked and they can't find the handle and there's no room to *move* on the back seat of a rotten little Mini. Oh, and don't forget the married women. Their husbands have rights."

"I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"What happened to you?"

"Nothing. I was nearly the one in the back of the Mini, but I got the door open."

"And what happened afterwards?"

"I walked home. I found I could pass him in the street without puking. I put sugar in his petrol tank."

"Did you tell anyone?"

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“No. I felt... contaminated. I was scared of what my parents would say. I had two thousand years of history telling me it was *my fault*.”

We sit for a long time without a word.

The wine bar is closing. Bridie scoops up her olive stones and puts them in the ashtray. We shrug into our coats.

“Why don’t you tell Mellor about Salamander and Albion?” Bridie asks. “She’s not going to hold a little private enterprise against you.”

This is a question I have been asking myself. Why not? I am unable to come up with an answer that is convincing. But if I do there will be no way back. Once I surrender those few names I have nothing, no control over events at all.

I remember going swimming once, with Giles. I do not know how old I was, eight or nine probably. The pool had an elaborate set of diving boards, not boards, really, but platforms, tapering in a staggered pyramid over the deep end, up and up until the highest one seemed to be roosting in the peak of the roof. It was the middle of the school holidays and the place was heaving. Giles started off up the ladder and I followed, thinking he was going to one of the lower levels. By the time I realised that he was going all the way to the top there were other kids below me. When I stopped I could feel them crowding behind.

The platform was close to the ceiling and the trapped air was warm and moist, reeking of chlorine. The knife-edged sound of children’s voices echoed up from below. Giles ran and leapt. I stood on the edge and looked down. I could see the bottom tiles blue beneath the water, fractured and re-fractured by splashing swimmers, the black lines which marked the racing lanes jerking to and fro like broken-backed snakes. Fortunately the platform was wide enough to allow other boys to jump without having to push me aside. After a while I went and sat at the back. It was about twenty minutes before someone noticed me and a pool

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attendant climbed up to bring me down.

“Well, if you won’t, you won’t,” Bridie says.

5

There are still people about as we walk home. It is too dark for faces but I memorise the outlines of pedestrians going our way. On the corner, Khaled has the shutters up. A couple of doors down, the scaffolding has finally been removed, but the builders are still working inside and the skip is still by the kerb. Today’s contribution from the community includes several tyres. There is a car parked in front of the skip. Someone is sitting in it. I pretend I have not noticed and we walk the twenty yards to my gate. I open it for Bridie and behind me a car door clicks. I turn as naturally as I can to shut the gate.

“We need to talk.”

“This is Sergeant Mellor,” I tell Bridie. “Sergeant, this is Bridie. I expect you’ve checked up on her already. We were going to have a drink, you’re welcome to join us.”

“What I have to say is confidential,” says Mellor.

“Everything you tell me gets back to Bridie eventually,” I assure her. “You might as well tell her to her face and avoid the Chinese whispers.”

Mellor looks disgusted at my slack notions of security, but precedes us through the door and on up the stairs. Bridie goes after.

“You didn’t tell me she was pretty,” she hisses as she passes me.

“Didn’t I?” Wrong answer. “I mean, is she?”

“So, what’s up?” I ask.

The two women are installed at opposite ends of the sofa and another bottle of wine has been opened. I pour, then take up my

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place on the carpet across from them, back against the desk. There is what Mrs Sims would call “a bit of an atmosphere”. None of us is quite sure which subjects are safe.

“Any news?” I try again.

Mellor glances at Bridie, who raises her eyebrows to indicate polite interest.

“I want you to know that I am not happy with this,” Mellor says to me. “You’ve been given access to some very sensitive material. You’re not supposed to go blabbing to your girlfriend.”

“Then you should have made that clear in the first place instead of shaking a stick at me. I trust Bridie. I have no secrets from her. I value her ideas. Make the best of it. Why are you here?”

Mellor shrugs. “The run tomorrow night is the last one you go on,” she says. “Either we show some results or we pack it in.”

“Your auditors, I suppose.” She nods.

“Sorry I wasn’t more convincing,” I say, although I do not feel very sorry. “That bastard in the raincoat was down on me as soon as I opened my mouth.”

“Actually you were very convincing. If it hadn’t been for you we’d be finished already. He liked the way you talked back at him, apparently. *Pragmatic* he said. So we get one more go. Tomorrow night we have to make a connection between the landings in Dorset and wherever it is the women are taken in London. We need specifics, not the colour of the cars. Street names and numbers.”

“How am I supposed to provide those?”

“I’ve got a few ideas.”

“Simon, you’ve got to stop this.” Bridie is holding her glass in her lap, both hands wrapped around the bowl. I can see the purple liquid shaking. “These people are not human. Every time you drive that bus up here the women inside it are... I could

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understand it if you were rescuing them, getting them away somehow. But you're not. You're just going to hand them over to..." I take the glass from her, set it safe on the table, then lean against the sofa, holding her hand.

"You can't stop it," says Mellor. "This is not about six women in a bus tomorrow night. It's about six women next month and the month after that and the month after that."

"Of course it's about tomorrow. You can't trade off real people against something that *might* happen in a few weeks time."

"Have you had a chance to talk to any of the women?" Mellor asks me.

"No. No opportunity and no common language in any case."

"Right. Well, I've been sitting in on interviews with the group we got away after the crash. One of them has a couple of kids, did you know that? Boy and a girl, five and three. They're living with her mother. She thought she was going to be able to send money back. During one of the breaks I found the interpreter crying in the loo. Your friend is right. These are real people. But there will be more of them, and more and more and more. We need a firm connection between Crawford's little circus and London and we'll sacrifice half a dozen women if that's what it takes."

"Simon, tell her," says Bridie. "Let them deal with it, it's their job. If you don't, I will. I was there too, you know."

"What? Tell me what?" Mellor stares at Bridie, then at me. "Do you mean you already know something? You bastard! You total shit! You've been holding out on us all this time! Jesus!"

It is time to trust myself to the air.

And so I tell her about the letters I found in my brother's files. About Salamander Cleaning Services and Albion Lettings. I tell her about the website and about the briefcase which appears to connect Salamander with Crawford. And all the time

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I hear the rush of the wind and feel the lurch of free fall in my stomach, and I wait for the cold, flat blow of the water on the soles of my feet and the roaring bubbling plunge into the deep end.

CHAPTER EIGHT

1

The tide is in, just off the high water mark. The banking of the seabed damps the waves until they are only a few yards from the beach, then they spring out of nowhere, rear up and crack, curling down onto the shingle with a frustrated roar. The night is overcast, no stars or moon, but oddly bright as if the clouds are collecting every last stray photon and reflecting them all back down onto the pebbles.

A stiff wind is blowing, catching up fistfuls of foam and whipping them away along the tide line. Every now and then a stray raindrop slaps into my anorak, which is plastered across my side and back like a second skin. The rumble of the sea and the pummelling of the wind make it difficult to talk. I try putting my hood up, but the narrowed field of vision makes me nervous and I push it down again. Every few seconds I have to drag salt sticky hair out of my eyes. At least we are able to wait on the turf

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above the beach and leave the dash over the shingle until the last minute.

A light flashes on the headland for the third time. If it is the usual trail bike, I cannot hear it. On a night like this I can well imagine the signaller preferring to take his lamp up there on foot. From the sea, nothing. I count the breakers, looking for the fabulous seventh, the master wave. We did that as kids, counting aloud, yelling into the spray. The crash of the water and the rattle of stones merge into a single chaotic thrash and grind, no rhythm, no melody.

Then the inflatable is there, swooping out of nowhere mounted on a wall of surf which flings it high up among the bladder wrack. Before we can move a second wave floats it again and is dragging it back towards the sea, then a third shoves it further up the beach, spinning it so that it grinds onto the stones at an angle. Two figures push past me and grab the prow, struggling to haul it straight before it is swamped.

Crawford vaults over the side and runs awkwardly up the shingle. I steady him and put my head close.

“Why didn’t you show a light?” I shout.

“We did. Must have been in a trough. Jesus, that stupid cow has vomited all over me!” He makes brushing motions with his hands, then thinks better of it, picks up a handful of seaweed and tries to wipe his jacket with that. “Oh God, this is disgusting!”

“Try some grass,” I yell and shove him in the direction of the turf. I bend against the whipping spray and struggle on down to the boat.

All but one of the women have clambered out over the bows and are following Crawford, heads down and staggering with each gust. The last is still sitting huddled at the back. Presumably she is the one who shared her supper with him. Relieved of the weight of nearly all its passengers, the inflatable is beginning to

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buck in the wind and the men holding it are yelling at her to move. One of them shakes it. She comes to herself with a start of panic and begins clambering blindly over the side just as a large breaker hits, lifting the stern and knocking her to her knees. Then she falls into the surf and I see her fingers slip.

I am already running. With the wind behind me I manage to hurdle the near side of the boat, landing on one of the seats and falling rather than leaping forward into the water next to her. Another wave rushes over us, filling my eyes and mouth with salt and grit. I grab for her collar and feel her dead weight dragging me further out. Another few feet and the stones will drop away leaving me over my head and at the mercy of the current. I watched a dog drown once, swept along parallel to the beach, paddling frantically until it was too exhausted to care and coming no nearer the land.

A third wave buoys her up and I scramble with the torrent of water, letting it push her body and mine higher up the shore. Just as it turns I feel someone grip my free arm, then her weight slackens as someone else seizes her. The two men who were struggling to control the boat have abandoned it and come after us instead. I fall coughing to my hands and knees and, turning my head, see it drift upside down into the dark.

The woman is still conscious and crawling, retching, away from the water. A couple of the others run down to help her, followed by Crawford.

“The boat, what about the boat?” he yells.

Still on my knees, I look up at his pale face. His glasses are pocked with drops of water.

“Fuck... the bloody... boat...”

The path up the valley is muddy and slippery and we walk in single file all the way. The trees roar around us, surges of sound that seem about to lift the sky from above our heads like the lid off a kettle. More than once I see women looking

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up apprehensively, faces flashing sideways, pale in the torchlight. At the top we squat in the lee of the burial mound for a few moments before moving on to the bus.

“Damn, damn,” Crawford snarls in my ear. “Do you know how much those Zodiacs cost?”

“Why don’t you tell me in the van? At least it’s got a heater.”

“I notice the police are never snooping around on nights like this,” he says, standing and running his eye over the huddled group, counting heads. “Got more sense, the bastards. Sea’s like a millpond on the nights we have to miss. Never fails.”

“You mean you know when they’re coming? Who tells you that?”

“I get a phone call. Come on, you people, let’s move! Not far to go. Hey, don’t let her lie down now, we’re nearly there.”

2

The light in the yard comes on as soon as we are through the gate, etching intricate shadows into the herringbone pattern of brick between the house and the garages. The front door and the windows are deeply shaded, blank panels of glass reflecting rippled splashes as the headlights sweep across them. The place looks empty and cold. Not as cold as the night outside, however.

“There is no way I am going to drive all the way to London soaking wet like this. She’ll catch pneumonia too if we don’t get her some dry things.”

The argument with my co-driver started a couple of minutes earlier, when he had realised that I was not following the normal route.

“We’re not supposed to come up here. Steer clear of the bloody farm, is what Mr Crawford always tells us. We’re not supposed to attract attention.” He is about my size, with wide

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shoulders and no neck. Everything seems to make him angry.

"It's my bloody farm..." I say. "Near enough anyway. I'll come up here if I bloody well like. Come on, bring them all in, you can't keep an eye on them in the bus."

"We'll be late for the pick up."

"We'll make up time on the motorway. A rub down and a change of clothes. Fifteen minutes, that's all it'll take. Twenty, tops."

I unlock the door and we troop through into the kitchen. The women move in a huddle, grouped protectively round the one who has fallen into the sea. She is wearing a borrowed coat, but is still hunched and shivering. The inside of the house seems to arouse their interest. I see them looking round and it occurs to me for the first time how alien England must seem to them, on top of everything else.

I cannot imagine what their home lives may have been like, but I can remember my own first trip abroad, an exchange visit to Le Havre as a schoolboy. The place *smelled* wrong. Not unpleasant, but nothing like the odours I was used to. The horizon was broader, the streets were wider, the buildings taller and made out of an unfamiliar stone. Kerbs, gutters, pavements and shop fronts seemed minutely stretched and compressed, like objects seen in a distorting mirror. I motion to the women to sit down around the table and try to picture what the room must look like to them. Big, probably. Ceiling too high or too low. The function of everything clear enough, but the shapes off key. To me it looks clean rather than lived in, polished and squared off, a holiday home at the moment of arrival with the luggage still in the car. It is months since anyone has done any serious cooking here.

"Make yourself useful," I say to my partner. "Put the kettle on. Better make it coffee, there's no milk. Mugs in that cupboard there." I go through to the sitting room and come back with the

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last of Giles's malt. "Here, give everyone a slug."

No heating, but the water should be hot. I go upstairs and paw through drawers and cupboards until I find an old pair of jeans, a shirt and a sweater, then I fetch a towel from the airing cupboard. Back downstairs I call to the shivering woman from the kitchen doorway, but she shrinks away and one of her friends puts a protective arm round her shoulders. Oh Lord, what does she think I want to do to her?

I go in and put the dry clothes on the table in front of her, with the towel on top.

"These are for you," I say, gesturing. "There's a bathroom upstairs. You can change there. Do you understand any English at all? Your friend can go with you."

She does seem to have a few words. Her friend touches her wet things and says something to her and they both stand cautiously.

"Here, hang on," the gorilla begins.

"You shut up." I point at the boiling kettle. "Make coffee."

I lead the two of them upstairs, open the bathroom door and turn on the light, then stand well back. One watches me while the other checks out the room. I can see her looking round: white tiles, coloured shower curtain, mirror, window. Damn, we are on the upper floor but there is a lean-to roof beneath the window. Too late now, have to risk it. They both slip quickly in. I hear the bolt click, then go to find some dry gear for myself. As I come downstairs I hesitate by the telephone. No, someone will hear me. Mellor will have to wait.

