

ROBERT
GALBRAITH

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE HALLMARKED MAN

A CORMORAN STRIKE NOVEL

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Also by Robert Galbraith
Praise for Robert Galbraith

To Séan and Nadine Harris, who gave me back what I thought I'd lost forever.

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MULHOLLAND
BOOKS

I had dipped in life’s struggle and, out again, Bore specks of it
here, there, easy to see, When I found my swan and the cure
was plain; The dull turned bright as I caught your white On
my bosom: you saved me—saved in vain
If you ruined yourself, and all through me!

Robert Browning
The Worst of It

PART ONE

Concerning the mines themselves he was not called upon for an opinion… all he had to do was to follow the veins and win the ore in paying quantities…

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

1

Oh often have I washed and dressed
And what's to show for all my pain?
Let me lie abed and rest:
Ten thousand times I've done my best
And all's to do again.

A. E. Housman
XI, Last Poems

The windscreen wipers had been working their hardest ever since the BMW had entered the county of Kent, their soporific swish and clunk aggravating Cormoran Strike's exhaustion as he stared out through thick rain, which had turned the deserted road ahead to gleaming jet.

Shortly after he'd boarded the sleeper train from Cornwall to London the previous evening, his detective partner's boyfriend, who Strike always referred to inside his head as 'Ryan Fucking Murphy', had called to say that Robin had come down with a high fever and sore throat and would therefore be unable to accompany Strike on today's visit to their newest prospective client.

Everything about this call had annoyed Strike, and an awareness that he was being unjust – because this was the first time in six years Robin had taken a sick day, and if she had a temperature of 104 and a swollen throat it was perfectly reasonable for her to ask her boyfriend to call on her behalf – deepened rather than alleviated his grumpiness. He'd been counting on Robin driving him into Kent in her old Land Rover, and the prospect of several hours in her company had been the only point in favour of keeping this appointment. A mixture of professionalism and masochism had stopped him cancelling, so after a quick shower and change of clothes at his attic

flat in Denmark Street, he'd set out for the village of Temple Ewell, in Kent.

Having to drive himself wasn't only depressing, but also physically painful. The hamstring in the leg on which a prosthesis had replaced the calf, ankle and foot was tight and throbbing, because his sojourn in Cornwall had involved a lot of heavy lifting.

Ten days previously, he'd dashed down to Truro because his elderly uncle had suffered his second stroke. Strike's sister, Lucy, had been helping Ted pack up for his imminent removal to a nursing home in London when, in her words, 'his face went funny and he couldn't answer me'. Ted had died twelve hours after Strike had arrived at the hospital, his niece and nephew holding his hands.

Strike and Lucy had then proceeded to their uncle's home in St Mawes, which had been left to them jointly, to arrange and attend the funeral, and to make decisions about the house's contents. Predictably, Lucy had been horrified by her brother's suggestion that they might hire professionals to empty the place once they'd removed those sentimental items the family wanted to keep. She couldn't bear the idea of strangers touching any of it: the old Tupperware once used for picnics on the beach, their uncle's threadbare gardening trousers, the jar of spare buttons kept carefully by their late aunt, some of them belonging to dresses long since donated to jumble sales. Feeling guilty that Lucy had had to cope with Ted's final lapse from consciousness alone, Strike acceded to her wishes, remaining in St Mawes to lug boxes, nearly all of which were labelled 'Lucy', out of the house into a rented van, to throw rubbish into a hired skip and take regular breaks in which he administered tea and comfort to his sister, whose eyes had been constantly red from dust and weeping.

Lucy believed the stress of Ted's removal to a nursing home had brought on his fatal stroke, and Strike had had to force himself not to become impatient with her repeated bursts of self-recrimination, doing his utmost not to match her fractiousness with ill-temper, not to snap, nor to become irritable when explaining that just because he didn't want to take more of the objects associated with the most stable parts of their childhood, it didn't mean he wasn't suffering as much as she was from the loss of the man who'd been his only true father figure. All Strike had taken for himself were Ted's Royal Military Police red beret, his ancient fishing hat, his old 'priest'

(a wooden cosh with which to finish off fish still fighting for life), and a handful of faded photos. These items were currently sitting in a shoe box inside the holdall Strike hadn’t yet had time to unpack.

Mile by mile, with no company except the emotional hangover of the past ten days and the aching of his hamstring, the dislike Strike had already taken towards today’s prospective client mounted. Decima Mullins had the kind of accent he associated with the many wealthy, wronged wives who’d come to his detective agency hoping to prove their husbands’ infidelity or criminality in hope of securing a better divorce settlement. On the evidence of their only phone conversation to date, she was melodramatic and entitled. She’d said she couldn’t possibly visit Strike’s office in Denmark Street, for reasons she’d disclose in person, and insisted that she was only prepared to discuss her problem face to face at her house in Kent. All she’d deigned to divulge so far was that she wanted something proven, and as Strike couldn’t imagine any possible investigative scenario that didn’t involve proving something, he wasn’t particularly grateful for the pointer.

In this unpropitious mood he proceeded along Canterbury Road through a landscape of bare trees and sodden fields. At last, windscreen wipers still swishing and clunking, he turned up a narrow, puddled track to the left, following a sign to Delamore Lodge.

2

… I have lost him, for he does not come,
And I sit stupidly… Oh Heaven, break up
This worse than anguish, this mad apathy,
By any means or any messenger!

Robert Browning
Bells and Pomegranates No. 5 A
Blot in the ’Scutcheon

The house to which Strike had driven wasn’t what he’d been expecting. Far from being a country manor, Delamore Lodge was a small, run-down dwelling of dark stone that resembled an abandoned chapel, set in a wild garden that looked as though it hadn’t been touched in years. As Strike parked, he noticed that one of the Gothic windows had several cracked panes which had been covered from the inside with what looked like a black bin bag. Some of the roof tiles were missing. Viewed against an ominous November sky and through driving rain, Delamore Lodge was the kind of place local children might easily believe to be inhabited by a witch.

Placing his fake foot carefully, because sodden leaves from a few bare trees had formed a slimy carpet on the uneven path, Strike approached the oak front door and knocked. It opened seconds later.

Strike’s mental image of Decima Mullins as a well-groomed blonde in tailored tweed could hardly have been wider of the mark. He found himself facing a pale, dumpy woman whose long, straggly brown hair had greying roots and which looked as though it hadn’t been cut in a long time. She was wearing black tracksuit bottoms and a thick black woollen poncho. In conjunction with the wild garden and the ramshackle house, her outfit made Strike wonder whether he was looking at an upper-class eccentric who’d

turned her back on society to paint bad pictures or throw wonky pots. It was a type he failed to find endearing.

‘Miss Mullins?’

‘Yes. You’re Cormoran?’

‘That’s me,’ said Strike, noticing that she got his first name right. Most people said ‘Cameron’.

‘Could I see some ID?’

Given how unlikely it was that a roving burglar had decided to turn up at her house by daylight in a BMW, at exactly the same time she was expecting a detective she’d summoned into Kent, Strike resented having to stand in the downpour while fumbling in his pocket for his driving licence. Once he’d shown it to her, she moved aside to let him enter a cramped hall, which seemed unusually full of umbrella stands and shoe racks, as though successive owners had added their own without removing the older ones. Strike, who’d endured too much squalor in his childhood, was unsympathetic to untidiness and dirtiness in those capable of tackling them, and his negative impression of this dowdy upper-class woman intensified. Possibly some of his disapproval showed in his expression because Decima said,

‘This used to be my great-aunt’s house. It was tenanted until a few months ago and they didn’t look after the place. I’m going to do it up and sell it.’

There were, however, no signs of redecoration or renovation. The wallpaper in the hall had torn in places and one of the overhead lamps was lacking a bulb.

Strike followed Decima into a poky kitchen, which had an old-fashioned range and worn flagstones that looked as though they’d been there hundreds of years. A wooden table was surrounded by mismatched chairs. Possibly, Strike thought, eyes on a red leather notebook lying on the table, his hostess was an aspiring poet. This, in his view, was a step down even from pottery.

‘Before we start,’ said Decima, turning to look up at Strike, ‘I need you to promise me something.’

‘OK,’ said Strike.

The light from the old-fashioned lamp hanging overhead didn’t flatter her round, rather flat face. If better groomed, she might have attained a mild prettiness, but the overall impression was one of neglectful indifference to

her appearance. She'd made no attempt to conceal her purple eyebags or what looked like a nasty case of rosacea on both nose and cheeks.

'You keep things confidential for clients, don't you?'

'There's a standard contract,' said Strike, unsure what he was being asked.

'Yes, I know there'd be a contract, that's not what I mean. *I don't want anyone to know where I'm living.*'

'I can't see why I'd need—'

'I want an *assurance* you won't tell anyone where I am.'

'OK,' said Strike again. He suspected it might not take much for Decima Mullins to start shouting or (and after the last ten days, he'd find this even less palatable) crying.

'All right, then,' she said. 'D'you want coffee?'

'That'd be great, thanks.'

'You can sit down.'

She proceeded to the range, on which a pewter pot was sitting.

The chair creaked under Strike's weight, the rain drummed on the intact windows, and the black bin bag stuck over the cracked panes with gaffer tape rustled in the wind. Apart from themselves, the house seemed to be deserted. Strike noticed that Decima's poncho was stained in places, as though she'd been wearing it for days. The back of her hair was also matted in places.

Watching her make heavy work of brewing coffee, opening and closing cupboards as though she kept forgetting where things were, and muttering under her breath, Strike's opinion of her shifted again. There were three kinds of people he was unusually good at identifying on short acquaintance: liars, addicts and the mentally ill. He had a hunch Decima Mullins might belong in the third category, and while this might excuse her ill-kempt appearance, it made him no keener to take her case.

At last she carried two mugs of coffee and a jug of milk over to the table, then, for no obvious reason, sat down extremely slowly as though she thought she might do herself an injury by hitting the chair too hard.

'So,' said Strike, pulling out his notebook and pen, more eager than ever to get this interview over with, 'you said on the phone you want something proven, one way or another?'

'Yes, but I need to say something else first.'

‘OK,’ said Strike, for the third time, and he tried to look receptive.

‘I wanted you because I know you’re the best,’ said Decima Mullins, ‘but I was in two minds about hiring you, because we know people in common.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. My brother’s Valentine Longcaster. I know you don’t like each other much.’

This information came as such a surprise that Strike was temporarily lost for words. Valentine, whom he’d met infrequently and always reluctantly over a certain period of his life, was a good-looking, floppy-haired, extravagantly dressed man who worked as a stylist for various arty glossy magazines. He’d also been one of the closest friends of the late Charlotte Campbell, Strike’s sometime fiancée, who’d died by suicide a few months previously.

‘So “Mullins” is…?’

‘My married name, from when I was in my twenties.’

‘Ah,’ said Strike. ‘Right.’

Could she be telling the truth? He couldn’t remember Valentine mentioning a sister, but then, Strike had always paid as little attention as possible to anything Valentine said. If they were indeed brother and sister, Strike had rarely met a pair of siblings who resembled each other less, although in some ways that might add credence to Decima’s story: it would have been perfectly in character for Valentine to hush up this squat, grubby-looking woman, because he was a man who placed a very high premium on looks and stylishness.

‘It’s *especially* important you don’t tell Valentine where I am, or – or anything else I might ask you to keep private,’ said Decima.

‘OK,’ said Strike, for the fourth time.

‘And you know Sacha Legard, too, don’t you?’

Now starting to feel as though some personal devil had decided to devote its day to kicking him repeatedly in the balls, because Sacha was Charlotte’s half-brother, Strike said,

‘You’re related to him, too, are you?’

‘No,’ said Decima, ‘but he’s involved in… in what I want you to investigate. I never really knew Charlotte Campbell, though. I only met her a couple of times.’

Some might have considered her flat tone insensitive, given Charlotte's recent death in a blood-filled bathtub, but as Strike was more than happy to dispense with prurient questions or faux sympathy, he said,

'Right, well, why don't you explain what it is you want me to do?'

'I need you to find out who a body was,' said Decima, eyeing him with a mixture of wariness and defiance.

'A body,' repeated Strike.

'Yes. You probably read about it in the papers. It was the man they found in the vault of a silver shop, in June.'

Five months previously, Strike had been almost entirely focused on a complex case the agency had been investigating, and had had little attention to spare for much else, but he remembered this news story, which had generated a short but intense burst of media coverage.

'Right,' he said. 'If it's the one I'm thinking of,' (though God knew why he was saying this, because how many men were found dead in silver vaults, on average, per month, in London?) 'the police identified him quite quickly.'

'No, they didn't,' said Decima, her tone brooking no contradiction.

'I thought,' said Strike, though what he really meant was, 'as I accurately recall', 'he turned out to be a convicted thief?'

'No,' said Decima, shaking her head, 'he wasn't that thief. Not definitely.'

'I'm pretty sure that's what I read,' said Strike, tugging his phone out of his pocket. He was hopeful, now, he'd be able to get out of here within ten minutes, because she was giving him a cast-iron reason for refusing a case he definitely didn't want. 'Yeah, see here?' said Strike, having typed a few words into Google. '"… the dead man, who posed as salesman William Wright during his two weeks' employment at Ramsay Silver, has now been identified as convicted armed robber Jason Knowles, 28, of Haringey."'

'It wasn't definite,' insisted Decima. 'I know a policeman, and he told me so.'

'Which policeman is this?' asked Strike, who had prior experience of those who asserted imaginary ties to the police to justify their lunatic theories.

'Sir Daniel Gayle. He's a retired commissioner. His daughter works for me. I asked her whether I could talk to Sir Daniel, and he spoke to some

people, then told me the police never got DNA confirmation. They never *proved* it was that Knowles man, not beyond doubt.'

'What's your interest in finding out who the man was?' asked Strike.

'I just need to know,' said Decima. Her voice was trembling. 'I *need* to. I need to know.'

Strike drank some coffee to give himself thinking time. Odd features of the case of the body in the vault came back to him. The body had been naked and heavily mutilated, which had naturally fanned the flames of press interest before the victim had been revealed as a violent criminal, at which point, public sympathy and interest had dwindled considerably. Knowles, the press reported, had so severely beaten the female cashier at a building society he'd previously robbed that she'd been left with a fractured skull and seizures. In fact, there'd been general agreement that, however nasty his end, Jason Knowles had probably had it coming.

'Are you worried the man was someone you know?' Strike asked.

'Yes. I think . . no,' said Decima, suddenly passionate, tears appearing in her eyes, 'I *know* it was him, and… I need proof, because… I need proof. I just need somebody to prove it.'

'Who exactly—?'

'He was someone *very* close to me, and he matched the body *exactly*, and it all fits: the silver, and him being m-murdered, and he disappeared at the same time – it was him. I know it was.'

The lonely house, the tearful woman: Strike felt as though he'd been plunged back into the situation he'd left in Cornwall, but with far stranger overtones. Unable to think of anything else to do, he flicked open his notebook.

'All right, what similarities are there between the body and the man you know?'

'I've written it all down,' said Decima at once, reaching for the red notebook, and she flicked to the back of what was revealed to be a weekly diary, where Strike saw several densely written pages. 'My friend was twenty-six – the press said the body was of a man in his mid-twenties to mid-thirties. William Wright was left-handed; so was my friend. The body was blood group A positive – that's the same. Five feet six or seven – that matches. Wright was interviewed for the job on the nineteenth of May – I didn't see my friend that day. Wright moved into a rented room on May the

twenty-first – that fits, because my friend was moving out of his house that weekend – I wanted him to bring all his things to my place, but he wouldn't. I didn't understand where he was putting it all. It must have been this rented room.'

Having tried and failed to think of a more tactful way of posing his next question, Strike said,

'And why would your friend have changed his name and gone to work in a silver shop?'

'Because – it's complicated.'

'Have you reported him missing?'

'Yes, of course, but the police aren't helping, they just took his aunt's word for it that—'

She broke off, then said in a higher-pitched voice.

'Look, I *know* it was him, I *know* it was, all right?'

Strike, Robin and their subcontractors had a name for the kind of people who'd emailed and phoned their office in increasing numbers as the agency's profile grew, desperate to tell the detectives that they were being spied on by domestic appliances, that Satanic rings were being run out of Westminster, or that they were in relationships with celebrities who were unaccountably withholding their affections due to malign forces: Gatesheads. The distinguishing characteristics of a Gateshead were an irrational belief, a dislike of common sense questions and an inability to contemplate alternative explanations for their dilemmas. The woman sitting opposite Strike was currently presenting a classic set of symptoms.

'You said Sir Daniel Gayle's daughter works for you,' Strike said, hoping to unravel the problem by tugging on a different thread. 'What exactly—?'

'I've got a restaurant,' said Decima. 'The Happy Carrot, on Sloane Street. She's my maître d'.'

Strike happened to know the restaurant in question, which, in spite of the name, wasn't a vegan café but a very well-reviewed and expensive eatery offering organically produced food, to which Strike had recently tailed an unfaithful commercial pilot and his mistress. Unless Decima was lying about being Valentine's sister she came from money: the Longcasters were a very wealthy family, and Decima and Valentine's father, whom Strike had never met, but about whom he knew far more than he'd ever

wanted to, owned one of the most expensive private members' clubs in London. Trying yet another tack, he asked,

'How well did you know the man you think was the body in the vault?'

'*Very well,*' said Decima. 'I—'

To Strike's consternation, something now stirred beneath Decima's poncho, as though her breasts had developed independent motion. Then, making Strike jump, an ear-splitting screech echoed through the kitchen.

'Oh God!' said Decima in panic, scrambling to her feet. 'I hoped he'd sleep—'

She now struggled out of her poncho, which caused her fine hair to stand up in the static, to reveal a very small baby strapped to her in a fleecy sling.

'You mustn't tell anyone about him!' Decima told Strike frantically over the baby's squalling. '*You mustn't tell anyone I've got a baby!*'

Strike's disconcerted expression appeared to trigger still more panic in Decima.

'He's mine! I can show you the birth certificate! I had him three weeks ago! But nobody knows about him, and you *mustn't* tell them!'

Robin had chosen a fine fucking day to get a sore throat, thought Strike, as Decima tried and failed to extricate herself from the harness attaching the screaming baby to her. Finally, and mostly because he wanted the noise to stop, he went to her aid, successfully prising apart a clasp in which part of the poncho had become entangled.

'Thank you – I think he's hungry – I'm feeding him myself…'

'I'll leave you to it,' said Strike at once, more than happy to go and sit in his car if that was what it took not to have to watch.

'No, I – if you'll just turn your back—'

He willingly did as he was bidden, turning to stare through the window not covered with a bin bag.

The baby's screams dwindled; Strike heard the scraping of chair legs and a small whimper of pain from Decima. He tried not to visualise what was happening behind him, and hoped to God she wasn't one of those women who'd happily bare their breasts in front of strangers. At last, after what felt much longer than a couple of minutes, she said in a shaky voice,

'It's all right, you can turn round.'

Decima had pulled the poncho back over herself and the baby was once

more hidden from view. As Strike sat down again, Decima said tremulously,

‘Please, you *can’t* tell anyone I’ve got him! Nobody knows, except the people at the hospital!’

While he’d thought she was living here alone, Strike had been agreeable to keeping her secrets, notwithstanding his suspicion that she wasn’t in perfect mental health. She’d given no indication of suicidality, and she had family; if she wanted to hide out at her miserable inherited house, it wasn’t any of his business. However, Strike didn’t want the burden of being the only person who knew this baby existed, outside the hospital.

‘Haven’t you got a—?’ He struggled to think of someone whose responsibility women who’d just given birth might be. ‘A health visitor, or —?’

‘I don’t need one. You *can’t tell anyone about Lion.* I need a *guarantee* —’

Strike, who was fairly sure she’d just told him her son’s name was ‘Lion’, which didn’t strengthen his reliance on her mental health, said,

‘Why don’t you want anyone to know you’ve got a child?’

Decima burst into tears. When it became clear she wasn’t going to stop any time soon, Strike looked around for kitchen roll, saw none, so pushed himself back into a standing position and limped off in search of toilet roll.

The small bathroom off the hall had an old-fashioned chain-operated cistern and a dead spider plant on the windowsill. He took the entire roll off its holder, returned to the kitchen and set it in front of the weeping Decima, who sobbed her thanks and groped one-handed for a few sheets. Strike sat back down in front of his open notebook.

‘This man you think was killed in the vault,’ said Strike. ‘Is he your baby’s father?’

Decima began to sob even more loudly, pressing toilet roll to her eyes. Strike took this as a ‘yes’.

‘*He hasn’t left me!*’

She’d already told Strike her ‘friend’ was twenty-six, and Strike judged her own age to be nearing forty. Strike’s own mother had married a man seventeen years younger than herself, at whose hands Strike remained convinced (though the jury hadn’t agreed) she’d died. Jeff Whittaker had married Leda Strike for the money he’d believed she had, and had been furious to discover that it was tied up in ways that meant he couldn’t touch

it. In consequence, Cormoran Strike wasn't very well disposed to much younger men who attached themselves to wealthy older women.

'Everyone says he's left me!' sobbed Decima. 'Valentine – he was *vile* about me and Rupe, from the start – he actually said to me, "you'd better not get knocked up by him." *He actually said that!* And I was *already pregnant*! He was *g-glad* when Rupe disappeared! And my f-father said Rupe was only after my money – *it isn't true!* When we met, it was *instant*, like *nothing I've ever felt before* – it was as though I'd *always* known him, and Rupe f-felt exactly the same, he *told* me so – we had this incredible connection! It was as though we – we *recognised* each other, as though we'd known each other—' *don't say in a previous life* '—in a previous life!'

'His name's Rupert, is it?' was Strike's only response, picking up his pen again.

'Y-yes… Rupert Fleetwood.' Decima was struggling to pull herself together, and after a few gulps said, 'Rupert Peter Bernard Christian Fleetwood… he was born on March the eighth, 1990, and he g-grew up in Zurich.'

'Is he Swiss?'

'No… his aunt married a Swiss man, and… when Rupe was two… his parents took him there for a v-visit… and his mum and dad went skiing… and there was an avalanche… and they were k-killed… so he was raised there, by his aunt and uncle. But he *hated* it in Zurich, he had a really unhappy childhood, he just wanted to get back to the UK, and f-finally he got to London, and then Sacha – Sacha's Rupe's cousin – suggested he try for a job at my father's club, because Daddy's Rupe's godfather… and so, that's how we m-met. I w-was splitting my time between Daddy's club and my own place, because Daddy's previous chef was fired…'

The news that Rupert was the cousin of Sacha Legard, who was an acclaimed actor and exceptionally good-looking, added weight to Strike's suspicion that Rupert Fleetwood had been interested in Decima's money rather than herself. If he resembled Sacha, he could probably have taken his pick of younger, more glamorous women.

'How long were you and Rupert in a relationship?'

'A y-year.'

'Did Fleetwood know you were pregnant?'

'Yes, and he was *delighted*, he was *so*, *so* happy!' sobbed Decima. 'But

he was having some problems and – he's *proud*, he wanted to fix things himself – but he'd *never* have left me for good, we were *so in love* – n-nobody understands!'

'You mentioned him moving out of his house. You weren't living together?'

'Obviously we were *going* to, eventually, but he had things he needed to s-sort out first – he was trying to *protect* me!'

'Protect you from what?'

'He had someone after him, someone dangerous!'

'Who was that?'

'A drug dealer! And my f-father had – had called the police on him…'

'Why did your father call the police?'

'Because Rupe had taken – but I still think he had a right to it!' said Decima shrilly.

'A right to what?'

'A… a nef.'

'A what?' said Strike, looking up. He'd never heard of such a thing.

'It's a big silver table ornament,' said Decima, sketching an object some two feet square in the air with her free arm, 's-seventeenth century… in the shape of a ship… it used to b-belong to Rupe's parents. D-Daddy and Peter Fleetwood used to play backgammon and bet, and one night they were drunk, Daddy w-went and won this nef from Peter…'

'So Rupert thought he had a right to it, because it had once been his parents'?'

'Y – no – look, right after Daddy won it from Peter, Peter and Veronica *died*! So you'd think he'd've g-given the nef *back* to Rupe, if not when he was a child, then when he needed money so badly! But he d-didn't – *his own godson! How c-could he c-call the police on him?*'

Because he'd nicked his bloody silver, was Strike's unsympathetic thought, but aloud he said,

'He had a drug dealer after him too?'

'Yes, but that was all Zac's fault!'

'Who's Zac?'

'Rupe's housemate – he got mixed up in *drugs*, in *coke*, and there was this proper, real *gangster* after him, because Zac hadn't paid what he'd promised, or something, and Zac *ran for it*, his parents got him a job out in

Kenya, and Rupe got stuck with Zac's rent and security deposit and then this awful dealer was pursuing *Rupe* for payment of Zac's debt, *threatening* him—'

'D'you know what the drug dealer's name was?'

'They called him Dredge, I don't know his real name. He was *literally* threatening to kill Rupe unless he got his money, because he thought Rupe was rich, like Zac, but he's *not* – there's hardly anything left in his trust fund, he could barely cover all the outstanding bills Zac left him with, because his aunt and uncle used nearly all the money left by Rupe's parents to send him to a b-boarding school near Zurich he *loathed* – and then my father sacked him from D-Dino's, and that's why he took the nef, because he was desperate! *I* wanted to help him out financially, but he refused, because he *knew* people were saying he was only with me for my m-money!'

Strike strongly suspected there were things he wasn't being told. Fleetwood seemed to have had no scruples about brazen theft, so it seemed unlikely he'd refused a loan or a gift of money from his girlfriend. Strike thought it far more likely that the young man had shown a token reluctance to let Decima help him pay off the dealer, trying to maintain the fiction that he loved her for herself, and assuming that she'd continue to press the offer. When she'd taken him at his word, he'd turned to other ways of cashing in on the wealthy Longcasters.

'OK,' said Strike, turning a page in his notebook. 'When's the last time you saw Rupert?'

'On S-Sunday the fifteenth of May,' said Decima thickly, groping again for the red diary. 'I c-cooked him dinner. He was r-really worried about Dredge coming for him, and about being unemployed, with the baby coming. So, you *see*, don't you?' said Decima, her eyes imploring. 'He must have taken the nef to that shop, Ramsay Silver, and they agreed to take it, but they c-couldn't let him have the money until they'd found a buyer! And then Ramsay Silver had a vacancy, and Rupe t-took it, just to have *some* money coming in! He'll have thought, once the nef was sold, he could get Dredge off his back, and stop being William Wright, and come back to me! B-but then Dredge must have tracked him down and k-killed him!'

This was the first time Strike had ever met somebody who wanted an assurance their loved one was dead, rather than alive. This, he supposed,

was the most extreme manifestation of a phenomenon with which he was only too familiar: a woman absolutely refusing to accept that her partner wasn't what she thought him.

'When did you last hear from Rupert?'

'On the t-twenty-second of May… we talked on the phone. He was moving out of his house that weekend, so we d-didn't talk for long… we – we—'

Sobs overcame her once more. Strike drank more of his now cool coffee. At last Decima said,

'We argued. I wanted Rupe to j-just give the nef back to Daddy, but he refused, which wasn't *like* him, he wasn't usually like that, at all – he just told me it was his and he was keeping it! So you see' – her voice rose to a wail – 'it's *my* fault, what happened! It's *my fault* he went to Ramsay Silver! He thought he had nobody on his side, he was desperate… and then he was k-killed! His phone's dead, his social media stopped – I went to the police, I was frantic with worry, and they didn't get back to me for *weeks*, and in the end they told me R-Rupe's in New York, which is just *ridiculous*, he's *not*, I *know* he's not!'

'Why do the police think he's in New York?'

'They took his aunt's word for it! She c-claims Rupe rang her on the twenty-fifth of May and told her he'd got a job there, but that's *ridiculous*, he doesn't know anyone in New York, what would he *do* there?'

'What's Rupert's aunt's name?'

'Anjelica Wallner. She's an *awful* woman, Rupe *hates* her! That's what's so ridiculous – he wouldn't tell *Anjelica* anything!'

'Have you spoken to Mrs Wallner yourself?'

'Yes, but she just shouted "he's in America!" and told me to stop p-pestering her! Rupe… well, he hadn't told her we were together… she hates my father, or something…'

'What about Rupert's other relatives? Friends?'

'*Nobody's* seen him since the twenty-second of May! Sacha won't even take my calls any more! All he said was, "if Anjelica says he's in New York, that's where he is!"

'*Nobody's taking this seriously!* Rupe's friend Albie says he thinks Rupe went away to "get his head together" but even Albie's stopped answering my calls now! Sacha won't talk to me – Valentine's been so vicious about it

all, I came down here to have the baby in peace—

'I need Lion to know his daddy only went away to try and fix things, and he never meant to leave us for good! I've *got* to prove it! And then I'll be able to give Rupe a proper f-funeral… and at least we'll have… a g-grave to visit. I can't go on like this – *I need you to prove it was Rupe in that vault!*' wailed Decima Mullins, her eyes as pink and swollen as a piglet's, her thief of a boyfriend's baby hidden beneath her dirty poncho.

3

Too suddenly thou tellest such a loss.

Matthew Arnold
Merope: A Tragedy

Robin Ellacott had lied to her detective partner about having a sore throat and a high fever. In fact, she was currently lying in a hospital bed on a morphine drip, determined that as few people as possible should know why she was there.

The previous afternoon, Robin had been crossing the concourse of Victoria station in pursuit of a surveillance target when she'd suddenly felt as though a red-hot knife had pierced her lower right side. Her knees had buckled and she'd vomited. A pair of middle-aged women had hurried to her assistance and, muttering in panic about burst appendixes, had hailed a station attendant. In a remarkably short period of time, Robin had been gurney-ed out of the station to a waiting ambulance. She had a hazy memory of the paramedics' faces, of more searing pain, and the bumping of the trolley as she was sped into the hospital, then of the icy ultrasound wand on her belly, and the anaesthetist's masked face. Her next clear memory was of waking up, being told that she'd suffered an ectopic pregnancy, and that her fallopian tube had burst.

Robin had phoned her boyfriend, CID officer Ryan Murphy, as soon as she'd been able to reach her mobile, but he was too far across London to have any realistic chance of reaching her before evening visiting time had ended. She'd begged Murphy, who was horrified by what had happened, to call Strike with the excuse of the fever and sore throat, and tell him she wouldn't be able to drive him into Kent. Robin had also impressed upon her boyfriend that her parents weren't, on any account, to know what had

happened. The very last thing Robin needed right now was her mother hovering over her, and blaming what had happened on Robin's job, which she was sure, however unfairly, to do.

The shock of her sudden hospitalisation, and the reason for it, had been such that twenty-four hours later, Robin still felt as though she'd slipped through some kind of portal into a reality that wasn't her own. She'd barely slept the previous night, due to the low moans of an elderly woman in the next bed. That morning, Robin had been wheeled into a newly vacant single room, for which she was grateful, though without being entirely sure what she'd done to deserve it, except that one of the older nurses on duty seemed to pity her for having had no visitors.

Groggy though she was from the combination of sleeplessness and morphine, Robin had spent a lot of the morning trying to retrace events in her head, to work out when the contraceptive failure must have happened, given the likely date of conception given by her surgeon. She now thought she'd worked out when the mistake must have been made, and she dreaded having to talk to Murphy about it when he arrived in the afternoon. Most of all she felt a vast sense of self-recrimination, for not having managed her own body better, for having, as she saw it, brought this avoidable catastrophe upon herself.

She was lying watching a murmuration of starlings twirl across the leaden sky outside her window when her mobile rang. She picked it up and saw her mother was calling. Unable to face the conversation, she let it ring. Linda gave up at exactly the moment the door of Robin's room opened. She looked around to see the broad, genial face of her surgeon, Mr Butler.

'Good afternoon,' he said, smiling.

'Hello,' said Robin.

'How're we feeling?' he asked, taking her chart from the end of the bed and casting an eye over it.

'Fine,' said Robin, as Mr Butler pulled up a chair and sat down.

'No pain?'

'No,' said Robin.

'Good. Well, now… did you know you were pregnant?'

'No,' said Robin. Not wanting to seem stupid, she said, 'I had to come off the pill for a bit, but we've been using condoms. I suppose one of them must have split, and we didn't notice.'

‘A shock, then?’ said Mr Butler.

‘It was, yes,’ said Robin, with polite understatement.

‘Well, as I told you yesterday, we had no choice but to remove the ruptured tube. It’s very fortunate you got here so quickly, because it could’ve been life-threatening, but I’m afraid there’s an issue you might not have been aware of,’ said Mr Butler, no longer smiling.

‘What’s that?’ asked Robin.

‘We found significant scarring on the fallopian tube we removed. We had a quick look at the other one, and it’s exactly the same.’

‘Oh,’ said Robin.

‘Have you ever had a diagnosis of pelvic inflammatory disease?’

‘No,’ said Robin.

‘To your knowledge, have you ever had chlamydia?’

The dart of dread was blunted by the morphine, but Robin felt it nonetheless.

‘Yes, when I was nineteen, but they gave me antibiotics.’

‘Right,’ said Mr Butler, nodding slowly. ‘Well, by the looks of it, the antibiotics didn’t work. It can happen. Did you continue to have symptoms?’

‘Not really,’ said Robin. There’d been some pain, certainly, in the months following the rape that had ended her university career, but she’d told herself it was psychosomatic. The last thing she’d wanted at the time were any more intimate physical examinations. ‘No, I thought it had gone.’

‘Well, the symptoms are variable, they can be easy to miss. Can you remember when you were next given antibiotics?’

‘I think… maybe a year later?’ she said, struggling to remember. ‘I got strep throat. I was given more then.’

‘Right, well, that lot probably did the trick, because there’s no current infection. Unfortunately, though, you’ve been left with quite a lot of damage. I think it’s very unlikely you’ll be able to conceive naturally, I’m afraid.’

Robin simply looked at him. Possibly he thought she hadn’t understood, because he continued,

‘The embryo couldn’t get past the scarring, you see, which is why it implanted in the tube and ruptured it. And as I say, the other side’s just as bad.’

‘Right,’ said Robin.

‘How old are you?’ he asked, looking back at her chart.

‘Thirty-two,’ said Robin.

‘Well, there’s nothing wrong with the ovaries. If you’re planning on children, though, I’d consider freezing your eggs sooner rather than later. Your best chance would be IVF.’

‘OK,’ said Robin.

‘And you should be very careful with contraception, going forwards. There’s a significant chance the same thing could happen in the remaining tube, if you conceive accidentally again.’

‘I’ll be careful,’ said Robin.

‘Good.’

Mr Butler got to his feet and replaced Robin’s chart at the end of the bed.

‘We’re going to keep you another night, but assuming you’re going on well, I think you’ll be able to go home tomorrow.’

‘Great,’ said Robin. ‘Thank you.’

The surgeon left.

Robin turned to look out of the window again, but the starlings had gone; the pewter-coloured sky was empty. Her mind was blank. She couldn’t have said what she was feeling. She was simply numb.

She ought to have gone back on the pill, of course, after being forced to stop taking it during the four months she’d recently spent undercover in a cult where all contraception had been banned. The repercussions of Robin’s stay with the United Humanitarian Church were still playing out in the newspapers and on TV. Investigators had finished recovering all the bodies buried in unmarked graves on the land where the cult had first started; its originators, a couple called the Waces, were in custody, along with the upper echelons of the UHC’s management, and attempts were being made to trace many trafficked babies. Celebrity supporters were trying to backtrack, with various degrees of success; a famous novelist was currently in hiding, while a young actress had been dropped from her new film after she was revealed to be one of the cult leader’s ‘spirit wives’.

The role the Strike and Ellacott Detective Agency had played in bringing down the cult had been minimised by both police and the agency itself. Robin had given a full, detailed statement of all she’d witnessed at

Chapman Farm to the police, but, to her immense relief, she'd been told she wouldn't be required to give evidence in court. Emboldened by the public exposure of the UHC's regime of faked supernatural events, hard labour and brainwashing, hundreds of former members were continuing to come forwards to give their accounts. For decades, the UHC had wielded its money and power to silence all critics; now it seemed that every few days there was another television or online interview with someone else the cult had harmed. A mere two months after Chapman Farm had been raided, the first memoir of an ex-member appeared and shot immediately to the top of the bestseller charts.

All of this should have been gratifying to Robin, and she was indeed deeply relieved that the so-called church appeared to have been dealt a mortal blow, but she found the endless news coverage far more traumatising than she'd expected. She'd rather not have been reminded about the Retreat Rooms, where cult members demonstrated their spiritual purity by having unprotected sex with anyone who wanted it; she'd have liked to expunge from her mind all memories of the five-sided Temple where she'd been almost drowned; she'd have been delighted never again to see the pictures of the dark woods that kept being shown in the papers.

And, of course, it was impossible to completely extinguish all trace of the agency's role in bringing down the cult. While there were enough sordid details of what had gone on at Chapman Farm to keep journalists busy for months, and nobody except those very closest to the investigation knew the specifics of what Robin had gone through, there'd been press calls to the agency's office, and her name, and that of the agency, had been mentioned in some of the coverage. An enterprising young tabloid reporter had tried to badger Robin into comment as she came and went from Denmark Street, until he was literally chased off by one of the agency's subcontractors, Midge, who advised the man 'get the fook out of it, she's got nothing to fookin' tell you, you fookin' prick'.

Robin worked steadily through all of this, determined not to admit to anyone how fragile she felt about it all. By her own choice, there'd only been a one-week break to decompress after those months of non-stop, high-stress work, but she hadn't wanted to add extra hormones to what she privately acknowledged to herself was a very shaky state of mind. So her pills had remained in her dressing table drawer for the time being, although

she’d looked up the efficacy of condoms before deciding to rely on them for a while (she hadn’t left everything to chance) and they were ninety-eight per cent effective, if used correctly.

If used correctly.

Robin’s mobile rang again. She stretched out a hand, picked it up and saw Strike’s number. Glancing towards the glass panel in the door, in case another medic was about to walk in, and glad of a chance to think about something other than her fallopian tubes, she decided to risk it, and answered.

4

It should be objection sufficient to exclude any man from the society of Masons, that he is not disinterested and generous, both in his acts, and in his opinions of men, and his constructions of their conduct.

Albert Pike
Liturgy of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry

‘Hi,’ said Strike. ‘How’s the throat? Can you talk? If not, I’ll email you later.’

‘I can talk,’ said Robin. Her voice was slightly hoarse, because the hospital room was so warm, which was helpful to her cover story. ‘I’m really sorry I couldn’t drive you. Where are you?’

‘Parked outside a pub called the Fox,’ said Strike, watching the rain splattering on his windscreen. ‘I’ve just left Decima Mullins.’

‘How was she?’

‘There’s no single-word answer for that,’ said Strike. ‘I want your opinion.’

He described the interview he’d just had, outlining Decima’s theory that her boyfriend had been the body found in the vault of a silver shop in Holborn.

‘Oh God,’ said Robin, when Strike had finished speaking. ‘Poor woman. So we’re supposed to track down Rupert Fleetwood for her?’

‘Nope,’ said Strike.

‘What?’

‘She’s very clear about the fact that she doesn’t want him found alive. Any time I came close to hinting he might just have buggered off because of all the trouble he’d got himself into, she had another meltdown. We’re in

proper Gateshead territory. It's identify that body, or nothing.'

'Tell me about this murder at the silver shop,' Robin said. She'd been undercover at the cult without access to news in June, and this was the first she'd heard of it.

'Salesman calling himself William Wright was hired to work at Ramsay Silver, which he did until he was found dead in the vault two weeks later. Police theory is, he went back with accomplices by night to rob the place, but a fight broke out and he was killed. I remember thinking the story was a bit off when I read it—'

'How was it off?' asked Robin.

'Well, speed tends to be the essential component of a heist, doesn't it? If they were slick enough to get into the vault you'd think they'd be smart enough not to have a punch-up mid-job, but a load of valuable silver was nicked the night he was killed, so it's hard to see what other explanation fits other than a burglary that turned into accidental killing. Before they identified the corpse the story got a lot of coverage, because the body was badly mutilated – the police seemed to think that was done to prevent identification – and the shop deals in masonic stuff and is right beside the Master Lodge of All England or something—'

'Conspiracy theories?'

'By the lorry-load, but once the papers found out it wasn't a masonic ritual killing, they lost interest.'

'And the dead man was definitely this thief?'

'Well,' said Strike reluctantly, 'Mullins claims the ID of the body wasn't definite and she *might*, possibly, be right, because I've just had a look, and in all the news reports where the bloke in charge of the investigation is quoted directly, he says he's "ninety-nine per cent certain" it's Jason Knowles but then appeals for more information. I've had a quick Google, and I can't find anything more definite since, no "DNA has now confirmed", "we have proven beyond doubt" – and they haven't caught the killers or found the silver, either. And the retired police commissioner Decima claims to know, Sir Daniel Gayle, is real.

'But none of that means Fleetwood was in the vault. She's tried to construct a story around the fact that he had this bit of old silver to sell, but for her theory to be right, this drug dealer who was threatening to kill Fleetwood if he didn't pay off his housemate's debts would have had to

track him down to the shop where he was pretending to be Wright, get in there by night with a couple of mates, open up the vault, murder Fleetwood, who's conveniently there alone at one in the morning, carve up the body, remove this haul of silver, reset the alarm on the vault, leave the shop and lock it up behind him without leaving any trace of his presence, then scarper with a large sack full of masonic candlesticks, or whatever was taken. And I think you'll agree that if he managed all that, the man wouldn't have needed his money back, because he'd be a fucking genie.'

Robin's laugh was cut short by a small exclamation of pain, because she'd experienced a sharp twinge in the operation site.

'You all right?' said Strike.

'Yes, just my throat.'

'Personally, I think Auntie in Switzerland pulled some strings to get him away from his cradle-snatching girlfriend, and he's exactly where she says he is: New York.'

'What d'you mean, "cradle-snatching"?'

'Decima's thirty-eight. I just Googled her.'

'We've investigated enough men with wives twenty years younger than themselves, haven't we?' said Robin, a little coolly.

Too late Strike remembered that he didn't want to suggest to Robin that there was anything wrong with age gaps between romantic partners.

'I'm only – she's not the kind of thirty-eight-year-old I can see your average twenty-six-year-old going for.'

'Well, if he's really in New York, it shouldn't be too hard to prove.'

'Except that she doesn't want us to prove it. She'd literally rather believe he's dead than that he left her. She's called the baby "Lion",' Strike added inconsequentially.

'As in Aslan?' said Robin, smiling. She knew perfectly well how ludicrous Strike would find the name 'Lion'.

'Yeah.'

'A lot of posh people call their kids strange things,' said Robin.

'As do nutters,' said Strike. 'Anyway, I'm calling for your opinion, because I don't think it's ethical to take her money.'

'No… but it sounds as though she'll just try and hire someone else.'

'Oh, she will,' said Strike, 'and it's the sort of case where you could bleed the client dry, if you were unscrupulous.'

There was a short silence, during which Robin stared at the ceiling of her hospital room, and Strike watched his exhaled vapour unfurl across the rain-spattered windscreen.

‘I think,’ said Strike at last, ‘I’ll tap a couple of police contacts and find out just how certain they are the body was Knowles. If it’s become a hundred per cent certainty since the news reports, I’ll tell Decima free of charge it wasn’t Fleetwood, and then maybe she’ll face up to reality.’

‘And if it’s still ninety-nine per cent?’ asked Robin, checking the time on her phone, because visiting hour was fast approaching.

‘Well,’ said Strike, whose Google search on Decima had confirmed that she was exactly who she claimed to be, ‘I’d say we could investigate just to put paid to her delusions, because at least we wouldn’t string her along, but in the interests of full disclosure, I should say that she and Fleetwood are both connected to people I hoped never to speak to again.’

‘Who?’

‘Valentine Longcaster and Sacha Legard.’

‘Sacha Legard, the actor?’ said Robin. ‘Why d—? *Oh.*’

The realisation had been a little delayed by the morphine.

‘Yeah,’ said Strike. ‘Sacha’s Rupert Fleetwood’s cousin, and Valentine’s Decima’s brother, who was one of Charlotte’s best friends.’

Immediately, both Strike and Robin thought about the last time Strike’s late fiancée had been mentioned between them, which had been over a month previously, on the day Strike had told Robin that Charlotte had been certain he was in love with his detective partner. In spite of the morphine, Robin now felt a strange mixture of anticipation and panic. Strike had opened his mouth to speak again when Robin suddenly said,

‘Strike, I’m really sorry, I’m going to have to go.’

Without waiting for his response, she hung up.

5

But oh, my man, the house is fallen
That none can build again…

A. E. Housman
XVIII, Last Poems

Robin had just seen visitors passing the glass panel in the door of her room, and sure enough – here was her boyfriend, tall, handsome, wearing a look of extreme anxiety and holding a bunch of red roses, several magazines and a large box of Maltesers.

‘Christ, Robin,’ muttered Murphy, taking in the drip and the hospital gown.

‘It’s fine,’ said Robin. ‘I’m fine.’

Murphy set down his gifts and bent to hug her, very gently.

‘I’m fine,’ Robin repeated, although even the simple act of raising her arms to hug him back caused her some pain.

Murphy dragged a chair to her bedside.

‘Tell me what the doctor said.’

To Robin’s alarm, a hard ball seemed suddenly to have lodged itself in her throat. She hadn’t cried since being admitted to hospital, and she didn’t want to cry now, but having to say out loud the things the surgeon had just told her was going to make what had happened real, rather than a strange interlude she could half-convince herself was a nightmare.

She managed to tell Murphy the substance of what she’d been told without shedding any tears, hating how dirty and ashamed it made her feel, to talk about the infection she hadn’t realised was quietly destroying her fallopian tubes. By the time she’d finished talking, he had his face in his hands.

‘Fuck,’ he muttered. ‘It must’ve… a condom must’ve split.’

‘Yes,’ said Robin. ‘Or come off. Or something.’

He looked up at her.

‘You think it happened that night we rowed.’

‘It *was* that night,’ said Robin, her throat constricted. ‘From the dates – that’s the only night it *could* have happened.’

‘You still think I was drunk?’ he asked, in a low voice.

‘No, of course I don’t,’ said Robin quickly. ‘I know it was an accident.’

Murphy had arrived late at Robin’s flat on the night in question, on edge, his manner brusque. He’d been dealing (and was still dealing) with a dreadful case at work. A six-year-old boy had been shot dead and his nine-year-old brother blinded when caught in the crossfire of what was believed to be a gang shooting in East London. The Met had no leads and the press were being highly critical of the way the investigation was being conducted.

Murphy hadn’t been rough during sex on the night in question so much as clumsy. When he’d withdrawn from her she’d asked whether the condom was intact, because she’d had misgivings, and he’d said, ‘yeah, ’s fine – I’m checking – ’s fine’ in a voice that was definitely slurred. When she’d asked, tentatively, whether he’d been drinking, Murphy, a recovered alcoholic, had blown up as Robin had never known him to do before. If his voice wasn’t razor sharp, he shouted, pulling his clothes back on, it was because he was fucking exhausted. What was she playing at, asking him if he was back on the booze; was a man not allowed to be tired? He’d then walked out.

Forty-five minutes later, he’d returned, full of contrition, and made an abject apology. Her question, he’d said, had reminded him of his ex-wife, who’d apparently refused to believe he was capable of sobriety even when he was on the wagon. His explanation had been perfectly cogent, there’d been no smell of alcohol on him, and Robin had felt ashamed. Her boyfriend had been nothing but understanding and supportive after she’d ended the undercover job that had left her physically drained and emotionally spent, and she felt immensely guilty that she’d failed to extend similar consideration to him when he was going through work difficulties of his own.

Robin had now had twenty-four hours alone in hospital to reflect on the fact that she ought to have gone to get the morning-after pill following that night, but she’d assumed her worries about the condom had been as

baseless as her suspicion that Murphy had been drinking. In any case, she'd needed to be up early for a surveillance job. Thank God her mother would never need to know that she'd prioritised an investigation over her own health… thank God nobody would ever need to know…

'I thought the thing was intact,' muttered Murphy. 'I swear I did.'

'I know,' said Robin, reaching for his hand. 'This is on both of us. I should have gone for the morning-after pill, it was really stupid not to. But I'm going to restart the pill, because as I – as I say, the surgeon said there's a high chance…'

Her voice broke. Murphy made to hug her again, but Robin held him off.

'Sorry – I'm just sore…'

He passed her some tissues, then clasped her hand again.

'Thank you for my flowers, they're lovely,' said Robin, blowing her nose.

'When will they let you come home?'

'Tomorrow,' said Robin.

'Shit, that quickly?'

'What, you wanted a longer break from me?' said Robin, forcing herself to smile.

'No, but I'm supposed to be – I could see if I can get time off—'

'Ryan, it's fine, I'll get a taxi back. It was keyhole surgery, it's not a big deal. I haven't even got an overnight bag to carry.'

'But you'll need help at home – let me call your parents—'

'*No*,' said Robin firmly. 'I can't stand them coming down here and fussing over me again. I *can't*, Ryan. *Promise* you won't tell them.'

'OK,' he said uneasily, 'but I still think—'

'I'll order takeaways and lie on the sofa and watch TV,' said Robin. 'I don't need anyone else – apart from you,' she added, 'obviously.'

6

Grief for the loss of those we love is natural and proper. But we *lament not only the death of a friend and benefactor, but also the loss of the True Word, of which we are deprived by his death, and which we have henceforth to seek for until it is recovered.*

Albert Pike
Liturgy of the Ancient and Accepted Rite of Scottish Freemasonry

As it was Saturday, Denmark Street was full of shoppers when Strike arrived back there that afternoon. As he limped past the familiar guitar shops and record stores, even more tired, sore and depressed than when he'd left them that morning, the opening chords of 'House of the Rising Sun' issued from an open door. In spite of his low mood, this caused Strike a brief moment of amusement: the owner of that particular shop had once told him he slapped an extra hundred quid on the price of any guitar bought by someone who played the riff in front of him.

He climbed the metal stairs with difficulty, let himself into his deserted place of work, made himself a mug of creosote-coloured tea, then took a pile of files through to the inner office, because he wanted to catch up on what he'd missed during the ten days he'd spent in Cornwall. However, before opening these, he turned again to Google and scrolled slowly down through the search results, pausing on a picture of Decima in a white chef's coat and hat, which belonged to the website for the Happy Carrot. Here, she looked far younger and fairly pretty, with her hair swept back in a shining bun and a dimpled smile.

In a spirit of masochism, he then Googled Valentine Longcaster, which resulted in myriad images of Charlotte and Valentine together, falling out of

clubs, attending launch parties and opening nights, Charlotte darkly beautiful, Valentine foppishly dressed, and both of them either beaming or bellowing with laughter.

Charlotte and Valentine hadn't been just friends. To their great amusement, they'd been step-siblings during their childhood. For two acrimonious and explosive years, Charlotte's mother, Tara, had been married to Dino, Valentine's father, although their respective children had never lived under the same roof, because Valentine (and presumably Decima) had been spirited off to Los Angeles by their own mother, who'd rebounded onto a composer of film scores.

In the days when Strike had known her, Tara had often held forth when drunk on 'that fucking bastard Longcaster'. Strike had often suspected that the friendship Charlotte struck up with Valentine in adulthood had been at least partly in defiance of the mother she loathed, although it was undeniable that Charlotte and Valentine had also had much in common: a waspish sense of humour, a love of cocaine, an endless quest for distraction and drama, and a detestation of all that was worthy and dull.

Looking at these pictures was the reverse of cheering, but Strike kept scrolling, pausing on a picture of Charlotte flanked by Valentine and her half-brother, the actor Sacha Legard, who strongly resembled her, except that he had vivid blue eyes instead of Charlotte's hazel-flecked green. Legard was the product of Tara's third and longest marriage, to a lord who owned a stately home called Heberley House. Strike couldn't remember Sacha ever talking about a younger cousin in Switzerland, though this wasn't much of a surprise: when Strike had known him, Sacha's conversation had generally turned on himself.

Strike next searched for Rupert Fleetwood, and soon found an Instagram account on which there'd been no activity since May.

There were only a few selfies on Rupert's page, and they showed him to be far from the junior Sacha Strike had imagined. Fleetwood was an ordinary-looking young man whose face would never have graced a magazine cover. He was pale, fair-haired, broad-shouldered and short-necked, with a very round face that put Strike in mind of an Edam cheese minus the wax rind.

One of the selfies showed Rupert and Decima standing in some unidentified park, both of them muffled against what looked like a chilly

spring day, taken on March the eighth of the previous year. Neither of the couple had arranged themselves to best advantage before it was taken. Decima was windblown, a strand of dark hair in her eyes, her cheeks pink with cold, but with no stress-rosacea or eyebags. Rupert was red-nosed and his short neck wasn't flattered by his turtleneck. Strike was, however, forced to acknowledge that their ages didn't look too far apart here. Rupert had captioned the picture with words in Italian: *Buon Compleanno a me* (happy birthday to me) and *anime gemelle* (soul mates). Other than this one lapse into Italian, there was no indication on Rupert's Instagram page of multilingualism, and no allusion to his Swiss upbringing. The bulk of his posts comprised photographs of London. No Swiss names appeared beneath his posts, which did indeed suggest he hadn't much enjoyed growing up on the continent and had severed all ties.

There were a couple of old family pictures on the account, including a photograph of Rupert with his parents, posted on the anniversary of their death. Baby Rupert was sitting happily in the arms of his glamorous mother, Veronica, whose thin eyebrows and choppy bob pronounced her to have given birth in the nineties. Her husband Peter, narrow-faced and handsome, looked good-natured and vaguely bohemian.

Further back still was another family picture on which Strike paused. This picture showed a chubby Rupert, aged around twelve or thirteen, standing with his Uncle Ned, Charlotte's second stepfather, in front of gigantic, many-pillared Heberley House. Like his famous actor son, Ned Legard had had piercing blue eyes.

Doubly certain he didn't want Decima's case, Strike closed down the Instagram account and spent the next couple of hours familiarising himself with developments in the agency's existing investigations.

He was still reading when he heard a knock on the outer glass door. Swearing under his breath, because he supposed somebody had come to the wrong door, Strike heaved himself up.

'Hi,' said Kim Cochran, the agency's latest hire, when Strike opened up. 'I was hoping you'd be back.'

Kim, who'd left the Metropolitan Police a year previously, had worked for a rival detective agency until it had gone out of business. She was pertly pretty, always well groomed, and, with her short brunette hair and alert brown eyes, reminded Strike of a small bird.

‘I’ve got news on Plug,’ she said.

‘Ah, right,’ said Strike, wondering why she couldn’t have texted it, rather than turning up in person. ‘Come through.’

The nickname ‘Plug’ derived from its owner’s resemblance to the character in the Bash Street Kids comic strip. He was, by common agreement, the ugliest man the agency had ever been hired to investigate, having very large ears, a pronounced overbite, buck teeth and an uncoordinated lankiness. Aside from boasting a multitude of past criminal misdemeanours, mostly involving soft drugs and petty theft, Plug was also the lone parent of a scrawny teenaged son, who looked perpetually downtrodden and miserable.

Father and son had recently vacated their cramped flat in Haringey and moved, uninvited, into the Camberwell house of Plug’s mother, who had rapidly advancing Alzheimer’s. According to Plug’s well-to-do uncle, who’d hired the detective agency, Plug was not only verbally abusive to the old lady, he was gradually draining her of her life savings, and nobody in the family had yet found a legal way of stopping Plug helping himself to his mother’s money, or dislodging him from her home. The aim in hiring private detectives was to find something for which Plug could be arrested.

The Plug case made a change from the run-of-the-mill adultery cases the agency undertook for wealthy clients; it was pleasant, all felt, to be trying to stop an undeniable villain and protect a fragile old lady. Unfortunately, Plug hadn’t yet been detected in any criminal activity whatsoever.

‘He’s just met a guy at Tufnell Park station,’ said Kim, ‘and handed over a big wodge of cash. I got video.’

She held out her phone and there, sure enough, was the astoundingly ugly Plug, passing over what looked like a roll of fifty pound notes to a man with many hand tattoos.

‘What’s weird is, he didn’t get anything back,’ said Kim. ‘I was hoping to see drugs or something.’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike, watching the video. Having handed over the money in furtive fashion, Plug simply turned and slouched away.

‘Might be payment for services rendered, of course,’ said Kim.

‘What did he do after this?’

‘Went back to his mum’s. Dev’s taken over, so I s’pose’ – Kim yawned – ‘sorry – we’ll find out whether Plug gets any funny deliveries this evening.’

She stretched, raising her arms to the sky and arching her back. Strike looked quickly back at the rota. She was wearing a snugly fitting black sweater.

‘Stiff,’ she said, dropping her arms back to her sides. ‘Too many hours in the car this week. Got any fun weekend plans?’

‘Work,’ said Strike, eyes on the rota. ‘Going to have to cover some of Robin’s stuff, now she’s off sick.’

‘I’m happy to do some of it, if you like,’ said Kim. ‘I haven’t got much on this weekend.’

‘That’s good of you,’ said Strike, looking back at her. ‘It’s a bit tricky otherwise, because Barclay’s away tomorrow and Monday.’

‘I like to keep busy. How was Cornwall?’

‘It was… you know,’ said Strike, eyes back on the rota.

‘Was he old, your uncle?’

‘Nearly eighty.’

‘Still. Never easy when they go.’

‘No,’ said Strike.

‘And you had to drive out to that Mullins woman as soon as you got back, too. How was she, by the way?’

‘Fine,’ said Strike, trying to inject a note of finality into his voice.

Kim took the hint and stood up. She was good at taking the hint.

‘I’ll be off, then. Email me the hours you need me this weekend, and I’ll be there.’

‘Thanks,’ said Strike. ‘Appreciate it.’

Kim left. After another twenty minutes fiddling with the rota, his eyes itching with tiredness, Strike locked up the office and headed upstairs to his attic flat, to make himself a solitary dinner.

He did his best to ignore the mounting pain in his hamstring while cooking himself a steak and vegetables, but his deepening depression was harder to dismiss. After sitting down at his small Formica table, his thoughts moved to the dilemma that had been dominating his thoughts for many months now, latterly becoming acute, and in no way diminished by his miserable interlude in Cornwall. He’d discussed the matter with nobody because he wanted neither advice nor comfort. Indeed, as far as he was concerned, there’d been quite enough unwelcome interest in the subject already.

When a man is forced to recognise that, in spite of his best efforts to prevent it happening, he's fallen in love with the woman with whom he's built a thriving business, and who he considers his best friend; when that woman has been in a stable, happy relationship with another man for over a year; when the first man knows he risks both business and friendship if he makes an open avowal of his feelings, yet has decided he doesn't want to live with the knowledge that he might have had what he wanted if only he'd spoken, then that man must determine how, when and where the long-resisted discussion is to take place. Strike had been mulling over this problem ever since he'd made his first sober attempt to breach the barriers he himself had erected between himself and Robin Ellacott, by telling her that Charlotte had been certain he was in love with his business partner, and had mentioned the fact in her suicide note.

For the umpteenth time, as he sat eating his solitary meal, Strike recalled Robin's reaction when he'd uttered these words. 'Stunned' perhaps described it best. Stunned, and then flustered. The conversation had been cut short by the appearance at the office of Ryan Fucking Murphy. The next time Strike and Robin had come face to face, there'd been a definite tinge of self-consciousness on Robin's part that hadn't been there before.

Such behaviour was, of course, open to widely divergent interpretations. Perhaps it showed he had grounds for hope. Strike had been alert in the days following his oblique admission for any uptick in the frequency of Robin's mentions of Murphy, or references to how happy she was with the CID officer, because these would surely be the obvious way to warn Strike that further mention of the word 'love' between them would be unwelcome, but he'd detected no such increase. On the other hand, she'd made no attempt to return to the conversation, even obliquely or in jest.

Sometimes since, when tallying up promising signs, he'd reminded himself that embarrassment didn't necessarily denote revulsion, that Robin had once uttered the words 'I don't want to lose you' and that she'd freely told him he, too, was her best friend. He recalled her wedding day, when she'd run out on her first dance to follow and hug him. Yet in his darker moments he relived those fatal, drunken few seconds outside the Ritz a little over two years previously, when he'd moved to kiss her and seen a clear refusal in her expression. He was eight years older than Murphy, and while he knew, without vanity, that he was very attractive to certain kinds of

women, on the available evidence, he wasn't physically what Robin liked. Both her current boyfriend and her ex-husband (Matthew Fucking Cunliffe) had been slim, fit, classically handsome men, whereas Strike resembled a broken-nosed Beethoven and was still, in spite of intermittently strenuous efforts, over a stone off his ideal weight, which in itself had to be calculated to accommodate the loss of half his leg.

And Robin had hung up as soon as he'd mentioned Charlotte today. Why? Because she feared hearing, again, that Charlotte had thought him in love with her? Because she wanted to shut down any further discussion of the subject?

His steak finished, and feeling, if anything, worse, Strike went to the holdall he'd brought back from Cornwall and extracted the shoe box containing Ted's two old hats, the leather-bound fisherman's cosh and the photographs Strike had removed from the familiar, now mournfully empty house.

He hadn't cried at Ted's funeral, in spite of the invisible, weighty slab that had lain on his chest throughout. His uncle had become increasingly frail and confused after the death of his wife two years previously, but even as Strike had nodded at the bromides delivered by well-wishers at the crowded wake – 'perhaps it was for the best', 'he never wanted to be a burden', 'it's what he would have wanted, going quickly' – he'd found it hard to disguise a latent antagonism. They all appeared to have forgotten who Ted really was; not the shambling figure who'd got lost one morning on the beach he'd once known better than his own face, but the hero of Strike's youth, his model of a man. Strike had been brought closest to tears when, in a welcome interlude at the bar with his oldest friend, Dave Polworth, the latter had raised a pint of Cornish ale to the ceiling and said,

'Proper man, Ted.'

'Proper man' was a Polworth-ism with many connotations. To be a proper man meant to be a strong man, an outdoors man, but also a man of principle. It meant lack of bombast, a repudiation of shallowness and a core of quiet self-belief. It meant being slow to anger, but firm in conviction. Polworth, like Strike, had had to take his male role models where he could find them, because neither had a father who qualified as 'proper', and both boys had found in Edward Nancarrow a man worthy of admiration and emulation, whose approval meant more than any school teacher's star and

whose rebukes spurred a desire to do better, to work harder, to earn back Ted's good opinion.

Now Strike took out the old pictures and examined them, one by one, pausing on the oldest one of all, which was black and white. It showed a large, swarthy, crudely handsome man with dark, curly hair exactly like Strike's, standing with his back to the sea, his enormous hand on the shoulder of Ted the boy, whose face was pinched with anxiety.

Trevik Nancarrow, Strike's Cornish grandfather, had died before Strike was born, and given what he knew about the man, Strike had no sense of loss. Hard-drinking and powerfully built, Trevik had passed for a solid member of the community outside the family home. Within it, according to his children, he'd been pure terror.

Trevik's long-suffering wife had died young, leaving him in sole charge of two children, born fourteen years apart: Ted, who'd been sixteen, and Peggy, Strike's mother, who'd been only two – the same age Rupert Fleetwood had been, it now occurred to Strike, when both his parents disappeared beneath a deadly mass of thundering snow. Trevik's mother had offered the fetching little Peggy a home. As capricious and mean-spirited as her hard-drinking son, the old woman had had no time for Ted: teenage boys were messy and loud, and their place was with their father, whereas Peggy, the old woman insisted, loved and needed her granny, who took pride in dressing her and looking after her mane of long dark hair.

Ted had told Strike much later that he'd known if he'd stayed in his father's house beyond the age of eighteen, murder would have been done, and it was a toss-up which of them would be killer and which the victim. National Service had saved the young man, and having no desire to return to St Mawes while his father lived, Ted, to Trevik's disgust, had remained in the army, forgoing the sea and the rugged coastline he loved for the military police, returning only when news reached him of his father's premature death. Ted had then married the local girl with whom he'd corresponded for seven years.

It was Ted who'd broken the pattern of hard-drinking violence that had plagued the Nancarrow men through generations. Ted's wife had had no need to fear his fists and his surrogate children had known firmness, but never brutality. Ted had embodied the virtues, hitherto almost unknown in that family, of steadiness, sobriety and fair play, whereas Peggy, who at

eighteen had seized her first chance of escaping her draconian grandmother and run away with a youth who'd come to Truro with the fair, had rechristened herself 'Leda' and carried chaos with her wherever she went, until her death in a squalid squat in London.

Staring at Ted and Trevik, Strike found himself wishing the strong, capable storehouse of sense he'd just lost could be here with him tonight. Ted had always had a way of putting into words things the unsettled and often angry teenage Strike had recognised as true, even if he hadn't yet lived long enough to test Ted's words for himself.

'There's no pride in having what you never worked for,' had been one of Ted's well-worn maxims. Strike was prepared to put in the work with Robin, but the weeks that had elapsed since he'd seen the look of shock on her face had afforded few opportunities to advance his own cause. It wasn't only that, until the hiring of Kim, the agency had been overstretched covering its cases. Strike could also tell that Robin was finding the onslaught of press coverage about the UHC hard to handle; she seemed jumpier and more anxious than usual, yet had snapped at him when he'd mooted the idea of her taking more time off. He'd several times cut one of the subcontractors short when they'd wanted to tell Robin gleefully about a further UHC arrest, in the expectation that she'd be as happy about it as they were.

For weeks now, Strike had daily postponed the declaration he wanted to make, because he feared that dumping his feelings on Robin right now would be selfish. Then Ted's death had forced Strike away from London, and now this this virus of Robin's was prolonging their separation and, no doubt, affording Murphy endless opportunities to play the considerate boyfriend.

While he hadn't yet heard any concrete indications, Strike feared that Murphy might be planning a proposal. Murphy and Robin's relationship appeared to be as strong as ever, and both were clearly of a marrying disposition, given that each of them already had an ex-spouse. Robin was in her thirties, and might even be thinking of children. She'd seemed ambivalent on that subject the only time it had ever been mentioned between her and Strike, but that had been a while ago, before she'd met her handsome CID officer. After their last big case, and Robin's long and traumatic spell undercover, she might well feel now was the time to take a

career break. These fears added urgency to Strike's predicament. He needed to speak up before Murphy went ring shopping, or Robin announced she'd be needing maternity leave.

'Never let the other chap change your game plan,' Ted had once told Strike, though they'd been speaking of boxing, rather than romance. 'Stick to your own, and play to your strengths.'

And what were Strike's strengths, in this particular case? Undoubtedly, the agency that he and Robin had built together, which he was almost certain meant as much to her as it did to him. Their work offered opportunities, although lately not enough of them, to spend a lot of time together. So many missed chances, thought Strike bitterly: overnight stays, shared meals and long car journeys, and he, like the stupid prick he was, had prided himself on not letting his attraction overmaster him, and what was the upshot? He was sitting here alone with the dregs of a pint and a throbbing leg, while Murphy was probably at Robin's flat, racking up points by bringing flowers and heating up soup.

Bored by his own misery, he got to his feet again and washed his dinner things. Brooding would do no good whatsoever: what was needed was decisive action.

It seemed to Strike that the wraith of Edward Nancarrow nodded approvingly at this conclusion, so having finished the washing-up, he replaced the photographs and two hats in the shoe box and then, after a second's deliberation, placed the old fisherman's priest on the windowsill, the only ornament, if it could be so called, he'd ever put on display.

7

Dully at the leaden sky
Staring, and with idle eye
Measuring the listless plain,
I began to think again.

A. E. Housman
XXXI: Hell Gate, Last Poems

Robin was discharged from hospital on Sunday morning, with advice to take paracetamol and ibuprofen as needed, refrain from strenuous exercise and resume normal activities only after a further three days' rest. She'd slept badly again, not because of noise this time, but because she'd dreamed, repeatedly, that she was back in the box into which she'd been locked overnight at Chapman Farm. These nightmares had plagued her over the last couple of months, but she'd told nobody about them, nor about the waves of panic that slid over her unpredictably, especially in crowded spaces, nor about the fact that unless Murphy was spending the night with her, she slept with her bedside lamp on. Robin knew what happened when she told people she was struggling mentally: they told her to stop doing her job. Strike had once or twice suggested her taking more leave after those intense months undercover, but Robin didn't want a holiday: she wanted to be busy, to bury herself in investigation, to fill up her restless mind with other people's problems.

She took a taxi back to her flat with a thudding pain in her lower right side that painkillers had dulled without removing. In spite of what she'd told Murphy, whose gang shooting case was keeping him at work, about being fine alone, Robin felt weepy, and infuriated with herself for being so. *Get a grip. This was nothing. Think of Strike, with half his leg blown off.*

You'll be fine once you get home.

But she'd been back inside her flat barely ten minutes when the man upstairs turned on music which, as usual, was very loud. Robin listened to the pulsing bassline, too sore and tired to go upstairs and ask him to turn it down, but feeling more strongly than ever that she'd like to cry. Instead, she went to fetch her laptop. She'd just opened it when her mobile rang and she saw her mother's number again.

Mentally bracing herself, Robin answered.

'Hi Mum. Sorry I didn't call you back yesterday,' she said, before Linda could ask. 'I was working.'

'I thought you must be,' said Linda, whose voice sounded thickened.

'Is everything OK?'

'I just wanted to let you know… we had to put Rowntree down.'

'Oh no,' said Robin. 'Oh Mum, I'm sorry.'

The family's chocolate Labrador had been old, but Robin had loved him. She felt the still-unshed tears of the last few days sting her eyes. Linda, meanwhile, was clearly crying.

'We had to,' she said in a muffled voice. 'It was his liver… there was nothing they could do. Better for him to… go quickly…'

'Yes, of course it was,' said Robin, 'but I'll really miss him. How's Dad?'

'He wants another one… he's already looking at puppies online. I don't know, though… dogs are such a tie… and there'll n-never be another Rowntree…'

They spoke for a further twenty minutes, Robin mentioning none of her own troubles. When at last Linda had rung off, Robin turned back to her laptop, now doubly eager to bury herself in anything that would keep her mind busy.

She Googled 'silver vault murder', then scrolled downwards.

As she quickly saw, there'd been four distinct phases to the news coverage of the silver vault murder, all of it happening over a month in the summer, while Robin had been completely isolated from the outside world at Chapman Farm.

In the immediate aftermath of the discovery of William Wright's body, words like 'naked', 'dismembered', 'mutilated' and 'masonic' had featured in a hundred lurid headlines. From one of these, Robin learned that the

discoverer of the handless, eyeless corpse had been the silver shop's owner, Kenneth Ramsay.

> 'It was the most appalling shock, as you can imagine. I genuinely thought I was going to have a heart attack. The body on the floor, all the Murdoch silver gone. We can't understand *how* it happened, let alone why. Wright didn't have keys or codes, he shouldn't have been able to get into the shop that night, and he definitely didn't know how to open the vault.'

Robin clicked on a related article to discover what the 'Murdoch silver' might be.

> Priceless masonic treasures, recently bought at auction, were stolen from the vault in which William Wright was murdered. These were part of the collection of A. H. Murdoch, a Scottish-born explorer and Freemason, who discovered the second largest silver mine in Peru in 1827. Murdoch amassed the biggest, most important collection of masonic artefacts in the world, some commissioned from silver from his own mine, others collected over many years. These included the ceremonial dagger of John Skene, the first Freemason ever to emigrate to America.

The articles stopped short of suggesting that William Wright had been murdered as part of some masonic plot, though plenty of reports nudged up against the exciting possibility.

> Murdered in the shadow of Freemasons' Hall, the imposing meeting place of over a thousand masonic lodges…

> The Murdoch silver holds great significance for those who practise the secretive 'craft' of Freemasonry…

The next phase of press coverage had been triggered by the discovery

that there had been no such person as William Wright, whose name, CV and personal details had been found to be fake. The possibility of masonic involvement was now deemed to have grown stronger.

‘MASONIC MURDER’: WHO WAS SLAIN VICTIM?

> Police continue to appeal for information on the salesman posing as ‘William Wright’ of Doncaster, who was stripped and dismembered in the vault of a masonic silver shop… several notable Freemasons have borne the surname Wright, including Sir Almroth Wright, bacteriologist, and author Dudley Wright…

Grainy images of Wright taken from Ramsay Silver’s internal security camera had been released to the press, but they were of such poor quality that Wright could have been almost any bearded, bespectacled man. His shape was the most distinctive thing about him, because, while quite short, he was well-proportioned, with broad shoulders. The blurry nature of the pictures seemed to have added to the mysterious aura around the murder. During this second phase of the reporting, police announced that they’d had many leads about Wright’s possible identity, and were following them all up.

The next wave of news stories, which was by far the most excitable, began when the police released more still photographs, this time from CCTV cameras close to the silver shop at night, which appeared to show William Wright and three other men heading towards the shop in the early hours of Saturday the eighteenth of June. These pictures were also fairly indistinct, although one of the men was definitely short and sported a beard. The tabloids now became feverish with excitement, and while the broadsheets reported the wildly spiralling stories of masonic ritual killing only to urge caution in believing them, they nevertheless devoted multiple paragraphs to the theories.

> Online sleuths have been quick to point out that the murder of ‘William Wright’ has strange echoes of the legend of ‘Hiram Abiff’, the mythical Grand Master of the stonemasons, who was entrusted

with the building of King Solomon's temple, including a secret vault to house the Ark of the Covenant.

Abiff possessed knowledge of a secret word, a symbol of divine wisdom.

Three lesser masons, Jubela, Jubelo and Jubelum, wished to gain knowledge of the word and threatened Abiff, who refused to give it up, and was therefore murdered inside the temple by the three tools sacred to Freemasons: the gauge, the square and the gavel. Ornate versions of these were among the objects stolen from the Ramsay silver vault, where the body of Wright was found.

Robin glanced through excitable reader comments, some of whom had spotted still more masonic features in the killing of William Wright.

The severing of the body's hands is an allusion to the dismembered Hands of the Mysteries that unlock the temple of wisdom.

The surrounding silver might well have been an illusion to the scripture reading in the Third Degree: 'Or ever the silver cord be loosed.'

I've heard the letter G was carved into Wright's back – obvious reference to the only surviving letter of Hiram's secret word.

But then had come phase four, which proved horribly anticlimactic. The police had announced that 'William Wright' had in fact been Jason Knowles, twenty-eight, of Haringey. Knowles had previously served six years for the burglary of a building society in Lewes in 2010 and his mugshot showed a broad-shouldered, thick-necked, well-muscled man, with a narrow, freckled face, and a slightly manic glare.

An article in *The Times* concluded:

'Given the widespread speculation on social media about a so-called "masonic killing", which has been amplified by some sections of the

press, I’d like to confirm that we have no reason to believe that Knowles’ death was in any way associated with, inspired by or committed by Freemasons, nor does the proximity of the United Grand Lodge have any bearing on the case whatsoever,’ said DCI Malcolm Truman, who has led the investigation. ‘We’re now as certain as we can be that Knowles and his killer, or killers, were motivated by nothing but financial gain, and we continue to appeal for information about the murder, and the objects stolen from the Ramsay Silver vault.’

Robin wasn’t surprised to see that this dampening news hadn’t entirely extinguished the hopes of those reluctant to give up the possibility that the killing had been a deliberate re-enactment of the murder of Hiram Abiff.

Shaun Coolidge

The guy was murdered while stealing masonic items from a masonic shop in the shadow of the United Grand Lodge of England but sure, no masons were involved.

Peter Mikkelsen
if you’re ever murdered in the veg aisle at Tesco’s, we’ll know a cucumber did it

Floozy Soozy
hahahahaha

Debbie Palser
lol

This comment has been removed as it violated our community standards policy

Jane Burnett

All that nonsense about Freemasons and it was a common or garden burglary!

SkankyDoodle

how many common or garden buglaries end with a theif left behind with his eyes pulled out and his hands cut off ? why was nothing taken from the shop except mason stuff and why was the body naked and killed in a ritual manner ?

Jane Burnett

As the daughter and wife of Freemasons I can assure you that there are no ritual killings involved! Freemasons raise many millions for charity every year yet are routinely stigmatised by ignorant people such as yourself.

This comment has been removed as it violated our community standards policy

Jeff Grayling

Security at that shop must've been p*** poor if the guy could crack the vault after working there for 2 weeks.

Paul Everleigh

Was just thinking that exact thing. Either lax security or inside job.

Starbanger

My comment has now been Removed by the moderater TWICE!!! There is something bloody fishy here!!!! The Chief Investigator Malcolm TRUMAN is a Freemason, member of Winston Churchill Lodge 7502, Holborn!!!!!!

Robin's phone rang. She hoped it would be Strike, but it was Kim Cochran.

'Hi,' said Kim briskly, sounding as though she was in a car, 'just a quick one. Did Plug look like he was heading for a train, when you lost him on Friday? Or could he have been meeting someone?'

'Possibly meeting someone,' said Robin. She'd had the presence of mind to text Kim after she'd come round from surgery, pretending to have

confused Plug with another man in the bustle. ‘He was heading towards Caffè Nero when I lost him.’

‘I’d have thought it was impossible to mistake anyone else for Plug,’ said Kim, with a little laugh.

‘It was very crowded,’ said Robin.

‘Must’ve been. I’m only asking because I saw him handing over cash to a guy at Tufnell Park yesterday,’ said Kim. ‘I’m following him up the A12 right now. Strike asked me to do your shift this morning.’

‘Right,’ said Robin, and then, with an effort, ‘well, thanks for covering for me.’

‘He’s pretty depressed, poor guy.’

‘Who is?’

‘Strike, after Cornwall. He was telling me all about it.’

‘Oh,’ said Robin, ‘right.’

‘Good to know about Victoria, anyway,’ said Kim. ‘You get back to your Lemsip.’

She hung up, leaving Robin staring, eyes narrowed, at her phone.

Robin had been telling herself that Kim Cochran was a good hire ever since the latter had joined the agency. Kim’s work was exemplary, and she had good police contacts, because she’d worked for the Met for eight years before becoming a private detective. However, the more contact Robin had with Kim, the less she liked her. This was largely due to the marked mismatch in the way Kim treated the two people whose names were engraved on the agency’s glass door. Kim laughed longer and harder at Strike’s jokes than anyone else and treated his ideas and opinions with deference. To Robin, Kim was casual, even dismissive. She’d already made a jocular sideswipe at the fact that Robin, alone of the detective team, had no police or military background, hinting that Robin’s main worth to the investigative team was that she was sleeping with a CID officer, then laughing loudly (‘I’m kidding!’) when Barclay had retorted, ‘When’s the last time *you* brought down an entire fuckin’ cult?’

Robin set aside her laptop and headed for the kitchen. She didn’t want to think about Kim Cochran, but as she made herself tea and toast (because toast didn’t necessitate reaching up for dinner plates or bending down for saucepans) her unruly thoughts returned to something that shouldn’t have annoyed her at all: Kim asking Midge (who’d passed the information on to

Robin) what Strike's relationship status was.

When a woman has spent a period of years asking herself whether she's fallen in love with the man she considers her best friend; when she's sacrificed a marriage and financial security for the business they've built together; when, after finding out that that same best friend is secretly sleeping with another woman, she's forced to admit to herself that she has indeed fallen in love with him, then the only thing to do is to fall out of love as quickly and as cleanly as possible, and this, Robin had made every effort to do. Unlike Strike, she didn't particularly want to spend the rest of her non-working life living alone in a spartan flat with a succession of short-lived affairs to break up the monotony, so she'd done what had been urged upon her by their mutual friend Ilsa Herbert, and accepted Ryan Murphy's offer of a drink.

Over a year after that first date, Robin really did think – no, she *knew* – that she loved Murphy. The events of the last few days had certainly left her shellshocked and destabilised, but that would pass. Murphy was kind, intelligent and very good-looking. Yes, there'd been a conversation, two months previously, in which Strike had hinted—

Standing beside the toaster, Robin told herself she wasn't going to start deconstructing that conversation again, because she didn't need any more complications, pain, or stress in her life. She was with Murphy, and Strike could do what he liked, although if what he liked was responding to Kim's flirtation ('he's pretty depressed, poor guy, he was telling me all about it') she pitied his taste, and that was all there was to it.

Robin took her tea and toast back to her laptop while 'Stitches' by Shawn Mendes blasted through her sitting room ceiling. As she sat down, her mobile rang again, and this time, it was Strike.

'Hi,' he said. 'How're you feeling?'

'Bit better,' said Robin. 'How're you?'

'Fine. Sitting in the BMW watching Arsehole's ex-wife having lunch with another woman.'

'You need to stop calling him Arsehole,' said Robin, half-amused, half-exasperated. 'Especially in public. Pat thinks we should use "Mr A".'

'Pat doesn't have to give him weekly updates,' said Strike.

The client in question was a South African cricketer who believed his ex-wife was having an affair with a married tabloid journalist, and that this

accounted for the recent stream of unflattering, though true, stories about the cricketer's past in that particular paper. Strike happened to know the journalist in question: his name was Dominic Culpepper, and the agency had occasionally done jobs for him in the days before they could afford to pick and choose their clients.

'I wanted a word about the Mullins case, if you've got time,' said Strike.

'Yes, go on.'

'I've tried every police contact I've got to see if they know anything about the body in the vault, but no dice. Wardle, Layborn – I even tried Anstis. None of them were anywhere near the case and they don't know anyone who worked on it. Couldn't try Vanessa Ekwensi, could you?'

'I can, but she's on maternity leave.'

'Shit,' said Strike. 'Might ask Kim if she knows anyone.'

'I could ask Ryan,' Robin suggested. 'Although he's kind of snowed under at work just now,' she added, when Strike didn't say anything. 'He's on that gang case, where those two young brothers got shot.'

'Nasty,' said Strike, though without much sympathy. 'Well, unless we can get a friendly copper to give us some inside info, I think this is a dead end. We can't tell Decima it definitely wasn't Fleetwood unless we know what forensics said.'

'I'll try Ryan,' said Robin.

'I've also called one of Fleetwood's friends, a bloke called Albie Simpson-White,' said Strike. 'He's a waiter at Decima's father's club, Dino's, but "isn't available to talk".'

'Dino's?' said Robin. 'That private members' place with the restaurant at the back?'

'That's the one.'

'I looked into taking Mum there for her sixtieth. The average cost per person for lunch is four hundred pounds.'

'Four hundred quid? *For lunch?*'

'It's got three Michelin stars.'

'I'm not spending four hundred fucking quid on lunch unless they're chucking in the table and chairs.'

Robin laughed, but stopped quickly, because it hurt.

'I haven't asked how it was in Cornwall.'

'What? Oh. As you'd expect,' said Strike. 'Non-stop crying from Lucy.

She’s taken virtually the entire contents of the house back to Bromley with her, which I doubt Greg’ll be happy about. Funeral was packed. I wish – shit, got to go, Mrs A’s on the move.’

Strike hung up, leaving Robin wondering what he wished.

In the absence of anything else to distract her, the disquiet she’d been trying to suppress ever since her talk with the surgeon intensified. After staring for a further minute at the name of the masonic lodge to which DCI Truman allegedly belonged, Robin moved her cursor back up to the top of her laptop screen, and, reluctantly, typed in: ‘egg freezing’.

8

It is the saddest of all sights upon this earth, that of a man lazy and luxurious… He is the faithless steward, that embezzles what God has given him in trust…

Albert Pike
Morals and Dogma of the
Ancient and Accepted Scottish
Rite of Freemasonry

The ex-wife of the cricketer Strike called ‘Arsehole’, and Pat, ‘Mr A’, was driving in the direction of her flat in Chelsea. While her social circle overlapped with that of Dominic Culpepper, she and the journalist had shown no sign so far of being anything other than nodding acquaintances. Strike had pitched to their cricketer client the idea of looking more closely at other people close to him to discover the source of leaks to Dominic Culpepper’s paper, but Arsehole – ‘living right up tae his name’, as Barclay had put it – had sneered at this suggestion, remaining insistent that the agency keep watching his ex-wife.

So Strike drove on through the steadily fading sunlight to Glebe Place, where the gorgeous ex-model parked her Mercedes S-Class and entered the townhouse she’d received as part of her divorce settlement. Strike parked his BMW, then settled back to watch the woman’s front door. Judging it safe to assume that, at a bare minimum, she was changing her clothes to go out again, he took out his mobile and found the number Decima had given him for Rupert Fleetwood’s Aunt Anjelica in Zurich.

The European dialling tone sounded long and shrill in his ear, and after a few seconds, was replaced by an upper-class voice.

‘Wallner.’

‘Mrs Anjelica Wallner?’

‘Speaking.’

‘My name’s Cormoran Strike, and I’m a private detective. I was given your contact details by—’

‘You’re what? What did you say you are?’

He got as far as ‘private detective’ a second time, at which some sort of explosion seemed to happen at the end of the line.

‘What is this? *What is this?* Is this that *Decima* again, or whatever her damn name is?’

‘I was hoping to ask you about your nephew, Rup—’

‘This is intolerable! First the police, then you!’

‘You’ve spoken to the police, have—?’

‘*Who does she think she is*, sending people to badger me*?*’

‘I understand she’s your nephew’s girlfriend,’ said Strike.

‘I’ve looked her up! I know who she is!’ said Rupert’s aunt. ‘*What* he thought he was doing, getting involved with the daughter of that *ghastly man—’*

‘You don’t like Dino Longcaster?’

‘It’s immaterial whether I like him or not! And *she’s* old enough to be his mother!’

‘Well, not qu—’

‘He was after her money and I suppose he didn’t get enough of it, that’s why he’s left her! Tell her that! *Tell her that from me!’* shouted Mrs Wallner, née Fleetwood. ‘He just wants an easy life! Doesn’t want to work!’

‘Decima told me you think Rupert’s in New—’

‘He *is* in New York! I told him he needed to get a proper job and he did, and about bloody time too! He’s a grown man and he needs to sort out his own messes!’

‘Would you happen to have contact det—?’

‘If he hasn’t given her his contact details, it’s because he doesn’t want her to have them!’

‘But you’re confident he’s in America, are you? You’ve heard from him since the twenty-fifth of M—?’

‘It’s none of your business whether I’ve heard from him or not! It’s outrageous, sending people to pester me like this, *outrageous*!’

‘Decima’s simply concerned about Rupert, and she’d like to be reassured he’s—’

‘The police are satisfied as to his whereabouts, so I’ll thank Miss Longcaster to stop pestering me! *Passing my phone number out!*’

‘You haven’t got any concerns about Rupert’s safety, personally?’

‘Why should I have? Why should I have?’

‘I hear he was being threatened, before he went away,’ said Strike.

‘If he got involved with drugs, I’ve got no sympathy for him! Nothing to do with me! I told him, “I’m not giving you money, so don’t. *Don’t ask!*”’

‘Rupert wanted you to help him out, did he?’

‘I’m not paying off drug debts! I haven’t got money to pour down the drain!’

‘You’re aware that he was being threat—?’

‘I don’t doubt he was being threatened! He ought to choose his friends more carefully, oughtn’t he?’

‘As far as you’re aware—?’

‘That’s all I’ve got to say! *Goodbye.*’

The line went dead.

9

If you would have me better for your love,
Revert no more to these sad themes.

Robert Browning
Paracelsus

At eight o'clock that evening, Robin's doorbell sounded.

'Hi,' said Murphy's voice over the intercom. 'I've got chips.'

'Oh, wonderful, I'm starving,' said Robin, and she buzzed him inside.

'Fuck's sake,' were Murphy's first words after stepping over the threshold and kissing Robin hello. He was glaring at the ceiling, through which the upstairs neighbour's music was still pounding. 'Want me to go up there and tell him to knock it off?'

'There's no point,' said Robin. 'He turns it down for twenty minutes then it starts creeping up again. He thinks people won't notice as long as he does it gradually.'

'Twat… Sit down. We only need knives and forks, I've brought drinks.'

'Ryan, this is lovely, thank you,' said Robin five minutes later, once both were eating their fish and chips off their laps, a can of zero-alcohol beer and a Diet Coke on the coffee table. 'How're things at work?'

'Same,' said Murphy, clearly disinclined to go into the complexities of the gang shooting case. 'How're you feeling?'

'A lot better,' said Robin, who hoped that if she said it often enough, she'd start believing it.

They ate without talking for a few minutes, until Robin said, 'Listen, d'you know anything about a murder that happened while I was at Chapman Farm, the one they thought was masonic?'

'What, the body in the silver shop?'

‘Exactly.’

‘Yeah, an armed robber got bumped off,’ said Murphy through a mouthful of cod. He swallowed. ‘Alternatively, a male prostitute got murdered by the shop owner, who panicked and chucked the body in the vault because he couldn’t think what else to do with it.’

‘Was that an actual theory?’ said Robin, freezing with a chip halfway to her mouth.

‘Probably a joke. You know what it’s like. The dead guy was naked and fake tanned.’

‘You know someone who was on the case?’

‘Yeah. Why?’

‘Strike met a woman yesterday who’s convinced the man in the vault was really her boyfriend.’

‘She the type to date armed robbers?’

‘I wouldn’t think so. She’s quite posh, I think. Her boyfriend was a waiter – a posh waiter. We’re trying to find out for her whether it was ever confirmed beyond doubt that the man in the vault really was that armed robber.’

‘As far as I know, they’re happy with the ID,’ said Murphy.

‘A hundred per cent happy?’

‘Dunno,’ said Murphy. ‘Why? Strike fancies showing up the Met again, does he?’

‘What?’

Murphy reached for his no-alcohol beer and took a swig.

‘People have lost their careers after Strike’s come meddling, you know.’

‘Who?’ said Robin sharply. ‘Roy Carver, you mean? Strike tried to give him the solution and he wouldn’t listen. And if you’re going to blame the agency for solving things the police didn’t, you should be blaming me, too.’

Murphy ate a few more chips before saying,

‘The coppers who keep feeding Strike information aren’t winning many friends at work, I can tell you that. Eric Wardle ought to think about that, next time he accepts a free curry.’

‘We’ve given Wardle plenty of stuff in return,’ said Robin. ‘It’s been a two-way street, you know.’

She refrained from pointing out that Strike had handed Murphy the kudos of arresting a killer just a couple of months previously, and that the

agency had given Murphy material assistance in another case. She couldn't help suspecting that the continuing coverage of the successful investigation of the UHC, versus Murphy's so far unsuccessful attempts to catch the shooter of the two young boys, was exacerbating her boyfriend's resentment.

They ate for a few more minutes, the only sound the pounding of the bass from upstairs.

'Sorry,' said Murphy abruptly. 'Just not enjoying all the slagging off we're getting in the press.'

He drained his can of beer and said,

'How's that Cochran woman settling in?'

'Well,' said Robin. *Too well.*

'She had quite the rep at work, I hear.'

Robin really wasn't in any mood to hear what a wonderful detective Kim had been, so she changed the subject to US president-elect Donald Trump's latest public pronouncements on the subject of whether or not he'd pursue the imprisonment of his defeated opponent, Hillary Clinton. There was one thing to be said for Trump's shock election triumph, thought Robin: it always gave you something to talk about, if you wanted to avoid other, trickier, subjects.

After they'd finished eating, Murphy took the cutlery through to the kitchen and washed them up, instructing Robin to remain where she was, then returned with coffees. Seeing his tentative expression as he sat down again, Robin felt a prickle of dread.

'So… how're you feeling about…?'

'I told you, a lot better. I'll definitely be good to go back to work on Wednesday.'

'I didn't mean physically.'

Robin, who'd known exactly what Murphy had meant, said, 'Well, I'm glad to be out of hospital, obviously… Mum just called me, by the way. They had to put Rowntree down. His liver packed up.'

'Shit,' said Murphy. 'I'm sorry.'

Robin, who'd mentioned Rowntree's death purely to change the subject, found herself temporarily unable to speak. Her throat had contracted and she was afraid she was going to cry, not least because she could tell Murphy wasn't going to be deflected from what he really wanted to talk about.

‘Can’t we discuss it?’ he said quietly.

‘Discuss what?’ Robin said with difficulty.

‘What the doctor said.’

‘I told you, I’ve restarted the pill.’

‘No, not that. About freezing your eggs.’

‘I haven’t thought about it,’ said Robin.

‘Don’t you think it might be a good idea? To be on the safe side?’

‘What safe side?’ said Robin, her voice suddenly ragged. ‘I’ve looked up what it involves. You have to be pumped full of hormones and go under a general anaesthetic, and sometimes you have to do it multiple times, if they don’t get enough eggs, or they aren’t viable.’

‘Why wouldn’t they be viable? You’re only thirty-two.’

Shocked by her own anger, Robin was avoiding eye contact again. *Don’t cry.*

‘I feel like you’re blaming me,’ said Murphy.

‘I’m not blaming you, I just – you’re talking about egg freezing as though it’s nipping down to the shops. It isn’t. It’s invasive and time intensive, I might need time off work—’

‘Can you not forget about work for two minutes?’

‘That’s rich coming from you! You’ve been working round the clock lately!’

‘I’m sorry I’ve left you alone today – d’you think I wanted to? You were the one who didn’t want your parents to know!’

‘This isn’t about being left alone, I’m *fine* on my own, I’m just pointing out it’s apparently OK for *you* to put work first, but not me!’

‘That’s different, I’ve *got* to do what I do—’

‘Someone put a gun to your head and made you join the police, did they?’

‘Come on, you know what I mean!’

‘Yes, that my work’s so trivial it doesn’t matter if I don’t turn—’

‘I never said it was trivial!’

‘You want me to “forget about work”. Well, I don’t want to forget about it. I happen to love my work, and I’m also damn good at it,’ Robin added, in a shaking voice.

‘Bloody hell, I know you are! I’m just asking you to put yourself first for a bit!’

‘No, you’re asking me to put my *eggs* first. My eggs and I are *not* the same thing.’

A silence followed.

‘I’m trying to tell you,’ said Murphy, at last, ‘that if you want to do the egg thing, I’d support you through it, I’d be with you—’

‘What d’you mean “with me”? Will *you* have to be prodded and poked and fiddled about with, Ryan? Will *you* have to have things inserted inside you, and swallow drugs, and suffer any pain or discomfort *at all*?’

‘No,’ said Murphy, looking unnerved.

‘We’ve never talked about children,’ said Robin. ‘You’ve never even asked if I want them.’

‘I assumed – you like kids. Your niece, your god-kids—’

‘I *do* like them, I love them, of *course* I do. That’s not the – look,’ said Robin, still fighting tears she was determined not to shed, ‘this isn’t the way I ever wanted to have this conversation, but if you’re asking, I don’t know whether I want kids of my own, OK? But even if I don’t, it wasn’t easy – having that surgeon – tell me – out of the blue – that that *fucking* rapist did this to me and – *no!*’

Murphy, who’d risen to hug her, recoiled.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Robin. ‘I’m still sore. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t apologise.’

Murphy dropped to his knees beside the sofa and reached for her hand instead.

‘What can I do?’ he said humbly.

‘Stop bitching about my work, and Strike, and the agency,’ said Robin angrily, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. ‘I’ve had enough of that from Matthew and my bloody mother. Nobody’s trying to show anyone up, we’re just trying to find out whether we can help that woman. She’s just given birth to her boyfriend’s baby and doesn’t know where he’s gone. It must be awful.’

‘I’ll stop bitching,’ said Murphy quietly. ‘I was being a dick. What can I do to make you feel better? Name it. Ice cream? Weekend in Paris?’

A reluctant laugh escaped Robin.

‘Dog? D’you want a puppy?’

‘Ryan, you sound like you’re trying to lure me into a van.’

He laughed, and Robin did too, even though it hurt.

‘Come on, I’m serious,’ he said. ‘Anything. Name it.’

‘Anything?’

‘That’s what I said.’

‘OK,’ said Robin, taking a deep breath, ‘find out how certain the police are that it was the armed robber in that vault.’

Murphy sat back on his heels, his expression so strangely blank that Robin said, ‘Sorry, forget it. I don’t want you to do anything—’

‘It’s not that,’ said Murphy.

He rubbed a hand across his face.

‘The woman I know, who’s on the case… I had a drunken grope with her, about six years ago.’

‘Oh,’ said Robin.

‘No sex. Lizzie had just left. I was shitfaced. It happened down the pub.’

‘Right,’ said Robin.

Murphy sighed.

‘I could ask her, if it’s really that important to you. She knows I’ve got a girlfriend now.’

‘She does?’

‘Yeah,’ said Murphy, ‘because every time I run across her she makes it clear she wouldn’t mind a replay, so I mention you a fair bit… but if it’s that important to you, I could try and get her talking.’

Robin hesitated. She was aware of a need to word what she said next extremely carefully, but also dimly aware that what she currently felt wasn’t what many women would feel, faced with the prospect of their highly eligible boyfriend seeking out a woman with whom he’d previously had an amorous encounter, drunk or not.

‘Well, I trust you,’ she said slowly, ‘but I don’t love the idea of some woman trying to lure you away…’

She’d said the right thing; Murphy looked happier at that. His fingers tightened on hers.

‘I’ll see what I can do.’

‘Thank you,’ said Robin, returning the pressure.

‘D’you only love me for my intel?’

‘No,’ said Robin. ‘I also like the chips… and quite a lot of other stuff.’

He pulled her into a hug, and this time, Robin didn’t fend him off. The realisation that she wanted the information, even if it meant Murphy having

to buy drinks for a woman who clearly fancied him, was slightly disconcerting, but given how many other things she had to worry about at the moment, there was no need to start analysing that, as well.

10

… a Brotherly affection and kindness should govern us in all our intercourse and relations with our brethren…

Albert Pike
Morals and Dogma of the
Ancient and Accepted Scottish
Rite of Freemasonry

Strike called a team meeting on Wednesday morning, because the ex-wife of the cricketer Pat preferred to call ‘Mr A’ had boarded a plane to the Canary Islands. Plug was at his mother’s house in Camberwell, over which Midge was keeping watch. Strike was keen to brainstorm, with particular emphasis on getting rid of Mr A as soon as possible.

He arrived at the glass door of the office at nine o’clock to find it unlocked and office manager Pat Chauncey already at her desk. Sixty-eight years old, simian of face and with unconvincingly boot black hair, Pat had, as was her invariable practice, an e-cigarette clamped firmly between her teeth.

‘Happy birthday,’ she croaked, in the baritone that often led to her being misidentified as Strike on the phone.

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Yeah. Thanks.’

He hadn’t forgotten his birthday, he’d just hoped the rest of the agency would. He didn’t want an early morning tea party, with candles and present opening, and he didn’t particularly want to remind Robin that he was forty-two. However, a large envelope and a sizeable cube-shaped present wrapped in blue were sitting on Pat’s desk, and, glancing towards the kitchen area, he saw an old cake tin decorated with pictures of Princess Diana that definitely didn’t belong to the office.

‘A woman called Decima Mullins called,’ said Pat. ‘She wants to know

when you'll be getting a contract to her.'

'When I've decided whether we're taking her case,' said Strike, heading towards the kettle.

'And Mr A left a message last night. He wants an update.'

'Fuck's sake.'

The glass door opened again. Strike turned and saw Robin.

'Morning,' she said, smiling.

'You look remarkably good, for someone who's just got off their sickbed.'

'Yes, well, that's blusher and concealer for you,' said Robin, with unfeigned cheerfulness. She felt significantly better than she had at the weekend, and much happier for being back in the office. 'Happy birthday, by the way.'

She headed a little awkwardly towards Strike to give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek, which he accepted gladly.

'And I got you this,' said Robin, pulling a weighty wrapped package out of her tote bag, which made the operation site twinge, and handing it to him. 'That one,' she said, indicating the large present on Pat's desk, 'is from all of us. You can open mine now. It isn't very imaginative.'

She didn't say that she'd had to ask Murphy to buy it while she was temporarily housebound, which was why it was fairly impersonal. Strike unwrapped the box and found a bottle of what had once been his favourite whisky. Robin wasn't to know it now reminded him of his dead ex-fiancée, so he said,

'Fantastic, thanks very much.'

'So why are we having a team meeting?'

'Opportunity,' said Strike. 'Mrs A's away. Midge is on Plug, but she's going to dial in – and Two-Times—'

'You're kidding me,' said Robin, freezing in the act of hanging up her jacket. 'Two-Times is back?'

'Morning,' said Kim, entering the office before Strike could answer. 'Happy birthday, Cormoran!'

'Cheers,' said Strike, now heading for the cupboard where they kept the fold-up plastic chairs. 'I haven't agreed to take Two-Times on yet,' he told Robin over his shoulder. 'Until we've made a firm decision on Decima Mullins, I don't know whether we'll have room for him.'

‘I should have something soon, on how certain they are that body was Knowles,’ Kim informed Strike confidently. ‘I’ve tapped a couple of contacts. People are being weirdly cagey about it, though. The lead investigator, Malcolm Truman, has been suspended.’

‘Has he?’ said Robin. ‘Why?’

The glass door opened again.

‘Morning,’ said Glaswegian Barclay. Tall, beaky-nosed and prematurely grey-haired, he, like Strike, was ex-military. ‘Oh yeah,’ he added, spotting the package on Pat’s desk. ‘Happy birthday.’

‘Cheers,’ said Strike again.

‘Told Robin about Two-Times yet?’ asked Barclay.

‘Who’s Two-Times?’ said Kim.

‘Guy who likes being cheated on,’ said Barclay. ‘He pays people tae catch his girlfriends in the act.’

‘Ah, cuckolding fetish,’ said Kim with authority.

‘Who’s the lucky woman this time?’ Robin asked Strike.

‘His wife.’

‘Oh my God – someone *married* him?’

‘We’ve all made mistakes,’ said Kim. ‘Admittedly, I never *married* one of mine.’

She laughed. Robin, the sole divorcee among the detectives present, felt the rise of an increasingly familiar antagonism, but told herself that Kim meant no offence.

When Shah, who was shorter than both his male colleagues, and so good-looking he was generally selected to sweet-talk female witnesses or suspects, had arrived, Pat dialled in Midge Greenstreet on FaceTime.

‘Happy birthday, Cormoran,’ said Midge, who had short, slicked-back dark hair, clear grey eyes, and was currently sitting in her car. ‘What are you now, forty-five?’

‘Two,’ said Strike, ‘forty-two. Right, shall we—?’

‘Have you opened our present yet?’ asked Midge.

‘You’re not easy to buy for,’ said Pat, now heaving the large package off her desk and holding it out to Strike. ‘We went for something practical.’

Strike opened the package and was relieved to find nothing that would need to be tried on in front of them all, nothing pointless he’d have to keep in his flat out of politeness, but a bulk order of his favourite vape juice.

‘Enough nicotine to kill a bull,’ said Strike. ‘That’s great. Genuinely. Thanks very much…

‘Right, better start with Plug, in case Midge needs to get going. What’s he up to?’ Strike asked the onscreen Midge.

‘He’s been shouting at his poor old mum again, the bastard. I could hear him from the street, but he hasn’t been—’

‘I’ve told Cormoran this already,’ said Kim, talking over Midge. ‘On Sunday—’

‘All right if I finish what I was saying?’ said the onscreen Midge crossly.

‘Sorry,’ said Kim, eyebrows raised. ‘Go on.’

‘—hasn’t been out,’ Midge finished, glowering.

‘Right,’ said Kim, with a little laugh. ‘Well, on Sunday he drove to Ipswich, where he met up with another couple of blokes in a pub. One of them was noting things down in a kind of ledger. I got photos of numberplates and I’m going to ask a Met mate to run them through the files.’

‘Good work, that could help,’ said Strike, and Robin, remembering Murphy’s ‘she had quite the rep at work’, tried without success not to feel resentful, ‘but we haven’t got the manpower to start tailing a bunch of Plug’s mates unless we can get rid of Arse—’ he caught Pat’s glare ‘—Mr A. Speaking of whom—’

‘She’s nae shaggin’ fuckin’ Culpepper,’ said Barclay. ‘If he wants to stop shit appearin’ aboot him in the papers he could try not bein’ an arsehole.’

‘Yeah, but the stuff in the papers is about his past arseholery,’ said Shah, ‘and if it’s not coming from his ex, who’s leaking it?’

A fifteen-minute discussion ensued about the people Mr A and his ex-wife routinely met. Robin’s mobile buzzed while this conversation was still going on. Murphy had texted her.

I’ve got what you wanted, but it’s a lot more sensitive than I realised.

Robin texted back:

Ryan, thank you so, so much. Would it be ok for Strike to

hear what you’ve got, as well as me?

Having ticked Mr A off the list of things to discuss, Strike moved on to Decima Mullins. While he gave the others an overview of the current position, omitting mention of Decima’s baby, Kim reiterated her hope that one of her police contacts might be prepared to share the DNA findings on the body in the silver shop vault. Robin waited on tenterhooks for Murphy’s response, which was slow coming; the detectives had already discussed various expense-related matters, the subcontractors’ upcoming Christmas and New Year leave requirements, and agreed a couple of job swaps, before at last it appeared.

Yeah ok but we’ll do it face to face and NOBODY ELSE can know I’ve given you anything. It’s properly sensitive.

Robin looked up. Pat was removing a homemade iced cake from the tin decorated with pictures of Princess Diana. E-cigarette clamped firmly between her teeth, she stuck two candles in it, a large four and a two.

‘Wasn’t gonna put the lot on,’ she told Strike, carrying it over to the desk. ‘Fire hazard.’

Strike did his best to look appreciative while ‘Happy Birthday’ was being sung. Noticing the forced nature of Strike’s smile, Robin started to laugh before the song was finished, noting with gratitude that laughter no longer caused her much pain. Strike, unwillingly amused by Robin’s amusement, found himself genuinely grinning by the time Pat instructed him to blow out his candles.

‘Did you make a wish?’ asked Kim archly, as Pat began cutting everyone slices.

Strike, who hadn’t, didn’t answer.

‘Strike, could I have a quick word after this, about Decima Mullins?’ asked Robin.

‘Yeah, definitely,’ said Strike, accepting a bit of chocolate sponge from Pat. ‘I’ve got a couple of things to tell you, as well.’

Robin took secret satisfaction at the sight of a flicker of annoyance on Kim’s face.

11

If two lives join, there is oft a scar,
They are one and one, with a shadowy third…

Robert Browning
By the Fire-Side

Once the subcontractors had finished their cake and departed for their various jobs, Strike and Robin moved into the inner office, where the window was misted with fine rain. As Robin closed the door on Pat, Strike said,

‘Midge hasn’t exactly been a ray of sunshine lately.’

‘Kim talked over her,’ Robin pointed out.

‘I don’t just mean that. She’s been in a foul mood all this week.’

‘She and Tasha aren’t doing so well,’ said Robin, who’d heard the full story of Midge’s relationship troubles the last time she and Midge handed over surveillance on Mrs A. ‘Tasha’s away filming and Midge thinks she might be up to something with her leading man.’

Strike made an indeterminate noise. His subcontractors’ difficult love lives were of minimal interest to him; his own was giving him quite enough grief.

‘Ryan’s managed to get some information for us, on the body in the vault,’ Robin continued. ‘He knows someone who was on the case.’

‘Ah,’ said Strike. ‘Great.’

He didn’t like having to be obliged to Murphy for it, but information was still information.

‘I know it’s your birthday, so you’ve probably got plans,’ Robin went on, ‘but if you were free to come over to my place tonight, you could hear what he’s got directly from him. He doesn’t want to text it. Apparently it’s

very sensitive.’

‘Yeah, I could do that,’ said Strike, whose plans for the evening had comprised lying on his bed drinking beer while watching Arsenal play Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League, which wasn’t what he’d told Lucy, who thought he was being taken out to dinner by his friends Nick and Ilsa.

Robin picked up a photo lying on the desk.

‘Is this what you wanted to show me?’

‘No, but you should see it anyway,’ said Strike. ‘That’s Rupert Fleetwood.’

While Robin was examining Rupert Fleetwood’s round face and broad shoulders, and his waiter’s uniform of burgundy bow tie and waistcoat, Strike said,

‘I called Shanker last night, to see if he’s heard of a big-time coke dealer who might go by the name of “Dredge”.’

Shanker, as Robin knew, was the name of a career criminal Strike had known since the age of seventeen. She had a fondness for him Strike felt was at least partially ill-advised.

‘And?’ asked Robin.

‘He knew who I was talking about. Fleetwood’s idiot housemate definitely tangled with the wrong bloke. I’ve asked Shanker to have a sniff around for me, find out whether this Dredge might’ve bumped off any ex-public schoolboys lately. Usual rates,’ Strike added.

Friends though they were, Shanker wasn’t a man who performed services for free.

‘Well, that’s good,’ said Robin. ‘I read your email about Rupert’s aunt, by the way. She doesn’t sound exactly cosy.’

‘Old-school dragon,’ said Strike. ‘Zero affection or concern. Mind you, we don’t know the backstory. Maybe he robbed her blind before leaving Switzerland for England.’

‘But she said he’s in New York?’

‘Yeah, but refused to tell me whether she’s heard from him since the twenty-fifth of May. Must admit, I can’t help wondering how hard the police would look for a man whose next of kin insist he’s not missing. Decima isn’t married to him and they weren’t living together, so she hasn’t got much standing in terms of triggering a search.’

‘I had a look through all the news coverage of the murder, while I was off,’ said Robin. ‘People talking about the masonic legend of Hiram Abiff. Had you ever heard of him?’

‘Oh yeah,’ said Strike. ‘Most skilful artificer of Solomon’s temple, murdered for refusing to divulge the Master Mason’s secrets. *I will keep a worthy brother Master Mason’s secrets inviolable, when communicated to and received by me as such, murder and treason excepted,’* he intoned.

Robin stared at him.

‘What?’ said Strike.

‘You’re never a Freemason?’

‘Course I’m bloody not,’ said Strike, with a snort.

‘Well, I might not know! It’s a secret society, isn’t it?’

‘“A society with secrets”, that’s the line. No, a mate of mine in the military was one. Graham Hardacre. I used to call him Hiram occasionally, for piss-taking purposes. Mind you, he only joined up to get a hot meal.’

‘What?’

‘His wife doesn’t cook. They live off sandwiches. Masonic dinners were a way he could legitimately get hold of some steak.’

‘Couldn’t *he* learn to cook?’

‘If that’s ever occurred to him, he’ll have dismissed it as the product of a diseased mind. He’s a funny bloke, Hardy, in both the odd and ha-ha senses. Good investigator, though.’

As he said it, Strike remembered that Hardacre had sent him an email several months previously which he, busy with both work and personal matters, had neglected to answer. Their paths had diverged dramatically since Strike had left the army for a London-based life, while Hardacre remained in the Special Investigation Branch of the Royal Military Police. Hardacre had done Strike a couple of favours in the early days of the agency, but it now occurred to Strike that they hadn’t met face to face for five years.

‘Well, it’ll be interesting to hear from Murphy how much truth there was in the Abiff rumours,’ said Strike.

‘Why do men do it?’ asked Robin.

‘What, murder people?’

‘No, why are they so keen on closed societies with rituals and things? Women don’t go in for that kind of thing as much.’

‘Dunno,’ said Strike, but after a few seconds’ thought he added, ‘Think we might like the hierarchical thing more than you do. And we tend to need a reason to meet. Go out and do something or watch something, together. We don’t hang around in each other’s houses a lot, unless there are women involved.’

‘So Freemasonry’s like five-a-side football?’

‘Except that there’s not as much emphasis on funny handshakes in five-a-side football and you don’t often hear players asking each other how old their grandmothers are.’

‘What?’ said Robin, utterly confused.

‘It’s how masons ask each other what lodge they belong to. The lodges are all numbered. “How old’s your grandmother?” “Two thousand and fifty-three.”’

‘Did Hardacre tell you all this?’

‘Some of it. You can look most of it up. From what I gleaned from Hardacre, you’re supposed to help out the needy – with an emphasis on fellow masons – and generally be a model citizen. And you’ve got your duty of admonishment.’

‘What’s that?’

‘No public exposure. Just a quiet brotherly word in the ear.’

‘Would that extend to something criminal?’ asked Robin curiously.

‘“Murder and treason excepted”,’ quoted Strike. ‘There are bits of it that aren’t for public consumption. Hardacre wouldn’t tell me the big stuff.’

Robin checked her watch, then said reluctantly, because she was interested in the conversation,

‘I’d better go, I’m taking over from Midge for a couple of hours. Does seven tonight suit you? I’ll order some pizza or something.’

‘Yeah, great,’ said Strike. ‘See you then.’

Robin headed off, leaving Strike to wonder what an evening spent in her and Murphy’s company was going to be like, because it would be the first time he’d ever been with them, alone, as a couple. Possibly, he thought, he’d be able to find a way to make Murphy look like a prick.

On this undoubtedly puerile but satisfying thought, he turned back to his computer to type out an update for Mr A.

12

We are all of us, though not all equally, mistaken.

Albert Pike
The Liturgy of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry

Only after Robin had left the Denmark Street office did a certain trepidation about the forthcoming evening creep over her.

She was well aware that her detective partner and her boyfriend, who'd been reasonably friendly before she and Murphy began their relationship, were now antagonistic to each other. Murphy had more than once revealed his suspicion of Robin and Strike's friendship, and she'd finally succeeded in shutting that down by telling her boyfriend that Strike was in a relationship with a lawyer, even though it was untrue; Strike's brief affair with Bijou Watkins had ended before she'd told Murphy about it. Robin hadn't corrected the story since, as it continued to serve her purpose. She completely understood why Murphy was uptight about her closeness to Strike, because his ex-wife had left him for a male friend, but she didn't need more unnecessary displays of jealousy, having had quite enough of those from her ex-husband.

The reasons for Strike's antipathy towards Murphy were more mysterious to Robin, but she had a suspicion it was because he was afraid he was going to lose his business partner to marriage and children. If that was indeed his concern, Robin found it both insulting and infuriating, because she'd surely proven her commitment to the job and the agency ten times over by now. Of course, there was another possible explanation for Strike's attitude, but she wasn't going to think about that – except that she did think about it, more often than she wanted to admit. *I told Amelia*

exactly what Charlotte wrote… she knew I was in love with you…

Stop it, Robin told herself firmly, while tidying her sitting room at six o'clock that evening. She resented feeling apprehensive, and hated her ill-disciplined brain for returning, yet again, to the conversation in which Strike had lobbed his bombshell, then walked nonchalantly away. *He's not in love with you, he was just being an annoying sod.* She wiped the coffee table a little more energetically than was required, as though to defy the slight throbbing of her operation site, and reminded herself that she was happy with Murphy.

Her jangled nerves weren't helped when she turned on the news for distraction and saw a picture of Jonathan Wace, cult leader, staring back at her. She turned the TV off again.

She'd hoped Murphy would be there at half past six, and *in situ* when Strike arrived, but he was twenty-five minutes late. Just as she was thinking that Murphy would have only himself to blame if Strike got there ahead of him, her boyfriend knocked on her front door carrying a water bottle, his gym bag over his shoulder, looking flushed.

'Bloke downstairs let me in. Sorry I'm late. Did an hour at the gym, but when I came out some tosser had blocked me in in the car park. Had to wait for him to come out.'

'It's fine,' said Robin, greeting him with a kiss and a hug, glad to know he'd been doing some exercise; hopefully it had brought down his stress levels, which, given the ongoing drubbing his team was getting in the press for failing to catch the shooter of the two young boys, remained high. 'I'm so grateful for this, Ryan, I really am.'

'Yeah, well, you didn't want the weekend in Paris… He not here yet?'

'No, but he will be any minute,' said Robin. 'I've ordered pizzas.'

She was trying to show Murphy she was making no special effort for her detective partner, and had dressed in jeans and an old sweatshirt for that reason.

'You've warned Strike, haven't you, that this is sen—?'

The doorbell rang again. Robin buzzed Strike in, and a few minutes later he and Murphy were shaking hands and exchanging what almost qualified as smiles. Strike handed Robin a bottle of red wine, for which she thanked him, heading into the kitchen to get glasses. The doorbell then rang for a third time.

‘I’ll get it,’ Murphy called to Robin, and while he was buzzing in the pizza delivery man, Strike took off his coat and hung it up, glancing around Robin’s sitting room, noting Murphy’s gym bag lying nonchalantly outside the bedroom door.

The flat was mostly unchanged since the last time Strike had been here, when he’d been sleeping over, though unfortunately only on the sofa bed. He wondered whether Murphy knew that. He noticed that the plant he’d given Robin as a housewarming gift was flourishing, but to his displeasure, one of the photographs on the mantelpiece was now of Robin and Murphy, arms around each other in front of what looked ominously like Robin’s family home in Yorkshire.

When Murphy had tipped the delivery man and passed the pizzas to Robin in the kitchen, he returned to Strike, who was still standing in the middle of the room, and said quietly,

‘What I’ve got is highly confidential. If anyone finds out I’ve passed it on, I’ll be up to my neck in shit. My contact shouldn’t have said as much as she did, so it’ll be her neck on the line, too, if anything gets blabbed.’

‘I don’t blab,’ Strike assured him.

‘Robin wanted this. That’s why I’ve done it.’

As it was hardly likely Strike thought Murphy had gone digging for information for love of him, Strike wasn’t entirely sure why he was being told this.

‘Anyway,’ said Murphy, and he gestured curtly towards the three-piece suite.

Strike sat down in an armchair and Murphy on the sofa. Robin, who could hear the uncomfortable silence, wished she’d thought to put on music, and sped up in her assembling of plates, napkins and glasses.

‘How’re things going with the lawyer?’ Murphy asked Strike.

‘What lawyer?’ said Strike.

Out of sight, Robin experienced a lift-drop in her stomach.

‘Thought you were going out with a lawyer? Bijou or something.’

‘Oh,’ said Strike. ‘Yeah. It’s going well.’

Robin hurried back into the room, slightly flushed, holding pizza, plates and napkins, and avoiding looking at Strike.

‘Shall we get going, then?’ she said, before sitting down on the sofa beside Murphy. The latter reached for his notebook.

‘Just been telling Strike: this *can’t* go any further.’

‘It won’t, Ryan, I promise,’ said Robin, pouring Strike wine.

‘Right. Well.’ Murphy picked up his notebook, as Strike helped himself to pizza. ‘You’ll know the basics. Guy calling himself William Wright got himself a job at this shop in Holborn, Ramsay Silver. Worked there two weeks. On the third Monday, the shop owner opened up the vault, found Wright’s mutilated body, and none of the valuable silver they’d put in there on Friday.

‘Cops soon found out there was no such person as William Wright. No records for him under the name and birth date given, and the references he’d given at interview were fake. The antiques shop he claimed to have worked for in Doncaster had never heard of him. Both referees’ numbers turned out to be burner phones. A member of the public came forward to say Wright had lived downstairs from him, in Newham. Wright had only been there a month, paid cash for the deposit, and the people who shared the house only knew him as William Wright, from Doncaster.’

Murphy took a sip from his water bottle, which led Strike, who was making notes, to a new realisation that water bottles carried around after exercise were an obnoxious affectation. Murphy turned a page in his notebook and continued,

‘The last verified sighting of Wright alive was on Friday the seventeenth of June. He’s on the shop’s interior security camera nearly all day Friday—’

‘“Nearly?”’ said Strike.

‘He was sent out for one errand in the late afternoon, but he came back and remained in the shop until six. At ten past six he was caught on camera entering Covent Garden Tube station.

‘There’s CCTV footage of four men entering Wild Court in the early hours of Saturday morning, which is the street Ramsay Silver’s on, close to the time they know the shop was opened up again. The presumption is that it was Wright and three associates.

‘The interior security camera footage shows somebody entering the shop around one a.m., in the dark. They crossed the floor and turned off the camera. Wright’s believed to have been killed shortly afterwards, by one or more of the men accompanying him. Forensics say he’d been dead around forty-eight hours when he was found.’

‘Wright was definitely killed in the vault, was he?’ asked Strike. ‘Not

somewhere else, and shoved in the vault later?'

'No, it definitely happened in the vault,' said Murphy. 'The splash patterns from the blood were un-fakeable, according to forensics. There was also a partial footprint that had clearly been made while the blood was still liquid.'

'Have you got details on the footprint?' asked Strike.

'Thought you were trying to identify the body, not catch the killers?'

'ID-ing the killers would help identify the body,' said Strike, matching stony glare with stony glare.

'As you'll realise in a minute, you'd be very ill-advised to try tracking down these particular killers,' said Murphy. He returned to his notes.

'The security camera was switched back on around three a.m., the alarm was reset—'

'Had they disabled it when they entered the shop?' asked Strike.

'I – don't know,' admitted Murphy, looking down at his notes. 'I assume so. Anyway, the shop wasn't opened again till Monday morning.'

He took another sip of water, then said,

'External CCTV footage shows only individuals or pairs in the vicinity of Wild Court in the aftermath of the robbery, so the three thieves clearly split up.'

'Were they carrying the stolen silver?' said Robin.

'My contact didn't have a lot to say about that – maybe they shoved it in backpacks. They think one of them got into a getaway car that arrived on Wild Street around the right time, but the nearest camera was out of commission. According to my source, a car with fake plates and a lone driver had passed an earlier camera shortly after three a.m. When it passed the next couple of cameras, there were two people in it.'

'What make was the car?' asked Strike.

'Contact didn't say,' said Murphy, not bothering to look up this time. 'As I say, Saturday, the shop was closed, so the body lay undisturbed until Monday, when the owner opened up the vault.'

'The body was mutilated, right?' said Strike.

'Yeah, but the people working there recognised it as Wright from hair, height, build et cetera. DNA from the body matched DNA found in the shop, including hair in the U-bend of the sink. The corpse had been dressed in something weird, but my contact wouldn't tell me what. I got the

impression it was done to send a message, maybe to humiliate him.'

Murphy took another swig of water, then said,

'The next bit is what you *can't* talk about.'

'We won't,' Robin assured him.

'It explains why there's been no absolute confirmation Wright was really Jason Knowles, but if you talk—'

'Ryan, we won't.'

'All right,' said Murphy and he continued: 'Jason Knowles was very well connected, underworld-wise. Most of his family are cons, and his uncle's a serious player. Knowles himself wasn't a big fish, though, just a thief.

'The National Crime Agency's had a plainclothes plant in Knowles' uncle's circle for the past six months, because the uncle's dealing guns. The NCA guy heard the same story from two separate sources: Jason was lured into an ambush in the belief he and his killers were doing a job together, and his body had been left unidentifiable. The rumour was, his uncle personally gave the order to kill him, suspecting he was the one leaking info to the police.'

'Jesus,' said Robin quietly.

'Everything about the silver job fitted. Corpse matched Knowles in height and build, and when the cops showed the photograph of Knowles to the people working at the shop, they thought it was him. They said they couldn't be a hundred per cent, because Wright had a beard, which Knowles didn't in his pictures, nor did Knowles wear glasses, as Wright did, nor was Knowles usually fake tanned. Wright's hair was darker than Knowles', as well, but the corpse's hair was found to be dyed. Knowles had also been boasting that his next job would be all over the papers, and the silver that was stolen was historically important.'

'Fingerprints?' said Strike.

'That was a problem.'

'Knowles's must've been on record?'

'They were, but the body's hands were missing, which obviously implies the killer knew the fingerprints would identify the body.'

'Weren't Wright's prints all over the shop?'

'The assistants wear gloves to handle all the silver and open the glass cabinets, and unfortunately, the cleaner did a very thorough job on the shop,

the staff area and the toilet on Monday morning, right before the body was found.'

'Who's the cleaner?' asked Strike.

Murphy flipped over a page.

'Bloke called Todd.'

'Male cleaner?' said Strike.

'Men *can* clean, I've heard,' said Robin.

'Thought that was an urban myth,' said Strike.

Acting as though he hadn't heard this exchange, Murphy continued,

'The NCA plant was obviously going to be in danger if the Met started pursuing DNA identification of Knowles, so the NCA asked the Met to fudge it – keep appealing for information until they'd wrapped up the gun trafficking case and Knowles' relatives could be safely tested.

'Unfortunately, the guy in charge of the vault case, Malcolm Truman, then went rogue, and announced the Met were certain the body was Knowles.'

'The fuck did he do that for?' asked Strike, genuinely perplexed.

'Journalists were running with the Freemasonry angle, and Truman didn't want to look like a bloke who didn't have any leads. My source says he's an arrogant tit who didn't want to look clueless in the press. He was suspended after he talked. The team working the case tried to undo the damage, but the papers lost interest once they heard Wright had been a crim and the Freemasonry angle was bullshit. Bottom line,' said Murphy, 'William Wright was Jason Knowles, but they can't prove it yet.'

Murphy now set down his water and reached for a slice of pizza.

'I take it the people who worked at the shop are in the clear?' asked Strike.

'Yeah, they all had rock-solid alibis,' said Murphy through a mouthful of pizza. 'Todd the cleaner was playing cards into the small hours with a regular poker group who confirmed he was with them. The manager, name of Pamela, spent the weekend in Grantham, attending a family wedding, set off at eight on Friday evening. The owner, Ramsay, is a part-time carer for his wife; they had friends staying over the weekend who confirmed he only left the house for a pub lunch with them on Saturday.'

The three ate in silence for a minute. Robin wanted to ask Strike what he thought, but didn't want to do so in front of Murphy. Strike, meanwhile,

was musing on the fact that the CID man clearly didn't want the agency to take this case, and even though he'd been averse to taking it himself until this moment, Strike suddenly wondered whether he wasn't being offered a spectacular opportunity to drive a wedge between Robin and her boyfriend.

'You mentioned other possible contenders for Wright,' Robin said to Murphy.

'Yeah, there were a couple,' said Murphy. He picked up his notebook again and turned a page. 'Nearly all of them were ruled out. There were two blokes who couldn't be excluded, because they couldn't get DNA.

'One was called Tyler Powell. His grandmother called the helpline. Apparently he got himself into some kind of trouble at home in the Midlands and told Gran he'd got himself a job down south. He was the right height and in the right age range, but there's no other reason to suppose it was him.'

'Couldn't they swab the grandmother to check the DNA?' asked Strike.

'Powell's adopted.'

'Who was the other possibility?' asked Robin.

'Man called Niall Semple. He's been in the press, because he was an ex-paratrooper with mental health problems who vanished from his house in Scotland and cut all contact. Again, no blood relatives. They'd just cremated his mother when he disappeared. His wife contacted the police. He was the right height and blood group, but otherwise nothing to say it was him.'

'And nobody thought Wright might be Rupert Fleetwood?' asked Robin.

'My source only mentioned Powell and Semple,' said Murphy.

'And that male prostitute thing…' said Robin.

'What's this?' said Strike, looking up from his notebook.

'Just a bad joke that snowballed,' said Murphy. 'The body was naked, that's where it started.'

'This might be an odd question,' said Robin, 'but was anything carved onto the body's back?'

'How the fuck d'you know about that?' said Murphy sharply.

'I saw it online,' said Robin, nettled by his tone, especially in front of Strike. 'Someone commenting on the story said he had the letter "G" carved onto him.'

'My contact told me it was a hallmark.' Murphy closed his notebook.

‘And that’s all I’ve got.’

‘Well, thanks, Ryan,’ said Robin. ‘This has—’

‘So now what?’ said Murphy. He was looking at Strike rather than Robin.

‘We wanted to find out whether the Met had a definite ID,’ said Strike, ‘and now we know. They don’t.’

‘You can’t go fucking around with the Knowles family,’ said Murphy.

‘Not intending to. We haven’t got forensic labs, we can’t analyse DNA.’

‘So you won’t be taking the case?’ said Murphy.

‘Robin and I will have to discuss that,’ said Strike.

‘Does anyone want more—?’ Robin began.

‘It’s Knowles,’ said Murphy, glaring at Strike. ‘You’d just be stringing this woman along, pretending there’s a chance it’s her toyboy.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ said Strike, deliberately calm. Let Robin watch Murphy getting aggressive and trying to dictate what the agency investigated. ‘There are a lot of similarities between Rupert Fleetwood and the body, he had good reasons for wanting to lie low for a while, and he had a valuable bit of silver to sell.’

Robin, who knew perfectly well Strike didn’t believe Rupert Fleetwood had been William Wright, assumed he was saying this because he’d been as aggravated by Murphy’s dictatorial tone as she was.

‘Anyway,’ said Strike, setting down his plate and getting to his feet, ‘I’d better get going.’

‘Already?’ said Robin, disconcerted. ‘There’s more pizza. And pudding.’

‘I’m meeting Bijou,’ said Strike, looking Robin straight in the eye. Though she’d have given anything not to, Robin felt herself turn red. ‘Thanks, though,’ Strike added, looking down at the clearly fuming Murphy. ‘This has been extremely helpful.’

13

And then the sudden sleights, long secresies,
The plots inscrutable, deep telegraphs,
Long-planned chance-meetings, hazards of a look,
‘Does she know? does she not know?’

Robert Browning
In a Balcony

The work rota was so arranged that Strike and Robin didn’t meet again until Friday, which was cold and cloudless. Central London was now fully decked in its Christmas finery, and eleven o’clock found Robin in Mount Street in Belgravia, standing beneath one of the extravagant banners of silver lights that stretched across the road, pretending to be talking on her phone while the ex-wife of their professional cricketer client shopped in Balenciaga.

Though she was gloved and coated, the chill nipped at every exposed bit of Robin’s skin. She felt low and tired, because she was still not sleeping well. Strike’s visit had left an uncomfortable undercurrent in its wake. Murphy had returned to the subject of the body in the vault the following morning, outlining the dangers of provoking a man who’d already ordered his own nephew killed and reminding Robin, yet again, that more people than Strike would be put in danger if Lynden Knowles came to believe he was being investigated for Jason’s death. Robin had tried very hard not to sound defensive or angry as she reiterated that neither she nor Strike had any intention of going near Jason’s uncle, and assured him that the secret of the plainclothes man was completely safe with them.

She might have said far more. She might have reminded Murphy that she stood in no need of lectures on the dangers of tangling with career

criminals, because she and Strike had already come up against a criminal family every bit as sociopathic as Lynden Knowles' appeared to be. She might even have said aloud the thing that both of them knew, which was that everything Murphy was saying was coloured by his dislike of her partner. She'd refrained, though. She didn't want an argument.

Robin would ordinarily have texted Strike to ask what he thought about taking Decima's case, but lurking embarrassment at having been caught out in the lie about Bijou Watkins prevented her doing so. Now she stood staring across the road at a motif carved in stone over the windows of Balenciaga; it was either a tree or a sheaf of corn. Possibly she was being influenced by the masonic symbolism she'd been reading up on during her Tube journey that morning: the sheaf of corn, she now knew, represented bounty and charity to Freemasons.

Hearing her name, Robin started and looked round. Strike was walking towards her. She'd been expecting to hand over to Shah, and then only in an hour's time. Pretending to finish her call, Robin slipped her phone back into her pocket.

'Plug's heading for Ipswich again,' were Strike's first words. 'Christ knows what he's up to there. Anyway, Shah's tailing him, and he told me you were here.'

'You're early,' said Robin. 'I'm still on her for another hour.'

'I know. I wanted to talk over the silver vault case in person. I've just had Decima Mullins on the phone again.'

'Hang on,' said Robin, eyes on the door of Balenciaga, 'Mrs A's on the move.'

The brunette, who was wearing a long black coat of faux-fur and very high-heeled boots, had emerged from the shop carrying a large shopping bag, and now sauntered on up the street. Robin and Strike set off on the opposite pavement, keeping pace with her, though twenty yards behind.

'What did you tell Decima?' asked Robin.

'The truth,' said Strike, 'leaving out the plainclothes bloke, obviously. I said the circumstantial evidence points strongly towards it being Jason Knowles, but that there's no absolute confirmation yet that it's him.'

'And what did she say?' said Robin.

'She begged me to try and prove who Wright was,' said Strike. 'So, what d'you think?'

‘I thought you didn’t want the job?’

‘I’m not going to lie,’ said Strike. ‘I’m getting interested in that body.’

But this, of course, wasn’t the whole truth.

Since realising how little Murphy wanted them to investigate the corpse in the vault, Strike had come to see how many opportunities this case offered with regard to the furtherance of his plans regarding Robin. Given the sensitivity around the undercover NCA agent, Strike had a perfect excuse to insist he and Robin did the bulk of this case together, excluding the subcontractors. The need for confidentiality would justify regular closed meetings between the two of them and, as a bonus, they might need to visit the home towns of the other candidates for William Wright, so as to rule them out. That would mean long car trips, plenty of joint interviews and debriefs and, with luck, overnight stays. He even had an excellent excuse to bring up Charlotte’s suicide note again, when outlining why Sacha Legard and Valentine Longcaster might not be keen on talking to him.

Strike didn’t doubt that some would call him cynical, but that didn’t trouble him in the slightest. After all, he fully intended to give Decima Mullins value for money, and if they managed to prove that Fleetwood hadn’t been the man in the vault, their client would have the resolution she needed.

The brunette on the other side of the road entered a jewellers. Strike and Robin turned automatically to look into a window opposite, watching the reflected shopfront.

‘But,’ said Strike, ‘if investigating is going to cause trouble between you and Murphy, we’ll pass.’

Caught off-guard, Robin looked up at him.

‘I – even if it did, that’s not a good reason not to take it,’ she said, without thinking.

Interesting, thought Strike, but aloud he said,

‘Well, that’d be my view in your position, but some might say that’s why I’m still single. You haven’t asked me how my date with Bijou went,’ he added, looking down at her.

‘Oh God, I’m sorry about that,’ said Robin, blushing. ‘I never – I forgot to tell Ryan you’d stopped seeing her, I – you didn’t have to—’

‘Doesn’t bother me,’ said Strike. ‘She makes a far better imaginary girlfriend than she did a real one. Not,’ he added, ‘that she was ever a

girlfriend.’

‘What would you call her, then?’ said Robin, thoroughly taken aback by the turn the conversation had taken. Strike’s usual form was resolute tight-lipped-ness about his private life.

‘A misguided exercise in distraction and instant gratification that’s cured me of the practice. That was quick,’ Strike added, as Mr A’s ex-wife emerged from the jewellers opposite.

‘Nothing she fancied,’ said Robin, as they turned to walk after her. ‘I think she’s Christmas shopping.’

‘Christ, don’t remind me,’ groaned Strike. ‘I fucking hate it. I’d pay a grand for someone to do it for me.’

‘Where are you spending Christmas?’ Robin asked. For the first time in six years, both partners would be free over the holidays.

‘Lucy’s,’ said Strike. ‘I couldn’t get out of it, not right after Ted dying. I’ve got to go to the Christmas Eve party with all the neighbours, too. I’d rather eat my own fucking feet. What are you up to?’

‘Ryan and I are going to Mum and Dad’s. I’m dreading that too, to be honest,’ said Robin.

‘Really?’ said Strike. ‘Why?’

‘I don’t know,’ sighed Robin. ‘It’s just families, isn’t it? The house is going to be packed…’

But there was so much she couldn’t say. There would be two pregnant women in the house, her sister-in-law, Jenny, and her brother Martin’s girlfriend; none of the family knew about Robin’s recent hospitalisation, but she didn’t doubt there’d be a lot of baby and pregnancy talk, and she was afraid Murphy might use that as an excuse to start talking about egg freezing again.

‘… I’d like to stay in London and do my own thing, but it feels as though you’re not allowed to do that unless you’ve got kids.’

‘You’re not allowed even then,’ said Strike. ‘Joan would have been mortally offended if Lucy and Greg hadn’t turned up every year with her great-nephews.’

Ahead, their target threw back her mane of professionally blow-dried hair as she walked.

‘So,’ said Strike. ‘Do we take the case? It’s your call.’

‘Well… from all you’ve said, if we don’t do it, she’ll just hire someone

else.’

‘I agree. And we won’t string her along.’

‘No,’ agreed Robin, ‘and I must admit, I’m getting interested in that body, too.’

‘But as I say, if it’ll cause you trouble—’

‘Call her back, and tell her we’ll do it,’ said Robin.

‘You sure?’

‘Definitely,’ said Robin.

‘I’ll ring her now,’ said Strike, drawing out his mobile.

Robin listened to Strike’s side of the call, feeling particularly warm towards him, appreciative of his consideration with regard to Murphy, and grateful that he’d passed off her lie about Bijou Watkins as a joke.

‘Right, I’ll get that contract to you,’ Strike was saying. ‘Right… yeah… no problem at all. Our pleasure.’

He hung up.

‘Very grateful,’ he said. ‘More tears.’

The two partners walked on in silence, Strike thoroughly satisfied with his last ten minutes’ work. He’d just made an excellent start in establishing that he was no longer interested in casual affairs by saying what he had about Bijou Watkins, and Robin had agreed to the investigation, in spite of her boyfriend’s clear disapproval. No matter the risks, no matter the possible fallout, he now intended to seize the first auspicious moment to tell her what he felt, and if no such opportunity arose naturally, he’d engineer one.

There’s no pride in having what you never worked for.

Never let the other chap change your game plan.

Stick to your own, and play to your strengths.

PART TWO

‘Sometimes the deepest mines prove the best in the end.’
‘And as long as there’s anybody to pay for it I suppose you go on digging.’

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

14

You have taken the first step over its threshold, the first step toward the inner sanctuary and heart of the temple. You are in the path that leads up the slope of the mountain of Truth…

Albert Pike
Morals and Dogma of the Liturgy of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry

‘Where are you?’ were Strike’s opening words on the second of December, when Robin answered his call.

‘On the A40,’ said Robin, who was having to speak loudly because she was in her decrepit Land Rover, which didn’t have Bluetooth. ‘Mrs A’s staying near Stroud. I’m taking over from Midge.’

‘Kim’ll do Stroud,’ said Strike. ‘I’ve just got off a call from the owner of Ramsay Silver. I didn’t expect him to be so keen to talk to us; he nearly bit my hand off. He wants to know if we can go along there today at one.’

‘OK, great,’ said Robin, who was considerably more interested in seeing the site of William Wright’s murder than she was in staring at a deserted croquet lawn from behind a hedge. ‘I’ll come back.’

‘Meet you outside Freemasons’ Hall at half twelve.’

So Robin turned London-wards again. The chilly day was overcast, but from time to time the sun slid out from behind clouds, revealing the dirt on the windscreen she’d been first too busy, and then too recently operated on, to clean. The ancient Land Rover had developed a mysterious rattle in the past few days, which Robin hadn’t yet managed to trace to its source. Its MOT was imminent and she had a strong feeling that this time it might not scrape through.

The prospect of visiting Ramsay Silver had raised her mood, which happened to require some lifting, because, prior to Strike's call, she'd been brooding about a couple of recent conversations she'd had with Murphy. Her boyfriend hadn't said so explicitly, but Robin could tell he was angry about the agency taking the silver vault case, even though she'd claimed they were trying to find Rupert Fleetwood, rather than identify the body. Then, the previous evening, Murphy had been complaining over the phone about his own unsatisfactory neighbour, whose slamming doors and shouting matches with her teenage children were a constant bar to relaxation, when he'd suddenly said,

'You know, if we bought a place together, we could get away from all these wankers.'

At these words, Robin had felt something very like panic. However, feeling guilty about the way she'd lied about the silver vault case, she felt she owed him.

'Yes, I suppose we could,' she said.

'Don't be too enthusiastic.'

She'd laughed nervously.

'No, it's definitely an idea.'

Ever since the call had ended, Robin had been trying to argue herself out of an increase in anxiety. She loved Murphy, didn't she? Yes, she really thought – knew – she did. And most women would be delighted to know that the man they loved, and who loved them, wanted to make this kind of commitment, wouldn't they? And didn't it make sense to find a better place together, without rowdy neighbours?

But when Robin thought about cohabitation, the image that presented itself was of the third and last home she'd shared with her ex-husband. Robin knew it had been a lovely house, in an eighteenth-century terrace that had been built for shipwrights and sea captains, but she couldn't picture it in any detail now. What she mostly remembered was the leaden feeling of constriction and misery in which she'd spent too many of the days she'd lived there.

But that was Matthew. Ryan's not Matthew.

Murphy's unexpected suggestion that they move in together had come just an hour after Robin had opened a letter from her GP, which had been lying on her doormat when she'd got home, late, after hours of surveillance.

The doctor wanted her to make an appointment for a check-up after her recent hospitalisation. She hadn't told Murphy about this. She didn't want to go; she didn't see what the point was. She had all the information she needed already, and she felt well, and the operation site had healed, so what could the GP do or say that was of any benefit to her? Before Strike had called, thoughts of egg freezing had been tangling themselves in her complicated feelings about house-hunting, and she had a sense, not for the first time, that she wasn't like other women, that she wanted different things, and was prepared to bear different hardships, and she couldn't help remembering Strike's words:

That'd be my view in your position, but some might say that's why I'm still single.

As Robin got out of the Land Rover on Great Queen Street an hour and a half later, a corpulent, balding passer-by said cheerfully,

'Don't see many of that age still on the roads!'

'No,' Robin agreed. 'It's on its last legs.'

She watched the man turn into the huge Art Deco building of pale grey stone beside which she'd parked. She'd never seen Freemasons' Hall before. Had she thought about it, she might have expected those entering to require, if not a secret password, then at least a membership card, but a sign beside the glass doors proclaimed that there was a café inside, a museum open to the public, and guided tours.

Strike was standing on the corner ahead, collar turned up against the chilly day, vaping while staring up at the building's front, and Robin walked towards him feeling far better for having something to think about other than her personal predicaments, and much more cheerful for seeing her work partner.

'Impressive building,' said Robin, when she reached him.

'It is,' agreed Strike.

From this angle, Freemasons' Hall looked as though it had been constructed like a isosceles triangle, except that at the point where the two long sides converged it had been squared off, presenting a relatively narrow but very tall and grand frontage comprising columns, a square clock and a tower.

'"*Audi, vide, tace,*"' said Strike, reading an inscription high above them. '"See, hear, be silent."'

‘Any chance of walking a bit?’ Robin asked, hands deep in her pockets. The Land Rover’s heating was non-existent, and the day near freezing.

‘Yeah, that’s why I wanted to meet early. Get a feel for the area.’

So they set off along Great Queen Street, with the massive stone hall to their right.

‘I think Ramsay’s keen to meet us because he’s hoping we’ll find his stolen silver,’ said Strike. ‘He’s had a hell of a run of bad luck in the last couple of years. His adult son and only child died in a jet-ski accident on holiday eighteen months ago.’

‘Oh no,’ said Robin.

‘And then his wife had a massive stroke. She’s still incapacitated. She was the one managing the shop, because Kenneth works at some financial services place up the road. I heard the whole story this morning. I think he was trying to get me as emotionally invested as possible in finding the silver.’

‘Well, if his wife needs medical care and can’t work…’

‘Not blaming him, just giving you a heads-up, because I think he’ll be most forthcoming if we pretend we’re as interested in the robbery as in the body. He told me they had a slight increase in custom after the murder, but it was mostly gawkers, rather than people wanting to buy masonic medals.’

Strike was scanning the street as they walked for CCTV cameras, and for side streets and lay-bys where silver could be divided between gang members, unobserved, but it was a populous area that would be well lit by night, and Strike doubted the felons could have counted on the absence of passers-by even then.

‘Can’t see our killers-slash-thieves making their getaway in this direction,’ said Strike. ‘No, I think the police are right: the silver went in that getaway car in Wild Street.’

Robin had an unbidden mental image of Murphy’s expression, could he have heard Strike (as Murphy would undoubtedly see it) deigning to agree with the police’s conclusions.

They turned right into Kingsway, a broader and even busier street. Canned Christmas music drifted out from a shop as they passed and both felt that undertow of sadness from which Christmas in adulthood is rarely free, Robin wishing she felt as straightforwardly happy at the prospect of her trip home as she would have done when she first moved to London,

Strike suddenly visited by thoughts of Ted, Joan and the empty house in Cornwall, which had just gone up for sale.

‘The shop’s up an alleyway, to the right,’ he said. ‘Wouldn’t have said it’s a great location, but given the proximity to Freemasons’ Hall, they must get some masonic trade…’

He checked his watch.

‘Bit early, but we might as well head there now.’

So they turned up an unlovely lane, which had a line of plastic bins on one side.

The silver shop, which sat at the join of the red brick Connaught Rooms and the pale grey stone of Freemasons’ Hall, looked dingy and old-fashioned. Medallions and ceremonial chains lay on black velvet in the window. Somebody had draped red fairy lights around these items, in a lacklustre tribute to the season. The black awning bore silver lettering, which read:

RAMSAY SILVER
~ Masonic Insignia, Silverware and Rarities ~

As Strike pushed open the door a bell tinkled and he noted that neither of the two locks were of a much higher grade than those of the average house.

The first sound they heard, drowning out the Christmas carol playing over hidden speakers, was the gabbling voice of a man in his fifties, who was standing at a desk with a silver bowl in his white-gloved hands, talking to a customer.

‘… pity you weren’t in last year if you like Art Nouveau, because we had two jewels in, designed by Alphonse Mucha, very special – Ah!’ said the man eagerly, becoming aware of the newcomers. ‘Mr Strike?’

‘Yes,’ said the detective.

‘With you in a tick!’ said Kenneth Ramsay.

His suit hung loosely on him, as though he’d lost a lot of weight in a relatively short space of time. The little hair he retained was silver and curly, which, combined with a strangely innocent-looking pink and white face that looked as though it never needed shaving, gave him the

appearance of an ageing cherub. Turning back to his customer, who was a tall man in a cashmere overcoat, Ramsay said,

‘Something else you might like, if it’s Art Nouveau you fancy—’

‘I really just want the bowl,’ said the customer, who had his wallet out.

‘Sure? Tell you what we’ve got, though, and they’d would go very nicely with this – pair of 1926 candlesticks, came out of Aitchison’s Haven Lodge in Scotland. They’d make a lovely addit—’

‘*No*, thank you,’ said the customer firmly.

‘Right, hahaha, no problem, we’ll get this wrapped for you, then. Laura! Wrap this for me, please!’

A sulky-looking young woman in glasses, who was returning various other bits of silver to their shelf, slouched over to the desk and began plying Sellotape and bubble wrap.

‘Wonderful choice, a really fabulous piece. Lovely scrollwork. Are you a collector? Would you like gift wrapping? Got ribbon somewhere, haven’t we, Laura? Got any good Christmas plans? Staying in town? Would you like to join our mailing list? Well worth it, you’ll be given early notice, if anything special—’

‘*Just the bowl,*’ said the customer, no longer troubling to be polite.

Robin was looking around at the cramped and cluttered shop floor. The right and left walls bore racks of ceremonial swords and shelves laden with silver. Taller items, such as urns and ornamental centrepieces, stood on tables, while snuffboxes and jewellery were displayed in glass cabinets. Masonic symbols, now becoming familiar to Robin, were everywhere: eyes in triangles, sheafs of corn, beehives, coffins and skulls. The back wall broke the monotony of the sea of silver, because it displayed many antique aprons and sashes embroidered in gold, and Robin’s eye lingered on an apron embroidered with a bloody severed head, held up by a single hand.

Strike, too, was making a covert survey of the shop, though concentrating on security rather than silverware. Beside the street door was a keypad for the alarm, which looked as though it had been installed at least a decade earlier. A small camera, which also looked many years out of date, was positioned over a slightly warped black door behind the desk.

When at last the customer’s purchase had been put into its black and silver bag, Ramsay trotted to the street door to open it, and in the absence of his voice, they could hear the Christmas carol playing over the speakers.

I saw three ships come sailing in

On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day…

The customer, one of whose eyes was hypertrophic and staring up at the ceiling, scanned Strike and Robin superciliously with the other as he went out of the shop. Ramsay inclined his head as the man passed, like a footman. Once the door had thudded shut, Ramsay stripped off his white gloves and strode to Strike to wring his hand, his demeanour no less frenetic than it had been with his customer.

'When you called this morning, I thought, "at long bloody last". Ray of hope, it really was. Ray of hope. I've been reading up on you. Couldn't have asked for – I've been at my wit's end, to be honest. You might be the godsend I've been hoping for.'

'This is Robin Ellacott, my partner,' said Strike.

'How d'you do, how d'you do?' said Ramsay. His eyes dropped from Robin's face to her breasts and moved back again as he shook her hand in turn. 'Lovely – I mean – what would you like to do first? Look around, or —?'

'Yeah, let's look around,' said Strike.

'Right, yes – Laura, you can take lunch now,' Ramsay called to the sulky sales assistant. She disappeared through the door behind the desk, coming back a minute later with her coat and handbag, and left, setting the bell tinkling again.

'So,' said Ramsay, spreading his hands wide, 'this is the shop floor, obviously, hahaha – I'll show you the vault. This way.'

And what was in those ships all three

On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day?

Ramsay led them to the black door behind the desk, Strike, by far the largest of the three, moving carefully so as not to topple any urns off their tables.

'As you can see,' said Ramsay, pausing to point up at the camera over the door leading to the vault, 'state-of-the-art security. Camera covering the shop and another one over the door outside – alarm – iron blinds over the windows at night – and down here' – it took him two attempts to open the black door, which fitted poorly into its frame; on the second shove, it opened to reveal a narrow flight of stairs leading down to the basement – 'we've got the vault.'

He flicked a light switch and illuminated both the stairway and a cramped basement area. The steep wooden stairs creaked as the threesome descended. The small space below smelled slightly of mould and looked as though it had been fitted out on the cheap, many years previously. The steel door facing them had a second keypad beside it and a wheel handle; to the right was a door that stood ajar to reveal a cramped toilet, and to their left was a sink, some laminate cupboards bearing mugs and a kettle, and a couple of wall pegs.

'We'll look away,' said Strike, as Ramsay moved to tap in the code on the keypad.

'Oh,' said Ramsay distractedly, 'yes – thank you.'

When the door had audibly swung open, Strike and Robin turned back to see the place where William Wright had died.

The vault, illuminated by a single bare lightbulb hanging from the low ceiling, was high enough for an average-sized man, if not Strike, to stand upright in, and deep enough to accommodate a man of the same height lying down. The walls were of brick, and lined with currently bare shelves. The vault contained nothing except five crates of varying sizes, all stamped with the name Gibsons, which Strike knew to be a minor auction house. He took out his notebook.

'Those,' said Ramsay, pointing, 'are the crates the Murdoch silver came in… all stolen,' he said, staring around at the shelves, 'and I'd never even seen it.'

'Really?'

'Yes… it was supposed to arrive on Friday at lunchtime. I came here to receive it,' said Ramsay, as though the silver had been a visiting potentate, 'but Gibsons had lots of deliveries that day, so it was delayed, and I had to go back to work. Pamela called later to say it had arrived…'

'Pamela is…?'

'Pamela Bullen-Driscoll. My sister-in-law – my wife's sister. She was helping us out at the time, with Rachel being so ill. Gone back to her own business now.'

'You had houseguests over the weekend, didn't you?' asked Strike.

'That's right, and I couldn't leave Rachel alone with them, so I didn't come in over the weekend.'

'But you were here on Monday morning, when the theft was

discovered?'

'Oh, yes, because I wanted to see John Auclair myself.'

'Who's he?'

'Very important silver collector,' said Ramsay. 'Very wealthy… he'd asked me to put the Murdoch silver aside for him to view, before we offered it to anyone else. That's why Pamela never took it out of the vault, just unpacked it and put it on the shelves…

'I came down here – opened the door… and it was all gone… and Wright – well, Knowles,' said Ramsay, pointing at the floor, 'was there. Face down. His hands were missing. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It didn't look real.'

'Face down, you say,' said Strike, who was making notes.

'That's right. And there was dried blood around the head and…'

Ramsay swallowed, looking sick.

'News reports said he was naked,' said Strike.

'Yes, he was, except – yes, he was naked.'

'I heard a hallmark was carved into the body's back?'

'How do you know about that?' Ramsay gasped, staring up at Strike.

'It was mentioned in a news story,' lied the detective.

'Oh… I didn't think they were going to give that out… yes, it was the Salem Cross. The Murdoch hallmark.'

Strike made a note, then said,

'And the body was naked, except for…?'

'I… DCI Truman told me not to talk about that.'

'Really?' said Strike, looking down at Ramsay.

'Well, you see… they'd tried to make the killing look… Truman said it would mean more trouble for me. I saw his point. Considerate of him. I liked Truman, he was the only one who seemed interested in getting our silver back, but then he was taken off the case. We weren't told why, nobody told us anything… I'm a big supporter of the police, very difficult job, but I haven't been at all impressed with the lot we've had handling this business,' said Ramsay resentfully. 'Not since Truman left.'

'Was the corpse wearing something masonic?'

Robin watched Ramsay's weakening faith in the police do battle with his desire to assist the detectives he seemed to see as a last hope.

'Yes,' said Ramsay weakly, at last. 'A masonic sash. I can't remember

which one. When they turned him over, I wasn't… concentrating on the sash. The eyes and ears had been – Pamela screamed…'

Ramsay's voice faded away.

'All right, I think we've seen enough down here,' said Strike. 'Would you mind if I use your bathroom?'

'No, of course not,' said Ramsay, closing the vault door with what looked like relief. 'Shall we?' Ramsay said to Robin, who smiled, and the two of them climbed the stairs again. Once they'd disappeared, Strike, who had no need whatsoever of the bathroom, advanced on the keypad beside the safe to examine it more closely.

Upstairs, Ramsay beckoned Robin to one of the two chairs facing his desk, on which a computer sat.

'Truman said it would be playing into the killers' hands to talk up the sash and the hallmark,' he said, sitting down opposite her. 'It was obvious misdirection. He knew people can be silly about the masons…'

Unsurprisingly, being asked to describe the body seemed to have upset Ramsay.

'I don't know whether your partner told you,' he added, as he fiddled with his cufflinks, 'but it's been a very difficult time for my wife and me – dreadful, actually – and then to lose all the Murdoch silver, when we weren't insured… we've had a horrible couple of years, everything's been… just hellish, actually. It's been hellish.'

'I'm so sorry,' said Robin, remembering the jet ski and the dead son. Ramsay blinked rapidly. With no aim other than distracting him a little, Robin looked towards the nearest glass cabinet, which was full of small silver trinkets, and said,

'You've got some lovely things.'

'Oh yes,' said Ramsay, brightening, 'and very affordable!'

To Robin's consternation, he jumped to his feet again, pulled his white gloves back on, and proceeded to unlock the cabinet.

'Nice little pocket watch,' he said, holding it out to her in his cotton-covered palm. 'Sterling, not plate! Triangular, of course. Masonic symbols instead of numbers, you see? More of a man's piece, of course,' he said, when Robin showed no sign of enthusiasm. 'For the ladies – you'll like this —'

He picked up a small silver orb charm, and flicked a catch, so that it

transformed into a jointed cross.

‘Nice, eh?’ he said. ‘And again, you’ve got your masonic symbols, hidden inside.’

‘Very pretty,’ said Robin.

‘You should drop a hint to—’

Ramsay’s eyes flickered to her bare ring finger.

‘—or just treat yourself. For Christmas.’

To Robin’s relief, Strike now reappeared, his face somewhat contorted. The stairs were steep and his stump still complaining, post-Cornwall.

‘I could do you a good deal,’ said Ramsay, smiling anxiously at Robin.

‘Maybe another time,’ she said, embarrassed.

Ramsay locked up the cabinet with obvious reluctance, returned to his seat behind the desk, and rummaged in the desk drawer for a glossy auction catalogue.

‘I’ve circled everything I bought,’ he told Strike, as the latter sat down next to Robin. ‘So you know what you’re looking for.’

‘Great,’ said Strike, taking the catalogue. The cover read: *The A. H. Murdoch Collection* and featured a sword and a large silver ship on wheels.

‘Would that be a nef?’ asked Strike.

‘Ah, you know your silver!’ said Ramsay eagerly. ‘Yes, she was commissioned by Murdoch out of silver from his own mine – second largest in Peru, discovered in 1827 – and modelled on the *Carolina Merchant*, the ship that took the first ever Freemason to America. We were all delighted his great-grandson wanted to hold the auction here in London, rather than in the US…’

Ramsay now launched unstoppably into an explanation of the significance of the Murdoch silver, speaking with the peculiar, tone deaf intensity of the monomaniac.

‘… Murdoch, of course, was Inspector General of the Louisiana jurisdiction…’ ‘… largest, most valuable collection of masonic silver in the world,’ ‘… gadrooned borders…’ ‘… superb nineteenth-century setting maul…’ ‘… bright cut engraving…’

‘We can keep this, can we?’ interrupted Strike, stemming the flow of words by raising his voice.

‘Oh – yes, yes, I’ve got another copy.’

‘Are you on the square yourself?’ asked Strike.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Ramsay. ‘You?’

‘’Fraid not.’

‘Ah. I thought, being ex-military – one of our best customers is a colonel in the Light Infantry. My wife’s father was a mason, too. She’s a Bullen by birth. Bullen & Co? Very old silver firm. They’re down in the London Silver Vaults. Been going a hundred and twenty-seven years.’

‘Wow,’ said Robin, to whom the job of being impressed by interviewees usually fell.

‘But when her father retired a couple of years ago, he handed the business over to m’sister-in-law and her husband. His choice, of course, up to him,’ said Kenneth sniffily. ‘We’d hoped… but, long story short, Pamela and Geoffrey and Rachel and I worked out a deal, and we took the masonic stock – Bullen & Co had a small side-line in masonic artefacts, nothing on our scale, of course – and we opened this place.’

‘What kind of business was here before you took over?’

‘A jewellers,’ said Ramsay, ‘so the place was already set up for us, really. Very convenient.’

‘You changed all the codes when you took the place over, though?’ said Strike.

‘Oh yes, of course,’ said Ramsay, before pointing at the catalogue in Strike’s hands and reverting to his favourite subject. ‘I got all the most important Murdoch pieces. Made an offer before the auction, and it was accepted. Put a few noses out of joint, as a matter of fact, hahaha. There were a lot of collectors who were very interested, waiting to bid.’

‘Let’s talk about William Wright,’ said Strike.

‘Of course, anything you need to know, ask away,’ said Ramsay, but he pressed on before Strike could speak. ‘Our security’s really top notch, as you can see, but Knowles was a professional, wasn’t he?’

‘Did you interview him for the job?’ said Strike.

‘Yes, with Pamela, and she liked him at the time, whatever she said afterwards. *She* was the one who’d been saying we needed someone else, because she wasn’t up to lifting the heavier stuff, especially taking it up and down the stairs – none of us are getting any younger and she’s got problems with her eyes.’

‘What sort of problems?’ asked Strike.

‘She had that laser eye surgery, and it didn’t work. She’s had a lot of

trouble since. So we advertised.'

'Did you have many applicants?' asked Strike.

'Not many. Young people have unrealistic expectations of salaries these days, very unrealistic,' said Ramsay, bristling slightly, 'but Wright seemed ideal. Short, but a strong lad – our security chap had resigned a couple of months previously, you see, so I thought Wright could cover both bases, as it were. He did jujitsu.'

'Was he given the alarm and vault codes when he started here? Keys?'

'Oh, no,' said Ramsay. 'No, of course not. Absolutely not.'

'Did you see much of him yourself?'

'Not really. I'd pop in here at lunch sometimes, see how things were going. No, it was really just Pamela – oh, and Jim, coming in to clean two mornings a week. He's been with us since the start, couple of years now.'

'This would be Jim Todd?' asked Strike.

Ramsay didn't question how Strike knew his cleaner's surname, but said,

'That's right. Lovely man. Fell on hard times, so we helped him out with a job. He cleans for a few different businesses.'

'So it would've been Pamela who had most to do with William Wright?'

'Yes, and Jim would've seen a bit of him, too. More than me. As I say, I've been very busy, but it was important to keep the shop going. It's our baby, you know, and—'

Ramsay's voice broke, and Robin, thinking again of the dead son, said,

'This must all have been incredibly difficult for you.'

'It has,' said Ramsay hoarsely. 'Yes. It has.'

His gaze roved, apparently absent-mindedly, back to Robin's chest. She folded her arms and he looked hastily away.

'So William Wright was on your security footage, all that Friday the seventeenth of June?' said Strike, his tone less sympathetic than Robin's. He'd noticed the ogling.

'Yes, yes, we've always got the camera on, in case of shoplifters. The police took that footage away, after the burglary, or – no, maybe it's still on here,' said Ramsay, peering dimly at the computer, 'but I wouldn't know how to…'

'Could I have a look?' asked Robin. 'We've got a similar camera feed in our office. I might be able to find it.'

‘Yes, of course,’ said Ramsay. ‘Password,’ he muttered, and after a couple of attempts, he succeeded in entering it correctly, then ceded his chair to Robin.

‘I understand Wright left the shop for a while, that Friday?’ said Strike.

‘Yes, very briefly, in the afternoon,’ said Ramsay, taking Robin’s vacated seat. ‘Stupid thing. The delivery driver mixed up two crates. Sent the Oriental Lodge centrepiece – you’ll see it in the catalogue, magnificent, it really is – to Bullen & Co by mistake, and delivered some of the things *they’d* bought to us. Pamela realised what had happened and sent Wright out to Bullens to get it back. Embarrassing for Pamela, actually,’ said Ramsay, his face growing a little pinker. ‘If that hadn’t happened, we wouldn’t have known she and her husband had bid on some of the Murdoch collection. We had a gentlemen’s agreement that Bullen & Co wouldn’t set themselves up in competition with us. *We* were to concentrate on masonic silver.’

‘And Wright brought this centrepiece back, did he?’ said Strike.

‘Yes, in a taxi. He wasn’t gone long. The Silver Vaults are only just up the road.’

‘I think,’ said Robin, her eyes on the computer monitor, ‘I might be able to download the relevant camera footage. Would you be comfortable with us taking a copy, Mr Ramsay?’

‘Yes, yes, of course,’ said Ramsay.

‘Would you have phone numbers for Pamela Bullen-Driscoll and Jim Todd?’ Strike asked.

Ramsay gave them. Strike now brought out the photograph of Rupert Fleetwood that Decima had given him.

‘In your opinion, is there any possibility that William Wright was this man?’

Ramsay glanced down at Rupert Fleetwood.

‘Oh, no,’ he said. ‘No, no. What is he – a waiter? Wright wore glasses, and had a beard. He was dark.’

‘Disregarding the outfit,’ said Strike, ‘and trying to picture this man with a beard, and dyed hair—’

‘No, no,’ repeated Ramsay, who seemed annoyed, ‘no, he doesn’t look at all like Knowles.’

Strike took the picture back.

‘Did the police show you pictures of two men called Niall Semple and Tyler Powell?’

‘Yes, yes, but it wasn’t them, it was Knowles,’ said Ramsay, now almost agitated. ‘I’m *certain* it was Knowles.’

‘OK,’ said Strike, making a note. ‘Did anyone offer you a different nef for sale, around the time Wright came to work here?’

‘A different nef?’ said Ramsay, confused. ‘No, the *Carolina Merchant*’s the only one we’ve ever had in stock. We don’t deal in ornamental objects that aren’t masonic.’

‘Right,’ said Strike, making another note. ‘And is there anything you remember about Wright that seemed odd, or distinctive?’

‘No, not at all. As I say, I didn’t really – oh, but there were the things he searched for. The police found that out.’

‘“Things he searched for”?’

‘Yes, he’d looked things up, on this computer,’ said Ramsay, nodding at the monitor on the desk. ‘The police went all through the what-have-you, and they found he’d been looking at some odd things.’

‘They found his search history?’

‘Yes, exactly. He wasn’t supposed to be on that computer at all. It’s only there for website orders and our client database. I said to Pamela, “what was he doing, messing around on the computer?” She said it must have been when she went out for lunch. You know, a lot of this is down to Pamela’s carelessness,’ said Ramsay, in a sudden burst of temper. ‘We were supposed to be so grateful for her help, but she was the one who left early on Friday, which meant Wright could close the door without setting the alarm!’

‘Really?’ said Robin, who’d just successfully cut, copied and emailed the relevant portion of camera footage to the agency’s address. ‘Why did Pamela leave early?’

‘She – it was a private matter,’ said Ramsay, looking uncomfortable. ‘But even so – damn careless of her.’

‘What had Wright been doing online, d’you know?’ asked Strike.

‘He’d been looking up things about Freemasons, and he’d been on some website that was all about clearing your name and escaping prison and things like that.’

‘It’d be very helpful if you could remember the details of that website,’ said Strike.

Kenneth screwed up his cherubic face.

‘It was called something like “Innocent and Accused”. People complaining they’d been framed, or blamed for things they hadn’t done, and advising each other how to get out of it. Some really nasty stuff on there. Advocating vigilantism, some of them. How to get their own back.’

‘Can you remember what the website looked like? A logo, or colours?’

‘Had a sort of eye-for-an-eye logo,’ said Ramsay. ‘Two hands, each holding an eye.’

‘And there’s nothing else you can tell us about Wright?’ said Strike. ‘Accent, mention of home life, interests…?’

‘Well, he wouldn’t tell the truth about anything like that, would he?’ said Ramsay, sounding frustrated. ‘He was a criminal. He was playing a part. Oh,’ he added suddenly, ‘but there was the email. We think Wright sent a strange email, from here. He used the Ramsay Silver email address.’

‘Who was the email sent to?’ asked Strike.

‘A man called Osgood.’

‘Did you tell the police about this?’

‘Oh yes. Pamela found it, after we’d realised Wright had been using the PC. The police questioned us about it, but none of *us* had sent the email. We were all baffled, we’d never heard of the man – but I daresay Osgood was one of Knowles’ criminal associates. Possibly he was letting him know he’d managed to infiltrate the shop.’

‘Would you mind us taking a copy of the email?’ asked Strike.

‘No, of course not. It’s still on there,’ Ramsay told Robin, who found it without much difficulty and forwarded it to both her own and Strike’s accounts.

‘I know you need to get back to your office,’ Strike said to Ramsay, ‘so, last question: would you happen to have the address Wright was living at?’

‘I didn’t keep his CV,’ said Ramsay, ‘but I do remember the street. St George’s Avenue, Newham. I thought that was a good omen, when I saw it. Saint George.’

‘Would you happen to remember the house number?’

‘No, I’m afraid not… maybe directory enquiries…’

‘Well, thanks for meeting us,’ said Strike. ‘It’s been very helpful.’

He got to his feet, holding the catalogue Ramsay had given him.

‘If you have any more questions, don’t hesitate to call me,’ said Ramsay,

as he too stood up. Now that Strike and Robin were about to leave, he once again seemed eager and a little pathetic. ‘Here – take my card. Whatever you need…’

They shook hands again.

As Ramsay bustled ahead to open the door for the detectives, Dean Martin’s voice crooned over the shop’s speakers:

Silver bells, silver bells,

It’s Christmas time in the city…

15

The deed a man may do on the spur of the moment, when his brain is on fire, is not so readily done when it has to be thought about.

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

Strike glanced up at the camera over the street door as he and Robin emerged into the chilly afternoon. Strike suspected it was inactive, because it had a noticeable crack in the lens. This, he assumed, was the reason there'd been no pictures in the press of the killers entering the shop.

'Let's have a look at Wild Street,' he said, and they headed onwards, away from Kingsway, onto a much quieter road without shops or cafés.

'Yeah, they must've brought the silver here,' said Strike, looking up and down the street, 'and bunged it in the getaway car. There's a pub up there,' he added, pointing back towards the place where they'd met. 'Fancy some food?'

'Great,' said Robin.

'What was Ramsay trying to flog you, when I came upstairs?' asked Strike as they walked.

'Um – first a triangular pocket watch, and then a charm that was a ball that turned into a cross marked with hidden masonic symbols when you opened it. I could've been persuaded into buying that one.'

'Never had you pegged as a pushover for salesmen.'

'I'm not, but it was pretty and—'

'You felt sorry for him.'

'I did,' Robin admitted, 'yes.'

'You haven't got enough money to go round trying to save idiots from bankruptcy.'

'"Idiot"'s a bit harsh.'

‘He’s an idiot,’ said Strike implacably. ‘I’m sorry for his personal misfortunes, but state-of-the-art security my arse, it’s about as lax as it could be without leaving the bloody doors and windows open. He would’ve punched in the code for the vault right in front of us if I hadn’t stopped him, he didn’t insure this silver he’d paid a mint for, he hires an untrained security guy on the cheap, he didn’t check Wright’s references properly, never upgraded the alarm or the camera after buying the place, the locks on the front door—’

‘I know all that, but he’s lost his son, his wife’s seriously ill… people don’t always make the best decisions when they’re under a lot of stress.’

‘People who’re already in trouble are the very people who can’t afford to get careless,’ said Strike sententiously.

He didn’t notice Robin’s slightly clouded expression, and wouldn’t had understood its significance if he had. He had no idea how much of Robin’s free time was currently spent castigating herself for what she now saw as a cavalier disregard for warning signs at the ages of both nineteen and thirty-two.

‘What were you up to, pretending to need the bathroom?’ she asked.

‘Wanted to have a shufti at that staff area. It wouldn’t take much to guess which six digits open the vault, because the keys are worn. All you’d have to do is memorise the pattern made by whoever was punching in the code. The sink and bog are clean, so Todd doesn’t seem to have been acting in an unusual manner when he scrubbed the staff area before the police turned up. The cupboards under the sink are full of silver polish and Dettol.’

‘You’re thinking collusion?’

‘First thing you’ve got to ask, when there’s a burglary like this. Todd wiped the place clean of prints and Pamela left early on the day of the killing, leaving Wright to shut up. Any standard set of skeleton keys would open up the latch lock on that door, as long as the mortice hadn’t been locked. Makes you think.

‘That said,’ Strike continued, the Prince of Wales pub now in sight, ‘they all seem to have very solid alibis, so it could’ve just been sloppiness. If this Pamela was worried about her knees and her eyes, going up and down the stairs, she might’ve given Wright the vault code so he could lug stuff in and out of it for her, and not wanted to admit it to Ramsay, or the police. After you.’

Robin walked through the door Strike was holding open for her, into the large, crowded and noisy pub, which had wooden floorboards, tiled pillars and a good deal of red and gold tinsel hanging from the ceiling.

‘I’ll get the drinks in,’ said Strike. ‘What d’you want?’

‘Orange juice, please.’

‘Have some reading material,’ said Strike, handing her the catalogue Ramsay had given him. He headed for the bar, already weighing the non-investigative possibilities offered by this apparently casual lunch, while the oblivious Robin sat down at a table beside the window and flicked through the catalogue.

The introduction explained that the ‘museum quality’ objects on sale had all been purchased or commissioned by A. H. Murdoch, nineteenth-century American explorer, industrialist and Grand Master Freemason. The Murdoch hallmark had been used as a backdrop to several of the pages. It was a curious symbol: a slanted cross with additional bars. Kenneth Ramsay had circled in Sharpie everything he’d bought, and by examining estimated prices, Robin worked out that he’d have had to pay a minimum of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds to get the pieces removed from the auction. His business seemed to be far from flourishing, so she wondered how on earth he’d managed this.

A. H. Murdoch’s collection wasn’t entirely masonic. Here and there were bits of silver that were merely ornamental, but Ramsay hadn’t bid on any of these. Instead he’d obtained a selection of objects whose use was mysterious to Robin. What, for instance, was a ‘setting maul’? To her, it resembled a plunger, having a handle of polished oak and a cone-shaped piece of solid silver at the end, intricately engraved with eight-pointed stars. There were many trowels and set squares, and multiple ‘jewels’, which to Robin’s eye were medals, with elaborate designs, including a two-headed eagle on a Teutonic cross.

When Strike returned to the table with the drinks and two menus, he found Robin looking at the picture of an ornate silver centrepiece, which according to the catalogue measured nearly three and a half feet in height.

‘“Estimate: sixty to eighty thousand pounds”,’ Robin read out of the catalogue, turning it so that Strike could see it.

‘Fuck’s sake,’ said Strike, staring at the thing, which he found exceptionally ugly.

‘That’s the Oriental Centrepiece, which went to Bullen & Co by mistake,’ said Robin, turning the catalogue back towards herself to examine at the profusion of symbols that embellished the object. ‘Jacob’s ladder, acacia tree, the all-seeing eye, the blazing star…’

‘Been boning up on masonic symbolism?’

‘Yes… it’s strange, though.’

‘It’s an eyesore, is what it is,’ said Strike, looking at the upside-down centrepiece.

‘Not this – the theft. It’s not like stealing cash, or diamonds, which you could sell easily. The thieves can’t have been intending to melt the silver down, because its value is in its form. And this centrepiece alone must be massively heavy.’

‘Which is why I think it must’ve all gone in the getaway car in Wild Street. Why anyone wanted a pile of masonic crap, though…’

Robin thought of the spartan attic in which Strike lived, devoid of almost anything of sentimental or decorative value.

‘I think you might underestimate how obsessive people can get about objects, not being a things person yourself.’

‘A “things” person?’

‘Are there any physical objects you’re really attached to?’

‘Yeah, my prosthetic leg.’

‘Ha ha… you know what I mean. It’s not just the size and weight of them,’ said Robin, now turning the pages of the catalogue, ‘they’re all publicly linked to Wright’s murder. D’you think whoever stole them has just stashed them in a cellar somewhere, and they go down every night to gloat over it all?’

‘Good question,’ said Strike. He took a sip of his beer, then said, ‘Another good question is: why would Lynden Knowles want a pile of masonic silver?’

‘Maybe he knew a buyer who wouldn’t care how it was obtained?’ said Robin doubtfully.

‘Does that smell right to you? A gangster who deals in guns, suddenly turning high-class fence?’

‘Not really,’ Robin admitted.

‘And if he’d wanted the stuff for himself, which I think is highly unlikely, why tie his nephew’s murder to it?’

‘It is odd,’ admitted Robin. ‘And why kill Knowles in the vault? Wouldn’t it have been simpler to—’

‘Shoot him in the back of the head in the car on the way to a fake robbery, then dump the body? You’re right, it would… what d’you want to eat?’

‘Soup,’ said Robin. ‘I’m not that hungry.’

Strike, who was very definitely hungry, set back off for the bar, where he ordered soup for Robin and fish and chips for himself. When he returned to the table, Robin handed him her mobile, on which she’d brought up the email to the man called Osgood, allegedly sent by William Wright.

Ramsay Silver
Re: Something you should know
To: Osgood@goodtunes.co.uk

dear Mr Osgood (Oz)

I can help you with something that I know has been a problem for you if you would be happy to meet me.

‘Sent a week before Wright was killed,’ Strike noted. ‘No guarantee it was Wright who sent it, of course.’

‘If he didn’t, it’s odd nobody at the shop admitted to doing it,’ said Robin, taking her phone back.

‘True,’ said Strike. ‘But if the police thought this Osgood bloke had any bearing on the murder and theft, I’d have expected it to be in the press. We’ll try and contact him, though.’

‘It’s weird how quickly press interest died, isn’t it?’ said Robin. ‘Once they heard it was Knowles, nobody seems to have cared any more that his hands had been chopped off and his eyes gouged out—’

‘Standard operating procedure, isn’t it?’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘Let violent young men polish each other off. Who cares?’

‘But this was a really *nasty* killing. To do that to a body – if it had happened to a woman—’

‘Glad you said that, not me.’

‘Why?’

‘Not fashionable, to say men are seen as disposable in certain contexts.’

‘I’m not saying he was *disposable*—’

‘I know you’re not, but there wasn’t a tenth of the interest there would have been if he’d been a woman, even if she’d had a record. And you’re right, this was bloody sadistic,’ said Strike. ‘Proper butchery.’

‘I’m just saying, if it had been a woman, there’d have been salacious interest, because she was naked,’ said Robin.

‘True,’ said Strike, ‘but men don’t tug at the public’s heartstrings the way women and kids do. I’m not saying women have it easy,’ Strike added, pre-emptively defending himself against an accusation he seemed to hear hovering in the wings of the conversation, ‘but there are far more men sleeping rough and they get a lot less press traction when they go missing – I’m not saying women have it easy,’ he emphasised, ‘just stating facts. Look at those two blokes they couldn’t exclude on DNA. Semple got a bit of interest because he’s an injured veteran, but Powell got fuck-all. I’ve had a quick look for him, and not a whisper about him the press.’

‘I found some stuff,’ said Robin, rummaging in her bag.

‘Seriously?’ said Strike, surprised.

‘Yes – here—’

Robin handed Strike a couple of sheets of paper on which she’d printed out some photographs she’d found on Instagram, and which she’d been intending to put in the office file when she got a chance. All had been enlarged from group shots in which Tyler Powell had been tagged. He was a powerfully built young man with overlarge ears, a slightly lopsided face and mouse-brown hair. In one of the photos, he was wearing an England football strip.

‘I’m ninety-nine per cent sure he’s the right Powell. The photos were posted by people in Ironbridge.’

‘That’s up Birmingham way, right?’ asked Strike.

‘Exactly,’ said Robin.

Strike was pleased Tyler Powell hadn’t lived nearer to London. A trip to Ironbridge might just provide those hours of uninterrupted time with Robin he wanted.

‘Look at the back of the second page,’ said Robin. ‘I printed out some of

the comments beneath the last picture.’

Strike did as he was told.

lolajonz can’t stand looking at that bastard Powell after what he did

rileymiley urgh cant you crop TP out

ayeshaaaa why are we still lookin at pics of that shithead

ponzie2 chloegriff take these down nobody wanna see that fucker

‘Seems to have made himself unpopular,’ said Strike, turning the page over to look at Powell’s picture again. He didn’t look much of a villain, but Strike well remembered a young private in the Rifle Corps who’d resembled a choirboy and been convicted of rape in Cyprus.

‘I haven’t found any social media for Powell yet,’ said Robin, ‘but I’ll keep trying.’

‘OK,’ said Strike, ‘and I’ll ask Hardy if he can find out anything on Niall Semple for me.’

Their food now arrived. Strike ate a couple of chips, then said,

‘You know, I wouldn’t mind knowing whether DCI Truman ever rolls his trousers up when he’s not paddling.’

‘What?’

‘You have to roll up your trouser leg during initiation into the Freemasons. Prove you’re unshackled – a free man. I don’t think the Freemasons killed Wright,’ Strike said, as Robin opened her mouth to speak, ‘but Truman wanting to hush up the sash and the hallmark on the body’s back makes you think, as does the fact that he fell over himself to rule out the Freemasonry connection to the press.’

‘Somebody said online that Truman is a mason. It was in the comments on one of the news stories. They even gave his lodge.’

‘Did they, now?’

‘But that’s the kind of thing people *would* say, isn’t it? I’ve been looking at some of the conspiracy theories about masons and people can’t make up their minds whether they’re a front for Jewish world domination, or affiliated with Ku Klux Klan.’

‘There was a good bit of Freemasonry in the army, when I was still in,’ said Strike. ‘Hardy used to take the piss out of me for saying it influenced promotions. His shtick was, masonry’s a man’s private affair, nobody’d let it spill over into his day-to-day life, but I witnessed people cosying up to a known Grand Master at mess dinners. Freemasonry used to be rife in the police, as well. Coppers and serious criminals belonging to the same lodges. Remember Duncan Hanrahan?’

‘No,’ said Robin.

‘Freemason and ex-copper turned crook. Tried to do a bit of bribery through his masonic connections on the force. Might see what I can turn up on DCI Truman,’ said Strike, making a note to that effect.

‘Is that necessary?’ said Robin.

Strike looked up. His partner was suddenly looking tense, and Strike guessed instantly that she was worried about her boyfriend’s reaction, should he learn that the agency had turned its attention on one of his fellow policeman. This situation, Strike knew, wanted playing very carefully. He raised his eyebrows.

‘You don’t think it’s relevant, if Truman had a personal motive for rushing out the ID of Knowles?’

‘I just can’t see how Truman being a mason would get us any nearer to identifying Wright,’ said Robin.

She had, indeed, suddenly become conscious of the possible ramifications of this light-hearted conversation. She’d already fibbed to Murphy by telling him they were trying to find Rupert Fleetwood rather than attempting to double-check the Met’s identification of Knowles. What would he say if he found out they were staking out masonic lodges for signs of a senior policeman entering and leaving?

‘I’d say it’s fairly relevant to our investigation, if the lead copper let personal loyalties override his professional duty,’ said Strike. ‘What if he suppressed information, because it was convenient to identify Wright as Knowles? What was the name of Truman’s alleged lodge, can you remember?’

‘No,’ said Robin truthfully, though she was further rattled by the ‘personal loyalties’ comment. She didn’t like this feeling of divided allegiances, which she’d never experienced before during a case.

Deciding to temporarily back off Truman and the masons – better by far

for Murphy to be the one pissing Robin off, rather than him – Strike ate a few more chips, then said,

‘Well, we should have a look for this website Wright visited, for people who’ve been wrongly accused, but it’s a bloody odd thing for Knowles to have done. Career criminals like him don’t usually need internet strangers to tell them how to cover their arses.’

‘No,’ agreed Robin, ‘but it *might* fit Rupert Fleetwood. Maybe he was looking for advice on how to convince the police he hadn’t really stolen that nef?’

‘He marched upstairs in the club in broad daylight to nick it, then admitted to his girlfriend he had it and refused to give it back, which isn’t the behaviour of a man keen on covering his tracks. If you ask me, nicking that nef was about more than money. Fleetwood was sending a giant “fuck you” to Dino Longcaster. Longcaster’s his godfather. Fleetwood probably assumed he could slack off at work because of the family connection, then had a hissy fit when he realised he couldn’t. The whole thing smacks of arrogance and entitlement.’

‘Nice that you’re keeping an open mind about him,’ said Robin drily.

‘I don’t like grifters and leeches,’ said Strike. ‘But OK, for the sake of argument: say it *was* Fleetwood in the vault. He’s gone to ground at Ramsay Silver to evade his various problems and responsibilities, intending to flog his nef to Kenneth Ramsay, who’s just lied to us about being offered it. Why would he then use the work computer to find out how to worm his way out of a theft charge? He’d successfully disappeared from view and found a possible buyer for the goods. You’d think he’d be ordering champagne online, not asking for advice.’

Robin now looked even more troubled.

‘What’s the matter?’ said Strike.

‘I just… we aren’t doing something immoral, taking this case, are we?’

Shit.

‘I thought we agreed we’d do it to put Decima’s mind at rest?’ said Strike.

‘But if we really *don’t* think it was Fleetwood, if there’s not the *slightest chance…*’

‘There’s always a slight chance,’ said Strike, backtracking shamelessly. ‘We haven’t promised Decima we’ll prove it was Fleetwood in the vault.

We'll be giving her closure if we prove it was someone else.'

'Until she starts imagining Rupert was the victim of another unsolved murder.'

'If her delusion survives us proving Fleetwood wasn't William Wright, I'm happy to be the bastard who tells her she's in the grip of a morbid fixation.'

'You don't think it might be kinder to do that right now?'

'Look, there *are* similarities between Wright and Fleetwood. Height, build, blood type, left-handed, Fleetwood disappears, Wright appears, the silver thing… actually, on the subject of Fleetwood, would you mind taking over trying to persuade Rupert's friend Albie Simpson-White to talk to one of us? He's still refusing to come to the phone whenever I call Dino's. Woman's voice: less frightening.'

'OK,' said Robin, writing herself a reminder.

'I've also emailed Fleetwood's drug-dealing ex-housemate, Zacharias Lorimer, but no response so far. I'll give him a few more days, because I'm not wasting money calling Kenya if he's just going to tell me to piss off. Haven't tried Sacha Legard and Valentine Longcaster yet. Probably have to send Sacha a message through his agent.'

'What's he like?' asked Robin, who'd been unable to suppress a small frisson at the mention of Charlotte's Oscar-nominated half-brother.

'Like someone who'd benefit hugely from being punched in the face.'

'Strike!'

'You haven't met him.'

'What's wrong with him?'

'His whole life's been laid out for him on a golden platter; everything he wanted, from birth. His parents worshipped the ground he walked on and he takes it for granted everyone else feels the same.'

'And that clearly *really* pisses you off.'

'No. Well,' Strike conceded, 'a bit. Doesn't mean I want him dead.'

'God above, I should hope not!' said Robin, half-amused, half-shocked. 'D'you usually want people you dislike dead?'

'Some of them,' said Strike, thinking of Jeff Whittaker, his mother's second husband. 'If I heard Mitch Patterson had dropped dead in the dock, I'd probably celebrate with a pint. Rather see him in the clink, though.'

Until a few months previously, ex-policeman Mitch Patterson had

headed up the rival detective agency for which Kim Cochran had been working. There'd never been any love lost between Patterson and Strike, and in the course of attempting to bring down Strike and Robin's business, Patterson had found himself arrested for the illegal bugging of a top barrister's office.

'The trial starts next week,' said Robin.

'I know, I'm looking forward to that more than Christmas. You know, thinking about it,' Strike said, feigning a sudden thought, 'if anyone's going to talk to Sacha Legard, it might have to be you.'

'Why? You're the one who knows him.'

'Yeah, that's the problem. I assume he knows what Charlotte's suicide note said, which means he won't be very well disposed to me at the moment. Although, come to think of it, that probably extends to you, too.'

Robin felt a hot explosion in the pit of her stomach; she didn't know whether panic or pleasure predominated, but she was afraid she was going red.

Strike noted the blush and waited to see whether Robin ignored what had just been said, or responded to it for the first time. Looking down at her soup, she said,

'Sacha can't blame you for what she wrote in that note. She was… the papers said she'd taken a load of drink and drugs…'

'She knew exactly what she was saying. She'd said it all to me before, sober.'

This was news to Robin. Before she could muster a response, Strike's mobile rang, and Robin seized the opportunity to get away from the table by muttering,

'Need the loo.'

Annoyed by the interruption, which he considered extremely ill-timed, Strike answered his phone.

'Hi,' said Midge, 'I'm just letting you know, Kim and I've swapped jobs this evening. She'll do the Dorchester with you.'

'Why?' said Strike, frowning.

'She thinks Plug clocked her yesterday, so she'd rather he doesn't see her again today.'

'OK,' said Strike. 'Thanks for letting me know.'

He hung up, still annoyed. He'd hoped to do the Dorchester job with

Robin – sitting in the bar, both of them dressed up to infiltrate a charity ball, might have been exactly the right setting for the declaration he intended to make – but unfortunately, Robin was due the night off.

Meanwhile, an agitated Robin was inside a cubicle in the Ladies, asking herself what the hell Strike was playing at, bringing up Charlotte's suicide note again. Knowing her work partner as well as she did, two possibilities occurred to her. Either he was making straightforward statements of fact untinged with embarrassment, referring to the note purely because it might indeed colour Charlotte's half-brother's attitude to him and Robin, or…

Or what? Was he trying to tell her indirectly that he did have deeper feelings for her than he'd ever admitted before? Was he pushing to see what she felt in turn? Or was it safe to play this game, now she was with Murphy? Was his aim to undermine her relationship, because it suited him better to keep her single, meaning the threat of her leaving the agency receded?

With mounting annoyance, Robin asked herself why, if Strike had something to say, it had to be couched in these plausibly deniable terms, out of the mouth of a dead woman. What was she supposed to say, in a crowded pub, in the middle of a job: 'was Charlotte right? *Are* you in love with me?' If Strike did indeed feel anything approximating love for her, he'd had countless opportunities to say so, hadn't he? She'd suffered on account of her own feelings for him far more than she wanted to admit to herself nowadays. Had he hinted at such feelings two years previously, everything might have been different… or would it? As Robin knew from long, close contact with him, Strike didn't do committed relationships. A few months was all she'd ever known him manage, and Robin was now old enough, and wise enough, to know she'd never be the kind of person who wanted casual sex, or short flings. It was important to remember that, whenever her ill-disciplined thoughts drifted towards Cormoran Strike…

She thought of Murphy, who didn't play games, who said outright what he felt for her, who had no problem talking about a future with her, and didn't bail on relationships at the first hint of trouble; who wasn't, in short, an infuriating sod who messed with your feelings to further a confused, but probably self-interested, agenda. It was pointless, not to mention masochistic, to dwell on how she'd felt when she'd hugged Strike on her wedding day, or when they'd looked into each other's eyes on the pavement

outside the Ritz and she'd known he was about to kiss her, or when she'd groped for his hand in the bed they'd shared, after she'd fled Chapman Farm…

There was a loud knock on the door of the cubicle in which Robin was sitting, and she jumped.

'Is anyone in there?' said an angry voice.

'Yes,' said Robin, and she hastily pulled up her pants and flushed the toilet.

Back at the table, Strike was still eating chips when Robin's mobile, which she'd left lying face up on the table, received a text. Being good at reading things upside down, Strike didn't need to touch the phone to see:

Ryan
We could probably afford something like this www.rightmove.c…

Fuck. Fuck, fuck—

'How's your fish?' said Robin, sitting back down opposite him. She glanced at her phone, then put it back in her bag without answering the text.

'Pretty good,' said Strike.

This indication that Murphy and Robin appeared to be thinking of moving in together had come as a significant blow to Strike. Furthermore, he sensed, from Robin's tone, that continuing to milk Charlotte's suicide note would be inadvisable just now. Reluctant to abandon the field completely, however, he said,

'You've told Murphy we're taking Decima's case?'

'Yes,' said Robin.

'How'd he take it?'

'Fine,' said Robin shortly.

Strike retreated, but only to marginally safer ground:

'I'll email Sacha Legard to see if he's prepared to meet one or other of us.'

Whether because the conversation had veered back within orbit of Charlotte's suicide note or not, Robin now glanced at her watch.

'I'd better get going. I'm supposed to be in Camberwell in forty

minutes.’

‘OK,’ said Strike, as she gathered up her things, ‘but let’s try and get out to St George’s Avenue and talk to Wright’s housemates soon. Probably have to be both of us or it’ll take all day to find the right house, given we haven’t got the number.’

‘Fine,’ said Robin again, now brisk. ‘Let me know when.’

16

… this wild girl (whom I recognise
Scarce more than you do, in her fancy-fit,
Eccentric speech and variable mirth,
Not very wise perhaps and somewhat bold
Yet suitable, the whole night's work being strange)
—May still be right…

Robert Browning
In a Balcony

Strike returned to the office in a far worse mood than he'd left it. It might be the height of hypocrisy for him to feel aggrieved that Robin (as he saw it) had hidden the fact that she was house-hunting with Murphy – how much had he concealed about his own private life, throughout their friendship? – but this in no way lessened his resentment.

Stick to the game plan. He went into the inner office, opened the rota and identified Monday as the best day for him and Robin to visit St George's Avenue together, blocking out enough time not only to identify William Wright's former residence and, hopefully, interrogate his neighbours, but also to have another drink with Robin, ostensibly to debrief. Having made the necessary adjustments, Strike turned his attention to Niall Semple, the ex-paratrooper who'd now been missing for six months.

As Strike had told Robin, there'd been a light smattering of press about Semple when he disappeared, though interest seemed to have died fairly quickly. Strike now opened an article he hadn't yet read, in which Semple's wife, Jade, pleaded for information on her husband's whereabouts. The story contained three pictures: one of a clean-shaven Semple in the dress uniform of a paratrooper, the second, of the Semples' wedding day and the

third, the last known sighting of him, at a cashpoint in Camden.

Thick of neck, with high cheekbones, Semple was a handsome man with short blond hair and bright blue eyes, who resembled the physical type most often cast as a young Nazi in films, although his smile was engaging in the clean-shaven picture.

However, in the photograph of his wedding he was wearing a full beard – a most unusual choice for a soldier in the British army – and looked stern rather than happy. His wife, Jade, resembled an over-painted doll. Strike wasn't a fan of the fashion for thickly pencilled, angular eyebrows, which Jade had embraced whole-heartedly. Her thick hair, which was dyed a blueish-black, was pulled back in a semi-beehive, with locks left loose over her shoulders, and the bodice of her wedding dress was partly sheer, and had been constructed to make the most of her cleavage. She looked small even standing beside Semple, who, according to the article, was five foot seven. Strike didn't find Jade Semple attractive, but he could imagine that to men who liked that sort of thing, who enjoyed feeling large and masculine beside girlish women of tiny proportions, she'd be something of a catch.

The last picture, of Semple at the cashpoint in Camden on June the fourth of the previous year, showed a scruffy man with an unkempt beard who, rather incongruously, was holding a metal briefcase. Strike squinted at the hand gripping the briefcase. Either Semple was wearing a heavy metal watch, or he'd handcuffed it to himself.

He skim-read the article and learned that Semple had undergone brain surgery in 2014 and subsequently been discharged from the army, unfit for service. He'd disappeared from his family home in Crieff, Scotland, on the twenty-seventh of May, days after his mother's funeral.

> 'I'm desperate,' says Jade Semple. 'I'm so worried, I can't sleep or eat, I just want Niall to get in touch and if anybody's seen him, to please, please call the helpline. I'm really scared he's living rough or in some kind of bad situation.'

Strike sat back in his computer chair, thinking not so much about what the article contained, but what it didn't. The lack of detail on the incident

that had left Semple so severely injured it had ended his military career was particularly interesting to him. He opened Facebook, found Jade Semple's account easily enough and scrolled back to the date her husband had disappeared. A clutch of photos from the twenty-sixth of May all featured a fancy dress party. Jade was an identical twin: he couldn't tell whether she was the one dressed as Princess Peach from the Nintendo franchise, or the one dressed as Rosalina. There was no sign of her husband in any of the party photos.

From that day onwards, Jade had posted only requests for information on her missing husband and links to news stories about his disappearance. The very last picture posted showed Jade holding a small orange puffball of a puppy, captioned #NewFurBaby.

Strike sent Jade a private message explaining who he was, that he'd been hired to look into the body found in the silver vault and giving her his mobile number. He then opened email and began searching for the message he'd received months previously from his former SIB colleague and friend Graham Hardacre, which he'd neglected to acknowledge or answer. He'd just found it when a text from Kim arrived.

Where do you want to meet this evening? Kx

Strike noticed the casually attached kiss and didn't much like it. He texted back:

Outside Dorchester, 7

He'd only just sent this when his mobile rang with a call from Barclay.

'There's somethin' up,' said the Scot in a low voice, before Strike could speak. 'Plug's visiting some kinda compound, wi' two men.'

'What d'you mean, "compound"?'

'Waste ground, high fences, sheds… we're a good way north of Ipswich. Middle o' nowhere. Ah can hear guard dogs. There's somethin' up,' repeated Barclay. 'If Ah stick around till after dark, Ah might be able to get in there.'

'What about the dogs?'

'Ah'll change out o' my sausage trousers.'

‘OK, but for fuck’s sake don’t get caught. Last time Midge trespassed on private land, she got chased off by a bloke with a riding whip.’

‘Aye, but that was the aristocracy,’ said Barclay. ‘The look o’ this lot, it’ll be knives.’

‘We haven’t got health insurance, Barclay.’