They are up there for twenty-five minutes and I have to stop the gorilla hammering on the door. I am beginning to worry myself, but I can hear water running. Are they clever enough to turn on all the taps to mask the noise of an escape through the window? I would like to check outside but I do not want to give anyone ideas. The other five women sit at the kitchen table and

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drink their coffee, say nothing.

At last there is a sound in the hall and the missing pair reappear. They have both had a shower, which is why they have taken so long. The one who fell in the sea looks a lot better, if rather lost in Giles's old clothes. She hands me the damp towel, neatly folded.

"I thank you," she says.

"No problem."

"For... the sea also."

"Forget it. What's your name?"

"Katya." At least, that is what it sounds like.

"OK. I'm Simon."

The gorilla takes me by the arm. "Are you crazy?" he hisses. "Every one of these bitches will know you again. You've brought them to your house. And if that's not enough, you go and tell them your name. We've got to make a move. Now."

He starts pulling the women to their feet and pushing them towards the front door. I scribble a note to Mrs Sims, apologising about the washing up and for the state of the bathroom.

3

It is past two in the morning when the blue *Services* sign finally slides out of the dark, rears up in the headlights and flicks past on the left. I indicate and take the slip road up towards a cold jumble of sleeping lorries, glimpsed through the trees. The tarmac of the car park is glossy with damp, hatched with a senseless pattern of bays which will only begin to mean anything when the first vehicles occupy them in the morning.

A strange time I always found it, when I was younger and working the cabs to pay the rent. The cusp of the night. It

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inspired a feeling of poised possibilities sometimes, brought on by fatigue working on a sense of the hours still to go before the end of the shift. It was also the time when patients died, a nurse told me once.

The first car is already waiting for us, a blue Peugeot. As we enter the car park its driver gets out and stands by her open door. I pull up alongside and clamber down, making a great pantomime out of stretching and stamping my feet. She watches me warily. This is not in the script. I pull a face.

“Road works, sorry. Bloody great detour.”

She nods and goes over to the side of the bus, where she hauls back the door and speaks a few words to the women inside. I cannot hear what she says. Not English. Two of them follow her to the car and climb into the back. Without another look in my direction she slams her own door and pulls away.

The second car arrives so quickly that I wonder whether it has been waiting for the first to get clear. We go through the same routine again, with me prowling restlessly up and down in front of the parked vehicles.

“What’s got into you?” my partner asks through the window as the tail lights disappear. “You’re not supposed to get out of the motor. Your face will be on every security screen in bloody Hampshire.”

“I’ve got to take a crap,” I say. “Must have been something in that seawater I swallowed.”

“You’re not bloody well supposed...”

“Won’t be a minute.”

I set off towards the distant buildings, ignoring his anxious yelp. We are back on schedule, more or less. I should have about ten minutes before the next relay arrives.

The café area is deserted and half closed. Yellow plastic sandwich boards stand at the ends of aisles between tables, warning customers that the floors are wet, possibly slippery.

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Chiller cabinets have been wiped down, ready to be re-stocked with rolls and pastries. All the tills are dark and silent except for one. Somewhere behind that a radio DJ is talking country and western. A pimply boy scrapes grease from a hotplate.

I find a telephone and dial.

“Where the hell have you been?” I can hear the coffee crackling in Mellor’s voice.

“Problem on the beach. We were late getting away.”

“Where are you?”

I give her the name of the service area, this time on the M3. “A couple of the cars have been and gone. Three girls left, so two more to go.”

“Bugger! We’ll never get down there in time. Any numbers?”

“No. Peugeot and Citroen, not new. Dark colours, blue I think, it’s hard to tell in the light.”

“Wonderful. OK, we’re going to need you up here.”

“Can’t do tomorrow, I’m supposed to be meeting Crawford, then I’ve got to get back to Bridport.”

“Friday will be fine.”

“Do I get expenses for the train fares?”

“No.”

“How about some sleep, then?”

“You can get your head down when I do.”

“You haven’t got a gig tomorrow night. Where do I go?”

“Albion Lettings.”

The third pickup has taken place without me. It must have gone smoothly enough because the gorilla merely glowers as I climb back into the bus. Katya sits alone in the rear, hunched as far as she can get from the driver’s seat. Giles’s sweater could

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hold two of her. Her own damp clothes are in a plastic carrier bag at her feet. Everything she possesses, I suppose. None of the women has any luggage. It is cold and the windscreen is misting up. The gorilla lights a cigarette. I roll my window down a couple of inches.

Through the thin belt of birches that separates the car park from the motorway I see lights approaching up the slip road, then they go out and a red Mercedes swings into view. It circles round behind us and draws up alongside, pointing towards the exit. This time I stay where I am and its driver emerges and crosses to the door of the bus without looking in our direction. She slides it open with a grind and a thump and says a few words to Katya, who gets out holding her carrier bag. The woman takes it from her and tosses it inside. Katya protests and tries to reach for it. The woman snaps at her and takes her arm but Katya shakes her off and starts to scramble back.

The woman swears, definitely not in English, then calls to us. "Don't sit there, you. Give a hand."

The gorilla jumps from the cab, throws away his cigarette and wades in. He grabs a handful of hair and sweater and drags Katya out onto the tarmac, then when she starts to wail he spins her round and slaps her hard. She falls to the ground.

"Careful!" the woman says, and bends over her.

By this time I am out of my seat too and standing behind him.

"That's enough! Let her take her stuff, if that's what she wants."

The gorilla turns and leans towards me, deliberately crowding into my space, shoving his face into mine.

"I've had about enough of you, you smart bastard, barging in here and throwing your bloody weight around."

I step back and he smirks at me.

I reach into the bus and pull the fire extinguisher from its bracket on the wall, swinging it like a club. It hits him full on and

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he goes down like a sack of sand, blood spurting from his shattered nose. I edge forward and stand over him ready for another go, but he is out of it.

The woman has backed up against the Mercedes. She has the keys ready, poised to bolt. Katya is still sitting on the ground, her head in her hands. I look round. Nothing moves. Half a dozen lorries bulk square, dark and still. Extraordinary. You would think the whole world would come running. I put out my arm to help Katya up but she flinches away so I go over to the car. The driver inches round the bonnet, keeping her distance as I open the rear door.

“Get in,” I say to Katya.

She looks up at me. Her eyes are red and smeared and one is already beginning to swell. Her nose is running. She wipes it on the sleeve of Giles’s sweater, then stands up and straightens her clothes.

“Wait,” I say and cross back to the bus. Her carrier bag is under one of the seats. I pull it out and hand it to her.

5

“Are you going to tell me what we’re doing here?”

I fiddle with the froth on my cappuccino, heaping it on one side of the cup and burying the sprinkling of chocolate. We are sitting in the restaurant at the back of the National Film Theatre with a view over the south bank of the Thames. Waterloo Bridge rumbles above us. Tourists are taking advantage of the early sunshine and a few booksellers have ventured out of hibernation.

“I hear you had a bit of trouble last night.”

Crawford looks about him at the other tables, at the waitress who is wiping away crumbs nearby, out through the glass at the

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sunshine. The doors slide back to admit a couple of black-clad girls and for a second or two the sounds of the embankment flicker over us. Footsteps, talk and traffic, a pair of pigeons, the rumble and clack of skateboards.

"How is he?" I ask. A few hours ago I left the bus in the usual place, with the gorilla lying on the floor in the back. He was breathing, but that was all I could say for him. I found I did not care much.

"He'll be all right. He wasn't very pretty anyway."

"He was out of line."

"Yes, the pick-up driver thought so too." Crawford seems pleased about it.

"So. Why are we here?" I repeat.

"Business meeting."

"You said. Why here, for goodness sake?"

The restaurant is filling up with awayday shoppers taking lunch. Groups of women sidle between the tables, holding carrier bags high. They look round before sitting, like deer on a riverbank raising their eyes before drinking, then unwind scarves and coats, arrange packages round their feet and put their heads together to laugh. One man sits alone by the way out. Through the glass I can see another sitting at a table outside, enjoying the sun, reading a paper over a cup of coffee.

"The nature of the business," Crawford grins at me. "Lots of people, lots of exits and a rabbit warren of passages to get lost in, inside and outside. The food's not bad. A bit heavy on the basil and olive oil, but you'd expect that."

"Who are we meeting?" I watch the waitress serve the man by the way out sign: a sandwich, bacon and avocado on wholemeal bread, with a bottle of sparkling mineral water.

"Here's the deal." Crawford puts his elbows on the edge of the table and leans forward. "There's a milestone coming up."

"Christ, don't tell me you have a five year plan."

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“What’s wrong with that? We may not be quoted on the Stock Exchange, but the principle’s the same. At this precise moment our problem is expansion. We have to keep our contacts on the Continent happy, which means we have to keep the money flowing. To do that, we have to make more landings. More landings means more women and more women means more accommodation.”

Outside, books are laid out on trestle tables, wedged spine up in rows. People are stopping to examine them, bending forward, turning their heads to read the titles. Now and then someone picks up a volume to leaf through the pages while the rest of the row slumps slowly sideways into the gap.

“Where do the women go now?” I ask.

“There are a couple of houses. But property’s expensive. The guy we’re meeting today used to know your brother. He should be able to...”

“What the hell is he doing here?”

Crawford and I both look up. The glass doors are sliding closed behind three men, conservatively dressed in dark suits, overcoats. The one standing closest to our table is staring at me coldly. Gordon has put on a bit of weight, but then so have I. He still has the savage gaze of a predator.

“Hello,” Crawford says, half standing. “Good to see you again. This is Simon Coltraine.” The legs of his chair make a metallic ringing sound as they scrape back across the tiled floor.

“I know who it is.”

“Do you?” Crawford sounds confused.

I stand too. Gordon’s eyes follow mine. His two companions pose like heavy shop window dummies a pace behind him. The man by the exit puts his sandwich down and gathers his feet under his seat.

“Well,” Crawford hesitates, then carries on with his prepared speech. “Simon’s brother died, as you know. His wife inherited,

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but she's gone back to the States. Simon has control of the farm for the time being. He's been keeping an eye on things down there, learning the ropes. I think he'll be very useful."

"I'm sure he will."

"Did Mansfield send you?" I ask.

"No." Gordon shifts, raises his right hand and gestures to the others. They back away and sit at a neighbouring table. "Mansfield is yesterday's man. I expect him to remain that way for the next... um... five years or so. Until he gets out of Barlinnie. Even then, I doubt he'll ever amount to much again. He lost his nerve, rather, after your last encounter."

"If he's inside, it has nothing to do with me."

"Of course not. But as I say, he never regained his form after you dropped your case full of – what was it? Icing sugar?"

"Talcum powder," I admit. I had experimented with both and the talc had made a much more impressive cloud.

"Talcum powder. You scared him shitless."

"Just making a point."

"You two have met then," Crawford says, trying and failing to follow the conversation.

"Oh, yes. It was some time ago but the memory is vivid."

"And now it's payback time, is that it?" I say.

"Whatever for? Mansfield's loss was my gain. If anything I owe you a favour." Gordon pulls out the chair opposite mine and sits. He looks up at me, his head on one side, as I take my own seat. Crawford fidgets for a moment on the sidelines, then drops down on Gordon's right.

"So," Gordon says to him. "This man is learning all about your business."

"Yes. Well, no." Crawford's glasses blink back and forward between us. "I mean, only the Dorset end. Simon's been on three runs, driven two of them."

"Has anything gone wrong yet?"

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“How do you mean?”

“I’ve found that things don’t go according to plan when Mr Coltraine is involved.”

“Oh. No, of course not. Apart from the crash the first time out. But that was an accident. The driver was killed, and one of the women. Simon cracked a couple of ribs.”

“The other women were unhurt, were they?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“Well, they got away. We never traced them.” Crawford is finding Gordon’s steady gaze on my face as unnerving as I am. “I mean, we searched, but there was no sign. I pulled everybody out and we waited for the other shoe to drop, but there was nothing. The police knew bugger all. In the end I decided they’d gone to ground. They were in the country illegally.”

“Fascinating. You know, my experience of Mr Coltraine is that he’s quite devious. You’d be surprised.”

“Simon?”

“I didn’t like one of the deals he had going with my brother, that’s all.”

Gordon’s eyebrows lift. “You’re telling me you like this one?”

“Simon, what is this?”

“It’s nothing. I didn’t ask to get caught up in this. I didn’t come to you, don’t forget, you approached me.”

“No.” Crawford’s face hardens. “First out we tried to scare you off. Then you started poking around and it seemed like we should make the best of it.” His mobile rings and he gropes in his jacket pocket.

“What is it...? *What...*? When was this?” Gordon and I watch one another, pretending not to eavesdrop, both aware of how white his knuckles are as he grips the phone. Crawford listens without comment for a long time, then starts issuing instructions. “Get the remaining women out of there. Head west

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and call me when you're on the M4. No... No, just leave it. Leave everything."

"I take it something has gone wrong now," Gordon says.

"The police have raided one of the houses," Crawford says, staring at the screen of his mobile, then at me. "Also the offices in Wandsworth. Both at the same time. How could they do that? One or the other... but both? You fucking bastard!" The last phrase is screamed at me. He lunges across the cutlery and his chair falls over behind him with a clatter. I slip out of my own to keep the table between us. Heads turn all over the restaurant.

"I don't think this is a good idea, do you?" I say to Gordon. "Lots of people watching."

Gordon's companions are already out of their seats. He nods to one of them who puts his hand on Crawford's shoulder, forcing him down into my old place. The other picks up the chair which has been knocked over. Gordon smiles at the waitress who has hurried over from the cash desk.