‘Ach, I used tae drink in Barlanark in the nineties,’ said Barclay. ‘No evenin’ complete wi’out a bit o’ light stabbin’. Talk later.’

When Barclay had hung up, Strike returned to his email to Hardacre, over which he took some care, remembering to ask after Hardacre’s wife and two sons, whose names he managed, with a significant degree of effort, to recall.

At half past five, he locked up the office and went upstairs to shower, eat a sandwich and change, prior to heading out to the Dorchester. His bad mood was worsened by the fact that he considered the evening’s activities – infiltrating a gala dinner in benefit of a children’s charity – entirely pointless. Mrs A was to be in attendance, and the client was insistent that his wife should be kept under surveillance there, even though Dominic Culpepper was currently in Lancashire. Mr A thought his ex might ‘talk about shagging him, when she’s got her guard down’.

Showered and changed into his dinner suit, Strike debated whether to walk to the Dorchester in the interests of counterbalancing his earlier fish and chips or get a cab, because his leg was still aching, and compromised by setting out on foot and waiting for a cab to present itself, which happened on Shaftesbury Avenue.

The night was chilly and the combination of London’s gaudy Christmas illuminations and the cheery end-of-working-week revellers thronging the dark pavements seemed to mock Strike’s mood. As the cab slowed in front of the Dorchester, which was decorated with much greenery and thousands of twinkling ruby-red lights, he saw Kim Cochran standing alone beside the steps in a clinging crimson dress, high-necked and long-sleeved, through which her nipples were clearly visible. She was very obviously braless.

He got out of the cab and paid the male driver, who, understandably, was staring at Kim rather than at the large, bent-nosed man shoving fivers into his outstretched palm.

‘Evening,’ said Strike, when he reached Kim.

‘Wow, you brush up well,’ said Kim, smiling.

‘Likewise,’ said Strike, out of politeness.

Many other men in black tie were making their way through the twin revolving doors at the front of the hotel, accompanied by thickly made-up women in silk and sequins. As Kim moved ahead of Strike to enter via the revolving door, he saw that the dress was backless; it revealed a long expanse of smooth skin and a single mole, slightly to the right of her spine.

‘There’s a place up there we can sit for a bit,’ said Kim, pointing up the long marble-floored lobby. ‘And I’ve recced the bathroom the women at the event will be using, so I’ll make sure I’m in and out of it regularly, in case she lets anything slip during girl talk. *God*, I could use a drink. I’ve had a *very* weird couple of hours.’

‘Yeah?’ said Strike, as they reached the seating area. ‘Why’s that?’

‘First of all, get this – I got a call from Farah Navabi.’

Strike was immediately interested. Farah Navabi was an extremely good-looking, though not particularly competent, detective who’d been employed by his sometime nemesis Mitch Patterson.

‘What did she want?’

‘To hire me. She’s starting her own agency.’

‘The fuck’s she going to manage that? She planted the effing bug for Patterson. She’s going to be doing time right along with him.’

‘She’s confident she won’t,’ said Kim. ‘You don’t know Farah like I do. That woman could wriggle her way out of anything. *God*, I could use a drink.’

‘So what did you say?’ asked Strike.

‘Told her to get stuffed, obviously. I’m happy where I am and – oh, here she comes,’ Kim added in an undertone.

Strike glanced around. Mrs A was walking towards the ballroom doors, the same fake-fur coat she’d been wearing in Mount Street hanging open to reveal a floor-length sequinned purple gown. She was accompanied by a blonde wearing a corseted gold dress so tight Strike wasn’t sure how her internal organs could still be in their rightful places.

‘I’ll go and see if anything interesting’s being said at the coat check,’ said Kim, getting up to follow the women.

‘I’ll be in the bar,’ said Strike, getting to his feet: Mrs A ought not to see him sitting there alone. They weren’t going to be able to follow her into the gala dinner, of course, but Strike knew from similar jobs that once food had

been consumed, and as long as you were appropriately attired and carried yourself with the right degree of casual entitlement, these events were very easy to gatecrash.

After years of tailing the well-heeled, Strike was familiar with the layout of most of London's five-star hotels, so turned left at the end of the lobby. The Dorchester's bar was decorated in gold and green with Art Deco touches, and was bestrewn with more Christmas foliage and fairy lights. He was informed by the man at the door, who emphasised Strike's good fortune, that they could squeeze him in at the bar itself. Having ordered a double whisky, Strike had just pulled out his phone to kill time, when it rang in his hand.

'Strike.'

'Yeah,' said a female voice so loud that Strike winced and held the phone away from his ear, 'i's Jade Semple.' Her Estuary accent was so strong she pronounced her surname 'Sempaw'. 'Niall's wife. You've wrote to me, on Facebook.'

'Ah, yes,' said Strike, 'thanks for getting—'

''Ow do I know you're 'oo you say you are?'

She was throwing her voice as though speaking to him from the bottom of a well, and Strike was reminded of Bijou Watkins, who'd been similarly loud.

'We can switch to FaceTime if you'd like. I could screenshot my driving licence?'

He heard a male voice speak in the background, and knew he was on speakerphone.

'Not hard to fake a driving licence,' the man said.

'Or we could meet face to face?' said Strike.

The phone now seemed to change hands, because the man spoke next at full volume.

'Who's hired ye?'

'I can't disclose that, I'm afr—'

'Newspaper,' said the man confidently. 'Told you, babe.'

The line went dead.

Strike immediately saved Jade Semple's mobile number, which she'd incautiously failed to hide.

‘Nothing interesting at the coat check,’ said a voice in Strike’s ear. ‘Oh good, we’re drinking. Vodka tonic, please,’ Kim told the barman. ‘They’re all sitting down for dinner,’ she informed Strike.

Kim’s drink arrived at the same time as the man beside Strike got up off his bar stool, and she got onto it instead.

‘Whoops,’ she said, with yet another laugh, as her dress snagged on her heel, tugging it down at the back, leaving Strike with good reason to suppose she wasn’t wearing anything at all underneath it. She downed several gulps of her drink before saying, ‘*God*, I needed that… anyway, get this. Right after Navabi called me, I had my ex turn up at my front door. I was wearing this,’ she said, gesturing down at the dress, ‘so obviously he thought I was off meeting someone new… nice big row, obviously. He’s *such* a fool. We split up,’ she went on, although Strike hadn’t asked, ‘because he got made redundant and that became his entire personality, being jobless. I’m not even kidding! “Hi, I’m Ray, I don’t work.”’

She laughed again. Strike didn’t think she was drunk, but there was a slightly frenetic air about her that recalled Kenneth Ramsay, jabbering desperately in an effort to sell what wasn’t wanted. Strike had no desire whatsoever to hear about Kim’s private life, but protracted silence might provoke questions about his mood he didn’t want, so he asked, ‘What did he do?’

‘Worked for a hospital trust,’ said Kim, ‘and now it’s all “you left me when I was at my lowest”. I mean, there are other jobs, Ray. Just grow a pair and send out your bloody CV, hahaha. Oh dear God, look at her…’

Kim’s eyes were following the reflection in the mirror over the bar of a tall, willowy woman who’d clearly had a lot of cosmetic work done to her face. Strike was reminded of Charlotte’s mother, Tara, whose picture, the last time he’d seen one, had shown extensive overuse of fillers.

‘Why do they do it?’ Kim asked. ‘What’s the point? Look at her neck and her hands… you’re not fooling anyone… would *you*?’ she asked Strike, smirking.

‘What, have plastic surgery?’ asked Strike, knowing full well what she meant.

‘No,’ said Kim, laughing as she nudged him, ‘*you* know…’

All he had to do, Strike thought grimly, was get through the next couple of hours. He ordered another drink, so Kim did, too. She gabbled on and on,

and though Strike paid as little attention as he could, and his responses were perfunctory, he unwillingly learned far more than he'd ever wanted to about his newest subcontractor. Ray, she told him, had been the husband of a friend also on the force ('well, ex-friend now, obviously, hahaha'); their relationship had been the main trigger for Kim leaving the Met ('it's all politics, anyway, I'd had enough'); she'd also had two long, complicated affairs in her twenties, both with married policemen. Strike found it strange, to put it mildly, that she was telling him all these things unbidden, although she seemed to assume that he took her tales as sophisticated and exciting, rather than tawdry.

'… wanted kids, which I don't, so that was the end of that…'

Judy Garland was singing 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' over hidden speakers. Strike's thoughts drifted back to Robin. A good long road trip to Scotland to interview Jade Semple would mean an overnight stay four hundred miles away from Murphy, which was exactly the kind of situation he'd been hoping this case would provide. He had to put pressure on Jade Semple. Robin and Murphy might be viewing the house he'd seen on Robin's phone at this very moment. What if there was a ring-shaped Christmas present in Murphy's gym bag?

'… literally offered me money to stay. Can you imagine? *Money!*'

Someday soon we all will be together

If the fates allow…

'… glad to be working over Christmas, to be honest… I'll go and check whether we can get in there yet,' said Kim, and she slid off the barstool and walked back off towards the ballroom, her rear view attracting plenty of attention from men in the bar.

Strike ordered a third whisky, picked up his phone again and, in search of distraction, opened the website Truth About Freemasons and began to read answers to the many questions people had come on to the website to ask.

GI-67: Can Jewish people be masons?

Stolkin: Yes, masons can be any religion although Catholics aren't allowed to join by their own church.

AustinH: Is it true Freemasons protect each other?

Gareb 7: In a brotherly sense, yes. If you're thinking of concealing crimes, no, that's the mafia.

'Doors are open,' said Kim's voice in Strike's ear. 'She's pissed and dancing.'

Strike paid the barman and followed Kim back out into the lobby. As they approached the double doors into the ballroom, Kim slid her hand under Strike's arm, chattering and laughing, and they passed into the gala without challenge.

Tall vases full of white flowers and crystal icicles stood on the circular tables. Uniformed waiters and waitresses were winding through the party, clearing away empty bottles. The dancefloor was crowded, but Strike spotted Mrs A on its edge, dancing face to face with the woman in the gold dress to 'Shout Out to My Ex'.

'How fucking appropriate is that?' said Kim jubilantly, already gyrating to the music. 'Shall we dance?'

'Not my forte,' said Strike. 'Leg.'

'OK, I'll go it alone,' said Kim, and she sashayed away from him towards Mrs A and her friend, affording him another look at that long, bare expanse of back.

'What,' said a frigid voice beside Strike, 'are *you* doing here?'

Strike looked down to see a pale, petite brunette with large dark eyes, who was wearing a strapless black dress.

Oh, fuck.

'Friend invited me. Good cause,' said Strike.

'Bullshit,' said the Honourable Nina Lascelles.

He'd slept with her twice, six years previously. She was pretty enough, but that wasn't why he'd done it; she'd simply helped him gain important evidence in a case. It had seemed rude at the time not to have sex with her, because she'd clearly wanted it, but their awkward, if minimal, history was far from the only reason to deplore Nina's presence here tonight. Nina happened to be the cousin of Dominic Culpepper, the journalist Mr A suspected his ex-wife of sleeping with, and Nina had clearly drunk enough cheap champagne to make her disinhibited.

With a view to keeping the conversation civilised, Strike asked,

‘Who’re you here with?’

‘My fiancé,’ she said.

‘Ah,’ said Strike, ‘congratulations. Which one’s he?’

Nina pointed at a large blond man staggering around on the dancefloor beside Mrs A.

‘Nice moves,’ said Strike. Nina didn’t smile.

‘What are you *really* doing here?’

‘I just told you,’ said Strike. ‘Kids. Good cau—’

‘You’re here after someone.’

‘I’m a donor. The charity helped out my godson.’

‘Oh,’ said Nina. She clearly imagined even Strike wouldn’t lie about having a seriously ill godson. ‘Right. Sorry.’

He wanted to walk away, but thought it inadvisable to do it in any way she’d consider rude. Why the fuck hadn’t he just said ‘thank you’, or sent her flowers, six years ago?

Shout out to my ex…

‘Dominic’s pissed off at you,’ Nina shouted up at him. ‘He says you’ve got too grand for him. You’ll only give tips to Fergus Robertson these days.’

‘Would you say Robertson’s grander than Dominic?’ asked Strike. Robertson was a short, balding Scottish journalist of working-class origins, whereas Nina’s showbiz reporter cousin was ex-public school. When Nina’s expression remained icy, Strike said, knowing full well he wasn’t, ‘Dominic here?’

‘No,’ said Nina. ‘Is that your date?’ she asked, watching Kim dancing virtually back to back with Mrs A.

‘Yeah,’ said Strike.

‘Huh,’ said Nina, with a faint sneer. She took a clumsy swig of wine.

‘Shout Out to My Ex’ had ended. Mrs A and her friend staggered, laughing, off the dancefloor and headed for what Strike assumed would prove to be the powder room. Kim followed.

‘What’s her name?’ asked Nina, her eyes following Kim.

‘Linda,’ said Strike, off the top of his head, then wondered why the hell the first name to spring to his lips was that of Robin’s mother, who detested him.

‘Is she a detective too?’

‘No, she works in a shop.’

‘Sure she does,’ sneered Nina.

‘People *do* work in shops,’ said Strike. ‘Not everyone works in publishing or PR.’

‘I know that, *thank* you,’ snapped Nina, taking another gulp of wine.

Strike wished he still had a drink, and wished even more that Nina would sod off. Didn’t she want to dance with her fiancé, who was now staggering around to ‘Rockabye’?

‘Still at Roper Chard?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Actually,’ she added, with a slightly snide laugh, ‘if they knew I was talking to you, they’d want me to offer a deal on your memoir.’

‘There won’t be a memoir,’ said Strike.

‘I didn’t think so,’ snorted Nina. ‘Not a truthful one, anyway.’

Strike’s ego wasn’t sufficiently enlarged to believe that this degree of anger could be accounted for by a very brief liaison, six years previously.

‘What’s that mean?’ he asked.

‘It *means*,’ said Nina, ‘you really *fucked up* a friend of mine’s life.’

‘How did I do that?’ asked Strike.

‘Never mind,’ spat Nina.

Strike spotted Kim wending her way back towards him.

‘Linda,’ said Strike, before Kim could speak, ‘this is Nina. Nina, Linda.’

‘Hi,’ said Kim brightly. ‘How do you know Cormoran?’

‘We fucked twice, a few years ago,’ said Nina, leaving Strike to deplore the tendency of the upper classes to call a spade a spade.

‘Oh,’ said Kim, without a flicker of discomposure. ‘He’s good, isn’t he? Speaking of which, Corm, I’d rather be doing that. Let’s go.’

She linked her arm through Strike’s.

‘Night,’ said Strike to Nina, as he and Kim walked away.

Kim unlinked her arm from his just as Strike was about to pull away.

‘Got her, bang to rights,’ she told Strike, and held out her mobile to show him the photo she’d just taken.

Two women, one in purple, the other in gold, were closely entwined in a passionate kiss, leaning up against a tiled bathroom wall.

‘The woman in gold is Lady Violet,’ said Kim triumphantly. ‘Dominic Culpepper’s wife.’

17

Yea, and not only have we not explored
That wide and various world, the heart of others,
But even our own heart, that narrow world
Bounded in our own breast, we hardly know,
Of our own actions dimly trace the causes.
Whether a natural obscureness, hiding
That region in perpetual cloud,
Or our own want of effort, be the bar.

Matthew Arnold
Merope: A Tragedy

Strike called Robin on Saturday morning to give her two bits of news, neither of them particularly welcome.

‘Barclay was arrested last night.’

‘Shit!’ said Robin, freezing with a mug of coffee halfway to her mouth.

‘Yeah. He got taken by surprise by two men who found him trying to get inside that bloody compound Plug was visiting, north of Ipswich. Barclay managed to get onto the roof of a building from which – allegedly – there have been thefts of agricultural tools. So he’s been fucking fingerprinted and the police are going to recognise him if he goes sneaking around there again.’

‘What did he say he was doing?’

‘Said he climbed on the roof for a bet. Pretended to be pissed.’

Against her will, because it would be highly inconvenient if Barclay ended up in court, Robin laughed.

‘Glad someone finds it funny,’ said Strike.

‘Could he see anything from the roof, before he got dragged off it?’

‘No, he said the place was in total darkness, but there are dogs. That’s what tipped off the blokes who dragged him down, the guard dogs barking. Hope to fuck he’s not charged.

‘But in slightly better news, Kim’s cracked Mr A’s case,’ Strike went on. Having explained about the taking of the photograph in the Dorchester bathroom, he said, ‘… so you can take tomorrow off.’

‘Great,’ said Robin, trying to sound enthusiastic while imagining Kim’s smug self-satisfaction.

Delighted to learn that Robin had an unexpected day free, Murphy suggested lunch at the Prospect of Whitby, which she’d never visited before. It was the oldest of all the pubs that sat along the Thames, with wood-panelled walls and model ships on the window sills. The pair of them ate outside on the deck, watching the great river roll past, Robin well wrapped up against the cold. The peaceful interlude reminded Robin how well she and Murphy got on when neither of them was exhausted or stressed. With a glass of wine inside her, she concurred with more enthusiasm than she’d shown previously that they should start house-hunting in earnest, a decision made far easier because Robin’s upstairs neighbour had thrown a party on Friday that had meant she’d had barely an hour’s sleep. There was to be a viewing the following day of the terraced house in Wanstead for which Murphy had already sent Robin the details, and they agreed over lunch that they’d go, ‘just to get our eye in’, as Murphy put it. They further agreed that no properties would be viewed in Clapham, Ealing or Deptford, where Robin had lived with her ex-husband, or in Barnet, where Murphy had lived with his ex-wife.

Murphy was cheerful, conversation was easy and Robin felt nothing but affection for her boyfriend. Yes, there were things she wasn’t telling him – the GP’s letter, still unacted upon; the visit to Ramsay Silver to view the place where William Wright had been murdered and mutilated; the fact that she’d be attempting to locate Wright’s former residence the following day – but in the bracing chill, with the slight fuzziness given by the wine and the muddy Thames gliding past them, this didn’t trouble Robin overmuch. Nobody was talking about eggs, or their freezing; neither of them mentioned Cormoran Strike. To complete her good day, she received a text from Strike while she was buying more drinks at the bar, informing her that Barclay had been released with only a caution.

Great, she texted back. She hadn't told her CID boyfriend about Barclay's arrest, so when he asked why she looked so hazily happy on returning to the table, she said, 'I'm with you,' and was rewarded with a kiss.

On Monday morning, which was cloudless and chilly, Robin set off for St George's Avenue, Newham, in the still-rattling Land Rover. She'd been driving for fifteen minutes when she received a call from Midge.

'Hi,' said Robin, having to shout over the Land Rover's engine and its rattle. 'What's up?'

'I've lost a bloody wodge of expense receipts,' Midge said, sounding grumpy, 'and Pat said to call you about it.'

'It doesn't matter,' said Robin. 'Just write up what you think you spent and we can match it all against your credit card statement. Are you OK?' she added, because Midge sounded immensely stressed, which she didn't think could be entirely receipt-related.

'No,' said Midge bluntly. 'Tasha's not answering my fookin' texts and Kim's doing my fookin' head in. Can I ask you something?'

'Go on,' said Robin.

'Is there something going on with Strike and Kim?'

The receipts, Robin immediately realised, had been a pretext for Midge to call and ask this question.

'What d'you mean?' she asked, her heart rate suddenly accelerating.

'Strike. Kim. Shagging. Because I've just met her at the office, and she was banging on about Friday night.'

'Yes, she did really well,' said Robin automatically.

'I'm not talking about the photo – although that was hardly difficult, they were groping each other right there in the open. No, she says she and Strike were discussing their exes all evening and then he ran into one of them, at the party. And Kim told this woman they were off to shag, and the way she was saying it… I know he's a player,' said Midge, 'but I didn't think he'd shit on his own doorstep, y'know?'

'Nothing's going on,' said Robin, hoping she was telling the truth.

'D'you like her?' asked Midge baldly.

'She's good at the job,' said Robin.

''S not what I asked.'

'Midge—'

‘All right, fine,’ said Midge grumpily.

She hung up. Robin continued driving.

Would Strike sleep with Kim? *Had* he? Surely not. No, he couldn’t have done… he wouldn’t (as Midge had put it) shit on his own doorstep. If there was one thing that Strike put first, above everything, it was the agency.

So he’d run into an ex at the Dorchester. Well, it couldn’t have been Charlotte (a nasty mental image intruded of that beautiful face seen through bloody water)… maybe Ciara, the model? Elin, the radio presenter? Lorelei, owner of a vintage clothing store? Madeleine, the jewellery designer? Bijou, the lawyer? Robin drove on towards Newham, her thoughts dwelling on the succession of gorgeous women who’d been briefly entangled with Cormoran Strike, and she was angry at herself for ruminating on Midge’s words, and angry, too, at her detective partner, though she’d have found it hard to justify that emotion if interrogated. Strike wasn’t proven to have done anything wrong… he wouldn’t have slept with Kim… *God*, she hoped he hadn’t…

She arrived in St George’s Avenue at eleven o’clock and parked. As she was getting out of the Land Rover, Strike’s BMW passed her.

‘Morning,’ he said, when they met on the pavement between their respective cars. ‘Just been talking to Shah. He’s going to have a go at that compound this afternoon. Try and get in the front, posing as a vet who’s been called out and mistaken the address.’

‘Great,’ said Robin, trying to dispel thoughts of Kim and the gala. ‘So, we’re looking for a place with multiple bells, right?’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike, wondering whether he was imagining a slight aloofness in Robin’s manner.

‘All right, why don’t you go that way, I’ll go this, and we can call each other if we find a likely house.’

So the partners split up, Strike walking up the street and Robin down.

18

They had none of them cared much for this man. He was not a man to make close friends. But death had given him a new dignity among them…

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

St George's Avenue wasn't a particularly long street. Strike passed short terraces and a couple of squat, square blocks of flats, but a few minutes after he and Robin had parted, Strike's eye fell upon a house he considered promising: tall, narrow, shabby, its bins overflowing and with four bells on a dirty panel beside the main door.

He phoned Robin.

'Think I've found it.'

'Already?' said Robin, who was standing outside a primary school at the other end of the street.

'It's not far from where we parked.'

So Robin headed back up the street and found Strike standing at the top of a flight of filthy steps. He pressed each of the four doorbells in turn, but no responding voice issued from the intercom. Strike glanced at the only window on the ground floor. The thin curtains, which had come partially off their rail, had been drawn together against the light with a plastic hair claw.

A rangy-looking man with a long beard was walking past on the other side of the road. He stared at Strike and Robin as he passed, but carried on. Then Robin spotted a pale, overweight woman wearing leggings and a sweatshirt heading down the street, carrying a bulging plastic shopping bag in one hand and holding the hand of a small boy eating a chocolate bar with the other. The mother's hair was dark and greasy, and she had tattoos on her hands and neck. Robin had a strong presentiment that mother and child

lived in the building they were trying to enter, and sure enough, she stopped at the foot of the steps, staring up at the two detectives.

‘Morning,’ said Strike. ‘Don’t know whether you can help us?’

‘Wha’ d’you want?’ the woman said suspiciously, climbing slowly up towards them. Strike could smell the stale cannabis on her clothes.

‘Is this where William Wright used to live?’ asked Strike.

‘Yeah,’ she said suspiciously. ‘Why?’

Strike pulled a card out of his pocket and showed it to her.

‘My name’s Cormoran Strike and this is my partner, Robin Ellacott. We’re private detectives.’

The woman took Strike’s card and stared at it. An expression of dawning comprehension spread over her face, and when she looked up again, she seemed slightly awed.

‘Are you ’im ’oo done that church? An’ got that strangler?’

‘She did the church,’ said Strike, indicating Robin. ‘I got the strangler.’

‘Ha,’ said the woman, looking from one to the other. It was clear that she considered herself in the presence of celebrity, and Strike reflected that here he was seeing the flipside of the inconveniences of becoming newsworthy: the lure, to potential witnesses, of reflected glory.

‘We’ve been hired to find out anything we can about Wright,’ he said, now pulling his wallet out of his pocket. The woman’s eyes followed it greedily as he extracted three tenners.

‘I fort they knew ’oo Wright was?’ she said.

‘Maybe,’ said Strike, ‘maybe not. Anything you tell us would be in strictest confidence. We’ve got nothing to do with the police,’ he added, in indirect acknowledgment of the strong smell of weed hanging in the crisp winter air.

She chewed her lip, thinking.

‘Yeah,’ she said at last. ‘All righ’.’

She plucked the banknotes out of Strike’s hand, then unlocked the front door while her son peered up at them with the blank, wary stare of small children. The foursome stepped over a mess of fliers lying inside the front door that nobody had bothered to pick up. The overhead lightbulb was out, the uncarpeted floor was of grimy stone, and there was a mingled smell of damp and cooking. The woman opened a door on the right, and led them into her home.

What must once have been a drawing room had been converted into a cramped bedsit, which smelled strongly of cannabis and body odour. Much of the floor was cluttered with bowls used as ashtrays, empty cigarette packets, and other, less readily identifiable bits of detritus. In one corner of the room stood an aged cooker and a fridge; evidently occupants were supposed to wash up in the dirty sink visible through the door to a cramped bathroom. There was a double bed, a cot, a television standing precariously on a cardboard box, a small sofa currently occupied by two bulging black bin bags, and a chest of drawers, on top of which were two mugs growing mould, and a slightly crumpled letter headed *HM Courts and Tribunals Service.*

Strike was instantly and unpleasantly transported back to those parts of his childhood spent with his mother. Even the man with long greasy hair who was lying face down in the double bed seemed familiar. The latter jerked awake as his partner closed the door.

‘Hurgh?’ he said groggily, turning a swollen-eyed face towards them. ‘*The fuck?*’ he repeated in dazed alarm, looking up at Strike who, even in civilian clothes, conveyed an air of officialdom to those primed to detect it.

‘’E’s Cameron Strike, the private detective,’ the woman, with dim excitement. ‘’Im what caught that Shacklewell Ripper an’ done that church. An’…’

She’d forgotten Robin’s name already.

‘Robin Ellacott,’ supplied Robin.

‘Yeah,’ said the woman. ‘They wanna talk abou’ William Wright. They’re not police, Daz.’

Strike, who had considerable expertise in this area, recognised in the sleepy man the signs of a fully committed pothead: slothful speech, dazed affect and a slight, though in this instance not unreasonable, paranoia.

‘Yeah, but – the fuck?’ said Daz again, weakly. ‘I’ve got nuffing fuckin’ on, Mandy.’

Mandy cackled, tugged a pair of jeans out of one of the black bin bags and chucked them at her boyfriend.

‘Put ’em on under the duvet,’ she instructed him, now heaving both bin bags off the sofa. ‘Gonna go the laundrette later,’ she informed the detectives. Her son ran to pick up a Spider-Man action figure which had been dislodged from between the sofa cushions.

‘Council put us ’ere,’ Mandy informed Strike and Robin. ‘Shit’ole, innit? You can sit down,’ she said, pointing at the sofa. It was extremely dirty, but the two detectives did as invited, forced to sit so close that their arms and thighs touched. Mandy perched on the end of the bed; Daz, now hidden beneath the duvet, was wriggling into his jeans.

‘They don’t fink William was that Jason Fing,’ Mandy informed the undulating lump beneath the bedclothes. ‘*I* never fort ’e was,’ she said proudly.

‘Yeah, you did,’ came Daz’s muffled voice from under the duvet.

Their son was now rummaging through Mandy’s bag of shopping.

‘*No*, Clint!’ said Mandy sharply. ‘*Fuck’s* sake—’

Clint began to cry.

‘Oh, all right,’ she said, relenting instantly. She pulled out a pack of chocolate biscuits, ripped them open with her teeth and handed him one. ‘Don’ blame me when the dentist wants to take ’em all out,’ she added, pulling out a packet of Mayfair cigarettes for herself, and unwrapping them.

‘Is it OK if we take notes?’ Robin asked.

‘Yeah, go on,’ said Mandy, looking rather excited.

‘I’ll do it,’ muttered Strike to Robin, pulling out his own notebook. He thought Robin might appear less threatening to Daz, whose head had just re-emerged from beneath the duvet.

‘So you didn’t think Wright was Jason Knowles, Mandy?’ asked Robin.

‘You did,’ said Daz, before his girlfriend could answer. ‘When it was on the news, you said, “fuck, ’e *was* on the run!” *I* was the one what said ’is voice was off. ’E wa’n from Doncaster,’ Daz informed Robin. ‘I ’ad a mate from Doncaster.’

‘You think he was putting the accent on?’ asked Robin.

‘Yeah,’ said Daz.

‘Could he have been Scottish?’ she said, thinking of Niall Semple.

‘Dunno,’ said Daz. ‘Maybe.’

‘Could he have been upper class, and trying to sound working class?’ Robin asked, thinking of Rupert Fleetwood.

‘Maybe,’ said Daz again.

‘I seen ’im out there,’ said Mandy, who seemed to want to reclaim the detectives’ attention, and she pointed towards the hall. ‘Seen ’im the day ’e arrived.’

‘Did he have much stuff with him?’ asked Robin.

‘Just a suitcase,’ said Mandy. She bent down, retrieved a lighter from beside a sock on the floor, and lit her cigarette.

‘Which room did he have?’ asked Robin.

‘One above this,’ said Mandy, pointing at the ceiling. ‘S’even worse. ’Alf the size. Mind, there was on’y one of ’im.’

‘Were you the people who identified William from the pictures in the press?’

‘Nah, that was Hussein,’ said Mandy, exhaling smoke. ’’E’s moved out now, ’im an’ ’is wife an’ daughter. They wuz in the rooms on the top.’

‘D’you know their surname?’ asked Robin. ‘Where they went?’

‘Mohamed, their surname was. Syrian. Dunno where they went. Their little girl was in a wheelchair. They got council ’ousing fast, because of being shoved up top, ’ere. Maybe if I shoved Clint in a wheelchair *we’d* get an ’ouse, ’an all,’ said Mandy bitterly.

Daz got out of bed, bare-chested and -footed, and switched on the kettle standing on top of the fridge. He was somehow both skinny but also soft-looking, a small white paunch hanging over his jeans. A large tattoo on his back showed the Roman numerals for four and twenty.

‘Did you see much of Wright?’ asked Robin.

‘Bit, yeah. Fort ’e was weird, din’t we?’ Mandy said to Daz.

‘Yeah,’ said Daz, with a snigger. ‘Looked like one of them on Guess ’Oo.’

‘Wh—? Oh, the children’s game?’ said Robin, after a few seconds’ confusion.

‘Yeah,’ said Daz, who was now looking for teabags. ‘Wiv ’is beard an’ ’is glasses… if ’e’d ’ad an ’at, hahaha… an’ ’e was fuckin’ orange… fake tan. An’ ’e worked out. Seen ’im getting’ fuckin’ ’eavy boxes delivered, an’ I said, “what’s that then?” An’ ’e said, weights, got ’em off eBay, really pleased wiv ’imself… carryin’ ’em upstairs… we could ’ear ’im fumpin’ around up there.’

Strike was taking rapid notes. Clint, who’d already consumed his first biscuit, helped himself surreptitiously to a second from the packet on the bed behind his mother.

‘We sorta laughed at ’im,’ said Mandy, ‘’cause ’e told me people might come round lookin’ for ’im, an’ if they did, we should say ’e weren’ there.

Fort ’e was biggin’ ’imself up – but then look what ’appened,’ she said, with an air of dim surprise.

‘Did he say who might come looking for him?’ asked Robin.

‘Nah.’

‘He said “people”, did he? Plural?’

‘’E said “someone”, an’ then ’e said, “or ’e might send someone”.’

‘Makin’ out the mob was after ’im,’ said Daz, with a chortle. Turning to face them holding his tea, which he’d made in a mug bearing a cartoon picture of a penis captioned ‘Mr Bellend’, he said, ‘Know wha’ I fort ’e was? Stripogram. Fake tan an’ fuckin’ abs… I said to Mand, ’e’s a fuckin’ stripogram an’ ’e don’ wanna admit it.’

‘Clint, don’ do that,’ said Mandy sharply. Her son was trying to pull a plate off the top of the chest of drawers. When he showed signs of grizzling, she distracted him with a third biscuit. Daz, who was idly scratching his belly, said, ‘’E come down ’ere one time, Wright.’

‘Did he? Why?’ asked Robin.

‘Wan’ed to buy a bit of dope. We was ’avin’ a takeaway, an’ ’e ’ad a bit wiv us.’

‘Can you remember anything you talked about?’

‘’E said ’is girlfriend was gonna join ’im. Come an’ live wiv ’im, upstairs.’

‘Did he tell you his girlfriend’s name?’ asked Robin.

‘Nah,’ said Daz.

‘Rita, woz it?’ said Mandy vaguely.

‘Oh yeah, maybe,’ said Daz, although Robin had the impression he couldn’t remember. ‘An’ the gun fing,’ he said to Mandy, ‘remember?’

‘What gun thing was this?’ asked Robin, while Strike’s pen sped up.

‘We woz watchin’ *John Wick* while we was ’avin’ the Chinese,’ said Daz, ‘an’ he said someone weren’ ’olding their fuckin’ gun properly. Tryna be the ’ard man, see?’

‘No, that Rita fing…’ said Mandy, frowning. ‘Tha’ was when ’e was proper fuckin’ stoned… Rita Linda or somefing. Asked if we knew ’er. Remember?’ she said to Daz.

‘He asked if you knew someone called Rita Linda?’ said Robin.

‘Yeah… woz it Rita Linda? I fink ’e said… didn’ ’e say ’e knew what *’appened* to ’er?’ she said, appealing to her boyfriend again. ‘An’ din’ ’e say

we’d see it on the news?’

‘Dunno,’ said Daz, still scratching his navel.

‘It *woz* somefing like Rita Linda.’ Mandy ran the names together: ‘*Ritalinda*.’

‘Ritalin-da,’ said Daz. ‘Hahaha.’

‘He said he knew what had happened to Rita Linda?’ said Robin. ‘And it would be on the news?’

‘Yeah, somefing like… an’ ’e dropped ’is doob tube, remember, Daz? An’ ’e told you it was a fuckin’ blood sample, like you was gonna nick it off ’im.’

‘I don’t understand, sorry,’ said Robin. ‘He dropped what?’

‘’Is doob tube. *You* know, where you keep your stash. Fell outta ’is pocket when he stood up. Daz went to pick it up for ’im an’ Wright grabs it away, an’ Daz says, “all right, I wasn’t gonna fuckin’ take it,” an’ Wright says, “wouldn’t be no use to you, it’s my blood sample.”’ Mandy cackled. ‘Blood sample! Was it fuck.’

‘Did he say why he was carrying a blood sample around with him?’ asked Robin.

‘Yeah, said ’e was gonna ’and it in at the doctors, an’ then ’e left.’

‘You saw the tube clearly, did you? It was definitely full of cannabis?’

‘Yeah,’ said Mandy, but then, ‘musta bin. ’E fort Daz was gonna nick ’is blow or why’d ’e be so weird about it?’

‘’E was a bit of a fuckin’ weirdo,’ said Daz. ‘Mind, when it come out, on the news, I says to Mand, “tha’s what the fuckin’ mason fing was.” ’E asked me what I fort of the masons. Sounded like ’e was finking of joining,’ said Daz, now idly examining half a joint left in an ashtray on top of the fridge. ‘Fuckin’ masons,’ he said, with a guffaw.

‘But when you heard he’d been killed in a masonic shop—’

‘Yeah, I knew why ’e’d asked. Fuckin’ masons,’ Daz said again, no longer smiling. ‘S’not funny, really, is it?’ he said, as though everyone else had been laughing.

‘Can you remember anything else he said?’ asked Robin. ‘Like, where he’d come from? Anything about his family?’

‘Nah,’ said Daz.

‘Don’t fink so,’ said Mandy regretfully, ‘I don’ fink… nah.’

‘Did he ever have visitors, that you can remember?’ asked Robin.

‘Yeah, a girl an’ some dick’ead in sunglasses. But ’e wasn’ ’ere then, wozee?’ Mandy asked Daz.

‘I wasn’t ’ere eiver,’ said Daz.

‘Oh yeah,’ said Mandy, and she smirked. ‘I forgot.’

‘Wright had visitors when he wasn’t in?’ asked Robin.

‘Yeah,’ said Mandy, ‘it was after ’e was killed. No,’ she corrected herself, ‘the girl was before. The bloke was after. I only realised later. Toldja, din’ I?’ she said to Daz, who nodded.

‘Can you tell me about them?’ asked Robin. ‘Starting with the girl?’

‘She come, like, the evening before ’e was killed.’

‘You’re sure of the date? Friday the seventeenth of June?’

Mandy looked alarmed at being asked to be so precise, but then said,

‘Yeah, it was then, ’cause that weekend, when all what ’appened, ’appened, me an’ ’im’ – she pointed at Daz – ‘we’d ’ad a row an’ I told ’im to get out, an’ when I ’eard someone open the front door in the evening, I fort it was Daz come back, so I open our door an’ I seen ’er.’

‘She let herself in?’

‘Yeah, she ’ad a key,’ said Mandy. ‘She looked foreign. Like, maybe Pakistani, but light. Black ’air, really long. An’ wearing a pink top wiv flowers on it,’ she added, and she looked pleased to have remembered it. ‘An’ she was carryin’ a suitcase.’

Beside Robin, Strike’s pen was moving ever faster.

‘An’ I says to ’er, “you movin’ in?” ’cause of Wright sayin’ ’is girlfriend was gonna move in wiv ’im an’ she says, “just visitin’” an’ she didn’ sound English an’ she wen’ upstairs an’ about an hour later, she come back down, ’cause I was lookin’ out of the window—’

‘Lookin’ for me,’ said Daz smugly.

‘No, I wasn’,’ snapped Mandy. ‘I was jus’ lookin’ out the window! She come down an’ she could ’ardly carry the suitcase now, an’ she ’eaves it into the boot of a car an’ off she goes.’

‘What can you remember about the car?’

‘Silver coloured,’ said Mandy. ‘Looked new.’

‘Can you remember a make?’

‘Nah,’ said Mandy. ‘An’ then, really early nex’ day, like, five in the mornin’, I ’ears the front door again—’

‘Couldn’ sleep,’ Daz said smugly. ‘Missin’ me.’

‘Missin’ you, my arse,’ said Mandy loftily, ‘but I fort it *was* gonna be Daz this time, so I got up an’ I opened our door an’ I seen this guy wiv curly ’air goin’ up the stairs, an’ ’e ’ad an empty suitcase an’ all, an’ ’e looked back at me when I come out into the ’all an’ ’e was wearing sunglasses, indoors. ’E looked a real twat.’

‘Was he black, white…?’

‘White. So I come back in ’ere, an’ I gets back into bed, an’ about ten minutes later there’s this, like, *’uge* bang on the stairs, an’ I finks, what the ’ell’s goin’ on, an’ I gets back up and opens the door an’ this twat in the sunglasses ’as dropped the suitcase down ’em, an’ I says, “make more racket, why don’t you?” an’ ’e din’ say nuffing, jus’ dragged the suitcase out the door an’ slammed it. An’ I went to look froo the window again an’ ’e got in the car and off ’e went.’

‘When you say “the car”, you mean the same one the girl had been driving earlier?’

‘Looked like it. Yeah, I fink it must’ve been ’er drivin’, cause ’e put the suitcase on the back seat an’ got in the front passenger seat.’

‘And you’re sure both the man and the girl had been in Wright’s room?’

‘Yeah, I could ’ear ’em walking ’cross our ceiling. An’ I asked Hussein later, “did you see eiver of them people?” An’ ’e said no. An’ then, on the Monday, it was on the news Wright ’ad been killed, and I said to Daz—’

‘I come back Saturday evenin’,’ Daz informed Strike and Robin. ‘She’d suffered enough.’

‘Fuck off,’ said Mandy vaguely. ‘No, so, I says to Daz, “that was weird, those two goin’ in an’ out ’is room”.’

‘I’m only asking this for our information,’ Robin said, ‘not because we’re going to pass anything on. Did you tell the police any of this?’

Daz gave a little ‘huh’ of laughter.

‘Nah,’ said Mandy, showing her brown teeth as she grinned. ‘Jus’ said we didn’ really know ’im.’

Daz, of course, was dealing pot, and possibly other drugs; Strike and Robin had both registered the Ritalin joke, just as they’d noticed the court summons lying on top of the chest of drawers. Robin could well imagine that Daz and Mandy’s dominant emotions on finding police in the house would have been panic and a firm disinclination for letting them enter this squalid room.

Robin asked a few more questions, but Mandy had no information to give about either the couple's clothing or age; the woman, she said, looked young and the man older, but the hall, she reminded Robin, was quite dark.

'Did either of you ever see inside Wright's room?' Robin asked.

Both shook their heads.

'Before we go,' said Strike, reaching into his coat pocket, 'could I show you some pictures?'

He pulled out his phone and laid it on his knee as he sorted the pictures of Niall Semple, Tyler Powell and Rupert Fleetwood. While he was doing this, the screen of his mobile lit up and Robin saw a text from Kim, and the words, in capitals, **'SO SEXY'**. Next second, Strike's large, hairy-backed hand had covered it, and he'd returned the phone to his inner pocket, leaving Robin to feel as though as ice cubes had just dropped into her stomach.

'Could you tell me whether any of these men could have been Wright?' Strike said, getting up to hand the pictures to Mandy. Daz, his half joint now lit, moved to the end of the bed and sat down beside Mandy to look.

'Woss 'e wearin'?' was Mandy's only comment, as she surveyed Rupert Fleetwood in his waiter's bow tie. ''Andsome,' she said appreciatively, when she turned to Niall Semple's picture. 'Looks like Thor.'

'Does 'e fuck,' sneered Daz, scratching his small, flabby belly again.

''Is ears,' sniggered Mandy, when she reached Tyler Powell. 'But,' she said, looking at Powell, 'it could've been 'im, y'know. Wiv 'is ears covered, wiv 'is 'air.'

'Really?' said Strike.

'Nah,' said Daz.

'Could of been,' said Mandy.

'How sure are you?' said Strike. 'Out of ten?'

Mandy looked as alarmed as she'd been when asked to agree to a firm date, earlier.

'Five,' she said. 'But 'e was a bit like 'im, too,' said Mandy, now holding up Rupert Fleetwood's picture, with an air of wanting to cover all her bases.

'Right,' said Strike, taking the photos back again. 'Well, you've been very helpful, thanks,' he said. 'For the record, what did you think, when you saw Knowles' picture?'

‘We never fort it was ’im,’ said Mandy.

‘*You* did,’ Daz contradicted her. ‘You said, when it come out, “fuck, ’e was for real, ’e *was* on the run.”’

‘I never,’ said Mandy crossly.

‘Is there anything else you can remember about Wright?’ asked Robin, but Mandy and Daz had given all they had to give. However, even Daz seemed slightly reluctant to let the detectives go: their visit had been an unusual, mildly exciting, interlude.

Robin wanted to get out into clean air again, but she felt a pang of guilt at leaving the family where they were, especially as Mandy began talking about housing when it became clear that Strike and Robin were really leaving.

‘We’ve bin on the waiting list for a council ’ouse for a year,’ she said, walking them to the front door.

‘That’s awful,’ said Robin.

Strike reached into his pocket again and took out a further twenty pounds.

‘For your trouble,’ he said. ‘Buy Clint something for Christmas.’

‘Oh, cheers!’ said Mandy, now far happier to see them depart.

The door closed behind Strike and Robin as they walked down the steps.

‘That was nice,’ said Robin.

‘Just hope it doesn’t all go on weed. Fancy a debrief? There’s a pub up —’

‘Could we do it tomorrow?’ said Robin. ‘I’ve actually got to get going just now.’

‘Oh,’ said Strike. ‘Right.’

‘I’ve got a load of paperwork to file at the office, and I don’t want to put it off, because I’m going to view a house later,’ said Robin.

‘Right,’ said Strike again.

Fuck, fuck, FUCK.

Strike walked slowly back towards his BMW, pulling his mobile out of his pocket as he went. Another text from Kim had followed the one he’d glimpsed inside.

Omg, sorry, that wasn’t meant for you!

He scrolled up to the previous text.

He looked SO SEXY in his dinner jacket!

19

We for a certainty are not the first
Have sat in taverns while the tempest hurled
Their hopeful plans to emptiness, and cursed
Whatever brute and blackguard made the world.

A. E. Housman
IX, Last Poems

‘So,’ said Murphy, setting a glass of tonic water and a packet of crisps in front of Robin six hours later, ‘that was a waste of bloody time.’

‘I know,’ said Robin.

They were sitting in the corner of a loud and noisy pub situated close to the small terraced house in Wanstead they’d just viewed. Having spent an hour in Mandy and Daz’s bedsit that morning Robin would have expected anything to look good by comparison, but she doubted the ‘three bedrooms, separate lounge and kitchen’ had been decorated or restored in thirty years. Robin and Murphy had trailed around the place in the wake of a middle-aged couple who appeared to be looking at the house as an investment opportunity: renovate, sell and reap a fat profit.

Murphy had only ten minutes to spare before he needed to set off back to work. He hadn’t told Robin exactly what was happening on his gang shooting case, or what he’d be doing this evening, had arrived late for the house viewing and been almost monosyllabic throughout. He kept checking his phone.

‘Are you OK?’ Robin asked tentatively.

‘Yeah,’ said Murphy.

He took a sip of his zero-alcohol beer, then said,

‘The mother’s given a big interview to the *Mail*.’ Robin knew him to be

referring to the woman who'd lost one child, and whose other was now blinded, in the gang shooting. 'Probably be online soon.'

'Oh God, I'm sorry,' said Robin.

'I'm just sick to the back fucking teeth of it all,' muttered Murphy furiously. 'We had the guy who was driving the car the shooter fired from in custody. We applied for an extension to keep questioning him and it's been fucking refused.'

'Why was it refused?'

'Because he's got a shit-hot piece of shit lawyer, that's why.'

Robin could tell her boyfriend was in the state where neither sympathy nor further questions would be welcome. She took a sip of tonic water and opened her crisps.

'How was your day?' said Murphy, with an obvious effort.

'Fine,' said Robin, with forced brightness.

'What were you doing?'

'Trying to find Rupert Fleetwood. We didn't.'

Murphy forced a smile.

Five minutes later, after finishing his drink, he said,

'I'm gonna have to go.'

'OK. I'm going to stay a bit longer. Might get more crisps.'

Murphy kissed her, and left.

Robin had to admit to herself that it was a relief to see him disappear. Now she could let her face fall, relish the anonymity of this crowded, noisy pub and try and address her own mood, which was a combination of anxious, miserable and another emotion she didn't particularly want to identify.

Aside from the depressing visit to the rundown property they'd just viewed, and the disquiet that had resulted from seeing that text to Strike from Kim, Robin was now weighed down by the knowledge that she and Strike were in possession of information the police had never been given. She'd assured Mandy and Daz they wouldn't share anything the couple had said, but of course, that had been a lie: she and Strike had an obligation to pass on important evidence to the people who ought to be dealing with it, because, whatever Murphy might think, they weren't in the business of trying to upstage or sideline the proper authorities.

Robin had been inwardly debating whether she should tell her boyfriend

about the man and woman who appeared to have taken things from William Wright's flat before and after he'd been murdered, but, given his mood when he'd finally turned up at the terraced house, she'd decided against doing it this evening. Had she gone for a debrief drink with Strike, they could have discussed all of this, of course…

SO SEXY. Staring at the tinsel-decked bar, Robin asked herself when she'd ever needed to send Strike a text with the words SO SEXY in it. Unless she was reporting an overheard conversation, she couldn't imagine any circumstances under which she'd have done so, even after years of deepening friendship. At the very least, they suggested a hitherto unsuspected degree of familiarity and complicity between Kim and Strike.

Her mobile screen lit up. Strike had texted her.

How was the house?

Though Robin didn't know it, Strike was also currently sitting alone in a pub: the Flying Horse, his favourite local. He, too, was feeling depressed, although at least he had the compensations of alcohol. It had taken him half an hour to decide on sending the four-word text. He wanted to push her into admitting that she and Murphy were moving in together because, unwelcome though the announcement would be, no carefully targeted offensive action could be taken against a hidden enemy.

Robin contemplated Strike's message for several minutes. Annoyed at him as she currently felt, she was vaguely touched that he'd bothered to ask. They were friends, after all. Best friends.

Horrible, she texted back.

Strike was very slightly cheered by this answer. At least cohabitation wasn't imminent. He began to type again:

I think I've found that website William Wright was looking at, at work. www.AbusedAndAccused.org

Robin pressed the link and was taken to a website headed by the logo

Kenneth Ramsay had described: two stylised hands, each of them holding an eyeball.

She scrolled slowly downwards. The website was clearly the very last resort of the desperate. Lawyers of the less reputable type posted advertisements there, trawling for those looking for compensation or appeals against convictions. Laymen were either profligate with free advice that strayed into the criminal, or had visited the site in a spirit of Schadenfreude.

Anon9: I have been arrested drunk driving but nobody give my miranda rites does this mean I can apeal

Dogger: Miranda warnings are only given in the states you twat

AustinH: my girl frend ‘s father spread rumors I done sonething really bad . how do I stop this do I need a lawyer

Kojak: I can sort that for you no lawyers involved

Kibosh: Have been accused of ‘inappropriate touching’ of work experience girl, suspended on full pay, would be grateful to hear of anyone else who has been subject of similar baseless accusation.

Belter: Nonce

C2J88: Nonce

Japh: Nonce

Robin texted Strike back.

It does look like WW was hiding or on the run from someone/something.

Yeah. I’m going to call Wardle about that couple who took stuff from Wright’s flat, btw. We

can’t sit on that.

Robin relaxed somewhat. She wouldn’t have to tell Murphy and, hopefully, her boyfriend would never hear where Wardle had got the information.

Strike, meanwhile, was interested in Robin’s willingness to engage in a text conversation with him. This seemed to suggest she wasn’t with Murphy right now. He sent another text.

I’ve emailed that Osgood bloke. No response yet.

Robin responded:

No. Well, he didn’t seem very fond of unsolicited emails

Strike typed **true**, then sent a further text.

Been wondering why a man would be carrying around a blood sample.

That must have been a lie?

I’d have thought so. Also been wondering whether the getaway car containing the Murdoch silver also contained a curly-haired man and a long-haired woman.

Yes

Wouldn’t mind pictures of the body. See whether there were defensive wounds.

Don’t want much, do you?

Might get lucky on some of it. Kim says she’s got an in.

A shard of red-hot resentment pierced Robin.

For God’s sake, calm down. You need information, said a rational voice in her head, but it was no match for the angry self that wanted to type, *why don’t you just team up with bloody Kim on the case instead, if she’s got so many ins?*

She lifted her glass to her lips, only to find it empty. Looking up, she realised that a group of women close by were throwing her unfriendly glances for hogging a table and texting, when she was neither drinking nor eating. Robin gathered up her things and left the pub.

The night was freezing, the stars overhead glinting, remote and unfriendly. Once inside the Land Rover, Robin locked the door and turned back to her phone. While she’d been walking to the car, Strike had texted again.

What do you think of her, incidentally?

Robin stared at these words for a few seconds, before typing back,

Who, Kim?

Yes

Unbeknownst to Robin, Strike was consciously trying to disarm what he feared might be a ticking bomb. He couldn’t be sure that Robin had seen the

SO SEXY text, and maybe it was vanity to imagine that she'd have been remotely concerned, but he didn't like the idea of what Kim might be saying behind his back, and after their evening at the Dorchester, he wouldn't put it past her to be hinting at a mutual attraction that didn't exist.

Back in the Land Rover, Robin was afraid of taking too long to answer.

She's good at the job.

Strike pondered this answer, scowling slightly. Was this diplomacy, or had Robin not noticed a trace of flirtatiousness in Kim's manner towards him? Or didn't she care?

What do you think of her personally?

Robin, who was now wondering whether she was being asked to give her seal of approval for Strike's affair, hesitated. She feared responding negatively, because she didn't want Strike to realise… what? Then she saw the three dots that meant Strike was typing again, and waited.

Because she's starting to piss me off

Suddenly the stars dimly visible through Robin's misty windscreen were winking benignly. She could be generous, now.

She's good at the job, though.

It's just me who thinks she's bloody full of herself then, is it?

No, thought Robin, feeling even more relieved than she had when Strike had said he'd tell Wardle about the couple who seemed to have stolen items

from Wright's flat, *it isn't.* She considered telling Strike about Midge's question of that morning, but something held her back. The thought of Murphy was somehow tangled in with her reasons for not opening a conversation about Strike being fancied by Kim: better, perhaps, not to go there at all.

She's quite pleased with herself, but you can't say she hasn't anything to back it up. It was good work, getting that picture at the Dorchester. Have you shown it to Mr A, by the way?

Yeah. He's pleased. Just hope there's no fallout.

What do you mean?

I ran into someone at that dinner who knows me: cousin of Dominic Culpepper's. If A uses that picture to try and wreck Culpepper's marriage, it won't take Culpepper long to work out who was keeping watch over his wife and Mrs A that night.

The smile now faded off Robin's face. So whichever ex-girlfriend Strike had run into at the gala dinner was Dominic Culpepper's cousin? That didn't fit any of the former girlfriends she knew about. Exactly how many exes did Cormoran Strike have?

Oblivious to the new hole he'd inadvertently dug for himself, Strike was

typing again.

I've been going through the footage from Ramsay Silver's interior camera this afternoon.

Anything interesting?

A couple of bits I wouldn't mind discussing. Have you had any luck on Tyler Powell?

I tried calling his grandmother this afternoon. No answer. I think I've also found his parents, but no landline for them. The whole family's in Ironbridge. Odd that the grandmother called the helpline, not his mum or dad.

Robin's fingers were becoming increasingly numb in the cold, but she typed on.

How did Dev get on at that Ipswich compound, by the way?

No dice. There was a kind of watchman who didn't seem to buy his story.

Strike, I'm going to have go to, I've got to drive home and I'm

freezing.

No problem. We’re both free Weds afternoon, we could review the Ramsay camera footage then?

Great, texted Robin.

Nine miles away in the Flying Horse, Strike replaced his phone in his pocket and contemplated the bottles behind the bar, feeling morose. He needed to start his bloody Christmas shopping. His sister, Lucy, kept sending him anxious texts about the sale of Ted and Joan’s house. There was bound to be a house out there, somewhere, that Robin and Murphy would like.

Nevertheless, he thought, getting to his feet, he’d secured another afternoon alone with Robin. Given her house-hunting activities, every conversation from now on had to be considered in the light of an opportunity.

20

The when, and where, and how, belong
To me—'Tis sad work, but I deal in such.

Robert Browning
Second Year 1731 – King Charles

'Why have we got a fish tank?'

It was nine o'clock on Wednesday morning and Strike had just entered the office to find his office manager shovelling gravel into the bottom of an aquarium standing on a side table beside the sofa, where previously there had been a fake pot plant.

'Because nobody told me Tilly's nan was getting her one,' said Pat sourly, over the clatter of gravel.

'Tilly?'

'One of my great-granddaughters,' snapped Pat. 'She wanted goldfish, it's her birthday. I bought the whole kit and caboodle and then I find out her other nan's bought her the lot. I'll have to go out at lunch and get her something else.'

'I assume you're planning on putting fish in it?'

'Well, I'm not going to shove a cat in,' said Pat irritably.

Strike had no wish whatsoever to add the care of goldfish to his daily workload, but given Pat's current irascibility he decided not to ask why she didn't just sell the aquarium on eBay. As he headed for the kettle, he placed a sheet of paper headed 'Hussein Mohamed' on Pat's desk. He'd asked her to make a search of online records for the Syrian family who'd lived upstairs from William Wright, and had a wheelchair-bound daughter.

'We've had a couple of funny phone calls,' Pat told him, over the clatter of gravel.

‘How, “funny”?’

Pat set down her bag of gravel, crossed to the desk and pressed a button on the phone. A reedy, petulant male voice said,

‘This is Calvin Osgood. I’d be grateful if you’d call me back immediately and tell me what this is all about. And for the record, *nobody calls me Oz*.’

The man dictated his mobile number and hung up.

‘That’s all right,’ Strike told Pat. ‘He’s just a bloke who got a strange email from Ramsay Silver. I’ll call him back after I’ve had a coffee. What’s the other funny call?’

Pat pressed the answer machine button again. Low, guttural breathing issued from the speaker, followed by a male voice rasping:

‘Leave it an’ you won’t get ’urt.’

‘That it?’ said Strike, turning to look at the machine as it beeped again. ‘Bit non-specific.’

‘Yeah,’ said Pat. He could tell she was trying to hide an unease for which he couldn’t blame her. They’d both been in the office when Pat had opened an explosive device. As Strike moved towards the kettle, he mentally reviewed the cases currently on the agency’s books, wondering exactly what ‘it’ they were supposed to leave.

Two-Times had been taken on as a client again because, whatever his personal peculiarities, he always paid his bills on time. However, unless his fetish for unfaithful women had developed a strange new offshoot, Two-Times would hardly be calling the office to tell them to stop tailing his wife. That left Plug and the silver vault case.

‘It could be one of the blokes who dragged Barclay off the roof of that compound,’ he said. ‘Kim thought Plug might have clocked her the other day, as well. I’ll check.’

‘Is that a new shirt?’ said Pat, squinting at him.

‘Er – yeah,’ said Strike. He’d put it on that morning because of his imminent tête-à-tête with Robin. Now he felt vaguely self-conscious, as though Pat had read his mind.

‘Suits you,’ she said gruffly, and returned to her fish tank.

Once at the partners’ desk, and fortified by half a mug of strong coffee, Strike called Kim. Her immediate response was a hitherto unexhibited sharp defensiveness.

‘Plug didn’t really spot me, I was just being super-careful,’ she said. ‘I thought there was a remote chance. Anyway, I was wigged up and wearing glasses. There’s no way he could have traced me to this agency, I just thought it was best if I didn’t follow him again too soon afterwards.’

‘Right,’ said Strike. He hadn’t forgotten that the job swap in question had meant Kim got to accompany him to the Dorchester in a backless dress.

‘It was probably Robin,’ said Kim. ‘She lost him, remember, at Victoria? He might’ve spotted her and deliberately shaken her off. She isn’t as careful as she should be about disguises, given she’s been in the press a l—’

‘Well, there’s no guarantee it was anything to do with Plug,’ said Strike. ‘I’ll let you get on.’ He hung up, drank some more coffee, then returned Calvin Osgood’s call.

Strike was halfway through explaining who he was, and why he was calling, when Osgood interrupted in the thin, whiny voice Strike imagined a mosquito might have, should it be granted speech.

‘I know who you are, you explained in your email! I haven’t got *anything* to do with Ramsay Silver. I told the police all this – somebody out there’s *pretending* to be me. That’s who this person must’ve thought they were emailing!’

‘You think your identity’s been stolen?’

‘I *know* it’s been stolen! He’s calling himself Calvin “Oz” Osgood, music producer, which is who I am, except I’ve never called myself Oz, and nor has anyone else, and he’s linked my LinkedIn profile to his bloody Instagram page, so I’ve been getting emails to him on my professional account!’

‘“Emails”, plural?’ said Strike, his mobile now pinned between shoulder and ear as he logged into LinkedIn and searched for *Calvin Osgood music producer.* ‘What did they say?’

‘Well, there was that one from Ramsay Silver talking about helping me with a problem, and some idiot asking if I was still interested in buying his van, and complete gibberish from a girl who couldn’t write proper English, saying I’d played a prank on her cousin, and what had I done to her, or some such crap.’

Strike had just found what he assumed was Osgood’s genuine LinkedIn profile. It featured a man with a chubby, though not unhandsome, face who Strike judged to be in his mid-thirties, but what interested him most was

that Osgood had dark, curly hair. Skim-reading the page, Strike learned that Osgood produced incidental music for television shows, though not any that Strike had watched.

‘Did you keep these emails for “Oz”?’

‘I deleted them,’ said Osgood, adding defensively, ‘I didn’t know I was going to have the police and a private detective calling me about them, did I?’

‘Could the deleted emails still be in your email b—?’

‘I emptied it. The police haven’t been any help at all,’ Osgood continued, his reedy voice rising still higher. ‘What’m I going to be dragged into next?’

‘This must’ve all been very difficult for you,’ said Strike, not particularly sincerely. He’d just found the Instagram page Osgood had described. The account purported to be that of Calvin ‘Oz’ Osgood, music producer, there was a link to the real Osgood’s LinkedIn page, to bolster the fake account’s credibility, but ‘Oz’ didn’t feature in the Instagram pictures except for the occasional wisp of dark, curly hair, the back of an equally curly head, or one lens of his mirrored sunglasses. In the absence of full-face shots, the small visible traces of the fake Osgood might plausibly have been photographs of the real producer. The images showed glamorous, intriguing settings – infinity pools, long white beaches, fireworks in the Seychelles, mixing desks, photographs of well-known singers that appeared to have been taken from the wings of the stage and interior shots of private planes. The captions were short, giving little away, and tending towards brief hashtags: #HighLife, #GouldingGig, #MusicMagic. One showed a pair of tanned bare feet standing on a pair of scales that read 68kg, with the caption #TargetWeight.

‘And those are the only emails you’ve had from people who think you and Instagram Oz are the same person, are they?’ asked Strike. ‘The one from Ramsay Silver, the one about the van, and another one about some supposed prank?’

‘Yes,’ said Osgood, sounding still more defensive. ‘Why would I lie?’

‘Just checking,’ said Strike. ‘Well, thanks for getting back to me.’

‘I was in Manchester,’ Osgood said, ‘when that Wright person was killed, and I’ve already proved it to the police!’

‘Then I needn’t trouble you any longer,’ said Strike, and having thanked

Osgood again for his time, he rang off and began reverse-searching the images Oz had posted to Instagram.

As Strike had suspected, all had been stolen from other accounts, with portions of Oz's curly hair photoshopped in. Strike suspected the picture of the scales, showing a weight Strike would have had to lose at least a couple more limbs to achieve, was meant to explain the discrepancy in size between the real chubby-faced music producer on LinkedIn and his Instagram impersonator.

Strike took out a fresh notecard of the type he used to pin on the noticeboard and headed it: Oz

Impersonates Calvin Osgood, music producer, online
Set up fake Instagram account in January last year
Might have his own curly hair or wears curly wig when pretending to be Osgood.
Someone at Ramsay Silver emailed Osgood/Oz offering help for unspecified problem
Was emailed about a van for sale
Was emailed in bad English about prank played on girl

Strike pinned this card beneath the various press clippings and notes relating to their four possible William Wrights, returned to his desk, and spent the rest of the morning dealing with paperwork unconnected to the silver vault case.

He was still there, consuming a late lunch, when Midge arrived to file her most recent notes. Hearing her ask Pat, 'Are we getting fish?' and Pat's snapped answer, 'No, turkeys, what's it look like?' Strike called Midge through to the inner office and asked whether she thought Plug had spotted her lately.

'No,' she said with an unexpected degree of aggression. 'Why? What's Kim been fookin' saying now?'

'She hasn't been saying anything,' said Strike. He remembered Robin telling him Midge's romance might be on the rocks, but he didn't much appreciate her tone. 'We've had an anonymous call to the office and I wondered whether it could've been him or one of his mates.'

‘Oh,’ said Midge, looking somewhat abashed. ‘Right. Well, he did something fookin’ weird last night. Left his mum’s at midnight, jumped in his van, and drove to an allotment up the road. He goes into the shed with a torch, stays five minutes, comes out, locks it up again, and drives home. I waited ’til he was safe in the house, then went back to the allotment. Long story short, nearly bust my knee climbing over the fence, and there’s something alive in there.’

‘What, in the shed?’

‘Yeah. It’s animal, not human – unless they’re deaf, I s’pose. I said “knock twice if you can hear me” and nobody did. Whatever it is sounds big, but it wasn’t moving a lot. The windows are blacked out and there’s a massive chain and padlock on the door.’

Strike heard Pat’s gruff ‘afternoon’ in the outer office and knew Robin must have arrived. He followed Midge into the outer office, where Robin was hanging up her coat and Pat was making more coffee.

‘Oh, are we getting—?’ began Robin, looking at the fish tank, but Strike interrupted,

‘How was Mrs Two-Times?’

‘Dull,’ said Robin. ‘All she seems to do is shop and meet her girlfriends for lunch. I just handed over to Dev in Harvey Nichols.’

Strike, Robin noticed, was wearing a blue shirt she’d never seen before.

‘We’ve had a threatening phone call,’ he informed her. Pat played Robin the second of the two messages the agency had received overnight.

‘“Leave it and you won’t get hurt?”’ Robin repeated. She’d once unwrapped a severed leg in this very office, so a non-specific whisper seemed fairly tame in comparison, but all the same, she didn’t fancy further unwanted packages. ‘What’s “it”?’

‘Christ knows.’

The two partners retired to the inner office.

‘Don’t mention fish,’ Strike told her, as he closed the office door. ‘The tank was supposed to be a birthday present for her great-granddaughter, but a rival grandmother beat Pat to it.’

‘Oh, I see,’ said Robin. ‘Well, they’ll brighten the place up.’

‘Yeah, be a real morale-raiser, fish carking it and Pat blaming me,’ said Strike.

Robin laughed, then, noticing a few additions to the noticeboard since

she'd last examined it, moved closer to look at them.

On the lower part of the board was Strike's new note about 'Oz', and beside it a card headed 'Wright' bearing a summary of the notes Strike had made about the man who'd lived for a month in St George's Avenue, and worked at Ramsay Silver for a fortnight.

> 5'6/7 – blood group A+ – left-handed – mid-twenties–early thirties – fake tan, worked out, weights – dope smoker – has handled gun professionally/recreationally? – faking accent? Not from Doncaster? – knows about 'Rita Linda'. This will be/has been in papers? – girlfriend coming to live with him? – associates/enemies may include man with dark curly hair and light-brown skinned, long black haired girl (possibly South Asian). These had keys to Wright's house and room.
> TBD: Call Jim Todd, Ramsay Silver cleaner 07335 854042
> Call Pamela Bullen-Driscoll, Ramsay Silver manager 07194 241267

At the very bottom of the board was a new photograph, showing a man with dark hair, a pronounced widow's peak and a thick moustache. Beside this Strike had written:

> TBC: DCI Malcolm Truman, allegedly member of Winston Churchill Lodge
> Next meeting Freemasons' Hall Dec 23rd 18.30

Evidently, Robin thought, with a slight sinking feeling, Strike had found the online allegation that Malcolm Truman was a Freemason. Her gaze moved back up the board to the new note about 'Oz'.

'So that Osgood man's a victim of identity theft?' she said.

'So he claims,' said Strike. 'He's none too chuffed he's been dragged into a murder investigation.'

'Hardly surprising.'

'He claims he was in Manchester when Wright was killed. I'll check that out, but I suspect it's true and the police concluded he was irrelevant.

’Course, the police weren’t aware a man with curly hair entered Wright’s room the morning after Wright was murdered.’

‘You think that might have been this “Oz” person?’

‘Got to be a possibility,’ said Strike, ‘but I’m keeping an open mind.’

‘Have you told Wardle about the curly-haired man and the South Asian girl?’

‘I have, yeah, and he’s passed the information to the team handling the case. I’ve also contacted the cleaner and the shop manager, Jim Todd and Pamela Bullen-Driscoll. Interesting responses.’

‘Really?’ said Robin, sitting down as Pat entered the room, holding two mugs of coffee, which she set down beside each partner.

‘Cheers, Pat,’ said Strike.

‘Biscuit?’ she asked.

‘No, thanks. Trying to be good.’

‘I won’t, either,’ said Robin. ‘Christmas coming.’

‘A biscuit won’t hurt *you*,’ said Pat.

‘You can close the door behind you, Pat,’ said Strike.

The office manager left, now smirking.

‘Go on, about Pamela and Todd,’ said Robin.

‘Todd’s happy to meet, but can’t till the nineteenth. Pamela Bullen-Driscoll all but told me to fuck off.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Very genteel,’ said Strike, ‘and very cold. “Ay’ve said all Ay’ve got to say to the police, Mister Strike.”’

‘Oh,’ said Robin. ‘I got your email about Jade Semple, by the way.’

‘Yeah, another one who’s not keen on talking to me. I’ve sent her screenshots of my bona fides and no response whatsoever. Maybe she’s not as keen on finding her husband as she claimed to the press. There was a fairly shirty man with her when we spoke.

‘But I’ve been all through the Ramsay Silver camera footage for the relevant days,’ said Strike. ‘If you come round here, I’ll show you the edited highlights.’

So Robin picked up her coffee and rolled her chair around to sit beside Strike, and he smelled a trace of the perfume he’d bought her.

‘Right,’ he said, opening his notebook to a page on which were listed many different times, so he knew where to stop the footage. He pressed

play and, immediately, fast forward.

‘Oh dear,’ said Robin.

‘Yeah,’ said Strike.

The quality of the black and white film was very poor, the outlines of the cabinets, tables and silverware in the empty shop fuzzy.

‘Knew that camera was a pile of shit. Right,’ said Strike, watching the minutes pass rapidly on the small digital clock in the corner of the screen. ‘Twenty to nine, Pamela Bullen-Driscoll arrives.’

He pressed play. A boxy-looking woman appeared in silhouette behind the door’s glass panel, her facial features indistinguishable. She entered, turned on the lights, then punched in a number on the keypad beside it to turn off the alarm. Strike pressed fast forward again.

‘She opens the warped door to the basement on the third push, and we can deduce she was hanging up her bag and making herself a coffee, because she comes back upstairs minus handbag and plus mug. She raises the blinds,’ said Strike, as Robin watched Pamela wield a metal crank to do so. ‘Note, by the way, that the right-hand one’s damaged. It doesn’t go fully to the bottom of the window – another supposed bit of security Ramsay hasn’t bothered to fix or replace. At eight fifty-four, our murder victim arrives. That,’ he said, pressing play again, ‘is William Wright.’

A suited man as fuzzy and indistinct as Pamela entered the shop. His dark beard covered a lot of his face, as did his glasses, which had thick frames that were visible even on this poor-quality film, and Robin was reminded of Daz’s comment that Wright had looked like a character from Guess Who?. Wright raised a hand in greeting to Pamela, who was now sitting at the desk.

Strike pressed fast forward again.

‘Nothing interesting in the morning,’ he said, while Pamela and Wright moved around the shop floor in comically quick fashion. ‘Business is slow. Three browsers, only one of whom buys anything – him,’ said Strike, pointing at an elderly man zooming between glass cabinets.

Strike pressed play again at 11.46, and they watched William Wright write a receipt for the old man.

‘Definitely left-handed,’ said Robin.

‘Exactly,’ said Strike, pressing fast forward again. ‘Then, at three minutes past one, Kenneth Ramsay turns up.’

Sure enough, Ramsay appeared, recognisable to Robin because of his blur of silver hair.

‘Excited,’ said Strike, as the fast-forwarded Ramsay paced and gesticulated, exchanging comments with Pamela and Wright, ‘because he thinks the Murdoch silver’s about to arrive.’

The on-screen Ramsay left the shop three times to look up and down Wild Court in hope of seeing the Gibsons delivery van, but returned disappointed each time.

‘He hangs around till fourteen minutes past two,’ said Strike, ‘decides he can’t stretch out his lunch hour any longer, and leaves. Then, at a quarter past three, the stuff finally shows up.’

He pressed play.

A large delivery man in overalls appeared outside the door, which Wright opened. The man entered, pushing a sack truck loaded with two medium-sized crates and a smaller one.

‘Wright drags the first three crates off the trolley,’ said Strike, as Robin watched this happen on-screen, ‘and goes outside to help the delivery man with the largest crate. They get it off the trolley together – dump it beside the others – now, watch this… the delivery guy’s saying it’s not his job to carry the crates further than the shop floor.’

Pamela was now gesticulating; the delivery man was shaking his head. Pamela signed a document he offered her. The delivery man departed.

Pamela headed once more for the basement.

‘She’s gone to unlock the vault,’ said Strike. ‘Note that she doesn’t do it in front of Wright.’

They watched Wright lift the smallest crate and stand waiting for Pamela to reappear. When she’d come back upstairs, Wright headed down to the basement, and Pamela made a call on her mobile.

‘We’ll see the result of Pamela’s call at a quarter to four,’ said Strike, pressing fast forward again.

A blonde woman entered the shop and began darting between cabinets. In double-quick time, Wright lifted one of the medium-sized crates and hurried off towards the vault with it. The blonde customer spoke to Pamela, who donned white gloves to open a cabinet. While she was showing the customer indistinguishable small objects, Wright reappeared and took the third crate down to the basement.

At 15.47, yet another man appeared in the shop. He was balding, almost spherical in shape, wearing a backpack, and also appeared to be wearing overalls. Strike hit pause.

‘That’s Jim Todd, the cleaner.’

‘How d’you know?’

‘Because when I spoke to him, he assumed I already knew he’d been summoned to the shop by Pamela, because Wright needed help getting the biggest crate down to the vault. Todd cleans for a local office on Friday afternoons, so he was in the vicinity. Pamela pressured him into leaving early and helping her out.’

‘He doesn’t look the heavy-lifting type,’ said Robin.

‘You’d be right about that,’ said Strike, pressing play again. ‘Watch.’

Wright, who’d just returned from the vault, joined Todd in lifting the largest crate, though Todd was clearly struggling to support the weight of it, and they edged, crab-like, towards the stairs to the vault and disappeared. Pamela was still busy with the blonde customer. Strike pressed fast forward. Wright returned to the shop floor alone.

‘I think Todd’s having a minor heart attack downstairs,’ said Strike. ‘Keep watching.’

The blonde customer was still making her choice of purchase, and Robin remembered the little silver orb charm she’d liked. Todd finally reappeared, massaging his chest. The blonde left the shop. Pamela descended the stairs to the vault alone.

‘This,’ said Strike, ‘will be when Pamela started prising off crate lids and realised part of the delivery’s got mixed up… she comes back upstairs…’

Pamela returned to the shop floor, holding unidentifiable objects in her arms.

‘The “minor items” Pamela bid on, that should have gone to Bullen & Co?’ said Robin.

‘You should be a detective,’ said Strike.

‘She finds a bag for the stuff, gives it to Wright, tells him to take it to Bullen & Co… he leaves… and now she makes another call.’

Strike pressed fast forward again. Pamela finished the call on her mobile, then had a conversation with Todd, who seemed, from his gestures, to be telling her he needed to be elsewhere.

‘Saying she still needs him,’ said Robin.

‘Yeah,’ said Strike, ‘because Wright won’t be able to carry the centrepiece down into the vault alone, once they’ve got it back from Bullen & Co.’

Pamela went back down to the vault, reappearing at 16.42. She took something from her jacket pocket.

‘Watch closely,’ said Strike, hitting play again.

‘A text?’ said Robin, as the on-screen Pamela stared at whatever was in her hand.

‘I think so,’ said Strike. ‘Watch the body language.’

Pamela stood frozen for almost a minute, before Todd spoke to her. She looked up at him. Another animated conversation followed, Pamela pointing at the vault, then making hand-chopping movements.

‘Laying down the law,’ said Strike. ‘He wants to go, but she wants him to stay to help Wright downstairs with the centrepiece, once it arrives.’

Strike fast forwarded yet again, stopping at six minutes past five, when Pamela received yet another call on her mobile. With her mobile clamped to her ear, she pointed at Todd, who left through the front door. At nine minutes past five, both Wright and Todd reappeared, staggering under the weight of another large crate.

‘The Oriental Centrepiece has been delivered to the correct buyer,’ said Strike, as the two men staggered out of sight through the door leading to the vault.

Todd re-emerged from the basement, holding Pamela’s shoulder bag. She snatched it from his hand and, talking to him over her shoulder, strode towards the street door.

‘And she leaves,’ said Strike, pressing pause again.

‘For a woman who was punctilious about security earlier…’ said Robin.

‘Exactly. She’s buggered off, leaving two men in the shop who don’t have codes or keys – or shouldn’t have.’

Strike pressed play again. Jim Todd appeared to be having a coughing fit.

‘Is this where the heart attack happens?’ asked Robin.

‘He survives, but I think the manual labour’s taken its toll.’

He fast forwarded until five to six.

‘Wright comes back upstairs… Todd leaves…’

‘Hang on,’ said Robin, and Strike pressed pause again. ‘Wright’s holding something, isn’t he?’

Strike rewound and pressed play.

‘He is,’ said Robin. ‘A bag or something. He’s holding it to his chest.’

‘Maybe,’ said Strike. The film was so grainy it was hard to tell. ‘He puts down the blinds… the right-hand one still won’t go to the bottom of the window… turns off the light… and leaves, slamming the door.’

Strike paused the footage again.

‘Thoughts?’ he said.

‘The vault door could still be open. The front door hasn’t been properly locked. The alarm isn’t set.’

‘You’re good,’ said Strike.

‘Collusion between Wright and Pamela?’

‘Got to be a possibility. Now watch…’

Strike pressed fast forward yet again. The shop grew steadily darker as they watched. Ten p.m. Eleven p.m. Midnight. One a.m. A small amount of light penetrated through the sliver of window not covered by the broken blind.

At ten past one in the morning, Strike again pressed play.

Somebody was opening the shop door. The darkness was such that what was happening was barely visible: a faint glint on the glass in the door, a shadow moving across the shop floor. The camera was switched off at eleven minutes past one.

‘Keep watching,’ said Strike.

A second’s blackness, then the clock restarted at 3.07. A shadow again crossed the shop floor in the opposite direction. The almost indistinguishable figure paused by the alarm. The door opened and closed, and they were gone.

Robin picked up her lukewarm coffee, a nasty prickling sensation running up her spine. In the blank interlude on tape, a murder had happened, and she seemed to feel the eyes of the men on the corkboard behind her staring down on the pair treating the matter as an interesting puzzle.

‘And that’s all, for the night of the murder,’ said Strike, hitting fast forward again. ‘Literally nothing happens over the weekend… shop’s empty through Saturday… continues being empty on Sunday… then, on

Monday the twentieth, we've got early opening. Eight o'clock in the morning, so Todd can clean before customers arrive…'

They watched Pamela Bullen-Driscoll appear in silhouette again and unlock the front door. Todd followed her inside, in his overalls.

'Todd hasn't got a key,' commented Robin. 'She has to let him in.'

'Correct.'

Strike hit pause as Pamela was turning off the alarm.

'Either she's forgotten she didn't set the alarm on Friday, or she expected someone else to have done it. She doesn't seem concerned or confused about it being reset.'

'Why *did* the killer reset it?' asked Robin.

'Very good question,' said Strike. 'Resetting it makes it look as though the culprit was either somebody who worked at the shop, or had a connection to one of them. On the other hand, it gave Todd a handy hour in which to wipe away as many fingerprints as he could,' said Strike. 'Now watch…'

Strike pressed play again. Todd disappeared down the stairs to the basement. Still in fast forward, they watched Pamela crank open the metal shutters. Todd reappeared, holding a bucket containing cleaning supplies, and began polishing the glass cabinets and desk.

'Nine o'clock comes,' said Strike, as the clock in the upper right-hand side of the screen ratcheted up the minutes. 'Wright should be there, but isn't. Pamela makes a call… no answer.'

Todd disappeared into basement.

'He's cleaning the staff kitchen area and bog. Pamela goes to look up and down the street for Wright, who's now forty minutes late. She goes back to the desk, makes another phone call… no answer… and here's Kenneth Ramsay.'

Robin watched Ramsay arrive. He disappeared down the stairs to the vault. Now Strike hit play again.

'So, out of sight, Ramsay's opened the vault door… I think he must've yelled out, because watch…'

Pamela moved hurriedly to the head of the stairs, looking down them.

'Then she goes down, too…'

For two minutes, the shop was empty. Then the front door opened, and a small, bearded man in a dark suit entered.

‘That,’ said Strike, pausing again, ‘is John Auclair, the collector Ramsay thought he was going to flog the Murdoch silver to. I looked him up. Advertising millionaire.’

Pamela emerged from the stairwell, staggered to the phone on the desk and made a call.

‘Calling the police… she collapses into a chair… presumably tells the confused Auclair what they’ve just found… and, unsurprisingly, he buggers off…’

On-screen, the advertising mogul was backing towards the main door. He opened it and exited at speed. Strike pressed pause.

‘Rest isn’t worth seeing. Police turn up and it’s exactly what you’d expect. Door locked, Ramsay, Pamela and Todd corralled for questioning.’

Strike’s mobile rang, and to his surprise, he saw his old friend Shanker’s name.

‘What’s up?’ he asked.

‘Wanna word,’ said Shanker.

‘What about?’

‘In person.’

As Strike knew, Shanker was generally averse to long phone conversations. This was mostly because he preferred to do business in person, because it often took the form of beatings and stabbings.

‘When?’ he asked.

‘Soon. Now,’ said Shanker.

‘Where are you?’

‘Clapham Junction. You’ll ’ave to come to me. I gotta stay ’ere. Meetin’ a geezer.’

Strike’s gaze moved to the window. It was another wintry, grey day; his leg was still sore and he’d been counting on an afternoon with his partner, hoping, however over-optimistically, that he might get a chance to declare himself, but Shanker rarely got in touch without having something that was worth hearing.

‘All right,’ Strike said reluctantly. ‘Give me an hour.’

‘Falcon pub,’ said Shanker, and hung up.

‘What does he want?’ asked Robin.

‘To meet,’ said Strike. ‘Now.’

‘Why?’

‘Maybe he’s found out Dredge the drug-dealer did have Rupert Fleetwood murdered in the silver vault?’

‘So the case might be wrapped up by teatime?’ said Robin, conscious of a faint disappointment, because she, too, had been looking forward to an afternoon together.

‘I wouldn’t bet on it,’ said Strike, hoping he was right. He needed this case.

‘I like your shirt, by the way,’ Robin said. ‘Is it new?’

‘It is, yeah,’ said Strike. ‘Thanks.’

Feeling slightly more cheerful, he headed into the outer office to fetch his coat.

21

Yet my heart forebodes
Danger or death awaits thee on this field.
Fain would I know thee safe and well…

Matthew Arnold
Sohrab and Rustum: An Episode

It took Strike forty minutes to reach Clapham Junction station. By coincidence, the last time he'd been in this part of London, he'd been running surveillance on Two-Times' first PA-turned-lover. The area had become progressively more upmarket over Strike's lifetime; he remembered Clapham Junction when it had been home to pawn shops and dodgy garages turning over stolen cars. Now there was a Waitrose, wine bars and brisk professionals bustling homewards to houses worth well over a million pounds.

He knew the pub Shanker had designated as their meeting place of old, but the Falcon, too, had been gentrified. Strike entered to find polished wood, a stained-glass chandelier and freshly upholstered leather benches. There was something reassuring about spotting Shanker sitting alone, scowling and compulsively clicking his fingers, thereby effortlessly repelling anyone who might consider sitting near him. Shanker's beard concealed the deep scar that ran from the middle of his upper lip towards his cheekbone, which, unshaven, would reveal a mouth dragged upwards in a permanent Elvis-style sneer. His closely cropped head and the tattoos that covered his hands and neck marked him as of a life apart from the polite newcomers to the area, who clustered around the bar, some of them throwing Shanker sideways glances with a mixture of fascination and trepidation.

Shanker, as Strike well knew, was almost entirely amoral, a man raised in conditions most people in the developed world barely understood, where violence was a daily reality, and the only law was self-interest. The place where he and Strike had bonded, against all odds, was in their mutual love of a deeply flawed woman who'd been Strike's biological, and Shanker's adoptive, mother. Leda, who'd scraped the teenaged Shanker off the street after he'd been stabbed, and taken him home to the squat where she was living with her two children, had unwittingly forged a regard between the two teenagers that had survived a divergence of interests that should have been absolute, and they were occasionally useful to each other. Both would have been sorry to know the other was dead, but months and sometimes years had passed without contact, and it was highly unusual for Shanker to summon Strike to meet him, as he had today.

'How're you doing?' said Strike, once he'd got himself a pint and sat down.

'I'm lookin' at firty-six monfs unless me fuckin' lawyer pulls 'is 'ead out of 'is arse,' said Shanker, glowering.

'Yeah? What's the charge?' asked Strike, not bothering to act surprised. Shanker had been in and out of prison all his adult life.

'Obstruction of fuckin' justice. Load of bollocks. An' Alyssa's fuckin' chucked me out again.'

'Sorry to hear that,' said Strike.

It was news to the detective that Shanker's girlfriend had already decided at least once already that her household would function better without Shanker in it, but it didn't come as much of a surprise.

'How's Angel?' asked Strike, who knew Alyssa's older daughter had had leukaemia.

'Doin' well,' said Shanker.

'That's good,' said Strike.

'Yeah,' said Shanker moodily. 'I love them kids. Fuckin' love 'er as well, fuckin' bitch.'

He glugged some beer.

'This what you wanted to talk about?' asked Strike. 'Because I'm not much of a relationship counsellor.'

'Nah,' said Shanker. 'I know what I'm gonna do about fuckin' Alyssa.'

'Yeah? What?' said Strike.

He stood ready to oppose any mooted plan of revenge or intimidation against a single mother whose eldest child had been seriously ill, but Shanker responded, ‘Jewellery.’

‘Jewellery,’ repeated Strike.

‘Got that tip off me old man, before ’e went senile,’ said Shanker. ‘Women never say no to jewellery. Only useful fing ’e ever fuckin’ told me. They don’ chuck it, an’ then they fink about you every time they fuckin’ look at it.’

‘Wise counsel,’ said Strike.

‘You can fuckin’ smirk, but ’e ’ad kids wiv abou’ ten diff’rent women.’

‘By giving them all jewellery?’

‘Well, ’e ’ad a nine-inch cock as well,’ said Shanker, and Strike laughed.

‘So why’m I here?’ he asked. ‘Dredge the drug dealer?’

‘Oh yeah,’ said Shanker, as though he’d only just remembered this. ‘Dredge ain’t never killed that boy. He was jus’ tryna put the frighteners on. The kid give ’im a coupla grand in cash, so Dredge backed off.’

‘Wait, what?’ said Strike.

‘That kid,’ said Shanker impatiently, ‘Fleetfing, the geezer you fort might be dead. ’E ain’t. ’E gave Dredge a coupla grand to get ’im off ’is back, an’ Dredge let ’im off. Fleetfing wasn’ the one what done the dir’y on Dredge, was ’e? It was ’is mate, what fucked off to Africa.’

‘You’re positive about this?’ said Strike. ‘Rupert Fleetwood gave Dredge a couple of grand to leave him alone?’

‘Jus’ said that, d’in I?’

‘Right,’ said Strike. ‘Well, that’s good to know.’

‘Tha’s not why I wan’ed to meet ya, though,’ said Shanker, lowering his voice.

‘Really?’ asked Strike, puzzled. ‘Why’m I here, then?’

‘Doin’ ya a favour.’

Strike took a sip of beer, then waited, interested in what was coming next.

‘You’re diggin’ where you shouldn’t, Bunsen.’

Strike looked at him, perplexed.

‘Meaning?’

‘Meanin’,’ Shanker lowered his voice, ‘body in silver shop.’

Strike was momentarily struck dumb with surprise. He hadn’t told

Shanker anything about the body in the silver vault, only that he wanted to find out whether Fleetwood had come to harm at the hands of Dredge.

'How the *hell* d'you know I'm investigating that?'

'For me to know, innit.'

Strike stared at him, before saying,

'Knowles?'

Shanker raised his eyebrows.

'It was Knowles,' said Strike.

Shanker said nothing.

'Don't give me that inscrutable shit,' said Strike impatiently.

'What's that?' said Shanker, mildly interested.

'*That*,' said Strike. 'Raising your fucking eyebrows. "For me to know."'

Bad temper though he appeared to be in, Shanker grinned.

'You wanna leave it, Bunsen.'

'*Was – it – fucking – Knowles?*'

Shanker absent-mindedly clicked his fingers. At last, he spoke.

'No.'

'It wasn't?'

'No.'

'Knowles is still alive?'

''Course 'e's fuckin' not,' said Shanker impatiently. ''E was a narc. Got what was comin' to 'im. But he wasn' in no fucking silver shop.'

Strike stared at him. There were many subjects on which he knew Shanker to be almost impressively ignorant – the geography of anywhere beyond Greater London, how taxation worked, who made laws – but his knowledge of organised crime in London was peerless. The non-specific warning left on the office phone now took on a slightly different aspect.

'Why're you warning me off, if it wasn't Knowles? Lynden doesn't want me digging into it?'

'Bunsen,' said Shanker, lowering his voice and leaning forwards, 'Lynden finks it's funny the pigs fink that was Jason. Why would Lynden put 'im in a fuckin' safe in a fuckin' silver shop? Thass way more fuckin' trouble than 'e fuckin' deserved.'

'That thought occurred to me,' said Strike.

'Ain't got shit for brains then, 'ave ya?' said Shanker.

'So where's Knowles now?'

‘Gawn to Barnaby’s,’ said Shanker, with a dark smile.

‘The hell’s “Barnaby’s”?’

‘For me to know,’ repeated Shanker.

‘If it wasn’t Knowles, why’m I getting this warning? Because Lynden Knowles doesn’t want me proving it *wasn’t* his nephew?’

‘Lynden wouldn’ give a shit eiver way,’ said Shanker, with a shrug. ‘Even if they found what’s left of Jason, they couldn’t pin it on ’im. Thass the ’ole point of Barnaby’s.’

‘Then why—?’

‘’Cause the bloke in the vault’ – Shanker dropped his voice again – ‘was an ’it.’

‘A hit?’

‘Yeah,’ said Shanker, ‘an’ you don’t wanna start fuckin’ wiv the geezer ’oo put out the ’it, awright?’

‘You know who ordered it?’

‘Know enough,’ said Shanker.

‘Who is he?’

‘Don’ know ’im person’ly,’ said Shanker.

‘You know the bloke who carried it out?’

‘We go back a long way, Bunsen, but you keep your side of the street an’ I’ll keep mine, know what I’m sayin’?’

When Strike merely looked at him, Shanker said,

‘Don’ know ’im well. People in common.’

‘And?’

‘’E’s gone to ground. Smart, for ’im.’

‘He’s not usually smart?’

‘’E’s a nutter. Moufy. Still, slick job,’ said Shanker, with professional appreciation. ‘Earned a packet for it, I ’ear.’

‘But he talked, or you wouldn’t know he’d done it.’

‘Well, yeah, ’e’s moufy. Like I said.’

‘So why was the guy in the vault killed?’

Shanker drained his glass, then said,

‘I ’eard he fort ’e could make a fast buck an’ didn’t fuckin’ realise what ’e was up against.’

‘Double cross?’ said Strike. ‘Blackmail?’

‘Ain’t stupid, are ya, Bunsen?’ said Shanker, with a gleam of

appreciation.

‘Want another drink?’

‘Yeah, go on,’ said Shanker.

Strike bought two more pints. There were gold baubles strung along the top of the bar. He’d been so absorbed in his conversation he hadn’t noticed the Christmas music playing in the background.

Hither, page, and stand by me,
If thou knowst it, telling
Yonder peasant, who is he?
Where and what his dwelling?

‘How did you know I’m investigating?’ Strike asked, after sitting down again.

‘You was seen,’ said Shanker. ‘Seen where you shouldn’t ’ave been. An’ word got back, an’ the big shot what ordered the ’it ’ain’t ’appy you’re stickin’ your fuckin’ bugle in. S’all I know.’

‘Listen,’ said Strike, ‘if there’s a second Lynden Knowles after me, I need to know. This isn’t just about me, this is Robin and the rest of the agency. What exactly am I looking at here?’

‘Work it aht,’ said Shanker. ‘Where it ’appened.’

They looked at each other. When Shanker neither blinked nor laughed, Strike said, ‘You have to be kidding me. You think I’m going to be done in by the Freemasons?’

‘You know your problem, Bunsen?’ said Shanker, scowling. ‘You’re fuckin’ naive. You fink because some geezer’s got money an’ wears a fuckin’ suit, an’ ’e’s never been done for nuffin’—’

‘I *don’t* think that, but—’

‘You fink a man ’oo’s got a lot to lose, an’ pays to get rid of some geezer ’oo’s got the goods on ’im, an’ gets away wiv it, is ’appy when ’e ’ears you’re nosin’ around? You gotta name now, Bunsen,’ said Shanker, not without a certain admiration.

‘All right, you’ve told me this much, tell me who this big-shot Freemason is.’

‘Can’t. Toldja. I don’ know ’is name.’

‘You’re not just assuming he was a mason from where the body was found?’

‘No,’ said Shanker, now growing impatient, ‘I’m tellin’ ya, ’e’s a fuckin’

mason. The guy ’oo done the ’it, ’e said so. The bigshot’s a mason, ’e’s got money to burn, ’e’s got people to do ’is shit for ’im.’

Shanker sipped his pint, while Strike recalled Mandy’s words, back in St George’s Avenue: *‘’E said “someone” might come round lookin’ for ’im, but then ’e said, “or ’e might send someone.”’*

‘You don’t know the mason’s name?’ asked Strike.

‘I’ve fuckin’ toldja, *no.*’

‘D’you know who the victim was?’

‘No, I jus’ know ’e ’ad somefing on the mason, so ’e got rubbed aht.’

‘The hitman doesn’t ever go by “Oz”, does he?’ said Strike, taking a shot in the dark.

‘What – like the fuckin’ wizard?’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike.

‘Not that I ever ’eard.’

Shanker’s gaze swivelled right, towards the door.

‘Time’s up, Bunsen.’

Strike looked around. A large man even more comprehensively tattooed than Shanker had just entered the pub.

‘That’s all you’ve got?’ said Strike.

‘’S’all I’ve got,’ said Shanker, already raising a hand to alert the tattooed man in the doorway to his presence.

‘All right,’ said Strike, getting to his feet. ‘Thanks for the warning.’

He finished his pint at the bar, then left the Falcon without looking back at Shanker or his business associate.

To his knowledge, Shanker had never intentionally misled him, preferring a straightforward ‘keep the fuck out of it’ if Strike’s questions struck too close to home. Strike therefore had to take seriously the possibility that he and Robin had indeed stumbled unknowingly on to a crime that had lain undetected until they arrived on the scene to complicate matters.

Strike turned his coat collar up against the cold, then stood for a few moments, vaping and mulling over what his next move should be. One particular thing his old friend had just said gave rise to an idea. Slipping his vape pen back into his coat pocket, Strike set off again, not for Denmark Street, but for Wild Court.

22

But chiefly the great and troublesome question of ‘Who?’
John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

Strike phoned Robin at home that evening to inform her that Rupert Fleetwood had somehow scraped together two thousand pounds to buy off the drug dealer with a grudge against his housemate, and to relay Shanker’s warning about the body in the silver vault. Murphy was there for dinner, and Robin’s flat was far too small for him not to be able to hear everything she was saying unless she locked herself in the bathroom. As pretending to want a shower immediately after her work partner had called her might give her boyfriend well-justified grounds for suspicion, her responses to Strike were deliberately concise and gave no hint of what they were talking about.

Fortunately for Robin, whose mind was racing post-call, Murphy asked no questions. He was very obviously low and tired, slumped on the sofa watching the news. Tuesday’s *Mail* had run its double-page interview with the mother of the boys who’d been shot in the gang shooting, and this had been followed by stories in other papers, today. For the first time, Robin, along with the rest of the newspaper-reading public, had learned that the bereaved mother’s estranged boyfriend had been arrested initially, and this, it was alleged, had wasted valuable hours and days in which the true perpetrators had been able to cover their tracks.

Once again, she sensed that Murphy would welcome neither sympathy nor questions, so she hadn’t mentioned the *Mail* article, or any of the spin-offs, but it was impossible not to suspect that Murphy had personally been involved in some part of what now seemed to have been early mistakes in the case. Remembering again how kind and understanding he’d been in the aftermath of her long stay at Chapman Farm, not to mention his

consideration since she'd been hospitalised, she wanted only to be supportive and give him a respite from his stress and, perhaps, his guilt. They ate the ready-made lasagne Robin had heated up, and as both needed to be up very early the following morning, they were in bed by half past nine. They hadn't had sex since Robin been released from hospital, but Murphy wrapped his arms around her in bed, kissed the top of her head and said,

'I'm so fucking lucky to have you.'

'I'm lucky to have you too,' she said, kissing him back.

But after Murphy's breathing lengthened, and he rolled away from her, asleep, Robin lay awake in the dark, ruminating on Strike's call and its possible ramifications. What she really wanted to do was to slide out of bed and call her detective partner back, but she didn't want to wake Murphy, so she stayed where she was, finally falling asleep to dream that she and Strike were standing in Ramsay Silver which, for some mysterious reason, had been filled with cuddly toys instead of masonic swords and aprons.

By nine the following morning Robin was back in Camberwell, watching the house where Plug was living with his elderly mother. She'd glimpsed the old lady through a downstairs window and her heart had ached with pity: she looked worried and seemed to be mumbling to herself. Then, five minutes after she arrived, Plug's fourteen-year-old son, who ought to have been at school, burst out of the house looking terrified and set off at a fast walk up the road. With a split second to decide whether she should keep watching the house or follow the boy, she chose the latter.

Robin felt almost as sorry for Plug's son as she did for Plug's mother. Not only was the boy burdened with his father's ears and overbite, he seemed lonely, forlorn and often looked scared. She could well imagine that being uprooted from Haringey to live with his grandmother with Alzheimer's and his verbally abusive father wasn't fun. The boy was walking very fast, every now and then breaking into a jog, and Robin had a hunch that whatever he was doing, it was on his father's orders. Robin soon had a dull stitch in her side – or perhaps, she thought, the operation site was aching. This reminded her of the letter from the GP she was still ignoring.

She'd been tailing the boy for fifteen minutes when her mobile rang.

'Got a moment?' asked Strike.

'Yes,' said Robin, trying not to pant. 'I'm following Plug Junior on foot.

Where are you?’

‘Liberty’s,’ said Strike, and Robin immediately remembered her thirtieth birthday, on which Strike had taken her to the old London store to buy her perfume, before that fatal trip to the bar at the Ritz. ‘Mrs Two-Times is in the hairdressers.’

‘I didn’t know Liberty’s had a hairdressers.’

‘Nor did I, and now I’m stuck hanging around the women’s clothing department looking like a weirdo,’ said Strike, shifting to allow a group of women to examine rows of what, to him, were exceptionally ugly, baggy dresses with large fluorescent flowers printed all over them.

‘It’s Christmas,’ said Robin. ‘Pretend to be buying presents. *Actually* buy some presents.’

‘Not in here,’ said Strike.

‘Why not?’

‘I just… can’t.’

The music, the bewildering choice, the crowds, his total ignorance of what the women he had to buy for might want: he’d rather face root-canal surgery. At least that would be quiet, and there’d be anaesthetic.

‘You’ll look more natural hanging around in there if you’ve got shopping bags. Who are you buying for, women-wise?’

‘Lucy and Prudence. I wasn’t going to get Prudence anything, but she’s invited me to their Christmas party. I can’t go, but that probably means she’s got me something.’

‘When did Mrs Two-Times start her hair appointment?’

‘Five minutes ago.’

‘Then you’ve got two and a half hours at least.’

‘How d’you know?’

‘Because she’s got two different shades of highlights. That takes time.’

‘I called,’ said Strike, ‘to discuss Shanker, and that anonymous phone call to the office, which I’m inclined to take a bit more seriously now.’

‘We can discuss Shanker while you go down to the ground floor,’ said Robin.

‘Why’m I going to the ground floor?’ said Strike, moving off, nevertheless.

‘Handbags,’ said Robin, ‘and scarves. For Lucy and Prudence.’

‘Pretty sure they’ll both have a handbag and a scarf.’

‘God, you’re hopeless,’ said Robin. ‘I think Plug Junior might be going to that same allotment his dad visited the other night,’ she added, eyes on the figure ahead of her.

‘Maybe the crocodile or whatever they’re keeping in the shed’s chewed its way out,’ said Strike. ‘I’m going outside so I can hear myself think and we can discuss Shanker.’

‘All right,’ said Robin, ‘but afterwards—’

‘I’ll buy something, yeah,’ said Strike with a sigh.

He forged his way through the crowded stationery department and at last, with relief, reached the pavement and took out his vape pen.

‘So,’ said Strike, while Robin continued to stride along, the pain in her side becoming ever sharper, ‘I called Decima and told her we’re fairly sure Fleetwood shook off Dredge the drug dealer by giving him cash. She’s not having it – or, more accurately, she thinks this proves he sold the nef to Kenneth Ramsay, but thinks Dredge killed him anyway, as a warning to Zacharias Lorimer.

‘I’ve also called Wardle and told him our criminal contact is certain that Jason Knowles’ body went to “Barnaby’s”, whoever or whatever that is, and that Knowles wasn’t the corpse in the Ramsay Silver vault.’

‘Great,’ said Robin, who’d been worrying about having information the police ought to have; hopefully Murphy would never find out where this information had come from, either. ‘You didn’t tell Shanker about the plainclothes—?’

‘Fuck’s sake, of course not!’

‘Sorry,’ said Robin quickly. ‘Sorry, of course you didn’t, I don’t know why I…’

But she did know why she’d said it: she was consumed with paranoia about her boyfriend finding out that she and Strike were meddling in matters that didn’t concern them.

Plug Junior had slowed down to take a call on his mobile, so Robin adjusted her pace accordingly. Her lower right side was now throbbing.

‘I really called about this hit business,’ said Strike, ‘and the fact that whoever allegedly ordered it knows we’re investigating – or knows *I* am. Shanker didn’t mention you.’

‘Where d’you think you were spotted?’

‘It’s got to be Ramsay Silver or St George’s Avenue,’ said Strike.

An ornate clock was set high on an archway to his left, a mechanical Saint George and the dragon above it, a legend in gold beneath it:

No minute gone comes ever back again, Take heed and see ye do nothing in vain.

Back in Camberwell, Plug's son was unlocking the allotment gate and Robin, with relief, had taken refuge beside a postbox.

'This is getting bloody strange and murky,' said Strike. 'If we accept the premise that a rich, powerful Freemason wanted a man who was blackmailing him dead – and blackmailing victims do tend to want their blackmailers dead – I can't see any earthly reason why the hit had to be carried out at Ramsay Silver. In fact, you'd think a murderous Freemason would want to keep the whole thing as far away from a masonic silver shop as possible, and why the *fuck* he'd have given instructions that the corpse should be draped in a masonic sash…'

'And if Wright really was the blackmailer of a wealthy Freemason,' said Robin, watching Plug Junior hurrying towards the padlocked shed door, 'why would he go and work for another Freemason?'

'Well, exactly. The whole thing feels like something dreamed up by a conspiracy theorist. It's like the plot of a B movie.'

'But Shanker's not a conspiracy theorist.'

'You say that,' said Strike slowly, 'but get Shanker on to the subject of what powerful people in the law-abiding world get up to and things get fantastical, fast. You'll never convince him that people who've achieved wealth and power legally aren't really crooks, and he's a firm believer in secret associations and hidden influence that people like him can't access – and I know,' said Strike, guessing what Robin was about to say, 'unfair advantages and old boys' networks exist, of course they do, but what Shanker believes goes way beyond that. If you told him the Prime Minister siphons off half the nation's taxes and puts them in his own bank account, Shanker would tell you you're a mug for not thinking he takes three quarters. At bottom, he thinks everyone's as bent as he is, and world leaders and billionaires just conspire with each other to get away with it.'

'He can't think *everyone's* bent,' said Robin reasonably. 'He knows you.'

'He accepts that freaks of nature like me crop up from time to time, but he's more credulous than you might think once outside his area of

expertise.’

‘So you think Shanker’s got hold of the wrong end of the stick? It’s all rubbish?’

‘He claims to know the actual killer. He says the guy’s been mouthing off, pleased he got away with it. We’ve got to take that seriously. And there was that call to the office, too. It could’ve been a random nutter – but it might not’ve been.’

‘D’you want to drop the case?’ Robin asked, and she was surprised how unhappy she felt at the thought of doing so.

‘No,’ said Strike. ‘I’m getting more and more interested – but it’s not just up to me. That’s why I called.’

‘Well, if Shanker’s right, the risk was there already, wasn’t it?’ said Robin. ‘Whoever killed Wright was never going to be happy we’re investigating, were they? I can’t honestly see that we’d be in any less danger if we give up. It’s not as if we can let them know we’re backing off. In fact, it’s far better to know they’re on to us. We’re forearmed.’

‘That’s exactly my thinking,’ said Strike. ‘What’s Plug Junior up to now?’

‘He’s inside the shed.’

The pain in Robin’s lower right side was still extremely sharp. For the first time, she thought she might make that appointment with her GP. Previous neglect of symptoms had led her directly into the mess she’d recently found herself in; the responsible thing was to get herself checked. Wanting distraction, she said,

‘Have you been following Patterson’s case?’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike. ‘Not exactly riveting so far, is it? I was hoping they’d just call him a cunt and give him ten years.’

‘Maybe it’ll hot up once he’s on the stand. Are you going to get back inside Liberty’s and buy some presents?’

‘Fine,’ Strike sighed, and he returned inside the shop, to be met with a blast of hot air and ‘Jingle Bell Rock’. ‘How’m I supposed to know what scarves to buy?’

‘Well,’ said Robin, her eyes still on the distant shed, ‘Prudence likes classic colours. Cream, navy blue, black… nothing multicoloured or, you know, hippy. And Lucy looks good in pastels, so go light, and nothing too dramatic or splashy.’

‘How d’you know these things?’ said Strike, in honest amazement.

‘How do I know what looks nice on people?’

‘All of it,’ said Strike, who was now standing in a bewildering array of scarves of different sizes and patterns. ‘Remembering what colours Prudence wears.’

‘The same reason you remember the legend of Hiram Abiff. Listen, I know you’re not going to like this, but I think we ought to get the staff Christmas presents, too.’

‘Fuck’s sake,’ groaned Strike.

‘It’s good for morale,’ said Robin, ‘and we’ve got a really great team for once. We ought to be showing our appreciation.’

‘I’m not buying more scarves,’ said Strike firmly.

‘You don’t have to,’ said Robin. ‘I was thinking bottles of booze, or gift tokens. And,’ she added, because she didn’t doubt Strike was as clueless about what to buy her as he was about his sisters, ‘if you’re getting me a scarf, I like blue and green.’

‘Too late, I’ve already chosen your present,’ said Strike. ‘I’m going to have to go, I can’t hear a bloody thing. Speak to you later.’

He hung up, leaving Robin in a state of mild surprise.

23

Then evils gather together,
There wants not one of them all –
Wrath, envy, discord, strife…

Sophocles tr. A. E. Housman
Oedipus Coloneus

The substitution of Two-Times for Mr A meant that the agency was once again working at full capacity. Strike and Robin saw each other only in passing over the next few days, so informed each other by text and phone call that nobody they'd approached for further information on the silver vault case had responded.

'It's Christmas,' Robin reminded Strike on Monday, 'people will be busy or visiting family.'

In spite of these frustrations, there were developments in two matters of mutual interest, both unrelated to the murder of William Wright. The first was a couple of days of high excitement in the Patterson case, which was being lavishly covered in the papers. On Tuesday, Farah Navabi took the stand, and turned in a heart-rending, charismatic performance. Breaking down in sobs, so that a solicitous judge asked whether she'd like a break to compose herself, the beautiful Navabi regaled the court with an account of how she'd been relentlessly bullied, intimidated and sexually harassed by her boss, and revealed that she'd only undertaken the job of bugging the barrister's office because Patterson had made egregious threats of retaliation if she didn't do as she was told.

'I can't tell you how much I regret it,' she sobbed. 'Andrew Honbold's a good, good man, and Mitch had me convinced he was a monster.'

'Told you,' said Kim Cochran smugly, during what Strike made sure was

a brief surveillance handover that evening. ‘She’s rented premises in Belsize Park and she’s already snagged a ton of Patterson’s clients.’

On Wednesday, Patterson, who was tall and broad-shouldered, with a deeply pitted and lined face, was pursued from car to court by paparazzi. His evidence, live-tweeted from court by several journalists, became instantly meme-worthy for his barked repetition of the phrase ‘wholly and completely untrue’. By the time he was permitted to leave the witness stand he’d said it forty-seven times, and nobody, with the possible exception of Patterson himself, was surprised when the following morning he was found guilty, with sentencing deferred to the new year.

Strike would have enjoyed all this far more had he not discovered, on the news website where he’d been reading about Patterson’s conviction, a supremely vicious piece about himself, written by Dominic Culpepper. Exactly as Strike had feared, Nina had clearly informed her cousin that it was Strike who’d been keeping his wife under surveillance at the Dorchester.

Another paper had tried to run a piece a few months previously, asserting that Strike was as big a womaniser as his father, that he routinely had sex with clients, and had slept with a woman who was also in a relationship with the very barrister whom Mitch Patterson had bugged. That article had never been published because Charlotte, of all people, had not only resisted the invitation to screw Strike over in print, but had contacted those of Strike’s girlfriends she knew, to ensure that nobody talked.

But the flimsy barricade Charlotte had erected had been swept away by Culpepper’s rage and Nina’s resentment. The journalist no longer needed quotes from the ex-lovers who’d declined to talk last time, because he had his cousin, Nina, who’d provided anonymous quotes with which Culpepper was able to bolster his portrait of a grubby, unscrupulous man who used women to obtain whatever he needed, bracketing Strike with Patterson as a libidinous, parasitic scavenger, profiting from human misery and callously manipulating good-hearted people. Culpepper had also re-hashed the story of Strike’s conception, which had famously taken place on a bean bag at a druggy A-list party in 1974, and had even found someone else to speak on the record about the grubby antics of private detectives: Lord Oliver Branfoot.

Strike had never met Branfoot, but he knew what the man looked and

sounded like because Branfoot was one of those public figures who managed to penetrate the mass mind like a noxious, invisible gas. Marlborough-educated, a scion of nobility, Branfoot was a large, untidy man notable for an inability to pronounce his ‘r’s. Previously a Conservative MP, he now headed various charitable and political organisations and committees, was ever-ready with a quote for the papers, sprinkled his conversation with Latin tags and capitalised to the full on the English public’s weakness for a toff who seemed ready to laugh at himself, having a fondness for appearing on political quiz shows, where he played to the hilt the part of genial, bumbling blue-blood. While Strike didn’t know exactly why Lord Oliver Branfoot should want to attach his name to the excoriation of a man he didn’t know, he could think of one obvious reason why Branfoot might want to thunder in print that the private detective business ought to be far more stringently regulated.

Strike had no illusions as to the likely trajectory of Dominic Culpepper’s fury: this article, he suspected, was an opening shot in what was likely to become an ongoing vendetta. He was conscious of a strong desire to call Robin, because the sound of her voice usually made him feel better about whatever shit he was currently dealing with, but there was a possibility that she hadn’t spotted the article yet, and it seemed the height of folly to draw her attention to it if she hadn’t.

But Robin had, of course, already seen Culpepper’s attack on her partner, because she’d read the same online account of Patterson’s conviction, and it had certainly given her food for thought as she sat at lunchtime in the bar of the Rosewood Hotel, watching Two-Times’ beautifully coiffed wife enjoying a cocktail with a female friend.

Strike might have been very slightly heartened to know that Robin was by no means as horrified by the article’s accusations and insinuations as Culpepper intended the reader to feel. Nobody had worked more closely with Cormoran Strike over the past six and a half years than Robin Ellacott, and she was prepared to swear that whatever flaws Strike might possess, he’d never slept with, nor would he ever sleep with, a client, no matter that sundry divorced and divorcing women (she remembered in particular the alluring Miss Jones) had made their willingness to do so perfectly obvious. Robin had also noted that no ex-client was quoted, even anonymously, in the article.

Nevertheless, some unknown woman who'd helped him with a case clearly had a serious grudge against Cormoran Strike, and this, Robin presumed, was Culpepper's cousin. The implication that Strike had seduced the unknown woman in pursuit of evidence wasn't, Robin had to admit, a pleasant thought, although it might be argued that she didn't have much right to condemn him, having allowed an important witness and potential suspect in a previous case to press her up against a pub wall and stick his tongue into her mouth.

At this point in her musings, two texts arrived on her phone, almost back to back. The first was from Murphy, and contained a link to a new property for them to view.

This might be worth a look? I see Patterson's got what was coming to him. Have you read the thing on Strike? X

Strike would have been delighted to know that Robin's immediate reaction to this message was annoyance at her boyfriend and protectiveness of her detective partner. Murphy had suffered himself from bad press of late and he hadn't even been personally named, so Robin would have hoped he'd show some fellow feeling for another man being roughed up in print. Instead of answering the message, or opening the link to what appeared to be another terraced house, this time in Wood Green, Robin opened the second text, which was from Strike himself.

Two-Times just called. He's about to join his missus and her friend for cocktails. You can stand down, he'll be with her for the rest of the day.

Robin had just raised her hand for her bill when her mobile rang from an unfamiliar number, though she recognised the Ironbridge area code. She answered at once.

‘Hello, this is Robin Ellacott.’

‘Hello,’ said a tentative voice far too young to be Tyler Powell’s grandmother. ‘Are you the one who’s been calling my great-aunt?’

‘If your great-aunt’s Dilys Powell, yes,’ said Robin.

‘Well, she’s in the hospital,’ said the girl.

‘Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. You picked up my messages, did you?’

‘Yes,’ said the girl. ‘I’m feeding her cat. Why do you want her?’

‘I wanted to talk to her about your cousin Tyler,’ said Robin.

‘He’s not here,’ said the girl. ‘He left.’

‘Yes, I know,’ said Robin. ‘Have you heard from him lately?’

Robin could hear the scratching of a pen, and surmised that the girl was either doodling or taking a note.

‘I don’t like him,’ the girl said finally. ‘We don’t talk.’

‘Well, would you mind telling your great-aunt I’ve called, and asking her to get in touch when she feels better?’ said Robin.

‘All right,’ said the girl.

‘Thank you very much,’ said Robin. ‘Can I ask your n—?’

But the girl had already hung up.

Ten minutes later the paunchy Two-Times entered the bar wearing a much-creased suit, smiling broadly at his wife and her friend. Robin gathered up her bag and coat and left, making sure not to make eye contact with Two-Times, who had a tendency to smirk whenever he spotted one of the detectives he’d paid to spy on whichever woman he was currently sleeping with.

In the lobby of the hotel, Robin paused beside a large Christmas tree surrounded by silver models of fawns. On her way here, she’d registered her proximity to the London Silver Vaults. She took out her mobile, and called Strike.

‘Hi. Listen, I’m five minutes’ walk away from Bullen & Co. What d’you think of me trying to interview Pamela Bullen-Driscoll?’

‘I think you’ll be very lucky to get her to talk.’

‘Even so,’ said Robin, now heading out onto the street, ‘she’s a key witness and pressure’s always easier to apply face to face.’

‘S’pose it’s worth a try,’ said Strike, who assumed from Robin’s friendly tone that she hadn’t seen the online hatchet job on him. ‘Maybe she’ll be more amenable to a woman. I’m heading to Ipswich in an hour or so, by the

way.’

‘Why?’

‘One of Plug’s Ipswich mates has done a two-year stretch for embezzlement. Kim found out. Thought I’d go and have a nose around for what he might be getting up to these days that involves Plug, a lot of cash and a ledger.’

‘OK,’ said Robin, ‘Well, I’ll let you know how I get on with Pamela. You might be hearing back from me in ten minutes.’

She hung up, checked the route on her phone, then headed off along High Holborn, turned into Chancery Lane and finally entered Southampton Buildings.

24

You were informed in the Royal Arch degree, that King Solomon builded a secret vault, the approach to which was through eight other vaults or apartments in succession, all under ground, and to which a long and narrow passage led…

Albert Pike
The Ancient and Accepted
Scottish Rite of Freemasonry

The Silver Vaults' entrance was a discreet wooden door with a small glass awning. Robin was admitted after pressing a buzzer and found herself facing a uniformed security man, who asked to search her bag. She then had to sign in at the desk, and was instructed to descend three flights of stairs, and take no photographs outside the individual shops.

Intrigued, Robin proceeded down broad, bare stone stairs, her footsteps echoing, and found herself in a space unlike any she'd seen before.

A long, low-ceilinged, arched underground passageway stretched away from her, the walls on both sides lined with heavy steel vault doors. She set off along the corridor, noticing the regularly spaced cameras watching her from the ceiling, and looking left and right through the open doors at Aladdin's Caves of dazzling, gleaming silver. The bright light in both passage and shops almost hurt her eyes, especially when reflected from thousands of brightly polished silver surfaces. Robin turned a corner and saw that the subterranean labyrinth extended far beyond the first corridor.

Bullen & Co lay in the second passage she entered. It was one of the larger shops, carpeted in bright blue, and a veritable sea of silver met her eyes: shelves of platters, trays, boxes, urns, jugs and shields and, on sturdy mahogany tables, gigantic pieces including candelabra, centrepieces covered in cherubs and a huge nef representing a galleon in full sail.

A woman Robin recognised instantly as Pamela Bullen-Driscoll, because of her boxy back view, was speaking rapidly into the phone on a desk.

‘Ay’ve already told you, Geoffrey. Ay’ve told you – Ay simply don’t *care*!’

Pamela seemed to sense someone behind her, because she turned, said, ‘Ay’ve got to go!’ and slammed down the receiver.

Pamela had seen no need to change her style because fashions had moved on around her. From her stiffly lacquered hair to her large gold earrings and necklace, her double-breasted, shoulder-padded black blazer to her frosted pink lipstick, Pamela had never left the eighties, even though succeeding decades had deepened lines around her mouth and across her forehead. While not overweight, she was square and short-waisted. A pair of gold reading glasses hung on a crystal-studded chain around her neck.

‘Can Ay help you?’

‘I hope so,’ said Robin, drawing a business card out of her bag. ‘My name’s Robin Ellacott and I’m from the Strike and Ellacott Detective Agenc —’

‘Ay’ve got nothing to say!’ said Pamela loudly.

Recoiling, she bumped into a table laden with silver objects, and a fragile-looking horn cup in an elaborate silver casing fell to the ground. Pamela stood on it accidentally, and the horn shattered. She burst into tears.

Robin rushed to assist Pamela, who was groping for the pieces in a manner that suggested drunkenness, taking multiple attempts to place her hand on each piece.

‘Please leave!’ sobbed Pamela. ‘And close the door behaynd you! Ay have *nothing* to say to you!’

Robin turned, walked back to the shop entrance and did indeed close the door, but remained inside the fantastical silver storehouse, returning to Pamela to help her pick up all the bits of horn in silence. The shop owner seemed too distressed to care that Robin hadn’t followed her orders. She stumbled to a small desk, grabbed a handful of tissues from a silver box, dropped into her chair and cried.

Robin laid the shards of horn on the desk, feeling guilty and trying to project sympathy. After almost a minute’s weeping, Pamela said,

‘It’s may eyes! Ay had that laser eye surgery… and Ay can’t *see*

properly… blurry… double vision… awful headaches… *Ay need may eyes!*' said Pamela hysterically. 'And may husband…'

She didn't finish the sentence, but continued to weep, the already dark grey tissues becoming darker with specks of mascara.

'Could I – is there anywhere I could make you a tea, or a coffee?' asked Robin.

Pamela didn't answer, so Robin decided to explore for herself. There was a small kiosk-like structure in the corner of the shop that contained a coffee machine and mugs. Robin made two coffees, added a lot of sweetener to Pamela's, then returned to the desk and sat down opposite her. Pamela sobbed for another minute until she came to a hiccoughing halt and reached for her mug. It took her two attempts to grasp the handle. She sipped the sweetened coffee, then whispered,

'Thank you.'

'Can't they do anything, for your eyes?' Robin asked, in genuine concern.

'Ay'm traying to find someone… they said it would clear up and it hasn't…'

'When was the operation?' asked Robin, surreptitiously turning her mobile to record, in her bag.

'January… the *headaches.*.. but Ay can't stop work. It's may own business!'

'It's an amazing shop,' said Robin. 'Bullen & Co's a very old firm, isn't it?'

'F-four generations,' hiccoughed Pamela. 'May great-grandfather started it… but there are no Bullens left now. Ay couldn't have children, and may – may nephew…' She let out another sob. 'Oh, we've all been through a dreadful tayme…'

Robin left a tactful pause before saying,

'Mrs Bullen-Driscoll, we really do need an expert opinion. We know nothing about silver, you see.'

'You want to t-talk about silver?'

'Yes, if you wouldn't mind. It would help to understand why the Murdoch silver was so significant and why someone would go to such lengths to steal it. Mr Ramsay says—'

'Kenneth's a fool!' said Pamela, with sudden anger. 'An *idiot*! Ay had *no*

idea what he'd done! Ay'd have stopped him, but he didn't tell me, didn't tell may sister – he re-mortgaged their house, borrowed some *exorbitant* sum at a *ludicrous* rate of interest, cashed in all their shares – may sister knew nothing, *nothing* until it was too late. *Insanity!* Ay could have told him his stupid scheme wouldn't work!'

'What sch—?'

'He paid *much more* than the Murdoch silver was worth – *lunacy*! He thought John Auclair – he's a well-known collector – would come trotting along to his grotty little shop and give him half a million for it! Nobody in their rayte *maynd* would have paid that much for the stuff! Kenneth's a *fool*, an absolute *fool*!'

'You didn't think he'd make a profit on the collection, then?' asked Robin.

'Of course not!' said Pamela impatiently. The Murdoch collection's really only of interest to a narrow subset of people.'

'You mean masons?' asked Robin.

'Yes. Well, not necessarily *only* masons…' The chance to talk about her specialist subject seemed to be soothing Pamela slightly. 'A. H. Murdoch was quate a romantic figure, Ay suppose. One of those Victorian explorer taypes. Some of the pieces he collected had artistic merit on their own terms, but most of it – Skene's dagger, and the Oriental Centrepiece, which quayte frankly is a monstrosity—'

'That's the piece that was delivered here, by mistake, isn't it?' said Robin.

'Yes. Enormous, ugly thing, covered in masonic symbols, over three feet tall. Ay can't imagine who'd want it, frankly. Ay told Rachel two years ago when they bought the shop, "you're making a mistake!"' said Pamela, with a resurgence of anger. '*Everything*, from start to finish, was misgayded, but she wouldn't listen! "*Kenneth* thinks it'll do very well", "*Kenneth* knows the market", "*Kenneth* knows people who'll *queue up* to buy" – and of course, they've been making a loss ever since they opened! The location's dreadful, and there simply isn't a *demand* for that kind of specialist shop… if they'd been content to sell onlayne… but Rachel's *always* been silly about business. Nayther of them had the *first* idea what they were doing. *She* was miffed our father put me in charge here, and Kenneth hates his day job and thought he was going to be able to give it up and talk masonic silver

all day. And nayther of them have a *clue* about proper security. You'd think, with Rachel being a Bullen' – Pamela said this rather as someone might have done on declaring their sister a Mountbatten-Windsor – 'she'd *realise* what's needed. *This*,' said Pamela, gesturing around at the Silver Vaults, 'is the fourth most secure building *in the world*. There's *never* been a theft from the London Silver Vaults, *ever*. *Stupid*, baying that rundown place, thinking they could do everything on a shoestring. Ay tried to tell them! And then *look* what happened!'

'It was very kind of you to go and help them out,' said Robin.

'Well, Ay *had* to. After may nephew…' Tears welled in Pamela's eyes again, '… and then m'sister had her stroke… of *course* Ay trayed to do what Ay could. Nayther of them wanted to let the shop go. "It's all we've got now." *Naturally*, Ay said Ay'd help.'

'John Auclair *did* come in to view the collection at Ramsay Silver, didn't he?'

'Yes,' snorted Pamela, 'but one doesn't get to be as rich as John Auclair is bay being a *fool*. Ay know John, Ay've sold him a few pieces over the years. He knew *perfectly* well Kenneth paid *way* over the real value of the silver. *Ay* knew John was coming in on the Monday to decide what he was going to take once Kenneth got desperate to claw *something* back. But of course, he never saw any of it, because…'

'Awful, losing it all like that,' said Robin, who didn't want to introduce the subject of the body too early.

'It was dreadful,' said Pamela, with a shudder. 'Ay had *no idea* anybody had been in the shop over the weekend. Wrayght didn't work Saturdays, Kenneth looks after Rachel at the weekends, and Ay couldn't be there, because Ay was attendin' may cousin's wedding.'

'Presumably,' said Robin, 'you and Mr Ramsay were the only ones who knew the codes and had keys?'

'Yes – well, I suppose Todd *mayt* have known where the camera controls were, but he shouldn't have known the alarm or the vault codes, and he *definitely* didn't have keys… Kenneth came rushing in after Ay arrayved, frayghtened he'd missed John Auclair, sneaking out of his office, as usual – he's hanging by a thread at his day job – so he went down into the basement, and then he yelled out.'

Pamela swallowed.

‘Ay called down, “are you all rayte, Kenneth?” Ay thought he’d maybe slipped over, hurt himself. He didn’t answer. Ay went to the top of the stairs. Ay said, “*are you all rayte?*” And he still didn’t answer, so Ay went down there… he could have stopped me seeing,’ said Pamela bitterly. ‘He could have warned me… it was dreadful. Ay still have nayghtmares.… did Kenneth tell you? About Wrayght’s hands being missing, and… and everything?’

‘A little bit,’ said Robin. ‘It must have been awful.’

‘It was *ghastly* – and then John turned up. Ay’d just come back upstairs, to call the police. Ay nearly passed out in front of John. Ay’d just said to the operator, “there’s a body, we’ve found a body,” and then Ay had to sit down. John left – Ay can’t blame him, who’d want to be mixed up in *that*? Then Kenneth came upstairs, babbling, and Todd came up, too. He’d seen, of course. He’d been cleaning the bathroom when Kenneth went down there. Horrible man,’ said Pamela, with another shudder. ‘Horrible.’

‘Jim Todd, you mean?’ asked Robin.

‘Yes. Ay don’t like him at all. Ay don’t think he’s trustworthy.’

‘Really?’

‘Something very sneaky about him. Kenneth has *appalling* judgement,’ said Pamela, becoming suddenly heated again. ‘*All* the people Kenneth hired… he only cares if they’re cheap!’

‘Was Wright cheap?’ Robin asked.

‘Yes, and that’s a *perfect* example of what Ay’m talking about!’ said Pamela, in frustration. ‘They were paying their first security chap next to nothing, so naturally, he took the first job offer he got, and because they were losing money hand over fist, they didn’t replace him. But Ay didn’t want to be there alone when Ay went to help out, Ay couldn’t manage carrying everything up and downstairs, and *how* Rachel was supposed to do it, if she ever gets well enough – so Kenneth advertised for a sort of jack-of-all-trades, a salesman who could do heavy lifting and security.’

‘He said there weren’t many applicants,’ said Robin.

‘No, of course not, not on the salary he was offering! There weren’t many applicants. Ay *told* him Ay didn’t think much of Wrayght’s CV. Misspellings all over it.’

‘Misspellings,’ repeated Robin.

‘Yes. And then he *layed.*’

‘Wright did?’ said Robin.

‘No, Kenneth! He agreed we shouldn’t interview Wraygh, then sneaked his email address on to the list and Ay didn’t realise until Wraygh turned up that Kenneth had *hoodwinked* me into offering the man an interview. And *then*,’ said Pamela furiously, ‘he accused *me* of making the mistake, *me* of adding his email address to the list, bay mistake!’

‘That seems very unfair,’ said Robin, who was most interested in this information. ‘How many people did you end up interviewing?’

‘Just three – well, two. One of them didn’t turn up – the one Ay thought *mayt* be quite good. Ay suppose he had a better offer. So it was just Wraygh and this boy who was seventeen and looked as though he couldn’t fayt his way out of a paper bag. So, of course, with the *physical* requirements, Wraygh was the only choice.’

‘He claimed to be from Doncaster, didn’t he?’ said Robin. ‘Did he have a Yorkshire accent?’

‘Ay don’t really know. He didn’t sound very refayned… polite enough,’ said Pamela grudgingly, ‘but Ay knew *straight away* he knew nothing about silver or antiques, whatever he’d said at interview. Not even a *basic* understanding. He asked me what the lion passant meant!’

‘What does it mean?’ asked Robin.

‘The lion passant,’ repeated Pamela, with slight disbelief at Robin’s own lack of knowledge. ‘The most *basic*, common British hallmark. It means the item is sterling silver: point nine two five purity. When Ay explained that to Wraygh, he said “that’s funny”.’

‘“That’s funny,”’ repeated Robin. ‘What was funny about it?’

‘Ay’ve no idea,’ said Pamela. ‘But afterwards, when we found out he was Knowles, Ay thought, *Ay should have known*, from the name “William Wraygh”. They’re a well-known firm in Sheffield. They make silverware for hospitality. That’ll be where Knowles got the idea. Ay felt so silly for not seeing it.’

‘Mr Ramsay says Wright used the work computer to look things up,’ said Robin.

‘Yes, he visited “Truth About Freemasons” or some such sayte. Ay suppose you could argue he was traying to learn, but there’s no proper information on silverware on a sayte layke *that*. Just conspiracy nonsense, and people going on there to discuss masonic plots, and Freemasons

arguing with them – nothing about masonic *objects*.'

'Mr Ramsay's given us the camera footage from the day the Murdoch silver arrived, but we haven't had a chance to look at it yet,' Robin fibbed. 'Was it a normal kind of day?'

'Yes,' said Pamela, but there was a slight wariness in her tone. 'Well – not with the Murdoch silver arrayving. But otherwayse it was normal.'

'Mr Ramsay told us the silver arrived late,' said Robin.

'It did, yes. He's been sacked – the delivery man from Gibsons. Ay'd had dealings with him once before. Name of Larry McGee. Careless, not at all the kaynd of person you'd trust with valuable deliveries. Ay'm not surpraysed Gibsons got rid of him.'

'The silver was meant to arrive at lunchtime, wasn't it?'

'Yes, but it didn't get there until a quarter past three, and then McGee refused to carry it down to the vault, just dumped the crates in the middle of the shop, so Ay had to call Todd to come and help Wrayght lift it. Todd does Frayday afternoons at an office on Kingsway that closes at lunchtime, so he was nearby.'

'And did anyone open the crates, to check the silver?' asked Robin.

'Yes, of course, Ay did mayself. Ay'm very careful about security, Ay wasn't going to let those two handle valuable objects without me present. Ay opened the vault for them, and once they'd carried the crates inside, and were back upstairs, Ay went down, and took off the lids mayself. *That's* when Ay opened the big crate and found McGee had delivered *our* things to Ramsays, so Ay knew the Oriental Centrepiece must be *here*. Wrayght went to fetch it from may husband.' For a second, Pamela looked as though she might cry again, but she took a deep breath then said, 'Afterwards, if you can believe it – *after everything that had happened!* – Kenneth grumbled that Ay'd bought a few things from the collection for Bullens. Said Ay'd broken a gentlemen's agreement. Absolute nonsense! Nothing we bought was masonic, just a few nayce bits of general silverware. Ay think Kenneth believes anything A. H. Murdoch *touched* is his, by divayne rayte!'

'He's a personal fan of A. H. Murdoch, then?' said Robin.

'Oh, yes. Murdoch wrote books, you know. Kenneth's got all of them. He belongs to some grotty little lodge in Lewisham – Kenneth, not A. H. Murdoch. May father was a mason, too, that's whay Bullen & Co had a little saydlayne in masonic goods while he was alayve, but Daddy wasn't

anywhere *near* as silly about it all as Kenneth.'

'So, once you'd put the Murdoch silver in the vault, it was a completely normal day?' asked Robin. 'You closed at the usual time, and so forth?'

A fractional pause followed, in which Robin was certain Pamela was reminding herself that she was caught on camera.

'Ay had to leave a little early. Ay had an *awful* headache,' said Pamela. 'Ay've had them ever since the laser surgery.'

'You got a text, didn't you?' said Robin casually. 'Just before you left?'

'What?' said Pamela. 'Oh – yes…'

Tears rose suddenly in Pamela's eyes again.

'Ay don't want to talk about that. It had nothing to do with any of this, the Murdoch silver, or Wrayght. Ay asked Todd to man the shop until Wrayght got back. Everything was quayte safe. And then I went home.'

Leaving untouched the question of how Wright and Todd were supposed to have locked the door, set the alarm or opened the vault to place the centrepiece in it, Robin said,

'I don't suppose there's any possibility of you giving us a clip of your *own* footage – just from when William Wright came here that Friday, to pick up the centrepiece?'

'Well… Ay don't see why not,' said Pamela, still sniffing, but turning to her keyboard. Coffee and sympathy appeared to have softened her considerably. 'But you won't faynd it very helpful, Ay'm afraid. He's only visible for a few seconds.'

When the segment of footage had been forwarded to her email, Robin said,

'Would you mind looking at a picture for me?'

She took a copy of Rupert Fleetwood's photo from her bag and held it out.

'Our client would like to know whether this could have been William Wright.'

Pamela raised her reading glasses and peered at Rupert in his burgundy waiter's uniform. Robin could tell she was having difficulty focusing. When Pamela shook her head, her stiffly lacquered hair didn't move at all.

'No, definitely not.'

'You were all agreed William Wright was Jason Knowles, weren't you?' said Robin. 'Everyone who worked at the shop, I mean?'

‘Oh, yes,’ said Pamela. ‘Yes, it was definitely Knowles. Well, it made perfect sense. He’d spotted an opportunity. The security at Ramsays…’

‘The cameras look very old,’ said Robin.

‘*Old?*’ said Pamela, with resurgent scorn. ‘Bullen & Co replaced those models nay on twenty years ago, and the outside one hasn’t worked in all the tayme they’ve owned the shop. Kenneth never got round to fixing it. Thought just the *sayt* of it would be a deterrent.’

‘Right,’ said Robin. As she returned Fleetwood’s photo to her handbag, she said,

‘Mr Ramsay mentioned a funny email that had been sent from the shop, a week before the robbery. To a man named Calvin “Oz” Osgood? Saying they could help him with a problem?’

‘Yes, Wrayght sent it,’ said Pamela at once. ‘Well, it certainly wasn’t *me*, and Kenneth didn’t do it. Nayther of us had ever heard of the man.’

‘What about Jim Todd?’ asked Robin.

‘He shouldn’t have had the password to the computer,’ said Pamela. ‘*Ay* certainly never gave it to him.’

‘Mrs Bullen-Driscoll, this has been so helpful,’ said Robin warmly, getting to her feet. ‘I really do hope the problems with your eyes get better.’

‘Thank you,’ said Pamela, also standing up. ‘You’ve been… very kaynd.’

Ten minutes later, Robin was standing alone beside the entrance to Chancery Lane Tube station, her mobile clamped to one ear, a finger in her other, and a broad smile on her face.

‘Ellacott,’ said Strike’s voice, audible even over the roar of the surrounding traffic, ‘you’re a fucking marvel.’

25

‘We’ll all be rich before we die yet.’
‘Depends when we die,’ growled Tom – in which observation – obvious as it was – there was undoubtedly much truth.

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

Strike’s trip to Ipswich yielded a small amount of further information about the friend of Plug’s whom Kim had identified as an ex-embezzler. According to a neighbour who’d emerged from her house with a Red Setter, and with whom Strike struck up a conversation by pretending to be a great dog lover, Plug’s friend had been prosecuted under the Animal Cruelty Act and banned from keeping any domestic pet for five years.

‘Disgusting,’ the neighbour told Strike, scowling in the direction of the man’s overgrown front garden. ‘I think you should get a lifetime ban on keeping pets if you’re prosecuted for cruelty. What he did to that lurcher… I’ve got no time for people who mistreat animals. They should have the same done back to them, if you ask me.’

While driving back to London that evening, Strike wondered whether animal cruelty formed any part of whatever business was driving Plug and his associates’ discreet exchanges of cash. On arriving home he made an anonymous call to the RSPCA, tipping off the animal welfare charity that a large animal or animals appeared to be incarcerated without fresh air or sunlight in Plug’s padlocked shed. That, he hoped, might flush out something interesting.

As he left the office, he noticed that Pat’s aquarium had now acquired three inhabitants, and stopped to look at them. These weren’t goldfish as he recognised them. Indeed, one of them, which was black, appeared to him to

be so misshapen he wondered whether it wasn't diseased, having what looked like a knobbly growth on its head, a lumpy body and a distinctly waddling action. Propped against the base of the tank was a card on which was written in Pat's handwriting 'DO NOT FEED I'VE ALREADY DONE IT', an instruction with which Strike was more than happy to comply. He left, turning out the light.

His plan for the following day was to trace Larry McGee, the delivery man who'd been fired from Gibsons at some point after delivering the Murdoch silver. Strike set out for the auction house after breakfast, planning to pretend he didn't know McGee had been sacked, and hoping to wring details of his dismissal from whoever he could manage to talk to.

A woman was standing on the corner of Denmark Street and Charing Cross Road as Strike approached it. Alert as he was for the possibility of journalistic interest after Culpepper's story, Strike eyed her as he drew nearer, but discounted the idea that she worked for the papers. She was a well-built young woman with white-blonde hair extensions; as he drew nearer, he saw false eyelashes and plumped-up lips, and the figure revealed by the tightly belted coat showed evidence of cosmetic enhancement too, reminding him of Bijou Watkins, who'd also had large breast implants. The blonde bowed her head and hunched her shoulders as Strike passed her, but he suspected this was due less to any wish to preserve her incognito than a workaday wish not to be importuned by a random male, which he suspected might happen to her quite frequently.

Half an hour later, Strike arrived at Gibsons Auction House, which was situated in an elegant Edwardian building on Northumberland Avenue. Tasteful gold Christmas lights had been fixed around the edge of a large window, where a pair of abstract paintings were hung on almost invisible strings. A man as tall as Strike, who was wearing an immaculate black suit and had a goatee and a shaven head, stood guard outside the door.

'Morning,' said Strike, pulling a card out of his wallet and showing it to the security man. 'I'm hoping to talk to Larry McGee.'

'You'll be lucky,' said the man.

'Why's that?'

'He's dead, mate.'

The security man looked down at the card Strike had handed him and raised his eyebrows.

‘You that bloke what solved the Lula Landry thing?’

‘That’s me,’ said Strike. ‘Was McGee was still working here when he died?’

‘Nah,’ said the security man, who was now looking at Strike with curiosity. ‘He wuz sacked.’

‘Any chance I could talk to someone about that?’

Five minutes later, and slightly to Strike’s surprise, because he’d anticipated a rebuff, he was led by the security man into a stark white office with another abstract painting hanging behind the uncluttered desk. Its occupant was a tall black woman in her thirties, who was dressed in a violet trouser suit and wore her hair in long spiral curls. The name plate on her desk declared her name to be Diana Boadu and her accent suggested a private education, though she displayed none of the superciliousness Strike might have expected from her stylish appearance and the beautifully appointed Edwardian building in which she worked. On the contrary, like the security man, Diana seemed intrigued if not mildly excited to be speaking to Cormoran Strike.

‘Why on earth are *you* interested in Larry McGee?’ she asked, when Strike had accepted an offer of coffee, and a redheaded underling had been dispatched to make it.

‘He delivered the Murdoch silver,’ said Strike.

‘*Oh*,’ said Diana Boadu. ‘I see.’

‘But I’ve just found out he’s dead.’

‘Yes, I heard he’d died,’ said Diana, who didn’t seem unduly saddened by the fact. ‘But that was after we fired him – months later,’ she added, as though afraid that Strike might get the impression the sacking had somehow killed McGee.

‘Any idea what he died of?’

‘Carter might know, our Head of Deliveries, but I think he’s out on a job.’

‘Would you be comfortable giving me Carter’s contact details?’

Strike’s coffee arrived while Diana was dictating Carter’s number. When Strike had thanked the redhead, he said,

‘Could I ask what McGee did, to get himself sacked?’

‘I don’t see why not,’ said Diana. ‘I assume – I mean, given your reputation’ (Strike thought fleetingly of the recent press article about his

behaviour towards women; apparently not everyone had read it) ‘you’re discreet?’

‘Very,’ he assured her, drawing out his notebook.

‘Well, we suspected him of theft.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. The first incident concerned a pair of nineteenth-century Staffordshire pottery spaniels, which disappeared between the warehouse and the purchaser. The buyer was a fairly absent-minded collector and it took him a week to register that the spaniels hadn’t been in the delivery, because he’d bid on so many lots.

‘It was a tricky situation. They could’ve been stolen at the warehouse and never loaded into McGee’s van, and – well, candidly, there’s always a chance a buyer themselves is working a scam. We investigated, but we couldn’t prove anything, so we gave McGee the benefit of the doubt and reimbursed the buyer out of our insurance.’

‘McGee was alone on the delivery, was he?’

‘Yes,’ said Diana. ‘We usually send people out in pairs, but it was a particularly busy time, so he did this delivery alone. We think he spotted an opportunity.’

‘How much were these pottery dog things worth?’

‘Two to three thousand pounds,’ said Diana. ‘Then – oh, that’s Carter!’ she said in surprise.

Strike looked around to see a fit-looking white man in his early fifties looking through the glass panel of Diana’s door, fist raised to knock.

‘Come in, Charlie,’ she called.

‘Just wanted to tell you, the Burne-Jones delivery’s been postponed again,’ said Carter, opening the door and poking his head inside.

‘Oh, for God’s sake,’ said Diana crossly. ‘We aren’t a storage unit. He bought it, he needs to take receipt of it!’

‘He was calling from Istanbul.’

‘OK, fine,’ sighed Diana. ‘This is Cormoran Strike, Charlie. He’s a—’

‘Private detective, yeah,’ said Carter, sidling a little further into the room. ‘Bradley told me.’

Strike surmised that Bradley was the security man.

‘He’s here to talk about Larry McGee,’ said Diana. ‘D’you want to pull up a chair?’

Carter did so with such alacrity that Strike suspected the message about the delayed delivery had been a pretext to find out what was going on in Diana's office. Carter looked ex-military or police; his thick grey hair was cut very short, his gaze was penetrating and his royal blue overalls were neatly pressed.

'I've just been explaining about those disappearing dogs,' Diana said. Turning back to the detective, she said, 'Anyway, last January, the same thing happened on another delivery McGee made. This time, it was a kifwebe.'

'A what?' said Strike. If nothing else, the silver vault case was undoubtedly improving his vocabulary; first nefs, now this.

'It's a mask, produced by the Songye and Luba people. This was nineteen-twenties and especially fine, worth around five thousand. Again, it vanished between warehouse and purchaser and, again, the client had bought several items in the same auction, so didn't immediately notice that one of the masks was missing. Two incidents of easily portable objects disappearing from multiple lots delivered to the same buyer, McGee the delivery driver on both—'

'—is a hell of a coincidence,' said Strike.

'Well, quite.'

'You'd let him go out alone again, had you?'

'No,' said Carter, before Diana could answer. 'He never went out alone again after the pottery dogs disappeared. There were two of 'em on the kifwebe delivery, and the co-driver backed McGee up and said there hadn't been any opportunity for McGee to have pinched it. He was right gormless, that kid,' said Carter, shaking his head. 'Panicked and thought he'd be sacked if he admitted McGee had been alone with the mask. We had to let *'im* go in the end – nothing criminal, just dozy.'

'And you didn't involve the police?' Strike asked Diana.

'It's tricky,' said Diana.

'You don't want a reputation for poor security.'

'Well, exactly. The losses weren't huge, relatively speaking, but even so… We couldn't prove McGee had taken the mask, but after that, management asked Charlie to keep a log of every infraction, every instance of lateness or laziness. We just wanted to get rid of McGee.'

'He'll have been background checked before he was hired, I suppose?'

Strike asked Carter.

‘He will’ve been, yeah,’ said Carter, ‘but not by me. I inherited ’im from the last Head of Deliveries.’ Turning to Diana he said, ‘Did you tell ’im about the porn?’

‘I hadn’t got to that,’ said Diana.

‘Porn?’ said Strike.

‘McGee was watchin’ it on ’is phone, at work,’ said Carter. ‘Every free minute, pretty much. Not bothered if anyone saw him, either – or he wasn’t till he got a verbal warning for doing it. No, he had quite a little fantasy life going, McGee,’ said Carter.

‘In what way?’

‘Two of the younger lads he went on jobs with told me he was always going on about women, and girls coming on to him.’

‘*Larry McGee* thought girls were coming on to him?’ said Diana, with a scornful laugh.

‘Oh yeah,’ said Carter. ‘Drawn to him like flies round – all over ’im, he claimed,’ Carter corrected himself quickly. ‘Teenager living opposite deliberately left her blinds up to undress in front of the window, that sort of thing. Girls sidling up to him asking him for cigarettes and flashing their knickers when they bent over. Anyway, ’e got ’is next warning for ’ow he was behaving to the girls who visited the warehouse.’

‘We’ve got storage facilities and garaging in Waterloo,’ Diana explained. ‘That’s where McGee was based most of the time. He was making off-colour jokes about what the younger girls were wearing, and their sex lives. After we got two complaints we started gearing up for a full disciplinary hearing, but then he handed us a cast-iron reason for firing him, so there was no need.’

‘What was the final straw?’ asked Strike.

‘Oh, he really f – messed up,’ said Carter, correcting himself smoothly for a second time. ‘With the Murdoch silver delivery. He was with a co-driver as usual, they’d made a couple of drop-offs, then he deliberately ditched the other guy. Faked having a migraine. Begged the guy to go get him some stuff for it out of Boots, and when the guy come back out, the van was gone.’

‘Right,’ said Strike, who was now making rapid notes. ‘When did you find out what had happened?’

‘Dave called me immediately,’ said Carter.

‘What time did McGee take off in the van?’

‘Round half twelve,’ said Carter.

‘So the Murdoch silver was still in the back?’

‘Yeah.’

‘When I heard that McGee had got rid of his co-driver, I personally called the buyer, Kenneth Ramsay,’ said Diana. ‘He said the silver hadn’t turned up at the shop at the appointed time. I was extremely worried. I asked him to call me back if and when McGee turned up – I didn’t tell Ramsay what had happened, just that we were concerned about the delay. Anyway, he did call me back, to say McGee had turned up just after three. I was worried; I suspected that something would have gone missing again – it was another instance of a lot of items going to a single buyer, so the exact same conditions in which the mask and the dogs had disappeared – but Ramsay put me through to the woman who was in the shop, and she told me everything was there, except that two lots had got mixed up. A centrepiece had gone to Bullen & Co, and some of Bullen & Co’s items had gone to Ramsay Silver. I asked her to send photographs of everything she had there, and to contact me when the centrepiece was returned. I had to be sure we weren’t looking at another theft – although, of all the lots, I couldn’t see why McGee would have chosen that centrepiece to steal. It was incredibly recognisable and pretty much impossible for anyone but a weightlifter to carry single-handedly.’

‘And did she send you pictures?’

‘Yes, she took photos of the items and sent them, and they were all present and correct, and called me later to say the centrepiece had arrived, too. Everything was there – it was a huge relief.’

‘She sent a picture of the centrepiece as well, did she?’

Diana frowned, pulled out her iPhone and began scrolling. While she was doing this, Strike said to Carter,

‘Did you ever find out what McGee had done between ditching the other bloke and delivering the Murdoch silver?’

‘He claimed he’d got lost,’ said Carter, ‘but he didn’t expect to be believed. That was just something to say.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘He came back to the warehouse after he’d finally delivered the stuff to

Ramsays, I called him straight into my office and asked what had happened. He claimed Dave was taking too much time in the chemists, and he knew they were already late, so he thought he'd better get going, and then he got lost. He knew full well he was about to be sacked. Didn't care. Pleased about it, if anything. Smirked as he walked out.'

'Did you ever tell the police this?'

'Yeah,' said Carter, 'but they took their time coming to see us. Some young copper turned up, just to tick a box, probably. I don't think they cared about what happened to the silver before it got to Ramsays. Never heard anything back from 'em, anyway.'

'You wouldn't happen to have a picture of Larry McGee, would you?' Strike asked Carter, who pulled his phone out of his overall pocket.

'Probably got one on here,' he muttered, and began searching.

'No,' said Diana, who was still examining pictures on her own mobile. 'The woman at Ramsay Silver never sent me a picture of the Oriental Centrepiece – but she did text me to say it had arrived.'

'That's McGee,' said Carter, holding his phone out to Strike. 'Big guy in the middle. It was Hassan's stag.'

Strike looked down at a picture of a group of men in a pub. McGee, like Carter, had been in his fifties: tall, overweight, florid of face, with a droopy lower lip that gave him the look of a camel. The little hair remaining to him was grey.

'Could I take a picture of this on my own phone?'

'Feel free,' said Carter.

Strike did so, then flicked over a page in his notebook and asked,

'Did anyone keep in touch with McGee after he was fired?'

'Bradley saw a bit of him,' said Carter. 'Our security guy. He and McGee both lived in Hounslow. Same local.'

'Would it be all right to have a quick word with Bradley?' Strike asked Diana.

A few minutes later, Carter led the security guard into the office, the latter looking intrigued.

'Yeah, I ran into 'im in the pub a couple of times,' said Bradley, when asked about his post-sacking contact with McGee.

'How soon after he was fired?'

'Er…' Bradley scratched his goatee. 'Firs' time, it was the Saturday

night after.’

‘The day following the delivery?’ said Strike. ‘Before the body and the theft were discovered, on the Monday?’

‘Yeah,’ said Bradley. ‘It was before all that was on the news. I jus’ asked ’im why ’e’d ditched Dave an’ buggered off, an’ ’e talked a load of his usual boll—’

Unlike Carter, Bradley was slow at finding a synonym for the word he’d decided not to use in front of Diana. After a tongue-tied pause he substituted, ‘rubbish’.

‘What did he say?’ asked Strike.

‘Told me ’e’d been ’eld up by an “’ot little blonde” who lured him up a side alley,’ said Bradley, with a smirk.

‘Chrissake,’ muttered Carter, with an eye-roll.

‘I told ’im ’e was full of it,’ said Bradley. ‘’E jus’ laughed. Told me ’e wanted to leave Gibsons anyway, and ’e was gonna be coming into a decent bit of cash soon, so it made no odds to him, getting the ’eave ’o.’

‘Any mention of where this cash was coming from?’

‘No,’ said Bradley, ‘I fort ’e meant a will or somefing. We didn’ talk long. I never much liked ’im. ’E just lived up the road, so I sometimes ran into ’im.’

‘Ever see him after that?’

‘Yeah, once. End of October, same pub. ’E’d really let ’imself go. Looked like ’e’d packed on a coupla stone. I asked if ’e’d ’ad his windfall yet, and ’e bit my bloody ’ead off, said ’e’d never said ’e was gonna be getting a windfall, and walked out. Next I ’eard, ’e’d been found dead in his flat, after a neighbour complained about the smell. It was in the local paper.’ He continued in a self-consciously grave voice, ‘Sad way to go.’

‘In the paper, was it?’ said Strike, who was still writing.

‘Yeah. *’Ounslow ’Erald*. Natural causes. Always looked like ’e had ’eart disease. That sorta corned beef skin, y’know? ’S’ow my old man went.’

‘Proper catch for a hot young blonde,’ said Carter, and Bradley sniggered.

26

… desist!
— The warrior-part of you may, an it list,
Finding real faulchions difficult to poise,
Fling them afar and taste the cream of joys
By wielding such in fancy…

Robert Browning
Sordello: Book the Fifth

‘But that’s so… *weird*,’ said Robin, on the phone to Strike half an hour later, while he was walking back to the office.

‘It is, yeah,’ said Strike, a finger in his free ear to block out the sounds of traffic. ‘Very weird.’

His leg was paining him again, but, remembering Murphy’s gym bag and water bottle, he was resisting the temptation to hail a cab.

‘McGee seems to have thought he was going to be paid enough to make it worth his while to sacrifice his job,’ said Strike, ‘but paid for what?’

Robin, who was sitting in her Land Rover outside a house in Pimlico that Mrs Two-Times was visiting, didn’t answer immediately. After a short silence, both partners spoke at once.

‘I can only—’

‘I was think – go on,’ said Strike.

‘I was going to say, I can only think of two possibilities,’ said Robin. ‘Either he was doing something completely unrelated to the silver delivery, or he wanted to tamper with the silver in some way – but the silver wasn’t tampered with.’

‘You say that, but something *did* go wrong with the delivery. The Oriental Centrepiece didn’t go where it was supposed to.’

‘But it ended up at Ramsay Silver in the end. That seems such a pointless thing to do, switch the addresses on two crates, if that’s what he did.’

‘Pamela never saw the centrepiece, though. She dashed out of the shop right after the crate was put in the basement, so she never had an opportunity to photograph it and send the picture to Gibsons. We’ve got no proof it ever ended up there.’

‘You think Wright stole it, on the way back from Bullen & Co?’

‘Can’t see how he could’ve done. He couldn’t have lifted it alone and he arrived back at the shop bloody quickly for someone who’d have to have made a detour to deposit it with someone else.’

‘But of all the pieces to steal, the centrepiece would be the very last one, surely?’

‘That’s exactly what the woman at the auction house just said to me.’

‘Pamela told me it was virtually unsellable, even to masons.’

Robin’s eyes were currently trained on the front door of the house where Mrs Two-Times was visiting a female friend.

‘I assume,’ said Strike, breaking another short silence, ‘the police decided McGee’s detour’s irrelevant, but I’d still like to know whether they talked to him. Might try and trace relatives, find out if he was ever interviewed. Wouldn’t mind seeing the post-mortem results, either.’

Robin felt an increasingly familiar prickle of unease. Strike was, once again, checking back over the police’s work, and she thought again of Murphy, and that note on the office board about DCI Malcolm Truman’s alleged membership of a masonic lodge.

‘Not sure I’ve ever had a case where so many senseless things seem to have happened,’ Strike continued. ‘I can’t see why McGee disappeared off the radar before delivering the silver and I still can’t fathom why Wright had to be bumped off in the vault.’

‘We’re definitely accepting what Shanker said, are we? This was a planned killing, not a fight that got out of hand?’

‘Can’t say for sure until we know exactly how Wright died, can we? If there were defensive marks and stab wounds to the front of his body it still might’ve been a punch-up that got out of hand, but it still seems a bloody strange place for a fatal knife fight to break out. Like I said before, a heist is a quick in-out job. You get pissed off at someone during it, you wait until

you’re off the premises to thrash things out. I don’t think we should neglect the Ramsay Silver angle, going forwards. It’s all very well trying to fit different candidates to Wright, but I’ve got a feeling that when we find out why he was killed in the vault, we’ll know who he was.’

‘What happened to “means before motive”?’ asked Robin, repeating back to Strike his own oft-quoted dictum.

‘This *is* means,’ said Strike. ‘The motive could be anything: rage, jealousy, he hadn’t paid a debt. What I want to know is why Wright was killed *there*. We know he left Ramsay Silver at six, and we know he returned to the shop by night. It beggars belief that he turned up there by chance at one in the morning without realising a large-scale robbery was about to take place, so that suggests Wright’s a crook himself. Trouble is, with Knowles ruled out, the only current candidate for Wright we know had already committed theft is—’

‘Rupert Fleetwood,’ said Robin.

‘Exactly.’

‘But you don’t think Wright’s Fleetwood.’

‘I suppose,’ said Strike reluctantly, ‘framed like this, he has to move up the suspect list a bit, with one proven theft of silver behind him, but there’s a hell of a difference between him marching out of his godfather’s club in broad daylight, staggering under the weight of that nef, and this meticulously planned robbery – because you’ve got to give whoever did it that much credit, they’ve got clean away with it. No trace of the silver since, and no leads. But if the dead man’s Fleetwood, I’d say it was particularly unwise for the gang to polish him off in the vault. Fleetwood was a well-connected upper-class young man, a famous actor’s cousin, and when people like that get killed, you expect payback. I struggle to see how, with three other men in the vault, one of them wouldn’t have stepped in to stop a fight between Fleetwood and his assailant, knowing what the potential consequences might be of leaving him dead on the floor.’

‘I agree,’ said Robin. ‘It doesn’t add up.’

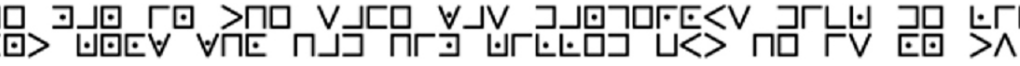
‘But if Wright’s killing was deliberate, planned murder, it seems even stranger than a spontaneous fight. Of all the places to polish someone off, the vault of a masonic silver shop seems one of the stupidest. Ramsays’ security might’ve been shit, but it was still a risky place to get into and you’re absolutely guaranteeing press interest.’

‘Strike, I’m going to have to go, I think she’s off shopping again,’ said Robin, watching Mrs Two-Times descend the steps of the house with her friend, and she ended the call, leaving Strike, whose stomach was now grumbling, to enter a supermarket to buy lunch. Murphy still in mind, he chose a salad, rather than the large BLT he really wanted.

The blonde he’d noticed earlier on the corner of Denmark Street had gone, but when Strike opened the street door to his office he spotted a small white envelope that definitely hadn’t been on the doormat when he’d left. On bending to pick it up, he saw the usual approximation of his own name printed in capitals: CAMERON STRIKE. The writing had an odd appearance, as though carefully formed between two horizontal lines, and Strike, who’d previously had reason to consult handwriting experts, suspected this had been done to eradicate any trace of individuality.

On entering the office, he found Midge and Pat in conversation. They fell silent when he entered. Midge’s eyes, he noticed, were bloodshot.

‘Morning,’ he said, pretending he hadn’t noticed. Walking past the goldfish, he closed the door of the inner office, sat down at the partners’ desk and opened the white envelope. Inside was a piece of paper on which were written two lines of what he recognised as pigpen cipher.



‘The fuck?’ he muttered, and had just turned on his computer to translate it, when Pat knocked on the dividing door.

‘There’s a man ringing the buzzer. Says he wants to talk to you about Niall Semple.’

‘Really?’ said Strike, thinking immediately of the man who’d advised Jade Semple not to speak to him, on the phone. ‘Has he given a name?’

‘No,’ said Pat, looking disgruntled, ‘and he hasn’t got an appointment.’

She disapproved on principle of letting people in off the street without appointments.

‘Let him in.’

Strike got up, closed the wings of the noticeboard on which he’d pinned Semple’s and the other possible Wrights’ pictures, and slid the cipher note out of sight, beneath his keyboard. He then headed into the outer office in time to see Pat opening the glass door, Midge passing out of it, and a

stranger walking in.

He was a good-looking man in his late fifties, broad-shouldered, almost as tall as Strike, and wearing a dark blue suit the detective could tell was tailored. He had a thick head of short salt-and-pepper hair, a square jaw and silver-framed glasses, and entered the office, not exactly with an air of expecting to be saluted, but something close to it. Strike wasn't entirely surprised to see a smile of welcome replace Pat's scowl; she always had a soft spot for handsome men.

'Mr Strike?' said the newcomer, in the kind of rich, upper-class voice Strike could imagine declaring a garden fete open. This definitely wasn't the man who'd called Jade Semple 'babe'.

'That's me.'

'Ralph Lawrence.'

They shook hands.

'Want a coffee?' asked Strike.

'No, thanks, pressed for time,' said Lawrence.

'I could do you a small one,' said Pat.

'All right,' said Lawrence with what Strike thought was a consciously charming smile, 'a small one, then.'

'Come through,' said Strike, standing back to let Lawrence pass.

He noticed the sweeping gaze the man gave the two rooms as he moved through to the partners' desk, as though he was memorising details.

'We've got an acquaintance in common,' Lawrence said, sitting down in Robin's chair as Strike closed the door.

'Yeah?' said Strike. 'Who's that?'

'Angela Darwish.'

Strike's interest in his uninvited guest sharpened considerably. He and Robin had met Angela Darwish in the context of a previous case, which had involved a far-right terrorist group. Darwish had been working in conjunction with the Met and had never disclosed either her precise job description or employer, but by the end of the investigation, Strike had known perfectly well she was MI5. That didn't mean Lawrence also worked for the security service, of course, but certain suspicions lurking in the back of Strike's mind about Niall Semple now took more solid form.

'How can I help?' he asked, also sitting down.

'You're currently trying to identify the body found in the silver vault at

Ramsay Silver, yes?'

In the absence of proof that he was speaking to a genuine MI5 operative, Strike answered with a question of his own.

'Did Semple's wife tip you off I want to interview her, or are you monitoring private messages on her Facebook page?'

'Have you spoken to anyone other than Jade yet?' Lawrence asked.

'Why d'you ask?' said Strike, who could play question for question all day.

'I think a man of your intelligence can probably guess why I'm asking,' said Lawrence, with a faint smile.

There was a knock on the dividing door and Pat appeared, holding a tray. Childish as he knew it to be, Strike was nevertheless slightly irked that Pat had got out both the milk jug and the sugar bowl for their suave visitor.

'Thank you very much,' said Lawrence, smiling at the office manager, and Strike heard the gratification in Pat's gruff 'you're welcome'.

'Can I be candid?' said Lawrence, once Pat had closed the door again.

'I don't know. Can you?' said Strike.

He wasn't being combative just because he was hungry and had only a supermarket salad to look forward to, nor because of Lawrence's aura of easy assurance; Strike had met plenty of his ilk in the army. What Strike found offensive was the man's assumption that he had only to hint he was MI5 for Strike to accept this as fact. Strike considered that he was owed a little more respect, so sat back in his chair without returning Lawrence's smile and sipped from the chipped Arsenal mug Pat had deemed appropriate for her boss.

'People better placed than you are already looking for Niall Semple,' said Lawrence.

'Yeah?' said Strike. 'My agency's got a one hundred per cent success rate in tracking people down we've tried to find, but if you locate him before we do, give us a shout.'

He'd half-hoped to wipe the smile off Lawrence's face with that, but no.

'What d'you know about Semple?'

'Nobody's seen him alive since a corpse of his approximate height, weight and age turned up in a vault in Holborn.'

'Who are you working for? A newspaper?'

'If you are who you're hinting you are, you can always hack our

computers and find out,' said Strike.

Lawrence's smile didn't flicker. The impression given was that he'd dealt with obstructive dolts like Strike too often to let them anger him.

'Mr Strike,' he said, 'Niall Semple wasn't the man in the silver vault. You have my personal guarantee on that.'

'OK,' said Strike. 'Bung me the proof and we'll cross him off our list.'

'Unfortunately,' said Lawrence, 'I can't provide proof without breaking the Official Secrets Act.'

'Can't count him out, then, can I?' said Strike, unimpressed by the hint that he might be endangering national security by identifying a body.

Strike detected a certain chagrin in Lawrence that his appeal to Queen and country hadn't worked. Lawrence now glanced down at the place where Strike's prosthetic leg was concealed by the desk.

'Herrick, yes?' he said, referring to the British military operation in Afghanistan.

'Yeah,' said Strike, knowing full well he was supposed to be flattered Lawrence knew this.

'I understand you may have a – a certain fellow feeling for Semple, being ex-military yourself—'

'I don't need to have fellow feeling for a missing person to try and find out whether they're living or dead,' said Strike. 'It's my job.'

'You haven't got the resources we do.'

'And yet, with all your resources, you haven't found him.'

'You're fond of publicity, Mr Strike, but publicity, in this case, could do harm.'

Strike knew he had the whip hand now; he could tell Lawrence regretted his descent into personal attack immediately, because the man said swiftly,

'Look – we're on the same side.'

'I want to find out whether Niall Semple's dead. You want to stop me finding out. Those are very different fucking sides. Shall I tell you what I think's going on here?'

'Please do,' said Lawrence, reaching for his coffee.

'Worried by the possibility of a tabloid leak now I'm looking for Semple, you've decided a quiet approach should be made to me, to let the matter drop. The fact that high-level bureaucrats are trying to warn me off' – he saw Lawrence's eyelid flicker, and was pleased to see the man hadn't

liked being described as a bureaucrat – ‘makes me think Semple might have been injured on an operation you don’t want the public to know about. He’s brain damaged and might be a liability. Bottom line: it’d suit you if he’s dead, but you’d far rather it hadn’t happened in a newsworthy way.’

For a moment, they looked, unblinking, into each other’s eyes, Lawrence’s pale blue into Strike’s brown.

‘All right,’ said Lawrence, setting down his coffee and standing up. ‘Thanks for your time. Should you at any point wish to contact me, call that number.’

He took out a flat silver case and laid a thick white business card on the desk. ‘Goodbye.’

He left without a second handshake. Rather than walk him to the door, Strike picked up the card Lawrence had left and examined it, unimpressed. It bore only the man’s name, which Strike wasn’t necessarily accepting was his real one, and a mobile number. Strike opened the wings of the noticeboard and pinned the card beneath Semple’s picture, then he turned back to his PC, opened Facebook and sent a new message to Semple’s wife.

I’m not working for a newspaper. I’m just looking for a quick conversation.

If Lawrence really was able to access Jade’s private Facebook messages, Strike hoped he’d enjoy that one.

Sitting back down at the desk and ignoring his salad, because he was already in a bad mood, Strike retrieved the cipher note he’d hidden under his keyboard and set to work, translating the message symbol by symbol. Within minutes, he’d produced a sentence in English written beneath the code:

the | man | in | the| safe | was | dangerous | dick | delion | i | don’t | know | who | had | him | killed | but | he | is | on | TV

27

The only difficulty was to decide how to look into it – what to do, and how.

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

On Saturday morning, which was foggy and cold, Robin awoke, exhausted, in Murphy's flat in Wanstead. She'd have liked another couple of hours' sleep, because in spite of telling her boyfriend that she'd be 'coming to bed soon' and 'just needed to send another couple of emails', Robin had sat up in Murphy's sitting room until two o'clock, perusing the Facebook page of Calvin Osgood, the genuine music producer, and the Instagram page of Calvin 'Oz' Osgood, his impersonator. After making her way through a digital labyrinth of connections and dead ends, she'd reached a website for missing young people and been unable to go any further.

She'd crept into bed so as not to wake Murphy, but her night had been restless and punctuated with nightmares about Chapman Farm. However, as she and Murphy had an appointment to view another house together, she rose, swollen-eyed but uncomplaining, at eight, dressed and ate breakfast, before setting out into the thick, chill mist. They were in Murphy's Toyota Avensis, because Robin had now taken her Land Rover to a garage for its MOT. Leaving it there, she'd felt not unlike a pet owner waiting to hear whether the vet could save her beloved animal: the car's rattle, which she still hadn't traced to its source, had grown louder.

Murphy was in a better mood today. The Met had re-arrested the driver of the car from which the shooting of the two young brothers was believed to have happened. Murphy now told her, with cautious confidence, 'I think we'll get the bastards this time.'

The fog lay thickly on the road as they drove west to Wood Green, but

the Avensis was warm and snug, and Robin thought of the old Land Rover and tried to tell herself it mightn't be a bad idea to have a car with a working heater. 'Do They Know It's Christmas?' was playing on the radio when Robin's mobile rang and immediately connected to Bluetooth, revealing Strike's name.

'Hi,' she said, answering, 'what's up?'

'Got news, if you can talk.'

'Actually,' said Robin, slightly panicked – she didn't want Strike to say anything that would reveal to Murphy what they were up to, and least of all did she want Strike to mention that they knew the body wasn't Jason Knowles – 'could I call you back? I'm on my way to see another house.'

'No problem,' said Strike, 'speak later.'

Robin hung up. 'Do They Know It's Christmas?' came back over the speakers.

'What aren't I allowed to hear?' said Murphy.

'Don't be silly,' said Robin. 'I'm just tired. I can't be doing with a long work chat right now.'

They drove on through the fog, and after a while, Robin initiated a conversation about their imminent trip to Masham.

See? she thought. *You're the one I'm taking home. You're the one I'm spending Christmas with.*

'This looks all right,' said Murphy enthusiastically, half an hour later, when they arrived in Moselle Avenue. The terraced houses were of red brick, and all of them looking in far better repair than the one they'd recently viewed in Wanstead.

Robin had just got out of the car when her mobile rang again, and she recognised the same Ironbridge number she'd seen before. As she'd left yet another message for Dilys Powell the previous day, she said, 'Ryan, I've got to take this, it's about Rupert Fleetwood. You go in, I'll be five minutes.'

'I'll wait for you.'

She wondered whether he thought it was Strike calling back.

'It's freezing, go in and look interested, we don't want to miss the slot.'

So Murphy headed across the road, and was admitted to the house, while Robin answered her call.

'Robin Ellacott.'

'This is Dilys,' said a cracked voice.

‘Mrs Dilys Powell?’ said Robin. ‘Tyler’s grandmother?’

‘Yes,’ said the woman, who sounded suspicious and befuddled.

‘I’m very glad to hear from you, Mrs Powell. I’m a private detective, and I was hoping to talk to you about your grandson.’

‘What? You called me.’

‘Yes,’ said Robin, speaking slowly and clearly. ‘Your great-niece told me you were in hospital.’

‘What?’

‘I hope you’re better now?’ said Robin loudly.

‘Well, I’m home,’ mumbled Dilys Powell.

‘I called because we heard you were worried Tyler might have been the man at the silver shop. The body in the vault. Has he turned up since you contacted the police?’

‘No, he hasn’t turned up,’ said Dilys Powell. ‘Not a word.’

‘What made you think he might have been the man at the silver shop, Mrs Powell?’

‘What?’ said Dilys Powell. ‘Speak up, I can’t hear you.’

‘Could I come and see you?’ said Robin, raising her voice and enunciating clearly. ‘To talk about Tyler? I could come to Ironbridge.’

‘Took off,’ said Dilys Powell. ‘Told Griff where he was going. Never told me.’

‘Is Griff a friend of Tyler’s?’ asked Robin, now groping one-handed for her notebook.

‘He’s up the road. What d’you want?’

‘To talk to you,’ said Robin, even more loudly and clearly, ‘about Tyler. Could I come to Ironbridge? Maybe after Christmas?’

There was a brief pause.

‘Yeah, you can come.’

‘Thank you very much,’ said Robin. The front door of the house for sale had opened, and she saw Murphy watching her. ‘Could I call you back, Mrs Powell, and we can arrange a date to meet?’

‘Call me back? Yeah. All right.’

Robin hung up, then hurried across the road.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘It was urgent.’

A chatty pregnant woman of around Robin’s age started showing them around the house, which was bandbox neat. Her husband was entertaining a

toddler and an older girl in the sitting room.

‘They were going to go to the park, but it’s so cold and Nate’s getting over a cough,’ the mother told Robin and Murphy as they moved past the rest of the family to look at the small, sparklingly clean kitchen. ‘It’s a lovely area, lovely neighbours. We’ve been *so* happy here, we just want a bit more space with another baby coming, and I’d like to be nearer my parents. Garden,’ she added, smiling, pointing towards the small, well-kept lawn outside the kitchen window.

Upstairs, she moved aside to let them look into the box room, which held a bed with the name Nathan carved into the headboard, and had planes in primary colours painted on sky blue walls. Murphy reached out for Robin’s hand and squeezed it. She felt a slight clenching of her stomach, and unbidden into her mind came the thought, *I will never live in this house.*

‘And this is Laura’s, obviously,’ said the proud homeowner, beaming, as they looked into a second, larger bedroom, decorated in white and bubble-gum pink, ‘and ours.’

‘Lovely,’ said Robin automatically, looking blankly at the yellow duvet cover and pine furniture.

‘And the bathroom.’

Spotless, with blue and white tiles: a nice house in every way, except that Robin had already made up her mind. The stairs were narrow, and Murphy released her hand to let her walk down first. As they were descending, the doorbell rang.

‘Whoops, I think that’s the next lot, early!’ said the homeowner.

‘Have you had a lot of interest?’ asked Murphy.

‘We have,’ said the woman, with a note of apology. ‘If you’d like to go into the garden and have a proper look?’

So Robin and Murphy exited through the back door, to stand on the frosty lawn and breathe in the dank, sooty taste of the gradually lifting fog.

‘What d’you think?’ asked Murphy.

‘Nice,’ said Robin, who didn’t want to find fault too quickly.

‘I bet you it goes for way over the asking price.’

‘I was thinking that, too,’ she said, feigning regret, ‘and parking could be tricky, with two cars. Still, it *is* nice.’

Through the kitchen window they saw a family of four looking around.

‘Want to have another look upstairs?’ said Murphy.

‘There are good photos online. We could go and get a coffee, have a look at the area?’

‘Good idea.’

So they headed back through the house, thanked the owners, and emerged again onto Moselle Avenue. As they were about to cross the road, Murphy’s mobile rang.

‘Work,’ he said. ‘Sorry.’

He walked away up the street, answering the call only once he was out of earshot. Robin waited until he was fifty yards away before calling Strike back.

‘How was the house?’ he asked.

‘Not great,’ said Robin, and she felt a sense of release in saying it, although she knew it wasn’t the house she hadn’t liked, but Murphy’s squeeze of her hand – in consolation? Hope? Encouragement? ‘Tell me your news, because I’ve got some, too.’

Strike told Robin about Ralph Lawrence’s visit to the office the previous afternoon.

‘God above,’ said Robin, immensely relieved that she’d prevented Strike telling her all this over the car Bluetooth. ‘MI5 are warning us off?’

‘Assuming he’s telling the truth about who he is,’ said Strike. ‘MI6 would be involved initially, if Semple was Regiment.’

‘What regiment?’

‘*The* Regiment,’ said Strike. ‘SAS, and, if I had to bet, I’d say E Squadron.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Covert ops, which explains why there were no details given in the press on how he got his brain injury. He was doing something the British public and the enemy aren’t supposed to know about. Also explains his beard. Special Forces are the only ones who’re allowed them. But I’m not worried about Lawrence.’

‘You aren’t?’

‘I think, if he genuinely had evidence Semple wasn’t the body in the vault, he’d have shared it. In the absence of proof, we’re well within our rights to keep investigating.’

Robin said nothing, although she was once again imagining Murphy’s expression, if he could hear what Strike was saying.

‘Anyway,’ Strike continued, ‘I’ve sent another message to Semple’s wife, and I’m hoping to hear back from my SIB mate Hardy, who I’ve asked to dig out some intel on Semple for me. But that’s not the only thing I had to tell you…’

Strike now described the note that had been pushed through the agency’s door. When he’d finished, Robin said, ‘What the *hell*?’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike, ‘and I think I know who posted it. There was a woman standing at the end of the road when I left the office yesterday, and she didn’t want me to see her face. Didn’t think much of it at the time, but I think she was heading for our door to poke the note through the letterbox when she saw me coming out. When I passed her she was trying to look like she was just waiting for someone, but it’s an odd meeting place, a freezing cold corner in a street full of pubs and kebab shops.’

‘Say the name again?’

‘Dangerous Dick de Lion.’

‘He sounds like—’

‘A porn star?’

‘I was going to say, a cartoon character.’

‘He’s a porn star.’

‘Wh—?’

‘I’ve looked him up. He’s a bona fide adult actor, and from the looks of the woman lurking in the street, she’s in the industry too. What’s more, if Dangerous Dick had any social media accounts, he’s deleted them all. Obviously that might mean a fresh start away from the porn industry – but it might not.’

Not entirely to Strike’s surprise, ten seconds of stunned silence from Robin ensued.

‘The note said “*had* him killed”?’

‘Yeah.’

‘By someone on TV?’

‘So it seems.’

‘But wouldn’t that—?’

‘Tie in with Shanker’s story, about a bigshot with people to do his bidding? It would, yeah,’

‘And how does *she* know we’re investigating the body?’

‘That, to me, is far more interesting than the dimensions of Dangerous

Dick de Lion, which you can look up for yourself if you're interested.'

'And why write a note? She could have just emailed us anonymously.'

'Maybe she doesn't want to leave a cyber footprint. She might think we employ computer whizz-kids who can track her down. The note looked like she'd tried to make sure her handwriting wouldn't be identifiable, which might explain the cipher, although another name for pigpen cipher is the masonic cipher.'

'You're kidding,' said Robin, with a glance at Murphy, who still had his back to her.

'I don't know whether this is all bullshit or not,' said Strike, 'but going forwards, we take precautions. I want to know where you are at all times, and if it's a question of going to a badly lit or sparsely populated location, you don't go alone.'

'And am I going to know where *you* are at all times?' asked Robin.

'If you want,' said Strike.

'But that's less important?'

'I'm not looking to get hacked to death and dressed in a masonic sash, but I respectfully suggest they'd find it harder to do that to me than to you. What's your news?'

'What?' said Robin. 'Oh, yes – a few things. Tyler Powell's grandmother just called me back. She's been in hospital. She'd be happy to speak to me, if I come to Ironbridge.'

'Excellent,' said Strike. 'We might be able to pick Dilys and Semple's wife off in a single round trip.'

'OK, great,' said Robin.

'And the other things?'

'Midge and Tasha have split up.'

'Ah,' said Strike. 'I thought there was something going on. She looked like she was crying when I saw her at the office yesterday.'

'Right, so try—'

'Not to be a bastard?'

'I was going to say "try and cut her a bit of slack", but not being a bastard works, too.'

'Fair enough. Anything else?'

'Well, this might not help,' said Robin, 'but I did a deep dive on Facebook and Instagram last night, looking at the accounts of the real

Osgood and Oz, and there's a girl—'

Murphy had turned back, and was now walking towards Robin.

'Strike, I'll have to go,' said Robin hastily. 'I'll tell you the rest later, but this is all getting—'

'Yeah,' said Strike. 'It is.'

28

I’ve my taste of truth,
Likewise my touch of falsehood…

Robert Browning
Mr Sludge, ‘The Medium’

At a quarter to two on Monday afternoon, Strike headed out for Holborn to interview Jim Todd, the Ramsay Silver cleaner. Having a pretext to call Robin, he did so, because maximising contact with her fell into the categories of both playing to his strengths and not letting Ryan Murphy change his game plan.

‘Hi,’ said Robin, answering on the second ring. ‘I’ve just found out why we can never get Rupert’s friend Albie at Dino’s. He hasn’t worked there for five months.’

‘Couldn’t they just have bloody told us that?’ said Strike. Robin was also walking somewhere with heavy traffic, and he had his free forefinger in his opposite ear, so as to be able to hear her.

‘No, because according to the waitress I just waylaid in the street, they aren’t allowed to give out information about staff over the phone. She says Albie’s gone to work at Harrods, so that’s where I’m heading. Where are you?’

‘Nearly at Leather Lane.’

‘Mucky Ricci’s old place,’ said Robin, referring to an old gangster who’d been a suspect in a previous case.

‘Exactly.’

‘Any particular reason for calling, or just checking the masons haven’t done me in yet?’

‘Yeah, I’ve just heard back from my SIB mate, Hardacre. Semple was

definitely SAS and was invalided out in 2015 following a traumatic brain injury that left him in a medically induced coma for three months. No details available, even to the Military Police, which makes me think he was definitely E Squadron.'

'So Lawrence *must* be MI5?'

'I think we have to accept that as a working assumption,' said Strike. 'To change the subject completely: what were you going to tell me on Saturday, about Osgood's Facebook page?'

'Oh, yes,' said Robin, who in her current state of sleep deprivation had forgotten she hadn't passed this information on, though she'd put it in the file. 'Well, the same girl – she's called Sapphire – appears in the comments on both the real Osgood's Facebook page, and fake Oz's Instagram page. I did some digging and I think I've found her. Her name's Sapphire Neagle and here's the thing: she's on a missing persons' website. She stopped posting to social media in November and hasn't been seen since. I know that might be coincidence, but—'

'Known online contact with a man who definitely isn't who he says he is, is suggestive,' said Strike.

'Well, exactly,' said Robin. 'I'm not saying she's with Oz, or that he's done away with her, God forbid, but it's got to be a possibility. I was thinking of calling the charity to see what they can tell me. What d'you think?'

'Can't hurt. We should touch a police contact, find out whether they know what happened to her, as well. Incidentally, did the Land Rover get through its MOT?'

'No,' sighed Robin. 'They rang ten minutes ago. They say it'd need more money spent on it than it'd be worth in scrap,' she said, trying not to sound as sad as she felt. She had a sentimental attachment to the old car she'd have found hard to explain to anyone who didn't know how much she associated it with her escape from her first husband, who'd never liked it, and with the career that meant so much to her.

'You could charge part of a new one against the business,' said Strike. 'Another Land Rover would be useful. It's good, having a car that works for the country as well, that doesn't stick out in rural areas. Gives us options. Well, let me know how you get on in Harrods. Got to go, I'm at Leather Lane.'

Call finished, Strike proceeded down the narrow street lined with shops, fast food restaurants and market stalls, thinking about Robin's defunct Land Rover, now destined for the scrapyard. While not as attached to the car as Robin was, it seemed somehow to mark the end of an era, and it occurred to him that his Christmas present to Robin might need rethinking, in light of the news of the car's demise.

The Craft Beer Co, the pub Todd had chosen for this interview, stood on a corner, was decorated with hanging baskets and a three-dimensional model of the royal standard over the door. Strike glanced up at the harp, the lion rampant, and the three lions passant as he entered the wooden-floored space.

Strike recognised Jim Todd, not by his face, because the quality of Ramsay's camera footage was so poor, but by his shape. The cleaner was sitting on a leather bench with a full pint on the table in front of him. Short and very rotund, Todd had small hands and feet, tiny blue eyes, a wide, thin-lipped mouth, and patches of fluffy greyish hair around his ears, though he was otherwise bald. He was wearing old trousers, a grubby-looking jacket, and his pinprick eyes were fixed on a young woman in a very short skirt who was standing by the bar.

'Cameron, is it?' said Todd, when Strike joined him, half a pint of IPA in his hand.

'Cormoran, but I answer to both,' said Strike, taking the chair opposite. 'Thanks for meeting me, I appreciate it. This your local?'

'Kinda. I'm just up the road. Got a little room, 'andy for me jobs. Me an' a bunch of Pakistanis, packed in over a Lebanese restaurant, hahaha.'

'Yeah, London housing's no joke,' said Strike, pulling out his notebook. 'You clean for a few different businesses, right?'

''S'right.'

'All in the same area?'

'Holborn, Covent Garden, yeah. Word of mouf. I do a good job,' said Todd, still smiling, but with a faint suggestion of defiance.

'Well, as I said on the phone, this is really just for background. How many hours a week do you do at Ramsay Silver?'

'Monday an' Fursday mornings, regular, an' a bit of overtime, polishin' stock an' stuff.'

'How long have you been there?'

‘Two years now.’

‘Did you answer an ad, or…?’

‘’Novver bloke I clean for mentioned me to Ken Ramsay, an’ Ken took me on.’

‘Did you have a lot to do with William Wright?’

‘Saw ’im a bit, yeah. But you mean Knowles, not Wright, dontcha?’ said Todd, grinning more broadly, as though he’d caught Strike out.

‘The police still haven’t got a firm ID,’ said Strike.

‘Fort they ’ad?’

‘No,’ said Strike. ‘But you’re confident it was Knowles, are you?’

‘Oh yeah,’ said Todd, still grinning. ‘No, it was Knowles. We all agreed, me, Ken and Pamela.’

‘Pamela’s got difficulties with her sight, though, hasn’t she?’

‘What? Yeah, but she ain’t *blind*.’

‘Did the police show you any pictures, other than Jason Knowles’?’

‘Showed us a couple, yeah,’ said Todd.

‘Can you remember the names of the men concerned?’

‘One of ’em was a soldier.’

Strike made a note before saying,

‘Was Knowles’ picture a mugshot?’

‘Yeah,’ said Todd, and answering the unasked question he said, ‘it weren’ just that. ’E looked like Wright.’

‘Wright was pretty well disguised, from what I’ve seen on the shop’s security footage.’

‘Well… yeah,’ admitted Todd.

‘Looked like he was one of those men who can grow a thick beard,’ said Strike.

‘It was fick, yeah,’ conceded Todd. ‘Some blokes can do that, can’ they? Go from ’ere’ – Todd tapped a stubby forefinger at a point two inches beneath his eye – ‘to ’alfway down yer neck. Pamela told ’im to tidy it up a bit, but Wright told me ’e ’ad acne scarring. Wanted to keep it ’idden.’

‘Really?’ said Strike, and he made another note before saying, ‘I’ve got a few pictures here, if you wouldn’t mind having a look. I think you’ll have seen at least one of them before.

Sure enough, when Todd laid eyes on the pictures of Niall Semple, he said, ‘Yeah, that’s ’im, that’s the soldier.’

He passed over the picture of Tyler Powell with a slight shake of the head, but lingered, grinning again, over the photo of the man Strike had no choice but to call Dick de Lion, until they found out his real name. In the least lewd picture of him Strike had managed to find online, de Lion was shirtless.

‘Woss ’e – a stripper?’

‘Not as far as I know,’ said Strike.

‘Mind, ’e *was* that colour, Wright.’

‘Fake tanned?’

‘Yeah. Could of bin ’im, maybe…’

Todd squinted, and Strike assumed he was trying to visualise the blond Dick de Lion with dark hair, a full beard and glasses. De Lion had brown eyes and very white teeth, although these had possibly been enhanced in the photograph.

‘*Could* of bin ’im,’ said Todd.

‘How sure are you? Out of ten?’

‘Dunno… five? But it *could* of bin ’im – Wright was a bit—’

Instead of finishing the sentence, Todd raised his right hand and let it hang, limply, from his wrist.

‘What?’ said Strike. ‘Camp?’

‘Poncey. Yeah.’

Todd turned from the picture of de Lion to that of Rupert Fleetwood.

‘Nah,’ he said, ‘don’ fink so.’

He handed the pictures back.

‘Did you have much to do with Wright, at the shop?’ Strike asked.

‘A bit.’

‘Talk to him at all?’

‘A bit,’ repeated Todd.

‘What was his accent like? Did he sound like he was from Doncaster?’

‘Wouldn’ know ’ow that sounded,’ said Todd.

‘He couldn’t have been Scottish, and faking an English accent?’

‘Don’t fink so.’

‘Or trying to sound more working class than he was?’

‘One of them’s posh, is ’e?’ said Todd, gesturing towards Strike’s pictures.

Strike ignored the question.

‘What did you and Wright talk about?’

‘Freemasons,’ said Todd promptly, grinning again. ‘’E asked questions about ’em, all the bloody time.’

‘Are you one?’ asked Strike.

‘Hahaha,’ said Todd. ‘Not me, guv.’

He buried his face in his pint and drank a couple of inches before setting it down again.

‘D’you think he got interested in Freemasons after starting work at the shop, or was this something he’d been interested in before he was hired?’

‘Dunno. ’E was def’nitely into it all, though. Wen’ an’ looked round Freemasons’ ’All, in ’is lunch hour.’

‘Really?’ said Strike.

‘Oh, yeah. I was walkin’ down Great Queen Street, just goin’ to one of me ovver jobs, an’ I seen Wright goin’ in there. I says to ’im, next time I seen ’im, “find any sacrificial goats?” Hahaha.’

‘And what did he say?’

‘Said ’e wanted to see Temple Seventeen.’

‘Why?’

‘Dunno, ’e wouldn’t say. Just said “I wan’ed to see it”. After I found out ’e was Knowles, though, I fort, “Temple Seventeen my arse, ’e was up to sumfing to do wiv the silver ’e was gonna nick”. They’ve got a museum in there, in Freemasons’ ’All, an’ a shop, wiv books in it. I fort, “’e was lookin’ stuff up. Tryina find out what it was all worf, that Whatsit silver.”’

‘Did you tell the police Wright had visited Freemasons’ Hall?’

‘Yeah, ’course,’ said Todd smugly.

‘Did Wright ever tell you someone might come looking for him?’

‘No,’ said Todd, ‘opposite.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘I fort there was a guy watching the shop. I seen ’im ’angin’ around a few times. After I seen ’im the fird time, I told Wright, keep an’ eye out for ’im. Big guy, same kinda size as you. Just ’angin’ around. But when I told ’im, Wright said ’e’d seen ’im, an’ ’e worked at the Connaught Rooms. Didn’ give a toss. After, I fort, “accomplice, wannit”.’

‘Did you tell Pamela or Kenneth about this man?’

‘Didn’ wanna worry ’em. Anyway, it was Wright’s job, ’e was s’posed to be security.’

‘What about the police, did you tell them about this guy?’

‘Yeah, I fink I did. Yeah,’ said Todd, and he took another gulp of beer.

‘Did this man have dark curly hair?’

‘What? No. Straight ’air. ’Oo’s got dark curly ’air?’

Strike ignored this question, too.

‘So Wright never told you he was on the run, or needed to go into hiding, or that he’d been wrongly accused of anything?’

‘Like wha’?’ said Todd.

‘I don’t know,’ said Strike, ‘but he visited a website called Abused and Accused, on the Ramsay Silver computer.’

‘I know abou’ that website, police asked us about it,’ said Todd. He was no longer grinning. ‘They asked me if *I’d* ever bin on it. ’Course I ’adn’t. I never ’ad the password to the fucking computer. It’s on *’er* if the silly tit was messin’ around on there.’

‘What d’you mean?’ asked Strike.

‘’Cause she was out, wan’ she? Pamela. The day that bloody Whatsit silver arrived, she pissed off early, an’ all.’

‘It’d be helpful if you could run me through what happened that afternoon,’ said Strike. ‘You were at another job when the silver arrived, weren’t you?’

‘Yeah. I said to Pamela, Fursday, “I’ll give you an ’and if you need it.” For overtime,’ he added, ‘’cause I knew one of the fings was massive. Kennef showed us it all, in ’is catalogue. I said, I’ll ’elp, if you need it.’

‘Wouldn’t the Gibsons man be expected to carry the silver downstairs?’

‘You seen them stairs?’ said Todd. Ever since the mention of the Abused and Accused website, his manner had been prickly, and he was now scowling.

‘I have, yeah,’ said Strike.

‘You fink people ’oo don’t ’ave to wanna risk breakin’ their necks? I was there before when a deliv’ry man wouldn’ carry stuff down there. ’Ealf an’ safety, innit? I said to Pamela the firs’ time, gimme a tenner an’ I’ll carry it down, ’cause that was before they got Wright.’

‘Was the previous delivery man who wouldn’t carry stuff down the stairs Larry McGee?’

‘’Oo?’ said Todd. He picked up his pint glass and drank again.

‘McGee delivered the Murdoch silver.’

‘Oh. No. I dunno, I never saw ’im, did I?’

‘So you’d recognise Larry McGee?’

‘No,’ said Todd. ‘’Oo was ’e?’

‘I just told you. The delivery man from Gibsons.’

‘Never ’eard of ’im.’

‘So when did Pamela phone you about the Murdoch silver, can you remember?’

‘Round free. I ’ad to wait till I could leave discreetly, ’cause I was at me ovver job.’

‘So you got there, when?’

‘’Bout ’alf an hour later, an’ Wright ’ad got most of it down wivvout me. It was jus’ the big crate ’e needed me for. Me ’an ’im carried it down.’

‘Did you go back to the Kingsway job after you’d put the crate in the vault?’

‘No, because then Pamela yells upstairs there’s bin a mix-up, and she tells Wright to go an’ get the fing what’d been delivered to ’er place, Bullen & Co, an’ she says to me, “you’ll ’ave to stay, an’ ’elp ’im get it dahnstairs when ’e’s got it.” An’ I says, “I’ve gotta go, I fort this was gonna be a five-minute job,” and she says, “you’ve gotta stay,” an’ I didn’ wanna, because of the ovver job, but she kinda, you know, guilted me into it.’

‘How did she do that?’ asked Strike.

‘Ah, you know, Ken an’ ’is wife an’ their son – you know their son died?’

‘I do, yes,’ said Strike.

‘So, yeah, I said I’d stay. ’E’s a good guy, Ken, I didn’t wanna let ’im down. So Wright gets back an’ we carry the fing dahn to the vault, an’ Pamela says, “Jim, bring me up my ’andbag,” an’ I did, an’ I fink I’m done, but then Pamela tells me I’ve gotta stay in the shop till Wright comes back upstairs, ’cause ’e’s down there ’eavin’ the fucking candelabra or wha’ever it was out the box. An’ then she bogged off, an’ I’m left stuck there, manning the shop.’

‘So you never saw what was in that last crate? The one that should have contained the Oriental Centrepiece?’

‘No. An’ then Wright comes back upstairs, an’ I says to ’im, “I gotta go, I gotta finish my ovver job” an’ ’e says, “’ow’m I supposed to set the alarm an’ all the rest of it?” an’ I said, “tha’s not my problem,” an’ I left. Fakin’,’

said Todd, ‘wannee? Saw ’is chance. Leave the door unlocked, leave the safe door open. It’s on *’er* it ’appened.’

Todd’s interpretation might be open to question, but his account of what had actually taken place tallied exactly with what Strike had seen on the security footage, so he asked no further questions about Friday, but turned a page in his notebook.

‘You weren’t at Ramsay Silver over the weekend?’

‘No, I told you, I on’y do Mondays an’ Fursdays.’

‘Did you have keys to the shop, or the alarm code?’

‘No, never.’

‘The police will have asked you where you were on Friday night, I suppose?’

‘Yeah, I was playin’ cards wiv four ovver blokes at my place, an’ they all told the police that, an’ there’s CCTV on our corner showin’ I was back at my flat when—’

‘I assumed the police would have asked you,’ said Strike. ‘Can we talk about the Monday when the body and the theft were discovered? You were down in the basement when Kenneth opened the vault door, is that right?’

‘Yeah, I’d been cleanin’ the staff area downstairs. I was doin’ the bog at the time.’

‘What can you remember about the discovery of the body?’

‘I was in the bog,’ said Todd again. ‘I ’ad the door closed, ’cause if you leave it open it gets in the way of the stairs an’ the vault. I ’eard Kennef open up the vault. Then I ’eard ’im shout. I says, “you all right, Ken?” Pamela yelled somefing down the stairs, then I ’eard ’er comin’ down. Then she made a weird noise an’ all, so I says, “what’s goin’ on?” and I wen’ out to see.’

Todd took a sip of his pint before continuing.

‘Fuckin’… they did a proper job on ’im. Stuff carved on ’im, an’ ’ands gone, an’ then, when they flipped ’im over… terrible business.’

‘Who turned him over?’ said Strike.

‘Police. They come, an’ then we weren’ allowed to leave the shop. Copper on the front door, keepin’ the public out. We was stuck there, nearly all day. They brung us sandwiches. Forensics come, takin’ photos, an’ they turned ’im over, f’r us to see… Pamela nearly puked. They’d cut ’is eyes out, smashed in ’is face an’ ’is dick was gone.’

‘His penis had been cut off?’