"I'm terribly sorry," he says. "I must apologise for my friend. He's just had some very bad news. We'll be leaving immediately. I'm so sorry." She steps back a few paces but I can see reinforcements gathering from the bar opposite.

Gordon turns back and speaks quietly to Crawford and myself. "I don't know what's going on here," he says. "Whatever it is, I want no part of it. Sort out your own problems. By the sound of it, you've got plenty. This meeting did not take place. I was never in London. Is that clear?" I shrug. Crawford does not move. A muscle is working in his cheek.

"I think it would be best if you were to leave first," Gordon says to him. "Go through the doors here, turn left and walk along the river. Don't stop. Take your people with you." He lifts his chin towards the man who has been sitting by the exit. Now he is on his feet, watching.

Crawford holds the edge of the table with both hands as if he

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is about to overturn it, but instead he leans towards me, lips tight and ready to spit. Then a shutter blinks down behind his eyes. *Don't get mad, get even.* He takes a long, shallow breath and his shoulders drop. With a jerk he shakes himself free of the heavy grip of Gordon's colleague and pushes backwards to stand. I still expect him to say something, but he nods a few times, then turns quickly and makes for the way out, followed by his minder.

The glass slides back into place behind them. Crawford is walking fast and stiff-legged so that the other has to stretch to keep up. A third man rises from one of the tables by the book-stalls and joins them.

"My friends and I will make our way through the building and leave by the front entrance," Gordon says. "I suggest that you wait about ten minutes then do the same. If ever I did owe you a favour, consider it paid in full."

The NFT is staging a Ken Russell retrospective. Fifteen minutes later I join the crowd leaving a lunchtime screening of *Tommy* and cross the road to Waterloo Station and another train to the south-west.

6

"Are you OK?"

Not really. I nod and grin.

"Never better. I've got a good feeling about this."

We stand in the backstage dark. Even with the lights dimmed the stage looks bright and exposed and huge, cables and equipment everywhere, amplifiers and microphone stands blocking every path. The wings are curtained and deeply shadowed. Looking out at an angle I can see the far end of the front row, people taking their coats off, sitting, turning to talk to friends behind. Beyond them others are coming into

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the auditorium with glasses in their hands. They must have rung two minutes in the bar. Bridie slips her arm through mine and squeezes reassurance.

It seemed like a good idea at the time. Double back to a part of the country I used to know well, where there used to be friends and places to hide. Surround myself with people. The trouble with being on tour, though, is that everyone knows where to find you. There is no future in ducking and weaving when about fifty posters, a website and a mail shot of who knows how many colour leaflets all say that Simon Coltraine will be playing in Bridport at 8pm on Thursday.

The MC comes up behind me, slaps me on the shoulder.

“OK Simon? Looks like a good house.”

“Ready as we’ll ever be.”

He laughs and ducks past the curtain. The house lights drop. A spot picks him out at the front of the apron as he fumbles the microphone off the stand. A few people cheer and someone calls out from the back of the hall. Everyone knows everyone else at these local gigs. He talks for a minute or two while latecomers sidle to their seats. Arts Centre news, other bands who will be playing later in the spring. Then:

“But you’ve had enough of me. Yes, all right, thank you. It’s time to welcome back an old friend and local hero, paying us a visit as part of a warm-up for a major tour later in the year – details in the foyer during the interval. Ladies and gentlemen... Simon Coltraine!”

7

The interval, and Len has been reunited with a fan from way back.

“Here, look at this,” he says, holding out an antique 45 still in

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its paper sleeve. "I haven't seen one of these since... I used to have a couple of copies but they got lost years ago. I haven't got anything that will play vinyl any more." He sounds a little sad. "I think I transferred it onto cassette, but I couldn't even put my hand on that now."

"Do you think you could sign it?" the woman asks.

"Are you sure? This is a rarity, you know. You could probably sell it on eBay for all of five pounds."

The room is crowded, people three deep along the bar, others who have ordered in advance for the interval circulating slowly. A wooden ledge extends most of the way round the wall and this is loaded with bottles and glasses, clustered into groups, each one identified by a soggy slip of paper. Men sidle in and out, holding drinks high to avoid spills, calling to partners and friends. A lad brings ours over, pints freshly pulled, ice unmelted. One of the perks.

"What's your name?" Len asks.

"Pam," the woman says. "I used to live in London in those days. Do you remember the concert at the Hammersmith Odeon, when the fans rushed the stage? I was there. In the balcony, unfortunately. Then at the end you released those enormous balloons and people batted them from one end of the auditorium to the other..."

"To tell you the truth, they were there to give us a chance to get off. *For Pam. The old songs are the best.*" Len scribbles on record sleeve. "There you go. Here, have a copy of our last CD as well. On the house."

We have a stall in the corner of the bar where we are selling albums, T-shirts and copies of the *Simon Coltraine Songbook*, a self-publishing venture from a year or so ago.

"Has it got *Cold Hillside* in it?" someone asks.

"Yep. Including the fiddle breaks, if you're a fiddle player. Are you?"

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“My boyfriend is. It’s for him really. Could you sign it? Are you going to play *Cold Hillside* later?”

“Well, we don’t normally do requests... Unless someone asks for one, of course. I’ll add it to the list.”

Len’s fan has returned accompanied by a girl of about Bridie’s age.

“I was telling my daughter about seeing you,” she says to him, “And what you said about not having the single any more. I’m sorry, I didn’t think of it myself, but she wondered if you would like a copy of it?”

“I could burn it onto CD,” the girl offers. “If you gave us your address, we could send it on.”

“Simon, great show. You staying for a drink after?” Matt has laid aside his pinstripes, but a trace of professional aplomb still clings to him, even in leather jacket and chinos.

We shake hands but I find my eyes straying over his shoulder. I hate it when people do that to me. Two men are standing in the doorway. People pass between us and for a moment I cannot see their faces, then through a gap in the crowd I recognise Terry. The man with him is familiar but I am unable to place him until he takes out a mobile phone, then I feel a thump of anger in my gut. That toerag. *Your kind isn’t welcome round here.* I should have broken his arm when I had the chance.

Matt notices my expression and turns to look.

“What’s going on?”

“You don’t want to know, believe me.”

“That bad?”

“Worse.”

And of course I had seen the bastard even before that unpleasant little episode. Now I know where. Sitting in a Land Rover midway along an avenue of beeches. Staring at black skid marks on the road. *Not me mate, sorry. I’m not often down this way.* Like hell.

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8

“Hello Terry. Don’t turn round.”

“Simon! You bastard, now I’ve pissed on my shoes.”

The interval is over and the audience are back in their seats. After a hastily-negotiated reordering of the play list, Bridie and Steve are opening the second half with a number for unaccompanied voices which we normally do as part of a medley towards the end of the evening. Steve did not need much persuading. He is dead chuffed to be in the spotlight. If it works out, we might even keep it that way. The rest of the band are lurking in the wings. I am lurking in the gents. I have about three minutes.

A man with his flies undone is at a great disadvantage. I take Terry by the collar and push his face against the tiles.

“Don’t give me a hard time, Terry, or you’ll end up pissing your pants as well. What are you doing here?”

“Enjoying the music, Simon, that’s all. I’m a big fan.”

“Bullshit. You’ve never been near one of my gigs in your life.” I tap his head against the wall. In the auditorium I hear Bridie’s voice soaring, pure and clear and clean.

“Ow! Don’t do that! I’m looking for you, OK?”

“How many of you?”

“Just me. Argh!”

“Come on, I’ve seen that little tick with the mobile phone already. How many?”

“OK, OK. Four. Four of us.”

“Thank you. That didn’t hurt, did it? Now, I want you to cast your mind back a few weeks. Think back to that first run I did, when Tod rolled the bus. Remember that?”

“Yes.”

“You weren’t happy about the way they dumped him, were you?”

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“No.” Terry’s voice changes. “No, I wasn’t.”

“Good. You were right not to be happy. And because you weren’t happy I’m giving you a break now. That’s the only reason, because to be honest I think you’re a bit of a toad.” I lean against his back and whisper in his ear. I feel his shoulders stiffen. “The crap is hitting the fan, Terry, right now while you’re taking a leak. I’d like you to think about whose side you’re on. Will you do that for me?”

“Right. Anything you say, Simon.”

“OK.” In the auditorium I can hear Bridie and Steve going for the final harmonies of the song. “Take a minute to wipe yourself down. No rush.” Thirty seconds later I am walking on, joining in the applause, taking up my violin from its stand, rubbing rosin onto the bow.

9

We play two encores. People carry on clapping even after the house lights have come up, but I shake my head at the MC.

“Don’t know any more songs, sorry.”

He laughs. “It’s been a terrific evening. You’ve got to come down more often you know Simon. This is your turf. Beer in the dressing room, OK?”

“Be right with you. Just got to check something.”

I gesture to Bridie to stay put in the wings, then walk back onstage. The auditorium is already beginning to empty, now that the brilliance of the spots has been replaced by the flat light of real life. People are struggling into their coats and winding scarves, shuffling along the rows to the aisles, gathering in groups in the exits. The quality of the sound has changed already, there is the beginning of an empty echo in the hall. I make a show of unplugging a cable and coiling it on my

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arm. At the back two men start to make their way towards the footlights, pushing sometimes against the flow of the crowd. I rejoin Bridie.

“Time to go.”

We head for a door leading from the backstage area into a corridor that runs the length of the auditorium. This is off limits to the public, walls painted in a functional cream gloss with red tiles on the floor. There is nobody about. On the stage I hear a hollow thump as someone climbs up from the stalls. I point to the right.

“That way, through the fire door.”

We are still five yards away from it when Bridie gives a squeak of dismay. Ahead of us, at the other end of the corridor, Terry and his colleague with the mobile phone, in no hurry apparently, are walking in our direction. Behind us the backstage door slams open and footsteps sound on the vinyl. We reach the fire exit and I throw my weight on the bar.

Outside another figure is waiting.

10

We tumble through the fire exit. In the alley outside Matt is holding the car door open.

“Let’s not hang about.”

I push Bridie towards the car and she falls into it. A moment later a hand slaps down onto my shoulder. Someone spins me round and a fist slams into my gut. The blow drives the air out of my body with a force that seems to rip the skin from the inside of my throat. The muscles of my diaphragm are paralysed. I am suffocating, unable to take a breath, and I fall to the ground curled into a ball with my arms round my head. Someone kicks me in the ribs. Twice.

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Then the car horn is sounding and people are running down the alley. There are shouts and the sound of heavy panting and feet scuffling around me, then running footsteps, an engine starting. After a while I find that I can breathe after all. I roll and crawl until I am beside the car wheel, prop my back against it and put my head between my knees. More footsteps.

“Simon. You OK, mate?”

“Piss off.”

“Good. Look, you’d better get in the car in case they come back. Can you do that? Bridie’s having hysterics. Matt wouldn’t let her out.” Georgie Sims. I spend my life being rescued by Georgie Sims.

The car door bursts open and Bridie hurls herself forward, throws her arms around me. Her cheeks are wet and her mascara has run. She is hugging me too tightly and my ribs hurt. Matt appears as well. He and Georgie pick me up, ease me into the passenger seat.

“Thanks again, Georgie.”

“No problem. You run along Simon, we’ll tidy up here. Great show, by the way, did I say?”

CHAPTER NINE

1

“Quite an evening.” Matt throws himself into an armchair. “Not much of that kind of thing in Beaminster. You don’t get the same rush from conveyancing.”

We are back at the B&B after the gig. Our landlady prefers to get to bed early but her sitting room is available for guests’ use. A gas fire in which real flames lick between bogus lumps of coal gives instant heat. The yielding furniture, in loose covers of a riotous William Morris print, has a seaside boarding house smell of seaweed and damp. On top of the television set are several groups of porcelain flowers. The petals are delicately folded and painted in bright, translucent colours.

“Georgie was fantastic,” I say. “How did you get hold of him?”

I am lying on the sofa, head on a cushion, stockinged feet across the arm at the other end. My gut aches and I speak slowly

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with pauses for breath. My stomach will be black tomorrow, but I do not think there is any permanent damage. My ribs are another matter.

"Oh, he was there anyway. Never misses. You'd be surprised how many of your old mates turn up to these things." Matt is keeping it light but he will not meet my eye. There are gaps in the conversation which he does not hurry to fill. He is waiting for me to offer an explanation.

"I should be in a pub with them now... not horsing about like this."

"They see you often enough."

"They used to." I feel as if I have lost something, an object with rich associations, not to be replaced, carelessly put down and forgotten. It is like finding a new scratch on an old piece of furniture. Then I remember crawling on my hands and knees in the village street, legs crowding on all sides. *Your kind isn't welcome...*

Matt seems to be thinking along the same lines. "Three times now. You should call the police."

"Not a good idea."

"Ah. I was afraid of that." He is silent for a moment. "Your village mugging, that was a funny thing."

"Glad you think so."

"I've talked to Georgie about it. He says he only knows one of the guys who attacked you. Some kind of hanger-on of Terry's. Terry claims he doesn't remember his name, for what that's worth. The others weren't in the pub. It's as if they were waiting for you outside. They all legged it as soon as you were gone. None of them has been around since."

"Terry and his hanger-on were both involved tonight." Terry had taken my warning seriously enough to hold back, though. Without that we might not have got away.

"Were they? I missed that. What I'm saying is, the 'Simon is a

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scumbag' campaign was orchestrated, and it never took off. Not among people who know you, at any rate."

"What about your boss?" I ask.

"I don't have a boss, I'm a partner." Matt puts on a dignified expression which collapses immediately. "I know exactly who you mean, though. Not a word. Nothing since I was told to take your name off the mailing list. I was hoping to get a chance to talk to you, so I braced him about it this afternoon – very evasive: couldn't possibly speak... highly confidential... utmost discretion... blah, blah, blah. If I didn't know better I'd say something had put the wind up him."

"Who does he play golf with?"

"Local mafia. Councillors, magistrates, business types, couple of policemen. They're probably all Masons or something."

"Are you?"

Matt laughs. "A Mason? No. A guy did try to slip me the handshake once, but I thought it was some bugger making a pass. That's not to say it wasn't, of course."

Bridie comes downstairs. She has bathed her face. I shift on the sofa to look up at her and wince at the pain in my side.

"You need to get that seen to."

"I'd prefer to steer clear of A&E departments for the moment."

"Are you two going to tell me what's going on?" Matt finally asks.

Bridie looks at me, shakes her head.

"Why aren't you staying at the farm?"

"First place anyone would look."

"It sounds to me as if you're going to need my professional services before this is over," he says.

"Very likely."

"OK, then. No detail for the time being. But answer one general question. Whose side are you on? Good guys or bad guys?"

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“Do you need to ask?” I have known Matt all my life, he is one of the few people I would trust without a second’s thought. Clearly he no longer feels the same way about me.

“I think I do. If it were Giles I wouldn’t bother, but with you it’s sometimes hard to tell. It’s to do with being a musician, I think. You spend your life doing what pleases you most. It means that you’re more likely to please yourself in other things too.”

“You’re a musician.”

“No I’m not, I’m a solicitor. Most of us don’t have to make choices, you know Simon. They’re made for us by our jobs, our colleagues, our families. Our options are limited and we’re used to compromises. Performers are different, some professional sportsmen too, I should think. It’s not that rules don’t apply to them, they’re simply more likely to consider breaking them. So, good guys or bad guys?”

“Good guys... I think.”

Matt laughs again. “Serves me right for asking a silly question.”

“Look, it’s one of Giles’s old rackets. I’m involved because the police are twisting my arm. Today it blew up in my face.”

“But you can’t trust the police with what happened this evening?”

“I don’t know. I’d rather not risk it.”

“Hm. The other thing to remember is that musicians are no more guaranteed to choose the winning side than anyone else.”

2

For once Accident and Emergency was not crowded. The pubs had closed three or four hours earlier and in any case it was midweek, and wet. I followed the signs from the hospital’s main

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doors and found the night entrance. An ambulance was parked outside. A man in a lime green jacket sat in the driver's seat with a clipboard on his knee, sipping from a plastic cup and ticking boxes.

There were three or four individuals waiting inside, slumped in plastic chairs. They had the inward look of people dealing with pain, not necessarily their own. I crossed to the reception desk. Alongside it a row of black plastic bags propped up the wall. Further down the corridor several trolleys were heaped with folded bed linen. The desk itself had piles of brown envelopes on it, patient records, waiting to be filed. There was nobody behind it, but I could hear movement in the adjoining office. After midnight people stop worrying about appearances and the mechanics of life show through.

The receptionist directed me to a nursing station and I moved further into the building. I had been asleep only half an hour earlier and my tongue still felt thick and gummy. The lights were too bright and there seemed to be no room for shadows among the pastel colours.

I passed a row of cubicles with curtains ready to be drawn round them. In the second sat Giles. He was in his shirt-sleeves and his jacket lay on the couch beside him. His head was hanging back so that his closed eyes were directed blindly at the ceiling and his Adam's apple jutted out from his throat. His arms hung vertically on either side of the chair. For a moment I thought he was dead.

I must have made a sound because he opened his eyes and allowed his head to flop over in my direction. Bruising was already beginning round his left eye and he had a short row of bloody stitches above the eyebrow.

"How are you?" I asked.

"As you see. Totally fucked."

"Not totally, surely? Two arms, two legs. Fingers moving

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on command.”

“It feels totally.” He stirred and pulled himself upright, flexing and massaging his right arm. I handed him his jacket.

“Here, you’ll get cold. How’s Sheila?”

“OK, apparently. I haven’t seen her yet.”

“What happened?”

“Car’s in a ditch.”

“And how much have you had to drink?”

“None of your bloody business.” He sighed. “Couple more than I needed, obviously.”

“What about the police?”

“Don’t worry about the police. There was no-one else involved, they’ll let it go.”

“Must be nice to have friends.”

3

From a distance Albion Lettings looks much the same as before: Victorian corner shop, white vertical blinds blanking the windows, frosted glass in the door. The charmed calm of Christmas has gone, though. Traffic grinds past on the main road, buses, trucks, taxis and cyclists competing for space. People range the pavements: pensioners, mothers with toddlers, shift workers and kids bunking off. The side street is lined with parked cars. I tell the cab driver to drop me five minutes further on and walk back. There is a school somewhere nearby, I can hear the racket of playtime voices and rushing feet. I turn into a newsagent’s on the opposite side of the road and buy a paper, then linger outside checking the runners at Newmarket.

Albion is open for business. Between passing lorries I see two men go in, one coming out again almost immediately carrying a cardboard box. It looks heavy. There are lights in the first floor

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room above the shop front and movement behind the glass.

"Hello," says Mellor behind me. "Prompt as ever, I see."

I turn and find her leaning against the newsagent's window, her head backed by a halo of postcards taped to the inside of the glass. *H Reg Golf. Metallic blue, alloy wheels. 150,000 miles. Good runner.* Black sweater again today, but otherwise her usual uniform of denim. She must have a wardrobe full of jeans. I look down at my own, dusty, mud-stained and with something dark splashed across one knee. Could that be blood?

"Thank you." I say. "Seems to be a lot of activity over there. Us or them?"

"I wonder which us is us to you? Come and have a look."

We cross the road, dodging between slow-moving vehicles. I have to trot the last few paces and end up standing on the kerb, hand to my side.

"What's the matter?"

"Some of Crawford's people jumped us last night. At least, I think it was them. Audiences aren't usually that aggressive."

Mellor stops and draws me back to the edge of the pavement out of the path of buggies and shopping bags.

"Was he there himself? We haven't been able to get hold of him yet."

"Don't think so. Just four of his boys. Local, a couple of them."

"Any names?"

"No."

She does not believe me. Change the subject.

"The tracer worked this time, then?"

She squints up into my face, then shrugs. "Like a dream. We picked it up coming off the motorway and it led us straight to a building near Earl's Court. Where did you put it?"

"The last girl had a carrier bag of clothes. I dropped it in there."

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“Couldn’t be better. She must have taken it right on into the house.”

“Was she OK? Her name was Katya.”

“Don’t know any names, I’m afraid. They were still waiting for an interpreter when Randall called me over here. The place was an out and out brothel – about fifteen girls in squalid little rooms. We scooped up several of their clients. One of the women had been pretty badly knocked about. Presumably she wasn’t co-operating.”

I turn and walk the ten yards to the corner. As I reach the door of the Albion offices it opens and a second man comes out carrying another large cardboard box. “Sorry mate,” he says. “If I could just...” He edges past and goes on his way.

“You timed those raids deliberately, didn’t you?” I say. “You knew I’d be with him.” The two men are stacking the boxes in the back of a van double parked in the side road. They return for another load. One of them nods to Mellor.

“We weren’t sure how far Crawford was involved in the London end,” she says. “It’s still not clear, in fact. That’s not the way it usually works – you have importers and you have exploiters, different groups normally. But it seemed like a good idea to make our move when he was otherwise occupied.”

“We were sitting round a table when his people phoned him. He wanted very badly to throttle me. Fortunately there were too many witnesses.”

“Frustrating for him. What about the guy you were meeting?”

“The call came too soon for me to get much.” I have decided to let sleeping predators well alone. “As far as I could make out Crawford wanted him to bankroll expansion, but he bolted as soon as he heard about your raid.”

She ducks past me and goes through the door. I follow her in.

There are four desks in the shop front office. Each has telephone, keyboard and monitor, pens and pencils, trays to hold

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papers. One has a vase of artificial flowers on it, another has a mug with *The World's Greatest Mum* printed on the side in purple letters. Behind the desks are shelves full of box files, charts and calendars on the walls. There are waste paper baskets, all full, and half a packet of chocolate biscuits on top of one of the filing cabinets.

"Well?" I say to Mellor.

"We're still talking to the staff, but it looks as if Albion is a genuine lettings agency. All the paperwork confirms it. We've checked several of the properties the company manages. Seems to be quite well run."

I take out my reading glasses and peer at a wall chart. It is a new one, as you would expect at the beginning of the year, but it shows the last month of the previous year as well. There are entries throughout December, scribbled notes in several different hands and a number of coloured stickers. They continue into the spring, thinning out towards the summer. Somebody should be interviewing a new receptionist today. The applicant is going to be disappointed.

Mellor leads me out of the back of the former shop and into the yard. As we pass through the hallway I glance up. The camera is still there, inactive now that the PC it was connected to has been removed. The yard itself also seems much as I remember it: high walls, flagstones, the bins where I positioned them in case I needed to make a getaway. On the way back inside I put my head round the kitchen door. Again it reminds me of a village hall. The only things missing are handwritten signs stuck to the tiles over the sink.

THE BLUE CUPS ARE FOR THE USE OF
PARISH COUNCIL OFFICERS ONLY.

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In every village hall there is someone who writes notices in capitals, with words underlined.

4

I sat with Giles until a nurse appeared. Like the hospital itself, she seemed to reserve a special manner for the early hours.

"I see you found each other," she said. "How are you feeling Mr Coltraine? No, stay where you are. You're still a bit shaken up, I expect. Can I get someone to bring you a cup of tea? We've just made some. Perhaps your brother would like one?" I shook my head. She took Giles by the chin and turned his face towards the light.

"They've done a neat job with that stitching. You'll have a bit of a shiner tomorrow, but nothing permanent. A couple of weeks and nobody will know the difference. I expect it will itch, though, at first." Giles grunted.

"How's my sister-in-law?" I asked.

"She's fine. They're finishing off now, then you'll both be able to go in and see her." She turned back to Giles. "The pair of you were very lucky, only a few cuts and bruises. Car's a write-off I understand. Nice to know that all those belts and airbags really do work."

There were a couple of discarded dressing packets on the trolley next to his chair and she started tidying up, dropping them into a pedal bin, pushing the trolley back against the wall, putting everything in its place ready for the next catastrophe. I had a glimpse of what the walls of that cubicle must have witnessed, blood and fear and grief, day after day, leaving not a mark. I remembered a trip to Portsmouth when I was at school, a visit to HMS Victory. The orlop there, the lowest deck where the surgeon carried on his grisly business, was painted red to

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hide the gore. This was better, no question. Watching the nurse move to and fro I wondered what she did with the pain at the end of the day.

“The doctor wants to keep your wife in until the morning,” she said. “Nothing to worry about. There’s no reason why your brother shouldn’t take you home now, then you can both come back and pick her up, say, about eleven?”

Giles came awake at once. “Why are they keeping her in? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing at all. She’s more shaken up than you are. You’re welcome to stay here if you like. You could push a couple of armchairs together in one of the visitors’ sitting rooms, catch a bit of sleep. One of the nurses will wake you and you can get breakfast in the staff dining room.”

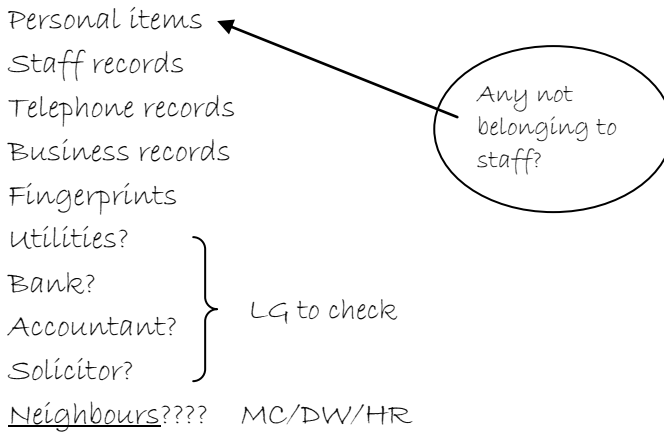
5

“Someone’s giving you the finger,” I say. “If you want my view, that’s what it is. Up yours, copper.”

“Thank you for that,” says Randall. “Wouldn’t be you, by any chance, would it?”

We are in the upstairs conference room at the Albion offices. The long table is now covered with paperwork and items collected from downstairs. There are polystyrene cups in the waste basket and on the windowsills. Randall is on his feet, watching the traffic in the street outside. Mellor and I sit at one end of the table. A whiteboard has been erected at the other and I can read jottings from an earlier brainstorming session:

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“Must be masses of fingerprints.” I say.

“None of yours, I dare say,” Randall looks over his shoulder.
“Did you wear gloves when you had your snoop round?”

“Er... yes.”

“Very professional.”

“The place is run by a manager,” Mellor explains. “He claims he’s never heard of Crawford. Says the camera in the hallway and the PC under the stairs were his own idea – normally any pictures end up on equipment at his home. We’ve seized it all, of course. Hard drive, discs, they’re all being checked, it will take a while. In the meantime, though, the Met confirm that there was a break in here about six months ago. Photographs were produced in court.

“The manager says he found that the PC had gone when he opened up after the Christmas holiday, but he decided not to bother reporting it. It would only put up the insurance premiums, and they were high enough already.”

“The manager has never met the owners?”

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“He says not. They don’t come near the place. He reports to a solicitor, and that not often. He’s been around for a couple of years, all the other staff have joined since. So far the solicitor is not being very co-operative.”

“What about the neighbours?”

“Still asking. Nobody noticed your bit of breaking and entering, by the way. And talking of breaking and entering, the manager insists that his system has not logged any pictures of you. He’s had nothing since a couple of days before Christmas. We’ll be able to confirm that when we’ve been through his stuff.”

“Fortunately we’ve got something much more concrete.” Randall tires of watching buses pass and turns back into the room. He sits on the window sill and considers the debris on the table. “This morning it occurred to one of our brighter officers to look up the address of the Earl’s Court house in the Albion files. The building is managed by this lettings company.”