‘Yeah… fuckin’ terrible… then they bagged ’im up an’ took ’im out, an’ we was allowed to go ’ome.’

‘Did anyone tell the police John Auclair had been there, right after the body was discovered?’

‘Yeah, I fink Ken did.’

Strike made another note, then said,

‘Would you happen to know anything about how Wright was hired? There was a disagreement about how he got shortlisted for interview, wasn’t there?’

‘Know about that, do ya? Yeah, I ’eard ’em arguin’ about it.’

‘Kenneth and Pamela?’

‘Bofe of ’em blamin’ the ovver one for puttin’ Wright’s email down instead of some ovver bloke’s.’

‘Who would you say that was most like?’ asked Strike.

‘What d’you mean?’ said Todd, frowning.

‘Which of them would you say would be most likely to put the wrong email down by mistake? Pamela or Kenneth?’

‘I dunno,’ said Todd, but then he added, ‘Ken, probably.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘’Cause… I dunno, ’e can be a bit careless. ’E’s a good guy, though, Ken,’ said Todd, as though Strike had been suggesting the contrary. ‘There’s nuffing wrong wiv Ken.’

‘But you think he could have made a mistake?’

‘Anyone can make a mistake,’ said Todd.

‘True,’ said Strike. ‘Would you happen to know anything about an unsigned email sent from Ramsay Silver to a man called Calvin “Oz” Osgood?’

‘No,’ said Todd, looking Strike fixedly in the eyes. ‘Why?’

‘Ever used the computer there yourself?’

‘No, I already told you that,’ said Todd, still unblinking. ‘I’m the cleaner. What would I be doing on the bloody computer?’

‘Not a crime, is it, using a computer?’ said Strike. ‘You don’t know a man called Osgood, then? Or “Oz”?’

‘No,’ said Todd pugnaciously. ‘I don’t.’

‘Nothing else you remember about Wright? Anything he might’ve let

slip?’

‘He wasn’ gonna let anyfing slip, was ’e?’ said Todd.

‘But he told you he’d gone to look at Temple Seventeen.’

‘Lyin’, probably,’ said Todd. ‘Wan’ed to look up all abou’ silver.’

‘Well, this has been very helpful, thanks,’ said Strike. ‘Just a couple of things—’ He flicked back a page in his notebook. ‘Why did you call William Wright a “silly tit” earlier?’

‘What?’ said Todd.

‘You said “it’s on her” – Pamela – “if the silly tit was using the computer”.’

‘Well, what was she upta, always leavin’ Wright in charge while she naffs off?’ said Todd. ‘Silly mare. ’Oo buggers off an’ leaves a fief in charge?’

‘But why “silly tit”?’ said Strike.

‘Well – bloody stupid to go lookin’ up stuff like that, at work.’

‘Stuff like what?’

‘Like… wha’ever that website was. What was it?’

‘Abused and Accused,’ said Strike.

‘Just silly, tellin’ your employer you bin up to somefing.’

‘The people on that website all claim to be innocent,’ said Strike.

Todd’s only response to that was a faint ‘huh’.

‘And you said “who was he?” earlier,’ said Strike, turning another page, ‘with regard to Larry McGee.’

‘So?’

‘“Who was he?” as opposed to “who is he?”’

Todd stared at him.

‘Larry McGee’s dead,’ said Strike. ‘Did you already know that?’

‘No. ’Ow would I know? ’Oo was ’e, ’oo is ’e – same diff’rence.’

‘Always lived in this part of London?’ Strike asked, as he slipped his notebook back into his pocket.

‘’Ereabouts,’ said Todd, who now seemed definitely aggressive.

‘And always cleaning?’

‘Done diff’rent fings,’ said Todd. ‘’Andyman… diff’rent stuff.’

Strike judged Todd to be in his mid-sixties, and therefore soon to qualify, or just qualified, for his state pension. He wore no wedding ring. The man’s desire for piecemeal work that might well be hidden from the

taxman, and the uncomfortable living conditions he'd just described, suggested he had neither savings nor family, but it might point to other things, too.

Had Strike only been back in the SIB, and Todd a soldier, he would have had immediate access to the man's date of birth, prior addresses and any previous misdemeanours. His feeling that there was something not quite right about the cleaner had increased as the interview proceeded, even though he hadn't caught Todd in any lies; on the contrary, the checkable information he'd provided had been entirely accurate. Yet that slip of the tongue about Larry McGee, and his clear discomfort at the mention of the Abused and Accused website, were interesting.

'Well, thanks for meeting me,' said Strike, getting to his feet.

'Pleasure,' said Jim Todd, but his tone contradicted the word.

Strike walked back up Leather Lane, thinking about the man he'd just left: getting on in years and grubbing for money where he could. The willingness of a variety of business owners to give Todd work at retirement age interested Strike, as did the fact that said businesses were all in central London, rather than out at some shabby periphery.

Respectable landlords were often unwilling to rent to certain kinds of men, Strike knew, and those same men might also have limited options even when it came to social housing. Into this category fell those recently released from prison, especially if they'd committed particular kinds of crimes. Such men needed friends if they were to survive with any degree of comfort in the outside world, and it seemed to Cormoran Strike that, unenviable though Todd's life might appear, he was being given an unusual degree of quiet assistance that neither his personality nor his talents seemed to justify.

29

… the souls of the vicious dead passed into the bodies of those animals to whose nature their vices had most affinity… To this doctrine probably referred those figures of animals and monsters which were exhibited to the Initiate…

Albert Pike
Morals and Dogma of the
Ancient and Accepted Scottish
Rite of Freemasonry

Harrods stood in massive red brick splendour in the heart of Knightsbridge, outlined in the dull mid-afternoon with golden lightbulbs, its green and gold awnings stretching over windows full of clothing, handbags and jewellery Robin could never have afforded. She'd only ever entered the department store twice before: once with her ex-husband, shortly after they'd arrived in London and purely for sight-seeing purposes, the second time with her mother, for identical reasons.

Today, Harrods' windows were displaying the usual range of designer goods in snowy settings and, on stepping inside, Robin found herself immersed in a sumptuous Christmas fantasy where, if you walked the halls long enough, with their lavish, twinkling decorations, you might be tempted to believe that you, too, could stage a holiday of high glamour and luxury for your loved ones, at least until you started checking price tags.

The place was so large it was disorientating, and Robin couldn't blame the various shop assistants she importuned for assistance for being impatient; they were overwhelmed by the Christmas crowds, and some were understandably suspicious of her desire to locate a brother whose department she couldn't remember. Floor by floor Robin ascended the Egyptian staircase, which had golden ankhs, pharaohs and constellations on

its walls and ceiling, and scanned enormous rooms full of merchandise, looking for the young man whose photographs she'd studied on Facebook.

At long last, after two and a half hours of solid searching, Robin found Albie Simpson-White in the sports department on the fourth floor, where he was standing close to a life-size fibreglass horse, assisting a mother and her teenaged daughter to find the correct size of riding breeches.

He looked incredibly young to Robin, who knew from his Facebook page that he was twenty-four: tall, blond and baby-faced, with a complexion many women would have envied. She lurked among the Aertex shirts until Albie had finished with his customers, then, before anyone else could corner him, she approached the counter.

'Albie?'

He looked slightly surprised to be addressed by name, even though it was displayed on a badge on his suit lapel.

'I'm Robin Ellacott and I'm a private detective.' She slid her card across the counter. 'I'd really like to talk to you about Rupert Fleetwood. Not here, obviously, but if you get a break, or after work. We could have a coffee, or a drink?'

He looked down at her card, blinked at it for a few seconds, then said,

'Has – who – has Decima hired you?'

'That's right,' said Robin.

Albie glanced around, then said in a low voice,

'I *told* her, I don't know where he's gone! I've *told* her! She kept calling me. *I don't know where he is!*'

'I'd be very grateful for a quick chat,' said Robin. 'Just for background. Decima's incredibly worried about Rupert.'

'There's no need for her to be worried!'

'How do you know? Are you in touch with him?'

'No,' said Albie, colour mounting in his boyish face, 'but I'm sure he's fine!'

'We could really use all the background we can—'

'Who told you I was here?'

'I spoke to a friend of yours from Dino's, Lina.'

Albie glanced at a suited man also wearing a name tag standing some ten yards away, then back at Robin. She could tell that, like the majority of people unexpectedly confronted by a private detective, Albie was as scared

of refusing to talk as he was of speaking to her. What did she know? What might be the consequences of sending her away?

‘All right,’ he said nervously, ‘I’ll meet you at the staff entrance at eight.’

‘Where’s the staff entrance?’

‘Twenty-eight Basil Street.’

‘Thanks very much, Albie,’ said Robin. ‘You can keep my card, just in case you need my mobile number.’

Albie pocketed it quickly, then turned to a customer waiting to pay for a pair of trainers.

Robin returned to the ground floor to while away the time before her interview, postponing a return to the icy street. She had just entered one of the food halls when her phone buzzed. She took it out and saw that her mother had texted her a picture with the caption ‘say hello to Betty’ and an eye-roll emoji. The picture showed Robin’s father, Michael, holding a jet black Labrador puppy in his arms.

Robin returned the phone to her bag without responding and set off again, with a vague idea of buying some chocolates or biscuits to take home to Masham. However, it was almost impossible to walk more than a few feet unimpeded, and she was buffeted constantly by shoppers both irate and aimless. Since leaving the cult where she’d worked undercover, Robin had found no enjoyment in finding herself in a mass of bodies, especially in windowless spaces.

Just as she was thinking she’d rather wait out on the chilly pavement after all, her eye fell on a clear plastic tube full of festively coloured jelly beans: red, green and white. She was reminded of the tube William Wright had claimed was a blood sample. Perhaps her niece, Annabel, would like the jelly beans? Robin reached out for them—

A large hand closed painfully around the back of her neck, holding her so tightly that she couldn’t turn her head or cry out, the strong fingers tight on her carotid artery, and Robin was so shocked she couldn’t quite comprehend what was happening, or even raise her arms, and the shoppers kept shuffling all around her—

The man holding her – she knew it was a man, by the size and strength of the hand compressing her neck – was forcing something small and rubbery into her own left hand, and she closed her hand into a fist, fighting

to draw breath to shout, but he squeezed her neck more tightly, and she knew she must open her hand, if that's what he wanted, and did so, and he pressed what felt like a small lump of rubber into her grasp, then hissed in her ear,

'*It'll 'appen again unless you fuckin' give this up.*'

He released but simultaneously pushed her so hard in the back that she toppled forwards into a woman who was carrying a toddler; the former shrieked at the impact and dropped the jar of brandy butter she'd been holding, which cracked open on the floor.

'Watch what you're doing!' shouted the woman, staggering to regain her balance, and the toddler began to cry, and heads turned.

'I'm sorry, I'm really sorry – someone pushed me—'

Neck still throbbing, Robin turned and stood on tiptoe, and thought she saw a slight disturbance at a distant doorway, as though someone was forcing their way out of the food hall at speed, but it was impossible to see her assailant through the forest of heads.

Now trembling, Robin looked down at the object he'd forced into her hand. It was a small rubber model of a gorilla.

For several long seconds she stared at it, trying to tell herself the man had been mentally ill, that she'd been a random recipient of a nonsensical gift, that he'd mistaken her for someone in the crush, that this didn't mean what she was terrified it meant.

It'll 'appen again unless you fuckin' give this up.

The rapist who had ended her university career and ruined her fallopian tubes had worn a rubber gorilla mask to attack her and six other girls, two of whom had died from strangulation. He'd been sentenced to life and was still in jail, all applications for parole refused. Robin's identity had been hidden from the press when she gave evidence in court, aged nineteen.

How could a stranger know she'd been Witness G?

'Excuse me!' said a cross voice, and a tall, patrician-looking man reached past Robin to seize a boxed Christmas cake.

Robin moved out of the way, the small rubber gorilla still clutched in her left hand, and blundered out of the food hall, looking for a way outside, fruitlessly scanning the face of every man she passed. She wanted to drop the gorilla, throw it away somewhere, but her assailant's hand had been bare, so it might have his DNA on it, like the rubber mask of her serial

rapist, which had been found hidden beneath the floorboards in the ‘study’ his wife had never been permitted to enter. Robin stuffed it into her handbag.

Heading in what she thought must be the direction of Brompton Road, passing cosmetic counters and struggling through more dense crowds, she imagined telling Murphy what had just happened. He’d be outraged. He’d demand to know what measures she was taking to protect herself. And, just as suddenly as she’d imagined telling her boyfriend, she knew she wouldn’t do it.

She had to tell Strike, though. Had she ever told her partner that her almost-killer had worn a gorilla mask? She didn’t think she had.

The cold had deepened outside and night was rapidly falling. Robin moved to stand beside one of the brightly lit windows, out of the way of the shopping hordes, her breath rising frostily before her. Strike answered his mobile within a couple of rings.

‘Hi,’ said Robin, trying to sound casual. ‘How was Todd?’

‘Interesting,’ said Strike. ‘Any luck on Albie Simpson-White?’

‘Yes,’ said Robin, ‘he’s meeting me after work.’

‘Great.’

‘Yes… I’m actually calling because something strange just happened,’ said Robin, doing her best to sound mildly interested, as opposed to profoundly shaken.

When she’d related the incident, Strike said incredulously,

‘He put a toy *gorilla* in your hand?’

‘Yes,’ said Robin. ‘And the thing is… the man who – you know – when I was nineteen – the reason I left uni – he wore a latex gorilla mask, during the… attack.’

Robin suddenly realised that she was very close to tears, and mentally crossed her fingers that Strike wasn’t about to react angrily, to chastise her for not having taken more care, or not been quick enough to spot the man who’d done it.

‘OK,’ said Strike, and to her relief, while he sounded serious, he didn’t sound angry. ‘Where are you speaking to Simpson-White?’

‘I thought somewhere round here, in a pub or something.’

‘D’you want me to come and pick you up afterwards?’

‘What?’ said Robin, with a half-laugh. ‘No, of course not. The middle of

town’s packed. I’ll just—’

‘What are you doing afterwards?’

‘Meeting Ryan,’ said Robin.

‘Take a taxi,’ said Strike.

‘There’s no—’

‘*Take a bloody taxi.*’

‘All right, all right, I’ll take a taxi,’ said Robin. She checked the time, and started walking towards the staff entrance where she was supposed to be meeting Albie. ‘Maybe,’ she said, striving for a calm, objective tone, ‘it was – I don’t know, a coincidence or—’

‘It wasn’t a coincidence.’

‘No,’ said Robin, as double-deckers rushed past her, the faces of passers-by illuminated by the golden glow of Harrods’ windows. ‘I don’t think it was either.’

Tears stung her eyes, and for a few seconds, she wanted to run. But run where? Home to Masham, as she’d done after the rape? Back to Murphy, who she knew she wasn’t going to tell?

‘Just be vigilant,’ said Strike, and she could tell he was exerting maximum self-restraint not to say it more forcefully, ‘all right?’

‘I will,’ said Robin. ‘I promise.’

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Ask me no more, for fear I should reply;
Others have held their tongues, and so can I…

A. E. Housman
VI, Additional Poems

Albie emerged from the staff entrance shortly after eight. His eyes sought Robin's over the crowd of staff now hurrying homewards.

'Hi,' said Robin, and shaken though she was, she managed to sound perfectly cheerful, 'd'you want to get something to eat? It's on me. We could get a burger or something?'

Having three brothers, two of them younger than herself, Robin knew the importance of food to young men.

'Er… yeah, all right,' he said, and Robin thought she read in his expression, nervous though it was, a certain satisfaction at the fact that there was something in this for him.

'D'you know the Alfred Tennyson pub?' said Robin, who'd looked the place up while waiting. 'It's ten minutes up the road, but the food's good.'

In fact, she'd never eaten there, but everything nearer looked even more expensive, and there was a limit to what she thought she could persuade their accountant into accepting as a legitimate business expense.

They walked through the chill evening, through throngs of passers-by, Robin making banal chitchat. They discussed the staff discount Albie received at Harrods, and what a good deal he'd got on most of his Christmas shopping. She learned that he'd recently 'buggered his knee' playing football, and that 'people always think I'm posher than I am', because of his double-barrelled name, which was really the result of his feminist mother demanding equal billing on his birth certificate. Albie

seemed an amiable young man, bright though not academic (‘I can’t see the point of university, you’re just wasting time when you could be earning money’), and she was slightly puzzled to know why Rupert Fleetwood, whose behaviour – regarding the stolen nef, and towards his pregnant girlfriend – suggested fecklessness and unkindness, should have been good friends with a young man who seemed decent, hard-working and responsible.

The Alfred Tennyson was crowded, but they were able to secure a table for two in the restaurant area. Robin slid into the seat with her back to the wall; nobody else was going to approach her from behind, unseen, if she could help it. Albie, who seemed torn between pleasure at the prospect of a decent hot meal after a long day at work and worry about what was coming, ordered a burger and a pint, then sat, slightly hunched, with his hands between his knees.

‘So,’ said Robin, when the waitress had left, ‘as I said before, Albie, I’m really just looking for background. We don’t know much about Rupert, except that he and Decima were in a relationship, and that he was brought up in Switzerland by his aunt and uncle.’

‘OK,’ said Albie, looking nervous.

‘When did you first meet him?’

‘Last year. Early – like, February, I think. When he started work at Dino’s.’

‘How long were you there?’

‘Two years in all. Bit over.’

‘Did you like it?’

Albie’s pint arrived, and he took a large sip before saying, ‘It was OK. Some of it. Have you spoken to Mr Longcaster?’

‘No,’ said Robin. ‘But I know about the nef.’

‘You don’t want to judge him by that,’ said Albie quickly.

‘Judge who? Rupert?’

‘Yeah,’ said Albie.

Robin could feel the table vibrating slightly; one of Albie’s long legs seemed to be jumping up and down.

‘You liked Rupert, though? You were friends?’

‘Yeah,’ said Albie, with a slight smile. ‘He’s a good guy. Kind of… old soul, you know? Steady. The kind of bloke everyone tells their problems

to.’

This didn’t tally remotely with the idea Robin had formed of Rupert Fleetwood, who she’d been picturing as just another of the wealthy, well-born young male Londoners she’d come across during her detective career. They existed like tourists in their own city, taking the best of what it had to offer and never needing to dirty their feet where regular people trod, unless they hit some personal crisis; usually a sudden drop in funds caused either by an allowance-withholding parent or an out-of-control drug habit.

‘What d’you know about Rupert’s ex-housemate, Zac?’

‘He tried to stiff a drug dealer for payment, then fucked off and let Rupe and Tish take the heat,’ said Albie darkly.

‘Who’s Tish?’

‘Zac’s ex-girlfriend. The dealer was threatening her as well as Rupe. Trying to get to Zac through them.’

‘What’s Tish’s full name?’

‘I never knew her surname. I only met her once.’

Albie’s burger now arrived and he started eating immediately, clearly very hungry.

‘Rupert didn’t have much money, did he?’ asked Robin.

‘No. He sounds posh, but there’s nothing left in his trust fund. All the money went on paying for his boarding school in Switzerland. Rupe needs to work if he wants to eat. Have you spoken to his aunt?’

‘My partner has.’

‘Rupe can’t stand her. He had a bad childhood. He was really unhappy at his boarding school and he didn’t like his aunt and uncle. He told me he never felt like he belonged with them. He wanted to get back to England and his mum’s side of the family. He really liked his Uncle Ned, but he died just after Rupe came back to the UK.’

‘What did Rupert do before he worked at Dino’s?’

‘Worked for an estate agents, then he was front of house at some restaurant in Soho, and then Sacha – you know Rupe’s Sacha Legard’s cousin?’

‘I did, yes,’ said Robin. ‘Are they friendly?’

‘I don’t think Sacha wants to get too friendly.’

‘Why not?’

‘In case Rupe wants things from him,’ said Albie owlishly.

‘What kinds of things?’

‘Dunno. Money? Premiere tickets? Hang out with his famous friends?’

‘Would Rupert want those things from Sacha?’

‘No,’ said Albie. ‘All he really wants is family. Sacha was the one who suggested Rupe went and worked at Dino’s, though. Sacha’s a member there. He said, if Rupe wanted a better job than the restaurant, he should ask Mr Longcaster, seeing as he was his godfather and everything.’

‘Did Rupert have much to do with Mr Longcaster before he went to work for him?’

‘He never even knew Mr Longcaster was his godfather before Sacha told him. Rupe’s aunt doesn’t like Mr Longcaster, but Rupe didn’t care what she thought about anything any more, so he went to the club and Mr Longcaster said, “oh, you’re Veronica and Peter’s boy?” and said he’d try him out for a bit.’

‘Mr Longcaster hadn’t been a very involved godfather, then?’

‘I think he’d forgotten all about Rupert until he turned up at the club.’

‘And did Rupert like working there?’ asked Robin.

She was moving the conversation gradually closer to Decima, but didn’t want to arrive there too quickly.

‘He thought the same as me,’ said Albie. ‘Bits of it are cool. You see some really famous people in there, and at first that’s interesting, but after you’ve been there a while you realise they’re just people. Some of them are OK and some are twats, you know?’

‘And that’s how Rupert felt about it, too?’

‘Yeah… you haven’t spoken to Mr Longcaster?’ Albie asked again.

‘No,’ said Robin, but this time she added, ‘why?’

‘He’s… I hate him,’ said Albie, with sudden, surprising vehemence. ‘I hate all of them – except Decima. She’s OK. She’s the only decent one.’

‘When you say “all of them”, you mean—’

‘The Longcasters. Him and his wife, she’s a real bitch, and his other kids. Valentine – I wouldn’t piss on him if he was on fire,’ said Albie savagely. ‘He’s a shit, he acts like it’s his club, he treats the staff like dirt. And Cosima, she’s the youngest, and she’s a spoiled brat. Decima’s the only decent one, she always treated the staff well. Well, she kind of was staff herself, for a bit, working on the menus. Mr Longcaster asked her to help out. She’s a really good chef… but I think her restaurant’s in trouble. I saw

online.’

Robin thought she heard a trace of guilt, but Albie went on quickly, ‘Anyway, she doesn’t fit in with her family. Same as Rupe. I heard the two of them discussing it, once.’

‘So you saw Rupert and Decima’s relationship up close?’

‘Yeah, I s’pose,’ said Albie.

Their client’s prohibition on mentioning her baby was highly inconvenient; Robin sensed that Albie might be amenable to a little emotional blackmail.

‘So, did you think Rupert and Decima were a good fit, or—?’

‘Why’re you asking that, if you work for her?’ said Albie.

‘Because,’ said Robin, looking Albie straight in the eye, ‘I think it’d be kinder for her in the long run to know the truth, rather than be told lies, and left wondering why, if Rupert was supposed to genuinely care about her, he disappeared.’

Albie looked down at his plate, ate another couple of chips, then said, ‘She thinks he was that body in the silver shop, doesn’t she?’

‘She told you that, did she?’

‘Yeah, but’ – Albie laughed uncomfortably – ‘that’s mad. Why the hell would Rupert have gone to work there?’

‘You’ve just told me why,’ said Robin. ‘He had to work if he wanted to eat. He’d run off with Mr Longcaster’s nef, so he had reason to hide, didn’t he? But you don’t strike me as the kind of person who’d encourage him to ditch his girlfriend without a word.’

She watched as a flush spread over Albie’s face.

‘I’m not,’ he mumbled.

‘Did Rupert want to end things with Decima?’

Albie opened his mouth, shut it, then said,

‘Not really.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘I don’t know… her brother was really against it, he thought Rupe was way too young for her – and probably not rich enough, knowing Valentine.’

‘Rupert decided to split up with her, because Valentine disapproved?’

‘No,’ said Albie. ‘He didn’t want to end it, but he had—’

He cut himself off.

‘“Had to?”’ said Robin. ‘Why would he have to? Because he was afraid

of Valentine, or Mr Longcaster?'

'Not "had to", I wasn't going to say that,' said Albie, still red in the face. 'He just – you know, with that drug dealer and everything. He didn't want Decima targeted as well.'

'Albie, that's a nice story,' said Robin, 'but why would he break all contact with her, if he was doing it to protect her? And why steal the nef from her father, if he cared about her? That caused her trouble too, didn't it?'

'The nef wasn't – he didn't – you don't know what went on,' said Albie.

'I'm here to find out what went on,' said Robin.

Albie took a deep breath, then said in a low voice,

'Look – Mr Longcaster's a bully. He hardly likes anyone except his daughter Cosima, and that's only because she's thin and blonde and good-looking. Even Valentine's scared of his father. Mr Longcaster was a shit to Decima, even though she came to help him out at the club, and she's talented, she really is, she's a good chef. But it's all surface with Mr Longcaster, you've got to look right, it's all about being beautiful and stylish – being a bit plump or whatever, or not knowing how to dress, that's, like, I dunno, a – a sin. And Decima and Rupe, they don't look the way Mr Longcaster wants people in his club and his family to look. You think I'm exaggerating, but that's how he lives, everything's got to be perfect, the way the napkins are folded, how chilled the cocktails are, how thin the waitresses are – I'm not kidding – he finds a way of forcing girls out if he decides they don't look right. He wants to live in this – this completely controlled world… Rupe burned his hand really badly in the kitchen, a couple of days before he left, and Mr Longcaster was just angry. Said he didn't want his waiters wearing bandages, that they didn't look smart.

'And he used to call Rupe "the jellyfish". Any time he did anything wrong – and Rupe's a hard worker, it was only small mistakes – he'd call him the jellyfish and he worked up a comedy bit about it.' Albie looked truly angry now. '"Blob of brainless, semi-sentient matter", stuff like that. "Invasive species, fundamentally pointless." And he talked about Rupe's father.'

'What did he say?'

'That Rupe was just like him. "A drip off the old blob", that was his favourite. And once, Rupe was serving Mr Longcaster and his friends a

private dinner in Dostoevsky – that's one of the rooms, they're all named after famous gamblers – and Mr Longcaster pointed out the nef to one of his friends in front of Rupert, and said he'd won it off his waiter's father, and then he said Peter Fleetwood was "even worse at backgammon than he was at skiing". And that's how Rupe's parents *died*,' said Albie, and he was no longer red, but rather white. 'Skiing.'

'That sounds incredibly cruel,' said Robin.

'I'm not even giving you all of it,' said Albie in a low voice. 'Being a shit to Rupe was like his new hobby. And then Mr Longcaster found out about Rupe and Decima – I think Valentine noticed something was up, and told his father – and it was open season on both of them. Rupe just cracked. That's what the nef was about. One day, he saw red, and he took the nef, and left for good.'

'When was the last time you saw him, Albie?'

'Well… then. When he took the nef. That day. Earlier that day.'

'You haven't seen him since?'

'No.'

'But you were clearly good friends.'

'Yeah,' said Albie.

'You really haven't seen him since the day he took the nef?'

'No.'

Robin was certain he was lying. The fluency with which he'd discussed Dino Longcaster's bullying had been replaced by a distinct shiftiness.

'Has he called or texted you?'

'Er… maybe a couple of times.'

'How recently?'

'Probably… not recently. Like, a few days after he left Dino's. Nothing since then.'

Just as Strike had with Jim Todd, Robin now felt to the full the disadvantage of having no official power to demand sight of Albie's texts, to compel his cooperation. Albie's plate was nearly empty; Robin knew her time was almost up.

'Were you aware that the silver shop where the body was found – the body that Decima thinks was Rupert – is masonic?' she asked.

'Er… yeah, I think I saw that,' he said.

'Was Rupert interested in the Freemasons? Did he have any connection

with them?'

'No,' said Albie. 'I never heard him say anything about masons.'

'Did Rupert know a man called Osgood, or "Oz"?'

'I don't think so,' said Albie.

'Aren't you worried about him?' Robin asked.

'Who – Rupert? Why would I be worried?' said Albie, now sounding slightly scared.

'Well, he was under a huge amount of stress, wasn't he? He had the police and a drug dealer after him, no family support – and maybe other things that were panicking him, that he didn't feel able to cope with?'

It was the closest Robin dared go on the subject of Decima's baby.

'Rupe wouldn't've killed himself,' Albie said. 'He'd never have done that. I'm sure he's fine. I need to go, I'm meeting some people.'

'I'll get the bill,' said Robin, and as she'd hoped, Albie's good manners held him in his seat while she raised her hand for the waiter. 'Why did you leave Dino's?' she asked, having mimed writing in mid-air.

'I'd had enough, after how Mr Longcaster treated Rupe. I didn't want to stay any more. A few other people said they were going to leave because of it, as well, but they didn't,' Albie said scathingly. 'It was easier to stay. The money's good.'

Five minutes later, the bill paid, they emerged together onto the crowded pavement, where drinkers were thronged.

'Thanks for talking to me, Albie,' said Robin. 'I do appreciate it.'

She held out her hand, but when Albie shook it, she didn't release it.

'I think you know more than you're telling me. I think you know where Rupert is.'

'I don't!' said Albie. 'Seriously, I don't!'

'Then you're in touch with him.'

Albie pulled his hand free.

'I'm not!'

She expected him to turn and hurry away, but now that she wasn't physically restraining him, he seemed pinned to the spot by his own good nature.

'Look,' he said, 'tell Decima – tell her he really loved her.'

Even in the darkness, Robin could see that Albie had turned pink again.

'If he loved her, why would he walk out and leave her without a word?'

‘Maybe he had no choice,’ said Albie.

‘What does that mean?’

‘I mean, he must’ve had no choice,’ said Albie quickly, ‘because he really *did* love her. It wasn’t for her money or anything, whatever Valentine thought. Rupe was really… he was mad about her.’

‘Why are you talking in the past tense?’ said Robin. ‘What changed?’

‘Nothing. I mean – he must’ve just decided it wouldn’t work. She’s a lot older and – and everything.’

‘Albie, I think you know more than you’re telling me.’

‘Sometimes you’re better off not knowing things,’ blurted Albie, as though the words had been wrung from him. ‘I’ve got to go. Thanks for the burger.’

He turned and strode away on his long legs, vanishing into the crowds.

Robin watched him disappear, then glanced nervously around. Nobody was watching her; there were no men lurking in the shadows, ready to spring.

She set off in the opposite direction from Albie, keeping an eye out for a vacant taxi, thinking about all Albie had just said, but also checking regularly over her shoulder.

PART THREE

‘They put a lot of money in, and they get a lot of dirt out, but one does not hear much of any silver.’

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

31

… Polyphemus blinded, striking at random, and falling headlong among the sharp rocks by the impetus of his own blows.

Albert Pike
Morals and Dogma of the
Ancient and Accepted Scottish
Rite of Freemasonry

Strike doubted that MI5 would order an operative to grab Robin round the back of the neck and force a rubber gorilla on her in an attempt to make the agency back off the silver vault investigation, but the question of who was behind the assault was making Strike wonder exactly which of the hornets' nests the agency seemed, unwittingly, to have kicked was responsible. He was particularly worried by the fact that Robin's assailant had known exactly where to find her, and had seized the opportunity to attack where he was least likely to be seen, which suggested that he'd been tailing her for a while, without her noticing.

This thought had occurred to Robin, too. When she and Strike spoke the following morning by phone, she admitted her fear that the man had been following her for hours.

'Anyone could miss a tail in Christmas crowds in the middle of London,' said Strike, keen to keep on Robin's right side, in spite of his own concern.

'I know,' said Robin, 'but I still feel stupid. I won't make that mistake again.'

'I think we have to take that anonymous phone call to the office a bit more seriously now,' said Strike.

'"Leave it and you won't get hurt?"'

'Exactly.'

‘So “it”’s definitely the silver vault body?’

‘My gut says so.’ Strike vacillated before saying the next thing, well aware of how sensitive a subject it was, yet certain it had to be mentioned. ‘I can’t see how he knew—’

‘That I was Witness G at the rape trial?’ said Robin, who’d steeled herself to discuss this.

‘Yeah.’

‘I think I do,’ said Robin. ‘It’s online. I found out last night.’

‘Shit,’ said Strike. ‘How—?’

‘Local gossip, maybe,’ said Robin, trying to sound unconcerned, although, in fact, when she’d found her name on the website the previous evening it had made her feel physically sick. ‘People in Masham knew what had happened. Friends and family, after I left uni. Anyway, I found it in the comments under – well, it was actually in the comments of that article about you. Some anonymous person said they don’t understand how I can work with you, because I was a victim of a high-profile rapist myself.’

‘Oh Christ,’ said Strike. ‘I’m—’

‘Don’t apologise,’ said Robin flatly. ‘It’s not your fault.’

Strike was reluctant to voice his next opinion, but even if it led to a row, he decided it had to be said.

‘I’m serious about you keeping me posted on where you are. No lonely streets in the dark, on your own. Someone might’ve decided you’re the soft target.’

‘All right,’ said Robin, but Strike could tell from the tone that he’d barely got away with this. His partner never took kindly to Strike expressing concern in any manner that implied he didn’t trust her to look after herself. In truth, while he had good reason for thinking her occasionally reckless – he wouldn’t soon forget her jumping in front of a moving train to try and drag a man she definitely couldn’t have lifted to safety, nor sprinting ahead of him into a house where a known killer was waiting in the dark – he trusted her ability to assess risk more than perhaps she knew. And of all the members of the agency, her work ethic was the only one that truly matched his.

‘Did you tell Murph—?’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Robin, with an edge to her voice, and Strike decided it was safest to drop the subject completely.

But Robin was lying. She'd said precisely nothing to Murphy about the man in Harrods, because she was damned if she was going to take security lectures from more than one man, or have to discuss the rape yet again. The small rubber gorilla was now wrapped in a freezer bag in her sock drawer at home.

Strike and Robin were due a face-to-face catch-up on December the twenty-second, which would be the last morning Robin spent at work before Christmas. Strike woke that morning with the alarm, slapped it off, tugged his vape pen loose from its charger, then took a deep drag on it, the chill December air creeping into the flat from his poorly fitted windows as he watched the vapour drifting across his shadowy ceiling.

He'd been asking himself ever since their last conversation whether today might not be as good a time as any to force the discussion with Robin for which he'd as yet found no natural opening. It wouldn't, of course, be the way he'd planned it. He'd hoped for a far-flung pub or restaurant, where wine and laughter might have lowered her guard, but he was worried about the house-hunting, and about Christmas, with the possibility that Murphy might be about to spring a festive proposal. If Strike declared himself today, before Robin travelled north to Masham, she'd have time and space to think about what she really wanted. Perhaps this, after all, was the way: on a winter's day, unromantically, in the office where their friendship had been forged and where Strike, most unwillingly, had fallen in love with her.

He lay, still vaping, trying to frame an opening in his head.

'Listen, there's something I want to say.'

'I need you to know something.'

'I've been looking for a way to tell you this.'

It now occurred to him that this would be only the second time in his life he'd made the first move on a woman. Every other time (and he could imagine the reactions of other men, should he ever be fool enough to say this out loud) the woman had been the instigator, or had signalled so very clearly that a sexual approach would be welcome that it came to the same thing. The one exception had been at that student party in Oxford, where he'd swaggered drunkenly up to Charlotte, to whom he'd never spoken before in his life. She'd been the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen, but he'd risked nothing whatsoever: at worst, he knew he'd have had a good anecdote to tell about his audacity in approaching the woman every man at

the party was eyeing with equal parts of lust and awe.

This was different. If he laid everything on the line today, he needed to brace for the possible consequences: the business blown up, his most important friendship destroyed, all hope of the one relationship he really wanted, gone. The unerasable mental image of Robin's expression as he'd moved to kiss her outside the Ritz rose in his mind's eye as he lay in bed, listening to the window pane in the kitchen shivering in the wind. If he were to be met today with that same look…

But he had to speak. He couldn't live with knowing that he hadn't at least tried. Thus resolved, he sat up, swung himself off the bed and hopped, using the familiar balancing aids of chair backs and door jambs, towards the bathroom.

He'd just finished breakfast when, at nine o'clock precisely, somebody hammered on the door of his flat. Disconcerted, he opened it to find his office manager on the landing.

'Have you read it?' demanded Pat in her baritone.

'Read what?'

'You. In the paper. By that Culpepper man.'

'What – another one?'

'Yeah. I didn't realise – they called yesterday, asking for a comment. I thought it was about the last thing. There's fifteen-odd messages on the answer machine downstairs, and there's two of 'em hanging around outside.'

Strike strode immediately to the laptop that was charging on his kitchen table, sat down and flicked it open.

'What d'you want me to do?' said Pat, watching him.

'Say "no comment" to anyone who rings.'

He'd just spotted the story. As Pat closed the door behind her, Strike began to read the article.

Jonny Rokeby Son in Sex Worker Abuse Claim

Cormoran Strike, illegitimate son of rock star Jonny Rokeby and wealthy Londoners' favourite private detective, is alleged to have hired Candy, a 23-year-old sex worker, to entrap a married man and,

when the scheme failed, attempted to force her into sex with himself…

'It was in 2013 and I thought he must be a good guy, he'd caught that strangler who went after working girls… I was kind of excited, actually. I thought I was going to help him do something good…

'… doesn't seem fair naming the target, he didn't want to do anything with me. But when I asked Strike for my money, he said he'd only give it me if I slept with him…'

… this newspaper's recent report on Cormoran Strike, in which a second woman claimed that she'd been used by the detective to procure information needed in a case…

… son of rock star Jonny Rokeby and 70s super-groupie Leda Strike, who died of a heroin overdose in 1994…

'This is yet more proof, as if we needed it, that private detectives are operating in an unregulated Wild West that needs urgent legislative attention,' says Lord Oliver Branfoot '… the grubby tactics used by these detectives need to be addressed for the good of the public…'

We asked Cormoran Strike for comment.

Strike sat motionless, staring at the screen, every muscle tensed, a roaring in his ears, his guts full of lava. Culpepper had crossed over the line into pure invention; this story was entirely without foundation. Was the girl – her face was pixelated in the two pictures accompanying the story, but her body was clearly visible, in its skimpy red underwear – a chimera, too? Or had Culpepper paid some real sex worker a fee to become Candy, in print?

Strike looked away from the screen and his eyes fell on the fisherman's priest which lay quiescent on the windowsill, a worn relic of Ted, a man of whom nobody could ever have believed this kind of sleaze. Strike then glanced down at his mobile. Nobody had texted him. Doubtless his friends and his family were wondering whether it could be true, whether this was how he conducted his professional life, whether this was his dirty little secret.

He got to his feet, feeling as though his heart was attempting to knock its way through his ribs, grabbed his keys and left the flat, slamming the door

behind him.

32

What I seem to myself, do you ask of me?
No hero, I confess.

Robert Browning
A Light Woman

Robin had seen the online article about Strike just before boarding the Tube that morning, and consequently spent most of her journey to Denmark Street staring fixedly at the passenger opposite's feet and thinking about what she'd just read, instead of the discovery she'd made the previous evening and which she'd been looking forward to sharing with Strike.

She told herself the Candy story must be false, but could she be completely sure? Back in 2013 she and Strike had been by no means as close as they were now; there'd been pockets of his life that had remained totally mysterious to her. A voice in her head kept insisting *you know he never did this*, but life had taught Robin that men you might trust completely – clean-cut chartered accountants like her own unfaithful ex-husband, for instance, or serial rapists (the man who'd ended her university career, and ruined her fallopian tubes, had been cohabiting with a woman who'd stood by him throughout the trial and given him flimsy fake alibis), or the bigamists and philanderers she'd dealt with at work – were sometimes hiding huge and jagged secrets that tore apart more lives than their own when revealed. Strike's record on openness and transparency when it came to his sex life was extremely poor. Robin wouldn't have known about Madeline if Charlotte hadn't told her, about Bijou if Ilsa hadn't told her, or about Dominic Culpepper's cousin if Kim hadn't mentioned her.

No, Strike wouldn't be the first man to have done something nobody

around him believed him capable of, and the pit of Robin's stomach felt as though it was teeming with wriggling maggots, and she just wanted to get to the office and have the thing out with him, believing (but could she count even on that?) that if she could look him in the eye, she'd know the truth.

Robin had just left Tottenham Court Road when her mobile rang.

'There are journalists outside the office, he wanted you to know,' said Pat.

'How many?' said Robin.

'Two.'

'What's going on there?'

'I think he's going to do something silly,' said Pat.

'What d'you mean?'

'He's trying to get hold of that journalist who wrote the thing.'

'I'll be there in five,' said Robin, speeding up.

As she rounded the corner into Denmark Street she heard a man calling her name. She bowed her head and kept walking; there didn't seem to be a photographer, thank God— 'Miss Ellacott? Miss Ellacott? Anything to say about Lord Branfoot's comments? Anything to say about Candy, Miss Ellacott?'

'No comment,' said Robin coldly, refusing to look the young man in the face, but here came an older man, his phone recording in his hand.

'Did you know about Candy, Miss Ellacott? Did you meet her?'

'No comment,' repeated Robin; she was at the door, had opened it, and slammed it in the reporters' faces.

Up the two flights of metal stairs she ran, her operation site aching, until she reached the glass door. The first thing she saw on entering was Pat's alarmed face; then she heard her detective partner's voice as, probably, could the entire street.

'YEAH, I'LL LEAVE A FUCKING MESSAGE! *YOU TELL THAT CUNT I'M COMING FOR HIM, ALL RIGHT?*'

'Oh, for God's—'

Robin ran through the dividing doorway into the inner office.

'*IF HE THINKS THE ONLY THING I CAN GET ON HIM IS THAT HIS WIFE—*'

Strike's first clue that his partner had arrived was his phone being wrenched out of his hand.

‘*The fuck—?*’

Robin stabbed at the screen to end the call.

‘*You can’t go to war with Culpepper,*’ she said fiercely, backing away from Strike while keeping a tight, two-handed grip on his phone. ‘You *can’t*! He’s got a national newspaper on his side!’

Strike looked at her, his expression thunderous.

‘So you’ve seen it. Obviously.’

‘Yes, I’ve seen it.’

‘He’s not fucking doing this to me. *He’s not fucking doing it*. I’ll fucking *destroy* that fucker, I’ll make him wish—’

‘Strike—’

‘They’ve paid some fucking – they’ve dragged up some—’

‘*I know what they’ve done!* We need to talk!’ said Robin, slamming the dividing door on the staring Pat.

Strike was pacing in his shirt sleeves.

‘What?’ he threw furiously at Robin, who was watching him. ‘You need me to say it, do you? Fine, I’ll fucking say it: I’ve never hired a sex worker – I’ve never hired one, full fucking stop, but I’ve sure as *fuck* never done it to entrap anyone.’

‘I know,’ said Robin (*did* she know? God, she hoped she did), ‘but this isn’t the way to deal with it, you’re just giving Culpepper more to print, threatening him!’

Robin wished her voice wasn’t shaking, but she had to ask the next question; matters had gone too far for polite avoidance of the subject.

‘Who was the woman in the first article?’

Strike now knew the fury of a cornered predator. His business under attack, his relationship with Robin threatened; he knew he owed her an explanation, and that it was crucial she heard the truth from him, and that he made it sound as unsordid as possible, but all he really wanted to do was start punching out windows.

‘Her name’s Nina Lascelles,’ he said. ‘The *Honourable* Nina Lascelles, if you want the full fucking – and she’s how I got hold of the manuscript of fucking *Bombyx Mori*,’ he said, referring to a book the agency had been keen to get its hands on. ‘Culpepper told me his cousin worked at the publishers, and gave me her contact details. We met, we went to the Roper Chard party together, she ran me off a copy of the manuscript. There was no

seduction, no promise of anything. She enjoyed the adventure.'

'And?' said Robin, who was still holding Strike's mobile tightly in both hands.

'And I invited her to dinner with me at Lucy's the next night. As a thank you.'

Robin, who'd never been invited to Lucy's for dinner, couldn't understand why Strike, most private of men, would have mixed business and family in this way.

'And then—?'

'I slept with her,' said Strike aggressively, 'yeah. Twice. And then I never called her again. But there was no fucking coercion, no *quid pro quos*, nothing.'

'Right,' said Robin.

'It was – one of those things. I didn't particularly—'

He had just enough sense to bite off the end of that sentence, but Robin had heard it, anyway. *Didn't particularly fancy her.*

But you slept with her anyway, thought Robin, *because of course you did. And now look.*

'She wanted a relationship,' said Strike, who thought this was a point in his favour. 'She wanted to keep it going. That's why – I could tell she was carrying a grudge, the night I saw her at the Dorchester. She claims I fucked up one of her best friend's lives, too.'

'Whose?' said Robin in alarm, visualising fresh vistas of fertile scandals for the tabloids to explore.

'No fucking idea. Probably some cheating wife we investigated. But she guessed I was there on a job, at the Dorchester, so when Mr A told his ex he knew what she was up to—'

'Well, going forwards,' said Robin (Strike would have said exactly the same, she knew, had it been a question of another employee), 'maybe you shouldn't be doing the kind of jobs where you might bump into former girlfriends.'

'There aren't that fucking many of them!'

'But a lot of them come from that kind of social circle, don't they?' said Robin, who was determined to have her say; not to punish him, but because the agency meant more to her than coddling Strike's feelings. 'It's a miracle this has never happened before. You're the most recognisable member of

the agency, as well. We just need to bear that in mind from now on.'

After fuming in silence for a few seconds, Strike bellowed 'FUCK'S SAKE' at no one in particular, though it made Robin jump.

'You know what you need to do?' Robin said, forcing herself to speak calmly. 'Call Fergus Robertson.'

Strike glared at her, then said, 'I thought of that, but I'm not—'

'This won't go away with "no comment". Talk to Robertson, tell him the truth. You've always played fair with him.'

'I didn't want to have to—'

'It's too late for what you "didn't want to have to do",' said Robin angrily. This was her agency as well, and she wasn't going to stand by and watch it get trashed. 'You need to give Robertson the facts. You've got to push back.'

'It won't be enough. I need to stop this at the source.'

'What are you going to do, track this girl down and threaten her into recanting?' said Robin, now losing patience. 'How d'you think *that*'ll play out? "*Cormoran Strike in further threats to sex worker*"? Or are you planning to lay about Dominic Culpepper with a baseball bat? Because *that* —'

'Give me my phone.'

'You can't threaten Culpepper, Strike! You *can't*!'

'I'm not going to. I'll call Robertson and see if I can do some damage control.'

Robin gave the phone back but stood watching him.

'I'd rather you didn't listen,' he told her.

'Fine,' said Robin coldly, and she left the room.

Strike waited until the door had closed before sitting down and pressing Robertson's number.

''Ello, 'ello,' said an amused voice on the end of the line. 'Just thinking of calling you, seeing as you're not returning any of my colleagues' calls. Why's Mr Culpepper so keen to get you, all of a sudden?'

'Might be prepared to tell you that,' said Strike, 'as long as I'm guaranteed an accurate quote or two.'

'Who's giving the quotes?'

'Me,' said Strike.

'Fire away,' said Robertson, and Strike heard the turning of a page.

‘I’ve never hired any woman – emphasis on “any” – sex worker or otherwise, to entrap or lure an investigative target or witness,’ said Strike, and he heard Robertson’s shorthand moving rapidly across paper, ‘nor have I ever attempted to get sex by offering money, withholding payment, or by any other kind of threat. I have never met, spoken to or otherwise interacted with the woman calling herself Candy and her claims, for which she’s offered no proof, are completely without foundation.’

‘Gonna take legal action?’ asked Robertson, who was still audibly scribbling.

‘On the record, yeah, I’m speaking to lawyers. Off the record, I haven’t got the money to sue, as Culpepper fucking well knows.’

‘Right,’ said Robertson. ‘This all seems to have got very personal, very fast.’

‘There’s a reason for that,’ said Strike, ‘and I might be prepared to give you some pointers on where to dig, as long as you can guarantee I’m going to be accurately quoted…’

33

And we have been on many thousand lines,
And we have shown, on each, spirit and power;
But hardly have we, for one little hour,
Been on our own line, have we been ourselves—
Hardly had skill to utter one of all
The nameless feelings that course through our breast,
But they course on for ever unexpress'd.

Matthew Arnold
The Buried Life

Robin was in the bathroom on the landing. She'd retreated there because she didn't want to answer Pat's questions and now, for the second time in three weeks, she was sitting on a toilet with her head in her hands, infuriated and enraged by Cormoran Strike.

Had she thought him some kind of Sir Galahad? No, never; she knew him too well, but like millions of women before her, Robin would rather have thought the man of whom she was so fond was better than this. She believed he'd never met Candy the sex worker, but the fact remained that if Strike could have just resisted having sex with a woman he'd inveigled into helping him on a job, Culpepper wouldn't have had a peg on which to hang his scurrilous story.

Five minutes later, Robin returned to the office, to find Strike still shut up inside the inner office, and Pat with the telephone receiver clamped to her ear, listening to someone. Robin was hanging up her coat when Pat said,

'I'm just going to put you on hold, Mr Rokeby.'

So fraught had the events of the morning been so far that Robin didn't immediately register the name. Only on turning to face the office manager,

and seeing Pat's expression of mingled amazement and fear, did the import of what she'd just heard hit her.

'It's his father,' Pat breathed.

'Oh my God,' whispered Robin. Of all the things that she thought might tip Strike completely over the edge this morning, his father was foremost. 'What does he want?'

'To speak to him,' mouthed Pat, with a jerk of the head towards the out of sight Strike. 'He says he can't call him on his mobile, because he's got him blocked. And he said, if he wasn't available, he'd like to speak to *you*.'

Robin could hear Strike's muffled voice, still talking to Fergus Robertson in the inner office. The call might end at any moment.

'Tell him both of us are busy but that you can take a message and one of us will get back to him. And then text *me* the message, don't send—'

The door to the inner office opened.

'We going to have this catch-up, then?' said Strike, scowling.

'Yes, of course,' said Robin, trying her best to sound matter of fact.

She walked past him into the inner office, and he closed the door on Pat, who still had the receiver pressed to her chest.

'Robertson's going to write it up, with a complete denial from me,' said Strike, who was breathing as though he'd just done what he really wanted to do, which was to beat Culpepper into a purée. 'Says he'll put in a bit of "the Cormoran Strike I know", mention the UHC, the Shacklewell Ripper, public service, grateful clients…'

'Great,' said Robin.

Neither was looking the other in the eye. Robin could hear Pat's voice rising and falling in the outer office again. Strike moved to the window and looked down through the Venetian blinds into Denmark Street.

'And he said he was going to call off – yeah, he has.'

Down in the street, the older journalist had just taken a phone call, presumably from Robertson. He then moved to tell the younger man that there was no point hanging around, because Strike had made the only comment he was prepared to give, to their colleague.

'Right,' said Strike, not looking at Robin as he sat down, but pulling his notes on the silver vault case towards him, 'I've got news on Larry McGee. I spoke to his daughter last night.'

His adrenaline levels were refusing to drop; vivid mental images of

punching Dominic Culpepper so hard his teeth splintered kept recurring. The idea of telling Robin how he felt about her had, naturally, fled: there were imperfect moments for such a declaration, and then there were times when speaking would be outright lunacy, and Strike would have been hard-pressed to imagine a less auspicious occasion than having just been forced to explain how badly he'd treated another woman, then taken Robin's advice on how best to fight an accusation of harassment of a sex worker.

'So,' he said, trying to focus on the notes he'd taken while speaking to McGee's daughter, 'there was nothing fishy about the death. Post-mortem revealed myocardial infarction related to poorly managed diabetes. Basically, the security guy at Gibsons was right: he really let himself go after being sacked.'

'Was McGee on good terms with his daughter?' asked Robin, who was also attempting to sound businesslike.

'She hadn't seen him for nearly ten years. First she knew he was dead was the police knocking on her door. From what she told me, he wasn't a loveable guy; walked out on her mother when she was six, always looking to make a bit of easy money, creepy around women, got sacked from a previous job for allegedly feeling up a co-worker. I asked if she knew why he'd think he was coming into money and she had no idea, said nobody in the family had much to leave, especially to him. I asked if she thought he'd ever have nicked stuff from work, or colluded in a robbery, and she said she'd easily believe it of him. They cremated him and left the ashes at the crematorium,' Strike added. 'Said nobody in the family wanted to handle them. Anyway' – he flicked back in his notes – 'did you read my email about Jim Todd?'

'Yes,' said Robin. 'You think he might've known McGee outside work?'

'I'm not convinced his "who was he?" was a slip of the tongue, nor am I convinced Todd wasn't the one who accessed "Abused and Accused" at work,' said Strike. 'He got antsy when I mentioned it and given how slack they are in that shop generally, I'm not taking Todd's word for it that he couldn't get online in there. From what he told me about his living arrangements, I doubt he's got a computer at home. Calling Wright a "silly tit" for looking stuff like that up at work could've been self-recrimination. People slip up that way. So, what d'you think about putting some surveillance on him?'

‘I agree in principle,’ said Robin, ‘but we haven’t really got the manpower, have we?’

‘Well, we need to try and make it work, because I want him checked out. It’ll have occurred to you, I’m sure, that given the state of Pamela’s eyesight, the identification of Wright as Knowles rests largely on Jim Todd.’

‘It had occurred to me, yes,’ said Robin, who didn’t much appreciate the roughness of her partner’s tone. It wasn’t her fault that he’d slept with a journalist’s cousin.

‘Anyway,’ Strike said, ‘I read your notes on Albie Simpson-White. You think he knows more than he’s admitting.’

‘I do,’ said Robin. ‘That thing about Rupert having no choice but to leave Decima and “sometimes you’re better off not knowing things” – I want to know what that meant.’

‘That Fleetwood’s got another girlfriend pregnant?’ suggested Strike dismissively.

Robin was further annoyed by this reaction. She’d listened politely to Strike’s speculation about Jim Todd, after all.

‘But he said Rupert really loved Decima, and made him sound quite responsible and level-headed in general—’

‘If “responsible” and “level-headed” means knocking up your girlfriend, nicking a massive bit of silver from her father, then scarpering, Simpson-White needs a new fucking dictionary,’ said Strike, and Robin surmised, correctly, that in Strike’s current mood there was little point in trying to persuade him to take a kinder view of Rupert Fleetwood, so instead she said,

‘Well, if we had enough subcontractors, I’d suggest putting surveillance on Albie, too, because I think there’s an outside chance he’d lead us straight to Rupert. I know Decima doesn’t want us to find him alive, but—’

‘No,’ said Strike. ‘She doesn’t. I called her yesterday because I wanted to check with her about what we found out about Wright in St George’s Avenue, and she made it good and clear the only thing she wants to hear is that he’s dead.’

He brought the notes of his conversation with Decima to the top of the pile in front of him and redoubled his effort to concentrate.

‘I asked if Rupert ever did weights, and Decima said he looks after himself, likes the gym, and she could imagine him doing weights if he

didn’t have access to a cross-trainer. As far as she’s aware, he’s never done jujitsu, but he did a bit of wrestling at school. She never saw him smoke dope but knows he has, in the past. I asked whether he knew how to handle a gun and she said, yes, a rifle, because his expensive Swiss boarding school had a shooting club, and then I asked whether he knew or had ever mentioned a woman called Rita or Rita Linda. Also no. Then I asked her whether he was ambidextrous.’

‘What?’ said Robin blankly. ‘Why?’

‘Because before phoning her, I went back through everything we’ve got so far, including the footage you got from Bullen & Co.’

‘But it’s useless,’ said Robin, who’d already looked at the three minutes of film. ‘Wright’s obscured nearly all the time he’s in there.’

‘Yeah, but on a second watch, I noticed something. Come here and I’ll show you.’

So Robin wheeled her chair round to Strike’s side of the partners’ desk. As she did so, Robin felt the mobile in her pocket vibrate, and suspected Pat had just sent her Jonny Rokeby’s message. Now feeling as though she was concealing a small but powerful explosive device on her person, she watched Strike bring up the clip of black and white film, which was far clearer and sharper than that from Ramsay Silver. The wide-angled camera looked down on the whole of Bullen & Co, which had a very large crate sitting close to the entrance and a couple of browsers. A man in a cravat, who Robin took to be Pamela’s husband, was scribbling at the desk.

‘Here he comes,’ said Strike.

Short and powerful-looking, wearing his full beard and glasses, Wright appeared temporarily unobscured, though unfortunately scratching the side of his face, before the largest of the browsing customers blocked him. He was holding a black and silver bag in one hand. Pamela’s husband picked up the bit of paper on which he’d been writing and advanced on Wright.

‘Now,’ said Strike, and he slowed the footage, ‘I know you can’t see him clearly, because of the bloke standing in front of him, but watch: Driscoll takes the bag and Wright bends over the crate to sign what I assume is a handwritten chit to show he took receipt of the centrepiece. Watch his elbow.’

‘Oh God, how did I miss that?’ gasped Robin. ‘He signs with his right hand!’

‘Exactly,’ said Strike, pausing the film. ‘So, there are three possibilities: one, he’s ambidextrous, two, for some reason he didn’t want the signature he gave at Bullen & Co to look like his own, or, three, he was faking being left-handed at Ramsays, and he forgot the pretence when he had to sign something unexpectedly.’

As Robin wheeled her chair back to the other side of the desk, she heard a high, clear voice she recognised as Kim Cochran’s in the outer office. Then there was a knock on the dividing door, which opened before either partner could say ‘come in’.

‘Oh,’ said Kim, seeing Robin first, ‘if it’s a bad time—’

‘No,’ said Strike, because he didn’t want to give Robin the impression he wasn’t happy for her to hear anything Kim had to say. ‘What’s up?’

Kim entered the room in another skin-tight dress, knee-length and black, with high-heeled boots. Her make-up, Robin noticed, was immaculate. Kim gave a little laugh and gestured down at her outfit in poorly feigned bashfulness, as though she’d only just remembered she was wearing it.

‘Sorry about this, it’s my last afternoon off before Christmas, I’m having lunch with my sister. Anyway, I’ve managed to get details of the getaway car they think the silver vault killers used.’

‘Really?’ said Strike.

‘Yes,’ said Kim. ‘OK if I sit down?’

She went to fetch a third chair without waiting for an answer. Though irritated by the intrusion, Robin took advantage of the distraction to pull her mobile out of her pocket and read the texts Pat had sent her.

Rokeby says he saw the thing in the paper and wanted to offer his own lawyers, says he’ll pay. Said he knows Cormoran never did it and that Culpepper’s a shit. Says he feels bad the illegitimate stuff keeps being dragged up.

Pat had then sent a second text.

He was very nice.

‘Love the goldfish, by the way,’ said the beaming Kim, who’d returned with one of the fold-up chairs. She sat down and crossed her legs, which made the clinging black dress ride halfway up her thighs.

‘So,’ she said, ‘none of my contacts can tell me why they didn’t give out details of the getaway car to the press. Like I said before, there seems to be something really weird going on around this case, everyone’s being super cagey, but anyway: it was a light-coloured Peugeot 208 with fake plates. It arrived at the end of Wild Court with one person in it, but after leaving Wild Court there were two, though no clear view of either of them. It headed west along the A40 then disappeared into a residential area, where they think it might have changed plates again. That’s as much as I’ve got so far, but I’ll keep trying.’

‘That’s very helpful, thanks,’ said Strike, once again injecting a note of finality into his voice, but this time Kim ignored it.

‘I’ve got news on Plug, too.’

‘Really?’ said Strike.

‘Yes. Whatever was in that shed has been moved. I followed Plug and his son to the allotment just after midnight. They were in there ten minutes, then took something out wrapped in a sack. It was big; it took two of them to carry it, and it was either dead or drugged.’

‘Shit,’ said Strike. ‘I called the bloody RSPCA, as well.’

‘Maybe that’s why they got rid of whatever it was,’ suggested Robin. ‘An inspector visited the shed and Plug heard about it.’

‘Then,’ said Kim, as though Robin hadn’t spoken, ‘they slung it in the back of Plug’s van and drove it all the way to Haringey, where they took it into a shitty house on Carnival Street.’

‘Plug and his son used to live in Haringey,’ said Robin. ‘Maybe a friend’s agreed to look after whatever it is?’

‘And after that,’ said Kim, still without acknowledging Robin in any way, ‘they came out and went back to Plug’s mum’s place.’

‘Get the number of the house in Carnival Street?’ asked Strike.

‘Yeah, number fifteen,’ said Kim.

‘OK, good work,’ said Strike, ‘write it up for the file. Might be worth

keeping an eye on that house, as well.'

As she stood up and picked up her chair, Kim said to Strike,

'D'you want coffee? I'm making some.'

'Oh – yeah, that'd be great, thanks,' said Strike.

'Robin?'

'No thanks,' said Robin automatically, although in fact she'd have liked one, too.

Kim smiled and left, leaving the door open.

'What were we just saying?' asked Strike, running a hand over his face.

'We were talking about Wright's left-handedness,' said Robin. 'I take it you told Decima about it?'

'Yeah. We took the case on the basis we wouldn't string her along, right?'

'Of course,' said Robin.

'So I told her the truth: we haven't yet found any evidence to suggest Fleetwood was Wright, and it's looking even less likely than it did at the start – at which she burst into tears, begged me to keep investigating and told me she's left another load of messages for Sacha Legard to try and make him talk to me, seeing as he's ignoring my emails.'

Kim reappeared with a mug of coffee.

'Cheers,' said Strike, noting her warm smile as she set it down and half wishing he hadn't accepted it. Kim left, closing the door behind her.

She's going to hang around until we come out, thought Robin. *She's not going to let that dress go to waste.*

'I'd imagine the reason the Met didn't publicise that Peugeot 208,' said Strike, lowering his voice, 'is that someone in Lynden Knowles' circle drives one.'

'Probably,' agreed Robin.

'Moving on,' said Strike, turning to yet another page of notes, 'Pat's found ninety-two married Hussein Mohameds so far, so we're a while away from finding the one who lived upstairs from William Wright, but when I've got time I'll comb through them and see if any of them look likely.

'I've also done a bit of research on our porn friend, Dangerous Dick. He's registered with what looks like London's premier adult entertainment agency, Triple XR – or he was. I called there – fake name, obviously – and asked to be put in touch with him. He's no longer on their books.'

‘*Oh,*’ said Robin.

‘Obviously, that doesn’t mean he’s been bumped off, but it’s interesting, all the same. I asked for contact details and they sounded suspicious and said I could leave a message for him. I asked him to call, but he hasn’t. I’d imagine they get a fair few nutters trying to contact them, porn stars, so I think you might have to make the next approach. New voice, and I’d imagine a woman will seem less fishy, but I can’t think of any cover other than pretending you’re casting a porn shoot.’

‘Right,’ said Robin, privately wondering how many more unforeseen dilemmas she was going to have to face today. Exactly how you went about convincing an adult actors’ agency you were a bona fide porn producer, she had no idea at all.

‘We’ll workshop it,’ said Strike, ‘after Christmas. In the meantime, I’ll have a bash at identifying the woman who delivered that cipher note. If she’s in the same line of work, she’s bound to have an online presence. Anyway, what’ve you got?’

‘Well, I’ve hit a complete dead end on Sapphire, the girl who messaged Osgood and Oz. I called the missing persons’ charity,’ Robin added. ‘Apparently she disappeared from a foster home. She’d only been there a month and hadn’t told the foster parents anything about meeting a man, or mentioned anyone called Oz. She’s got quite a bit of form for running away, though, so maybe there’s nothing in that at all, but,’ Robin went on tentatively, ‘I’ve actually found something else. It might be completely irrelevant, but for what it’s worth…’

She typed a few words into her own keyboard then turned the computer monitor so that Strike could see a news story dating from June.

Two pictures of the same beautiful young woman, who had waist-length black hair and olive skin, stared out of the screen. In one, the girl was dressed in a T-shirt and jeans. In the other, she was pouting in black lingerie.

LONDON STUDENT FOUND STABBED ON NORTH WESSEX DOWNS

The body of a young woman discovered on the North Wessex Downs

on Sunday 19th June has been identified as Spanish student Sofia Medina, 20, say police.

Described by friends as ‘outgoing, hard-working and fun’, Medina was studying for a BA in Film and Screen Business at the University of West London. She was last seen alive by flatmate Gretchen Schiff, 21, on the afternoon of Thursday 16th June.

‘She told me she might be away all weekend,’ Schiff told reporters. ‘I didn’t think it was strange. She had lots of friends. I thought she was probably staying at someone’s flat after a party or something like that.’

Medina was a prolific poster on her OnlyFans account, which a friend who wished to remain anonymous says was Medina’s attempt to make enough income to help fund her degree.

‘I warned her she was making it too easy for men to find her in real life. She talked about being a student and posted pictures of herself in the university bathrooms. I’m really scared someone who saw her OnlyFans stalked her and abducted her.’

Forensic analysis has revealed that Medina was raped before she was killed. The murder is believed to have happened in the early hours of Sunday 19th June. Her body, which had sustained multiple stab wounds, was found by a dog walker.

ABANDONED VAN

Police would like to identify the owner of a 2013 VW Up Complete 999cc, which was found abandoned without its number plates on Baydon Road, approximately two and a half miles from where the body was found.

If you have any information about this story, please call…

Robin had thought she might need to explain to Strike why she was showing him the article, but when he’d finished reading, he said,

‘Yeah, I remember seeing that. You think she might’ve been the light-skinned Asian woman who took stuff out of William Wright’s flat, before he was murdered?’

‘Well, she’s obviously not Asian, but that hall’s dark and Mandy only saw the couple briefly. I know it’s a very long shot, but she does match the basic description of the woman – light brown skin, long black hair, didn’t sound English – and she was murdered just twenty-four hours after Wright.’ Robin could hear how thin her theory sounded when spoken aloud, yet still felt compelled to lay it all out. ‘I was struck by Sofia telling her flatmate she’d be away all weekend, but not giving details of what she was supposed to be doing.’

‘Maybe they’d fallen out. Or maybe they weren’t friends, just people who rented a flat together.’

‘I know it could just be that,’ said Robin, ‘but look at this.’

She typed in another search term, then said,

‘This is the description they gave out of the body, before it was identified as Sofia. “*Latina or South Asian, 162 cm, wearing jeans, trainers and a pink T-shirt with a peony design*.”’ She looked up at Strike. ‘Mandy said the girl who went in and out of Wright’s flat was wearing a pink top with flowers on it.’

She could tell by Strike’s expression that he was now interested, so she continued,

‘The last known sighting of Sofia alive was on the Thursday afternoon, so the day before the Murdoch silver arrived at Ramsay Silver. On Friday afternoon, a girl matching Sofia’s description and wearing a very similar or identical outfit drives to St George’s Avenue in a silver car, lets herself into Wright’s room, removes things in a suitcase and leaves the house. A silver car – possibly the same silver car – turns up early next morning, a curly-haired man goes into the house and comes out with more stuff in a suitcase. Somebody else is driving. The following day, Sofia’s murdered in the middle of nowhere, near an old abandoned van.’

‘A van,’ repeated Strike.

‘I know it’d fit better if it had been an abandoned Peugeot 208—’

‘Not necessarily,’ said Strike. ‘A man emailed Calvin Osgood, thinking he was Oz, and asking whether he was still interested in buying his van, remember?’

‘Oh God, of course!’

Strike stroked his chin, eyes narrowed.

‘You know, women can be useful in certain situations.’

‘Thanks,’ said Robin.

Strike almost smiled for the first time since waking.

‘I mean, the presence of a woman usually makes everything seem more innocuous. Rightly or wrongly, people see a man and a woman and they think “couple going about their ordinary business”, not “off to commit theft and murder”.’

Strike took a pull on his vape pen. He really needed to increase the concentration of nicotine, because it wasn’t satisfying him nearly as much as a Benson & Hedges would have done.

‘All right,’ he said, ‘for the sake of argument, let’s say Sofia Medina hooked up with one of the guys who bumped off Wright. Let’s push it a bit further and say that man was our curly haired friend Oz. She tells her flatmate she’s going to be away all weekend because she knows she’ll be assisting Oz in nicking the Murdoch silver and murdering William Wright.’

‘When you put it like that,’ said Robin, ‘it starts sounding less credible. She was a student. She had prospects. Why on earth would she agree to get involved in murder?’

‘He could’ve been coercing her.’

‘How?’

‘Young women whose families don’t know they’ve got OnlyFans accounts can be vulnerable to blackmail.’

‘But what was he blackmailing her to do? *She* can’t have killed Wright and she wouldn’t have been much use carrying the Oriental Centrepiece, either.’

‘Well, with a girl who looks like that, the obvious answer would be acting as bait.’

Both of them immediately thought of the pixelated Candy, posing in her red underwear in the paper.

‘Wright told his neighbours a girlfriend would be coming to live with him,’ said Robin. ‘Could that have been Sofia Medina? Could she have been the one who persuaded him to go and work at Ramsay Silver?’

‘It’s a theory,’ said Strike, who was thinking the thing out. ‘Maybe Wright thought he and Medina would be doing a Bonnie and Clyde, not realising there were people behind her who were going to gouge out his eyes and cut off his dick?’

‘Maybe there’s no connection,’ Robin said, losing confidence again.

‘’Course, Medina might not have realised the job was going to involve murder and mutilation,’ said Strike. ‘Oz might’ve kidded her that it was only burglary, maybe spun her some yarn about how he had a right to the silver, that she was helping him get back what was rightfully his. He could’ve claimed Ramsay had done him wrong in some way, and this was revenge. Or – hang on.’

Strike got to his feet and went to consult the card on the noticeboard where he’d written everything they’d found out so far about Oz.

‘The real Osgood got another email meant for Oz,’ said Strike, reading the card. ‘A girl wrote to him in bad English, wanting to know about a prank Oz played on her cousin…’

‘Bad English,’ repeated Robin. ‘You think the girl was Spanish?’

‘Could well be,’ said Strike. ‘Shame the dozy prick deleted the emails.’

‘But what kind of “prank” would involve Oz entering the shop under cover of darkness and coming out covered in bloodstains?’

‘She might not’ve noticed the bloodstains if he was staggering under the weight of the Oriental Centrepiece,’ said Strike.

‘But how did he explain away coming back out of the shop with a full set of men’s clothes? Because Wright had been stripped, remember.’

‘Yeah, good point,’ said Strike, frowning. ‘Might call Wardle back and point out the coincidence of Sofia Medina’s appearance and clothing matching the description of the woman who visited Wright’s house in the early hours of the morning, though.’

Strike was still standing with his back to Robin, scanning the increasingly full noticeboard. While he did so, Robin agonised over what she ought to do about Jonny Rokeby’s message. She’d have quite liked to withhold it, because unless there’d been communication between them of which she was unaware, the last words her partner had spoken to his father were ‘go fuck yourself’. However, it would definitely be wrong not to pass on the offer of legal assistance.

Unaware of what was going on behind his back, Strike, who was looking at a new piece of paper pinned beneath the picture of Tyler Powell, said,

‘You found “Griff”.’

‘What?’ said Robin.

‘“Man Tyler Powell confided in, instead of his grandmother”, it says

here.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Robin. ‘Dilys said “he told Griff where he was going, not me”. I think that’s his address. Dilys said Griff lives “up the road” and an Ian Griffiths lives right opposite Tyler’s parents. He might be worth talking to, as well as Dilys.’

‘And Dilys could meet us any time in January?’ said Strike, still reading Robin’s note.

‘Yes,’ said Robin.

‘I’ve been putting more pressure on Jade Semple and she seems to be wavering. I’ve reassured her I’m not working for the press, although I can’t see why she’s so worried about that. If she genuinely wants to find her husband, a bit more coverage might help. Anyway, if I can get her to agree, we’ll try and book those interviews around the same time, pick them off together.’

‘OK,’ said Robin, still trying to decide how best to broach the subject of Rokeby.

Strike turned away from the board, and was about to embark on a discussion of the best way for them to travel from London to Ironbridge, when Robin said,

‘Listen, I’ve got something to tell you,’ (and for a second, Strike remembered that it was he who’d planned to say those words, or something very like them, this morning) ‘but please – *please* don’t fly off the handle. Promise me you won’t do anything rash.’

‘All right,’ said Strike, wondering what on earth was coming. She wouldn’t preface an announcement of her engagement with these words, would she?

‘Your father just called the office. He saw that article and he’s offering help – legal help. He says he’ll pay for his own lawyers to take action.’

Strike simply stared at her. On the other side of the door, Robin could hear Kim laughing.

‘He phoned while you were talking to Robertson,’ said Robin. ‘I told Pat to take a message, and – well, that’s it. He said he felt bad that – that he’d been dragged up in the story, so he wanted to help. Pat says he was nice… Don’t go ballistic. Please.’

‘I’m not going to,’ said Strike, with difficulty.

Not with you here, anyway.

Robin checked the time on her phone.

‘I’d better get going,’ she said, getting to her feet.

‘You driving to Yorkshire this afternoon?’

‘This evening,’ said Robin, ‘but I need to pack and sort a few things out.’

In fact, she had an appointment with her GP that afternoon. It had been difficult to get one before Christmas and she didn’t want to miss it.

‘I’ve got your present here,’ said Robin, now reaching into her bag and pulling out what looked like a card. ‘I know it doesn’t look like much, but you’ll understand when you open it.’

‘Thanks,’ said Strike, taking it automatically. ‘I left yours upstairs. Hang on.’

Robin followed him into the outer office, where Kim was leaning up against the sink, coffee in hand. As Strike headed for the glass door, Kim said,

‘Thanks for the gift token, Cormoran.’

‘Thank Robin, it was her idea,’ said Strike. He left for his flat. As soon as the glass door had closed, Pat said to Robin in the growl that passed for her whisper,

‘Did you tell him?’

‘Yes,’ said Robin.

‘What’s he going to do?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Robin.

Kim’s bird-bright eyes were moving from one to the other; Robin could almost see her nose quivering with curiosity.

Strike was back within a few minutes, holding a small, flat square box wrapped in Christmas paper, and a card.

‘Happy Christmas,’ he said, handing it to Robin.

‘Th—’

The phone on Pat’s desk rang and Robin felt her stomach clench.

Please God, not Rokeby again.

‘Strike and Ellacott Detective Agency… who?’

Pat’s eyes widened.

‘Just going to put you on hold.’

She pressed a button and looked round at Strike.

‘He says he’s Sacha Legard.’

‘*What?*’ said Kim, eyes widening. ‘The *actor*?’

‘I’d better get going,’ said Robin, who was holding her present. ‘Merry Christmas, everyone.’

Had Kim and Pat not been there, and Legard not waiting on hold, she might have said more to Strike, might have reiterated her plea for him not to blow up at his father, for his own sake rather than Rokeby’s, but as it was, she just smiled at him, turned and left.

‘OK,’ Strike said dourly to Pat (*fuck Rokeby, fuck Christmas, fuck fucking Culpepper, fuck fucking everything*), ‘put Legard through to me in here.’

He retreated to the inner office again. The phone on his desk rang.

‘Strike.’

‘Cormoran,’ said Sacha Legard’s beautifully modulated voice. ‘Long time no speak.’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike.

‘I didn’t realise you’d been trying to contact me.’

The fuck you didn’t.

‘I’ve had a call from Dessie Longcaster – Mullins, I mean – sounding pretty upset,’ said Legard.

‘Did she tell you what this is about?’ asked Strike.

‘Yeah, my cousin Rupert,’ said Legard, with a tinge of humorous exasperation.

‘Decima’s very worried about him. Could we meet to talk?’

‘Honestly, I think this is all a bit of a storm in a teacup,’ said Legard.

Interviewers, as Strike knew, generally concurred that Sacha Legard was not only an outstanding talent, but a man of uncommon sweetness and generosity of spirit. Strike, who knew better, had avoided reading their fawning comments for years; he ate quite enough fried food, and didn’t need the increase in blood pressure. Strike now let his silence speak for him. Did Legard want to puncture his charming public image by figuring as a man unwilling to help a distressed woman? Did he really want to seem indifferent to the whereabouts of his young cousin?

‘Well, if it’ll help put Dessie’s mind at ease,’ said Legard finally, ‘of course.’

‘Great,’ said Strike. ‘Tomorrow suit you? I’m free all day.’

‘Sure. Come to the National Theatre at three. It’s our last night of—’

‘Fine, I’ll see you then,’ said Strike, and he achieved some small sublimation of his continuing urge to punch someone by hanging up before Sacha Legard could tell him which undoubtedly well-reviewed play he was currently starring in.

34

Blame not thou the faulting light
Nor the whispers of the night:
Though the whispering night were still,
Yet the heart would counsel ill.

A. E. Housman
XVII, More Poems

Robin's trip to the GP was difficult in ways she hadn't anticipated. All she'd really wanted was to find out whether the sharp pains in her lower right side were anything to be concerned about, and the short answer to that, according to the blunt young male locum she was forced to see, instead of the female doctor she'd requested, was 'no'. Having asked her whether she'd had symptoms of an infection, such as a raised temperature, and whether the incision site had healed well (she'd declined his offer to have a look at it), he said,

'You've had an operation,' as though she hadn't realised, as though she'd slept through the shock and the pain and the morphine, 'you're still healing. Have you been very physically active since you left hospital?'

'Reasonably,' said Robin, remembering the dash along the pavement to Plug's shed, and today's sprint up the agency's stairs.

'Well, there you are,' said the doctor.

'Right,' said Robin, bending to pick up her bag to leave, but the doctor was still talking.

'I see they discussed IVF with you, at the hospital,' he said, eyes on his computer monitor.

'Yes, but—'

'You're thirty-two, right?'

‘Yes,’ said Robin.

‘While you’re still under thirty-five, you’ve got around a fifty-five per cent chance of a live birth via IVF,’ he said, ‘but the odds are lower with a first implantation. Wait until forty, and your odds drop to ten per cent.’

‘OK,’ said Robin, ‘well, thank—’

‘Women often think IVF’s a safety net. There are no guarantees. If that’s what you want, you need to be thinking about it—’

‘Sooner rather than later,’ said Robin. ‘Yes, the surgeon said.’

She didn’t mean to be rude, but she’d already had more than enough of the GP, his statistics, his monobrow and his air of patronage. Maybe she’d imagined the air of judgement when he’d read ‘chlamydia’ aloud, off his screen, but she was damned if she was going to tell him how her fallopian tubes had come to be ruined.

Robin spent most of the four-hour drive to Masham feigning a cheerfulness she didn’t feel. Murphy, who’d had the tact not to mention the article about Strike and Candy, was in high spirits because, at last, he and his team had secured three arrests in the case of the shot brothers: that of the man who’d fired the gun, the driver of the car from which he’d done so, and the girlfriend of the latter, who’d given both men a fake alibi. Sincerely pleased for him, and for the mother of the boys, Robin was full of congratulations, and told herself it was the wrong moment to tell him about her visit to the GP.

When, exactly, would be the right moment to discuss that, Robin didn’t know. She had a horrible feeling that if she told Murphy what the odds of a successful birth were via IVF he’d suggest they start trying for a child immediately, that his previous ‘you’re only thirty-two’ would turn rapidly into ‘you’re already thirty-two’. Robin thought again of all the women in the world who’d be delighted that their boyfriend wanted to have children with them, and she asked herself what was wrong with her, that she felt panicked and stifled at the thought of what she’d once thought she wanted, before she’d been sent to a rundown office in Denmark Street as a temporary secretary, and everything had changed: the part of her she’d thought the rapist had taken away for ever had proven to be not dead, but dormant, just waiting for its chance, while something she’d taken for granted – that she could have children as and when she wished – was gone for ever, although she hadn’t then known it.

Don't cry, Robin told herself, as the dark M11 slipped past the car windows, the Christmas songs played on the radio, and Murphy talked in detail about how he'd personally ground down the driver's girlfriend, catching the woman out in contradictions in her story.

'She's a spice addict,' he told Robin.

'A what addict?'

'Spice. Synthetic cannabis. It's bloody everywhere. She was sweating like she was in a sauna. Spoke about three words a minute. Nearly five hours it took, to break her.'

Murphy took a swig of water, as though the memory of it made him hoarse.

'Christ, I'm looking forward to this. I need a break.'

'Me too,' said Robin untruthfully. In fact, she'd have given almost anything to be driving in the opposite direction, back to her solitary flat and work, even if that was where the man who'd seized the back of her neck was. *It'll 'appen again unless you fuckin' give this up.*

They arrived at last, by darkness, at the old stone house in Masham where Robin had grown up. Her father had strung white lights in the old lilac tree in the front garden. When Robin pressed the doorbell there was a rush of welcome during which Betty the new puppy dashed outside and had to be rescued from the middle of the road by Murphy. Here was Stephen, Robin's eldest brother, and Jenny, his tall wife, in such an advanced state of pregnancy it took her three goes to get up out of her armchair to greet the newcomers, and Jonathan, Robin's youngest brother, who'd now graduated from university and was working for a brand management consultancy in Manchester; Robin's dark-haired father, in his horn-rimmed spectacles, and her mother, Linda, whose affection for Murphy meant he received just as warm a hug as Robin did. The family had delayed dinner so Robin and her boyfriend could join them. They all settled around the scrubbed kitchen table, on a floor covered in sheets of newspaper due to the presence of the so far un-housetrained Betty, whose tail caused her entire body to undulate as she wagged it non-stop. With a slight raising of her spirits, Robin drank wine and ate the chicken and mushroom casserole her mother had cooked, and the news that her ex-husband, Matthew, was also in town for Christmas, with his second wife and son, caused her barely a tremor of emotion.

'She's pregnant again,' Linda informed the family, 'that Sarah. I saw her

in the Co-op.’

‘Well, good luck to her,’ said Robin, determinedly offhand.

‘When are you due?’ Murphy asked Jenny.

‘Third of January,’ said Jenny, ‘but honestly, he can come tonight if he wants. I’m sick of the bloody heartburn.’

‘It’s a boy?’ said Robin, who hadn’t known this.

‘Yeah, and they reckon he’s going to be well over nine pounds,’ said Stephen.

‘I’m glad one of us is happy about that,’ said Jenny.

‘We’ve been worried,’ said Linda, mock-reproving, as she looked down the table at her daughter-in-law. ‘She was still working until a month ago,’ Linda told Robin.

‘Only the small stuff, Linda,’ said Jenny, who was a vet. ‘No horses or cattle.’

‘I thought Martin would be here,’ said Robin.

Martin was the third of the Ellacotts’ four children, who, until very recently, had lived with his parents, although he’d now moved in with his pregnant girlfriend in nearby Ripon.

‘No, they’re coming tomorrow,’ said Linda, with just that shade of reserve that told Robin there was a story that her mother didn’t want to share in front of company.

Robin was glad to get to bed in her old room. Murphy fell asleep almost as soon as he lay down. Robin listened to the sounds of the others going in and out of the bathroom, of Annabel’s parents checking on her in Martin’s old room, of Jonathan moving around in the attic conversion where, as the last-born, he’d had to sleep when young. She wondered for a few minutes what was in the flat, square box Strike had given her for Christmas, which she’d left at the bottom of her holdall when unpacking, rather than taking it downstairs and putting it beneath the Christmas tree, as she and Murphy had done with the presents they’d bought the family, and each other. Strike’s box had the size and weight appropriate to a piece of jewellery, but she could think of nothing less likely than her detective partner giving her something so personal, not when he’d been scared out of buying her perfume one year because the names had seemed too intimate. The memory of Strike telling her he’d panicked at the idea of giving her a bottle labelled something like ‘Shaggable You’ made her smile in the dark.

It’ll be fine, she told herself, listening to Murphy’s slow breathing. *It’s only four days*.

35

Why not, then, have earlier spoken,
Written, bustled? Who's to blame
If your silence kept unbroken?

Robert Browning
Waring

Strike considered self-pity an unjustifiable waste of time, yet the dejection gripping him the following morning refused to lift. Whatever Robin had said previously about the strains of a family Christmas, who was to say she wouldn't be softened by the festive atmosphere once she got to Masham? There'd be kids and carol services, and maybe mulled bloody wine, and everyone charmed by her immensely eligible CID officer… Strike had only ever visited Masham once before, to gatecrash Robin's wedding. Well, he was fucked if he'd do that a second time.

He was currently sitting in his BMW, keeping watch over a builders' warehouse to which he'd tailed the unemployed Plug. While watching the warehouse doors for Plug's reappearance, Strike exacerbated his own despondency by pondering the many other dilemmas facing him.

Fergus Robertson's article had appeared in the *Telegraph* that morning. As the detective supposed he should have foreseen, some tattered code of honour among hacks had prevented Robertson from telling the world the real reason that Dominic Culpepper was currently determined to trash Strike's reputation, but he'd intimated that Strike had made many enemies during his investigative career and quoted Strike in full as regarded his denial of everything pertaining to Candy, and his empty threat of legal action. Perhaps, Strike thought, eyes on the warehouse, he really should hire a lawyer. The costs would be exorbitant, but he had a nasty feeling his

rebuttal wouldn’t be sufficient to make the Candy story disappear for good.

He had no intention of accepting his father’s offer of financial help, which he was certain stemmed from a desire on Rokeby’s part to bolster his own public image. Strike considered that Rokeby had violated a territorial boundary by calling his office in Denmark Street and speaking to one of Strike’s employees. Yes, Robin was probably right: the wisest course was to ignore his father, but if she returned from Masham engaged, Strike would consider all previous pledges cancelled.

Meanwhile, Jade, the abandoned wife of Niall Semple, had texted him the previous evening.

look theres no point you coming to see me because I don’t think Niall was the man in that shop any more

This was bad news, because in the event that Robin returned from Masham ringless, a trip to Scotland would give Strike an excellent opportunity to declare himself, whereas if they were only travelling as far as Ironbridge, it would be difficult to justify an overnight stay in a hotel. He’d typed back:

What changed your mind?

Her answer was,

I think he’s with another woman

Strike had replied asking whether it wouldn’t put her mind at rest to make sure her husband hadn’t been in the vault, but there’d been no response.

As if all this wasn’t enough to be dealing with, Strike had received an anonymous call to his mobile, forwarded from the office phone, shortly after leaving Denmark Street that morning. After some guttural breathing, a rasping voice had said,

‘Leave it. We’ve got gow-too on our side. *Leave it.*’

‘The fuck’s “gow-too”?’ Strike had said, at which the caller had hung up.

Gow-too. Since the unknown man had threatened Robin in Harrods, Strike was no longer disposed to dismiss the anonymous caller as a joker amusing himself at the agency’s expense. That said, as Robin was currently safe in Yorkshire, he was simply riled that another irritant had been added to his already tottering pile.

There was nothing in Strike’s immediate future likely to cheer him up. He’d gladly have slept through the next three days, but he wasn’t even allowed that. The following day was Christmas Eve, which meant having to attend Lucy’s party for the neighbours, followed by a night in the spare room and the enforced jollity of Christmas Day, with his brother-in-law Greg making the usual barbed comments about Strike’s life choices. The detective usually ignored these for his sister’s sake, though it occurred to him, as he sat in his car watching the warehouse where Plug was shopping, that punching Greg might be almost as satisfying as battering Dominic Culpepper, and he indulged himself for a few seconds by imagining knocking Greg out over the turkey. However, before he got anywhere near Christmas lunch, he had to meet Sacha Legard at the National Theatre, a prospect that was dredging up memories of Strike’s late fiancée which, in his weakened emotional state, he was finding impossible to fend off.

Charlotte’s attitude towards her half-brother Sacha, and indeed her entire family, had always swung between two polar extremes. She’d spent much of her life damning them all to hell and declaring that she hated and dreaded Heberley House, the stately home in which she’d spent most of her childhood, and where her mother and stepfather had thrown extravagant, druggy parties, at one of which Charlotte, aged ten, had accidentally ingested LSD. She’d insisted that she despised the conventions of her class, blamed her boarding schools and relatives for her unhappiness, and claimed that all she wanted out of life now that she was free of them were simple pleasures and genuine human connection. This had been the part of Charlotte that Strike had both loved and pitied, and which, in the earliest days of their affair, he’d allowed himself to believe was the ‘real’ Charlotte.

However, with age and experience had come the unwilling realisation that the woman he loved was chameleon-like, multifaceted and often manipulative, containing many other selves which were just as real as his

favourite one. Shifts between these different aspects of her personality would come without warning; suddenly, she'd find the amusements Strike could afford on a military policeman's salary dull and restrictive, and she'd announce a desire for an expensive day out at the races with champagne and heavy betting, or a drop-of-the-hat trip to Marrakesh with high society friends, including 'Sachy' and 'Val', because 'come on, darling, it'll be fun', and then she'd mock Strike for his reluctance and for his bourgeois obsession with solvency and sincerity.

'Oh, of *course* Sachy's a massive hypocrite,' Charlotte had once said, laughing, when Strike had laid this charge against her half-brother, after a dinner party during which Sacha and another wealthy actor had talked socialism through three courses. 'We all know he votes Tory and there's not a tax dodge he isn't wise to. Lighten up, darling, you take these things way too seriously.'

In the manic episodes that seized Charlotte at regular intervals, she'd ask why Strike cared that the public face didn't match the private mores, as long as the person concerned was entertaining and stylish. Why did Strike have to bore and embarrass everyone with quibbles rooted in actual experience of poverty and squalor? And arguments would ensue, in which she'd accuse Strike of parsimony and joylessness, and if he reminded Charlotte of things she'd said, days or even hours previously, about her hatred of double standards, falseness and materialism, there'd be a sudden eruption of rage, in which she'd throw wild accusations at him: that he hated and despised her, and thought her worthless and shallow, and then would come either self-destructive drinking or flung missiles, and often both.

The one family member towards whom Charlotte had never, under any circumstances, expressed love, was her mother. Charlotte had been regarded as surplus to requirements by both her parents, who'd been hoping for a son after her elder sister. Charlotte had only ever known disdain and unkindness from Tara, which Strike had always believed was rooted in their close physical resemblance, the narcissistic Tara hating to see her own lost youthful beauty blinking at her across the breakfast table. Never, before or since, had he known a parent and child hate each other as Tara and Charlotte had, and he ascribed most of Charlotte's mental instability to a childhood of neglect that had amounted, at times, to outright abuse.

Tara's latent maternal instinct had finally awoken with the arrival of

Sacha, who was the product of her third marriage. Tara had doted on her only son, perfectly content to see her own features in masculine form, and he'd become the only person the hedonistic, profoundly self-centred Tara cared about as much as herself. In consequence, Sacha was the only person in Charlotte's drink- and drug-riven family who could sincerely say that he'd had an entirely happy upbringing.

This wasn't, of course, Sacha's fault and Strike didn't blame him for it. His grudge sprang from the way Sacha had behaved once he was old enough to notice Tara's callousness towards his sister. Sacha was the only living soul who might have been able to intervene to some effect, yet Charlotte's suicide attempts and spells in mental health facilities had always gone unacknowledged by her half-brother, who'd never visited her, never called, and never referred to any of them after they'd passed. When Charlotte was well, Sacha was delighted to socialise with her, because she was a witty and ornamental asset to any gathering. Otherwise, as far as Sacha was concerned, Charlotte might as well not have existed.

There'd been one occasion, and one only, on which Strike had appealed to the younger man for assistance. Notwithstanding her frequent diatribes against the place, Charlotte had been determined to celebrate her thirtieth birthday with a large party at Heberley House. Strike had foreseen myriad possibilities for drama and conflict in trying to stage the event at Heberley, and had tried to persuade Charlotte that a party in London, or even a weekend away with him, would be preferable, but to no avail. Charlotte wanted champagne and canapés, two hundred people in black tie crammed into the ballroom, pictures taken on the sweeping staircase and lanterns hung in the trees of the deer park, and Strike's lack of enthusiasm for the plan was taken, inevitably, as a drag and a slight. Maybe some remnant of the neglected, unloved child Charlotte had once been was trying to prove to herself that she had worth in the eyes of her family, or perhaps she was deliberately setting up a situation in which an implosion would occur. Strike had become familiar, by then, with the dangerous part of Charlotte that sometimes sought to wound herself as deeply, and on as grand a scale, as possible.

Two months of entirely predictable conflict with Tara prior to the party had culminated in Tara countermanding half of the arrangements and announcing that she'd be spending the day of the event in St Moritz with

her son. Unaware that Tara had dropped this bombshell by voicemail, Strike, who'd been on leave from the army at the time, had returned to Charlotte's flat after a pint with his old friend Nick to find no sign of his girlfriend, but the black lace dress she'd been planning to wear to her Heberley party lying in shreds on the bedroom floor, and smears of blood in the bathroom sink. She wasn't answering her phone, nor did she return that night. The following morning, unable to reach any other family member, he'd called Sacha.

When he answered his mobile, Sacha was in a first-class lounge at Heathrow, among the jet set crowd with whom Tara ran. The information that his sister had gone missing, leaving bloodstains and a ripped-up dress behind her, hadn't made the slightest dent in Sacha's good humour. Though speaking to a man ten years older than himself and with far broader life experience, the twenty-year-old Sacha had adopted a world-weary tone as he told Strike that Tara's therapist had advised her that a little tough love was in order where his sister was concerned. The best thing Strike could do, Sacha had said, while the laughter of Tara and friends rang in the background, was to ignore this obvious bid for attention, and before Strike could tell Sacha exactly what he thought of him and his mother, the young man had hung up.

It had taken Strike a further forty-eight hours to track Charlotte down to a hospital. She'd swallowed a handful of anti-depressants with as much whisky as she could stomach in the middle of a Soho bar. When she'd slipped sideways off her chair, the manager had gone to her assistance, only to be roundly insulted and told to keep his fucking hands off her. Incredibly, she'd still been able to walk, because she then staggered out onto the pavement and blundered into traffic, where she'd been clipped by a passing bus. When Strike finally found her, a day after his own thirtieth birthday, which he'd spent making fruitless calls to more relatives and ringing hospitals, she was lying in a surgical ward after having her stomach pumped, with self-harm marks up her arms and a fractured shoulder. His reward for three days of dread and non-stop attempts to interest her relatives in her fate had been to be told what a complete fucking bastard he was for having gone out for a pint with Nick, just when she most needed him. She'd then presented him with one of her regular me-or-the-army ultimatums and Strike had, as usual, chosen the military, and returned to

Germany, where he was then stationed, a temporarily free man.

When Charlotte had been found dead in a blood-filled bath by the police, Sacha had had the perfect, poignant statement ready for the papers: ‘I’m just one of the heartbroken people who loved her, struggling to comprehend the fact that we’ll never hear her laugh again. “*Death lies on her like an untimely frost Upon the sweetest flower of all the field.*”’

Sitting in his chilly BMW, unwillingly remembering all of this, Strike asked himself yet again what the hell he’d been playing at, all those times he’d agreed to take Charlotte back. He prized truth; she’d been an incorrigible liar. He’d insisted that you could, with work, rise above your genetic inheritance, whereas Charlotte had had a fatalistic belief that she was inescapably damned by a family plagued with addiction. Yet they’d known each other so well that each had been able to predict with almost frightening accuracy what the other was thinking and feeling. While enmeshed in the relationship, Strike had never been able to imagine loving another woman as deeply, but since it had ended, he thought of it in terms of a protracted infection he’d finally succeeded in throwing off.

It occurred to him now, as he sat staring at the builders’ warehouse, that Robin, who seemed so much less complicated than his dead ex-fiancée, was far more of a mystery to him than Charlotte had ever been. He didn’t know what Robin was thinking and feeling, and falling in love with her, which had happened entirely against his will, didn’t resemble an infection, but the recognition of a deficiency he’d never known he had, but which had become gradually and painfully symptomatic. And now – every thought led back there, no matter how seemingly unrelated – she was in Masham with Murphy, and he was alone and miserable, and he had nobody to blame but himself.

36

A Grecian lad, as I hear tell,
One that many loved in vain,
Looked into a forest well
And never looked away again.

A. E. Housman
XV, A Shropshire Lad

Strike had few strong opinions on architecture, but he'd always considered the brutalist building that housed the National Theatre, which resembled a cross between a multi-storey car park and a power station, one of London's worst eyesores. Walking towards it at ten to three that afternoon, with the dull grey Thames glimmering in the middle distance, Strike thought it compared unfavourably with the builders' warehouse where he'd just handed over surveillance to Midge. A banner hanging close to the door announced that Sacha's play was called *Death Is No Punishment*, and featured a headshot of Sacha looking serious and resolute in what appeared to be striped pyjamas.

A timid-looking, bushy-haired young woman in glasses was hovering beside the entrance, a lanyard around her neck.

'Mr Strike?'

'That's me.'

'I'm Grace. Sacha asked me to take you up to him. It's a bit of a confusing building, if you don't know it.'

'OK,' said Strike.

She held the door open for him, and, as they walked together across the vast, brown-carpeted foyer, with its high ceiling patterned like a gigantic concrete waffle, his guide asked Strike whether he'd seen Sacha's play.

‘No,’ said Strike.

‘Oh, it’s wonderful,’ she said breathlessly, and she spoke for several minutes about the piece, in which Sacha played the real life Dr Walter Loebner, who’d survived Gestapo torture, escaped from a camp and lived to testify against his tormentors.

Strike resisted the temptation to snort. There was, of course, no law decreeing that only courageous men should impersonate those who’d survived unspeakable atrocities before effecting death-defying escapes, but he happened to find it supremely incongruous that Sacha Legard should be doing so. Charlotte and Strike, both of whom possessed physical courage aplenty, had often laughed together about how successfully Tara had inculcated in her adored son her own horror of blemishing nature’s finest handiwork. Strike knew very well that Sacha fretted about the safety of flying harnesses and the likelihood of sustaining injury during well-rehearsed sword fights, had never progressed past the nursery slopes when skiing, and preferred his stunt doubles to do anything in the nature of diving, horseback riding or jumping off high ledges. None of this was widely known, of course, because Sacha made such a convincing on-screen daredevil.