6

We decided to check on Sheila, then go back to the farm. We could bring her some fresh clothes when we came to collect her in the morning. The nurse led us along a corridor to a lift, up a couple of floors, down more corridors. Giles walked steadily, but he looked very tired.

The ward consisted of several small bays off a central passage. Every bay held half a dozen beds, widely spaced, each surrounded by the usual hospital paraphernalia: cabinet, radio, curtain, TV suspended from the ceiling, switches and tubes on the wall. The lights were dimmed, except in one corner where a wakeful patient lay reading. Sheila’s bed was opposite and scatter from the lamp made her look very pale. She seemed to be asleep.

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"There she is," the nurse said. "Try not to wake her up and don't stay too long, you could do with some sleep yourself. The doctor talked to her about the baby but I'm not sure how much she took in, she was pretty woozy. He'll have another word with her tomorrow."

"The baby?" said Giles. I knew it must be a question but fatigue, shock and several drinks too many flattened his words into an exhausted statement of fact.

"I'm terribly sorry," the nurse said. "Still, you're both young enough, there's absolutely no reason not to... Oh..." She stopped when she saw Giles's face. "You mean you didn't know that she'd lost it? Didn't anyone tell you?"

Giles put out his hand and gripped the rail at the foot of the nearest bed. There was a clipboard of patient notes hanging from it which swung as his fingers brushed against the paper.

"I didn't know she was pregnant," he said.

7

"I've really got to get going."

"You're not playing tonight are you?"

"No, but the last train stops everywhere. If I don't get an earlier one Bridie will be picking me up after midnight."

"Plenty of time."

Crumpled paper napkins and the transparent shells of several sandwiches have joined takeaway coffee cups in the bin. Street-lights have come on outside. There are no blinds in the windows of the Albion conference room and the yellow sodium glare is reflected on the ceiling. Randall has been called away by a young man in shirtsleeves holding a file of papers in one hand, fingers between the sheets to mark his place. He seems to have been gone for hours. I look at my watch. He has been gone for hours.

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Opposite me Mellor is working her way through her own heap of files. I have been trying to doze, but my ribs are hurting and I cannot lie back comfortably in the unyielding chairs. I would stretch out on the floor if I could be sure of getting up again.

"I should come to one of your gigs some time." Mellor adds another folder to her out pile and rolls her head to ease the muscles of her neck.

"Not your kind of thing, surely?"

"I wouldn't say that. I bought a CD of yours the other day. Came across it at Camden Lock."

"Really? Did you like it?" I am not sure what I feel about this. Usually I am pleased when I find that someone has heard me play. This time there is a sense of intrusion.

"Yes. Impressive. Plenty of drive. Even better live, I should imagine. I found some of the songs a bit... chilly, though."

"That's a new one. We've been called a lot of things, but never chilly."

"Wrong word then... Remote maybe. Disengaged. That one about the soldiers: ...*to a bed on a cold hillside*. Is that really what you believe?"

"It's an image, that's all. The words aren't me."

"Isn't it a bit affected, the... bleakness? What about family, friends, loyalty. Love. You've got all those. Well..." She remembers Giles. "It's not as if you're starving in a ditch."

"Come and look at this." I heave myself up, leaning heavily on the chair arms.

"You should get that seen to."

"I will. Look at this."

I move over to the window and Mellor follows. We stand on either side of the sash and look down obliquely to avoid attracting attention from the street. The shops are still open, the less committed of them starting to put up their shutters. The newsagent across the way is lifting mesh grilles into place in

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front of his glass, fitting the lower edges into slots along the sill, fixing them in place with padlocks. It is that kind of area.

"Look at her," I tell Mellor.

An old woman is making her way along the opposite pavement. She is wearing a heavy, shapeless coat. The colour looks as if it might be mulberry, but the lamplight shifts shades confusingly. She has a woolly pom-pom hat on her head, with grey hair escaping all round. Her support stockings are wrinkled and the slippers on her feet have been darkened by the wet paving stones. She is pulling a shopping trolley, back bent, head down, taking each short pace with a slow, deliberate stoicism. Now and then she stops and looks up, counting the steps to her front door, or the bus stop, or simply perhaps to the next corner, not thinking yet about the corner beyond and the one after that.

"She may be going home to a gas fire," I say. "Couple of cats, grandchildren, friendly neighbours. It's possible. Many people do." I look at Mellor who has folded her arms and lowered her head. "On the other hand, it's more likely to be a cold single room, damp because her pension won't stretch to the heating. I bet she's got a savings account, though, and she puts away a little bit every week to pay for her own funeral. The world's full of people like her. They just keep on keeping on, because... because what else is there to do?

"How did you know she'd be there?" Mellor asks. "You walked over to the window and pointed at her. How did you know?"

"She's always there. There's always someone."

"Finally we're getting somewhere! Take one of these, will you?" Randall kicks the door shut behind him. He is carrying three more polystyrene cups balanced on the lid of a box file. Some of the hot liquid has already slopped out and when Mellor reaches over to take them they leave wet rings on the marbled

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board. Randall picks up a paper napkin and dabs with it.

“What’s happened?” Mellor asks.

“That manager character is telling the truth, I think. He knows bugger all. With a bit of prodding he’s come up with a few details, but it’s not much more than background.

I can see there is more. Randall is feeling pleased with himself. Even seated, he is strutting. He takes a gulp of tea and pulls a face.

“Ugh. Is there any sugar up here?” Mellor pushes a sachet over and he tears a corner, sprinkles, stirs with the end of a pencil.

“According to him, Albion Lettings has been going for about 30 years, staggering nearer and nearer to bankruptcy.” Another swallow. “Three or four years ago the firm changed hands. There was some new cash and from that point on things began to pick up. When he took over it was already quite busy. There are one or two commercial contracts – Albion supplies accommodation to Salamander Cleaning Services, for example.” Randall raises his cup in my direction. “Used to house immigrant workers – not clear yet whether or not they’re legit. Mostly, though, the company looks after flats for private landlords.

“The house in Earl’s Court is a special case. For one thing, they don’t handle much property north of the river. Mainly, though, it’s unusual because nobody from the office ever goes there. There’s no maintenance, no vetting of tenants. It’s always been a paper transaction – electronic, I should say. Once a quarter the rent comes into the bank and once a quarter it goes out again, less fees. This has been going on since before he started work here. No-one takes any notice. The thing is so far below the radar that it took him a while to figure out what we were talking about.”

“Where does the money go?” Mellor asks.

“Still checking. The interesting thing is the size of the

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deposits – as rents go, they're huge. The manager says that if he thought about it at all, he assumed that the property consisted of luxury apartments. He was gob smacked when I described the squalid little bed sitters we found there – thought we had the wrong address."

"Money laundering," Mellor says.

"Exactly. Albion covers its costs, which is very nice, but its main purpose is to convert the takings of a brothel into clean money. Rent, you see? Nobody is likely to compare the filthy rooms the women are trapped in with the penthouse rates on the paying-in slips."

8

"Hello Sheila, what are you doing in London? Come on up."

I pressed the button which released the catch on the front door a floor below, then opened my own door and stood on the landing. Sheila looked up at me as she climbed the stairs and smiled.

She and Giles had both recovered quickly after the accident and it had hardly been spoken of since. As the nurse had predicted, there were no visible scars. Sheila had thanked me for my help. I had changed the subject. What are brothers for? Lucky I was staying at the farm that week. No-one had mentioned the miscarriage. Things went back to normal and because I only visited now and then it was some months before I realised that Giles's drinking habits had changed. His driving habits, to be more accurate. He still took a glass when it suited him, but afterwards he would cadge a lift or, if the worst came to the worst, call a taxi. It was an improvement of sorts.

Sheila was looking strained. She sat, accepted coffee, stood again and fingered books on my shelves, riffled through some of

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the music on my desk.

"Did you do the score for that advert? I hadn't realised. It was terribly funny."

"Mm. And nobody can remember the product. Still, the director's talking about a film now. Probably won't come to anything, and it'll be low budget if it does, but you never know. What's up? I don't suppose you're here to see the sights."

"No... I'm hiding from Giles."

"Ah. What's he done?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. I need a bit of space. I don't suppose you could put me up, could you? Only for a couple of days."

"Of course. I'm away tomorrow and Thursday in any case, so you can make yourself at home."

Later on she asked if she could phone Giles. I went out into the kitchen to give her some privacy, but I could still hear one-sided fragments of the conversation.

"Hello Giles, it's Sheila. Yes, I'm fine. I'm in London. Phoning from Simon's place. Well, I don't know. Not yet. Simon's got some work in Nottingham. He says I can stay here while he's away. I may do that. He's been terribly sweet. No, driving. Stayed last night in a pub somewhere near Winchester. Can't even remember the name of the place. Romsey it might have been. No, no, don't do that. I'd like to be on my own for a bit. Things to think about. No, I can't talk about them yet, I haven't even got them straight in my own head. Please, Giles. It's only for a couple of days. Yes, I know you are. Giles, please, I can't do this now, I'll phone you on Friday. No, don't, I'll phone you, really I will."

I got back from Nottingham two days later. Sheila was looking calm and relaxed and I got the feeling that bridges had been burnt. There was one more to go, however, the biggest of the lot. Again, in fragments of a one-sided telephone

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conversation overheard from the kitchen, I witnessed the torch being thrust among the timbers.

"It's Sheila. Yes, I know you have, I got the messages. Because I wasn't ready. Yes, I think so. Sitting. Listening to music. Walking on Primrose Hill. Watching people. No, I don't think I am. No, don't say anything, Giles, listen to me. I'm flying to the States tomorrow, only for a week or so, to have a look around. But I've spoken to the University people – Simon's phone bill will be astronomical, I'm going to have to leave him some money. They loved the Hardy book and they're still keen. If the campus looks OK I'm going to take them up on the offer. Two years initially, with an option to renew.

"Giles? Are you still there? No, this isn't still about the baby, that's... Well, I suppose it is partly, but.... Yes, I know you've cut back. No. No, don't. If you do I won't be here. I can't discuss it face to face, that's the point. If I do I know what will happen. You'll turn on the charm and you'll be terribly, terribly reasonable and I'll end up wondering what on earth I'm making such a fuss about and you'll get what you want. I've seen you do it to other people. Getting what you want is the only thing that counts and you'll say anything. Sometimes I think you don't even see the rest of the world, it's an echo chamber for your own voice. You have no... joy. No, I don't know what I mean either. Don't come up. I'll call you."

9

"You're saving the best bit for last, aren't you?" I say. "Better get a move on, I've got a train to catch." Randall shakes his head at me and looks around for another sachet of sugar.

"Well..." he says finally. "The bright spark who thought to check for the Earl's Court address in Albion's files came up with

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a second idea. I'm going to have to do something about him, he's too clever by half. He asked whether there were any more of these properties on the firm's books. Places that nobody ever visited, paying money into the bank quarter by quarter."

"And...?"

"A lot of head scratching, but eventually the manager came up with one, within half a mile of the first. I sent some people along to ring the bell and they've just called in. Another sleazy bunch of bed sitters, but this time empty - everyone has cleared out.

"Is that it?"

"More or less. Apart from the names of Albion's owners."

"Who?"

"Companies House were very helpful. There are only two shareholders. Would you like me to let you have a car? You're cutting it a bit fine."

"Who?"

"Samuel Crawford and Giles Coltraine."

CHAPTER TEN

1

Dr Anna Lewis plays with a pencil on her desk. Alongside the inevitable monitor and keyboard there is a diary stamped with the logo of a drug company. Nothing else. She must one of those people who believe in clearing their IN tray by five o'clock.

I am wondering what will happen next. There have been no more slow motion dashes to London, mad activity at either end and in between nothing but the soporific rhythm of train wheels and a sense of time suspended. I have spoken to Mellor three or four times on the phone. Crawford is still at large, along with the women who worked in the second Earl's Court brothel. Police have occupied his travel company in Bristol. *The Hotspur* in West Bay is under guard. Presumably his passport number has been flagged and alarm bells will ring whenever one of his credit cards is used.

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“Assume he is still looking for you,” Mellor says. “Keep your head down.”

Instead, Bridie and I keep moving. The gig bookings still have us by the throat. A different bed and breakfast every night, a new landlady in a new town. The show must go on. We have survived Bridport, Taunton and last night Exeter, leaving my car behind and travelling incognito in the back of the van which carries the band’s kit. We sit side by side on an amplifier, rocking against one another on the bends, pointing out landmarks over the driver’s shoulder and sharing coffee from a vacuum flask.

My ribs are still hurting, though, and I have stiffened up. I am finding playing increasingly difficult. A&E still seems too public, but Dr Lewis is a familiar face. I have been given an appointment here after morning surgery is over. At short notice too – not something that happens frequently, judging by the curious glances the office staff shoot me when I arrive at the health centre.

It is a modern building. The waiting room is pleasantly fitted out in pale wood. Not the grim, four-square, hard-chaired antechamber that I associate with the GPs of my childhood, but wide and airy with daylight descending through glass in the roof. Benches and partitions divide it into alcoves. Children’s toys are scattered in a corner.

Dr Lewis’s office is like her desk, clear and functional with a couple of modern chairs for patients and a couch covered with a hygienic sheet of paper.

“I’m not happy with this,” she says. “From the medical point of view, you should be resting, not charging round the country performing. Playing the fiddle is one of the worst possible things you could be doing. Those are the same ribs I strapped up last time, after you rolled the car. This time the cracks are much worse and the bones are shifting against each other every time you lift your arms.” I nod. Tell me about it.

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"Then there's the ethical problem. This may be Dorset, but we're not all cabbage coloured. Keep your mouth shut if you like, I've seen people before after they've been given a good kicking." She waits to see whether I have anything to say. I concentrate on buttoning my shirt.

"And apart from any ethical considerations for me as a doctor, my husband is a senior police officer, did you know that?"

"No," I admit. "No, I didn't."

"I don't normally go home and tell him what my patients have been up to, but you must see it puts me in a difficult position."

"Yes, you're right, I do see that."

"You're not going to take a blind bit of notice, are you?"

"Probably not."

"Oh, for God's sake... OK, look, there's some new elasticated strapping which will grip more tightly than the stuff I've put on. We haven't got any here, but I can get some from the Minor Injuries Unit in Bridport. Come back later - after surgery this evening would probably be best, when everyone has gone. In the meantime, go home, lie down and don't move. Don't, I say don't, play the violin."

"This is the last time, understand? I don't want to see you again, ever."

2

The street vanished into the arch of a bridge, which gave it a darkened, foreshortened look, cut off from its horizons. It would have been cobbled once, it was that kind of road. I was about eleven years old. I remember tall buildings with narrow shop fronts. I think I realised even then that they were a little

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run down, and now I recognise the signs: small businesses managing from one year to the next.

We pulled up outside one artfully lit window. It was piled high with all kinds of objects: furniture, pottery, carpets, glassware. Not rubbish, but a good deal of it junk that had been rescued in the nick of time with a drop of glue and a swipe of polish. Giles and I got out of the yellow Post Office surplus van and he went round to the back to unload while I pressed my nose to the glass. On one side of the display, at the front, was a violin. It lay snug in a moulded case lined with green baize, the bow clipped inside the lid. At the narrow end of the case there was a small compartment with a trapdoor cover which opened with a leather tab. This had been propped wide and inside I could see a deeply grooved lump of rosin wrapped in a red rag and a set of spare strings in a square paper packet.

I had never seen a violin up close before. I would like to say that it spoke to me, but of course it did not. Still, the golden wood had a deep lustre which soaked up the light of the Tiffany lamp on the table above. There were grey lines on the ebony fingerboard where wire-wound gut had rubbed over the years. It had a sense of age about it, and a slightly dangerous magic. In the old stories, it is always the devil plays the fiddle.

Giles lifted a small writing desk out of the back of the van and banged a cheerful goodbye on the roof. His friend blipped the horn and drove off. I pushed the door of the shop open and held it for him while he manoeuvred his load through. There was a bell on a spring attached to the top of the doorframe and it clattered as we entered.

Inside, the shop was like the window, only more so. Everything was piled high, everything was for sale. The carpets on the floors had price tickets attached, as did the cabinets round the walls and the china in the cabinets. Tables had vases and umbrella stands on top of them, with paper flowers in the vases

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and walking sticks in the umbrella stands. Bookcases were draped with tapestries, chair arms were arrayed with scraps of lacework. A narrow passageway at the back led through to another, equally crowded room. A winding staircase, which I later found creaked alarmingly, led to an upper floor. Every inch of wall space in the stairwell was hung with pictures.

“Giles, dear. How lovely to see you. And this must be your brother. Simon, isn’t it? I’ve heard all about you. How do you do?”

The man appeared from behind a hanging in the inner room and I caught a glimpse of tools and a workbench behind him. He held out his hand to me, thumb tucked in and fingers drooping. I had never shaken hands with anyone before except in a school play, but I grabbed the tips of the digits he offered me and dropped them again. They were warm, dry and soft. He must have been about fifty and was dressed in the sort of clothes my father wore on Sundays: shirt, tie and light sweater, cavalry twill and stout shoes. He was very charming. A decent man I thought then, and I still think I was right, but even in my innocence I recognised something out of the ordinary. A neatness, in appearance and movement. For a man who worked with tools, his skin seemed terribly clean.

Giles sent me off to explore the shop and the pair of them bent over the desk. The man ran his hand over the leather inlay on the sloping lid, scratched at something with his fingernail, opened and closed one of the little drawers, took another out and examined the underside. I made my way upstairs, into a room where there were half a dozen model ships in glass cabinets surrounded by telescopes, brass navigational instruments and folders of charts, and one of those levers the captain uses to communicate with the engine room. I pulled it round until the dial showed *Full Ahead* but there was no answering shout from below. Instead downstairs I could hear the mutter of

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voices. Giles was speaking quietly, almost inaudibly. The owner's voice, being higher, carried better.

"Well now Giles, what have you got for me today dear...? Hm. Don't know if this is my kind of thing, it's a bit knocked about... All right, nice bit of marquetry on the front, but there's more work in it than I normally like to do... Leather inlay's crumbing away... And there's all these little paint flecks, look. Some silly boy painted the ceiling without covering it up... Hinges on the lid are loose. Looks like somebody's already tried to fix it. Same idiot as whitewashed the ceiling, I expect. Screw's split the wood here, you see?

"How much do you want for it dear...?"

"Get out of here, wasting my time. I'll give you thirty, tops... By the time I've fixed it up there'll be damn all left then. Even an old queen like me has to make a living... Nonsense, who told you that...? You read too many books. I doubt if it's even Victorian. Knocked up out of orange crates in the twenties, more like. Forty, and that's it..."

"Now you're being ridiculous, the violin's worth twice as much. If your little brother wants a fiddle he'd better ask your mother to buy him one. Get this piece of junk out of my shop."

Then there was a long pause in which Giles seemed to be speaking at length, his words lost among the oak and the copper and the porcelain. Finally I heard the man's voice again.

"Sorry dear, sorry, I didn't know about your mother. Just need to catch my breath... Let me sit for a moment... Where did you hear that about me? Some people are... You mustn't repeat such wicked lies. Wicked, wicked lies. You wouldn't repeat them, would you?"

"Could you fetch me a glass of water? Behind the curtain there... Thank you... You know, the violin's probably not worth all that much. I'll give you forty pounds and the violin. Fifty, then. You evil little shit."

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Giles called to me up the stairs. We went through to the front of the shop and he bent to take the violin out of the window, tucking the rosin into its niche, closing the lid carefully and snapping the catches shut. He handed it to me and I clutched it to my chest. I turned to look back through the passage at the shop's owner, searching for permission, I suppose.

He was sitting where Giles had left him. He held a glass in one hand. In the other was a handkerchief, which he pressed to his lips. He stared at the floor with the look of one who finds no comfort in the past and no hope in the future.

3

I have browsed through several issues of *Classic Car*, but they all look alike to me. E-Types, Aston Martins and Morgans seem interchangeable, as do the striped lawns they stand on. The alternatives are *Country Life* and *Mother and Baby*.

After a day of inactivity I am sitting in the waiting area at the health centre. It is dark outside and the room looks smaller by artificial light. The glass panels in the ceiling which brought the place to life by day are flat and black. In the gloom behind the enquiries desk shelves of buff NHS files dwindle to infinity. There is a life in each one. Some are bulging with incident. A vacuum cleaner drones in the vestibule, where a woman pushes it up and down.

There was nobody around when Bridie dropped me off, only a couple of vehicles beached in the car park. The outer door was bolted and Dr Lewis answered my ring herself. She led me through the reception area, past notices about repeat prescriptions, sick notes and ear syringing, past racks of leaflets about diabetes and pregnancy.

"Can you wait a minute or two?" she said. "I've got a couple

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of calls to make, then I'll be with you."

She has been gone more like ten. I get up and scan one of the notice boards to pass the time. Prostate cancer, signs and symptoms. I should live that long. Vaccinations for overseas travellers. Give blood. Not if I can help it. In the distance the vacuum cleaner whines.

My mobile phone rings. Bridie, the screen informs me.

"Hi, what's up?"

"You've got to get out of there, right now."

"I can't, Dr Lewis will be seeing me any second."

"For Christ's sake, for once in your life will you just move without half an hour's debate?"

"What's the matter?"

"Remember Crawford's phone bill and the Bridport number on it?"

"Yes." I had forgotten all about it.

"I've been trying it now and then, getting voicemail like we did before."

"So?"

"I've finally got an answer. The woman said: 'Hello, Anna here...'. It was Dr Lewis, I'm positive it was. It must be a direct line to her office or something."

"Oh come on, how many times have you heard her speak? You've hardly met her."

"Her name's Anna, isn't it? I'm sure you said it was Anna."

"Yes, it is. I'll get back to you."

"I'm coming to pick you up."

"No, no, don't do that. I'll get back to you in a couple of minutes."

I leave the alcove where I have been sitting and put my head through the archway which leads to the consulting rooms. There is a short corridor with several doors standing open opposite. Through one of them I can see the platform of a weighing

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machine and a hand basin on the wall. I can recall Dr Lewis's office from my morning visit, on the right at the end of the passage. This door is closed and I knock, but there is no reply. Somewhere in the building the vacuum cleaner has stopped. I try the handle. There is nobody inside, but the light is on.

I turn back. I think I remember a way out to the car park at the other end of the passage. The cleaning woman is standing a few yards away, watching me. She is wearing jeans and a padded sleeveless jacket zipped over a sweater. She must have suffered from acne in her teens. Her dark, shoulder length hair is tied back and secured with an elastic band. She is holding the tube of the vacuum cleaner across her chest like the barrel of a shotgun. I feel a cold draught from an open door and behind her an outside lamp throws a pale square of yellowish light across the carpet tiles. In the car park an engine starts.

The cleaner drops the figure of eight end of the tube down to point at my chest. It is a shotgun.

4

The minibus stops on the quay and the driver gets out to talk to someone waiting nearby. It is dark and the tide is nearly full. The harbour is ringed by the shuttered shapes of snack bars and fish and chip stalls, dropped down at the roadside like painted cereal boxes but now padlocked and boarded for the winter. Further off, the hotels are deserted: no visitors, no local people, certainly no police. The sluice which separates the harbour from the river estuary is closed. The water looks sluggish and oily as it laps against the granite of the quay. Lights are reflected back, folded and broken. A dark line on the stone shows how much further the sea has to go before the turn. Seaside towns have a special quality off season.

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The armed woman opens the door of the bus and climbs out, then stands well clear. She holds her shotgun vertically by her side, where it is lost in the folds of her clothing. I do not doubt that she can bring it to bear fast enough. Bridie and I follow her, then when she nods we move forward along a row of square wooden bollards. Bridie takes my hand. I smell salt and weed and fish and diesel.

The boat moored alongside has the look of a large, domesticated tug. There is a single smokestack amidships rising out of a clutter of superstructure. The wheelhouse is level with the surface of the quay and through the glass I can see a lot of very modern electronics. There seems to be some sort of saloon below. Fore and aft are wide stretches of deck fitted out with slatted bench seating.

The woman gestures towards the gangplank. Bridie and I stumble down. It is steep, with lateral battens every yard or so to stop feet slipping. Once on deck we turn aft and make our way towards the stern. The varnish on the benches feels greasy. Two crewmen appear and take up relaxed positions on either side of us, leaning against the rail.

5

"I wish you hadn't come back for me," I say.

"Well. Too late now. What else was there to do?"

Bridie and I sit in the saloon, where we were taken shortly after casting off. She leans against me and rests her head on my shoulder. After more than an hour I can feel the deep vibration of the engines in my bones. It is echoed in the quavering yellow light of the bulkhead lamps.

It is the boat I remember. When Crawford described *The Hotspur* to me and showed me his pictures I was not sure, but

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the mixed smells of diesel, brine and paint and the pitching of the deck trigger associations long forgotten. The windows are blanked out with a reflective film, like the ones on the minibus, but the loss of one sense sharpens the others.

The trip across the Solent, from Hythe to Southampton, can only have lasted twenty or thirty minutes but it seemed a momentous undertaking. On the jetty I could look between the planks of the decking and see the sea heaving up and down beneath my feet. Huge gulls wheeled and screamed above our heads, wings braced against the wind, and along the rail the ageless figures of fishermen stood staring at their lines. Out on the water engines throbbed and the surface foamed in the wake of passing tugs. Small boats clustering at their moorings shied and plunged in the wash. The hawsers tethering the ferry to land seemed as thick as one of my thighs. They reached down to the deck, now in graceful parabolas, now jerking taut as the boat shifted against the pier.

The gangplank moved under my feet as I shuffled down. I clung tightly to the handrail with one hand and Giles held the other. Once on deck he led the way to the bows, where I climbed onto one of the slatted seats. The sun broke through the clouds and the varnished wood glowed golden brown, streaked with black. I leaned over to look down at the water. It was an opaque green colour and bits of weed and a cigarette packet bobbed in the lee of the hull. Giles held onto my belt.

Our departure was accompanied by shouts from the shore. Ropes were thrown down and coiled, their looped ends dipping briefly in the water. The pitch of the engines rose and instead of moving ahead we surged sideways away from the pier, leaving the bits of debris on the surface swirling in strings of bubbling eddies. Then we slipped forward in a long arc and people and houses shrank smoothly behind us.

It started raining halfway across and the three of us scurried

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into the saloon out of the wet. Here where I am sitting. I remember standing on the seat to look out of the smeared window, holding onto the back rest with Giles supporting me against the roll and pointing across the choppy grey water at liners, cargo ships, the Isle of Wight ferry on its way out. The prow slapped its way through the waves, adding claps of spray to the froth from the bow. Our mother watched us. I must have been about five years old, Giles ten. She died the following spring, two days before my sixth birthday.

The door slides back in its brass runners and hits the stop at the end with a bang. The throb of the engines takes on a broader, open water quality. Crawford is outside, with two of his crew. He steps across the threshold while they remain watchful on deck. He has changed into jeans, heavy roll-neck sweater and pea-jacket and looks every inch the hard man. He stares at me, saying nothing. The light is refracted through the lenses of his glasses, falling in intense greenish-yellow lozenges along the top of his cheek bones.

“Get up,” he says.

“Leave us alone,” Bridie snarls at him, narrowing her eyes and showing her teeth like a feral cat.

“Not you. Simon. Stand up.”

I ease myself forward and straighten my legs slowly, doing my best to look casual rather than hurting. Without warning he steps forward and drives his fist into my stomach, as hard as he can, putting his whole weight behind it. The Old Man of the Sea descends on me, squatting on my chest, squeezing the life-breath out of me.