‘… go to Broadway, but I don’t think they can imagine anyone except Sacha as Walter, and he’s committed to a film next year…’

Strike and his guide ascended in a lift to the upper floors, and the young woman continued to rhapsodise about Sacha until Strike’s bored expression intimidated her into silence. She led him at last into a small bar reserved for the cast on the third floor, and there sat Sacha, alone except for the barman.

The actor was wearing jeans and a dark blue shirt, and even in the bar’s unflattering lighting looked astoundingly handsome. Like many of his fellow thespians, he was far slighter in person than he appeared on stage or screen.

‘Cormoran,’ he said warmly, getting to his feet. ‘Last time we saw each other must’ve been at Dad’s funeral.’

‘Must’ve been, yeah,’ said Strike, shaking Sacha’s proffered hand.

‘Thanks, Your Grace,’ said Sacha, smiling at the bespectacled young woman, who turned pink with pleasure at what was evidently a standing joke, and responded with, ‘You’re welcome, My Lord. Shall I get—?’

‘What are you drinking?’ Sacha asked Strike.

‘Coffee, if there is any,’ said the detective, and Grace bustled to fetch it.

‘You’ve done bloody well for yourself since we last met,’ said Sacha heartily.

‘As have you,’ said Strike, with an effort.

‘Ha,’ said Sacha, with a self-deprecating smile, ‘you’re only as good as your last review in this game.’

‘He can afford to say that,’ trilled Grace from the counter, ‘because he “owns the stage”, according to the *Independent*!’

‘“Owns the stage”,’ said Sacha, with a grin and a slight eye roll, as he sat back down. ‘What does that even *mean*?’

Strike had often thought Sacha more natural onstage than off. When the cameras were on, or the curtain went up, Sacha perfectly aped genuine human emotion. Offstage he always had a slight air of performing himself, and Strike was currently being given a private performance of *Talented Actor, Resting*.

‘So, you’re Lord Legard these days,’ said Strike.

‘Oh, Christ, no,’ said Sacha, with a laugh. ‘No, I’m like Dad, I don’t use the title. It’s so bloody outdated, all that.’

But you let underlings know, for joking purposes. Prick.

Approaching the theatre, Strike had wondered whether Sacha would mention Charlotte, whether he’d press Strike’s hand in condolence or reuse his *Romeo and Juliet* quotation, all of which Strike would have found thoroughly objectionable, but the total absence of comment stuck in his craw even more. He supposed he should have realised that Sacha would prefer no mention of the past and, perversely, this made Strike determined to make allusion to it when the opportunity arose.

Grace set a coffee in front of Strike, who thanked her. She left the bar.

‘So,’ said Sacha, ‘you want to talk about Rupe?’

‘That’s right,’ said Strike, taking out his notebook.

‘OK, well, I should probably tell you straight off the bat, I’m not going to be much help. I was shooting in Mexico when all this business with him and Dessie happened – I barely know her, actually – so, honestly, you probably know more than I do about it all. But obviously, I want to help,’ said Sacha earnestly. ‘Anything I can do.’

‘You barely know Decima?’

‘’Fraid so. I’ve only ever met her a handful of times – just through

Valentine, you know. I mean, I've eaten at the Happy Carrot. She's a really gifted chef. It's a shame, what's happening to the restaurant, I hear it's in trouble. She's taken a leave of absence or something, hasn't she?'

Strike suspected he was being invited to acknowledge that his client was having some kind of emotional crisis. When he didn't speak, Sacha went on, 'Yeah, so I'm afraid I'm out of the loop with the whole thing, because I went straight from filming *Conquest* into rehearsals for this.'

Strike had no idea what *Conquest* was – film, TV series, aftershave commercial – and cared even less, so he merely asked, 'Rupert's your first cousin, right?'

'That's right, yeah, Dad's sister's boy. Poor little sod. You know what happened? The avalanche, et cetera?'

'Yeah, Decima told me.'

'Bloody awful thing. I was only twelve when it happened. I can still remember bawling my eyes out. My first experience of real grief.'

Strike having declined, by his silence, the tacit invitation to commiserate with the actor, Sacha continued, 'Yeah, so, Rupe was brought up in Switzerland by his paternal aunt. She kept a pretty tight grip on him while he was growing up. It was all Dad could do to get him over to Heberley every few years, and Rupe's a lot younger than me, so we never really, you know, hung out much when we were kids. Lovely guy, though,' said Sacha.

'He seems to have got himself into a lot of trouble, one way or another,' said Strike.

'Well, as I say, you probably know more about that than I do,' said Sacha, with a rueful expression.

'Did you know about the drug debt?'

'The – what, sorry?' said Sacha, and Strike recognised his reaction as one of obfuscation, rather than genuine confusion.

'Rupert was being threatened. His housemate stiffed a drug dealer who then turned his attention to Rupert.'

'Ah,' said Sacha.

'And Rupert ended up paying the guy a couple of grand to get him to back off.'

'Oh,' said Sacha. 'Right.'

'You didn't know he had a vengeful coke dealer after him?'

'I… no, I had no idea.'

‘Did he ask to borrow money from you?’

A faint pink flush had now suffused Sacha’s handsome face.

‘I don’t know that that’s any of your business.’

‘My whole business is asking questions that wouldn’t usually be any of my business.’

‘“Dirty work, but someone’s got to do it”?’

‘Wouldn’t claim I’ve got to,’ said Strike. ‘Just the line of work that best suits my abilities.’

‘Look, the person you really need to talk to is Rupe’s aunt, Anjelica. She’ll know the whole story.’

‘I’ve already talked to her. She wasn’t very complimentary about Rupert, nor very sympathetic to his predicament.’

‘Ah,’ said Sacha, with another rueful smile. ‘Well, I think she worries Rupe’s genetically predisposed to being a wastrel.’

‘Rupert’s parents were wastrels, were they?’

‘Not my aunt, but Peter Fleetwood wasn’t what you’d call one of the world’s hardest workers. Charming guy, but he mostly gambled and drank.’

‘Did you know about Rupert nicking this silver ship thing from Dino’s?’

A less experienced interviewer might have missed the tiny twitch at the corner of Sacha Legard’s mouth.

‘No. Again, you see, I was—’

‘Mexico, yeah. But you found out subsequently?’

‘Yes,’ said Sacha, and Strike detected a slight reluctance at having to admit to this concrete knowledge, minimal though it was.

‘When did you find that out?’

‘Er… it was on my birthday, as a matter of fact.’

‘Which is when?’ said Strike.

‘May the twenty-first.’

‘Did Rupert tell you what he’d done?’

‘No, I – well, to tell you the truth, I saw Rupe and Valentine having some kind of confrontation in a corner, at my party. We were at Claridge’s and, yeah, there was a slight scene. I hadn’t actually invited Rupe – it wasn’t a big party, he wouldn’t have known many people there – anyway, I looked round and there he was. Kind of crazy to gatecrash, all things considered; you’d think he’d have avoided any place where the Longcasters were.’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike, who was making rapid notes, ‘you would. Was Dino at your party?’

‘God, no,’ said Sacha, with a little laugh. ‘Dino never attends parties unless they’re held at his club. D’you know him?’

‘No,’ said Strike.

‘Quite a character,’ said Sacha.

‘Tara doesn’t mind you hanging out with her ex-husband?’

‘Oh, that’s all water under the bridge,’ said Sacha easily. ‘Ma doesn’t dictate who I see. No, with my party – I only invited Val and Cosima. She was in tears, actually.’

‘Who’s Cosima?’ asked Strike, though he already knew.

‘Decima and Valentine’s half-sister. Lovely girl.’

Strike seemed to remember that in Robin’s notes of her interview with Albie Simpson-White, Cosima Longcaster had been described as ‘a spoiled brat’.

‘Why was she in tears?’

‘I assume because Rupe was being aggressive, or offensive. I… to tell you the truth,’ said Sacha for the second time, lowering his voice, ‘I had to ask security to ask Rupe to leave. He seemed to have come looking for a fight. After he’d gone, I asked Val what it was all about, and he told me about this silver ship thing that had gone missing.’

‘Did he say why Rupert had turned up?’

‘I assume he was trying to get Val to call off the police, or something. Val was pretty pissed off about it all, as you can imagine.’

‘How was Valentine supposed to call off the police? The stolen property was his father’s, wasn’t it?’

‘I honestly don’t know details,’ said Sacha, with a slightly helpless gesture. ‘It was all news to me, I didn’t know what was going on – and as you can imagine, I had a lot of people to speak to and so on, that night, so I let it drop.’

‘Did you hear from Rupert after the party?’

‘No, the next thing I heard, he’d left for New York.’

‘How did you find that out?’

‘Anjelica emailed all the trustees, said he’d got himself a job there.’

‘Have you heard from him since he went to New York?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Sacha, brow slightly furrowed again. He leaned

forwards, lowered his voice still further, and said, ‘Listen – can I speak honestly? I think… look, I don’t like saying this, but honestly, I really do think Dessie’s – you know – a bit deluded. Val thinks it would be better for her – *kinder*, at this point – for her to be helped to face facts.’

‘Which are?’

‘Come on, Corm,’ said Sacha, smiling, and Strike resented hearing the abbreviation of his name used by his friends, and by Charlotte, when she wasn’t calling him ‘Bluey’, ‘Dessie’s a lot older than Rupe. I hate saying this, but I think Rupe just wised up and wanted out. Dessie’s lovely, she’s great, but I think Rupe probably fell into this thing with her while he was working at Dino’s, and she’s made it into some *grand amour* in her head. He’s twenty-six. He doesn’t want to be tied down at his age.’

Conveniently forgetting that he’d told Robin that Decima wasn’t the kind of thirty-eight-year-old he could ‘see a twenty-six-year-old going for’, and that he’d asserted that Decima’s attraction for Rupert had been her money, Strike said, ‘They were together a year, weren’t they? Hardly a one-night stand.’

‘I don’t know, because—’

‘You were in Mexico, yeah. Have you got a number for Rupert in New York?’

‘No,’ said Sacha.

‘D’you know where he’s working?’

‘You’d have to ask Anjelica.’

‘I have. She refused to give me contact details.’

‘Well – with respect,’ said Sacha, ‘she’s not obliged to, is she?’

‘So you’ve never checked that he’s actually gone to New York?’

‘He’s a grown man, he doesn’t want me hounding him.’

‘So your position is: he’s gone to New York, he’s definitely alive—’

‘What d’you mean, “alive”?’ said Sacha, no longer smiling.

Perhaps the actor, like the detective himself, now felt as though a spectral Charlotte had drawn up a seat at the table, smiling. She’d always been stimulated by tension and the possibility of rows, and she’d loved seeing members of the family she claimed to hate, but from which she could never quite pull free, clashing with the boyfriend who was impressed by neither their wealth nor their breeding. Rupert Fleetwood, towards whom Strike had felt very little sympathy until this point, seemed suddenly

to have become her surrogate: a young man towards whom his blood relations seemed indifferent at best, who'd slipped out of sight, occasioning exasperation rather than concern. The night that Charlotte had so nearly been killed by a London bus felt as though it had occurred mere days previously as Strike said, 'Don't really know how much more simply to put it. "Not dead", if you prefer.'

'Why the hell would he be dead?'

'He'd lost his job, he was broke, he had a drug dealer threatening him, the police were after him, he'd just had a ruptured love affair, no family to speak of—'

'He's got family,' said Sacha.

'I don't mean any criticism,' said Strike, 'but my information is that he doesn't get on with the aunt and uncle in Switzerland, which leaves you, and by your own admission—'

'D'you think I wouldn't have done something, if I thought Rupe had genuinely gone missing?'

No, you fucker, I don't.

Strike could almost see Charlotte's wide smile. Now starting to take a vindictive pleasure in this interview, he said, 'Where exactly did it come from, this nef thing?'

'From Dino's club.'

'I mean: was it originally Fleetwood property, or Legard?'

'How's that relevant?'

'Well, where did Rupert think he was going to offload it?'

There was a pause. Strike watched Sacha's pale face colour.

'You aren't *seriously* suggesting…?'

'Not suggesting anything,' said Strike dishonestly. He didn't for a second believe Rupert had stolen the nef on Sacha's orders, so that it might henceforth grace the sideboard in Heberley House, but he enjoyed hinting that Sacha, so eel-like in his ability to wriggle free of responsibility and culpability, might yet be drawn into the story of the stolen nef and the drug dealer, by police or press. 'It was a Fleetwood relic, then, was it?'

'No,' said Sacha, after another fractional pause, 'it was ours. I mean, Dad's sister's.'

'Ah,' said Strike, making a further note. 'Well, I doubt Rupert would have taken it abroad. He needed cash. He'll have wanted to sell it. Have you

had any press enquiries at all?' he asked, the idea suggested by his own recent troubles.

'What about?'

'Plenty there to keep the tabloids excited, "famous actor's cousin pursued by coke dealer, does flit with ancestral treasure"—'

'No,' said Sacha, 'nobody – no, there's been no interest.'

Strike raised his eyebrows to indicate surprise, enjoying the discomfort now apparent in Sacha's expression.

'You're a member of Dino's, right?' Strike said. 'You were the one who suggested Rupert went and worked there?'

'Yes,' said Sacha.

'Any idea why Rupert's aunt thinks Dino Longcaster's a "ghastly man"?'

'Plenty of people think Dino's a ghastly man,' said Sacha, forcing a smile. 'Didn't you ever hear my mama on the subject?'

'I did, yeah. Is Tara in contact with Rupert?' asked Strike, who didn't doubt the answer was 'no', because he could think of little Tara would be less interested in, than an impecunious nephew by a previous marriage.

'No,' said Sacha, goaded at last into a display of weak temper, 'and I'd advise—'

He stopped short, but Strike, whose sole aim now was to needle the actor as much as he could before Sacha terminated the interview, said, 'You'd advise me not to contact your mother?'

'Yes, I would.'

'Drying out somewhere again, is she?' asked Strike, so politely that it was a few seconds before Sacha seemed to register the sense of his words, at which his colour mounted higher.

'I'd advise you not to contact her,' he said, now looking tense, 'for reasons I'd have thought would be obvious.'

'Charlotte, you mean,' said Strike.

The name had been spoken at last, and of the two men facing each other across the wooden table, Strike was by far the more at ease, and not only because he was the one who'd shattered the taboo. The detective was considerably larger than the actor, unafraid of adding another fracture to his already bent nose, and in any case quite keen on the idea of hitting someone, whereas he was certain that Sacha, though angry, was currently

wishing a panic button had been installed somewhere in the cast's bar.

'The sight of me would drag up unbearable memories of her beloved dead daughter, you think?' said Strike. 'That was the wording in her press statement, wasn't it? "Our beloved Charlotte"?'

'I'm afraid I need to get going,' said Sacha, who looked rather paler than he had when Strike had entered the bar.

Strike could tell the actor had hoped Strike would get up to leave on these words, and therefore took great pleasure in remaining exactly where he was.

It is the great misfortune of the coward that he sees danger everywhere, and of the snob that he perpetually underestimates those he considers his inferiors. Thus Cormoran Strike knew that Sacha Legard, who was both snob and coward, was placing no rational reliance upon the self-control of the common ex-soldier sitting opposite him.

'Corm, I don't want a row.'

But you're getting one, you fucking shitweasel.

'Going to make a hell of a splash in the papers, two of your relatives topping themselves within months of each other. Where should I send pictures of Rupert's body, when I find it? Via your agent?'

'Are you threatening me?' said Sacha, in a half-whisper.

'Asking a simple question.'

'I've got no reason to suppose Rupert's – that he's hurt himself.'

'Nobody's seen him for six months. Social media's inactive. No phone calls. Drug lord after him. Family insisting he's in America but obstructing anyone who wants to contact him.'

'Why not go all in and suggest one of us murdered him?' said Sacha, with a poor attempt at a scornful laugh.

'Struggling to see a motive, unless you really wanted that nef back at Heberley House and didn't want to pay him for it,' said Strike.

'I've been told Rupert's in New York,' said Sacha. 'I can only tell you what I've been told.'

'I'd run that line past your PR people before using it at the inquest,' said Strike.

'Are you – is that what this is?' said Sacha, who appeared to have scraped up a mote of weak courage from somewhere. Perhaps he was counting on the barman to come to his aid, should Strike dive across the

table and seize him by the throat. ‘You want revenge, or something? Charlotte was ill for years—’

‘Oh, you noticed, did you?’

‘So it *is* revenge?’ said Sacha, now white about the mouth and eyes. ‘Charlotte had the best psychiatrists, the best care the family could give her. You don’t know—’

‘*I* don’t fucking know? *I* don’t?’

‘You couldn’t even turn up to her funeral!’

‘I had a different fucking fashion show to go to that day.’

Strike got to his feet and saw, with pleasure, Sacha shrink slightly in his seat.

‘I’ve been hired to do a job,’ said Strike. ‘If it so happens that I have to testify in court that you’re a self-centred cunt who isn’t arsed when his desperate relatives go missing, trust me, I’ll be owning the fucking stage myself. Have a nice Christmas.’

37

But wherefore be harsh on a single case?
After how many modes, this Christmas-Eve,
Does the selfsame weary thing take place?
The same endeavour to make you believe,
And with much the same effect, no more:
Each method abundantly convincing,
As I say, to those convinced before…

Robert Browning
Christmas-Eve

'… well, if he did, it's criminal,' Murphy was saying.

Robin paused on the stairs. She'd slept until half past nine, which she hadn't done for months, and had woken to find her boyfriend gone from the bed. Judging by the quietness of the house, Robin guessed that one or both of Annabel's parents had taken her out for a trip to the shops or the park. Robin had been halfway downstairs to the kitchen when she'd heard Murphy talking, and something in his tone made her pause between walls on which family photographs were displayed, listening.

'Has she talked to you about it?' said Linda.

'No,' said Murphy, 'and I haven't brought it up. She gets ratty.'

'I don't think she can bear to admit he's not perfect, in case we all tell her she should get a different job, but it's not as though there aren't other places she could work. But this is a whole other level, this is really… really *grubby.* Has he got a girlfriend currently, do you know?'

'Yeah, some lawyer, apparently,' said Murphy.

'I wonder what *she* said when she saw it.'

'Christ knows,' said Murphy. 'He probably told her it was rubbish. What

else could he say?'

'It said in the *Telegraph* he was going to sue.'

Robin's heart was thumping uncomfortably fast, but she told herself to remain calm. It would be playing right into her mother's hands, and, indeed, Murphy's, to become overly emotional. She tiptoed down the last few stairs.

'She hasn't mentioned court action to me.'

'Well, if he isn't suing—'

'Talking about Strike and Candy?' said Robin, entering the kitchen, forcing herself to sound brisk rather than incensed.

Murphy looked startled and guilty. Linda had frozen in the act of drying a dinner plate. The puppy, Betty, gambolled towards Robin, barking a welcome. Robin bent automatically to pet her, but she was looking at her boyfriend as she did it.

'I left you to sleep because I thought you needed it,' said Murphy, who was wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt, and holding his water bottle. 'I was going to go for a run.'

'Well, don't let me stop you,' said Robin, in a tone that said *I'll deal with you later.*

Not entirely to her surprise, Murphy headed for the back door, looking sheepish. When it had closed behind him, Robin said to her mother, 'If you're interested in Strike, it's probably best to ask me for details rather than Ryan. I'm the one who works with him.'

The *Telegraph* was lying on the kitchen table, which exacerbated Robin's bad temper. Possibly her mother had been skimming it to check whether there were any more unpleasant stories about Strike she could discuss with Murphy, while Robin was out of earshot.

'I was only—' began Linda.

'I know what you were "only",' said Robin, heading for the coffee pot with Betty lolloping around her slippered feet. 'So ask away.'

'I just saw the story about that – that woman, and – well, people round here know you work with him, so they asked me about it.'

'OK, well, here's your chance to get a full bulletin for the neighbours,' said Robin.

'Robin, don't be like—'

'If you want to talk about me behind my back—'

‘We weren’t talking about *you*—’

‘“She gets ratty.” “She can’t bear to think he’s not perfect.”’

‘We were—’

‘Our agency found out the wife of that journalist is having an affair,’ said Robin. ‘That was the journalist’s revenge, claiming we hired a sex worker to entrap a man.’

‘He didn’t say *all* of you had done it,’ said Linda.

‘None of us did it,’ said Robin forcefully, now turning to glare at her mother. ‘*None* of us.’

‘OK, well, if you say it’s not true, it’s not true,’ said Linda. She still had the dinner plate and tea towel in her hands, but was doing nothing with them.

‘And Strike *is* suing,’ said Robin, out of sheer temper. ‘So be sure and keep an eye out for the retraction, so you can alert the neighbours when it comes in.’

‘Robin—’

‘If you want to bitch about my partner, do it to my face, not my boyfriend’s,’ said Robin, whose temper was increasing rather than diminishing as she vented it; she hadn’t realised how much anger she had stored up (because she was the easy child, the placator, the one primed not to make a fuss, amid three rambunctious brothers). ‘I’m sick and tired of this constant chipping away at Strike, and the agency. Maybe if this didn’t happen every single bloody time I see you, I’d want to come home more often!’

She knew how much she’d hurt her mother by Linda’s involuntary gasp, but didn’t care. Robin was thinking of the aftermath of the operation she’d gone through alone, rather than endure Linda’s insistence that her heavy work schedule had led to the mistake; of the week she’d spent with her parents after her long undercover job, during which Linda had increased rather than soothed her anxiety; of the countless jibes about the dangers she ran, whereas Jenny, the pregnant vet, got off with ‘we were worried’, not with a loud insistence that she should give up the career she loved, and for which she’d worked so hard.

‘Strike doesn’t need to try and intimidate sex workers into screwing him,’ Robin said, on a roll now. ‘Seeing as you’re so interested, you should know he does bloody well for himself with women, he doesn’t need to hire

them. I seem to remember you liking him, and telling me he's "got something about him", before you decided he's the Devil incarnate – and given his background, he doesn't need *Ryan* to tell him it's criminal to try and coerce women into sex by withholding payment.'

'Robin—'

'Just say it to my face! *Say* you don't like him, *say* you'd rather I'd stayed the girl I was after I got raped!'

'You can't – how can you say that to me?' whispered Linda.

'Easily. I'm where I belong, where I was always meant to be. It just took me longer to get there, because of what happened, but you'd rather I had a kind of half-life, you'd rather—'

'I wouldn't rather you were still with Matthew,' said Linda. 'We never liked him. I was glad when you called off the wedding, I never wanted to say it, but I was, we always thought he was wrong for you—'

'Pity you're not as smart when it comes to what's right for me,' said Robin.

'Robin—'

'*I'm not still in that bloody stairwell*,' said Robin, her voice becoming louder, 'but you make me feel like I never left it, the way you treat me!'

She'd overfilled her mug with black coffee, which had spilled over the sides. Betty, who hadn't liked the raised voices, had skittered away and was now worrying a rubber bone in the corner. Robin knew she'd hurt Linda worse than she'd ever done before, even in her teens, when a certain amount of door slamming and mutual recrimination had of course taken place. She and her mother had been close, once; but for the last four years, ever since Robin had received the injury that had left an eight-inch scar on her forearm, a gulf had been steadily widening between mother and daughter. Robin was infuriated and insulted by Linda's constant, implicit suggestion that her daughter was a malleable fool who did whatever her business partner wanted, without agency, without sense; her mother had no idea how often Strike had urged caution on his best female operative, how little he wanted to see her hurt.

'You haven't got children,' said Linda in a low voice.

'Thanks for pointing that out,' said Robin. 'I was worried I'd left them somewhere.'

'You don't know what it's like, to worry yourself sick about your

daughter—’

‘*You* don’t know what it’s like to have *my* worries,’ said Robin, thinking of the icy ultrasound wand on her stomach, and the rubber gorilla hidden in her sock drawer in London, and MI5 being angry at the agency for investigating, and DCI Malcolm Truman and his masonic lodge. ‘So we’re even.’

She’d just tipped some of her brimming cup of coffee into the sink when she heard the front door open and her father, Stephen and Annabel entered the kitchen, all pink-faced, cheerful and talkative. Linda hastily wiped her eyes on the tea towel as Michael Ellacott set a bulging bag of shopping on the table.

‘Auntie Bobbin,’ said Annabel, trotting over to Robin to show her a stick. ‘I’ve got Stick Man.’

‘We’re in a big Stick Man phase,’ Stephen informed his sister.

‘Lovely,’ Robin said to Annabel, who was big for her age, brunette, like her mother, but with her father’s dimples. ‘You need to look after him.’

‘Or a dog will take him,’ said Annabel, nodding gravely.

‘Jenny still asleep?’ Stephen asked Linda.

‘Yes, and so’s Jonathan,’ said Linda, her voice artificially cheerful as she resumed her drying and putting away of crockery. ‘I don’t know what *his* excuse is.’

Robin sat down at the kitchen table and pulled the abandoned *Telegraph* towards her while the others clattered around her, Linda opening and closing cupboards, Michael putting away groceries, Stephen unbuttoning Annabel’s coat and fetching her a drink. After staring mindlessly at an article on the United Nations Security Council without taking in a word, Robin turned the page.

Lord Oliver Branfoot was pictured, scruffy and bull-like, beaming in black tie beside a very tall man, and a large blonde woman in evening dress. The caption read, ‘Branfoot Trust Recommends Reintroduction of Borstals’.

‘Have you been hearing the Martin saga?’ said a voice near Robin, and she started.

‘What?’

‘Mum been filling you in on Martin?’ asked Stephen.

‘No,’ said Robin, getting to her feet, coffee in one hand, paper in the

other. ‘Sorry, it’ll have to wait. I’ve got to call Strike.’

38

What were the wise man's plan?—
Through this sharp, toil-set life,
To work as best he can,
And win what's won by strife.

Matthew Arnold
Empedocles on Etna

Though technically on Christmas leave, Strike was sitting at the partners' desk. To spare himself another trip upstairs he'd brought down the holdall he'd packed for his brief stay at Lucy's, plus two carrier bags full of Christmas presents for the family, comprising the pastel-coloured scarf he'd chosen for Lucy in Liberty's, a bottle of gin for Greg, gift tokens for his eldest and youngest nephews and, for Jack, his favourite, a survival kit Strike would have loved himself when young. Among other things, the khaki rucksack contained water purifying tablets, a compass, emergency food rations, camouflage make-up, an elaborate penknife and a couple of safety light sticks. The last of these had reminded Strike of the tube-shaped object that had fallen from William Wright's pocket on the night he'd shared a takeaway and cannabis with Mandy and Daz, and which Wright had claimed was a blood sample. What the hell that had really been, Strike still had no idea.

Pat was now on Christmas leave, but she'd propped another handwritten card against the aquarium.

DON'T FEED, THERE'S A TIME RELEASE BLOCK OF FOOD IN HERE, WILL LAST A WEEK.

The subcontractors were on various jobs, which left Strike alone and free to do a bit of research he preferred to do in privacy: trying to identify the woman who'd shoved the cipher note through their office door. This meant trawling through stills advertising porn films, and he didn't fancy being discovered with an erection, nor did he much relish the idea of explaining to the accountant why he was charging porn to the business account, which was why he was trying not to pay for anything.

Starting on the premise that the blonde might have worked with Dangerous Dick de Lion, if she knew or feared he'd been murdered, Strike was working his way steadily through de Lion's oeuvre, which included such titles as *Twelve Horny Men* and *The Ass House*. The man had done 'crossover', meaning he worked in both straight and gay porn, so Strike was currently squinting at various naked or scantily dressed women in an attempt to identify the woman he'd seen only once. He was staring at a brunette being penetrated both anally and orally when his mobile rang.

'Hi,' said Robin. 'Sorry to call on Christmas Eve.'

'No problem,' said Strike, shutting down the window on his computer as though she could see what he was doing, and hoping his hard-on would subside enough to concentrate. 'What's up?'

'I don't suppose you've seen today's *Telegraph*?'

'No,' said Strike, with an ominous feeling that, if nothing else, was helping to subdue his erection. 'There's not another—?'

'No,' said Robin, 'nothing about you, but there's a picture of Lord Oliver Branfoot in it, and Strike, he's standing beside the customer we saw in Ramsay Silver. That tall man who had one eye looking up at the ceiling.'

Sitting on her bed, still in her pyjamas, Robin waited for Strike's response. After a few seconds, he said,

'Shit.'

'Kenneth Ramsay said your name in front of him, remember? Not mine, though.'

'Who is he, the customer?' said Strike.

'Sir Victor Lambert,' said Robin, reading it from the newspaper. 'He sits on the Branfoot Trust and I've just looked him up; he's a banker. But *he* can't have ordered Wright's murder, can he? He'd hardly have gone shopping at Ramsay Silver afterwards.'

'That'd seem unwise,' agreed Strike.

‘So…’ said Robin, unwilling to put into words what she was thinking; if she’d worried that connecting Sofia Medina with the murder of Wright might sound far-fetched, this, surely, was a hundred times more so.

‘You think Lambert mentioned to his mate Branfoot that I’ve been nosing around at Ramsay Silver,’ said Strike, ‘and Branfoot, who ordered the hit on Wright, panicked and started gunning for us?’

‘Well… I know it’s a stretch,’ said Robin, ‘but you can’t say it doesn’t fit. Shanker said “you were seen”, and we knew all along that could only have been Ramsay Silver or St George’s Avenue. I know Branfoot’s a real rent-a-quote, but why’s he suddenly so interested in the private detective business? Why’s he out to get us? And he’s on the telly, which fits the cipher note, too.’

Robin heard someone coming upstairs. Right now she’d be delighted for Murphy to find her on the phone to Strike; indeed, she might ask him to leave the bedroom until they’d finished the call. However, the footsteps moved on past her bedroom door, and she reflected that Murphy would probably make sure his run was a long one, after the scene in the kitchen.

‘Well,’ said Strike at last, ‘there’s no reason, just because a man’s a raging self-publicist, he can’t also be a crook. Look at Jeffrey Archer. Look at Savile.’

He got to his feet and, once again, stood contemplating the corkboard on the office wall, where the four present candidates for William Wright were pinned, eyes on Dick de Lion, with his fake tan, his peroxided hair and his very white teeth.

‘Might be worth finding out which way Branfoot swings, sexually speaking.’

‘He’s married,’ said Robin, who’d done some speedy Googling before calling Strike. ‘To a woman. She’s here in this picture in the *Telegraph*, with Branfoot and Lambert. They’ve got two sons.’

‘Strong motive, if he’s been doing the dirty with de Lion, and doesn’t want the family and the papers to know,’ said Strike. ‘Still doesn’t explain why de Lion would have gone to work at Ramsay Silver, but… yeah, I think we’ll need to take a closer look at Branfoot. I might call Fergus Robertson again, see what he can tell me,’ said Strike, turning away from the board to write a reminder to himself in the notebook open on the desk. ‘We’ve had another threatening phone call, by the way.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Yeah. “Leave it or gow-too will get you.”’

‘What’s “gow-too”?’

‘Exactly what I asked him. He hung up.’

‘Is it a name?’

‘Not one I’ve ever heard of. Anyway, be on the watch for him, or it, or them. I also spoke to Sacha Legard.’

‘Really?’ said Robin, with a slight inward tremor. ‘How did that go?’

‘Pretty informative,’ said Strike, and he described the interview, leaving out some of the more aggressive things he’d said to Legard, and concluding, ‘so one of us needs to speak to Valentine Longcaster, and if he’s not willing, we’ll see whether his sister Cosima can explain what Fleetwood was doing, gatecrashing an A-list party where he wasn’t wanted, to talk to the family he’d nicked a large bit of silver from. I’ve looked Cosima up. Remember Legs?’ he said, in reference to a teenage girl the agency had watched for a while, because her mother believed her to be having an affair with her own ex-boyfriend.

‘Yes,’ said Robin, who’d tailed the filly-like blonde teenager on a few occasions.

‘Well, she looks just like her. You might have to do that interview, if it comes to it. She’s only eighteen; I’ll probably be accused of more sexual harassment if I go anywhere near her.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Robin.

‘And there’s something else,’ said Strike. ‘Last night, I sent Shah to watch the entrance of Freemasons’ Hall. Guess who turned up for his six-thirty lodge meeting, apron bag in hand?’

‘DCI Malcolm Truman?’ said Robin, with a sinking feeling.

‘Right in one,’ said Strike. ‘Shah got some covert snaps.’

‘Interesting,’ Robin forced herself to say.

‘How’s things in Masham?’ Strike asked, moving to the window and staring down into Denmark Street, where last-minute panic buyers were wending their way in and out of the music shops.

‘Lousy. I’ve just had a blazing row with my mother.’

‘Ah,’ said Strike, thinking it was a shame it couldn’t have been Murphy as he watched an ageing hippy below, hurrying along with a ukulele under one arm and a stack of vinyl records under the other. ‘Well, it’s the season

for it.’

‘When are you off to Lucy’s?’

‘Trying to leave it as late as possible,’ said Strike. ‘Aiming to arrive at the party halfway through, pleading pressure of work.’

‘If I have to suffer, so should you,’ said Robin. ‘Go early and help prepare the food or something. Earn some Brownie points.’

‘That reminds me,’ said Strike. ‘Thanks for my present.’

‘You’ve opened it already?’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike. ‘I wasn’t going to do it in front of Greg.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because he’s a cunt,’ said Strike, who thought this reason enough. Robin’s gift had been a monthly delivery of Cornish food and beer; he’d been touched by it, and was glad to have opened it without the necessity of explanations, or hearing comments about either his waistline or the woman who seemed to know him so well.

He didn’t really want the call to end, but couldn’t think of any reason to prolong it, so when Robin said, ‘I suppose I’d better go,’ he agreed that he should, too, wished her a good Christmas and hung up.

He’d just settled back at his desk, feeling marginally better for his chat with Robin, when the landline phone rang in the outer office. There was no longer any danger that it was Charlotte, who’d often called on special occasions and holidays, especially when drunk, but he was on high alert for journalists, who might be seeking to extend the Candy story into a Yuletide serial, so he got up and moved to Pat’s desk, switched on the speaker and let voicemail play. Once Pat’s gravelly voice had finished saying that the office was closed for Christmas there was a click, and a manic-sounding woman’s voice with a strong Scottish accent spoke.

‘Aye, Ah need help, he give me a bit, but there’s more, he told me, it’s all hid under the bridge but Ah need help tae get it, so come tae the Golden Fleece, ask for me there, Ah’ve gottae keep movin’, Ah’ve got people after me, Ah’m nae kiddin’, come tae the Golden Fleece.’

The message ended, leaving Strike staring at the phone in total bemusement.

39

And as yon tapers dwindle, and strange thoughts
Grow, with a certain humming in my ears,
About the life before I lived this life…

Robert Browning
The Bishop Orders His Tomb at
Saint Praxed's Church

Robin had the inevitable row with Murphy quietly, in their room, once he'd returned from his run. Now showered, and wearing a sweater Jenny had bought her, which Robin had thought it tactful to bring home for Christmas, she told her boyfriend exactly what she thought of him talking to Linda behind her back, and demanded why, if he had questions about the Candy story, he couldn't have asked them of her.

'You know why,' Murphy said, also keeping his voice low. He'd been apologetic at first, flushed and sweaty after his run, but in the face of Robin's anger had become increasingly irate himself. 'Because you won't hear a bloody word against Strike and the last time I mentioned I'd seen him in the paper, I got the silent treatment.'

'I've told you *multiple times* Strike can be an annoying sod,' said Robin, who was sure she must have done. She'd thought it often enough.

'You must've said it when I had headphones on,' retorted Murphy. 'You always keep as quiet about him to me as you do me to him.'

'What are you talking about?'

'"I'm on my way to look at another house."'

'What?'

'That's what you said to Strike, when we were on the way to see the house in Wood Green. "I'm on my way to look at another house."'

‘Well, we *were* on the way to see a h—’

‘Yeah. *We* were.’

‘I d—’

‘*We* were,’ said Murphy, no longer keeping his voice down. ‘You and me. “*We*.”’

‘Lunch!’ called Jonathan up the stairs.

As might have been expected, the atmosphere around the kitchen table hummed with undercurrents as the family consumed a large pasta bake. Linda was unusually quiet, but fortunately Annabel’s artless chatter filled the spaces where Robin’s conversation with her mother and boyfriend might have been, and Betty provided a distraction by producing a large turd right beside the Aga.

As Linda was taking an apple crumble out of the Aga, Robin’s third brother, Martin, banged on the back door. Like his father, Martin had dark hair and eyes, though he had neither Michael Ellacott’s sweetness of nature, nor his conscientious approach to work.

‘Isn’t Carmen with you?’ said Linda anxiously.

‘Coming later,’ said Martin, his expression sullen.

Robin spent most of the afternoon with Jenny and Annabel in the sitting room, while all male members of the family, plus Murphy, were talking football in the kitchen. Annabel was playing nurse with a rag doll, who’d apparently fallen out of a tree and broken all her bones, and while Robin helped wrap the doll in a lot of toilet roll and gave her medicine out of a plastic cup, Jenny told Robin the history of Martin and Carmen to date, which already included three break-ups and reconciliations.

‘Your mum’s worried sick,’ Jenny whispered.

‘When’s Carmen due?’ asked Robin, who’d never met the woman, but knew she’d fallen pregnant after only three months of dating Martin.

‘February,’ said Jenny quietly. ‘I’d like to put it all down to her hormones, but they’re so *alike*.’

‘Oh God,’ said Robin.

Martin’s employment history was patchy and his boredom threshold very low. What he enjoyed most was drinking and betting; money had always slipped through his fingers like water, and Robin’s previous suggestion that fatherhood ‘might be the making of him’ had been offered more in hope than expectation.

‘Anyone want a cup of tea?’ said Murphy, appearing in the doorway of the sitting room.

Remembering how she’d so recently refused coffee made by Kim, Robin said, ‘Yes, please, I’d love one. Thanks, Ryan,’ and she saw, as she’d intended, a slight softening of Murphy’s stony expression.

It was decided by six o’clock that evening that the four Ellacott siblings and Murphy, though not Jenny, because she was so tired, would go for a drink at the Bay Horse, the local the brothers and sister had frequented growing up. Robin was glad to get out of her mother’s vicinity, because the latter was wearing an air of martyrdom that was deepening rather than alleviating her daughter’s ire. Robin was also craving alcohol, which she thought might put her in a better festive spirit than she could achieve at home.

A very old Nissan Micra pulled up in the chilly darkness just as they were leaving the house, and from the fact that Martin immediately jogged across the street towards it, Robin assumed it was being driven by his girlfriend.

‘Better keep going,’ muttered Jonathan, ‘just in case they’re about to go off on one.’

‘Is it that bad?’ Robin asked, as she and Jonathan fell into step behind Stephen and Murphy, who were roaring with laughter at some joke Robin had missed.

‘It’s non-stop. She’s rough as hell.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘Tattoos, drinks like a fish and every other word’s “fucking”. You can imagine how that goes down with Mum.’

Given her current feelings about Linda, Robin found herself more than ready to give Carmen the benefit of the doubt.

It was only as they entered the road where the Bay Horse lay that Robin, for the first time in her life, wondered why it was called Silver Street. Thoughts of masonic centrepieces, mauls and set squares filled her thoughts again as they joined the throng inside the pub where she’d had her first legal drink and, later, celebrated her A-level results, little realising how short her university career would be, and why. The pub had three sections, two either side of the main door and a room at the back, and, as was predictable on Christmas Eve, it was packed. When Murphy bellowed that

he'd get the first round in, Robin asked for whisky. The last three times she'd drunk it had been with Strike. On all three occasions she'd needed the sharp, immediate relief of spirits, firstly, because he'd just given her a nosebleed and two black eyes, secondly, because she'd made what she'd feared would be a catastrophic mistake in a case, and lastly, because she'd been interviewed under caution.

The Scotch had its usual welcome effect as she gulped it down, burning her throat, starting to relax the hard, tight knot in her chest. It was easier, now, to reach out and to clasp Murphy's hand, and he returned the pressure, then bent to kiss her on the mouth, and they smiled at each other, and Robin thought, *he is lovely, really*, and, still holding hands, they stood beneath the Christmas streamers, and Robin waved at a couple of schoolfriends who'd never left Masham, and was relieved when they didn't come to speak to her.

'Robin,' bellowed Martin in Robin's ear, 'this is Carmen.'

Robin turned to see a woman taller than herself, with the sides of her head shaved and the rest of her hair dyed a vibrant tomato red and tied back in a pony tail. She was wearing a leather jacket over a clinging vest dress, and the skin above her breasts was a solid mass of tattoos: the wreck of a galleon at sunset, with mermaids on rocks. Her pregnant belly seemed not, quite, to be part of her, the rest was so skinny.

'Hi,' shouted Robin, as Slade began to sing 'Merry Xmas Everybody' over the speakers. 'Lovely to meet you.'

'And you,' Carmen shouted back.

'No, I'll get this round,' Robin said loudly to Jonathan, when she saw him fumbling for his wallet. 'Carmen, what would you like?'

She expected the woman, seven months pregnant as she was, to say fruit juice, but Carmen said, 'Double vodka on the rocks, please.' Robin released Murphy's hand to go to the bar.

Yet another pregnant woman was standing in line at the bar; she was blonde, with a bob, and her face was somehow puffy yet drawn, just like Jenny's, back at the house. The woman glanced at Robin as the latter drew alongside her, and only then, with a shock of surprise, did Robin recognise Sarah Shadlock, her ex-husband's old university friend, mistress and, now, second wife.

'Hi, Sarah,' said Robin automatically.

Sarah mumbled, 'Hi', and moved into the empty space left by a man

who'd moved away from the bar, clutching four pints in his huge farmer's hands.

'Lemme help,' said Murphy in Robin's ear, and when she turned, smiling, he kissed her on the mouth again. She might have thought he was as tipsy as the men singing along with Slade in the corner, he looked so happy that their row was over, and she saw Sarah glance back at them, before placing her drinks order.

In the warm, fuzzy glow engendered by Robin's second double whisky, she thought she might seek a reconciliation with Linda early the next day, before everyone else was up. Carmen and Martin were bellowing into each other's ears, and it was hard to tell whether they were exchanging endearments or insults, but they'd probably work it all out in the end, Robin thought, before asking Stephen, whose round it was, for a third whisky. He and Murphy were getting on particularly well; laughing at another joke Robin hadn't heard, but wasn't this what Christmas was supposed to be about? She felt a blanket goodwill towards everyone right now, and what was needed was more whisky, to keep this going, and when Stephen thrust her third double Scotch into her hand, she said, 'I love you, Button,' and he laughed at her, and said, 'You're pissed, Bobbin,' which was his old childhood nickname for her, as Button was hers for him.

And then, through a gap in the crowd, Robin spotted her ex-husband sitting at a table in the corner. Her eyes might have slid right past him, had Sarah not been there: he'd put on weight, and looked grey around the eyes. As Robin looked away again, 'Not Tonight Santa' began to play and, with an unpleasant inner shudder, she remembered the year the song had come out: she'd been twenty-one, and the man sitting in the far corner of this familiar pub, who'd later proved himself duplicitous, intensely materialistic, coercive and unfaithful, had been her one guarantee that men who wanted sex with you weren't all monsters. That had been in the aftermath of that shattering rape, which, unbeknownst to her, had left an infection inside her that would quietly eat away her ability to do what Sarah, Jenny and Carmen had done so easily, and conceive a child the natural way, whereby no men with monobrows, armed with statistics and censorious lectures, need involve themselves at all.

'Are you Robin Ellacott?'

'What?' said Robin stupidly, to the girl who'd asked the question. She

was a stranger, baby-faced, wearing a dress that looked like a skimpy nightgown and false eyelashes so thick they resembled the furry caterpillars Robin and Stephen had caught and tried, unsuccessfully, to raise in bowls full of lettuce, when they were children.

'Are you Robin Ellacott?' repeated the young woman.

No stocking this morning

But that don't make me blue…

'Yes,' said Robin.

'How can you, like, work with him, if he does stuff like that?'

'What?' said Robin loudly.

'Like' – the girl stood on tiptoes to shout into Robin's ear – 'how can you be with someone, if he forces girls to have sex with him?'

'I don't know what—'

On a slight delay, Robin realised what the girl was talking about.

'It didn't happen,' she shouted.

'What?'

'*It – didn't – happen!* You shouldn't believe everything you read!'

She watched the girl turn and relay her response to two friends, who were also wearing scanty clothes with very thick make-up. They probably went to the same school Robin had attended, too long ago to have been there at the same time. Robin turned her back on them, gulping down more whisky, and saw Martin and Carmen, now unmistakeably arguing, over by the wall where beer barrel lids were displayed. Robin looked away; she didn't want to see it, or worry about it, tonight. Murphy had been absorbed into a group of men Stephen knew, but here was Jonathan, thank God, holding out another double whisky.

'Thanks, Jon,' she said, and there ensued another shouted conversation with her youngest brother, which she was fairly certain was about his work, because she'd caught the words 'challenge' and 'difficult', and she'd noticed earlier, at the house, how he assumed a portentous tone when talking about his first real job.

'Great,' she said, at random, and Jonathan said, 'What d'you mean, great?'

'I don't know,' said Robin, confused. She hadn't eaten much pasta at lunch, because of the atmosphere, and she'd now consumed around a third of a bottle of neat whisky.

‘I said,’ yelled Jonathan in her ear, ‘*she’s got cancer.*’

‘Shit, who has?’ said Robin, alarmed.

‘My boss,’ yelled Jonathan.

‘Oh,’ said Robin, trying not to look too relieved that it was nobody she knew. ‘That’s terrible!’

‘I know,’ said Jonathan, and he kept talking, but Robin could only make out one syllable in four, and the three young girls with caterpillar-ed eyes, who hadn’t succeeded in attracting any male attention, were instead very obviously talking about that dreadful older woman, who worked with a notorious pervert, but pretended he wasn’t one. Robin wondered if they’d read about her rape online, or whether her past history had trickled down into local lore, without her realising it.

‘Just going to get a bit of fresh air,’ Robin shouted at Jonathan.

‘What?’

‘I’ll be back in a bit,’ she shouted, even louder, and Jonathan, doubtless assuming she was heading for the bathroom, turned away, so he didn’t see her making her way towards the exit, with the dregs of her whisky in her hand.

It was very cold out on Silver Street, but Robin was grateful to be out of the crowd. She leaned back against the whitewashed wall of the pub, thinking that this would sober her up, and then she’d go back inside. She tossed back the last of her fourth whisky, then, through force of habit, drew her phone out of her pocket to see whether Strike had texted her, but of course he hadn’t, because he was at Lucy’s party. It was Christmas. There was no work to be done.

Her good mood had vanished; she ought to have stopped at two whiskies, or have eaten more at lunch. Her breath rose in a cloud on the wintry air as she looked right, towards Chapman Lane, and then, with a funny inward start, she thought what a coincidence *that* was; strange, how you took things for granted when they were familiar, and didn’t question them, and it took distance to make you look back, and wonder why, and how, and whether it was all chance, or there was meaning there…

Strike would laugh at her, for that… mystic mumbo jumbo…

She had to make it up with her mother, especially now that she’d seen Martin and Carmen together…

Linda.

Rita Linda.

Asked if we knew ’er.

Rita Linda.

’E knew what ’appened to ’er.

Ritalin-da.

Robin raised her phone to eye level and typed in ‘Rita Linda’.

Linda Rita Clay was a hairdresser in Nantwich. Rita Linde was a German composer. Linda Mae Ritter lived in Detroit and had seven children, including a set of triplets.

Robin tried different spellings. Reeta Linder. Reena Lynda. Reata Lindar.

Did you mean Reata Lindvall?

‘All right, Rob?’

Robin looked round. Her ex-husband was standing there, a packet of Marlboro Lights in his hand. He’d smoked occasionally as a student, but never afterwards, at least while they were together.

‘Hi,’ said Robin.

He lit up.

‘Working?’ he said, with a half-smile.

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Huh,’ said Matthew.

They stood in silence for a while. The church where they’d got married, where Strike had gatecrashed the ceremony, knocking over one of the flower arrangements, was barely five minutes’ walk away from where they stood.

‘Who’s the Paul Newman lookalike?’

‘What? Oh – Ryan? He’s a CID officer.’

‘Ah,’ said Matthew, nodding as he blew out smoke. ‘I always thought you’d end up with Strike.’

‘You hid that well,’ said Robin sarcastically. Matthew laughed.

‘How long you home for?’

‘Until the twenty-ninth.’

‘We’re here till New Year.’

When Robin didn’t respond, he added,

‘Takes it out of you, coming back.’

Robin, who didn’t see why it should take anything out of Matthew,

turned her attention back to her phone – *Did you mean Reata Lindvall?* – but Matthew was talking again.

‘No kids yet, then?’

‘Nine,’ said Robin, trying to read about Reata Lindvall on her phone, but her vision was unaccountably blurred, ‘but I had them all adopted.’

He laughed again.

‘Not a bad idea. I’m going to be up all hours again, soon. Bloody nappies and—’

‘There you are.’

Sarah’s voice was icy. She was holding two coats. Robin looked at her, but the woman who’d slept with Robin’s husband in their bedroom in Deptford, and left a diamond earring in the sheets for Robin to find, no longer wanted to look back.

‘I was just having a fag,’ said Matthew, throwing the cigarette away.

‘I’m tired,’ said Sarah, pushing her husband’s coat at him.

‘OK,’ he said. ‘See you,’ he said to Robin.

‘Bye,’ said Robin.

The Cunliffes walked away. Deciding that the effort to focus on her phone’s screen was too onerous in her present condition, Robin took a deep lungful of night air, then headed back into the pub.

40

Ale, man, ale's the stuff to drink
For fellows whom it hurts to think:
Look into the pewter pot
To see the world as the world's not.
And faith, 'tis pleasant till 'tis past:
The mischief is that 'twill not last.

A. E. Housman
LXII, A Shropshire Lad

Strike arrived at Lucy's party in Bromley at half past nine. His objective had been to miss as much of the party as he could without being rude, and above all to avoid the painful early stage of every such gathering, where the crowd is sparse, small talk particularly laboured, and the choice of company so limited that you risked being trapped with a bore who'd then stick to you all evening.

However, he was later than he'd meant to be, because he'd lost track of time while trying to identify the blonde he believed had put the cipher note through the agency's door. Frustratingly, immediately before he'd realised he was late, and been forced to set out for Bromley with a bag of presents and an overnight bag in the boot of his BMW, he'd found her.

Her professional name was Fyola Fay, and she'd featured with de Lion in *I Know Who You Did Last Summer* and *Done Girl*. Had Strike not promised to attend this bloody party he'd have been able to remain sitting at the partners' desk in the office, working his way systematically through OnlyFans, Flickr, ModelHub and any of the other myriad places where a woman could make additional money selling nudes or camcorder footage online, looking for clues to Fay's real name and ways of contacting her.

Instead, he was trudging towards Lucy's front door, passing the bare magnolia bush in the front garden, carrying his bags of clumsily wrapped presents and preparing, after an afternoon of staring at breasts, huge penises and orifices, both male and female, to fake an interest in other people's jobs, houses and children.

He'd expected Lucy to be annoyed that he was late, but when his youngest nephew, Adam, opened the front door, Strike's sister, who was further down the hall and wearing a pair of flashing antlers with her party dress, cried 'Stick!' and hurried past the women she'd been talking to, to hug him, and it occurred to him, with a slight stirring of guilt, that she was happy and relieved that he'd turned up at all. 'I Wish It Could Be Christmas Everyday' was pounding out of speakers in the sitting room. Resolving to behave as well as possible, Strike climbed the stairs to deposit his bags in the spare room, greeted his favourite nephew, Jack, who was in his own bedroom playing some kind of shoot-'em-up game on his PlayStation with three other boys of around the same age, then returned to the crowded ground floor, which was full of adults wearing Christmas sweaters and party dresses, and several small children Strike did his best not to step on or knock over as he made his way to the kitchen where, he assumed, there would be food and beer.

'Here he is!' said Greg, his brother-in-law, falsely enthusiastic.

Greg was standing with three other men, who raised their cans of lager simultaneously to their mouths as though they'd been practising the movement, all of them eyeing Strike with that brand of defiance certain men display upon coming face to face with a male who might in any way be considered their superior, whether in terms of size, fitness or worldly success.

'We meet again!' said a female voice behind Strike, and, turning, he saw a woman he had no memory of ever meeting: dark, overweight, greasy-skinned, wearing a kind of knee-length silver kaftan that made him think of Bacofoil, and angel earrings that flashed, like Lucy's antlers. 'Marguerite,' she said, her face falling, when Strike's expression remained blank. 'We met here, at your birthday dinner, a few years ago. You brought your girlfriend, Nina.'

'Oh, yeah,' said Strike, now placing her: Lucy had invited Marguerite to meet her brother, not realising he was going to turn up with another woman.

‘How’re you?’

‘Great,’ she said. ‘Is Nina here?’

‘No,’ said Strike.

‘Easy come, easy go for you with women, isn’t it, Corm?’ said Greg, in the aggressively jocular tone he often employed towards his brother-in-law. Marguerite’s expression brightened.

‘Just getting a beer,’ Strike told her, because he’d spotted a stack of six-packs of lager on a distant work surface, and he forced a path through the crowd around the central table piled with food, causing a small ripple of muttering and turned heads. In his current pessimistic mood, he suspected this was due to the Candy story rather than any appreciation of his detective triumphs, and was careful not to meet anyone’s eyes, reaching the lager with a sense of achieving safe harbour.

As he yanked off a ring pull, his phone buzzed in his pocket. Hoping it was a text from Robin, he pulled out the mobile, but saw a message from Kim instead.

Plug’s left his son in the house with the old lady and buggered off to Carnival Street again, with a bunch of planks and chicken wire in the back of his van.

Well, what d’you want me to do about it? thought Strike irritably. He had a feeling Kim simply wanted an excuse to get in touch, a hunch strengthened by the fact that a second text came in almost immediately.

Hope you’re having a fun Christmas Eve x

Strike put his phone back in his pocket without answering, and looked up to find the group around Greg, which had now absorbed Marguerite, watching him. Strike didn’t have the slightest wish to join them: the men had the look of those who could wring a lengthy conversation out of the best service stations on the M1, or their most recent round of golf. Marguerite’s expression was simply hungry.

Strike’s phone buzzed again.

‘Sorry,’ he muttered, to nobody in particular. He took out his phone

again and, purely to get away from those gazing at him, let himself out of the back door onto the decking that Greg had built himself, facing the chilly lawn.

Expecting Kim's name again, he was surprised to see a text from Jade Semple and, judging by her spelling, she appeared to be trying, far more successfully than he was, to drown her Christmas Eve sorrows in alcohol.

I dont t hink bNiall was thagt body it was just the naeme William Wrihgt maed me thinkn it might have been

Strike typed back:

Did Niall have some connection with that name?

Somebody tapped on the window behind Strike. He turned and saw his eldest and least favourite nephew, Luke, whose objective in banging on the glass appeared to have been simply to make his uncle show his face to his two smirking teenage companions, as though Strike were some aquarium fish. Scowling, the detective turned his back on the window again, and saw that Jade had texted him again.

Kind of but I was just panicking g I dobn't think it was hijm

'Stick, what are you doing out here?'

Lucy had come out onto the decking, shivering in her thin party dress.

'Sorry,' said Strike again, hastily stuffing his phone back in his pocket. 'Work. One of my subcontractors has been punched in the face.'

It was true-ish: Shah had almost had his nose broken a couple of jobs previously.

'Oh, that's awful,' said Lucy. 'How—?'

'Let's go back inside,' said Strike, feeling guilty again. 'Introduce me to your friends.'

For the next hour he drank lager and made loud, empty conversation with various parents of children at Lucy's kids' schools. Some wanted to

quiz him about his detective career, others wanted to tell him how lovely his sister was; a few, who were already drunk, seemed unable to place him from the school run, and were confused as to why anyone who didn't take their children to the local school should be present. The exception was a sozzled, skinny woman, who was wearing a baggy dress that was probably the height of fashion, but which Strike thought looked like a postal sack: she insisted very loudly that she knew Strike 'from taekwondo', and that his son, Fingal, was very talented and shouldn't be allowed to give it up. In the end he agreed with her, and promised to preach perseverance to Fingal, upon which she hugged him and he discovered that she stank of BO.

Five minutes later, while fetching yet another lager, he was cornered by a man whose shallow forehead and long, pointed nose gave him the look of a whippet. Strike assumed he was some species of insurance agent, because he wanted to know how Strike indemnified his business against professional mistakes that led to wrongful arrests or injuries. When Strike said, truthfully, that his agency had never made a professional mistake that had resulted in a wrongful arrest or an injury, or at least, not an injury to an investigative subject (Robin might have had a case against him, if she'd ever chosen to pursue it) the whippet-faced man seemed annoyed.

'But *say* it happened—'

'Can't see how it would,' said Strike.

For the last twenty minutes, he'd been aware of the large silver mass that was Marguerite circling, like some large and unpredictable asteroid, and seeing that his interlocutor was determined to thrash the point out, Strike announced baldly, 'need the bog', and left him standing there.

There was, inevitably, a queue for the upstairs bathroom. Strike joined it with reluctance, because the woman in the sack-like dress who thought he had a son called Fingal was also waiting, so he pulled out his phone again to discourage conversation. He wanted to re-read Jade Semple's texts, but instead saw a new message from Kim.

Working, and I'd need to know you a LOT better to send nudes.

Fuck's sake. Was he about to be sent another 'oops, sorry, didn't mean to

send that to you’ text, or a nude picture? What Kim Cochran didn’t realise was, Strike had played these kinds of games at a far more sophisticated level, with a Grand Master, for sixteen years; this really was minor league attempted seduction.

An obese man in a reindeer-patterned sweater had just left the bathroom; the woman who smelled of BO staggered into it instead. As Strike moved along to stand beside the closed door, another text from Jade Semple arrived.

a woman took money out on Nialls card after that body was found

Strike was still contemplating this message when the bathroom door opened.

‘*I didn’t make the smell,*’ shouted the woman in the baggy dress, balancing herself with the door jamb, clearly very drunk. ‘That was him, before!’

Everyone but Strike laughed. The woman staggered out of his way and he entered the bathroom. She wasn’t wrong about the smell; Strike opened the bathroom window before taking a long piss. He’d have liked to barricade himself in here for the rest of the party, as long as the stench cleared, so that he could concentrate on Jade Semple. Even as it was, he thought he could chance a few minutes of peaceful seclusion, so he sent her a text reading:

If Niall had a connection to the name ‘William Wright’ I’d very much like to talk to you in person.

He waited a few minutes, but she didn’t answer, so, relishing the temporary release from small talk, he sat down on the closed toilet seat, and Googled: ‘Fyola Fay porn star real name’. Just as the search results arrived, someone pounded on the bathroom door.

‘*Quickly, please, he’s going to throw up!*’

Strike unlocked the door, and flattened himself against the wall as a red-headed boy of around six, green of face and being half-carried, half-dragged

along by his mother, gave a great heave and vomited copiously a foot short of the toilet, splattering Strike's shoes, trouser bottoms and the fluffy white splash mat around the base of the sink.

'He's lactose intolerant,' said the harassed mother. 'He went and ate a whole load of cheese straws – *didn't you, Hector?*' she said angrily, thrusting the boy's head down into the toilet as he heaved again.

Strike didn't consider himself a particularly squeamish man, but vomit was by far his least favourite bodily fluid; he also happened to rate personal cleanliness highly on his list of virtues, so being unable to mop the chunks of what looked like curried baked bean off himself was particularly irksome.

He headed back downstairs, but had to pause halfway, because of the bottleneck of leavers just inside the front door. Marguerite was lurking in the hall below like a basking shark, and he saw, even though not looking directly at her, the upward tilt of her face as she gazed at him. The battery on one of her flashing earrings was dead.

Her attention was luckily claimed by whippet face just as Strike reached the hall, so he managed to evade her on the way back to the kitchen, where he hoped to effect a cleaning job with the aid of wet kitchen roll. As he passed Greg, he said,

'Think you should know, your bathroom's just been the scene of a major environmental incident.'

'Why, what've you done?'

'I haven't done anything. A kid called Hector ate some cheese straws.'

He might have added that one of Greg's pals had also done a shit that radiated like nuclear waste, but the culprit was standing two feet away, perfectly unconcerned and shovelling down cocktail sausages.

'*Fuck's* sake,' said Greg, and he pushed his way out of the kitchen.

'Excuse me,' said the drunk woman in the baggy dress from behind him; Strike smelled her before seeing her. She put her hands around his waist from behind, as though to bodily shift him, but then she slipped on a patch of spilled liquid on the floor, and as he instinctively grabbed her to stop her falling, his phone slid from his hand.

'You're a *good man*,' she said indistinctly, and he held her rigidly away from him as she regained her balance, because he didn't want to be hugged again.

Marguerite had picked up his phone.

‘Oh my God,’ she gasped, half-laughing.

He glimpsed what she was staring at: a close-up picture of Fyola Fay, with her mouth clamped around a huge black penis. Strike snatched it out of her hands; no doubt the story would spread around Lucy’s social circle that he’d been having a wank in the bathroom during her Christmas party, and unable to think of any explanation that wouldn’t sound impossibly lame, he shoved his phone back in his pocket and headed, stony-faced, towards the sink, where he did his best to clean off Hector’s vomit. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the solid mass of silver approaching.

Do not fucking tell me you like porn.

‘It’s all right,’ she said in an arch whisper. ‘I don’t gossip. Women can like porn too, you know.’

‘Excuse me,’ he said, and once again, he let himself out into the back garden, his wet trouser leg chilly on his real ankle.

Why the hell had he given up smoking? As he walked down the steps from the wooden decking onto the lawn, intent on dissolving into the darkness where he could have peace for a few minutes, his phone buzzed yet again. If he’d been sent an ‘accidental’ nude from fucking Kim he was about to have a few blunt words with her, but when he dragged his mobile out of his pocket, he saw, with a lightening of the heart, a message from Robin. Then he read it:

idy~#=eeid

Butt dial, obviously. However, he responded:

Cipher? If so, send key.

41

Creep into thy narrow bed,
Creep, and let no more be said!
Vain thy onset! all stands fast.
Thou thyself must break at last.

Matthew Arnold
The Last Word

Everything had gone badly wrong at the Bay Horse. It was closing time, and Robin was now extremely drunk (‘we’ll sort ourselves out for food’, the departing pub-goers had told Linda, but nobody had consumed any food at the pub, and Robin had ill-advisedly drunk even more neat whisky since meeting Matthew outside).

She’d returned from the bathroom to see Martin and Carmen still arguing, and then Jonathan, who’d met two old footballing friends at the bar, had wanted her to carry pints back from the bar to Stephen and Murphy. Murphy had looked odd as he passed her the phone she’d left lying on the table and she saw she’d received a text, but she didn’t read it, because she was concentrating on not spilling the pints in her hand, and as she’d handed Murphy the glass, she’d said, ‘Is that non-alcoholic?’, thinking he’d be able to tell which beer was which by smelling them, but suddenly, out of nowhere, had come the same, sudden outburst of rage he’d displayed on the night of their worst row.

‘The fuck’s *that* supposed to mean?’

She saw Stephen’s look of shock as Murphy turned his back. Robin tried to answer, but her mouth appeared to be wadded with invisible cotton wool.

‘I din’ – I jus’—’

Her vision had become a constantly sticking film. So much whisky. So

many pregnant women. Matthew. Sarah. ‘Not Tonight Santa’.

And then it was closing time. It was a relief to get back out into the cold night air again, although Robin’s surroundings were still behaving like a flick book; Silver Street, and the sky, and her companions, appeared in a jerky set of still images. Murphy was walking ahead with Jonathan, and she wasn’t sure where Martin and Carmen had gone. So much whisky…

‘What did he bite your head off for?’ said Stephen, in a low voice.

‘Nutt – nothing,’ said Robin. ‘Just a – he thought I meant – accusin’ him… I’m very drunk, Button…’

Stephen put his arm around her. Her older brother, who was the land manager of a large estate twenty miles from Masham, was the biggest of the Ellacott brothers, nearly as big as Strike, but this didn’t feel anything like Strike holding her up at the Ritz, on the night when he’d nearly kissed her. *Don’t think about that.*

The stars were moving jerkily as well, and you’d think stars, at least, would stay still… they said, if you were seasick, you should stare at the horizon, but she couldn’t see the horizon, only hazy street lights, and Murphy’s hunched, angry back…

Then they were home, with the empty kitchen smelling of whatever Linda, Jenny and Annabel had eaten for dinner. Betty, woken inside her dog crate, began whining and whimpering to be let out. Murphy proceeded wordlessly upstairs. Jonathan called a cheery good night and Robin managed to make a reciprocal noise through the invisible cotton wadding in her mouth, and it seemed to her that it might be a good idea to visit the downstairs bathroom.

‘You all right, Bobbin?’

‘Yeah’m fine, g’ t’ bed, Button…’

Unlike the small boy down in Bromley she didn’t know existed, Robin managed to reach the toilet bowl before vomiting. A cruel, remorseless, giant hand squeezed her innards repeatedly; finally, utterly spent, trembling and doused in sweat, she lay on the hard tiled floor, weak and tired, and thinking what a terrible mess she’d made of Christmas Eve. After what might have been ten minutes or half an hour, when the small, dark room was no longer spinning, she got gingerly to her feet.

She re-entered the kitchen as Martin and Carmen came in through the back door, both of them clearly the worse for drink.

‘Who’s in my room?’ Martin demanded, and Robin had to struggle to remember.

‘Annabel,’ she said.

Martin and Carmen had been expected to stay in their own flat tonight, which was only a twenty-minute drive away.

‘Fuck,’ said Martin angrily, as though this was Robin’s fault, and she almost felt as though it was, and she nearly offered them her room, before remembering that Murphy was in there. ‘We’ll have to sleep in the fucking sitting room,’ said Martin, and he strode off in that direction.

‘You look nearly as fucked up as I feel,’ said Carmen, peering at Robin, who tried to smile at her before heading upstairs.

She opened her bedroom door very quietly, hoping Murphy would already be asleep, but of course, he wasn’t. Lying on his back, bare-chested, illuminated by his bedside lamp, he watched her, stony-faced, as she closed the door quietly behind her.

‘Puke, did you?’

‘Yes,’ said Robin.

‘But *I’m* the one who’s drinking.’

‘Ryan, I thought you’d be able to tell which pint was which by the smell of them,’ said Robin, standing just inside the door, not wanting to get too close to him before she could brush her teeth. ‘That’s all. I wasn’t accusing you of drinking real pints.’

She was very conscious of trying to enunciate clearly, because the whisky wasn’t quite out of her system. When Murphy didn’t respond, Robin moved towards the bedroom chair, on which lay her pyjamas.

‘Can’t let even Christmas Eve go without sneaking off to text him,’ he said suddenly.

‘What?’ said Robin, disconcerted, standing up with her pyjamas in her hands.

‘Strike. What you were doing, when you went outside.’

‘I haven’t texted Strike.’

‘Liar,’ he said, and the word clanged through the room like a dropped skillet.

‘I haven’t texted Strike,’ she repeated. ‘Not since we got here.’

‘Liar,’ he said again. ‘You left your phone behind when you went to the bathroom. He texted you back, I saw it.’

Robin felt in her pockets, pulled out her phone and stared down at Strike's incomprehensible message, which only made sense once she saw what she'd accidentally sent him, probably after abandoning her attempt to read about Reata Lindvall.

'Ryan, it was a butt dial. Look.'

She walked over to the bed and held out her phone. He took it and read the two messages.

'Oh,' he said.

Robin took back her phone. She wasn't yet sober, and she really wanted to cry, but instead, she went to fetch her dressing gown, prior to leaving for the bathroom. As she reached for the door handle, Murphy said,

'Why did you get so drunk tonight?'

'Because I rowed with Mum,' said Robin, her throat constricting, 'and then I rowed with you… and everyone's bloody pregnant.'

He raised himself a little on the pillows, incredibly handsome in the half-light. (*Who's the Paul Newman lookalike?*)

'Robin, I'm sorry,' he said in a low voice. 'Come here.'

'Not now,' she said, fighting tears. 'I need to wash and clean my teeth, I'm disgusting.'

'You're never disgusting.'

'Let me get clean,' she said, and then she ducked down to her almost empty holdall, groped for Strike's present, which lay hidden beneath her slippers, stood up with the box concealed by her robe, and left the room.

The house was silent. Robin shut herself in the bathroom and locked the door. She'd have liked to shower, but she feared waking Annabel, so she stripped off and washed, put on her pyjamas and cleaned her teeth for twice as long as usual, until no taste of whisky remained. Her head had begun to throb, but at least the floor remained steady beneath her feet, and the walls stationary.

Having pulled on her robe, she sat down on the edge of the bath and picked up Strike's present, which was covered in blue paper patterned with small gold stars. She could tell he'd wrapped it himself, because it was lumpy. He'd used too much Sellotape. He was awful at wrapping presents.

But when she tore off the paper, she saw what was unmistakeably a jeweller's box, made of thick pale blue card. Slowly, as though the contents might explode, she took off the lid.

A thick silver chain bracelet, from which hung seven charms, lay on a bed of black foam, and Robin recognised the middle charm immediately: it was the masonic orb she'd admired in Ramsay Silver. She stared, transfixed, unaware that her mouth was open. Then she lifted the bracelet out of its box, and amazed as she was, she could follow Strike's thought process perfectly. He'd gone back for the orb, and someone, maybe Kenneth Ramsay, had tried to sell him more charms – make it a bracelet! – and that had given him the idea, but he hadn't been content to buy a job lot from Ramsay; instead, he'd painstakingly built this, and it was like Strike, in that it was a bit clunky and inelegant, the charms mis-matched, but there was so much thought in every one of them: private jokes and shared memories, incommunicable to anyone but the two of them.

A silver Land Rover, representing the car which perhaps only Strike would miss as much as she did; the Houses of Parliament, where she'd worked undercover and planted a bug every bit as legally suspect as the one for which Mitch Patterson had been arrested (she'd never told Murphy that); a miniature enamelled shield bearing the coat of arms for Skegness, where they'd once eaten chips together, and joked about donkey rides, and interviewed the key witness in a thirty-year-old murder case; a silver sheep (*'What does your dad do for a living? You've never told me.' 'He's a professor of sheep medicine, production and reproduction… why's that funny?'*); a tiny pair of silver scales (*'That's Libra, it's my sign, I used to have a keyring with that on it.' 'Yeah, well, I'm team rational.'*); a silver and enamel robin, the newest and brightest charm of them all, for her name, and, perhaps, for Christmas; and in the middle of them all, what she didn't doubt had been the most expensive of the lot, barring the chain itself: the little silver orb, with its ornate catch which, when released, unfurled into the jointed masonic cross, and she'd raised it close to her eyes to examine the symbols inscribed inside before she realised she couldn't see, because of the tears now pouring down her cheeks.

What did you do that for? she thought, and she slid off the side of the bath onto the floor and sobbed quietly into her knees, two patches of tears spreading on her pyjama bottoms, the bracelet clutched in her hand.

It took Robin several long minutes to regain control of herself, and then she examined each charm again, twice over, thinking that nothing else anyone gave her today (because it must now be Christmas Day) could

possibly mean as much to her; not diamonds, not a new Land Rover: nothing. She knew how much hard work Cormoran Strike would have put into this, he who found present-giving an onerous chore, who found it inexplicable that anyone would remember what anyone liked, or wore, but he'd remembered all of this, and he wanted her to know he remembered it, and *oh God, I love him*, thought Robin, and then another voice in her head said sternly,

No, you don't.

I do, I do…

You're still drunk.

Wiping her eyes on the hem of her robe, Robin reached out for her phone. She didn't care if she woke him, didn't care if he wondered what she was doing awake and texting him, in the early hours of Christmas Day, when she ought to be in bed with her boyfriend.

Thank you. I love it so much xxxxx

And two hundred and fifty miles away in his sister's spare room in Bromley, sleepless, suffering heartburn and gas after too much lager, and grumpy after what was probably the worst party he'd ever attended, Cormoran Strike heard his mobile vibrate and reached for it in the dark. Looking down at Robin's text, Christmas, and the unusual opportunities it afforded you, if you were prepared, at last, to put in the work, suddenly seemed a wonderful thing.

I'm glad, he typed, and then, slowly, painstakingly, he added a kiss for every one of hers.

PART FOUR

And all putting in and getting nothing out results in stressful times, in business ventures as in the case of individuals. The great shafts sank deeper and deeper, the galleries branched out far under the sea, and there was a constant call for more and more money, lest that already sunk should be lost.

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

42

In every man's career are certain points
Whereon he dares not be indifferent;
The world detects him clearly, if he dare,
As baffled at the game, and losing life…
Thus, he should wed the woman he loves most
Or needs most, whatsoe'er the love or need…

Robert Browning
Bishop Blougram's Apology

Strike spent New Year's Eve on surveillance in the Stapleton Tavern in Haringey, watching Plug drink in the new year with a group of equally rough-looking friends. He used the time productively. He and Jade Semple had been in intermittent text contact ever since Lucy's party, and they continued to text backwards and forwards tonight. She was very obviously drunk again. Although she continued to insist that she no longer believed her husband had been the body in the vault, her readiness to keep communicating with Strike suggested a lurking doubt. Strike hoped he might, through sheer persistence, be on the verge of securing a face-to-face interview with her.

He was determined not to pass up the chance of securing an evening alone with Robin in a decent restaurant, hundreds of miles away from Murphy or any other fucker who wanted to interrupt. Of course, if he declared himself and Robin shot him down, the rest of the round trip would be singularly uncomfortable, but there'd always be reasons not to risk it. If the worst happened, he'd simply have to deal with it. He'd accommodated the loss of half a leg, after all.

His partner's Christmas Day response to his foray into truly imaginative

gift-giving had given Strike hope. She must have understood what he was implicitly telling her when she examined those silver charms, all of them freighted with memories and private jokes, mustn't she? Didn't opening his present in the early hours of Christmas Day indicate an unusual eagerness to know what he'd given her? The five kisses that had followed her thank you, the use of the word 'love' – admittedly followed by 'it' rather than 'you' – could this be the behaviour of a woman trying to keep a man firmly at arm's length? And where had Murphy been, while Robin was typing in all those 'x's? Was it too much to hope for that they'd had an argument?

Such ruminations enabled Strike to endure the long, unproductive hours watching Plug with good grace. However, on arrival back in cold, deserted Denmark Street at three a.m., his pleasant musings were rudely interrupted.

A large, still wet letter 'G' had been painted in scarlet on the street door of the office. Strike stood contemplating it for a full minute, dismissing within seconds the possibility that he was looking at the tag of some drunken graffiti artist. No other door in Denmark Street had been so decorated, and it seemed far too much of a coincidence that anyone should have randomly slapped up the one letter of the alphabet that had recently acquired an ominous double meaning for the agency on the upper floors.

Was he supposed to take this 'G' to symbolise the letter emblazoned in the middle of the square and compasses of Freemasonry's most identifiable sign? Had it been chosen because an eye of providence or an acacia tree would have required more artistry? Or was this a message for Robin, who'd been Witness G in the trial of her rapist and would-be killer?

Inwardly cursing the necessity, Strike hauled himself upstairs to his attic flat, dug out cleaning materials, and returned to the street to remove the letter, though, having no white spirit, he was able only to render what had been there illegible, leaving a large red smear. The door would definitely need repainting before the landlord next saw it.

It was four before Strike finally removed his prosthesis, wondering whether he should tell Robin what had happened. He didn't want to drag up her rape again. Was this, perhaps, an obvious case of least said, soonest mended?

Only as he connected his mobile to its charging lead did he notice that he'd received a voicemail message at some point overnight, and play it.

''S is Valentine Longcaster,' said a slurred, upper-class voice, against a

background of clatter and chatter. ‘I’ve got all your fuckin’ messages. I’ve got nothing to fuckin’ say to you. Do’s all a favour an’ make your new year’s fucking resolution gassing yourself.’

Strike set his alarm, yawned and got into bed. Valentine’s response to the emails Strike had sent him wasn’t a surprise. Several times, when full of drink, cocaine or both, Valentine had informed rooms full of people that *this*, pointing at Charlotte, was his *favourite fucking person in the world*. It seemed that, unlike the determinedly oblivious Sacha, Valentine wasn’t prepared to pretend he’d forgotten the contents of Charlotte’s suicide note, in which she’d blamed Strike’s refusal to pick up the phone for the planned overdose, and the slitting of her wrists in her bath.

His phone buzzed. He picked it up to see a text from Jade Semple.

all rightg you can come on the q17hb ut don’t tell noone because they djnat woant me talking to you

Great, Strike texted back, with a shrewd idea who ‘they’, who didn’t want her to talk to him, might be. **See you on the seventeenth.**

He lay back down to sleep, thinking that the year had, after all, started on a positive note, and already planning strategic manoeuvres that had nothing whatsoever to do with the missing Niall Semple.

43

The stars have not dealt me the worst they can do:
My pleasures are plenty, my troubles are two.
But oh, my two troubles they reave me of rest,
The brains in my head and the heart in my breast.

A. E. Housman
XVII, Additional Poems

Several days after returning from Masham and having worked almost non-stop since, Robin still felt as she had done ever since she'd unwrapped Strike's bracelet: anxious and guilty. Her nervousness resembled the state in which a person waited for exam results, or the outcome of medical tests. When, from time to time, her unruly subconscious made suggestions as to what she might be anticipating, or dreading – she wasn't sure which – she quelled them as best she could.

Strike's bracelet was now hidden inside her only evening bag in her wardrobe, but it was hard to forget what she'd drunkenly thought on first examining it. Moreover, she knew that if another woman had shown her the bracelet, and explained the significance of the charms, she'd have responded, 'I think he might be trying to tell you he's in love with you.' What man would give a present so intimate, so full of meaning only two people could understand, without knowing how it might be interpreted?

Yet the gift had been given by Cormoran Strike, he who voluntarily lived in two rooms over his office, alone and self-sufficient. Yes, the recent references to Charlotte's suicide note might suggest a desire to open a conversation they'd only once before come close to having, while eating curry at the office, when Strike had told her she was his best friend, and she'd thought he might be about to say more, to acknowledge what both of

them, she remained convinced, had felt on the day they'd hugged at Robin's wedding, when she could have sworn he'd considered asking her to run away with him, and leave Matthew standing on the dancefloor…

But he hadn't spoken at the wedding, had he? Nor in the office, over whisky and curry. In the midst of her guilty deliberations about what might be going on inside Strike's head, Robin kept bumping back against the conclusion she'd reached in the bathroom of the Prince of Wales pub: that Strike, whether consciously or unconsciously, was playing some kind of game intended to weaken her ties to Murphy, lest she contemplate leaving the agency for a more settled existence.

The thing she'd thought, when sitting, drunk, on her parents' bathroom floor, felt like a betrayal of the man with whom she was now supposed to be setting up house. She loved Murphy, didn't she? She'd certainly told him so, and she thought – knew – she did. Barring his two recent cobra strikes of anger, one born of stress, one of jealousy, and both entwined with his own history of drinking and the failure of his marriage, they hardly ever argued. He was kind and intelligent, and she couldn't have asked more of him in the aftermath of the ectopic pregnancy. He'd never expressed an opinion on how much she earned, or complained about the old Land Rover, or what everyone else seemed to see as her rackety career. Their now-resumed sex life was far more enjoyable than the one Robin had had with Matthew, because Murphy seemed to actually care whether Robin was enjoying herself, whereas Matthew, she realised in retrospect, had mostly wanted applause. He was generous, too: she was currently wearing the opal earrings he'd bought her for Christmas, which matched the pendant her parents had given her for her thirtieth. Most importantly of all, Murphy was open and honest. He didn't play games, didn't lie, didn't compartmentalise his life so that Robin didn't really know where she stood.

So she owed him similar honesty and transparency, didn't she? Yet she was increasingly feeling as she supposed unfaithful spouses must do as their lies snowballed and they were kept in a constant state of alertness for the slip that might lead to discovery. If Murphy found out she and Strike were interviewing relatives of other possible William Wrights, he'd know they were investigating the body in the vault, not just trying to find the missing Rupert.

Almost worse: Strike had sent her an itinerary for their visit to Crieff

and Ironbridge. He'd booked two sleeper berths to Glasgow for the night of the sixteenth. They were then to pick up a hire car and drive to Crieff to interview the abandoned wife of Niall Semple, before continuing south to Ironbridge, where Tyler Powell's grandmother lived, breaking their journey overnight in the Lake District. Robin had Googled the Lake District hotel. It looked rather beautiful, with stunning views out over Windermere. She and Strike usually stayed in the cheapest possible accommodation when on investigative trips. Little ripples of nervous excitement kept hitting her at the thought of the place, and she was trying not to analyse them, because she was already burdened with so much guilt. She'd told Murphy the forthcoming three-day trip north was connected to 'the Fleetwood case'. Thankfully, being as busy as ever at work, Murphy hadn't asked for many details.

Robin's nagging feelings of guilt and confusion manifested themselves outwardly as an increased niceness and consideration to her boyfriend. Before they'd returned to London, she'd agreed to put in an offer on the second house they'd viewed, but she'd known all along that it wouldn't be accepted, and was unsurprised when they heard, at the end of the first week of January, that it had sold for nearly ten thousand pounds more than the most they could have afforded. Now Murphy was sending her the specs of other houses, and she was making half-promises to view them when she had time.

Meanwhile, she was policing and second-guessing every move she made where Strike was concerned. On the dark and dreary evening of New Year's Day, she arrived home after a stint of surveillance of Plug, who hadn't stirred since he got back from the pub in the small hours, and had barely pulled off her coat when Strike texted her.

Valentine Longcaster doesn't want to talk to us. Not a big surprise. He was Charlotte's biggest fan.

Sitting on her sofa, Robin felt again that thrill of – what? Panic? Excitement? – at the recurrence of Charlotte's name, but she was

determined to appear unflustered and professional, so she texted back:

Pity. I want to know why Rupert crashed Legard's birthday party. On the subject of trying to get people to talk, I've been wondering what you'd think of me trying an approach to Gretchen Schiff, Sofia Medina's flatmate?

Strike was slow at responding to this suggestion. After five minutes had passed, Robin thought he might have forgotten who Sofia Medina was, and added:

Sofia, the girl whose body was found on the North Wessex Downs. Pink top.

When there was still no answer, Robin took her phone with her into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. Strike's response came just as the kettle was boiling.

Sorry, thought Mrs TT was on the move, false alarm. I think trying to get Schiff to talk is a good idea. If Medina knew a bloke with dark curly hair who likes wearing sunglasses indoors, we've finally got something concrete.

OK, I'll message Schiff. I've found her Instagram.

Robin had a couple more things she wanted to tell Strike, one of which she felt awkward and embarrassed about, while the other might be completely irrelevant to the investigation. While she was wondering whether it mightn't be easier to broach both of them by text, rather than face to face, Strike texted again.

Newsflash: just heard from Barclay. I put him on Jim Todd this afternoon. Todd cleaned a café for two hours, then made a call from a public phone box and a pointless Tube journey.

How, pointless?

Just sat on the Circle line for an hour, going round, then got off where he got on. There's definitely something fishy about Todd. Can't find him in any records. Think he's using a fake name.

Robin now received a text from Murphy, who was at work. She saw the tell-tale link to rightmove.co.uk, and swiped it away without reading it, instead texting Strike again.

You think Todd's got a record?

Starting to think it's odds on.

Having read this message, Robin decided to mention the subject she found awkward. In the small amount of time she'd had over Christmas that hadn't been dedicated to fretting about her feelings for Strike, or his for her,

she'd also been worrying about what he expected her to do regarding porn actor Dangerous Dick de Lion, who, if the cipher note slipped through the office door was to be believed, had been the body in the silver vault. Robin texted:

I wanted to talk to you about Dick de Lion.

There was no immediate response, possibly because Mrs Two-Times was now genuinely on the move. Robin therefore opened Murphy's text and followed the link to the details of a house in Walthamstow. Unlike most of the two-bed-one-box-room terraced houses he'd sent her, it looked as though it was recently decorated and stood on the end of the terrace. Murphy's text read:

Only two bedrooms, though.

Exactly how many IVF babies are you hoping for? was Robin's immediate thought.

Her phone rang. Strike was calling instead of texting. Trying to ignore the lurch in her stomach, Robin answered.

'What about de Lion?' Strike asked.

'I – well, I'm not going to be able to pretend I'm casting a porn shoot, however much research I do. Sorry, but I'm just not going to be any good at it. If you think that's the only way to find out where he is, it'll have to be one of the others.'

She wondered whether Strike was thinking her prudish or inadequate. The truth was that Robin had a strong aversion to pornography. The rapist who'd wrecked her fallopian tubes had kept a stack of movies focusing on throttling and rape beneath the floorboards where he'd also hidden his gorilla mask.

'I didn't want to have to involve any of the others on de Lion,' said Strike.

'Well, then, shall we concentrate on finding out who the girl was, who posted the note through the door?'

'Shit, I forgot to tell you,' said Strike. 'I know who she is. Her

professional name's Fyola Fay, her real name's Fiona Freeman, and she lives in Wimbledon. I found a website dedicated to outing female porn stars. Real names, former or current professions, marital status, etc. No equivalent site for men, unfortunately.'

'There's a surprise,' said Robin darkly. 'Shall I try and talk to her?'

'We need to think that through,' said Strike. 'I don't doubt she'd be happier talking to you than me, but I've found out she lives with a porn director who looks like he lifts buses for weights and eats steroids for breakfast. A bit of covert surveillance on the house might be needed, so we make sure to catch her at home alone.

'By the way, we seem to have picked up another Gateshead. Crazy-sounding Scottish woman who's called twice now, asking me to meet her at the Golden Fleece.'

'Where's that?'

'Your guess is as good as mine,' said Strike. 'She sounds crazy enough to have mistaken me for Jason of the Argonauts.'

Robin laughed, then said,

'There was something else I was going to tell you, actually,' said Robin. 'I know it might not be relevant at all, but I Googled Rita Linda while I was home and got a search result I want you to look at. It's the only one I've found that would explain "it might be in the papers" and Wright "knowing what happened t—"'

'Shit, got to go, Mrs TT's active,' said Strike.

He hung up.

Robin scrolled through her recent photos to find a screenshot she'd saved of a paragraph about 'Reata Lindvall', the woman whose name she'd found online while too drunk to read, outside the Bay Horse, and texted it to Strike.

She made herself a cup of tea, grabbed some biscuits, sat down at her laptop and headed back to the abandoned Instagram page of Sapphire Neagle, the missing schoolgirl who'd left online messages for both Calvin Osgood, the real music producer, and Oz, his online impersonator. Robin was trying to identify the school Sapphire had briefly attended before her disappearance. One pretty black girl seemed to have become close to Sapphire during her weeks at the school, judging by the many selfies the two had taken together, but Robin hadn't yet managed to find the friend's

real name.

In spite of having something to occupy her mind and the matter-of-fact exchange of information she'd just had with her detective partner, Robin's underlying anxiety hadn't been assuaged. She still felt as though waiting for something to happen, something disruptive and cathartic, as a person feels in the change of air pressure the first intimations of a coming thunderstorm.

44

Not over-rich, you can't have everything,
But such a man as riches rub against,
Readily stick to,—one with a right to them
Born in the blood…

Robert Browning
Half-Rome

Unbeknownst to Robin, Strike, too, was having property-related problems. A good offer had been made on Ted and Joan's house in St Mawes, but Greg thought they should hold out for more. What business it was of Greg's, given that he didn't own the place, was a question Strike hadn't yet posed, in the interests of maintaining family harmony. He'd now endured two fraught phone calls on the subject with his sister. Both times, Strike had advocated accepting what was being offered. On the second occasion, Lucy had said distractedly, 'Greg said you'd – oh, I just don't know what to do.'

Strike didn't know what Greg had said he'd do, but he could guess. His brother-in-law had either told Lucy the detective didn't need the extra money Greg was hoping to squeeze out of the purchasers, or that Strike was too dim to realise there was extra money to be made. Strike knew Lucy's inclination to hold out for more money wasn't truly mercenary. In some confused way, she wanted to get the fullest possible value for what had meant so much to her, for so long.

It so happened that to Strike, too, that old house in St Mawes wasn't just a prime bit of real estate, but he thought the offer that had been made was more than fair. Cheerless though it was to think of other people living in Ted and Joan's house, was it really worth another few thousand pounds to scare off what sounded like a pleasant, local family, in favour of the second

homers who might be able to afford more? And Strike was vaguely surprised to find in himself this very Cornish point of view, of which his oldest friend, Dave Polworth, would have heartily approved.

Meanwhile, Decima Mullins had requested a face-to-face update on the thirteenth of January, when, she said, she needed to come to London in any case. Strike, who suspected this trip might concern her failing restaurant, agreed to the meeting and, only too aware how little fresh information he had to give her, decided he was now justified in contacting Rupert's ex-housemate, and the author of one of Fleetwood's most pressing troubles, Zacharias Lorimer. He therefore emailed the young man for a second time, making vague intimations about a police inquiry, and strongly hinting that it was in Lorimer's best interests to answer.

Shortly before one o'clock on a bitterly cold Friday, precisely one week before the proposed catch-up with Decima, Strike returned to Denmark Street to find Pat at her desk and the office otherwise deserted.

'You've had a message from a man in Kenya, Zacharias Lorimer,' she told Strike.

'Yeah? Saying what?'

'He can FaceTime you today at half past four. That's half past one our time. His number's by your keyboard.'

'Great,' said Strike, checking his watch and heading towards the kettle. 'Want a coffee?'

'Yeah, all right,' said Pat gruffly. 'And Dev was just in. He says Todd's been on the Circle Line again and you'll know what that means.'

'Right,' said Strike, 'thanks.'

'And I've found more Hussein Mohameds.'

'How many are we up to now?'

'A hundred and five.'

As Pat seemed in a reasonable mood, Strike indicated the fish tank.

'Did you feel sorry for the black one?' he asked, pointing at the faintly obscene fish with its knobbly head growth.

'That's an Oranda,' she croaked, removing her e-cigarette to do so. 'Fancy breed.'

'Ah,' said Strike.

'I call it Cormoran. Got hair like yours.'

'Hair?'

‘You know what I mean,’ said Pat.

Having made them both coffee, Strike headed into the inner office, holding the sandwich he’d bought en route. He’d had barely two mouthfuls when his mobile buzzed and he saw a text from Robin.

Update on Gretchen Schiff. I might be getting over-excited, but I think there’s something there. I haven’t mentioned murder, just said we’re investigating a theft, a man with a false name and a woman who looked like Sofia. I expected her to

Strike’s mobile rang: it was Lucy. Strike refused the call and continued reading Robin’s text.

say Sofia would never have had anything to do with robbery, but she went quiet. She’s just got back to me asking for more details. I’ve said I’m not comfortable giving those by phone, but would rather say it in person. I’ve sent her proof that I genuinely am who I say I am.

His mobile rang for a second time: Midge. This time, he answered.

‘Hi, what’s up?’

‘*Fookin’ Kim!*’

‘What about her?’

‘She’s just had a *fookin’* go at me for sloppy note taking! I’m ex-*fookin’* police myself, I don’t need her telling me how to keep *fookin’* files! I’m telling you now, in case she comes running to you: I just told her to do one.’

‘Great,’ said Strike, far less sincerely than he’d said it five minutes previously, before remembering he was supposed to be ‘cutting Midge some slack’.

‘Look, I’m sorry, but it’s her *fookin’* manner,’ said Midge furiously. ‘She’s not the fookin’ boss of—’

‘I’ll have a word with her,’ said Strike. ‘I can’t talk now, I’ve got to make a call.’

He rang off and returned to Robin’s text.

My impression is she's worried and wants to know what I know. I'm waiting to hear whether she's prepared to meet.

Strike put down his sandwich, about to respond, when his mobile rang for a third time: Kim. He picked up.

'Hi,' said Kim. 'I'm sorry about this, but Midge and I have just had a bit of a run-in.'

'I've heard,' said Strike.

'Look, I'm just a stickler for keeping files up to date. The thing is, we're not getting anywhere with Plug, and digging into his mates looks like our best lead. Midge is a bit slapdash—'

'I've never found her slapdash,' said Strike, which was true, though he'd sometimes had reason to think her insubordinate, 'and there are ways of communicating with colleagues that don't give the impression you think you're their superior.'

He glanced at the time on his computer screen. He had three minutes until his call with Zacharias Lorimer.

'If she didn't like my tone, I'm sorry,' said Kim. 'I suppose I just get hyper-focused on the job and want everyone firing on all cylinders.'

'It's down to Robin and me to decide whether all the subcontractors' cylinders are firing.'

'OK, point taken,' said Kim, 'I'll apologise. To be completely honest with you, I was getting pissed off with her, because she'd been going *on* and *on* about that shitty story in the paper, you know, that thing with you and Candy—'

'An apology should sort things,' said Strike firmly, though he didn't like what he'd just heard.

'I'll ring Midge now. Actually, if you've got a mo, I wanted to explain about that text I sent, Christmas Eve. I've been *so* embarrassed. You're right above this guy Stu in my contacts, he's been pestering me for a date since he found out I've split up with Ray—'

'Doesn't matter. I've got to go.'

He hung up, thoroughly disgruntled, wondering whether Midge had indeed been harping on that bloody news story. She had form on loudly expressed comments about his personal life; he well remembered her raging

about ‘her with the fake tits’, after his extremely ill-advised liaison with Bijou Watkins had featured in *Private Eye*. Then, realising it was half past one exactly, he hastily brought up FaceTime and tapped in the number on the Post-it note Pat had placed beside his computer.

Zacharias Lorimer answered within a few rings, and Strike found himself facing a young man with thick, wavy blond hair, whose skin had the pink-brown, ham-like hue typical of Anglo-Saxons exposed to bright sunlight. He was sitting in what appeared to be an upmarket lodge of some kind, with wooden walls. Dazzling sunlight was falling through a window to his right. The corner of a large painting of a lioness and a well-stocked drinks tray were visible in the background, suggesting that Zacharias wasn’t slumming it in Kenya, though his khaki shirt gestured vaguely at some park ranger role.

‘Hi,’ he said, before Strike could speak. ‘You’re Cormoran, yah?’

‘That’s me,’ said Strike. ‘Thanks for getting back—’

‘OK,’ said Zacharias forcefully, ‘look, I don’t know where Rupert is, OK? I’ve *told* Decima I don’t know where he is, so that’s all I’ve got to say, OK?’

‘Yeah, that’s very clear,’ said Strike, who recognised a blow-hard when he met one, and changed his tactics accordingly. ‘Have you told the police that?’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘You left for Kenya before they got in touch, did you?’ said Strike.

‘What?’ said Zacharias, staring out of the screen with his slightly bloodshot eyes.

‘I assumed – but OK, if they haven’t tracked you down yet—’

‘What are you talking about? Why would the bloody police want to talk to me?’

‘Aside from the drug debt, you mean?’

Strike could tell Lorimer had been hoping Strike didn’t know anything about his dealings with Dredge, because his sunburned skin now turned blotchily red. He also deduced that Lorimer wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed, because after a long pause he said in a tone of poorly feigned confusion and defiance, ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Dredge. The dealer you stiffed for a kilo of Colombia’s finest.’

‘I don’t—’

‘I’m not arsed one way or another about the coke,’ said Strike, ‘but if you’d rather talk to the police than me, I’ll let you go.’

He reached out a hand, as though to close FaceTime, and Zacharias said, ‘Hang on!’

Strike withdrew his hand.

‘Nobody’s been in touch with me, except you, OK?’ said Zacharias, now looking panicky.

‘Look,’ said the detective, with a carefully calculated air of circumspection, ‘I only want information on Rupert. If the police think I’m messing with their investigation, or warning suspects—’

‘What d’you mean, “suspects”? Why – suspected of what?’

‘When did you leave for Kenya?’

‘Why?’

‘Because if you left after the murder was all over the British news, I can’t be accused of giving you details you already knew.’

‘I – what?’ said Zacharias, clearly thrown. ‘Wait – is this that silver shop thing?’

‘How did you know that?’ said Strike sharply, as though Zacharias had suspicious inside knowledge.

‘Because Decima said something about it, but that’s bloody ridiculous, I looked it all up online and the police found out it was some thief—’

‘There’ve been developments since then, but I probably shouldn’t – thanks for your time, anyway.’

Once again, Strike stretched out his hand to close the window.

‘Hang on! They – what? They actually think that body was Rupert? That’s just – that’s bullshit!’ said Zacharias, now looking thoroughly panicked.

‘D’you have a concrete reason for thinking that?’ asked Strike. ‘Have you been in touch with him since the body was found?’

‘No, but that doesn’t – it *can’t* have been him!’

‘Were you aware Rupert had an antique silver ship he wanted to dispose of?’

‘No,’ said Zacharias, looking genuinely confused.

‘He stole it because he needed cash to get Dredge off his back, after you fucked off to Kenya.’

‘I never told him to nick any bloody silver ship!’ said Zacharias, now

turning slowly purple. ‘If he did that, it’s on him!’

He reached out of shot for a glass of what might have been water or gin, and took a large swig.

‘So it’s news to you Rupert might’ve got his head bashed in, because you don’t pay your debts?’