I am lying on the floor with my head in Bridie's lap. Crawford

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is sitting opposite, smoking a cigarette. The smell of it is everywhere. His men have gone and the door is closed, plunging us back into a claustrophobic drum of engine noise and swell. I am no threat to anyone. Bruises upon bruises are screaming at me and my body seems to belong to someone else. Good job he did not know about the ribs. I would be spitting blood by now.

"Welcome back," he says. He examines his knuckle, then sucks it. He must have caught his fist on my belt buckle. "I hope that hurt." He looks around for somewhere to drop his cigarette end, gives up and throws it on the floor.

"No bloody ashtrays anywhere any more." He takes a packet from his coat pocket, fumbles out another filter tip, lights it and inhales. "Gave up a couple of years ago. But today I thought... Who gives a shit? Cancer is the least of my worries." To prove the point he breathes smoke out through his nose and watches the pair of us for a minute more.

"Do you know something? I've spent days, days, trying to think of some appalling pain I could inflict on you to pay you back for the damage you've caused. I've been going to sleep thinking about you and I've been waking up still thinking about you, with my jaw aching and my teeth loose in their sockets." He holds the cigarette vertically and examines the smouldering tip, blows on it to make it glow.

"Then a minute ago I realised that there wasn't anything I could do. There you were lying on the floor and it didn't make any difference. I could shove your head in the microwave and watch your eyes pop as it turned round and round, and it wouldn't be enough.

"So *fuck you*. You're not worth the bother. I shall get rid of you and move on. We should be making the rendezvous soon. When we do, you go over the side."

"Can you... tell me something?" Bridie stirs, but I find I can talk after a fashion.

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"No. Why should I?"

"Can't... make any difference..."

"You're right. So why should I?" But he stays where he is, waiting for me to ask.

"Did you kill Giles?"

"No. I thought you did."

"*What?*" A sudden cramp drives like a nail into my gut and I half turn and fold up my knees to ease the pain. Bridie leans over me and her hair brushes my face. It seems to go on for ever. When I open my eyes again I see Crawford watching me, head on one side.

"Why not?" he says. He can see that I will not be putting any more questions for the moment. "You missed out on the farm, but that was small change compared with the business. People have slaughtered their entire families for less.

"You had a pretty good idea what the deal was, even if you were a bit fuzzy on the detail. I watched you home in on Albion. I expected you to make your move right after Christmas, but you did nothing and did nothing. In the end I decided I'd rather have you where I could see you.

"Then Tod rolled the bus and the women disappeared. I was sure you must have an angle, but I couldn't make out what it was. Butter wouldn't melt. Some of the boys thought you were soft, but when that head case started acting up you slugged him and carried on as if nothing had happened. That was when I decided it didn't matter whether you'd killed your brother or not. A partnership made in heaven, I thought. You and me, we could make millions. Then I found out what was really going on."

"Your people were... at the accident site." My breath is coming back.

"Trying to figure out what happened, like you."

There is a shout outside and the door slams back again.

"Radio contact," the crewman says.

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“Good,” Crawford stands. “I’ll come. These two stay here.”

“What about Bridie?” I ask. “She’s done nothing to you.”

“No. Well, I’ve brought some of the girls along. Trinkets to trade with the natives, you know? I did think of taking her too, but I can see she’d be trouble. She can go over the side with you. In fact, she can go first. You can watch her sink.”

7

The throbbing of the engines steadies and the ghastly irregular plunge of the deck settles into an even pitching. We are under way again. Bridie and I have been alone for nearly an hour, with no way of telling what is happening around us. The movement of the cabin walls and the changing vibrations in the hull have been our only clues. There has been a lot of manoeuvring. Not long now.

Bolts rattle and the door slides back. Two crewmen are waiting outside. Their faces are expressionless and I wonder whether they know what is coming. Perhaps they have witnessed it all before. I go first and Bridie follows, one crewman leading the way and the other behind.

Half a dozen figures are huddled around one of the benches on the afterdeck. A group of women. One of the guards takes my arm and the other does the same for Bridie. The woman from the health centre, still with her shotgun, takes up a position behind me. The boat’s wake curves into the darkness like an extension of the vibration of the engines. The air is cold and clean and a few drops of spray whip past as we drop into a trough. I hear footsteps on the wheelhouse ladder and Crawford brushes past. His pea-jacket is buttoned up tight, and he has added a knitted woollen cap. He nods to the men holding us.

“OK,” he says. “Time...”

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“Chopper on the radar!” There is a shout from the wheelhouse. “Two minutes out!”

“Lights off!” Crawford yells.

“They’ve seen us!” Another shout. “Heading straight in. Two surface blips behind!”

I feel my captor’s grip on my arm slacken, and step sharply back, catching the cold barrel of the shotgun under my arm and raking the side of my boot down the woman’s shin. She yells and I swing my elbow round with all the force I can muster, ignoring the stab in my side. It strikes her in the throat and her cry turns into a choking gurgle.

The man holding Bridie sees me coming and shoves her towards the other women who are clinging to one another in the stern, then dives behind the nearest bench. I loose off the first cartridge which slashes a pale gouge of splinters across the varnished wood. The spread of the pellets is wide and another crewman screams and clutches his leg.

I swing round, muzzle questing for Crawford. He is also in the stern, and when he sees me turn towards him he steps sideways so that he is standing in front of the women. Then he spots Bridie and pulls her before him, his arm around her throat.

“Stop there, Simon. You let that thing off and the lot of us will bleed to death.” I hesitate and he yells to his men. “Take it away from him, for God’s sake!” A man on my right moves towards me and I swivel round to point the shotgun at his head. He freezes.

For several seconds I have been aware of a low clattering roar building in the background. Suddenly somebody turns up the volume and a dark shape rockets over the wheelhouse and makes a tight, slipping turn above us. Spray whips up in a stinging mist on all sides and a hard white light cuts down throwing shuddering shadows across the deck.

A metallic voice booms through the racket: “This is the

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police. Put down your weapons and prepare to be boarded. I repeat, put down your weapons and prepare to be boarded.”

Crawford tightens his grip on Bridie and looks round wildly. Then, as the spotlight above slides from side to side and juddering patches of dark jump across his features, the women behind him come to life, recognising him, finally, as the enemy. They crowd about him, limbs clinging, hands clutching, pinning him against the bulwark over the churning propeller, bending him backwards. He is unprepared for their clawing, spitting fury. His glasses slip off and fall to the planking and his face contorts in surprise and fear before it disappears in a swirl of hair and legs and teeth. Then there is a cry. When their bodies part he is gone.

“This is your final warning,” the loudspeaker roars. “Put down your weapons.”

Behind me in the bows people are shouting. I feel a violent blow over my kidneys. The shotgun falls from my hands. Then nothing.

ENCORE

1

Everyone thinks cells are cold. Mine is stifling hot. I can confirm, though, that they have a distinctive smell: of fart and sweat and disinfectant and badly-mopped up vomit. I spend two days alone in mine and by the end of it my clothes smell the same. Two days of boredom, punctuated by visits from the police doctor and trips to an interview room for sessions with a couple of very hostile policemen. They don't bother with good cop, bad cop. Just bad and worse. There is a lot of shouting and an atmosphere of menace which stops short of physical contact. I get the feeling that they are working up to that. Nobody pisses in my tea, as far as I can tell.

On the third day Matt finds me. In the next session the policemen are no less hostile, but the atmosphere is one of chilly correctness. They ask their questions, Matt wraps himself in the mantle of the law and I sit, silent for the most part. I find that

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my memory of the last days is muddled in any case. Some things seem huge. Tar-soaked wooden bollards on the dock, the cold barrel of the shotgun in my fingers. Other things I know must have happened, but I have no image of them at all. I have difficulty putting events in the right order.

Late afternoon, and Mellor appears. My policemen have no time for her, but she is accompanied by someone quite senior, judging by the way they bite off their comments. They all go away, Matt with them. I am returned to my cell. After a while a cup of tea appears, with two digestive biscuits on a paper plate.

There will be more interviews, but that night I spend with Matt and his family. Real food and a bath and a change of borrowed clothes begin to lift my spirits. So do his children, who burst into my room at seven in the morning to play me a tune they have practiced on their recorders. But there are explanations to be made.

I need a couple of hours with Matt, sitting room door shut, interrupted only once by his wife bringing Danish pastries and coffee. Then he drives me down to the farm and I spend the rest of the day with Sheila, who has flown back from the States at the urgent request of the British police. We break off a couple of times to walk the dog, but otherwise sit together in the kitchen. Now she does cry.

Finally, the familiar train journey back to London. There is a pile of post waiting, among the letters one from a man I have never met, named Michael Gideon, and one from my bank manager asking for an urgent meeting.

I make it to the bank the next morning. The manager, a normally jovial Scot, takes me solemnly through the transactions of the past few months.

"You understand my concern," he finishes. "Is there any comfort you can give me, Mr Coltraine?"

I show him Gideon's letter, and he is comforted.

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2

The entrance is halfway down Bond Street, between Italian shoes and Belgian chocolates. Only a doorway, black marble with a curved brass plate, lettering buffed almost smooth. Inside, a hall, floor tiled in red and white, and a staircase leading up with thick rubber edging on the treads. It is lined with framed Wigmore Hall posters, each one lit by a mini spot embedded in the ceiling of the first floor landing. The paint on the banisters is fresh. Everything is clean, smelling of polish. There are several doors on the first floor, but one buzzes as I reach the top of the stairs.

On the other side are white walls, dark wooden floor and a thick old rug in front of a scrolled fireplace. A couple of arm-chairs and the smell of fresh coffee filtering on a low table. More posters, but opera this time. Opposite the door is a single display case containing two violins. One is complete, polished to show the grain on the belly and the rosin-darkened marks between the f holes where the bridge has shifted. The other has exploded, each piece frozen a second after the detonation and supported from behind by a thin glass rod, so that you can see the sound post and the bass bar and the internal detail of the joints. From the other side of the room the pieces look as if they are about to fly apart and scatter themselves at your feet.

Two windows stare down on shoppers but none of the traffic noise penetrates the double glazing. A young man rises from a desk between them.

“Mr Coltraine? You have our letter? I wonder if I could see it?”

I take the envelope from my pocket and hand it over. Heavy cream laid paper, a discreet crest in a lower corner. *By appointment to...* some minor royalty or other.

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“You take your security seriously.”

“We have to.” He glances at the letter and hands it back with a smile, pleasant but not at all apologetic. “The instruments in the building at this moment have a combined value of... well, in excess of five million dollars. Let me take your coat. My father will be with you shortly. Can I get you anything? Coffee?”

I carry the cup over to the display case for a closer look. It is sealed, I notice, and small dials at the bottom give temperature and humidity readings.

“Striking, isn’t it? My son’s idea.”

The man who has appeared beside me is perhaps in his early sixties, but wiry and probably fit. He is shorter than me, pepper and salt hair curling back from a high, creased forehead, eyes bright and dark.

“It looks best in the evening, if we turn the lights down – you can hardly see the supports then. The pieces just... float. I’m Michael Gideon, by the way. You met my son when you arrived.”

We shake hands and I turn back to the display case.

“It reminds me of my brother,” I tell him. “He picked up a beaten-up old fiddle occasionally. Until you got in touch, that’s what we thought the will meant. A joke.”

“Ah. Well, there is sometimes money to be made out of violins.” Gideon smiles and gestures round the room. “We don’t do too badly. But it’s a small world. Incestuous, you might say. Difficult for an outsider to break into. Would you like to see our workshop?”

“Very much.”

He looks pleased and points towards a door in the corner by the fireplace. There is a keypad mounted on the wall next to it and he punches in a long number. He is casual about it, but his shoulder hides what he is doing.

The door clicks open, we walk down a short corridor and

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enter a brightly lit room. I hear the faint hum of air conditioning and my first impression is of laboratory rather than workshop. There are three long benches, with a couple of microscopes at the far end, several racks of electronic equipment and four or five computers. The centre bench is clear and covered in green baize. A number of violins are laid out on it, one of them in pieces. Several people are sitting on stools, bending over the worktops. A couple of them look very young, dressed casually in jeans and T-shirts. One of these, who is turning over the pieces of the dismembered instrument, is wearing white cotton gloves.

“Not at all what I imagined.”

“Everybody says that, the first time.” Gideon laughs. “We have a couple of other workshops, for routine repairs. Here it’s mostly restoration work – for institutions usually, though there are a few private clients. And research. Materials, that sort of thing. Sam and Jilly there are graduate students, on loan.” The two youngsters look up and smile.

“Sam’s particular project is a study of the acoustic properties of as many classic instruments as he can lay his hands on. He correlates wood types, glues, construction techniques. Quite illuminating, sometimes.”

“It all seems very... um... scientific.”

“Soulless, you were about to say? You were expecting old men stoop-shouldered with years of bending over their benches? Gnarled fingers? All that?”

“OK, OK. No need to rub it in.” His staff are grinning. This must be a familiar performance.

“Let me show you something.” He leads me further into the workshop and for the first time I see that the room is L-shaped. The foot of the L, at the far end, is partitioned off but the top half of the partition is made of glass, like the sound engineer’s booth in a studio. We stop beside it and gaze into another century.

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The room is tiny, nearly filled by a workbench which by the look of it has seen generations of use. The corners are rounded and scarred with saw cuts and the surface is marked with layers of wood stain, varnish and paint. Tools hang on nails in rows on the wall and a pot of glue sits on a gas ring, hardened drips frozen round the rim like miniature stalactites. There are several flat, round tins of wax and other materials, one of them open for use with a soiled rag next to it. The bench is littered with fiddle parts: chin rests, finger boards and coiling strings. A scrolled peg box is gripped in a vice with a narrow chisel laid down beside it, as though the carver has stepped out for a moment. Completed violins and bows hang from a rack suspended on pulleys from the ceiling.

“Admit it, this is what you had in mind.” Gideon looks delighted to have pulled off his little piece of theatre. Not for the first time, I imagine.

“This was my grandfather’s workshop. Not here, of course. We lived in the East End then. But the bench and the tools and a lot of the parts you see there. Exactly as I remember them. He was working on that scroll at about the time he died. Some of the tools belonged to *his* father, who carried them over from Russia in a sack.” He spreads his hands. “Family legend. I’ve no idea whether or not it’s true.

“You’re right of course. We’re nothing without craft. You’re a musician, you know as well as I do that skill is paid for with years of effort, and it sits in the muscle and the bone as much as in the head. Still, there are reasons for things, I think. Many different reasons, usually, and all tangled up. The work you do is better for knowing some of them.”

We have turned away from his grandfather’s memorial, back to the lab-like focus of his own workshop. He gestures towards the central bench.

“Those are yours.”

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Two violins are laid out side by side, the red-gold grain of the wood glowing under the lights. One is decorated with a thin black line of inlay round the edge of the body, set with lozenges of mother of pearl. Unusual, but rather ugly, to my mind.

“They’re both English instruments,” says Gideon. “Eighteenth century, very much sought after today. The one on the left is by a Dorset fiddle-maker named Thompson. The one on the right was made by a man named Jonathan Temple. He worked in Lichfield – the story is that he went to school with Samuel Johnson. Neither one is perfect, otherwise I doubt if your brother could have afforded them, to be frank. The scroll on the Thompson is not original. Quite well done, but late Victorian probably. Your brother bought that at auction and paid too much for it, in my opinion. Still, it will appreciate nicely. The Temple was a real find, part of a job lot he got for practically nothing, in Somerset, I believe. It does sometimes happen, though not often. The glue was giving way but we have reassembled it successfully. The tone is superb and the value to a collector shouldn’t be affected.”

“And that value is...?”

Gideon purses his mouth. “Depends who is buying. The pair of them, for insurance purposes... £250,000 maybe?”

I stare at them. Funny-shaped boxes on sticks. Bundles of wood and wire. Quite a lot of comfort there.

“Would you like to try them?”

“No.”

I don’t want to touch them. I’ll sell them and pocket the cash and I wish I didn’t have to do that. But I won’t play them.

Gideon watches me.

“That’s a pity. I’d like to have heard them played. By a professional, I mean. Obviously, I play a little myself, but... Well.”

He gives up, ushers me out of the workshop.

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“Your brother was an interesting man. He came here two or three times to watch us putting the Temple back together. But then he stopped coming... Now we know why, but it was a while before it seemed necessary to make enquiries. He was very interested in the value of things, you know?”

“He knew all about making money.”

“Yes, of course.” Wealth is something Gideon takes for granted in his clients. “But that’s not what I meant. Take a violin, for example. Menuhin’s del Gesù sold for six million dollars. Why, exactly? That’s a very great deal. There’s the tone, the beauty of the design and the materials, the craftsmanship... Historical associations... Ease of playing – you’d know all about that... A celebrated former owner... But *six million*? One could build a small hospital. A large one, in some parts of the world.”

The workshop’s lock clicks behind us and he stops to give the door a push to make sure it is secure.

“Your brother envied you, did you know that?”

“What?”

“He told me it was extraordinary the way a violin came alive when you picked it up. That’s why I was rather hoping you would play. It seemed to him that there was no question in your mind about what it was for, what it could do. The value of the thing, in other words. He envied you that certainty, I think.”

3

The laminated table top is chipped at the corners and someone long ago has left a cigarette burning on the edge. There is half an inch of cold tea in one of the plastic cups and I swig it back. It has the chalky taste of UHT milk.

“I can send out for another. The coffee’s worse.”

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“No, I’m fine.”

Mellor glances at the signature, then taps the sheets of my statement together. “We may want to speak to you again, but that’s pretty much it for now. Is there anything you want to ask me?”

“Where’s Randall?”

“Probably made Assistant Commissioner by now. Much too grand to take statements.”

“Hm. There is something, but I don’t expect you’ll know the answer.”

“Try me.”

“How did they get the whisky into me? That night on the farm. Crawford was trying to scare me off, and if that didn’t work rub my name in the dirt with the neighbours so that I’d be too embarrassed to show my face. They hit me over the head and poured half a bottle of whisky into me. It’s stupid after everything else, but I still have nightmares about it.”

“As it happens I do know the answer to that one. They didn’t.”

“What? Dr Lewis said the blood test was off the scale.”

Mellor shakes her head. “No blood test. They splashed the half bottle over you and trusted the bang on the head to give you a headache.”

“Christ.” A new idea strikes me. “I bet her husband plays golf.”

“He does. All the local gossip started with him. Crawford contributed a few of his thugs to push you around outside the pub. Actually the gossip didn’t amount to much. It didn’t matter what people thought of you, as long as you believed tongues were wagging.”

“What’s happened to Dr Lewis now?”

“She’s given up her practice. Her husband has taken early retirement. I believe they’re going to live in France.” She laughs

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at my expression. "Come on, win some, lose some. He was a senior police officer. Bringing them to trial would have been very messy. Really."

"Even for conspiracy to commit murder?"

"On what evidence? They only ever dealt with Crawford and your brother. With those two out of the picture it's not clear that Dr Lewis or her husband knew what was happening. The only thing he did was make sure the local force looked the other way now and then – on the night you crashed the bus, for example. I gather he performed the same service for your brother once or twice. His last job was to take the watch off *The Hotspur* for long enough to let Crawford get away. Dr Lewis was hardly involved at all until you turned up. She relayed messages between her husband and Crawford. Messy."

"Well... Any more about Albion?"

"Details. It looks as if the original scheme had nothing to do with trafficking. They were bringing in illegal immigrants. Firms like Salamander Cleaning Services were using them as cheap labour and Albion Lettings was organising accommodation. Salamander would advance money to new workers to pay a deposit and the first month's rent, and before they knew it they would be up to their eyes, using every penny they earned to keep up the repayments. Talk about the company store."

"The money laundering was later, after somebody had the idea of using the women as prostitutes. I'd guess Crawford. He seems to have been the ambitious one."

"You don't have to spare my feelings." Giles was quite capable of dreaming up something like that. The scale of the thing was not his style, though. He preferred to keep it personal.

"And Crawford used the security camera at Albion to find out how much I'd discovered?"

"Yes. You obviously had information from somewhere. He must have thought you were working down a list. Albion was

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bound to be near the top, so that was where he left his Trojan horse. I'd guess he knew about the camera from the court case – you remember? They caught a real burglar a few months before you broke in. He reprogrammed the PC to send any pictures to his own dummy website, then sat back and watched you try to log onto it. When he found that you had the name of his company, and even his mobile phone number, he decided enough was enough and used the briefcase you'd left with Salamander to send a final message.”

“Boom... How's Katya?”

“Recovering. She'll be repatriated.”

“And after all that, we're no nearer knowing how Giles died.”

“No. Could have been a genuine accident. Or I suppose somebody could have run him off the road – easy to do there.”

“Neither of those explains the gin.”

“No. The third possibility is that he staged the thing himself. The gin was to make it look convincing. Trouble was, he had to do it while he was still sober enough to get it right.”

I say nothing and start punching a line of holes in the side of the cup with the point of my pen.

“Personally, I find that explanation the most plausible.” Mellor waits to see whether I have anything to contribute. I push the pen right through the cup, then toss it into the waste bin.

“We were getting close,” she continues. “Your brother's tame policeman was warning him whenever we tried anything, but that couldn't last for ever. Crawford was turning out to be far more ambitious and not quite as clever as he'd expected. All those plans... there would have been trouble before long. The London underworld has an ecology of its own, and every niche is already filled.”

The tip of the ballpoint is now clogged and dribbling thick, gelatinous ink. It follows the cup into the bin.

“What could he do? He'd made a fair amount of money, but

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not enough to drop everything and run – anyway, he wasn't the type."

She is right. Giles made his excursions into eastern Europe, but of the two of us he was the one who returned home, to the lanes and the shingle and the familiar faces. I cannot imagine him sitting by a pool in Spain or Portugal, or wherever it is crooks run to nowadays.

Instead he stayed behind and planned his own end. Alone with our shadowed childhood he listened to the wind rattling the windows and found no way out. So he bought his ticket to the future, waited for as long as he dared, then handed it to me.

There are a couple of stirrers lying on the tabletop. I pick one up and start breaking off pieces of flimsy white plastic, dividing them into piles.

My inheritance. Sheila got the farm. For me the violins, which I could play or sell as I chose, and the letters, left without explanation in a box of old programmes and photographs, SIMON on the lid. I had imagined that they were hidden there as a warning, a message perhaps. *Take these. Put it right.* But no. They were my legacy too, to play or sell.

Mellor appears to be re-reading the top page of my statement.

"One more question," I say.

"Sure. As many as you like."

"Did you have an uncle? Like your friend Ling? Someone who stood too close?"

She stares at the sheets of paper and for a moment I think she is not going to answer. But she does.

"Yes, I did."

"What happened?"

"I said no."

"It's nothing to feel guilty about. Surviving. It's what happens. Somebody has to be the last one standing."

"I know. Now I have one more question for you. That phone

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call. The night your brother died. Anything you want to tell me about it? Off the record, for the sake of completeness – the statement's written and signed."

"No, it's gone. Family talk."

"Pity. It was the last time you spoke to him, after all. Think about it. You're waiting to go on, talking, tuning up – whatever it is musicians do. Your mobile rings. You take it out of your pocket, press answer. It's Giles. What does he say?"

The demons always find you, in the end.

4

I swallowed a mouthful of beer and started going through the pre-performance ritual, flexing and relaxing each set of muscles in turn. Shoulders then neck. Breathe slowly from the diaphragm, in through the nose, pause, out through the mouth.

Bridie, nerveless as usual, was across the room chatting up the lead singer of the band topping the bill. They had the last spot, immediately after us. She caught my eye and raised her eyebrows, tapping her watch. I shrugged and waggled the fingers of my free hand. Five minutes?

We had played there a couple of times before and I rather liked it. There was a common area where the acts congregated if the evening was going well. In a real theatre it would have been the Green Room. In that converted church it might have been the vestry or something. There was a pot of coffee in the machine and a fridge full of beer. The PA muttered quietly in the background. I recognised the opening chords of the final number in the set before ours.

I was about to switch it off and lock it in my fiddle case when my mobile phone rang.

"How's things, little brother?"

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"You're cutting it fine Giles, we're on any second."

"Best time to wish you luck. Good crowd?"

"They sound OK. But it's a fundraiser - only 40 minutes each. You're in with a chance if the band in front get off quick, if not, you're dead."

"Good luck to them too then. You doing the one about the voices in the mist? What's it called?"

"*Cold Hillside*. May do - it's on the list. It's a bit downbeat, though, with so little time. We'll have to suck it and see. Look, I've got to go Giles. Bridie's making hurry up faces."

"Fine. How is she?"

"Strength to strength."

"She's a great girl, Simon. Hey, remember the fort when we were kids? That time you thought you heard the voices?"

"Of course I do. That's where the song came from."

"I've never seen anyone look as scared as you did. I thought you were going to puke on my feet. Did you know it was me?"

"I figured it out."

"Before you wrote the song, or after?"

"A long time before." That is where the song came from too.

"Play it tonight, OK? They'll love it."

"If we can. Got to go, Giles. I'll ring you tomorrow."

We picked up our instruments. Over the PA I could hear the audience clapping. The previous band were already off and they passed us in the darkened passageway outside. Behind us someone opened a door and the light caught the musicians in clumsy poses, like a paparazzi photograph. One, gripping a guitar, was still on an adrenaline high, bright eyes and flashing teeth. The drummer looked exhausted and mopped his face with the corner of a towel slung round his neck.

Then the lights and the boards. Len crossed to his drum kit and the rest of us moved, Ian first, then Steve and Bridie, then me, stepping over cables, threading our way between boxes

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and equipment to the front of the stage. I glanced round at the others. They all had a closed, inward look, making small unnecessary adjustments to mike stands and tuning, shutting out the dim press of faces in front of them.

But now Len twirls his sticks and grins at me. Ian flicks a final switch and stretches his hands over the keyboard. On either side Bridie and Steve turn towards me and wait for my signal.

Len twirls his sticks. The Bridie of that evening burns in my memory in brown and orange and gold. I am glad today that they never found her body. Crawford washed up on Chesil Beach, but she rises and falls still in undersea currents, down to the Atlantic.

Len twirls his sticks. I look out over the heads of the audience and pick out a few faces. A bright scarf on the aisle. Down at the front somebody's glasses catching the stage lights. I settle my chin on the fiddle and raise the bow. This is going to be all right.

Last of all we play *Cold Hillside*. Eighty miles to the southwest my brother adjusts the volume and the stereo fills the living room with the drone of the concertina, very soft. Then the fiddle. Then the girl's voice, phrases fading, lost in the shadows. He pours another tumbler of gin. A little bread to hold it down.

'The crowd cries out for more.

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The Memory House

*"I'll leave you my fantasy," he
said. "It's all I have to leave you
in any case."*

Ip Dip

Ip dip, sky blue, who's it...?

Fulcrum

*Fulcrum, n. (pl. -ra). (Mech.)
point against which lever is
placed to get purchase.*

Snow

*Doesn't anyone die for love
nowadays?*

That Celeb. Smile

*Trouble is, any photograph worth
taking, costs.*

Giles, my sibling, my Mephistophilis.
You lie whenever it suits you, but
when you lie to me, surely you can
take the trouble to make it
convincing?

Simon Coltraine is a professional
songwriter and musician.

His brother Giles - trader, rogue
and amiable bully - is a crook.

When Giles is killed in a car accident
Simon returns to their childhood home
to confront his memories and his own
tacit complicity in his brother's
schemes.

The Devil has all the best tunes.

Violin by Michael Darnton of Chicago Illinois
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