‘I don’t even know who this Dredge—’

‘Spare me the bullshit,’ said Strike. ‘We both know you’re not in Kenya for the scenery. When did you last hear from Rupert?’

‘Not since we moved out of our house.’

‘Any idea where he might’ve gone, if he wasn’t the body in the silver vault?’

‘I dunno – back to Switzerland, maybe, gone to be a ski instructor or something? He speaks German and Italian. It’s what *I’d*’ve done, if I were him.’

‘Probably not much demand for ski instructors in May, which is the last definite sighting of Rupert,’ said Strike.

‘He could’ve stayed with his aunt and uncle in Zurich, before the season started.’

‘His aunt says Rupert’s in New York.’

‘Well, then, he probably is.’

‘Did he ever talk to you about getting a job in New York?’

‘No, not that I can remember – look, if he’s run off somewhere, it’s nothing to do with me, OK?’ said Lorimer. ‘I never made him steal anything! He was all over the fucking place, in that fucked-up relationship – she’s nearly forty, that Longcaster woman! I think he had a fucking Oedipiddle complex, or something.’

‘Oedipiddle complex?’

‘Yeah, you know, when you want to screw your mother,’ said Zacharias. ‘I’m telling you, he was going weird in the head before I left. Ripping up his clothes and shit.’

‘What d’you mean, ripping—?’

‘Tish not told you about that?’ said Zacharias, with a sneer.

‘This is your girlfriend?’

‘Ex-girlfriend. She probably knows where he is, go ask her, they were cosying up by the end.’

‘They were romantically involved?’

‘No,’ said Zacharias, scowling, but Strike suspected a different kind of betrayal; perhaps that the pair had bonded over mutual fear of Dredge’s displaced revenge.

‘What’s Tish’s surname?’

‘Benton, Tish Benton,’ said Zacharias with a promptitude that suggested a vengeful hope that Strike would redirect his unnerving attention towards his ex.

‘Have you got a number for her?’

‘Not a current one.’

‘Any idea where she’s living?’

‘No,’ said Zacharias. ‘Try her parents, they’re in Hampshire.’

Strike made a note, then said,

‘What was that about Rupert ripping up his clothes?’

‘Not his *clothes,*’ said Zacharias, as though Strike were the one who’d said it, not him, ‘just this stupid bloody lucky T-shirt he used to wear all the time. He tore it up. Like a – you know – gesture, I s’pose. Get more sympathy off Tish,’ he sneered.

‘When did Rupert tear up his T-shirt?’

‘I don’t know, not long before I left…’

Zacharias glanced at something out of the frame of the shot, possibly an approaching employer, because he next said, ‘I’m going to have to go, I’ve got work to do.’

‘What are you up to, over there?’ asked Strike.

‘Eco-lodge tourism stuff,’ said Zacharias dourly.

It was, Strike thought, the twenty-first century equivalent of shunting off the unsatisfactory son to the colonies. Possibly the ease with which Zacharias’s family had provided him with a comfortable sinecure accounted for the throwaway suggestion that Rupert Fleetwood might have disappeared to the Alps to become a ski instructor.

‘Can I ask one last question?’ said Strike.

‘What?’ said Zacharias ungraciously.

‘Did either you or Rupert know a man called Osgood, or Oz?’

‘No,’ said Zacharias.

‘Ever hear Rupert mention anyone of that name?’

‘No,’ said Zacharias again.

Strike heard a door open offscreen.

‘I’ve got to go,’ said Zacharias hurriedly. He leaned forwards, pressed a button, and disappeared.

The detective sat back in his chair, frowning at the blank screen, then looked down at his notes.

Tish Benton knows more?
Fleetwood speaks German and Italian Destroyed ‘lucky T-shirt’

He doubted this information would crack the case, and he needed some kind of breakthrough, because the expense of the expanding investigation was growing steadily higher. There was still a trip to Scotland and Ironbridge to come, and Strike hadn’t forgotten that Decima’s restaurant appeared to be in trouble. Tearing the page out of his notebook, he got to his feet, unfolded the wooden wings over the cork noticeboard and pinned these sparse notes beneath the picture of Rupert Fleetwood.

There’d been a new addition to the board since he last viewed it, clearly put there by Robin when she’d passed through the office. This was a printout of the article Robin had found online, screenshotted and already sent to Strike. It related to a Swedish woman called Reata Lindvall, who’d been murdered alongside her six-year-old daughter in Belgium, in 1998. Her ex-lover had been found guilty of the crimes and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Strike had already responded to Robin’s text about Lindvall with a non-committal ‘worth bearing in mind’, but he didn’t want to clutter up the board with things that, in his view, had only remote speculative value. All their current candidates for William Wright had been children when Lindvall had been murdered and none had any known connection to Belgium. Had any other detective at the agency pinned the paragraph there, he’d have taken it straight down again, but as it was Robin’s, he left it there, for now.

Taking a step backwards, coffee in hand, Strike examined the pattern most of the notes made, set in columns beneath their possible Wrights. Strike had no hunches about any of them, no underlying certainty that *there* was their man; it seemed eminently likely, still, that William Wright had been somebody else entirely.

He returned to his desk, picked up his mobile, and called Robin. She answered, and he could hear that she was driving.

‘Where are you?’

‘Mrs Two-Times is in Chelsea,’ said Robin.

‘Well, I just wanted to say, very good work on Schiff. If she—’

‘*Shit!*’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘It’s the clutch on this bloody hire car, it keeps sticking.’

‘Have you had a look for a new Land Rover yet?’

‘Yes, but there’s nothing I can realistically afford, not even if the business helps,’ said Robin, who sounded harried. ‘Sorry, Strike, I’m going to have to concentrate, the traffic’s bad and this *bloody* clutch—’

‘OK, speak lat—’

Robin hung up.

Strike sat back down at his computer and reached for his now cold coffee and his vape pen, thinking how impractical it was for the business to keep hiring cars for Robin. Her Land Rover was associated in his mind with many significant journeys, with jokes, shared food and long conversations. Some of their best times together had been in that draughty old car, with the tin in the glove compartment for him to use as an ashtray and its increasingly persistent rattle…

Strike reached yet again for his mobile and called Lucy.

‘Just saw I missed you earlier.’

‘Oh, I’m so glad you called back,’ said his sister, sounding just as stressed as she had the last two times they’d spoken. ‘It’s the house. Greg’s *insisting* we hold out for more, but I’ve just heard from the estate agent. The Smiths definitely can’t go any higher—’

‘You know, I’ve been thinking,’ said Strike dishonestly, ‘about what Ted and Joan would’ve wanted.’

‘Greg says they’ll have wanted us to get the most we can,’ said Lucy.

I’ll bet he fucking does.

‘You know, for the boys’ future,’ said Lucy quickly, ‘and for us, I suppose.’

‘D’you honestly think they’d have cared more about the money than who moved in?’ asked Strike. ‘I know we’ll be able to flog it to some London lot who want a second home—’

‘They wouldn’t have wanted that,’ said Lucy. ‘No, they’d have wanted locals.’

‘Well, exactly,’ said Strike. ‘How old did you say the Smiths’ kids are?’

‘Six and eight, I think.’

‘It’d be like Ted, Joan and us all over again,’ said Strike shamelessly.

Lucy made a small noise he suspected indicated tears.

‘Look, it’s up to you,’ he said. ‘If you’d rather hold out for more money —’

‘No, you’re right, you’re absolutely right,’ said Lucy, her voice breaking. ‘That *is* what they’d have wanted, for it to stay a proper family home. I’ve been thinking that all along, but Greg – no, that’s made up my mind. I want the Smiths to have it.’

‘Well, I agree,’ said Strike. ‘I think Ted and Joan would’ve been pleased. They weren’t mercenary people.’

‘No,’ said Lucy, and she blew her nose. ‘You’re right, they weren’t. Thanks, Stick, this is honestly such a weight off my mind, I’ve been really stressing about it. How are you, any—?’

‘I’m great. Sorry, Luce, I’m going to have to go, I’m on a job. Keep me posted on the Smiths.’

He hung up. With the money from the sale of the Cornwall house in his account, he’d not only be free of the burden of keeping an eye on the place at a distance of nearly three hundred miles, he’d also be able to offer Robin a personal loan to buy a new Land Rover. His mood somewhat improved, he set to work to try and find contact details for Tish Benton.

45

Slow, slow and softly, where she stood,
She sinks upon the ground;—her hood
Had fallen back, her arms outspread
Still hold her lover's hands; her head
Is bow'd, half-buried, on the bed.

Matthew Arnold
Tristram and Iseult

Robin was relieved to have one project to focus on at the moment, a place to concentrate her energies, where she couldn't keep fretting about personal matters: trying to persuade Gretchen Schiff, the former flatmate of Sofia Medina, to meet her in person.

Medina's OnlyFans page had disappeared from the internet, presumably at the behest of her family, so Robin was unable to see any of the men who might have been asking her for real world contact. Gretchen was therefore her best hope of further information on Sofia. There'd been long lulls between Robin's messages and Gretchen's responses, but Robin was becoming increasingly convinced that there was, as she'd put it to Strike, 'something there'. While Gretchen's suspicion and unwillingness to engage might be explained by the traumatic aftermath of learning that her flatmate had been murdered, the young woman still hadn't pushed back on the idea that Sofia could have been involved in a robbery, and this omission was as suggestive as Gretchen's constant probing to find out more about the man with the fake name Robin was investigating.

Finally, to Robin's delight, the student agreed to meet her on Thursday, choosing the Montagu Pyke, a Wetherspoons pub, as the venue for the interview.

Heavy rain was falling on the day of their lunchtime rendezvous. Robin was on high alert walking to the pub, glancing back regularly and taking all possible counter-surveillance measures, including crossing the road unexpectedly to see whether anyone plunged into the traffic after her, but was confident she hadn't been followed.

She was glad to get out of the rain, but the pub, she thought as she entered it, wasn't exactly what you'd call cosy or intimate. It had once been a famous music venue, and was large enough to fit a few hundred people, with a very high, arched ceiling and maroon walls, on which hung large posters of acts that had once appeared here, including The Who, Jimi Hendrix and – Robin's eyes were drawn to the huge picture instantly – the Deadbeats, Strike's father's band, with the long-haired Jonny Rokeby to the fore in his bell-bottom jeans and a leather jacket worn open over a bare chest. Robin waited for a group of young people who looked very hungover to order pitchers of cocktails, bought herself a coffee, then took a table where she had a clear view of the entrance.

Robin recognised Gretchen as soon as she walked into the pub, folding up a wet umbrella as she came. She was a curvy girl with thick, naturally golden hair that fell to her shoulders, sallow skin and a pair of clear green eyes. She wore no make-up and her fleece added inches to a very large bust.

Gretchen was accompanied by a tall, stringy, intense-looking young man whose hair was tied up in a bun and who sported a goatee and round-rimmed glasses. They both bought beers, and when Gretchen spotted Robin, who'd sent the student her photograph, she muttered something to the young man, and the pair headed over to her.

'Hi,' said Robin, as they reached her, smiling as she held out a hand, which Gretchen shook, though she didn't return the smile. The young man ignored Robin's outstretched hand when it was offered to him.

'You're Robin?' said Gretchen.

'That's me.'

Gretchen's English, as Robin had known from their only phone call, was virtually accent-less, though she was Austrian.

'This is my boyfriend, Max.'

'Hi, Max,' said Robin, as the couple sat down opposite her. 'Are you at the University of West London as well?'

'Yeah.'

‘What are you studying?’

‘Digital Marketing,’ said Max. He had the air of a man determined not to give out more information than was strictly necessary.

‘Would either of you like anything to eat?’ asked Robin, pushing the menu towards them, but both shook their heads. Max hadn’t taken his messenger bag off his shoulder.

‘Well, as I’ve already explained to you, Gretchen, our agency’s investigating a robbery,’ said Robin.

‘Vy are *you* investigating it?’ said Max. ‘Vy not the police?’

‘The police are investigating as well,’ said Robin.

It might be true, Robin thought. Somebody at the Met might have gone back to St George’s Avenue and asked Daz and Mandy for more details about the people who’d entered Wright’s room and left carrying suitcases.

‘But our client doesn’t think they’re taking it seriously enough, because the stolen objects weren’t very valuable,’ Robin went on.

This, too, could be true: all Robin knew for certain had been in William Wright’s room were his weights and the suit and glasses he’d worn to work at Ramsay Silver.

‘So vy do you vant to know about Sofia?’ asked Max, whose accent was far stronger than his girlfriend’s.

‘A girl was seen entering and leaving the burgled room on Friday the seventeenth of June. She had long black hair and was wearing a very similar outfit to the one Sofia was wearing when she was found. Then a man with dark, curly hair entered the room, in the early hours of the following morning. We think the pair of them then drove off together in a silver car.’

At the mention of the curly haired man, Max’s face lost expression, and Gretchen reached suddenly for her beer bottle and took a clumsy gulp.

‘But obviously,’ Robin said, masking the thrill of excitement that had just passed through her, ‘lots of women have long black hair and wear pink tops. It’s just that the sighting of a girl matching Sofia’s description in those unusual circumstances, just twenty-four hours before Sofia was found dead, made us wonder whether there was a connection.’

The pause that followed ought, Robin thought, to have been full of protestations – ‘Sofia would never have committed burglary’, ‘it can’t have been her’, ‘you’ve got the wrong person’ – but the two students sat frozen,

without looking at each other. Even so, Robin could almost see the invisible communications flying between them. *Now what? Just say something. Anything.*

'But as you say,' said Max at last, 'der are lots of vimmin who look like det, vid long hair and zo on. And I don't tink she'd be involved in somezing like det,' he added, turning in rather artificial fashion to look at his girlfriend. 'Vould she?'

'No,' said Gretchen. 'I don't think so.'

'Did you know Sofia well, Gretchen?' asked Robin.

'Yes,' said Gretchen, but she added quickly, 'only because we shared a flat. I advertised on the college noticeboard and she applied. We had different friends.'

'Did you like her?' asked Robin.

'Vy does it matter if Gretchen *liked* her?' said Max superciliously.

Ignoring him, Robin addressed Gretchen again.

'Did any of her male friends have dark, curly—?'

'No,' said Gretchen, too quickly.

Yes, thought Robin, it was definitely the dark, curly haired man who had the couple worried.

'But you weren't in the same friendship group,' said Robin, 'so you might not have known, if she was involved with someone like that?'

'No,' said Gretchen, clearly striving for a casual tone. 'Maybe not.'

'I read in the papers about Sofia's OnlyFans account. You were concerned she was making it too easy for men to find out where she was—'

'That wasn't me,' said Gretchen quickly. 'Somebody else said that, to the papers. It wasn't me.'

'Vot hass det got to do vid der robbery, an OnlyFans account?' demanded Max. 'Dere's nothing illegal, posting your own nudes. Det's not a crime.'

'No, of course it isn't,' said Robin, and, addressing Gretchen again, she asked, 'Did you ever hear Sofia mention a man called William? William Wright?'

'No, I never heard her talk about a William,' said Gretchen.

'Villiam, no, *I* never heard her talk about, eider,' said Max.

'What did *you* think of Sofia, Max?' Robin asked. If he wanted to talk, let him talk.

‘I only knew her because of dem sharing a flat,’ he said, but he couldn’t resist adding, ‘she vos a party girl.’

‘*Sag das nicht,*’ muttered Gretchen.

‘Der’s nothing wrong vid being a party girl,’ Max told his girlfriend. ‘She vos det type, det’s all. She showed me her – vot is it? *Requisiten,*’ he said to Gretchen. ‘Der first time I came to der flat. Der vigs and dat.’

When Robin looked politely enquiring, Gretchen muttered,

‘He means, her props.’

‘Props?’ said Robin blankly, and then she realised what was meant, and said, ‘Oh, for pictures to post online?’

‘*Ja,*’ said Max. ‘Sex toys and vigs and so on.’

‘Right,’ said Robin. She turned to Gretchen. ‘I suppose the police asked you about all of this?’

‘Yes,’ said Gretchen.

‘And about Sofia’s love life?’

‘Yes,’ said Gretchen reluctantly. ‘She was popular.’

‘She vos always viz men,’ said Max. ‘Everybody knows det.’

‘Did she have a particular boyfriend?’

‘Not – no,’ said Gretchen. ‘I don’t think so.’

Had Gretchen been this shifty with the police, or had her halting speech been put down to shock, or faulty English?

‘Did Sofia ever tell either of you she felt threatened, or worried, by any of the men who visited her OnlyFans site?’ Robin asked.

‘She voss enjoying the attention. She vossn’t vurried,’ said Max.

‘So you never saw Sofia with a man with dark, curly hair?’ Robin asked Gretchen, but Max answered for her again.

‘Gretchen has already said no. She’s tolt the police everything she knows.’

‘I don’t know everyone Sofia met,’ said Gretchen. ‘I told the police so. It’s like Max says. There were lots of different men.’

‘Did you ever know her to steal anyth—?’

‘No,’ said Gretchen.

‘Are you sure?’ said Robin.

‘She could… forget to return things,’ said Gretchen uncertainly, ‘but that’s not like robbing somebody’s flat.’

As friendliness was getting Robin nowhere, she decided a change of

tone was warranted.

‘Why did you agree to meet me, Gretchen?’ she asked, no longer smiling.

‘Because – I wanted to know what it was all about,’ said Gretchen.

Robin could hear the strain in her voice. She could also tell that Max was itching to spirit his girlfriend away from this dangerous woman, to regroup, to think out their next steps. Robin decided a bluff was the only way to go.

‘Gretchen, our agency’s got good police contacts. The police already know Sofia was hanging around with a man who had dark, curly hair. That’s how we connected Sofia with the pair who robbed the flat in Newham. I think you know who that man is, and I think you know Sofia was with him, the weekend she was killed.’

‘How could Gretchen know who Sofia vos vid?’ said Max angrily. ‘She vosn’t dere.’ He stood up. ‘*Lass uns gehen,*’ he said to his girlfriend.

Gretchen half-rose.

‘I’m afraid I’m going to have to inform the police I believe you’ve deliberately withheld information,’ said Robin.

Gretchen fell back into her chair as though her legs wouldn’t support her weight. Max stooped to hiss in his girlfriend’s ear.

‘*Du solltest mit einem Anwalt reden!*’

Robin, who’d taken three years of German at school, seemed to remember the word ‘Anwalt’ cropping up while learning the names of various professions. At her boyfriend’s words, Gretchen’s face crumpled. Hiding it in her hands, she began to sob.

‘*Ich hätte es sagen sollen!*’

‘*Dann geh zurück zur Polizei!*’ said Max angrily, and Robin deduced from the last word that Max was telling his girlfriend that the police should receive any information she might have, rather than Robin.

‘You don’t have to tell me what you know,’ said Robin, ‘but you *should* tell the police, if you know anything about that man.’ And now Robin changed tack again, becoming reassuring. ‘I’m sure you won’t be in any trouble. People forget things, and then their memory gets jogged…’

Gretchen was still crying. Max sat down again, putting a tentative hand on her back, muttering in German. The girl shook her head, her shoulders shaking, her face still hidden. Four young people at a nearby table, who

were sharing a jug of some purple liquid, were staring over at the scene. Robin cast a cold look at them and they turned hastily back to their pitcher of cocktails.

‘Tell me more about Sofia,’ Robin said, judging it best to leave the subject of the curly haired man for now.

Gretchen looked up. Her tear-stained, woeful face looked childish now. She wiped her nose on the cuff of her fleece.

‘She vos… what Max said,’ she whispered.

‘A party girl?’ said Robin gently. ‘Well, he’s right, there’s no harm in that, is there?’

Still rubbing his girlfriend’s back, Max said through clenched lips, ‘*Sag nichts anderes. Sie hat keine Autorität.*’

‘I might not be a policewoman,’ said Robin, ‘but we work closely with the police, and continuing to hide what you know—’

‘She vonted a sugar daddy,’ blurted Gretchen.

Robin wouldn’t have needed to know any German at all to recognise that Max had just sworn under his breath. An argument now broke out in their native language, Max speaking in an angry whisper, Gretchen tearful, her voice rising higher and higher in pitch. Several words recurred: *Polizei*, *Anwalt* and *Lüge*, the last of which Robin was certain meant ‘lie’.

‘*Weil die Polizei es bereits weiß!*’ Gretchen threw at her boyfriend at last, and appealing to Robin, she said, ‘They know already, the police, yes? They know she knew that man viz the curly hair?’

In the stress of the situation, her flawless English accent was deteriorating.

‘They do, yes,’ said Robin. *And if they didn’t listen when we told them he was at Wright’s house, they will now.*

‘You see?’ said Gretchen desperately to her boyfriend. ‘*Dey already know!*’

‘Tell me about this man,’ said Robin. ‘Where did Sofia meet him?’

‘On… on OnlyFans,’ said Gretchen.

Robin took her notebook out of her bag. Both her interviewees looked frightened at the sight of it, but they were in too deep, now, to run.

‘How long were they together?’

‘Only… a month or something, before she died. She said she *loved* him.’

‘It vosn’t *luff*,’ said Max impatiently. ‘She liked his money.’

‘He’s rich,’ Gretchen told Robin. ‘He gave her a ruby necklace… real rubies…’

‘Are you sure they were real?’ asked Robin, who was making notes.

‘Yes, because she took dem to a jeweller, and he said they were real.’

‘Was she was wearing the necklace, the last time you saw her?’

‘She wore it all the time,’ said Gretchen, as Robin scribbled. There’d been no mention of a ruby necklace on the body found on the North Wessex Downs.

‘Did you ever meet him, Gretchen?’

‘No, I didn’t vant her bringing him to the flat, I didn’t want any men from OnlyFans at the flat. She said he vos in the music business—’

A second surge of excitement shot through Robin.

‘—but he did bad things when he vos young.’

‘What sort of bad things?’

‘I don’t know. Sofia thought that made him more…’

‘Exciting?’ suggested Robin, and Gretchen nodded before saying miserably, ‘And she *did* have him at our flat and I knew, because I saw him leaving the building, when I was coming home. I saw him in the distance, a man like – like you said, with dark, curly hair, and he vos older, and I knew it was him. And I said, “you’ve had O – you’ve had him here, haven’t you?”’

Robin decided to ignore the ‘O’ for the present, but before she could ask her next question, Gretchen started to cry again.

‘I didn’t vont her family to know she was with a married man! They’re religious, they’re quite old! That’s why she wanted to come to the UK to study, to get away from dem! She was… innocent. She *vos*,’ she told her angry boyfriend, who’d opened his mouth to speak again. ‘She did all dese things, vit the pictures online, but she was… naive. Childish. She vonted to liff in a fantasy… O – he told her not to tell anyone she was with him, because he was married, and he had a kid, but she told me. She was excited about it all, she couldn’t keep it to herself. She vonted to show me the necklace…’

‘Was Sofia with him, the weekend she was killed?’ Robin asked again.

‘I don’t know,’ said Gretchen tearfully, ‘but I sink zo. She said she was going to be going somewhere special. He travelled a lot, so I thought maybe they were going abroad, but she was giggling about it, as if it was…

naughty, or something, so then I thought maybe he was going to take her to his house, because his vife was going to be away. I didn't like it, I didn't think she should… not viz a married man and a father, it wasn't right.'

'Did Sofia tell you where the man lived?'

'She said he had a big house in the country, with a swimming pool.'

'Can you remember a county, a town?'

Gretchen shook her head.

Robin laid down her pen.

'I can tell you're a good person, Gretchen,' she said. 'You've got morals. You were worried about what Sofia was up to with that man, and you clearly felt protective of her.'

Gretchen closed her clear green eyes, as though she couldn't bear to look at Robin.

'And that's why I know something big must have stopped you telling the police about this man,' Robin continued.

'*Ja*, I already told you – her family—'

'I'm afraid I don't believe it's because you wanted to protect her parents from knowing she was having an affair with a married man,' said Robin firmly. 'They already knew she'd been posting nudes online for money. Anyway, if he's the one who murdered their daughter, do you honestly think they wouldn't want him caught?'

Gretchen started to cry again.

'Are you scared of him?' said Robin. 'Are you afraid he'll do something to *you*, if you talk about him?'

Max was now staring up at the Deadbeats' poster. He'd stopped trying to control the interview; the thing he'd tried to prevent had already happened.

'Gretchen,' said Robin, dropping her voice, 'has this man got pictures of you, too?'

A tiny negative jerk of the head was the only response, but Gretchen's sobs increased.

'Has he?' said Robin quietly, and this time, Gretchen nodded.

'S-Sofia – he offered her a lot for some pictures of the two of us – I… I vos drunk. And next day… I vonted her to tell him to delete them, but I know he's still got them…'

'The best thing you can do, right now, is tell me that man's name, and anything else you can remember about him,' said Robin.

‘But der pictures will get in der papers,’ sobbed Gretchen.

‘If you’re a witness, there are ways of protecting you—’

‘People vill *know* it vos me, my family, people at college—’

‘Future employers,’ interjected Max angrily.

‘People will tink I do things like det all the time, I don’t, I never did, I vos drunk and she said I could haff half the money…’

‘You’d rather Sofia’s killer got away with it, would you?’ said Robin in a low voice. ‘You’d rather this man stays free to murder other girls? Or d’you really think Sofia got what she deserved, for being silly, and liking ruby necklaces?’

‘No!’ squealed Gretchen. ‘I *liked* her! She was funny and she vos… she vos sweet…’

‘Then tell me everything you know about this man,’ said Robin firmly.

‘She didn’t tell me anything except his job, and that he had a vife.’

‘And his name?’ said Robin.

‘It vossn’t his real name,’ said Max contemptuously. ‘He wouldn’t use *det.*’

But Gretchen, who had mingled snot and tears dripping from her chin, whispered: ‘Osgood. Calvin Osgood, but she called him Oz.’

Max heaved a large sigh, put his arm around his girlfriend’s shoulders and said, ‘*Und jetzt rufen wir einen Anwalt an.*’

‘Yes,’ said Robin, closing her notebook. ‘I think calling a lawyer’s a very good idea.’

46

And like the cloudy shadows
Across the country blown
We two fare on for ever,
But not we two alone.

A. E. Housman
XLII: The Merry Guide, A
Shropshire Lad

‘Well, I sure as hell haven’t got anything to beat what you got yesterday,’ said Strike, when Robin arrived at the office at eleven o’clock the following morning. They were to be lunching with Decima Mullins at Quo Vadis in Dean Street and Strike had suggested a quick in-person catch-up before meeting the client, not because there was much to say that hadn’t already been communicated by text, email and phone, but because he was continuing to seize every opportunity for private chats with his partner.

It was another chilly day, the sky smoke grey, and Robin was wearing a forest green knitted dress and black boots appropriate to both the chilly weather and their client’s choice of restaurant. Strike, who was wearing the only suit that currently fitted him after over a year of intermittent dieting, refrained from telling Robin she looked good. All of that could wait for the Lake District hotel: until then, he thought it best to maintain a strict professionalism.

‘So, what d’you reckon are the odds that Oz and Medina cleared out Wright’s flat?’

‘Getting much, much higher,’ said Robin, trying to sound upbeat.

The triumph she’d felt in the immediate aftermath of her interview with Gretchen and Max had become tinged with anxiety overnight. Once again,

she and Strike were in possession of information the police should be given. Strike had said he'd tell Wardle, leaving Robin praying once again that her boyfriend wouldn't hear where the intelligence had come from, but she had the feeling it was only a matter of time, now, before Murphy realised what they were really up to.

'But we still haven't got the full picture, have we?' Robin said. 'If it *was* Oz who cleared out Wright's flat, why involve Medina at all? Why not empty it himself? Why did it have to be done in two batches; why go back there at all, after Wright was dead?'

'I had a thought about that,' said Strike, 'and if I'm right, it's because Oz fucked up.'

'How?'

'I think Medina was supposed to take anything in the room that might've led to an ID of Wright, but there was something in there she couldn't lift. So Oz goes back for it, then drops it on the stairs, unable to hold it. Wright bought weights *after* moving in, remember? And unless he'd visited Wright in the lead-up to Wright's murder, Oz wouldn't have known they were there.'

'But why would it matter if the weights were left?' said Robin. 'The police already had Wright's DNA, they couldn't stop them matching it.'

'That's exactly where my speculation stops. I don't know why it would be urgent to take the weights, but I can't think of much else a fairly small woman wouldn't've been able to carry, and which Oz himself struggled to lift. I don't think Oz was supposed to have gone anywhere near Wright's room, but he had to – and unfortunately for him, Mandy was awake at five a.m.'

'I still can't see why he needed Sofia Medina,' said Robin. 'She was a liability; she blabbed to her flatmate. And as for being bait, she can't have been the girlfriend Wright thought was coming to live with him.'

'Why not?'

'Because the timescale doesn't fit,' said Robin. 'Gretchen says Sofia only knew Oz for about a month. Sofia might've been naive, but I can't see letting herself get pimped out to a second man, when what she wanted was Oz himself – or his rubies and his jet set lifestyle. Plus, Wright would've had to be even worse than naive, agreeing to a girl moving in with him almost as soon as she met him, when he knew people were after him.'

‘He wouldn’t be the first man to prefer not to look a very attractive gift horse in the mouth,’ said Strike, with a painful recollection of Bijou Watkins naked, ‘but yeah, you’re right, the time frame doesn’t seem to fit. Well, if the police start investigating Oz and Medina, we might be able to pick up some crumbs.’

‘I’m still trying to get information on that missing girl who messaged Oz online,’ said Robin. ‘Sapphire Neagle. I’ve found her Instagram account and I’ve identified a friend who might be helpful. If I can only find out where she goes to school, I could try and speak to the friend.’

‘Any new information would help, if you can get it,’ said Strike, now directing his attention to the clump of notes about Wright, and Ramsay Silver, grouped together at the bottom of the board, ‘because I’m damned if I can see how all this fits together and some of it has to be irrelevant. We’ve got to find a way of narrowing down all the Hussein Mohameds, as well, because we haven’t got the manpower to bang on over a hundred doors on the off-chance. Meanwhile, Midge says Jim Todd’s made two more calls from telephone boxes and has been riding round the Circle Line without going anywhere again.’

‘I’m still interested in that text Pamela Bullen got, the day of the robbery, which was followed by her dashing out of the shop without locking up.’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike, scratching his chin, ‘but the police are bound to have checked that out and been satisfied with whatever she told them.’

‘Still—’

‘I agree, I’d like that cleared up, too, but she’s already lied to you and I can’t see her coming clean now. I’ve been having a look into John Auclair, that silver collector who was there when the body was discovered, but we’re not going to be able to speak to him any time soon, because—’

‘—he’s in Monaco,’ said Robin. ‘I know, I saw it online. Nice yacht.’

Strike took a sip of his tea as he turned away from the board to face Robin.

‘Want to run through the latest info on our four current candidates for William Wright?’

‘OK,’ said Robin.

‘Taking the last first,’ said Strike, gesturing to the picture of Dick de Lion, with his sculpted abs and his orange skin, ‘I’ve had no luck on his real

name, but I've been digging on Lord Oliver Branfoot. According to Fergus Robertson, rumours have been flying around journalistic circles about Branfoot for years.'

'What kind of rumours?'

'The word in tabloid circles is, Branfoot swings both ways. Robertson told me Branfoot stepped down as an MP because there was an incident involving a young male intern. Apparently the intern was given a hefty pay-off, because he's refused to talk to the press and has kept shtum ever since. Branfoot resigned on the pretext that his wife was ill, and since then he's concentrated on his think tank and charitable work. He's got a particular interest in troubled young men, projects for juvenile offenders and so on, and Robertson doesn't think that's entirely altruistic.

'I didn't tell Robertson why we're interested in Branfoot, but he's not stupid, he's noticed Branfoot taking an unusual interest in the private detective business lately. I asked him to keep an ear out, and promised him the inside scoop if we get anything. If – big if, but for the sake of argument – Branfoot had anything to do with the body and if – even bigger if – that cipher note's to be believed, and the body was Dick de Lion, we might have a motive. De Lion was blackmailing Branfoot, or was refusing to be bought off like the intern, so Branfoot decided to get rid of him. But to say we've got no concrete evidence that's what happened is the understatement of the year.'

'But that theory *would* explain what Shanker told you,' said Robin.

'It would,' agreed Strike, 'which is why I asked Robertson whether Branfoot's a Freemason. He doesn't know, but he sounded excited by the question, so I'm hoping he'll do a bit of nosing around for us. On the other hand,' said Strike, turning to look up at the board again, 'we've got our road trip coming up. If we hear something that suggests it was Semple or Powell in the vault, Branfoot becomes irrelevant.'

Robin, who'd experienced another of her inconvenient inner tremors at the thought of that Lake District hotel, made an effort to sound matter of fact as she said, 'Jade Semple first, then?'

There was a knock on the dividing door, which opened immediately.

Oh, not again, thought Robin, as Kim Cochran appeared, holding a fold-up chair.

'Oh, sorry,' she said, 'I didn't think you were in this morning, Robin.'

She turned, beaming, to Strike. ‘I think you’ll like this.’

‘What?’ asked Strike, his tone as unwelcoming as Robin could have wished.

‘I’ve got intel on the three men who went into the shop to murder Wright, and’ – Kim held up a large manila envelope – ‘I’ve got you pictures of the body.’

47

And destiny, her course pursuing straight,
Has struck man's ship against a reef unseen.

Robert Browning
The Agamemnon of Aeschylus

'I've been working on this guy I know for *weeks*, and he finally came across last night,' said Kim triumphantly, unfolding her chair and sitting down while Robin quietly burned with resentment. It wasn't just that Kim was about to outshine her (though it was, definitely, partly that): Kim's offhand tone when speaking to Robin, and the broad smile she saved for Strike, rankled.

'OK,' said Kim, opening the manila envelope, 'needless to say, if anyone finds out the guy gave me copies of these—'

'They won't,' said Strike, holding out a hand. Although there were three different pictures, Kim handed the lot to Strike, and Robin's resentment burned a little hotter.

'Jesus,' said Strike. After examining the first picture, he slid it across the table to his partner.

The gouged-out eyes were dark and terrifying hollows. Dried blood, like lipstick applied by a drunk, coated the mouth from which the teeth had been torn. One ear had been sliced off; the other wound was still covered by the long dark hair. The masonic sash – black and red, with gold embroidery that shone in the flash of the camera – lay across a chest that was muscled and hairless, and had an artificial tan, which hadn't been properly applied: there were patches of white under the arms. However, the falsely healthy skin tone couldn't conceal the large patches of bluish-purple discolouration, which weren't bruises, but signs of livor mortis. His penis had been cut off,

too, leaving another gaping, blackened wound. The arms ended in stumps where the hands should have been: Robin could see bone and tendons, and she wondered, feeling slightly queasy, what had become of the dismembered parts of the body. Shoved into bags, or pockets?

She'd expressed surprise to Strike that the press hadn't been more interested in what had been done to this unidentified man, once they realised he was a criminal. Now she felt a slight stirring of guilt that she, too, had stopped thinking of him as a human being as the case had proceeded. The body in the vault – such a strange, contrived scene, with the sash and the silver, the unlikelihood of it all, the theatricality – had reduced the corpse almost to a waxwork figure in her mind, the centrepiece of a strange conundrum.

'The back view,' said Strike, sliding another picture across the desk to Robin.

She'd been imagining the hallmark carved into the dead man's back to be a small thing. On the contrary, the Salem cross ran from the nape of the neck to the cleft in the buttocks. Chunks of flesh had been removed to make the slanting three-barred cross, reminding Robin of a scored side of bacon.

'The mutilation was done a good bit after he was killed,' said Strike. 'There's not enough blood here for it to have been done immediately after death.'

'His killers were in the shop for two hou—' began Robin.

'He was attacked from behind, hit over the head with something heavy,' said Kim, interrupting Robin. 'The back of the skull's caved in. The PM said that's what actually killed him, the stoving-in of the head. Blood must've started pooling in the lower part of the body before they started to mutilate it. Maybe that was deliberate. Maybe they didn't want blood seeping out under the vault door.'

'Wouldn't have mattered if it had, nobody was there on Saturday or Sunday,' said Strike. 'D'you know where this footprint was, relative to the body?' he said, looking at the third picture.

'Underneath it,' said Kim. 'They saw it when they lifted him.'

'Really?' said Strike, frowning slightly as he handed the last picture to Robin, who saw a faint, partial print in what had clearly been fresh blood. She noticed a couple of things about it, but rather than say them in front of Kim, she asked,

‘What about the four men who entered the shop that night?’

‘They didn’t,’ said Kim, looking at Strike, rather than Robin. ‘They’ve been ruled out. Apparently, everyone’s shitting themselves, and that’s largely down to you.’

‘What’ve I got to do with it?’ said Strike.

‘My contact says you fed them info from a contact – an actual gangster, or someone – who said it wasn’t Jason Knowles in the vault.’

Kim’s bright brown eyes were searching Strike’s face for confirmation, but as he remained impassive, she said,

‘So, not long after you did that – if it’s true – they got confirmation of what you’d said. My guy says they got new information, I don’t know from where.’

From the undercover NCA guy, Strike and Robin thought simultaneously.

‘Apparently Jason Knowles was lured away thinking he was going to do a big housebreaking, so he had nothing to do with the silver vault job after all, and now everyone’s pissed off at you for being right.’

‘How did they rule out the four men in Wild Court?’ asked Strike.

‘Well, everyone’s been scrambling to re-check everything Truman did, and they went back to the footage of the four men entering Wild Court from Great Queen Street. I don’t know the ins and outs, but they finally traced them. Four pissed foreign students, apparently. They were lost, wandered down Wild Court, had some kind of argument, split up and finally found their way back to their hostel. The police have ruled them out completely as having anything to do with the robbery, so now the mystery is, how and when did Wright get back to the shop if he wasn’t one of those four men, because they can’t find footage to match him anywhere.

‘Plus,’ said Kim, ‘there was something about a delivery driver called McGee or something who went to Dalston, but I didn’t quite understand what my contact was saying there. I’d got him quite drunk,’ Kim added, with another of her little laughs.

‘Dalston,’ repeated Strike, making a note.

‘Yeah, he drove there and back up Old Street or something, but as I say, I don’t know how that’s relevant – I expect you do,’ Kim said, smiling at Strike.

She sat back in her chair, legs crossed, and looking, as Robin supposed

she had every right to do, exceptionally pleased with herself.

‘Anything new on that getaway car?’ asked Strike. ‘The Peugeot?’

‘Oh, yes, I nearly forgot,’ said Kim. ‘They think there was a couple in it. I assume some expert’s managed to enhance pictures of it from CCTV cameras that were actually working. It looks like a man and a woman.’

‘Right,’ said Strike. ‘Well, cheers, this is going to be a huge help.’

‘You’re welcome,’ said Kim, still smiling, but she didn’t get up.

‘Um, would it be OK if I have a quick private word with Cormoran, Robin?’

Robin was surprised to find her hackles could rise any higher, but as it turned out, they still had plenty of room to elevate.

‘Of course,’ she said, trying to sound gracious as she got to her feet. She supposed she, too, ought to congratulate Kim on the extra information she’d got out of the police, but as Kim had acted until this point as though Robin was entirely invisible, she couldn’t bring herself to do it, but simply left the room, closing the door behind her.

‘Sorry,’ Kim said to Strike, once Robin had gone, ‘but I thought you’d probably rather nobody else hears this.’

‘Hears what?’

‘Bijou Watkins is being followed by Farah Navabi’s agency, on Andrew Honbold’s instructions.’

Strike simply stared at her. The sentence contained components that didn’t appear to fit together.

‘Farah’s still keen on me joining her,’ said Kim. ‘She rang last night and told me you’re going to be hounded out of business by bad press.’

Ignoring a sudden burning sensation behind his navel, Strike said,

‘Andrew Honbold hired Farah Navabi? The woman who bugged his office?’

‘She said all that stuff about him being a “good, good man” on the stand, and cried about how she was coerced by Patterson and he lapped it up. So he’s hired her to follow Watkins.’

‘Why?’ said Strike. ‘Why’s he having her followed?’

‘I don’t know, but Navabi seemed to think it might be a problem for you.’

‘OK,’ said Strike, ‘thanks for the tip.’

Kim got up.

‘And we’re good about the Midge thing, right?’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike, who just wanted her to leave. ‘Fine.’

Kim left the room. Robin reappeared in the doorway.

‘Everything all right?’ she asked, because Strike’s expression was now strangely shut down.

‘Yeah, fine,’ said Strike again, checking his watch. They still had a good bit of time before lunch with Decima. ‘Actually – could you give me another moment? Need to make a phone call.’

48

Along the path that the Moon travels are nine conspicuous Stars…
Albert Pike
Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry

Robin withdrew again. To her displeasure, Kim was taking her time about leaving the office, standing beside the door and fiddling with the contents of her shoulder bag. As Pat's chair was empty, Robin assumed she was in the bathroom on the landing. Kim looked round, and said, smiling, 'Didn't want to do that, but he had to know.'

'Know what?' said Robin.

'Probably shouldn't say,' said Kim, maddeningly smug. She pulled on her coat, and left.

Meanwhile, in the inner office, Strike was trying to contact his old friend, lawyer Ilsa Herbert, the woman through whom Strike had met Bijou in the first place. Ilsa couldn't be blamed for Strike and Bijou's two-night stand; indeed, she'd tried to warn him off the woman after their first night together, telling him she was mouthy and indiscreet, but Strike – exasperated by the unsolicited advice and angry about Robin's deepening relationship with Murphy – had made it clear to Ilsa that his private life was none of her concern.

Ilsa's mobile was engaged. Strike redialled several times, and the five minutes it took him to reach her felt like an hour. At last, she answered.

'Hi, Corm.'

He knew immediately from her tone that she knew what he was calling about.

‘I’m just going to get somewhere a bit more private,’ she said.

Strike listened to her footsteps, wishing she was running. At last Ilsa spoke again, her voice echoing slightly.

‘OK, I can talk.’

‘What d’you know about Honbold and Bijou Watkins?’ he said.

‘How—?’

‘I’ve just had a tip-off he’s having her followed.’

‘Oh, God. Well, rumours are flying that Honbold’s taken out a super-injunction.’

‘Why?’

‘To stop the papers printing that he doesn’t know whether Bijou’s baby is his or yours.’

Strike didn’t speak immediately, because the worst of the imaginings that had run through his head while waiting for Ilsa to pick up had just come true.

He’d used protection when he’d slept with Bijou, because he wasn’t a fool. After he’d told her he didn’t want to see her again he’d realised that her target, all along, had been the married QC whom she hoped to force to leave his wife; Strike had been an enjoyable diversion and a possible means of making Andrew Honbold jealous. Bijou and Strike had both subsequently lied to the QC, saying their acquaintanceship had never gone further than drinks. Honbold, a well-known scourge of the tabloid press, had been thrown out by his wife after his affair with Bijou hit the papers, and until this morning, Strike had considered the matter closed, assuming, in the absence of other information, that Honbold would be marrying Bijou once his divorce came through.

‘It’s not mine,’ he said, and then, ‘it can’t be, if she hasn’t had the kid yet.’

‘She has, she had it early,’ said Ilsa. ‘Well, she’s saying it was early…’

‘Can’t they tell?’ said Strike, who was almost entirely ignorant of everything concerned with birth and newborns.

‘I don’t know the details, Corm.’

‘Why the fuck does Honbold – has she *told* him we—?’

‘*She* didn’t tell him,’ said Ilsa hesitantly. ‘Corm – I’m sorry, I tried to warn you. The whole of chambers knew you and she had slept together, it was bound to get back to Honbold at some point – I mean, before she got

pregnant, she *wanted* him to hear about it, to make him jealous. Apparently a journalist got wind of the fact that Honbold thinks the baby might be yours, and Honbold went straight to the High Court to stop him printing. He doesn't want to be all over the papers again, but I think he and Bijou have broken up. I suppose he's having her followed because he'd rather not pay child maintenance. He's trying to prove she's still sneaking around with you.'

'*It can't be mine,*' said Strike.

He didn't like the silence that followed.

'What?' he said aggressively.

'I don't—'

'You know something.'

'Corm—'

'*Just say it!*'

'OK, fine. She had a little trick when she was trying to get Honbold to leave his wife. She'd take used condoms out of the bin and…'

'She wouldn't have done that to me,' said Strike, as his innards crawled with panic. 'It was Honbold she wanted.'

Again, Ilsa didn't speak.

'D'you know something else?' Strike said.

'I don't *know* it, they're just rumours,' said Ilsa. 'Lawyers are terrible goss—'

'What rumours?'

'OK, there's this story doing the rounds that Honbold is taking some drug that lowers sperm count, so he thought it was strange that he'd been able to get her pregnant, and then it got back to him about you and her, and he went ballistic and now he's convinced it's yours.'

'When was it born?' said Strike, trying to remember times and dates, to find the numerical formula that would prove, beyond doubt, that he wasn't the father.

'I don't know exactly – early December?'

This was nowhere near precise enough for Strike. If the baby had been born at term, there was a chance…

'I *literally* heard about all this yesterday afternoon when people were whispering about the super-injunction,' said Ilsa. 'He must have only just hired this private detective—'

‘Yeah, I think he has,’ said Strike, who was now actually sweating beneath his suit jacket. ‘If you hear anything else—’

‘Yes, of course, I’ll call you,’ said Ilsa. ‘Corm, I – I’m sorry.’

‘You tried to warn me,’ said Strike, which cost him some effort. ‘Listen, can you send me Bijou’s number? I deleted it.’

‘OK.’

‘And can you please not tell Robin about any of this? I’d rather tell her myself.’

‘Of course.’

The call ended, and Strike opened the door to the outer office, where Pat sat typing. Robin was absent.

‘Where—?’

‘Loo,’ said Pat gruffly.

Strike’s phone buzzed. Ilsa had just sent him Bijou’s contact details. He retreated into the inner office, thinking… he couldn’t call her now, not with Robin just about to walk back in. It would have to be later, after lunch with Decima.

Meanwhile, inside the small, dank bathroom on the landing, Robin was washing her hands, thinking that if Strike was going to praise Kim’s undeniably impressive bit of detective work when she emerged, she might not be able to respond with much grace.

‘Everything all right?’ she asked again, when she’d rejoined him.

‘Yeah, Kim just wanted to discuss some personal stuff,’ said Strike, struggling to sound casual.

‘She sees you as the firm’s HR rep, does she?’ said Robin.

‘Christ knows,’ said Strike.

Robin sat down again and said,

‘So: the couple in the Peugeot. You don’t think—?’

‘Oz and Medina?’ said Strike, trying to concentrate (he thought he could count on Kim not telling Robin anything about Bijou – Kim, he was certain, would like nothing better than to think she and Strike had a slightly sordid secret that excluded his partner). ‘Got to be a chance.’

Robin picked up the photograph that showed the footprint in the blood around the corpse’s head.

‘That looks small for a man’s foot, doesn’t it?’

‘Yeah, I thought so, too,’ said Strike.

‘And it was *under* the body.’

‘Great. I mean, yeah,’ said Strike, still struggling to focus.

‘The mutilation, the sash – it looks like very deliberate staging,’ said Robin. ‘Why didn’t they get rid of the footprint?’

‘Maybe they didn’t notice it, then moved the body over it, while they were mutilating him.’

‘You know, if Medina *was* driving that Peugeot to pick Oz up after the killing, she might not have seen blood on him,’ said Robin. ‘Whoever did it waited for livor mortis to start setting in before they got started cutting the body up…’

Robin’s phone now buzzed, and she saw a text from her brother Stephen.

‘Everything OK?’ Strike asked, in response to Robin’s look of shock.

‘Yes, fine, my sister-in-law’s just had an emergency Caesarean… God above, the baby was nearly eleven pounds.’

‘Same as me,’ said Strike, still striving to sound normal.

‘When have you had an emergency Caesarean?’ said Robin.

‘No, I was nearly eleven pounds. It’s how I got my name.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘“Cormoran”. He was a Cornish giant. My mother said she was going to call me that, as a joke, my aunt took her seriously and said she couldn’t, so of course that’s what I got called, to piss off Joan.’

‘They’re calling him “Barnaby”,’ said Robin, looking at the picture of her new nephew, who was bright red, swaddled in a hospital towel, with a sumo wrestler’s indignant face. ‘Born on Friday the thirteenth.’

‘Who was?’ said Strike.

‘My nephew. Today’s Friday—’

‘Oh,’ said Strike. ‘Yeah, of course.’

He wasn’t a superstitious man, but he thought that might well change, after today.

49

Oh, many a month before I learn
Will find me starting still
And listening, as the days return,
For him that never will.

A. E. Housman
XLII: A. J. J., More Poems

Strike's conscience was whispering that he ought to tell Robin exactly what fresh, unforeseen calamity had descended upon him, that he had to warn her that another deluge of tabloid smut might be about to engulf them. However, after the story about the call girl, and his forced admission that he'd slept with Nina Lascelles, not to mention Robin's rape being made public on the back of his newsworthy love life, Strike didn't much fancy adding to the already unsavoury heap of circumstances in his disfavour that there was a remote chance – *please, God, a fucking remote chance* – he'd fathered a child with a woman he detested. A primitive sense of self-interest therefore shouted conscience down: he'd fix things without Robin ever having to know.

At a quarter past twelve, the two partners left the office for lunch in Dean Street. The day was cold and bright, the sun overhead a dazzling platinum coin trying to burn its way through the cloud cover. Trying to dissemble his new state of acute anxiety, Strike said,

'Looks like we can rule out Wright being killed in a fight that got out of hand. Someone stoved in the back of his head while he had his back turned. That was no accident.'

'No,' said Robin, 'which must make it more likely the mutilation, the masonic sash and the hallmark were planned, pre-murder.'

‘How many people would you say know A. H. Murdoch’s hallmark?’

‘Not many,’ said Robin, ‘but the Salem Cross is a masonic symbol, too.’

‘True,’ said Strike. He remembered the scarlet letter ‘G’ that had been painted on the office street door at New Year. ‘Any luck finding a new Land Rover?’

‘No,’ said Robin, ‘they’re all way out of my price range, even second hand… have we had any more calls from that Scottish Gateshead, by the way? The Golden Fleece person?’

‘Nothing since New Year,’ said Strike.

His mobile rang. He tugged it out of his pocket, saw that Pat was calling him. Afraid that Bijou, who no longer had his mobile number, was trying to reach him at the office, he switched his phone to mute.

‘Lucy,’ he said to Robin. ‘I’ll call her back. On that subject… we’ve just sold Ted and Joan’s house. I was thinking: the business could pay for part of a Land Rover, and I could loan you the rest.’

‘Wh—? You can’t do that!’

‘Yeah, I can. The money’s just going to sit in my account, I haven’t got any use for it at the moment.’

Robin’s immediate thought was of Murphy, and what he’d think of her taking a loan of this size from Cormoran Strike. He was bound to see it as another bond between them, another commitment of the type she’d never yet made to him. And yet she felt strangely vulnerable and bereft without her own car, her own means of – the word ‘escape’ rose in her mind, and was dismissed.

Quo Vadis, the large black-fronted restaurant and private members’ club where Decima had booked lunch, was now within view. Realising she hadn’t yet responded to what, by any standard, was a very generous offer, Robin said,

‘Strike, thank you, but you can’t. It’s too much.’

‘You need your own car and I don’t think any business manager would advise us to keep hiring them for you.’

‘But—’

‘The Land Rover was bloody handy, ’specially for long journeys and trips outside London.’

‘But even second hand, they cost—’

‘I know what they cost. We’ll see how much the accountant’ll let you

charge against the business and I'll make up the difference. We can have a loan agreement if it makes you feel any better.'

'But it could take ages to pay you back.'

Good, thought Strike, but aloud he said,

'So? I've just told you, I haven't got any use for the money right now.'

'It's *really* generous of you,' said Robin, and she thought with some longing of a second-hand Defender 90 she'd spotted online just the previous day. 'But—'

'Christ's sake, I'm not offering you a kidney,' said Strike, and Robin laughed.

They entered the club. The foyer had blood red walls. At the reception, they gave Decima's name and were led upstairs, past the entrance to a large restaurant with white walls and leather seats around tables, then into a small private room called the Library, which had dark blue walls, book shelves and orb-shaped lamps.

Decima was already sitting at the round table, wearing a loose black dress. She'd lost a lot of weight since she and Strike had last met; her large brown eyes were shadowed, but she'd brushed her hair and dyed its grey roots. Her air was of a creature who'd been forcibly flushed out of their burrow into the daylight. Strike, who'd been dreading having to watch Decima breastfeed, registered that there was no baby present.

'You haven't brought—?'

'Lion? No, I've got a local girl babysitting,' said Decima, and she glanced down at the phone lying face up beside her. 'He'll be OK, I expressed plenty of milk for him.'

This fell into the category of too much information as far as Strike was concerned, but Robin said, smiling,

'Have you got any pictures of him?'

'A couple,' said Decima. She brought up the photos of her child to show Robin.

'He's lovely,' said Robin, but in fact, to Robin, he just looked like a baby, any baby. He seemed smaller than the huge nephew whose picture she'd just been sent, but otherwise indistinguishable from most others. Yet unlike the baby pictures Robin was increasingly used to seeing from friends and family, these were all of the child alone, on a changing mat, or asleep in his cot. Of course, nobody lived with Decima to take a picture of her with

her child, and the father had never even seen him.

‘I didn’t want to leave him, I’ve never done it before,’ Decima said nervily, ‘but I had to come to town today, I needed to sort out some staffing problems. Hopefully they can get along without me for a bit longer.’

‘I like this club,’ said Robin, trying to put Decima at her ease.

‘I chose it because it’s near your office, and we can be private. My father hates it,’ Decima added.

‘I can’t see how anyone could dislike this,’ said Robin, looking around at the understated elegance of the place; the wood panelling, the fresh flowers.

‘My father doesn’t approve of any clubs except his own,’ said Decima. ‘Anyway, this is always full of media people. The *shitterati*, my father calls them.’

Robin might have laughed if Decima hadn’t looked so strained.

A waiter now arrived to take drinks orders.

‘Just water, please, I’m breastfeeding,’ said Decima, which again, as far as Strike was concerned, was information the waiter didn’t need.

When the door had closed again, Decima launched immediately into speech, looking at Strike rather than Robin, her tone shakily assertive.

‘There are a couple of things I want to say, if that’s OK.’

‘Of course,’ said Strike.

‘OK, well, firstly: you seem to think that, if Rupe managed to give Dredge some money, the man wouldn’t have hurt Rupe, but Zac owed Dredge much more than two thousand pounds. Dredge still had a motive to hurt Rupe: to send a message to Zac!’

‘That’s possible,’ said Strike, ‘but we’ve found no evidence to sugg—’

‘And if Rupe had two thousand pounds, he *must* have sold the nef! He obviously got an advance payment from Ramsay Silver, pending them selling it!’

‘The owner of Ramsay Silver says he’s only ever had one nef in stock,’ said Strike. ‘It was masonic, and taken the night Wright was murdered.’

‘But Ramsay would hardly *admit* to having my father’s nef, would he?’ said Decima. ‘It was stolen!’

‘Well, it’s notoriously difficult to prove a negative,’ said Strike, careful to keep his tone polite. ‘We can’t be a hundred per cent certain Kenneth Ramsay never bought your father’s nef, but I think it’s very unlikely. His

shop specialises in masonic pieces and—’

‘But then, where did Rupe get two thousand pounds from?’

‘I’m not denying he might have sold the nef somewh—’

‘But it’s kind of a huge coincidence that a body turns up in Ramsay Silver that *exactly* matches Rupe, who had a big bit of silver to sell, isn’t it?’ said Decima, her voice now rising in pitch. ‘And that Rupe had a drug dealer after him, who’d made threats to *literally* kill him?’

She’d said this already, of course, both in person and by email. Strike might have responded that the body no more exactly fitted Rupert Fleetwood than any of the other men whose pictures were pinned up on the corkboard in the office. He might even have pointed out that there had to be thousands of people up and down the country who had bits of silver they’d like to turn into ready cash, but that he saw no reason to suppose any of them had died in the silver vault, either. While he was trying to formulate a diplomatic response, Decima said,

‘And I wanted to say something else. I don’t believe Rupert went to Sacha Legard’s birthday party. Sacha’s either lying, or he’s made a mistake.’

‘I don’t think he can have made a mistake,’ said Strike. ‘There were a lot of witnesses. It’d be a very stupid lie to tell.’

‘But Rupe would *never* have gone there!’

‘Why d’you say that?’

‘Because a week before that party, Sacha was at Dino’s with some friends, and they were all talking about the party, and when Sacha looked up and realised it was Rupe serving him cocktails he looked really embarrassed, because he hadn’t told Rupe about it or given him an invitation or anything. But Rupe said to me he’d rather be dead in a *ditch* all night than go along to Claridge’s with Sacha and his friends. And the party was on the twenty-first, which was bang in the middle of the weekend Rupe and Zac were moving out of their house, so why on *earth* would Rupe have wanted to go to a party where he wasn’t wanted, when he was busy packing up and organising everything? And you said he went there to talk to Val – Val’s the *last* person he’d have wanted to see, after the business with the nef, and with Val being so *foul* about us being together!’

‘I thought it an odd thing for Rupert to do, myself,’ said Strike. ‘Apparently he spoke to your sister Cosima, as well as your broth—’

‘Cosima’s my half-sister,’ said Decima. Patches of red had appeared in her pale cheeks now, ‘and Rupe *hated* her, so that makes no sense, either!’

‘Why did he hate—?’

‘Because she’s entitled and spoiled. My father adores her and gives her everything she w—’

The waiter reappeared to take their food orders. Both Strike and Robin chose pasta at random.

When the waiter had disappeared, Strike said,

‘I’ve got a few new questions for you, Decima, if you wouldn’t mind.’

Now looking as though she suspected a trap, Decima said,

‘Go on.’

‘Did Rupert ever mention a man by the name of Calvin Osgood, or Oz?’

‘No. Why?’

‘There’s a possibility Oz was involved in the murder.’

‘He might have been one of Dredge’s friends!’ said Decima at once.

‘Possibly,’ said Strike, who wanted to stave off tears, if at all possible. ‘What about a girl called Sofia Medina?’

‘No,’ said Decima again, but now she looked worried. ‘Why?’

‘She might have been involved, too,’ said Strike.

‘No, I never heard him mention anyone called Sofia.’

‘OK, moving on: would you happen to have a phone number for Tish Benton? Her parents in Hampshire seem to be away and I can’t find a current address for her.’

‘Why d’you want to talk to Tish? *She* won’t know anything.’

‘Lorimer told me she’d become something of a confidant to Rupert before the household split up.’

‘I don’t think *that’s* true,’ said Decima at once.

‘Well, that’s what Lorimer said.’

‘No, I haven’t got Tish’s number… she and Zac got on Rupe’s nerves, bickering all the time when they were sharing the house. I don’t think she was ever close to Rupe,’ Decima added, with a tinge of fear that made Robin’s heart clench in pity.

‘What line of work is Tish in, do you know?’ asked Strike.

‘Marketing – she worked for some firm that makes handbags. I can’t remember which one.’

‘OK,’ said Strike, making a note. ‘Still on Lorimer: he suggested Rupert

might have gone back to Switzerland to be a ski instructor.'

'Rupe would *never* have gone to be a ski instructor – for God's sake,' said Decima, her voice suddenly raw. '*Never!* He didn't want to learn to ski in the first place, but they made him, at his bloody school. He hated it. Who wouldn't, after their parents died that way? Zac was supposed to be his *friend*, you'd think he'd realise that's the *last thing* Rupe would have wanted to do!'

'I thought it was unlikely myself,' said Strike. 'Now, this next question might seem strange, but Zacharias mentioned Rupert having a "lucky T-shirt".'

'Oh – yes, he did,' said Decima, and for a split second, their client almost smiled, but then her face fell. 'They found it in Wright's room?'

'No,' said Strike, 'but can you tell us about it?'

'Why?'

'Lorimer says Rupert tore it up before he disappeared.'

'What?' said Decima weakly. 'No, he… he'd *never* have done that.'

'Why not?'

'Because… he thought it was lucky, he loved it.'

'What made it lucky?' asked Robin.

'He was always wearing it when good things happened to him: when he heard he'd got a job in London and could come back to England, and when he passed his driving test – and – and he was w-wearing it – the night – I told him – I w-was pregnant…'

Oh God, thought Robin. *Oh shit.*

Decima burst into tears.

'*He can't have torn it up!*' she wailed, all restraint gone: Robin thought her voice was likely to have carried across the whole floor of the club. Robin reached instinctively across the table to offer comfort, but their client recoiled.

'No – no – don't – he *can't* have torn that T-shirt up, he *can't*…'

Strike's and Robin's eyes met, the former's slightly exasperated, Robin's anguished.

'He loved that T-shirt!' sobbed Decima, groping for her napkin. 'He loved it!'

'Can you describe it for us?' said Robin, with no real aim in view except to give Decima the sense that she was being taken seriously, and listened to,

and that the detectives were still actively trying to help.

'It's b-black,' sobbed Decima indistinctly, her face now concealed behind the napkin, 'with "White Lion" written on it—'

'"White Lion"?' repeated Robin.

'They were an eighties band,' sobbed Decima, 'glam rock… Rupe found the T-shirt in a second-hand shop, when he was a teenager… he had this bit of video… of his dad singing a White Lion song to him, when he was a baby… "Little Fighter", the song's called… and – and Rupe used to sing it… it was a sort of joke… sort of a personal theme song… that's why I called Lion "Lion"!'

'Right,' said Robin, and not caring what Strike thought, she added, 'well, it sounds as though Zacharias must have made a mistake. I can't see why Rupert would have torn up the T-shirt, if it meant that much to him.'

The door now opened again and the waiter reappeared with their food. He remained tactfully oblivious to Decima's tears as he set down her plate, while she wiped her face and blew her nose.

When the waiter had withdrawn, Strike said,

'You're probably aware the police considered other contenders for Wright, aside from Jason Knowles?'

Robin couldn't understand the abrupt change of subject, but Strike was acting entirely out of self-interest. He had a nasty feeling that immediately after this interview, Robin was going to tell him they had a moral duty to convince Decima that her boyfriend had never been William Wright, but he wasn't going to sacrifice the imminent trip to Crieff and Ironbridge; he needed that Lake District hotel. It was essential, therefore, that Robin heard from Decima's own lips that she wanted them to rule out all other possible contenders for the dead man in the vault.

'Yes, I… I knew they considered other people,' said Decima, still trying to stem her tears, 'Sir Daniel – Sir Daniel Gayle,' she added in parenthesis to Robin, 'he's a retired commissioner –' She said it with a pathetic insistence on his rank – *you see, I've got reliable sources of information, I'm well connected, I'm rational* – 'told me they were looking into a missing veteran, and some man who'd killed someone by accident, and run away.'

'One of them had killed someone by accident, had he?' said Strike. 'Can you remember a name?'

‘No. Sir Daniel said they were really only keeping the files open on those two men because they couldn’t get DNA for either of them. Why are you asking about them?’ she said, still trying to stem her tears with the napkin.

‘You said you wanted proof of who the man in the vault was,’ said Strike. ‘That necessarily means looking at the other possibilities, but if you’d rather we focused *solely* on Rupert, and what happened to him—’

‘He’s dead, *I know he’s dead!*’ said Decima, now with a trace of hysteria. ‘I *do* want certainty – but I *know* who it was in the vault…’

‘So you’d like us to try and rule out those two men?’ said Strike.

‘I suppose, if you *can*, it might make the police wake up and take Rupe more seriously,’ said Decima, wiping her eyes on the napkin. ‘I said to them, “you can take DNA from my baby, when he’s born, you can check it against Wright’s”… but after Anjelica said he was in New York, that was it, they stopped investigating… it was because we weren’t married, I know that… but he’s *not* in New York, he *can’t* be… I keep thinking I *hear* him…’

‘You hear him?’ said Robin, worried.

‘I think I hear him, coming up the drive… or calling my name… I dream he’s come back, but I know he’ll never come back… he’ll never see Lion… he’ll never know… never know how *sorry* I am…’

‘Sorry for what?’ said Robin.

‘The last time I ever spoke to him… I was *so angry* at him for stealing the nef, it was such a *stupid* thing to do… it’s my fault, it’s all my fault, I was angry and Rupe felt he had no other choice but to try and sort out the whole mess alone… *I killed him*,’ wailed Decima Mullins, ‘and one day I’ll have to explain to Lion what I did!’

50

… no sordid ambitions or pitiful greeds or base considerations can tempt a true Scottish Knight to dishonor…

Albert Pike
Morals and Dogma of the
Ancient and Accepted Rite of
Scottish Freemasonry

An hour after they'd sat down with Decima, and with no more information gained than they'd learned within the first quarter of an hour of lunch, Strike and Robin left Quo Vadis, both aware that their client was considerably unhappier for having met them. Decima had continued to insist over her untouched food that Rupert had been William Wright, reiterating the danger posed by Dredge the drug dealer, and dwelling with a kind of morbid despair on the height and build of the body in the vault, which, as she'd emphasised multiple times, *exactly* matched Rupert, down to height, weight and blood group.

While Strike had left the restaurant with Decima's official sanction for the trip to Crieff and Ironbridge, he could tell he was about to have trouble with Robin, who looked both angry and worried, so he suggested a coffee at his favourite local café, which was three minutes' walk away. Sure enough, once both were sitting at a round metal table outside Bar Italia, Robin said,

'I don't feel comfortable about this, Strike.'

'About what?' he said, prepared for battle. He'd been marshalling his arguments on the way to Frith Street. The sleeper compartments were booked. The hotel, with its lake views, was waiting.

'I think that woman's having a nervous breakdown. She's convinced herself Rupert's dead and it's her fault. We're just perpetuating—'

'If we don't do the job, someone else will,' said Strike.

‘Then we should put surveillance on Albie Simpson-White. I’m *sure* he knows where Rupert is.’

‘Decima’s been very clear that she doesn’t want Rupert found, if he’s alive.’

‘But – Strike, come on, that’s insane – you *saw* her back there—’

‘You’ll probably find a couple of people on any London bus who’re as deluded as she is. She’s not certifiable.’

‘She’s in sole charge of a baby – I’m sorry, I think we’ve got—’

‘A moral responsibility? I agree, which is why the quicker we prove that body wasn’t Fleetwood—’

‘You just want to keep investigating. You want to show up the Met.’

As soon as she heard the words escape her, Robin wished them unsaid. She hadn’t meant it; Murphy had spoken suddenly through her, or perhaps she was projecting onto Strike her guilt about the number of things she herself was concealing from her boyfriend.

‘“Show up the Met”?’ repeated Strike, staring at her.

‘I didn’t mean that,’ said Robin hurriedly. ‘I—’

‘You think this is all an ego trip for me, do you?’

‘No, of course not, I just think you’ve got really interested in that body in the vault, and you’re not thinking about what’s best for De—’

‘What’s best for her is that she stops blaming herself for getting Fleetwood murdered,’ said Strike, ‘because he *wasn’t* fucking murdered, and someone needs to prove it to her.’

‘But we *could* prove it, by following Albie Sim—’

‘If Mrs Two-Times hurries up and fucks someone else, or if Plug breaks the law, then yeah, we might have someone free to follow Simpson-White, but how exactly are we supposed to bill Decima for it, when she’s explicitly said that’s not what she wants?’

‘So we let her pour money into investigating the whereabouts of men with no connection to her?’

‘She agreed to it, back there—’

‘You know perfectly well you *made* her say it!’

‘We can’t take her money without being open about how we’re using it!’

And now Strike took the offensive; he hadn’t wanted to do it, because he’d hoped not to embark on their journey to Scotland with Robin angry at him, but with the trip itself in jeopardy he had no choice.

‘You agreed to take this case, knowing she’s almost certainly deluded about that body being Fleetwood.’

‘I know, but—’

‘The only thing that’s changed is that you’ve met her and feel sorry for her.’

‘Maybe that’s true,’ said Robin, ‘but—’

‘For her, it’s prove who that body was, or nothing. While Fleetwood’s uncontactable, she’s going to keep trying to prove it was him. If it’s not us, it’ll be someone else. The difference with us is, we don’t bill for bullshit. We’re actively trying to do what she wants, and if it turns out Wright was Semple, Powell or de Lion, job done – he wasn’t Fleetwood.’

‘And if we prove it’s none of them?’

‘Then she’s right: the police might take the possibility it was Fleetwood a bit more seriously, she’ll get her DNA test and bingo, she’s got certainty. You think I’m not trying to help her, but I am. If I can find a way of forcing Valentine to talk—’

‘Why’s it OK to force Valentine to talk to us, but not put surveillance on Albie? Why’s it OK to try and find that girl Tish who Rupert lived with?’

‘Because anything Fleetwood did and said *before* he disappeared could shed a light on whether he was intending to disguise himself as William Wright. We can justify that on her bills. What we *can’t* justify is trying to find the living Fleetwood, because the client’s expressly said she doesn’t want us to!’

‘But she’s going to have to face the possibility at some point!’

‘It isn’t our job to tell the client what she wants investigating,’ said Strike. ‘We aren’t fucking social workers.’

They sat in silence for nearly a minute, during which Robin drank some of her coffee, not looking at Strike.

‘I need to get going,’ she said. ‘I’ve got to get changed, I’m on Plug this evening. If I don’t see you before, I’ll meet you at Euston on Monday evening.’

Strike watched her go, unhappy with the way the conversation had gone, then pulled his muted mobile out of his pocket. He had another missed call from Pat, in addition to the one he’d ignored on the way to Quo Vadis. He called her back.

‘Hi,’ he said, ‘you’ve been trying to reach me.’

‘Yes,’ said Pat, ‘a woman called Bijou Watkins wants to talk to you.’

Strike knew Pat was aware who Bijou Watkins was, but he appreciated the pretence she’d forgotten the smattering of press connecting him with Bijou a few months previously.

‘OK,’ said Strike. ‘I’ve got her details. I’ll ring her now.’

‘Right-o,’ said Pat gruffly, and she hung up.

Strike contemplated Ronnie Scott’s jazz club, which lay almost opposite the café where he was sitting, thinking about what he was about to say. Then he took a lungful of nicotine vapour and called Bijou’s number.

51

… all I want's the thing
Settled for ever one way. As it is,
You tell too many lies and hurt yourself:
You don't like what you only like too much,
You do like what, if given you at your word,
You find abundantly detestable.

Robert Browning
Fra Lippo Lippi

'Hello?'

'It's me. Strike.'

'Oh, thank God,' said Bijou. 'Look, I'm sorry, I didn't want to have to drag you into this, but—'

'I know about the super-injunction. I know he thinks it's my kid.'

'Wh – how?'

'Because people have been fucking gossiping,' said Strike, 'exactly as you intended them to when you were trying to make Honbold jealous enough to leave his wife.'

'You don't underst—'

'Don't you *dare* fucking tell me I don't understand,' said Strike, his temper barely under control now he heard her loud, husky voice again, because it reminded him of the tedious hours he'd spent in her company, all in the service of two easy fucks, and of his own stupidity. 'Now, listen to me. He's having you followed.'

'*Andrew* is?'

'Who else?' said Strike, keeping his voice low with difficulty, because a hardy middle-aged couple had now, most inconveniently, decided to brave

the cold and sit at the next table. Abandoning his coffee, Strike got to his feet, shoved his vape pen back into his coat pocket and headed off in the direction of Denmark Street. ‘So there can’t be any face-to-face meetings between us, if that’s what you were calling to suggest.’

‘Oh God, oh God,’ moaned Bijou. ‘What does the person following me look like?’

‘How the fuck do I know? I’m just warning you, you need to live like an agoraphobic nun from now until you get the DNA test results.’

‘Andrew’s refusing to do a test! He’s *convinced* she’s yours!’

‘And she’s not?’

‘Of *course* she’s not!’

‘You’re sure about that?’

‘Yes, of *course* I am!’

‘Because since we last met, I’ve been filled in on an unpleasant bedroom habit of yours,’ said Strike mercilessly.

‘What d’you—?’

‘Used condoms. Bedroom bin. Do-It-Yourself.’

‘I *never*—’

‘That’s not what my source says, and I’m afraid I find them a lot more credible than you. I’ve also heard Honbold might have good reason to think he can’t get a woman pregnant.’

‘You mean the sulfasalazine? That only *lowers* sperm count, it doesn’t make you *infertile*!’

‘If,’ said Strike, ‘you deliberately got pregnant by me, because Honbold was firing blanks and you thought you’d be able to convince him the kid was his—’

‘*What do you think I am?*’

‘I know exactly what you are, which is why we’re having this fucking conversation. I warned you when you dragged me into your mess last time, I won’t take it lying down if this causes me even more fucking grief than it has already.’

‘You’re threatening a new mother!’ said Bijou shrilly. ‘How will *that* play in the press?’

‘You go to the press, I’ll be fighting fire with fucking nukes, so don’t you *dare* threaten me with the fucking papers. Honbold’s got to take a paternity test—’

‘He says he won’t do it unless I take him to court! He’s so angry – Cormoran, please, *please*, I need *you* to do it, so I can *prove* Ottolie’s his—’

‘Will I fuck,’ said Strike, incensed. ‘That implies I think I *might* be the fucking father, and when word of that leaks out—’

‘How would it leak out?’

‘Probably from you, because you tell everyone every-fucking-thing, you can’t keep your fucking mouth shut even when it’s in your own best interests. If you tell Honbold I’m giving a DNA sample, his every fucking suspicion will be confirmed—’

‘It won’t, it won’t, I’ll *tell* him you’re only doing it to *prove* you’re not the—’

‘Unless you’re lying, unless you think the kid *might* be mine, you don’t need my DNA. Tell Honbold you’ll take him to court if necessary and see how his fucking super-injunction holds up then.’

‘But if I do that, he’ll *never*—’

‘Marry you? You still think you’re going to be Mrs Andrew Honbold, after this? Tell him you’ll see him in court, and *leave me the fuck out of it.*’

Seething, Strike cut the call.

52

… while acts are from their motives judged,
And to one act many most unlike motives,
This pure, that guilty, may have each impell'd—
Power fails us to try clearly if that cause
Assign'd us by the actor be the true one…

Matthew Arnold
Merope: A Tragedy

Robin's Friday really only ended in the early hours of Saturday morning, when the lights in Plug's mother's house in Camberwell went out, and she knew her target, who'd done a lot of shouting that afternoon, had finally gone to bed. She drove home through the icy night in her hired Mazda, yawning regularly, thinking against her will of a multitude of stressful things, Decima Mullins foremost among them.

Strike might well be correct in saying the fragile woman obsessed with the corpse in the silver shop would only hire somebody else if they refused to investigate for her, but this was the first time Robin had felt grubby just for doing her job, and she didn't need more things on her conscience. The imminent trip to Crieff and Ironbridge was already weighing on it, because she'd deliberately obfuscated their precise destinations to Murphy, leaving him with the vague impression that they were looking for Rupert Fleetwood somewhere in Northumbria. Worst of all were the small ripples of mingled apprehension and excitement she felt when she pictured that Lake District hotel.

To compound Robin's general and specific stresses, Murphy was now pressuring her to commit to viewing at least one of the houses he kept forwarding her, and a stream of information about her new nephew

appeared on her phone every ten minutes, or so it felt, meaning that Robin had to fake the delight and fascination her family seemed to expect of her, and would need to find time in her busy schedule to buy and send a gift.

Babies seemed to be everywhere. Jenny and the miniature sumo called Barnaby; Robin's cousin Katie, to whose first son she was godmother, had just announced her second pregnancy; the soon-to-be-born child of the warring Martin and Carmen; Robin's policewoman friend, Vanessa Ekwensi, was due to give birth shortly; and Lion Fleetwood, photographed looking frail and startled on his changing mat.

Don't think about it. Ever since the shock of the ectopic pregnancy had worn off, Robin had been repressing a treacherous tendency in herself to dwell on the fact that what had split open her fallopian tube had been an actual human being. Better by far to think of it as something akin to a ruptured appendix, not somebody who might, but for untreated chlamydia, have made his or her appearance next August, irrevocably changing Robin's life. *Don't think about it, what's the point?*

Robin set off to take over surveillance on Jim Todd at midday. This was the first time Robin had followed the cleaner, and she'd donned her warmest coat, a useful beanie that concealed her hair, plus a scarf that was not only useful protection against the very cold day but handy should she need to bury her face in it. Shah had already texted Robin Todd's current location: a café on Kingsway. The agency had at last, by dint of watching the cleaner, found out which Lebanese restaurant he lived over, and discovered that he rarely emerged from the building before noon on the days when he wasn't cleaning. Robin remained alert for anyone following her, as she had ever since the unknown man had forced the rubber gorilla into her hand in Harrods, but was certain nobody had.

'Bloody freezing, isn't it?' were Shah's first words when Robin joined him. 'He's been in there half an hour. Late breakfast.'

'OK, thanks,' said Robin.

She expected Shah to leave immediately, because he had a wife and two small children at home, and probably didn't want to miss too much of the weekend, but to her surprise he lingered.

'Listen,' he said, 'I hope I'm not speaking out of turn here, but I wanted to ask you something.'

'Go on,' said Robin, wondering whether she was about to hear another

complaint about Kim Cochran.

‘Why’s Bijou Watkins calling Strike?’

‘When did Bijou Watkins call him?’ asked Robin, surprised.

‘Yesterday. I was filing expenses at the office yesterday afternoon and I heard Pat passing on the message.’

‘Oh,’ said Robin. ‘Right. I… I don’t know. I mean, they broke up. Are you sure Pat said Bijou—?’

‘It’s not a name that sounds like much else,’ said Shah.

‘No,’ said Robin. ‘That’s true.’

‘We don’t need Strike messing around with Bijou bloody Watkins again,’ said Shah. ‘You missed all that, but for fuck’s sake—’

‘What did I miss?’ said Robin.

‘*Private Eye*, rumours he’d helped her bug her married lover’s office. And she’s pregnant now, it was in the *Mail*, they did a sympathy profile of his ex-wife – the papers hate Honbold, he’s the chair of that Campaign for Ethical Journalism thing. We don’t need more publicity about Strike’s sex life, not after that fucking call girl story, and the thing about him shagging women who get evidence for him.’

The anxious knot in Robin’s belly tightened. Loyalty to Strike was conflicting with the desire to assuage Shah’s worries. They didn’t want to lose Shah: he was too good a detective.

‘Watkins could’ve been calling for some professional help,’ Robin temporised. ‘Not for any personal reason.’

‘Then he’d better have bloody well turned her down. We’ve got enough clients, we don’t need women he’s shagging.’

‘He doesn’t sleep with clients,’ said Robin.

‘He’d better not start,’ said Shah. ‘Sorry,’ he added curtly, ‘I know this isn’t your fault, but my wife believed that call girl story. She keeps asking me why I’m working for such a scumbag.’

‘That story wasn’t true,’ said Robin.

‘That’s what I told my wife,’ said Shah, ‘so it’d be good if Strike could keep his nose clean, going forwa – there’s Todd.’

Robin glanced across the road. The almost spherical cleaner, with his shining white pate and tufts of hair over his ears, had just emerged from Black Sheep Coffee, and was shuffling off down the street.

‘See you later,’ Robin told Shah, and she set off, trailing Todd on the

opposite side of the road.

Confused and worried by what she'd just heard, Robin wanted to call Strike immediately and ask what was going on, but Todd was heading towards Holborn Tube, which was only a minute's walk away, and sure enough, he crossed the four lanes of traffic ahead of her and disappeared into the station.

As she descended the escalator, keeping several people between herself and Todd, Robin mentally reviewed the evidence that Strike and Bijou's liaison had ended months previously. He'd told her explicitly that he'd never considered Bijou a girlfriend. He hadn't concealed Bijou's pregnancy from Robin; on the contrary, not long after Robin had come out of Chapman Farm, Strike had told her the child was Honbold's, with a perfect indifference that supported the impression that he couldn't care less about mother or baby.

So perhaps Bijou really did want to hire a detective?… except that that didn't ring true… Andrew Honbold wouldn't want her hiring Strike, not after her name and the detective's had been bracketed together in *Private Eye*… no, thought Robin, the unpleasant wriggling sensation in her stomach intensifying, there was something up, something Strike hadn't told her.

Todd took the first available train east and sat down, short, fat legs splayed, apparently playing a game on his phone, while Robin stood and swayed, holding on to a ceiling hand strap, ready to move when Todd did, her thoughts a long way away from the egg-shaped man whose reflection she was watching in the dark window.

53

Ill as yet the eye could see
The eternal masonry,
But beneath it on the dark
To and fro there stirred a spark.

A. E. Housman
XXXI: Hell Gate, Last Poems

Strike, who had Saturday afternoon off, was currently standing in the inner office, once again contemplating the noticeboard where material relevant to the silver vault case was pinned, which he'd just rearranged.

He was attempting to drown out the low hum of dread that had dogged him since his call with Bijou in work. His eyes were currently fixed on the partial footprint found beneath Wright's body. Several things about it had struck him, before these had been driven from his mind by the news about Bijou Watkins.

Robin was right: the print had been made by a relatively small foot. Although it was only partial, it was very distinct, and this seemed strange, because it had been found underneath the body, which surely meant it should have been smudged. Yet if it had had time to dry before the body had been moved, Strike could see no reason why the killer hadn't spotted it and wiped it away.

He'd noticed something else about the print, too. The tread of the trainer that made it was perceptibly worn on the right side. Strike happened to know a lot about gait assessment, because it had formed part of his rehabilitation post his amputation. He'd stood on a light box while the evenness of his footing was evaluated, as part of the adjustment for his prosthesis, and in consequence he'd learned something about the different

ways soles wore down if the owner possessed anything in the nature of an imbalanced walk. Unless he was mistaken – and the orthopaedic article he'd just read seemed to confirm his tentative hypothesis – the person who'd worn this trainer might have had a slight limp.

Strike reached for the pad on the table. Flipping it open, he saw what looked like a note Robin had written to herself: PRESENT BARNABY. Strike was immediately reminded of Shanker, and the mysterious 'Barnaby's' where bodies went; but then he remembered that 'Barnaby' was the name of her new nephew. Flipping to a fresh page, he wrote the single word 'LIMP?' on it, tore it out and pinned it beneath the picture of the footprint.

Strike had replaced the paragraph about Reata Lindvall, the Swedish woman who'd been murdered in Belgium in 1998, with pictures of the murdered Sofia Medina. The Spanish student pouted down at him, her skin the colour of dark honey against her black lingerie, her hair falling in shining waves either side of her face. The provocative vacuity of her expression drained her of all personality.

Beside Medina's picture were the three photographs Kim had procured of William Wright's corpse. Strike examined the detailing on the sash for a few seconds, then sat down at his desk, switched on his computer monitor and went to search Amazon for A. H. Murdoch's ebooks, purchasing what appeared to be the man's best known work, *Secrets of the Craft*.

Strike assumed that the number 32, which was picked out in red beads on the sash on the corpse, referred to one of the masonic degrees, and quickly discovered that he was right. Achieving degree thirty-two gave a Freemason the rank of Sublime Prince of the Royal Secret, was symbolised by wavy swords and a Teutonic cross bearing an eagle that also appeared on the sash, and was superseded in status only by the highest degree of all, Sovereign Grand Inspector-General.

Long since out of copyright, Murdoch's book hadn't been properly formatted, but scanned into digital form, so that the occasional word was illegible. Strike skim read the entry under Degree Thirty-Two.

> The Sublime Prince of the Royal Secret becomes with the degree's endowment none other than a Christian Knight, the spiritual and

legitimate successor of the Knights Templar…

Strike scrolled on, until he spotted the word ‘silver’.

> When she elevates and illuminates, a pure and chaste woman is as silver, or the moon. The […] Freemason is sure never to mistake base lead for the nobler metal, else he may find himself forever entombed in the dungeons of lust and licentiousness.

The last line brought back uncomfortable thoughts of Bijou Watkins, but before Strike could sink further into gloom, his mobile rang again.

‘Strike.’

‘Ah’ve got tae get out of here,’ said a weak Glaswegian voice.

‘Barclay?’ said Strike, frowning. ‘You all right?’

‘Ah’m fucked. Ye’ll have tae get someone else fer Plug.’

‘Have you been bloody spotted again?’

‘Naw, Ah’ve ate a fuckin’ prawn…’

‘You’ve *what?*’

‘Ate… a fuckin’ prawn… the fuckin’ sandwich mustae bin mislabelled… *fuck…*’

Strike heard retching.

‘What are you, allergic?’

‘Aye, Ah’m fuckin’ allergic,’ came Barclay’s weak response. ‘I need tae get tae a fuckin’ bog…’

‘All right, I’ll take over Plug,’ said Strike. ‘Where is he?’

Barclay retched again then gasped,

‘Camberwell. At his mum’s.’

‘Right, you get away,’ said Strike, getting to his feet. ‘Sure you don’t need—?’

‘Naw, the wife’s comin’… I cannae drive like—’

The call terminated as Barclay began to vomit again.

54

A man may be a good sort of man in general, and yet a very bad man in particular: good in the Lodge and bad in the world; good in public, and bad in his family; good at home, and bad on a journey…

Albert Pike
Morals and Dogma of the
Ancient and Accepted Scottish
Rite of Freemasonry

Robin was still tailing Jim Todd, who'd got off the first train at Liverpool Street and changed on to the Circle Line, which, for reasons so far undiscovered, appeared to be by far his favourite.

Todd remained on the new train for nearly an hour, intermittently playing the game on his phone and glancing around at the surrounding passengers. Once or twice he shifted seat, although Robin couldn't see why he'd done so. He didn't appear to have spotted her, but as a precaution she made small changes to her appearance every now and then while Todd was looking away: putting on the pair of clear-lensed glasses she kept for exactly this kind of situation, taking off her beanie hat and turning it the other way out, so that the red fleece showed rather than the black. She also changed position, sometimes sitting, sometimes standing: anything to stop him realising there was another person in this carriage who seemed to enjoy going round in circles just as much as he did.

All the time Robin was doing these things, and watching Todd, she kept feeling little ripples of anxiety about Strike and Bijou Watkins. It was absurd to think there was still something going on between them, wasn't it? Bijou was pregnant by another man…

Aldgate… Tower Hill… Monument…

Yet Strike had form on hiding things about his sex life, as Robin knew

only too well…

Gloucester Road… High Street Kensington… Notting Hill Gate…

Bijou was pregnant. Their affair had been a year ago, hadn't it? Perhaps not quite a year… and there was that horrible thing Ilsa had told Robin, when trying to persuade her to talk to Strike about the ill-advised affair… about the lengths to which Bijou had gone, to try and get pregnant by her married lover… Strike didn't want children, he'd always been clear about that…

Baker Street… Great Portland Street… Euston Square…

The train's doors opened and closed. A gaggle of teenaged girls entered the compartment, clutching their high street purchases, chatting and laughing. Robin watched them, feeling suddenly old in her practical layers of clothing. Two of the girls were barelegged, their flesh mottled beneath the miniskirts not even an icy January day would scare them out of wearing.

Todd stood up. Robin altered her own position, the better to keep watching him in case he was about to get off the train. Todd was now clinging to a hand strap, still looking at his phone.

Farringdon…

An elderly woman rose from her seat right beside the teenaged girls and moved slowly towards the doors, to be ready when they opened. With surprising speed for such a rotund man, Todd took the vacated seat. Now he was positioned right in front of the mottled, miniskirted legs, his small feet crossed, his head bent over his phone, seemingly intent on his game.

Barbican…

And seconds before she saw the proof, Robin realised why Jim Todd liked to ride the Circle Line for hours, and she knew why none of the other subcontractors had yet spotted him doing it: because opportunities would be rare in the bitter winter months…

He stealthily extended his phone so that it was underneath the skirt of the miniskirted girl standing with her legs apart for balance. Robin made an involuntary movement, and either this, or some sense that he was being watched, caused Todd to look round, straight into Robin's eyes.

'OI!'

Robin wasn't the only person who'd seen it: a tall black man wearing gigantic headphones was pointing.

'I SAW THAT, YOU FUCKING NONCE!'

The man in headphones tripped over a neighbour's rucksack as he lunged for the cleaner and Robin was blocked on one side by the agitated teenaged girls, one of whom was saying fearfully, 'What did he do? What did he do?' and, on another, by a clutch of people craning their heads to see what the commotion was. Todd was already at the door as the train pulled into Barbican station; he plunged out into the crowd waiting to board and disappeared from sight.

'Excuse me – excuse me!' Robin said loudly, trying to pass. Finally managing to fight her way out of the door, she looked frantically up and down the platform, but Todd was nowhere to be seen.

55

He had the elemental heartlessness of the savage, which recognises no sufferings but its own…

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

Strike had arrived outside Plug's mother's house in Vestry Road to take over from the stricken Barclay. The sun had set and the puddle of pinkish vomit in the gutter he'd noticed when he arrived had faded into darkness.

Just as he was settling in for what was likely to be an evening spent in his BMW, the front door of the house opened, and Strike's target emerged alone, bundled up against the cold in a thick black jacket. To Strike's displeasure, Plug didn't get into his car, but set off on foot, giving the detective no choice but to follow suit.

Wishing he'd had the foresight to bring gloves, Strike followed Plug along Peckham High Street. He soon revised his initial guess that Plug was going to get a takeaway, because the man kept walking, eventually disappearing beneath the archway of Queen's Road Peckham station.

On the platform, Plug approached a second man, who was stockily built, with an air of barely repressed aggression and an almost shaven head.

Strike's suspicions about Plug's regular trips to the compound outside Ipswich, the businesslike associations with other rough-looking men and the strange episode of the creature in the shed were as far as ever from being proven. This was the first time he'd been in a situation where he might be able to listen in on the man's conversation, so he muted his mobile, and ambled closer to the twosome, whose conversation was currently desultory, and conducted in low voices.

'Wossee offerin'?'

'Grand,' said Plug.

‘Worf more.’

‘’S’what I told him. She’s got a lot more in ’er.’

The two men fell silent, both looking truculent. It was hard to tell whether they disliked each other or were bosom friends; they belonged to that category of Englishman whose love and hatred bore almost identical faces.

The train arrived and Strike followed the men into the carriage. It was crowded, so it didn’t seem unnatural for him to choose a seat near them, pretending to be texting, but actually making notes on as much of the conversation as he could hear.

‘’Eard you ’ad trouble up Ipswich.’

‘Not trouble. People, ’s’all. But they ain’ bin back.’

The train moved off. Strike strained his ears.

‘Gaz’s bitch might do it.’

‘Fuck that,’ said Plug.

‘She’s lookin’ good.’

‘If you wanna waste your money,’ sneered Plug.

The train rattled on towards London Bridge.

56

I took my question to the shrine that has not ceased from speaking,
The heart within, that tells the truth and tells it twice as plain;
And from the cave of oracles I heard the priestess shrieking
That she and I should surely die and never live again.

A. E. Housman
XXV: The Oracles, Last Poems

Robin had chased along passages and searched crowded escalators, but found no sign of Jim Todd. It probably wasn't the first time he'd been spotted upskirting, and maybe he had strategies for such contingencies, had hiding places in his favourite Circle Line stations, and knew the quickest ways to escape above ground. Shortly after she'd given up looking for him, Robin saw the young man who'd also spotted what Todd was up to, and the teenaged girls, now tearful and agitated, talking to an Underground official, but Robin knew nothing would be done. The crime was too commonplace and Todd was gone. What was the woman in the navy blue uniform supposed to do about it?

With a stitch in her side from all the running she'd just done, Robin leaned up against the tiled wall of the station platform, watching Saturday-night drinkers and diners pass, and imagined the snide comments Kim was going to make when she heard that Robin had lost Todd at Barbican, just as she'd lost Plug in Victoria station. Then – because it had been preying on her mind for hours now, and even the revelation of what Todd was up to, riding the Circle Line for days at a time, couldn't drive it out of her head – she thought about Strike and Bijou.

She had an excuse to call him, now. Strike had the evening off, so he was probably at home. She'd tell him about Todd's upskirting, then slip in a

casual question about why Bijou was calling the office. She'd tell him Shah had been worried about it, frame the whole thing as a personnel matter. Thus resolved, Robin returned to the escalator and, in spite of her stitch, walked up it, keen to call Strike sooner rather than later.

Out on dark Aldersgate Street, she rang Strike, but the call went straight to voicemail. She left no message, but tried again, with the same result.

Something that was worse than anxiety pierced her. It was Saturday night. Where was he, with his phone turned off? Robin watched the passing traffic for a few more seconds, then turned and headed back into the station, and as she descended the escalator, she remembered the night Strike had come over to the flat to hear what Murphy had to tell them about Jason Knowles, and how he'd said 'I'm meeting Bijou'. Perhaps that hadn't been a joke. Perhaps he *had* been off to meet Bijou.

Murphy had wanted to see her tonight, but she'd had to work, so they'd agreed to spend Sunday together. The thought of the following day spent with her boyfriend ought to be cheering her, should mitigate this awful mixture of fear and anger, but it didn't. Robin wanted to look Strike in the face as she told him about Todd, and asked him about Bijou Watkins.

She knew as soon as she entered Denmark Street that Strike wasn't there, because the lights were all off, both in the attic flat and in the office. Nevertheless, Robin called him again while looking up at the windows. The call went to voicemail once more.

He's out with her.

You don't know that.

Then why isn't he picking up his phone?

Robin let herself in through the street door and climbed the three flights of metal stairs to Strike's attic flat, knowing it would be fruitless, but determined to make sure. She knocked on the door, but there was no answer, so she descended to the office level, unlocked the glass door and turned off the alarm.

In the inner office, she switched on the light, vaguely registering changes to the noticeboard since she'd last laid eyes on it. She checked the time on her phone: it was far earlier than she'd expected; her long day, and the darkness of the sky outside the window, had made her imagine it was nine o'clock at least. Heart thudding in her throat, she sat down in her usual seat and remained motionless for a minute or two, thinking. Then, taking a

deep breath, she phoned Ilsa Herbert.

‘Hi, Robin,’ said Ilsa, answering after a few rings. ‘How’re you?’

Robin was certain she heard a trace of caution.

‘Been better,’ said Robin truthfully. ‘How’re you? How’s Benjy?’ she asked of her godson.

‘Walking,’ said Ilsa, ‘which means he’s tugging on leads of table lamps and headbutting the coffee table twice a day, so that’s nice and restful. What’s going on?’

‘Not much,’ said Robin, with faux lightness. ‘Kind of a fraught time, one way or another. Busy at work and the Land Rover’s packed up.’ She swallowed. ‘You know about Bijou Watkins?’

There was a very slight pause. Robin could picture Ilsa’s wary expression.

‘What about her?’

‘About her and Strike,’ said Robin.

‘Has… he’s told you?’ said Ilsa, and Robin’s pulse quickened even further.

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Oh, thank God,’ said Ilsa, sounding immensely relieved. ‘He asked me not to tell you, said he was going to do it, but I *literally* said to Nick half an hour ago, “I bet he doesn’t.” Has he spoken to her yet?’

‘I think he’s doing it now,’ said Robin, whose ears were ringing.

‘Meeting her face to face?’

‘Yes, I think so.’

‘Oh God,’ said Ilsa, and she turned her mouth from the phone to tell her husband, ‘Robin says he’s meeting Bijou tonight.’ Ilsa came back to the receiver. ‘I tried to warn him, you know I did! If it *is* his… he says it can’t be, but I told you about her little condom trick, didn’t I?’

‘The thing where she took them out of the bin?’ said Robin, the shrill whine in her ears becoming louder. ‘Yes, you told me.’

‘Between you and me, the gossip around chambers is that it *is* Corm’s, that she realised she was pregnant after he’d ditched her, so tried to pass it off as Honbold’s, but that’s probably what people *want* to have happened. Neither of them are popular – Bijou and Honbold, I mean. Did Corm tell you about the super-injunction?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Robin.

‘I’m amazed Honbold got it through. If your public persona’s all about personal ethics and family values, and you’ve cheated on your wife and want to wriggle out of your obligations to a daughter you’ve fathered out of wedlock, that’s pretty solid public interest. But Honbold’s got friends in high places, and he didn’t get to be as rich as he has without knowing how to argue a case. He must’ve persuaded them there’s no story, but that won’t hold for long, the papers will be *straining* at the leash. I suppose it’s going to come down to a DNA test and then the papers will be able to let rip, one way or another… *God*, I hope she’s not Corm’s.’

‘So it’s a daughter, is it?’ said Robin’s voice, from some far-off place that didn’t seem to be connected to either her numb mouth or her paralysed brain.

‘Yes. I’d say she can’t be his, because Bijou was trying to trap Honbold for *ages*, but – I hate saying this – she really did fancy Corm. It wasn’t a random thing. I think she quite liked the idea of being Mrs Cormoran Strike, but then he ditched her, obviously, so it was back to Honbold.’

‘Right,’ said Robin’s disembodied voice.

‘I’d feel sorry for her, it’s no joke, being thrown over right after you’ve given birth, but she’s so obnoxious I can’t help feeling she’s got what was coming to her. But I feel for Corm… I know he’s a dickhead, but he used protection, and condoms are, what—?’

‘Ninety-eight per cent effective,’ said Robin like an automaton, ‘if used correctly.’

‘Unless someone fishes them out of a bin. *God*, it’s such a bloody mess.’

‘Well, nobody made him do it,’ said Robin, whose throat was rapidly constricting. ‘Nobody forces him to sleep with women and dump them, just because they’re willing, and he wants a bit of no-strings fun.’

‘I know, but for it to blow up in his face like this…’

‘Ilsa,’ said Robin, who didn’t think she was going to be able to sustain the pretence that she was untroubled much longer, ‘I’m going to have to go, sorry.’

‘Oh,’ said Ilsa, sounding disconcerted. ‘Why – did you just call for a chat, or—?’

Shit.

‘Oh God, sorry,’ said Robin, feigning absent-mindedness, though her traitorous throat was closing even as she spoke, and her eyes were stinging,

‘I just wondered if you were free for a drink some time this week.’

‘Not this week,’ said Ilsa, ‘I’m in court, we’re snowed under. Could I text you about the following week?’

‘Great,’ said Robin, but it came out as a kind of squeak.

‘Robin?’ said Ilsa.

She couldn’t immediately answer.

‘Robin?’ said Ilsa again, now sounding worried. ‘You did know everything I’ve just told you, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, of course,’ Robin forced herself to say, but there was no dissembling the fact that she was crying, now. ‘I just… it’s just a mess, like you said. Please don’t tell Strike I called you to talk about it, he’ll be annoyed… especially if he knows I got upset.’

‘No, of course I won’t tell him,’ said Ilsa sympathetically. ‘I’m really sorry, Robin, I know this is a nightmare for the agency, especially after those stories in the press.’

‘Yes,’ said Robin, ‘that’s the problem… but hopefully… well, we’ll wait and see what the DNA test says.’

‘I’ll call you about a drink, week after next,’ said Ilsa.

‘Great,’ said Robin. ‘Bye, then.’

She hung up, then slumped down onto the desk, face in her arms, and a dam broke inside her, and the unshed tears of months poured forth at last, as the confused tangle of feelings inside her, some acknowledged, but most long repressed, burst free of all constraint.

So Strike might have just become a father, along with Matthew, Stephen, Martin, Shah and Barclay, whereas she… she’d tried not to think about her baby, because it had been just a bunch of cells, hadn’t it? Not an actual human being that was hers, but still, she’d been robbed of what so many other women did deliberately and with ease, even if it meant a grubby tryst with a bit of slimy rubber in a bin; no, her child had been created through carelessness and ignorance, then there’d been agony for her, and death for the tiny person who’d lodged in her fallopian tube, forever barred from meeting its mother, and Robin hadn’t wanted that baby, but she mourned it now, full of shame that it had both lived and died…

And Strike, for whom she had feelings she ought not to have, feelings she’d tried to extinguish but which lately had been gaining power over her again – he’d given her that bracelet, and he harped on Charlotte’s suicide

note, and he offered her loans for a Land Rover, simply to keep her bound to him and the agency; it was all cynical, he wasn't honest with her, he didn't warn her that fresh scandals were going to explode like landmines under her feet. He didn't want what Murphy was offering her; no, all he wanted was to keep sneaking around and hiding massive secrets about other women, and maybe she'd find out in another year's time that he'd slept with Kim Cochran, and there'd be more sordid fallout and another shattering discovery for Robin, who needed to stop, now, for ever, feeling anything other than friendship for him – though right now she barely felt that…

And she cried out of guilt, because she hid so many things from Murphy, especially the biggest of the lot: that she felt as she shouldn't about her detective partner, there was no denying it now, but that had to end, today…

How many times was she going to torture herself about his real feelings, while he was busy concealing huge secrets from her? How much of her life was she going to put on hold, in hope and expectation – she was admitting it to herself, now – that Cormoran Strike would become sincere and straightforward, and tell her plainly what he wanted and felt? He'd *shown* her what he wanted, he didn't need to say it: a string of good-looking women, to be discarded when no longer convenient, and Robin on tap to help him run the successful business that was now being threatened by his own actions. What kind of starry-eyed fool expected that man to change, at the age of forty-two, into somebody who wanted monogamy and a settled home life?

At last, taking deep breaths, Robin sat up, wiping her stinging, swollen eyes on the sleeve of her coat, then went to fetch toilet roll from the bathroom on the landing, to blow her nose and wipe the desk which was now smeared with tears and mascara. Then she sat back down, still hiccoughing occasionally, with a headache burgeoning and the long Tube ride home still to come.

She wasn't going to betray Ilsa; two could play the duplicitous game of not admitting what they knew, but she couldn't stand speaking to Strike, not until she'd got herself under better control.

The office phone rang. Robin didn't want to answer: she didn't want Strike to know she'd been here. Nevertheless, she automatically switched the phone to speaker so she could hear the message, if there was one. She listened as Pat's gravelly voice informed the caller that they'd reached the

Strike and Ellacott Detective Agency, that office hours were nine to five, and that they could leave a message. There was a beep, and then a rasping male voice spoke.

'You were told to leave it. *Fucking leave it*, or you'll get what's comin' to ya, ya fuckin' bitch!'

A click: the caller had hung up.

Eyes still smarting, Robin stared at the phone. Even in her current state, she thought she recognised that voice as the same one that had hissed in her ear '*it'll 'appen again unless you fuckin' give this up,*' while grasping her neck in Harrods. She thought about Todd (the upskirting incident seemed hours ago) and the way he'd looked directly into her eyes, almost as though he'd sensed her watching him, but it hadn't been Todd who'd thrust the gorilla into her hand; she'd have felt his massive belly pressing into her back.

You were told to leave it. The unknown man knew she wasn't 'leaving it'. How? Had Todd called someone and told them he'd been followed by Robin? Was the caller watching the office right now? It wouldn't be the first time someone had turned up in Denmark Street to menace the agency. She could well imagine both Strike and Murphy barking at her to be careful, to call a cab, to take this threat seriously, as men did, when they were worried, when they'd rather turn their aggression on you than assess the situation dispassionately, but if the man on the other end of the phone genuinely wanted to hurt her, why leave messages first? Would they be sensible to track her to the office, after what had just happened?

Dismissing the call from her mind, Robin switched on her computer. She needed to find something she could use to get out of the trip to Scotland on Monday night…

Forty minutes later, she had two sound reasons, which had come so easily she felt as though some kindly fate had reached out through the screen to pat her on the head. *Here. You deserve a break.*

Robin picked up her phone, then set it down again. She didn't want to text Strike, because he might call back. Instead she opened email. After considering what salutation she should use, she decided to dispense with one entirely, because he wasn't her 'dear' anything, tonight.

I’ve found out why Todd’s so keen on riding the Circle Line all afternoon. He’s upskirting young girls. He was spotted while I was watching him and was literally chased off the train. In the commotion I lost him.

Robin stopped to think, then typed on.

I’ve been thinking about next week’s trip and it seems pointless for both of us to do Jade Semple when you’re the one who’s persuaded her to talk. I’ve just identified the school Sapphire Neagle was attending before she disappeared and I want to try and talk to a friend of hers on her way in/out of school, and find out what she knows about Oz, if anything.

I’ve also been looking at Valentine Longcaster’s Instagram. He’s been recceing a place called God’s Own Junkyard for a fashion shoot on Tuesday and I know the place. It’s in Walthamstow, not far from me. I think I should go along in person and try and interview him. He might be more likely to talk to me than you.

I’ll drive up to Ironbridge on Wednesday to do Dilys Powell, because I’m the one who’s talked to her previously.

Robin stopped typing again. Her eyes strayed to the noticeboard and she noticed that Strike had taken down the paragraph about Reata Lindvall. Robin knew perfectly well that none of their suspected Wrights had any known connection to Reata Lindvall, or to Belgium, but she was glad to have another reason to be angry at Strike, who’d cavalierly removed the thing she’d stumbled across on Christmas Eve, with her ex-husband standing beside her, and her angry boyfriend in the pub behind her, and Robin’s mind focused, as ever, on the job.

I noticed you've taken down the paragraph about Reata Lindvall but as we haven't got any other leads on who 'Rita Linda' might be, could you please ask Jade whether Niall or anyone in the family has either heard of her, or has any connection with Liège?

Robin paused yet again, staring at the screen with stinging eyes, then typed on.

I won't be able to hang around long in Ironbridge, because Ryan and I are looking at houses together and have got a couple lined up to view next week.

See you Tuesday.

PART FIVE

It was still a case of faith and hope – a case of continual putting in of work and money, and, so far, of getting little out – except the dross which intervened between them and their highest hopes.

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

57

When the bells justle in the tower
The hollow night amid,
Then on my tongue the taste is sour
Of all I ever did.

A. E. Housman
IX, Additional Poems

Cormoran Strike had been called many things by the women in his life, but ‘stupid’ had never been one of them. Robin’s bald announcement that she and Murphy were setting up home together, the icy tone of her email and the terse work-related texts they exchanged over the following forty-eight hours all told him as plainly as if she’d shouted it in his face that he’d now been issued the unvarnished rebuff he’d been alert for all these months, but which, until now, had never materialised.

Something had changed, but he didn’t know what. Had her anger at his refusal to put surveillance on Albie Simpson-White mounted to white-hot rage since their coffee at Bar Italia? Had Murphy raised objections to their trip north, asking (with some justification) why two of them needed to travel to Scotland to interview a lone woman? Had Strike been oblivious to an accumulation of smaller grievances, symbolised by Robin’s angry reference to his removal of Reata Lindvall from the noticeboard?

He’d called Robin after arriving at the office and hearing the new threatening message, left by the unknown man with the rasping voice, but the call had gone to voicemail. Robin had responded with a brief text, telling him that she was taking all possible precautions. The tone of this message made him wonder whether to try and force a conversation, to send a facile ‘is everything all right?’ text, but long experience of women who

were angry at him made him suspect the most he'd get in return was a passive-aggressive 'fine'. The sordid Bijou business was weighing on his conscience, but Robin couldn't know anything about that, could she? Ilsa had promised not to tell her, and if Kim had blabbed, Robin would surely have asked him about it? He certainly wasn't going to tell her about it unforced: he didn't want to look any more of a feckless, philandering bastard than he already did.

He cancelled his booking at the Lake District hotel, because he was damned if he was going to stare out at Windermere on his own, and at half past eleven on Monday evening, in spite of the self-discipline that usually prevented him drinking alone, Strike clambered aboard the Caledonian Sleeper with two pints of Doom Bar already inside him, and a bottle of Scotch nestling in the holdall he'd packed for his overnight journey to Glasgow.

His cabin was small and overheated. Without taking off his coat, Strike sat down on the lower bunk and downed a plastic cup of neat whisky. The Scotsmen next door were talking so loudly Strike could make out some of the words, mainly 'ya cunt' and 'ya bastard'. It was impossible to tell whether they were bantering or arguing.

Self-disgust and a bleak fatalism had Strike in their grip tonight. It seemed far more likely than it had three days previously that he was, in fact, the father of Bijou's child. The insurmountable distance between himself and the only woman he wanted was going to be counterbalanced by a tightening of the unwanted bond with a woman he'd never even liked. Wouldn't that be a fucking funny cosmic joke? He, with his lifelong resentment of a father who'd begotten him accidentally, who'd had to be forced into the most perfunctory parental obligations by a DNA test, now shackled to his own unwanted kid?

Seven years of missed opportunities with Robin; he'd be tallying them up for ever, as a miser counts his pennies. He'd fucked it all up, and it was over: she was going to move in with Murphy, and marry him, and have his kids, and leave the agency, and he, like the gigantic prick that he was, would have to live with it, because he'd been too late to act, too late to recognise what was bloody obvious, and he deserved this misery, deserved the hopelessness engulfing him, because he'd been an arrogant fuckwit who thought she was there for the taking if he chose…

At a quarter to midnight the train lurched off, taking Strike towards an interview he'd arranged purely to have an excuse for dinner with Robin. A second whisky didn't do much except make him sweat. He struggled out of his coat and wrenched open the cabin window, then lay down on the lower bunk, balancing a plastic cup of whisky on his chest, and thinking about the email in which Robin had finally acknowledged she and Murphy were moving in together, which he was well on the way to knowing off by heart.

He couldn't, as far as he could see, do much, right this moment, to improve relations – not that he imagined there was any chance of resuscitating what had always perhaps been a futile hope of romance, but he didn't want to lose her as a business partner or, worse, a friend. If it was his refusal to put surveillance on Albie Simpson-White that had angered her, he couldn't do anything about it tonight, because there was nobody available to follow the man. He was similarly stymied if the root cause of her sudden coldness was that Murphy had had an outbreak of jealousy. On the other hand, if the problem *had* been him removing that bloody bit of paper from the noticeboard, he could pretend he was taking seriously the possibility that 'Rita Linda' had been Reata Lindvall. He therefore took another swig of whisky and Googled the woman, finally alighting on an account of her murder on a Belgian website, which offered a translation into bad English.

Reata had been born in Sweden in 1972 to an unwed mother and an unknown father, and was left orphaned at the age of ten when her alcoholic mother died. She'd then bounced between foster homes until running away in 1988. Having travelled to Switzerland with a friend, where the two of them had been employed as 'chalet cleaner girls', she'd given birth to her own daughter, Jolanda, in 1993 with, as the website put it, 'again the father unknown'.

Repeated mention of accidentally conceived daughters was doing nothing to raise Strike's spirits. However, he read on.

Reata had intended to put her baby up for adoption, but changed her mind when the little girl was born. Shortly after giving birth, she'd met Belgian Elias Maes, who was thirty-nine. The pair began a relationship and Reata and Jolanda had moved to Liège, to live with Maes.

The relationship with Maes was violent and difficult and both

partners were large alcohol drinkers. Maes accused Lindvall of being a mother neglectful and both were accusing the others of infidelities. Neighbours said Maes complained about Jolanda's behaving and could be unkind to Jolanda. Lindvall and Maes parted for six months in 1998, then were reunited.

On 20th June 1998 Reata and Jolanda disappeared. Concerned friends have contacted the police. Maes, who was absent for business, was arrested when he returned, on suspicion of their abduction or killing. He was released later without charges.

In spite of appeals public, no sign is found of Lindvall or her daughter. Maes was still covered in suspicion and in 1999 he relocated to Antwerp.

In early 2000, police received a tip and searched the woods close to the Lac d'Ougrée. Fragments of human bone and old clothings were recovered. Analysis DNA proved human remains belonged to Reata and Jolanda.

Maes was arrested again. Belgian feminist groups campaigned outside the courtroom for the duration of the criminal trial. In March 2001, Maes was found guilty of the murders of Reata and Jolanda Lindvall, and given two life sentences.

Strike slugged more whisky and considered texting Robin with some anodyne comment or question about Lindvall to show he wasn't dismissing her out of hand, but he still couldn't see how the dead Swedish woman could be relevant to their inquiry, and felt masochistically certain that Robin, at this very moment, was shagging Murphy and thoroughly enjoying it.

The Scotsmen next door were still bantering or arguing, and Strike suddenly wanted to be somewhere, anywhere, other than this rattling sardine tin. Still clutching his bottle of whisky, he rose off his bunk, wrenched open the cabin door, and set off down the train.

The cramped bar compartment was harshly lit, none too clean, and hardly less depressing than his cabin. A small knot of men were standing at the far end, all, by the sounds of them, Scottish. Strike sat down at the only table and poured another large measure of Scotch into his plastic beaker,

then stared blankly through the window at passing pylons and lit windows.

His mobile buzzed. He hoped it might be Robin, but naturally it was from Kim.

Guessing you're not asleep yet if you're on the sleeper. Isn't this the woman we met at the Dorchester?!

Strike pressed the link to the press story she'd attached, and there, sure enough, was the Honourable Nina Lascelles in a wedding dress, beside the same blond man she'd pointed out on the dancefloor whose name, it transpired, was Percy, and whose wedding was newsworthy because he was a promising young Labour MP. Strike stared at the picture for nearly a minute, wondering why one of the bridesmaids looked vaguely familiar. Then he realised the dark and surly-looking woman was a prior investigative target. Midge had caught the married woman visiting her lover, which explained Nina's furious '*you really fucked up a friend of mine's life*' at the Dorchester.

He scrolled down. Beneath the Nina story was another article by Dominic Culpepper, and with an unpleasant lurch in his guts, Strike saw Charlotte's name.

The piece detailed the 'unconventional marriage' of Charlotte's mother, Tara, and her fourth husband, one Lord Jenson. The couple lived apart, Jenson retaining the large house in Mayfair in which he'd lived with his late wife, Tara ('of the wealthy Clairmont family, who founded the Clairmont hotel chain') continuing to preside over her son's inherited mansion, Heberley House, which 'suits Sacha', according to Tara, 'because he's away filming such a lot, and who's going to look after Heberley better than me?'

Naturally, there was also mention of Tara's daughter's 'tragic' suicide.

'She was troubled from childhood onwards,' says Lady Jenson sadly. 'We did everything we could, of course, but once your child is an adult… unfortunately, she entered a very long, very dysfunctional relationship that we believe significantly contributed to her mental health problems.'

Before her marriage, Charlotte had an almost 20-year on-off

relationship with Cormoran Strike, the controversial private detective recently alleged to have harassed a sex worker.

However, Lady Jenson remains resilient.

'One learns to cope,' she says. 'Naturally, the loss of a child—'

'The hell are you doing here?' said a rumbling voice.

Strike looked up. A short, thickset and almost entirely bald man, who was vigorously chewing gum, had detached himself from the group at the bar and was looking down at the detective: Fergus Robertson, the journalist who'd recently taken Strike's statement on the Candy story.

'Work,' said Strike. 'You?'

'Same,' said Robertson, dropping without invitation into the seat opposite Strike. 'Gonna get Nicola Sturgeon's reaction to Theresa May's speech on Brexit tomorrow. Paper's blagged me an interview.'

'Right,' said Strike, stuffing his phone back into his pocket.

'Didn't want to enrich British Rail, I see,' said Robertson, eyes on Strike's Scotch.

'Help yourself,' said Strike, pushing the bottle towards the journalist, who poured a generous measure into his own plastic cup.

Strike felt so depressed he could barely muster interest in Robertson's conversation, yet it was a slight distraction to be sitting opposite the journalist. When Robertson handed back the bottle, he poured himself another triple Scotch.

'Funny, bumping into you here,' said Robertson. 'I was going to give you a call when I got back from Edinburgh.'

'Yeah?' said Strike, without much interest. 'Why's that?'

'Ever heard of the Winston Churchill Masonic Lodge?'

'Why d'you ask?' said Strike, who knew perfectly well that this was DCI Malcolm Truman's lodge.

'You asked me whether Oliver Branfoot's a Freemason.'

'Yeah, and you said you didn't know.'

Robertson shoved more nicotine gum into his mouth, then said, watching Strike closely,

'Dodgy Freemasons are always news.'

'I'd imagine so,' said Strike, not yet so drunk that he was going to

unintentionally hand Robertson a story that might lay both of them open to being sued.

‘Rumour is, the membership of the Winston Churchill Lodge skews heavily towards police.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. I got talking to a journo mate who was covering the masons in ’99,’ said Robertson, dropping his voice still lower. ‘When the Home Affairs Committee produced their report into Freemasonry in public life, remember that?’

‘No,’ said Strike, who’d spent a good deal of 1999 in Kosovo. ‘What did it say?’

‘That there’s a lot of unjustifiable paranoia about Freemasons, but they don’t help themselves by being so secretive, and there were cases where allegations of masonic influence might be justified. The forensic scientist involved in the Birmingham Six investigation was a Freemason, as was uncovered by the Home Affairs Select Committee’s investigation into masonic influence. “As regards the forensic scientist we conclude that freemasonry could have been a factor in the close and unprofessional relationship he enjoyed with the police.”

‘Anyway,’ said Robertson, dropping his voice still lower, and still watching Strike for his reaction, ‘I was talking to this guy the other day, and I slipped Branfoot’s name into the conversation, and he said, yeah, Branfoot’s a mason, and he heard Branfoot changed lodges a couple of years ago. Apparently he used to be in one of the ones that are packed with aristos. Then, according to my source, he moved to the Winston Churchill.’

When Strike didn’t speak, Robertson said in a half-jocular growl,

‘C’mon. You’ve got something on Branfoot.’

‘He jumped on Culpepper’s anti-me bandwagon and I wanted to know why, that’s all.’

Strike had just been handed a plum bit of intelligence, but felt too anaesthetised by misery and alcohol to take much pleasure in it. The bar full of male voices and laughter, the pimply young barman in his polyester waistcoat, the smell of cheap whisky and the sight of Robertson’s vigorous chewing was suddenly even more intolerable than his cramped compartment.

‘Need some sleep,’ he informed the journalist as he stood up.

‘You’ll keep me posted,’ said Robertson, ‘right?’

‘Sure,’ said Strike.

He grabbed his whisky bottle by the neck and set back off along the train, swaying with its motion.

Back on his lower bunk, he considered texting Robin to tell her about Branfoot attending the same lodge as Malcolm Truman, but what was the fucking point? She’d be enjoying a post-coital laugh with her CID boyfriend right now. The news could keep until Ironbridge. However, one vindictive thought brought a kind of cold comfort.

He had a bloody good reason, now, for digging deeper into Detective Chief Inspector Malcolm Truman, who so coincidentally happened to share a masonic lodge with Lord Oliver Branfoot, and anyone who didn’t like Strike going after a member of the Met – Ryan Fucking Murphy, to take just one example – could stick their objections right up their arse.

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Some girl, who here from castle-bower,
With furtive step and cheek of flame,
’Twixt myrtle-hedges all in flower
By moonlight came
To meet her pirate-lover’s ship…

Matthew Arnold
A Southern Night

Robin, who’d spent much of the weekend pretending to be excited about the house she and Murphy were going to view on Thursday evening, was glad to have an excuse to get up before her boyfriend on Monday. She wanted to be waiting outside Juniper Hill High School in Finsbury Park before the first students arrived, so as to maximise her chances of waylaying Tia Thompson, friend of the missing Sapphire Neagle.

Standing on the opposite pavement to the entrance of the large, ugly grey comprehensive, watching the first pupils enter the school in their red sweatshirts, Robin was attempting, but failing, to block out thoughts of Strike.

He hadn’t called over the weekend – not that she’d ordinarily have expected him to – but you’d have thought he’d have rung her to ask why her email was so unfriendly, and why she was dropping out of the Scotland part of the trip, and to tell her there’d be plenty of other opportunities to speak to Tia Thompson and Valentine Longcaster, wouldn’t you? But no. So much for friendship…

Maybe I should leave, Robin thought. *Maybe I should just find another job.*

But this was a form of mental blood-letting: she didn’t really have the

slightest intention of resigning. Walk out on everything she'd helped build? Walk away from nearly seven years of sacrifice, and risk, and hard, relentless work? Throw away the job she loved, just because Cormoran Strike was a lying, manipulative bastard? Because he *was* manipulative, she saw that now: his offer to buy her a new Land Rover, and his Christmas gift, and the repeated mentions of Charlotte's suicide note, all designed to keep her bound to him and the business, while he was off impregnating Bijou bloody Watkins, and, for all Robin knew, sleeping with a few more women on the side… well, good luck, Bijou, you picked a hell of a father for your baby…

The red sweatshirt-ed throng was growing and Robin scanned the faces of every black girl she could see. Most students were arriving in groups, but when at last Robin spotted and identified Tia, the girl was walking along alone, reading something off her phone while vaping. So intent was she on her screen that as she made to cross the road, twenty yards short of where Robin was standing, the latter shouted out: 'Tia, *be careful*!'

Tia started and jumped backwards as a bus trundled past.

'The hell do you know my name?' the girl demanded, as Robin hurried towards her.

'I was hoping to talk to you,' said Robin, unable to stop herself adding, 'you shouldn't be looking at Snapchat when you're crossing roads.'

'For your information,' said Tia, showing Robin her screen, 'I'm reading a fucking book.'

'Oh,' said Robin. 'Well, even so… I was hoping to talk to you about Sapphire Neagle.'

'Why?'

'My name's Robin Ellacott. I'm a private detective. Sapphire's missing and I'm trying to find out what happened to her.'

Robin handed Tia her card. The girl scrutinised it, frowning.

'I'd just like to ask a couple of questions,' said Robin. 'If you don't know the answers, fine.'

Tia looked understandably wary.

'You can look me up online,' said Robin. 'I'm a genuine private detective, and I'm worried about Sapphire. Nothing you say's going to end up in court, or anything like that. I'm just trying to find her.'

'All right,' said Tia slowly, 'but hurry up. I don't wanna miss English.'

‘D’you know anything about a man – an older man – Sapphire might have met before she disappeared?’

‘Yeah,’ said Tia. ‘I told ’em about him.’

‘Told who?’

‘Police,’ said Tia. She took another deep drag on her vape and exhaled. Robin smelled candyfloss.

‘What did you tell them?’ asked Robin.

‘He said he was gonna get her a job as a backing singer. Said she could go on tour. With Ellie Goulding.’

‘Did you ever see her with this man?’

Tia shook her head.

‘Did anyone?’

‘Dunno. Don’t think so.’

‘How did Sapphire meet him?’

‘Up the road, in Jimmy’s,’ said Tia, nodding in the direction of the corner.

‘What’s Jimmy’s?’

‘Café,’ said Tia.

‘So she didn’t meet him online?’

‘I’ve just told you,’ said Tia, ‘she met him in Jimmy’s. She bunked off one afternoon and she got talking to the guy in there. He bought her a coffee. She said she’d looked him up online, so she knew he was for real.’

‘“For real” in what sense?’

‘He worked in the music industry or something.’

‘Did she tell you his name?’

‘Nah, she stopped telling me anything about him because I said he was full of shit and she went off on one and hit me round the face.’

‘She *hit* you?’

‘Yeah,’ said Tia, with a wry smile. ‘Didn’t hurt, really. She’s tall but she’s really skinny… some of the boys used to call her Olive Oyl.’

‘But you were friends with her?’

‘Not really,’ said Tia, with a slight shrug. ‘I was her “buddy”. If you’re a good student, you get to look after people, if they’re new…’

‘You had to take care of her?’

‘Kinda, yeah… she was always fighting, though. Spent most of her time in special ed when she was here.’

‘What else do you know about her?’

‘Know her dad and uncle were abusing her until she went into care when she was seven,’ said Tia, a pronouncement more shocking for being said in such a matter-of-fact tone.

‘How awful,’ said Robin.

‘Yeah,’ said Tia unemotionally. ‘She put it about a lot. Girls like her, they think they’ll get over it by letting boys do it to ’em again. Telling themselves it’s no big deal.’

Tia’s thickly lashed eyes looked too old and world-weary for her youthful, rounded face. Robin didn’t think the girl’s unshockability was a pose. Perhaps she’d been ‘buddies’ with too many troubled students to remain ignorant of the uglier facts of life.

‘D’you think Sapphire was sleeping with this so-called music producer?’

‘Probably,’ said Tia, taking another drag on her vape.

‘Can you remember her saying anything else about him?’

‘Yeah,’ said Tia, ‘he give her a necklace. She told me it was rubies.’

In spite of her general misery, a shiver of excitement shot through Robin at this.

‘Rubies,’ sneered Tia. ‘It was just beads. My auntie’s got a ruby ring, I know the difference.’

‘Do you remember anything else she said about him?’

‘Nah,’ said Tia, and as she said it, a bell sounded in the distance, and Robin saw the red sweatshirt-ed hordes swarming into the ugly grey building. ‘I gotta go.’

Robin watched the girl cross the road, but Tia had barely reached the school gate when she suddenly wheeled around and dashed back to Robin.

‘Jus’ remembered. He told her she reminded him of a Swedish girl he used to know. When he said she had the right look for the backing singer job.’

‘A Swedish girl,’ repeated Robin, her heart suddenly racing.

‘Yeah,’ said Tia.

‘Thanks, Tia,’ said Robin. ‘This is a big help. Shouldn’t you hide that?’ she added, looking at the vape still clutched in the girl’s hand.

‘Oh. Yeah,’ said Tia, smiling for the first time. She plunged it into her backpack, then turned, sprinted back across the road and into the rapidly emptying yard.

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Listlessly through the window-bars
Gazing seawards many a league
From her lonely shore-built tower,
While the knights are at the wars…

Matthew Arnold
Tristram and Iseult

Ever since limping off the train at Glasgow Central at six that morning, the end of his stump sweaty and sore because he'd fallen asleep fully clothed with his prosthesis still on, Strike had felt atrocious: poorly rested, queasy and with a headache throbbing behind his temples.

Fully aware that with nearly a bottle of Johnnie Walker inside him he was still over the alcohol limit, he picked up his hired automatic Audi A1 and set off north through yet more pelting rain, stopping on the way at a fast food van at the side of the road to buy and eat a fried bacon and egg roll, because he'd been in no condition to eat the plastic-smelling breakfast he'd been offered on the train. For the next half an hour, he drove in constant uncertainty as to whether he ought to stop the car again to throw up.

Shortly before eleven o'clock, thick rain still falling, stomach churning, head pounding, Strike entered the small Perthshire town of Crieff where Niall Semple's abandoned wife continued to live, and deposited his Audi in a car park off the High Street. The Semples' house had appeared a short walk away on the map, but what Strike hadn't noticed was that Comrie Road, up which he had to walk to get there, was on a steep incline. Head down, inwardly cursing the weather, the hill and his own whisky consumption, he set off up the street, passing small shops set in Victorian buildings of stained stone.

His mobile rang and he answered, taking inadequate shelter in a doorway.

‘Hi Pat, what’s up?’ he croaked.

‘You ill?’

‘No, I’m great,’ said Strike, while rain trickled down the back of his neck.

‘Might’ve found your Hussein Mohamed,’ said Pat. ‘There’s a local news story about a nine-year-old Syrian refugee called Hafsa Mohamed, who’s in a wheelchair. Says here: “Her father Hussein says proudly that although he and his wife had a little English when they arrived in London, Hafsa had to start from scratch. She’s now fluent in the language and flourishing at her primary school in Forest Gate.” Forest Gate, that’s still in Newham. Looks like they stayed in the area they knew.’

‘Sounds promising,’ said Strike. ‘Could you get on to the paper and see whether you can get contact details for the family?’

‘Yeah, all right,’ said Pat, making a note.

‘Better go, I’m heading for an interview,’ said Strike.

As he put his phone back into his pocket he turned his face upwards to allow rain to fall directly onto his face, hoping it might make him feel less ill. A familiar symbol caught his eye, directly overhead: the iron square and compasses, protruding discreetly over the nondescript blue door outside which he was sheltering.

He moved back onto the pavement, contemplating the masonic lodge, which was no larger than a two-up, two-down house, then walked on up the hill, wondering – while trying to maintain balance on the slippery pavement and ignore his broiling guts and his pulsing headache – how many masons met in the tiny temple behind him. He ought to have stopped for painkillers. He shouldn’t have sunk nearly an entire bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label. He really wished he hadn’t had that fucking roll.

The Semples’ house was large, square, detached and made of grey stone, with a well-tended front garden. As he knew from Jade’s texts, this was the house in which her husband had grown up, and which he’d inherited upon his mother’s death.

When he rang the bell, the front door opened to reveal the tiny wife of Niall Semple who, to Strike’s surprise, was dressed in a hooded bright yellow raincoat and accompanied by a dog on a lead that, to Strike, looked

as though someone had shoved a fox into a tumble dryer. It was small, orange and covered in thick, long hair that stood out all around its body, and began yapping vociferously at the sight of him.

'Cameron?' said Jade loudly, over the noise of the dog barking.

'Yeah,' said Strike, who couldn't be bothered to correct her.

'I dunno what I've said yes to this for,' she said, with what seemed to be a combination of irritability and foreboding, 'bu' we can talk while I'm walkin' Pom Pom. I 'aven't got long.'

Strike, who'd been very much looking forward to sitting down rather than taking a rainy walk, said,

'OK.'

In the hall behind Jade, a short ginger-haired man with the kind of moustache Strike associated with World War Two pilots emerged from a door holding a coffee, then ducked back out of sight. Unaware Strike had seen her guest, Jade said, 'C'mon then,' stepped outside, closed the door, and walked past him down the garden path, leaving Strike with no option but to follow.

He had a hunch he'd just seen the man who'd called Jade Semple 'babe' and advised her Strike was probably working for a newspaper. He also suspected that Jade might be a fellow hangover sufferer, a conclusion he drew not only from Jade's habit of texting him when she appeared to be unable to see her phone or use her fingers very well, but from her pallor, the puffiness of her face and the fact that her heavy fake lashes had been applied crookedly. She was elfin-looking, barely five feet tall, with large brown eyes and a small, pointed nose, and smelled strongly of a heavy oriental perfume that reminded him of a friend of his Aunt Joan's in the eighties, whose scent had been powerful enough to overwhelm barbecue smoke. In this case (unless he was judging her by himself, because he was certain he was giving off a reek of whisky) he suspected she was trying to cover up the fact that she'd slept too late to shower. The small amount of blue-black hair he could see from beneath the raincoat hood looked unbrushed, and there was a deep crease in her left cheek that looked as though it had been made by a pillow. Strike's best guess was that Ginger Moustache had kept her up late.

'We'll go up MacRosty Park,' said Jade. 'But, look, I *definitely* don't fink it was Niall in that vault now, all righ'? Tha' was jus' before I realised

what was really goin' on. I don' know why I said I'd do this,' she repeated distractedly.

'What made you think it was Niall in the first place?' Strike asked, eyes screwed up against the rain and trying not to limp. He could feel the end of his stump chafing.

''Cause of it being a masonic shop, an' the body sounded a bit like 'im, and righ' blood group an' everyfing, an' because 'e went a bit funny about the masons, after 'is 'ead injury. Did you know 'e's a mason?'

'No,' said Strike. 'D'you know what degree he was?'

'Knight of somefing, I can' remember.'

'Not Prince?'

'No, "knight"… all the men in 'is family were masons. 'E was never weird abou' it 'til 'e got injured, though, it was jus', like, a social fing, but then 'e wen' funny, readin' all the time, so that made me fink, when I seen it was a masonic shop… an' there was the name, "William Wright".'

'He had a connection with that name, did he?'

'Yeah, kinda. Wright was a famous what-d'you-call-it – botanist – an' he was born in Crieff, like, two 'undred years ago or somefing.'

'Niall's interested in local history, is he?'

'No, but 'is dad was. 'E self-published a book on masonic 'istory in Perthshire an' 'e put an 'ole chapter about this William Wright in there, finkin' 'e was a Freemason, but then it turned out 'e'd never been a mason, so 'e 'ad to cut them pages out of the book. When I seen that bloke at the silver shop was callin' 'imself "William Wright", I fort, wasn't that that guy old Mr Semple got it all wrong abou'? An' I looked 'im up an' I was right.'

She crossed the road towards a rainswept park and Strike followed, hoping to God he wasn't about to be asked to walk across slippery grass, which was the worst of all possible surfaces for his prosthesis.

'Bu' then I found ou' abou' the woman,' said Jade bitterly, 'so I knew wha' was really goin' on. I'm only stayin' 'ere in Crieff because 'e's gonna 'ave to come back some time. I'm not movin' back to Colchester so 'e can move some ovver woman in. I'm not makin' it fuckin' easy for 'im, after what 'e done. 'E can fuckin' well come 'ome an' tell me to my face 'e wants a divorce.'

To Strike's relief, they entered the park via a smooth, tarmacked path. It was still raining hard, but the cold, fresh air was making him feel less

queasy, he could barely smell Jade's perfume in the stiff breeze, and her loud voice was less deafening in the open. A deserted children's play area lay to their right.

'You think he's with the woman you texted me about, do you? The one who used his credit card, after the body in the vault turned up?'

'Yeah, I do.'

'Have the police traced her?'

'Not yet, but they showed me a picture of 'er, at a cashpoint, usin' 'is card. Bank security camera. She looks a real skank,' said Jade savagely. 'Blonde. 'E always told me 'e din' like blondes. I din' even know abou' that bank account they were bofe usin'. 'E was keepin' it 'id from me.'

'He was withdrawing money you didn't know about?'

'Yeah. Nobody'll tell me 'ow much was in there, or wevver it's all gone now. They jus' come to me wiv a picture of the woman an' asked if I recognised 'er, an' I never seen 'er before in my life. Tattoo on 'er face,' said Jade bitterly. '*Classy.*'

She bent down and let the Pomeranian off its lead; it bounded away onto the grass while Strike and Jade kept walking along the path.

'What kind of tattoo did this woman have?'

'You couldn' see clear, it was under 'er eye. I shoulda known. I 'eard 'im on the phone to a woman, back at the 'ouse, abou' a week before 'e buggered off. 'E was sayin' "meet me at the Engineer". I walked in the room an' 'e looked fuckin' guilty and 'ung up. We 'ad a row. I said, "'oo're you meetin'? Wha' Engineer?" 'E said 'e din't know what I was talkin' abou'. Fuckin' liar. I know wha' the fuckin' Engineer is, I wen' an' looked it up. 'S a pub in Camden. Coincidence. Righ' by where 'e was takin' out money from 'is secret bank account.'

'Are you sure it was a woman he was talking to?'

'Yeah, I could 'ear 'er, squawkin' on the other end of the phone,' said Jade. 'I was listenin', froo the door, from the 'all.'

'You told the police this?'

'Yeah, an' they say nobody at the pub remembers seein' 'im at the Engineer, but so wha'? Crowded. I shoulda known. We on'y 'ad a monf, married, but we've bin togevver a lot longer'n tha', and 'e played around on me – well, I played around on 'im, too – bu' when we go' married we bofe said, tha' was it now, jus' each ovver, y'know?'

‘Right,’ said Strike.

‘POM POM, NO!’ Jade bellowed, making Strike wince. The dog had picked up something Jade didn’t want it to eat. She strode away across the wet grass while Strike waited where he was in the heavy rain, watching her trying to wrestle whatever it was out of the Pomeranian’s mouth.

Jade reminded Strike of his oldest friend’s wife, Penny Polworth, not in looks – Jade was prettier, notwithstanding the crooked false eyelashes and bed hair – but in the way she spoke about her vanished husband. The Polworths had always seemed to Strike to live in a state of mutual animosity they appeared to consider the only natural condition for a man and a woman living together. Both seemed happiest on the occasions when they’d got their own way over the wishes of the other, and they constantly griped about each other, whether together or apart. Strike well remembered Polworth’s frank explanation of the reason he’d proposed (*I thought of the money I’ve spent chasing gash, and the hassle, and whether I want to be watching porn alone at forty, and I thought, this is the whole point. What marriage is for. Am I going to do better than Penny? Am I enjoying talking shit to women in bars? Penny and me get on all right. I could do a hell of a lot worse. She’s not bad-looking. I’d have my hole already at home, waiting for me, wouldn’t I?*). Strike had been best man at the wedding, and he seemed to remember both Polworths seeming happy enough on the day, but never, even once, had he envied their relationship; indeed, he couldn’t remember envying any marriage, except perhaps (he recognised it with an inward pang, never having really considered the matter before) that of Ted and Joan, who’d seemed to like each other just as much as they loved each other.

‘We’ll go this way,’ Jade called to Strike, beckoning him across the grass.

Rather than explain about his leg, Strike gritted his teeth and hobbled across the slippery grass to Jade and the Pomeranian, which had started yapping again, having been deprived of whatever rancid object it had been trying to swallow.

‘We can go over by the trees,’ said Jade, setting off again. ‘More shel’ered.’

As they walked, Strike pulled out his vape pen.

‘I ’ad one just like that,’ said Jade, squinting up at Strike, ‘but ’e fuckin’

took it off me.’

‘Who did, Niall?’ asked Strike, most of whose concentration was now given over to not stumbling.

‘Yeah, said ’e didn’ want me vaping. Fuck’s sake, I give up smoking for ’im, an’ going out anywhere, and bein’ stuck up in fuckin’ Crieff in the cold. I could at least ’ave a vape, couldn’ I?’

‘Can’t see why not,’ said Strike tactfully. ‘What did you mean when you said Niall was “a bit funny” about the masons, post-injury?’

‘’E was readin’ about ’em all the time, an’ not talkin’ for hours. An’ one day ’e went on a run an’ went all the way to fuckin’ Dunkeld.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘Twenny-odd miles away. An’ ’e was stuck on the bridge.’

‘What d’you mean, “stuck”?’

‘Scared to go over it. ’E freaked out. It’s masonic, as well, that bridge. Built by some old Freemason. There’s s’posed to be a masonic mark on it or somefing, I dunno. I ’ad to go pick ’im up in the car – wish I’d left ’im there, now,’ she said bitterly.

‘Did Niall have any connection with Camden, that you know of?’

‘No, but turns ou’ I didn’t know a ton of stuff, doesn’ it?’

‘Did he know Freemasons’ Hall, at all?’

‘I dunno.’

‘What about old silver?’

‘No. Why would ’e know abou’ about old silver?’

Strike thought, immediately, of a glass case full of gleaming Rhodesian silver in Hereford, situated in the best fortified army base in the UK, where the fences were topped with barbed wire, cameras watched the perimeter, within which photography and sketching were forbidden, and where the nature of what happened behind some of the closed doors was covered by the Official Secrets Act.

‘What kind of thing was Niall reading, before he disappeared?’ he asked.

‘I dunno. Old books.’

‘Did he take them with him, when he left?’

‘Maybe. ’E ’ad a briefcase wiv ’im, when ’e was filmed at the cashpoint.’

‘Yeah, I saw that,’ said Strike. ‘A metal case. Had you ever seen it before?’

‘No.’

‘It looked to me as though he might have it handcuffed to him.’

‘Yeah, the police fort that, too.’

They were under the canopy of trees now. Strike would have been more grateful for respite from the rain if the ground hadn’t been muddy. Still giving half his attention to not falling on his arse, he said,

‘What can you tell me about when Niall left?’

There was a short silence. Strike decided it was polite (and certainly easier) to pretend he hadn’t noticed she’d started to cry. He had an excuse; the tears now trickling down her face might be rain, but why couldn’t Robin have been here? Why did he have to deal with so many crying women on his own?

‘Ev’ryone finks I’m a bitch for goin’ away when ’e wasn’ right,’ said Jade huskily, ‘but it was our firtief – me an’ my twin’s. I’d been sittin’ in the ’ospital wiv ’im for free monfs straight. Then we come up ’ere to stay in ’is mum’s old ’ouse, an’ ’e was barely talkin’ to me, jus’ readin’ abou’ the fuckin’ masons an’ goin’ on runs. I said to ’im, “I wanna ’ave a birfday party”, an’ ’e didn’ wanna go, so – in the end – I said, “fine, I’ll go alone then”. I ’adn’t seen my family for ages. An’ tha’s when ’e left, while I was down in Colchester for the weekend.’

‘Didn’t he leave a note or anything?’

‘Yeah – well, no’ a proper note,’ said Jade in a choked voice. ‘Jus’ a bit of paper wiv some mad shit on it. Didn’ even ’ave my name on it, but ’e left it on my pillow.’

‘Where’s that piece of paper now?’

‘I give it to the bloke ’oo come to see me, after Niall left.’

‘What bloke?’

‘Lawrence or somefing – army or Ministry of Defence – I dunno, I was in such a state at the time – but ’e seemed to know all abou’ Niall, said they was tryna find ’im. I never saw or ’eard of ’im again.’

‘Lawrence showed you ID, though, did he?’

‘I can’ remember,’ said Jade. ‘Probably. ’E wan’ed to know where I fort Niall would’ve gone, an’ this is all before I found out abou’ that blonde woman, so I said I fort ’e must be livin’ rough or somefing, ’cause I knew ’e adn’t touched our joint account. I was worried sick,’ she said, with a sob that even Strike couldn’t credibly claim not to have heard.

‘I’m sorry, this must be very difficult for you,’ he said. ‘I know it’s—’

His false leg skidded out from under him; for a moment he was entirely airborne, then he fell with a crash on his back into a patch of mud. The Pomeranian set up a volley of yapping, as though Strike’s yell of pain had been an invitation to fight.

‘Oh my God,’ said Jade in panic, looking at the metal rod revealed by his trouser leg, ‘Pom Pom, *shut up* – you ’aven’t got a leg! Why din’ you say?’

‘I’ve got a leg,’ said Strike stupidly, while the dog continued to skitter around him, barking. ‘No,’ he added, as Jade stretched out a hand to try and help him; he could no sooner use a woman that small to bear his weight than he could haul himself up on a dangling leaf. After several attempts, covering both hands in mud in the process, he managed to get himself upright again, his right knee now excruciatingly painful and the end of his stump burning. Wanting neither pity nor discussions about his missing right foot, he said with forced cheerfulness,

‘All good. Let’s keep going.’

‘You should’ve told me… we’ll go back on the path,’ said Jade. Her manner had changed. While still tearful, she watched with some concern as the now extremely muddy Strike struggled onwards, no longer able to conceal his limp.

‘Was Niall’s brain injury the only one he suffered?’ the detective asked.

‘No,’ said Jade, ‘’e ’ad burns on ’is back as well as a sort of dent on the back of ’is ’ead. I never knew ’ow it ’appened because he never told me what ’e was doin’ on operations. But ’is best friend in the Regiment, Ben, got killed same time Niall got injured. They ’ad to keep tellin’ Niall before ’e took it in. “Where’s Ben?” “’Ow’s Ben?” Ben was Niall’s bes’ man,’ said Jade, with another sob. ‘Everyfing went wrong… I go’ pregnant, an’ then we go’ married, an’ then I lost it, and then, like a monf later, ’e was injured. When ’e come out the coma – after Ben dyin’ – I felt so fuckin’ lucky… and then ’e fuckin’ disappeared…’

‘I’m sorry,’ Strike repeated.

Accidental pregnancies, miscarriages: he was again unwillingly reminded of Bijou Watkins, and of Charlotte, who, in the dying days of their relationship, had claimed to have lost a baby he’d never been certain existed.

They walked slowly back to Jade’s house, making desultory talk, the mud-covered Strike in mounting pain. As they approached her front door she paused and said awkwardly,

‘I’d ask you in, but I’ve gotta go ou’ in a minute.’

‘That’s all right,’ said Strike, who was certain this was a lie, and that she didn’t want him meeting Ginger Moustache. ‘I’ve got a car, I’ll clean up at my hotel. Thanks for meeting me.’

He couldn’t offer her his hand, because it was covered in mud, so made a vague salute and turned away. He’d been limping for thirty seconds or so when he heard a shout behind him.

‘Hey, Cameron!’

She’d caught up with him, her mobile in her hand.

‘I took a picture of tha’ note Niall left me, on my pillow. If you wan’ it, you can ’ave it. I’ll text it you.’

‘That’d be great,’ said Strike, ‘thanks very much.’

‘OK, well… good luck findin’ out ’oo that body was,’ she said, then turned, walked back to her husband’s house, and the new man who was waiting for her there.

60

Now that her hope was shattered her mind dropped naturally into a grim groove…

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

Four hundred and fifty miles away, Robin was standing in an industrial estate in Walthamstow, watching the entrance of a large storage unit that housed God's Own Junkyard. This was a combination of shop, hire service and museum containing hundreds of neon signs, some reclaimed from old businesses, others made to order. Robin had got a glimpse of the blazing Technicolor interior while the models, photographer, make-up artist and assorted underlings had been taking in racks of clothes and accessories. She'd also caught a brief glimpse of stylist Valentine Longcaster, who she recognised from the pictures she'd found online. He had dirty blond hair with a long fringe and was wearing black jeans, a red shirt and a multicoloured waistcoat. Valentine had posted a few arty shots of neon signs on his Instagram the previous week, and, in response to a question from somebody who seemed to be a friend, had said he was 'prepping for photoshoot Tues'.

Robin's excitement about what she'd found out that morning from Tia Thompson had somewhat dissipated, and not only because it was bitingly cold, and awkward to be standing amid pallets and parked vans while curious car mechanics passed her, one of them scratching the two inches of buttock visible above the waistband of his sagging jeans. No, the main reason for Robin's increased misery was that she'd recognised one of the models who'd entered the storage unit: Ciara Porter, tall and angular-looking, with milk-white skin and white blonde hair. The papers never failed to remind readers of gossip columns that Ciara had a degree in

English from Cambridge, but to Robin, she'd forever be one of the women Cormoran Strike had slept with. London was littered with them, apparently: possibly she'd sat opposite one of them on the bus just now, or been served coffee by another before boarding it…

Stop obsessing about him, for God's sake, you need to get over this.

Robin doubted she was going to get anything at all out of these hours of surveillance in the cold. She couldn't enter God's Own Junkyard, because it was closed to the public for the photoshoot, and when Valentine eventually emerged, all he had to do was get into a car and drive away from her; she had no way of forcing him to talk to her about Rupert Fleetwood. However, she was still glad – if this resentment and misery could be called gladness – to have found a pretext to avoid that damn Lake District hotel.

There was a mechanic a short distance away, tinkering with a car. He was wearing a bandana over the lower half of his face, like a bandit. Robin wished she had one, too, even if it might look odd. She could no longer feel her lips or toes.

Her phone rang: Murphy.

'Hi, Ryan.'

'I need to ask you something,' he said, sounding angry.

'What's the matter?' said Robin, turning to walk a short distance away. It was about time she changed position, anyway.

'Has your agency been trying to get hold of photos of William Wright's body?'

Oh, shit.

'What – why are you asking me that?' said Robin.

'*Answer the bloody question!*'

'Ryan, I – Strike and I didn't try and get them, but – yes, Kim Cochran managed to get copies.'

'For *FUCK's* sake, Robin!'

Robin removed the phone a couple of inches from her ear.

'D'you realise – I fucking *told* you how sensitive that whole case is!'

Apparently the news that the Met no longer believed Jason Knowles to have been the body in the vault hadn't yet reached Murphy.

'Kim did it on her own initiative,' said Robin. 'We didn't ask her to do it. How did—?'

'The *stupid* fucker she got them from was seen making copies, and then

he was seen drinking with her, and now he's been fucking suspended without pay. D'you realise—?'

'I realise you're blaming me for something I haven't done,' said Robin, temper now rising. 'I've just told you, we didn't ask her to do it, she thought she was being help—'

'Well, it's not fucking helpful to *me* when you start undermining a fucking police investig—'

'What have we undermined? We looked at a few pictures!'

'Why would bloody Cochran think pictures would help with finding Fleetwood?'

'Well, the client thinks Fleetwood was the body, so obviously—'

'You need to stop fucking stringing that woman along and tell her it was Knowles!'

'Maybe you should go and talk to the team working the case, if you want to know how likely they think it was Knowles,' said Robin angrily. 'I've got to go.'

She hung up, now torn between rage and misery on account of Murphy as well as Strike. It was just as well she hadn't told him that MI5 had warned them off investigating Niall Semple, wasn't it? Or about DCI Malcom Truman's alleged membership of the masonic lodge? Or the rubber gorilla hidden in her sock drawer?

The man with his face covered like a bandit was still watching her.

61

The eyes of the cheerful and of the melancholy man are fixed upon the same creation; but very different are the aspects which it bears to them. To the one, it is all beauty and gladness… The other idly or mournfully gazes at the same scene, and everything wears a dull, dim, and sickly aspect.

Albert Pike
Morals and Dogma of the
Ancient and Accepted Scottish
Rite of Freemasonry

Two and a half hours after leaving Crieff, Strike broke his journey south in the small Scottish town of Moffat, where a café in the market square supplied him with a coffee and a burger and a welcome chance to rest his right knee. The mud on his coat and trousers had dried and the rain had eased off, but the mid-afternoon sky was already darkening. He supposed many would find Moffat picturesque, but Strike saw everything with the jaundiced eye of the hungover and miserable. His knee was swollen and sore, and the statue of a ram standing atop a pile of rocks, visible through the café window, darkened his mood still further. Sheep, even when cast in bronze, had a tendency to remind him of Robin's father, the professor of sheep medicine, and of the evening he and Robin had spent at the Ritz together, when she'd first given Strike this information.

Taking out his phone, he brought up the photograph Jade had texted to him, of the note Niall Semple had left behind when he'd disappeared.

Omnia in numeris sita sunt
generative
occult

chaos
salutary
generative
chaos
divinity
salutary
RL knows where

All Strike understood of this note was the Latin, which in English read: *everything lies veiled in numbers.*

He looked up ‘botanist William Wright’ on his phone, and saw that the man had indeed been born in Crieff, and was buried in Edinburgh. He Googled Dunkeld, and saw that the bridge there had been built by Freemason Thomas Telford, and learned furthermore that a bridge over the River Dee had been built by the equally masonic Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Remembering that Semple had wanted to meet an unknown woman in a pub called the Engineer, he wondered vaguely whether masonry appealed particularly to engineers, or vice versa.

He looked up the masonic degrees, and learned that there were no fewer than nine called ‘knight’. He opened Truth About Freemasons again, and searched the site for anything involving the SAS or the armed forces.

He found only two vaguely relevant threads. The first, dated 2015, was discussing how many decorated soldiers were Freemasons.

K of the East:	Paddy Mayne, one of the founder members of the SAS, definitely was. Died in a collision with a parked tractor in Ireland, after a masonic dinner.
Jeroboam9:	Pretty sure Austin ‘Fuzz’ Hussey (also SAS, Battle of Mirbat) was a mason.
Harry O’Dim:	Not true about Hussey, but Johnson Beharry VC definitely is.

The only other mention of the army Strike could find was a further short exchange.

St Geo: Is it true a Sublime Prince of the Royal Secret died in Op Toral?

DeMolay: Yes

St Geo: 'a combat of two religions, meeting head to head, like two goats of darkness on the bridge of the Infinite' - Pike

Strike re-read the quotation. Something was nagging at him… bridges…

His mobile rang and he saw the number of his friend and longest-standing police contact, Eric Wardle.

'Hi,' he said, answering. 'What's up?'

'You got photos of the silver shop body,' said Wardle.

'Ah,' said Strike. Unlike Robin, his pulse didn't start racing on learning that the Met knew this. 'Problem?'

'Well, the team working the case is seriously fucked off at you,' said Wardle. 'Guy who leaked them to you's been suspended.'

'For the record, it was done on a subcontractor's own initiative. Not saying I'm not pleased to have the pictures, though.'

'She's a shit-stirrer, that Kim Cochran,' said Wardle, whose tone was flat. 'She's caused trouble on every job she worked, from what I've heard. Man-eater.'

Strike chose to pretend he hadn't heard that.

'What are they more worried about, that I've got the pictures, or that they fucked up, claiming the body was Knowles?'

'Both. And they probably think you're about to upstage them. Again.'

'It's not them I'd be upstaging if I identify that body, it'd be Malcolm Truman,' said Strike. 'Are they going to own the mistake, or keep pretending it was Knowles?'

'Dunno. Just thought you should know, they'll be looking for any reason to clobber you, if you get under their feet.'

'Warning noted,' said Strike. 'Any line on what happened to Knowles' body yet?'

'No idea. I'm signed off work.'

'You ill?' asked Strike.

‘Not really,’ said Wardle. Then, evidently feeling this required explanation, he said, ‘Doctor says it’s depression.’

‘Ah,’ said Strike, ‘right.’

Wardle had lost his brother to a hit-and-run a few years previously. Strike knew he’d been trying to act as a surrogate father to his four nephews and nieces ever since. Meanwhile, Wardle’s wife had left him, taking their own three-month-old baby with her.

‘Thinking of getting out, actually,’ said Wardle.

‘Of the Met?’ said Strike, keen to clarify what Wardle meant. Men sometimes took a different way out. He’d known a couple.

‘Yeah,’ said Wardle. ‘I’m just… fucking tired.’

‘Job at the agency, any time you fancy taking it,’ said Strike. ‘Change of pace. Friendly team – if you don’t count me, obviously.’

‘Huh,’ said Wardle, in a forced laugh.

‘Fancy a pint when I get back to London?’

‘Yeah, all right. Where are you?’

‘Scotland,’ said Strike. ‘I’ll call you when I get back to town.’

‘Right,’ said Wardle, though he didn’t sound enthusiastic.

Call finished, Strike looked out of the window, feeling even more depressed. The rain was falling more thickly outside. He pulled out his vape, caught the censorious eye of the waitress, put it back in his pocket and ordered a second coffee.

62

Ubi honor non est, *where no honour is,*
Ibi contemptus est*; and where contempt,*
Ibi injuria frequens*; and where that,*
The frequent injury, ibi et indignatio*;*
And where the indignation, ibi quies Nulla*; and where there is no quietude,*
Why, ibi, *there, the mind is often cast*
Down from the heights where it proposed to dwell…

Robert Browning
Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis

It was half past six and dark on the industrial estate. Most of the people moving in and out of the units surrounding God's Own Junkyard had disappeared, though a few stragglers remained, for which Robin was grateful, because it made her own presence seem less odd.

Finally, the door of Unit Twelve opened, and Robin saw the neon blaze of the interior again, and watched as the three models exited, talking and lighting cigarettes as they reached fresh air, each wrapped in a coat. At last, when the racks of clothes had been rolled into one van, and the photographer and his assistant had packed away their equipment, Valentine Longcaster emerged, pausing to light a cigarette and chat with the models. Feeling it was now or never, and so cold she no longer really cared if she met a rebuff, Robin approached the group.

'Mr Longcaster?'

Valentine turned.

'My name's Robin Ellacott. I'm a private detective and I wondered

whether I could have a word with you about Rupert Fleetwood.'

Robin was very aware of four pairs of eyes fixed on her. Ciara Porter in particular – so pale she seemed illuminated in the dark – was goggling at her, and one of the other models, who had a short black pixie cut, gave a little gasp and said in an audible whisper to Ciara: 'Wait… *is this PP*?'

'I think it must be, yeah,' drawled Valentine, exhaling smoke.

Convinced he was going to refuse to talk, Robin was taken aback when he said, 'OK. Let's talk about Rupert fucking Fleetwood.'

The model with the pixie cut laughed.

'There's a restaurant not far from here,' said Robin, who certainly wasn't going to interview Valentine in front of an audience. 'We could talk there, if you like?'

'Doubt there's anything to "like" in Walthamstow,' said Valentine. 'Fine. I'll follow you in my car.'

'I didn't come in a car,' said Robin. 'It's a short walk. Just a couple of minutes.'

'Then I'll see you there,' said Valentine. 'What's it called?'

'Arte e Pasta,' said Robin. 'It's just round the—'

'I'll find it.'

'Right,' said Robin. 'I'll wait for you there, then.'

She turned and walked away. Behind her, she heard Valentine make some unintelligible comment, and a burst of laughter.

The small restaurant, which lay three minutes' walk away, had a mural painted on the outer wall. Robin was far too cold to wait for Valentine outside, so headed indoors and secured a table for two beneath a high ceiling that was partly corrugated iron. Coloured lanterns hung from iron bars above the tables and children's drawings were pinned up on the wall. Robin doubted it was Valentine Longcaster's kind of place.

Twenty minutes passed with no sign of Longcaster. Robin ordered herself a mineral water and checked her email. Pat had sent a message to both Robin and Strike saying that the local paper had refused to give contact details for the Mohamed family, which made no sense to Robin until she saw the attachment about Hafsa, the nine-year-old Syrian refugee. Hafsa's picture showed a little girl with a sweet, heart-shaped face and enormous, thick-lashed eyes. Robin was still examining this when she sensed someone looming over her and looked up to see Valentine.

While silhouetted by the neon glow of God's Own Junkyard, Valentine could have passed for twenty-five, because he was thin and moved energetically. His thick dirty-blond hair was cropped at the sides but with a floppy, boyish fringe, and his clothes were quirky and youthful. However, when he sat down opposite Robin, she thought he looked his full forty years. There was a softness at the chin, bags beneath the bloodshot eyes, of which the pupils were so dilated his blue eyes looked almost black. There was also a cluster of small yellowish pimples at the corner of his mouth, which he'd attempted to conceal with make-up.

'So,' he said, shrugging off his black jacket, 'where's Decima?'

'I don't know,' said Robin.

'Uh huh,' said Valentine sarcastically. 'I s'pose she thinks if she stays in hiding long enough, Fleetwood'll get worried she's done herself a mischief and come back?'

A young waitress appeared at their table.

'What's safe to drink?' drawled Valentine, looking up at the girl.

'Oh, well, we've got—'

'Peroni,' he said.

'I'm fine with this water,' Robin said, before the waitress could ask.

The waitress departed to fetch Valentine's beer. Robin took out her notebook.

'So, could I ask when you last saw Rupert?' she asked.

'You *could*,' said Valentine. 'Are you going to?'

'OK,' said Robin. 'When did you last—?'

'On May the twenty-first last year, as you already know, because Sacha told Corporal Brokeby.'

Robin chose to ignore the insulting nickname for Strike.

'And you haven't had any contact with him since?'

'Of course I bloody haven't.'

'Why "of course"?'

'You can drop the Miss Marple thing, you're not going to catch me out.'

'What d'you—?'

'Decima's already told you I think Fleetwood's a conniving little shit on the make, I'm sure. The family's glad to see the back of him.'

Robin's mobile rang. She pulled it out of her pocket, saw her mother's number, and refused the call.

‘You argued with Rupert on the twenty-first of May, right?’ she said to Valentine. ‘What was that about?’

‘He’d gatecrashed Sacha’s party, and I don’t like freeloaders.’

‘Why did Rupert turn up there, do you know? He’d stolen that nef from your father, so it seems odd—’

‘Well, he’s thick as shit, you see,’ said Valentine. He raked his hair out of his eyes, glaring at Robin through the huge black pupils. ‘He didn’t believe my father would call the police, because of publicity, but my father doesn’t give a shit what the press say about him and he certainly wouldn’t care what they write about Fleetwood. I told him at the party my father had rung the police as soon as he realised the nef had gone, so he panicked and fucked off again. Decima ought to have paid him what the nef was worth, to make him give it back. Apparently she hasn’t learned her lesson.’

‘What lesson?’

‘That if you want to turn a gigolo into a permanent fixture, you need to keep coughing up,’ said Valentine. ‘She married another leech in her twenties, did she mention that?’

‘No,’ said Robin.

‘Well, she did, so the family’s been here before. Mullins was a better-looking Fleetwood. Shitty business ideas, trying to make everyone invest, then bolt for someone better-looking once he realised Decima wasn’t actually a cashpoint, just shaped like one.’

The waitress arrived with Valentine’s lager. As he clearly wasn’t going to thank her, Robin did it.

‘Are you ready to order?’ asked the waitress.

‘I’m not eating,’ said Valentine.

‘Spaghetti carbonara, please,’ said Robin, who felt one of them should justify taking up a table. The waitress left again, and Robin said, ‘So you think Rupert left your sister for another woman?’

‘It’s what most of her boyfriends do.’

‘Your sister Cosima was upset by what Rupert said to her, at the party, right?’

‘So?’

‘What did he say to upset her?’

‘That’s none of your fucking business.’

‘Well, it *is* my business,’ said Robin, ‘because I’m being paid to find out

why Rupert disappeared.'

'He hasn't fucking disappeared, he's in America.'

'How d'you know that?'

'Sacha told me.' After a slight hesitation, Valentine said, 'Fleetwood was rude to Cosima when she told him he shouldn't have gatecrashed, all right?'

'She approached him, did she? To tell him he should get out?'

'No,' said Valentine, but then, 'possibly.'

'Sacha told my partner that Rupert seemed to have come looking for a fight. Who did he want to fight with? Cosima? You?'

Valentine sipped his Peroni.

'Because I don't think it adds up,' Robin persisted, 'that he went there just for free drink. He was moving out of his house that weekend. That's always stressful, and hard work. Plus, I spoke to a good friend of Rupert's, Albie Simpson-White—'

'Who?'

'He used to work at your father's club. The way he described Rupert, gatecrashing that party would be quite out of character.'

'But he did it,' said Valentine, 'so Albie What-ever-the-fuck's powers of perception don't seem great, do they?'

'Sacha said Cosima was in tears. Does she cry that easily, in the middle of a party, just because a gatecrasher's rude to her?'

'Are you trying to be funny?' said Valentine, suddenly aggressive, and leaning in.

'I'm simply—'

'If you or your fucking partner go anywhere *near* Cosima—'

'We won't need to, if you just tell me—'

'*Did you hear what I just said to you?*'

'Why did you agree to talk to me?' asked Robin, feigning composure. When he'd leaned in she'd seen the slight residue of white powder around his nostrils; he'd taken cocaine either in the car or just before leaving God's Own Junkyard. 'People usually agree to an interview because they want to find out what we already know.'

'Is this what the great detective's taught you? Transparent little mind games?'

'It's not a mind game, I'm—'

'D'you sit at Brokeby's one and a half feet, drinking in his wisdom?'

‘Two feet, one fake. You’re thinking of his legs. But go on.’

‘That’s exactly the sort of thing he’d say, the point-scoring little fucking pedant.’

‘He’s hardly little,’ said Robin.

‘You’d know, of course.’

‘We’re seriously doing penis innuendoes, are we?’ said Robin.

‘*Quod si non aliud potest, ruborem ferreo canis exprimamus ore.*’

‘You’ll have to translate, I’m afraid. I never did Latin.’

‘Ask your fucking boyfriend to do it.’

‘My boyfriend doesn’t speak Latin, either.’

‘He’ll understand that.’

‘Cormoran Strike isn’t my—’

‘*Oh,*’ said Valentine. ‘Got bored already, has he? That was quick.’

‘We’re not together, and we never have been,’ said Robin. ‘I’m here—’

Her phone rang again. It was Linda, a second time. Robin refused the call.

‘You two were fucking as soon as he left Charlotte,’ said Valentine.

‘You’ve been misinformed,’ said Robin.

‘It’s *you* who’s been misinformed, dear.’

‘I think I’m more likely to know who I’m sleeping—’

‘Did you know he knocked her around?’

‘Mr Longcaster, I—’

‘Rather not hear hard facts about your hero?’

‘Cormoran Strike isn’t my hero, he’s my business partner,’ said Robin.

‘Charlotte told me you were pretty fucking starry-eyed whenever he walked in the room.’

‘She saw us together for about a minute and a half, tops,’ said Robin, starting to lose her cool against her will. ‘And as I recall, I was looking at her the whole—’

‘I’ll bet you were. Like what you see?’

‘What’s that supposed—?’

‘Eyeing up the competition? You were *no* fucking competition, not to her.’

‘As I wasn’t competing, that’s neither—’

‘D’you know what she called you?’

‘I really couldn’t care le—’

‘“PP”,’ said Valentine. ‘Want to know what that stands for?’

‘I think we’re done here,’ said Robin, but with execrable timing, the waitress now returned and put a plate of spaghetti in front of her.

‘Thank you,’ muttered Robin.

‘Parmesan?’

‘No, thank you.’

The waitress walked away.

‘I think we’re done,’ Robin repeated to Valentine, but he didn’t move.

‘If Corporal Brokeby had come to me with that “what if Fleetwood’s killed himself?” bullshit he pulled on Sacha, I’d’ve given him what he deserves,’ said Valentine. ‘He wants to talk suicide, I’m more than fucking ready to talk suicide.’

‘Well, you had your chance,’ said Robin, ‘and you refused to speak to him.’

‘It’s on him Charlotte’s dead.’

‘It isn’t,’ said Robin.

‘He fucking *destroyed* her.’

‘They split up six years before she did it.’

‘That’s what he told you, is it?’

Robin felt a creeping sensation in her stomach. Had Strike hidden that, too? Had he continued to meet Charlotte, and sleep with her, through those years he’d pretended they’d split up?’

‘PP stands for the pit pony,’ said Valentine remorselessly. ‘Cormoran Strike’s scruffy little Yorkshire helper.’

‘Charming,’ said Robin. ‘If you’ve quite—’

‘He screwed around when he was supposed to be with her, he knocked her about, and she still fucking loved him, and the night she died, he said stuff to her—’

‘My information is, he didn’t pick up the phone,’ said Robin.

‘Then you need a better source of fucking information,’ said Valentine.

He got to his feet, looking down at her.

‘You *are* a fucking pit pony. He drags you along in the dark like some dumb fucking animal. Now fuck off away from my family. I don’t want to see you, ever again.’

He strode away, jacket over his shoulder, swearing at a woman who was too slow to move aside from the door.

63

The thoughts of others
Were light and fleeting,
Of lovers' meeting
Or luck or fame.
Mine were of trouble,
And mine were steady;
So I was ready
When trouble came.

A. E. Housman
VI, More Poems

Robin didn't have the slightest appetite for her spaghetti now. Just as she was thinking of calling the waitress over to say she'd like the bill, her mobile rang for a third time. Seeing her mother was calling again, she took a deep breath, put a finger in her free ear to block out the noise of the restaurant, and answered.

'Hi Mum, sorry I didn't answer earlier, I was on a job. Is everything OK?'

'Carmen's had the baby,' said Linda.

'Wait – what? I thought she wasn't due 'til—'

'He's a month early,' said Linda, 'and it was a bad birth, and they think there's something wrong.'

A chill ran through Robin.

'With the baby?'

'Yes,' said Linda. 'We're waiting to hear, we're at the hospital.'

'What—?'

'He's not moving an arm properly or something, I don't know, nobody's

giving us full information. They think it's a birth injury, torn nerves, or – nobody seems to know.'

'Oh no,' said Robin, who felt completely helpless. 'I – what can I do?'

'Nothing, nothing, I just needed to let you kn – Robin, that's the doctor – I'll call you back.'

She hung up.

'Everything all right with your spaghetti?' said the young waitress, reappearing at the table.

'Fine,' said Robin, looking up. 'Could I have the bill, please?'

'Are you sure there's nothing—?'

'No, please – please just get me the bill.'

Five minutes later, Robin emerged into the icy night, and set off in the direction of the nearest station. Finally, unable to bear her anxiety alone, she tugged off her gloves and called Ilsa.

'Hi, how're you?' said the latter, answering on the third ring.

'I'm really sorry to do this to you again, Ilsa, I just need to talk to someone. Well, to you.'

'Why? What's wrong?'

'I – my brother's girlfriend's just had her baby a month early, and there's something wrong with him, I just heard—'

'Oh no, Robin, I'm so sorry—'

'It's not that, I can't do anything about that tonight,' said Robin distractedly. 'Maybe I shouldn't care about this right now, but Ilsa, I just need to know, was Strike violent to Charlotte Campbell?'

'*What?*'

'I just met a man called Valentine Longcaster, and—'

'*Him*,' said Ilsa, her tone scathing. 'Oh, I know *him*. We met him a couple of times. There was a bloody terrible party on a barge, and some dinner in Belgravia. How on earth did you meet *him*?'

'It's complicated,' said Robin. 'Anyway, he told me Strike knocked Charlotte around, and Ilsa, if he did—'

'Did he hell,' said Ilsa.

'Are you sure?' said Robin, and even as she said it, she knew nobody could give her the total assurance she craved. Who knew what happened when a man and a woman were alone together, unwatched, unheard? 'I can't work with him if – I can't take this, on top of everything else—'

‘Robin, *she* injured *him.* She threw things, clawed his face—’

‘How d’you know it wasn’t self-defence?’

‘Well, for a start: the night on the houseboat, she got hammered and grabbed a knife and was waving it around. We all left, but Nick had left his favourite bloody sunglasses there, so he went back. He saw it through the window, she was threatening to stab Corm, or herself, and he disarmed her, and she slipped – we never told Corm Nick had seen it, but ages later Corm told Nick she was accusing him of throwing her across the boat or some such rubbish. If he was so violent, why was he the one constantly walking out with split lips, and why was she always begging him to come back?’

Robin wanted to believe Ilsa, but given recent events, she wasn’t sure she could be certain of anything relating to Cormoran Strike.

‘Look, nine times out of ten women are telling the truth about being beaten,’ said Ilsa, ‘and I should know, I’ve prosecuted enough domestic abuse cases, but Corm’s not an abuser. Robin, he’s *not.* Listen, I had a really terrible case, five years ago: a woman who was trying to get sole custody of her young daughter…’

Robin heard footsteps behind her. She glanced over her shoulder, but the man was fifty yards away. She didn’t like being followed, not after Harrods, and the incident that had left her with an eight-inch scar up her right forearm – not that this man was following her, of course, he was simply walking in the same direction, in the dark. Anyway, this was a residential street: lit windows everywhere, plenty of people to hear her scream…

‘… own history of violence, so the only way she was going to get custody was to paint him as even worse. She said he’d attacked them with broken bottles and used ligatures…’

Was it Robin’s imagination, or was the man behind her speeding up? She looked back again. Yes, he was definitely closer, and one hand seemed to be inside his jacket.

‘… just fell apart on the stand. It couldn’t have happened the way she claimed. Meanwhile, her partner had been seen covered in abrasions and bruises…’

The man behind Robin passed beneath a street light. He was wearing a latex gorilla mask.

‘Ilsa,’ Robin shouted, ‘I’m on Shernhall Street, heading towards Wood Street station and I’m being followed, and I’m about to film him and

describe him to you.’

‘*Wh—?*’

‘If anything happens, call the police!’

He was striding straight for her; Robin raised her phone, as though she was filming him, and said loudly, ‘He’s wearing a gorilla mask, about five nine, dark hair, green jacket, black gloves—’

The man slowed. She could see his eyes glinting behind the small holes in the mask.

‘You need to stop,’ he said in a low voice, advancing on her as she walked backwards. ‘Stop. Just stop.’

From beneath his jacket, he drew a dagger.

‘ILSA,’ said Robin, now screaming, ‘HE’S GOT A KNIFE—’

64

She thought, moreover, real lies were—lies told
For harm's sake; whereas this had good at heart…

Robert Browning
Pompilia

'You need to stop,' the man repeated, from behind the mask. 'All right? You need to leave it. Then you won't get hurt. *Stop*.'

Before Robin could say or do anything else, he threw the dagger at her feet, turned, and sprinted away.

Ilsa was still shouting on the other end of the phone. Too stunned to compute what had just happened, Robin stared at the dagger lying on the pavement, then crouched down to look at it.

'ARE YOU THERE? *ROBIN!*'

'Yes,' said Robin, raising the phone to her ear again. Her heart seemed to be thudding in her throat. 'I'm here. I'm fine. It's OK. He ran away.'

'*JESUS CHRIST, ROBIN!*'

'It's all right, I'm OK. He didn't do any—'

'You all right?' said a man in slippers, who'd just emerged from the nearest house. 'I heard a scream.'

'Yes,' said Robin, while Ilsa gabbled from the phone she'd lowered to answer him. 'Yes, thank you, I'm fine. A man was following me, but he's gone.'

'You sure you're all right?'

He was elderly, and as he drew nearer to the street light she saw his look of concern.

'Yes, really, I'm fine, but thank you – thank you so much for checking.'

The man retreated inside his house. Robin raised the phone to her ear yet

again.

‘It’s all fine, Ilsa, he just threw the knife at me.’

‘He *what*?’

‘I know,’ said Robin, gaining a perverse strength from Ilsa’s panic. ‘Some attacker.’

‘*He threw the knife at you?*’

‘Yes,’ said Robin, staring at the dagger lying on the ground. Its nine-inch blade looked blunt. It had a black handle and a brass crosspiece, on which a familiar symbol was engraved. Robin pulled her gloves back out of her pocket, put them on with her phone held between ear and shoulder, and picked it up. Ilsa was still talking.

‘Sorry, what?’ said Robin, straightening up, weighing the dagger in her hand. It was fifteen inches long, weighty and very clearly ceremonial rather than a genuine weapon. Even so, it would make a decent bludgeon.

‘I said, *call the police*!’

‘I doubt they’ll get him,’ said Robin, now examining the compass and square symbol on the hilt. ‘It’s dark and he was wearing a mask. No cameras… anyway, I’m not hurt. He just wanted to frighten me.’

‘*That’s hardly the bloody—!*’

‘Where did he follow me from?’ said Robin, talking more to herself than to Ilsa, now.

‘Robin, you’re scaring the crap out of me—’

‘I’m all right, I’m fine… now I just need to find a way of hiding this dagger so I don’t get arrested on the Tube.’

Robin’s phone began bleeping.

‘Ilsa, I’m really sorry, that’s Mum, I’ll have to take it.’

‘But—’

‘I’ll call you back.’

A man walking his dog appeared out of the darkness ahead. Robin thrust the masonic dagger inside her coat, tightened her belt so it wouldn’t fall out and accepted her mother’s call.

‘Hi, Mum.’

‘Oh, Robin, what a nightmare,’ said Linda, who was clearly crying.

‘What is?’ said Robin, in alarm.

‘Martin just threatened to hit the doctor—’

‘*What?*’

‘It turns out Carmen’s got an android pelvis—’

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s harder for the baby to get through, they think that’s why he was injured coming out, if he’d been full term they’d probably have done a C-section – Martin’s blaming them for not realising and acting sooner, she was in labour for nineteen hours and now he’s been escorted out of the hospital…’

Robin walked on, her mother sobbing in her ear, and could think of nothing to say except,

‘Where’s Dad?’

‘He’s gone after Martin, he’s trying to calm him down…’

‘Mum, I’m so sorry,’ said Robin. ‘I wish I could do something…’

‘Oh, Lord, hang on, Stephen’s just arrived…’ Linda’s voice became muffled. ‘It’s Robin, Stephen, I’m just telling her… I’m back,’ said Linda into the phone again.

‘But what’s wrong with the baby? You said his arm’s not moving.’

‘They say it’s torn nerves, something palsy – they need to investigate. They say it might resolve, if that’s what it is, but they seem worried…’

‘Mum, I—’ But Robin couldn’t think of anything to say that would help. ‘Please… just send Carmen my love, and say I’m really looking forward to meeting – has he got a name yet?’

‘They’re saying they’re going to call him Dirk,’ said Linda. ‘I don’t care… I just want him to be all right… *you’re* OK, are you?’ Linda added, clearly feeling she should check.

‘Me?’ said Robin, pausing to tighten her belt, as the dagger was slipping. ‘I’m great. Don’t worry about me.’

Now hyper-alert, Robin hurried home, glancing repeatedly over her shoulder. Once in her flat, she placed the dagger engraved with the compass and set square inside a new freezer bag, then hid it in her underwear drawer, alongside the small rubber gorilla that had been forced into her hand at Harrods.

Had they been the same man? Had she – the thought was irresistible – just come face to face with Oz?

Before she drew the sitting room curtains she peered down into the street to be sure no lurker was watching. She told herself there’d been a comic aspect to her menacer’s methodology; throwing the dagger at her had

been ludicrously anticlimactic, the kind of thing a child would do. But the gorilla mask had upset her, far more than the knife; that had been vile, personal, intended to invoke atavistic terror. She returned to her front door three times in the twenty minutes after arriving home, rechecking that she'd bolted it, and that she'd set her alarm.

The more Robin thought about it, the more certain she was that the man must have followed her from her flat that morning, taken the bus with her, then lurked on that industrial estate, and now she thought about it, the man with the bandana who'd been hanging around had the same dark green jacket as the one wearing the gorilla mask. He'd pretended to be just another worker moving around the industrial units, waiting for a chance to frighten her with his mask and dagger and deliver his message. She felt humiliated: she, who'd undertaken training in surveillance and counter-surveillance, was supposed to know better than this. She knew all the tricks because she used them herself: taking her jacket on and off, subtly changing her appearance, concealing her face, constantly switching position. He hadn't even been very good: she'd noticed him earlier, staring at her.

She knew exactly why she'd been so careless, of course. Relieved at being alone, and not having to fake cheeriness for Murphy, she'd sunk back into brooding about Strike and Bijou Watkins, then been distracted by the presence at the shoot of Ciara Porter.

Nervy, angry at herself, and in spite of the fact she'd eaten barely anything all day, Robin took only two bites of the sandwich she made herself, then threw the rest in the bin. She debated calling her boyfriend, but decided against it, still angry about the way he'd spoken to her earlier. In any case, she couldn't tell him about the man with the dagger; he'd overreact, and the last thing she needed right now was the burden of his concern, or renewed insistence that she shouldn't be investigating the body in the vault.

No, the only person she could tell – the only person she *had* to tell – was Strike. She picked up her phone again and contemplated calling him, then decided she'd tell him the following day when they were in Ironbridge.

The man upstairs was probably out, because no music was pounding through the ceiling. This was good: Robin would be able to hear movement on her landing, have advance warning of anyone trying to get inside her flat. She went to run herself a bath. Twice, she hurriedly turned off the taps,

convinced she'd heard a sound outside the front door.

Nobody's going to break in. Calm down, for God's sake.

She got into the bath, trying to enjoy the feeling of hot water, to relax. She needed to be able to sleep: she'd be up at five the following morning to pick up the hire car in which she'd be driving to Ironbridge, to interview Tyler Powell's grandmother.

The gorilla mask swam into her mind's eye, the pupils glinting in the street light. He was the third man who'd come at her, out of the dark: she remembered the hands throttling her in the stairwell, the scream of her rape alarm, the knife slicing her flesh…

Charlotte Campbell brandishing a knife on a barge; *it's on him Charlotte's dead;* a premature baby with an injured arm; *fifty-five per cent chance of a live birth;* the box at Chapman Farm; *you don't know what it's like, to worry yourself sick about your daughter;* a bracelet, a dagger and a rubber gorilla, hidden from the man she was house-hunting with; *when you start undermining a fucking police investigation… We're just trying to find Rupert Fleetwood… I'm really disappointed we didn't get the house… Me? I'm great. Don't worry about me…*

She couldn't tell the people who were supposed to love her the truth, because they didn't want the truth, they wanted her to be the person whose lies weren't lies.

The bath wasn't helping. Charlotte Campbell had bled out in a tub like this…

Robin got out and pulled out the plug as though she could drain her dark thoughts with the water, dried herself and put on pyjamas. For the very first time since moving into this flat, she wished she didn't live alone, and at once she remembered the night Strike had come to stay, when he'd snored on the sofa bed and she'd found the sound reassuring, because their office had just been destroyed by an explosive device…

Why was she thinking about Strike, not Murphy? She turned on the TV, then turned it off almost at once. She wanted to be able to hear footsteps.

You are *a fucking pit pony. Getting dragged along in the dark, like some dumb animal.*

You need to leave it. Then you won't get hurt. Stop.

65

Little is the luck I've had,
And oh, 'tis comfort small
To think that many another lad
Has had no luck at all.

A. E. Housman
XXVIII, Last Poems

Strike had used the retractable walking stick he carried with him for emergencies to enter and leave the Travelodge in Penrith, and slathered the end of his stump in its usual moisturising cream before sleeping. Unfortunately, neither measure had ameliorated the pain in his right knee, which remained swollen and continued to resent the slightest amount of weight-bearing or movement.

The drive to Ironbridge the following morning was therefore uncomfortable even though the Audi was an automatic. The rain lifted as he drove south, but the intermittent sunlight didn't do much to cheer him. He ought to have been driving away from the Lake District hotel with Robin at his side, either ecstatic that his declaration of love had been reciprocated and (even better) consummated, or – and in his current glum state of mind, he didn't doubt that this had been more likely, all along – in extreme mutual embarrassment, because she'd turned him down. But he'd have swapped even that for this state of flat depression. There was no dishonour in losing after venturing everything; he'd have coped, and he'd have known, at least, that he'd tried, but to be gunned down before you'd even left your trench was ignominious defeat indeed.

The small town of Ironbridge was beautiful, which Strike hadn't expected. A dramatic arching iron bridge spanned the sludge-green River

Severn, which was bordered by thick trees and foliage. Buildings seemed to tumble down the steep hill on the north bank, where the High Street, parallel with the river, was bordered with shops, cafés and pubs that had a quaintly 1950s appearance, their signs illuminated by the wintry sunlight. Strike took no pleasure in the scene; he'd have preferred to be pulling up among graffitied tower blocks and broken glass, which would have better chimed with his mood.

He left his Audi in the car park of the Swan Taphouse, and was about to text Robin his position when he spotted her a hundred yards away, getting out of her own hire car. He resented having to use the stick to walk towards her, because it felt like asking for pity.

Robin, who'd had only a couple of hours' sleep the night before, which had been punctuated by dreams of oversleeping to pick up the hire car, and of the box at Chapman Farm, and of Murphy shouting at her, had spent much of the journey resolving to be completely natural with Strike when she saw him. Murphy had called her during her drive north, apologising for being so angry about the photographs of the body in the vault, and they'd reaffirmed their intention to look over the two-bedroomed house in Walthamstow the following day. She hadn't, of course, told her boyfriend about being threatened with a masonic dagger.

Approaching each other from a distance, both self-conscious, each was struck by very different thoughts. Strike thought Robin looked far from her best. She still hadn't regained all the weight she'd lost at Chapman Farm, and in this bright winter light looked slightly gaunt and very tired. She also had a smudge of something black beneath her right eye. But none of it mattered: he wanted her as he'd never wanted any woman in his life, and it was too late.

Meanwhile, Robin saw Strike limping towards her, and she hated herself for recognising how attractive she found him, dishevelled and badly shaven as he was. It had taken Robin a long time to see what other women seemed to find so sexy about this broken-nosed, overweight, bear-like man, and it was extremely upsetting to find him physically appealing now, of all possible times, and she needed to readjust her sight again, to focus exclusively on Murphy (*who's the Paul Newman lookalike?*) because Strike was a liar who hid both girlfriends and babies from his business partner.

'Hi,' said Strike, when they'd covered the last few yards separating

them, each trying to look at anything but the other. ‘We’ve got half an hour before Dilys, right?’

‘Yes,’ said Robin.

‘Want to get a coffee or something?’

‘OK,’ said Robin. ‘I think that hotel’s open.’

In spite of her resolution to be natural, she heard the unfriendliness in her voice as she pointed towards the Tontine Hotel, a large Georgian building with pea-green shutters that overlooked the iron bridge.

They crossed the road in silence. Robin might have asked about the fact that her partner was walking with a stick, but as he usually disliked enquiries about his leg, she decided not to. Strike, meanwhile, was perversely wondering why she couldn’t at least ask about his leg.

Once sitting in the window at the hotel bar, each with a coffee, Strike told Robin about his interview with Jade Semple, omitting to mention either his crashing hangover or the fact that he’d fallen on his arse in the mud mid-interview, because his reputation as a detective was about the only thing he currently had going for him and he was damned if he was going to give that up, too.

‘If Niall was in such a poor mental state he was scared of crossing a bridge,’ said Robin, once Strike had finished, ‘is it likely he was in a fit state to run away with a girlfriend? Wouldn’t that woman be worried about him? Would she want the responsibility?’

‘No idea,’ said Strike, ‘but I’ll be honest, I don’t think the Semples’ marriage was a meeting of minds. She’s from Colchester, which means she probably met him when he was still 3 Para, as it’s where they’ve got their base. To be blunt about it, men in those kinds of regiments are warned against local girls looking for a ticket out of small-town life. She’s good-looking enough, but I can’t see that they’d have had a hell of a lot in common. Semple passed SAS selection, so he’ll be very intelligent, and she said herself they were both unfaithful before they got married. I think she got pregnant, he felt cornered and thought he was doing the right thing, marrying her.’

Severely aggravated by Strike’s gall in talking so casually about accidental pregnancy, and his implicit criticism of Niall Semple for getting entangled with a woman with whom he had nothing in common, Robin said,

‘Did you ask her about Reata Lindvall and Belgium?’

Shit. He’d completely forgotten.

‘Yeah. No connection,’ said Strike.

‘Did you ask whether he knew a man called Oz?’

Fuck. He hadn’t asked that, either.

‘Yeah,’ said Strike. ‘She didn’t think so.’

‘So,’ said Robin, striving to sound coolly professional, ‘how likely d’you think it is that Niall Semple was the man in the vault?’

‘On balance, slightly more likely than Fleetwood,’ said Strike, ‘because he’s a mason and, from what Jade says, he got a bit obsessive about Freemasonry, post-injury. Plus, there’s a connection with the name William Wright. On the other hand, would he have been capable of all the subterfuge involved in pretending to be Wright, with a brain injury? And why was he going on twenty-mile runs? That suggests to me he was training for something, or thought he was. I can’t help wondering whether he hasn’t left the country, tried to get back to a battlefield, find or avenge his best mate.’

‘But we’d know if he’d left the UK.’

‘You think the SAS always travel on their own passports?’

‘Oh,’ said Robin, to whom this hadn’t occurred.

‘We’re talking about the kind of bloke who can navigate by the stars, scale buildings without ropes, learn Arabic in two weeks flat – they’re the best of the best, the SAS. I struggle to see why a man like that would think it important to go undercover in a silver shop in London.’

‘Maybe the brain injury made him abnormally interested in the Murdoch silver?’

‘Oh yeah, and she gave me a picture of the note he left for her,’ said Strike, pulling out his phone, and Robin’s anger at him burned a little hotter for him ignoring her suggestion. Nevertheless, she took the mobile and read the strange message.

‘“RL knows where”,’ she read aloud. ‘Any idea what that means?’

‘No,’ said Strike.

Only now did it occur to him that these were Reata Lindvall’s initials, but as they were millions of other people’s initials, too, he didn’t find the fact of overwhelming relevance.

‘The other thing I found out was that he’d handcuffed his briefcase to him. I thought it looked like that, when I saw the photo in the press.’

‘You think he had something valuable in there?’

‘That would seem the obvious explanation, but if so, he must’ve got hold of the valuable thing between leaving Crieff on the twenty-seventh of May and visiting a cashpoint on the fourth of June. Jade says he didn’t take anything valuable with him. Maybe some old masonic books.’

‘Well, I managed to speak to Tia Thompson, Sapphire’s friend, yesterday,’ said Robin, handing Strike back his phone and making sure their fingers didn’t touch.

‘Ah, good work,’ said Strike, trying to curry favour, but she didn’t smile. After giving Strike a concise summary of all Tia had told her, she concluded,

‘… and the last thing she told me was, this mysterious man in the music business told Sapphire she reminded him of a Swedish girl he’d once known.’

‘Very interesting,’ said Strike, choosing not to voice his opinion that ‘you look Swedish’ was a fairly easy line to toss at a young blonde Brit you were trying to flatter. Nevertheless, still trying to ingratiate himself, he said, ‘Well, we aren’t exactly swamped with candidates for Rita Linda, so we should definitely bear Lindvall in mind… speaking of schoolkids, Pat thinks she’s found Hussein Mohamed – or his daughter, anyway.’

‘Yes,’ said Robin, ‘she emailed me.’

‘With the photo of the kid that was in the paper, we could—’

‘Hang around primary schools in Forest Gate and tail her home?’ said Robin.

‘It worked with Tia Thompson.’

‘I didn’t tail her home, and Tia’s sixteen. Do you seriously think that’s the same thing as stalking a child in a wheelchair who’s just escaped a civil war?’

‘I’m not talking about *stalk* – OK, forget it, it was just an idea,’ said Strike.

‘We’d better pay for our coffees,’ said Robin. ‘We haven’t got long now.’

‘I’ll get it,’ said Strike, reaching for his wallet.

‘I need the bathroom,’ said Robin, standing up. ‘Er – Dilys’s house is up quite a steep road, I’ve just seen the sign. If your leg’s bad—’

‘It’s fine,’ said Strike shortly.

Sod you, then, thought Robin, walking away in search of the Ladies.

Strike asked for the bill then stared gloomily out of the window at the huge iron bridge. Suddenly, his subconscious decided to throw up the thing that had been nagging at him in the café in Moffat. The unknown Scottish woman who'd twice called the office to beg for his help, and asked him to meet her in the Golden Fleece, had said: *It's all hid under the bridge*.

Meanwhile Robin, who was washing her hands at the sink, looked into the mirror over it and noticed not only how pale and exhausted she looked, but also the large black smudge of mascara under her right eye. Strike could have told her about it, she thought furiously, as she wiped it away.

66

… it was only the mistaken justice of a simple people that wanted blood for blood, and was not over-heedful as to whose blood so long as its own sense of justice was satisfied.

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

Robin hadn't been lying about the steepness of New Road, which made Comrie Road in Crieff look like a gentle incline. It wound its way up the hill behind the High Street and the gradient was such that, in spite of the cold, Strike was soon sweating from pure pain, and, against his will, having to stop every few yards.

'Listen,' said Robin, sympathy temporarily dampening down her resentment, 'I can easily interview Dilys alone.'

'No,' panted Strike, 'I'm coming.'

A mixture of pride, stubbornness and some sad residue of his determination to spend as much time with Robin as possible forced him onwards. Murphy, he thought, while his knee screamed for mercy, would doubtless be gambolling up the hill like a fucking gazelle.

The houses on both sides of the narrow road faced the river below, so that those on the right showed their back view. All were detached and well maintained, some built of brick, others painted and cottagey, with trailing plants around the doors. Robin, who'd been trying to match her speed to Strike's without dawdling too obviously, suddenly stopped of her own accord, staring at a circular blue plaque on a house in a short terrace.

'Strike.'

'What?'

She pointed. He followed her finger and read:

BILLY WRIGHT CBE
1924–1994
LEGENDARY FOOTBALL CAPTAIN
OF ENGLAND AND WOLVES
LIVED AND GREW UP HERE

‘Christ,’ muttered Strike, glad of a chance to stop walking, and trying not to look as though the stick was bearing half his weight. ‘Billy Wright… that should’ve occurred to me… never think of him as William…’

‘And Tyler’s grandmother lives just there,’ said Robin. She was pointing at a house that was rather smaller than those that flanked it, and painted a muddy shade of orange.

‘Just there’, Strike thought, was a relative term. It took him a further five minutes of agony to reach the wooden front door of Dilys Powell.

Robin knocked, then knocked again. They waited.

‘Oh no,’ said Robin. ‘She sounded pretty vague both times I spoke to her… maybe she forgot we were coming?’

Strike barely refrained from swearing. Robin peered in through the dusty window, past the plastic flowers in a jug on the window sill, to an old lady-ish room of armchairs bearing antimacassars, bits of inexpensive china and a patterned purple carpet.

‘Tyler’s parents’ house is a bit further on,’ said Robin. ‘We could try there?’

‘Fine,’ said Strike, trying to look as though this would require no effort whatsoever.

They set off again, Strike now bent sideways, trying to use the stick as a back-up leg.

At the crest of the hill stood a white house larger than Dilys’s, outside which was a For Sale sign. Robin knocked. Nobody answered. She went to peer through a window. The downstairs room was devoid of furniture.

‘*Oi!*’

The detectives turned. A short and extremely belligerent-looking man with longish dark hair had emerged from the back door of the house opposite. He was wearing a Steely Dan T-shirt and holding an acoustic guitar by the neck and as he hurried towards them, he did precisely what

Strike had been trying to avoid for the last fifteen minutes: slipped on his back lawn and tripped. However, he recovered his balance with the aid of his guitar and, hobbling and slightly pigeon-toed, he advanced on them, shouting:

'What d'you want? Bloody press, is it?'

'No,' said Strike, interested in this assumption. He pulled out his wallet and extracted a card. 'We're private detectives.'

Robin assumed the man was Tyler's neighbour Ian Griffiths, because he'd just emerged from the house she knew Ian Griffiths owned. Robin had grown up in a tall family – the only person in it who was of average height was her mother, and all her brothers were around six feet tall – and she felt slightly guilty (was there such a thing as sizeism?) that the first thing she'd noticed about Ian Griffiths was that he wasn't much over five feet tall. She had to admire his courage, though, because he was facing up to Strike as though more than willing to challenge him physically, in spite of the height difference between them of over a foot, and the fact that Strike was considerably broader. Possibly, she thought, Griffiths intended using the guitar as a weapon. He all but snatched the card out of Strike's hand.

'*Detectives?*' Griffiths snarled, reading the card. '*Shropshire* bloody *Star*, is it?'

'No,' said Robin, before Strike could answer; she sensed some placation might be necessary, and Strike's gifts in that area were variable. 'Dilys Powell invited us here to talk about her grandson Tyler, but she doesn't seem to be at home.'

'*Dilys* hired you?' said Griffiths, in clear disbelief.

'No, we're working for a different client,' said Robin.

'Faber bloody Whitehead, is it?' said Griffiths, looking still more incensed.

'I don't know anyone called Whitehead,' said Robin mildly. 'Dilys thinks Tyler might have been the man found dead in a silver shop in London last June. That's why she wanted to talk to us.'

'Oh,' said Griffiths. Some of the wind appeared to have been taken out of his sails. 'Yeah. She mentioned something about that…'

'You wouldn't happen to know where Dilys is?' asked Robin.

'No,' said Griffiths, looking down the road in the direction of Dilys's house. 'She's probably forgotten you're coming. She's on a lot of

medication. She had a bad fall a couple of months ago. Lethal, this hill, when it's icy.'

His belligerence seemed to be turning into embarrassment. He looked in his mid-forties; dark, with hazel eyes and a dimple in his chin, quite a handsome man. Now he glanced down at the guitar as though surprised to find himself holding it.

'You'll know Tyler Powell, I suppose?' said Robin. 'Living opposite his parents?'

'Yeah, I know him,' said Griffiths, who seemed to be trying to make up his mind about something. He squinted back up at Strike, who he seemed to find particularly suspicious. 'You're definitely not working for the Whiteheads?'

'Never heard of them,' said Strike.

'OK, well… you can come in here and wait for Dilys, if you want. She won't have gone far. Have a cup of tea. It's bloody cold.'

'Very good of you,' said Strike, grateful for the chance to take the weight off his right knee. 'Thanks.'

'Ian Griffiths,' said the man, at last holding out a hand, which first Strike, then Robin shook. 'But everyone calls me Griff.'

Still holding his guitar, Griffiths led Strike and Robin in through his back gate. His back garden was full of whimsical sculptures, including a gargoyle.

Strike, who'd dropped out of university at the end of his first year, had only a vague memory of student accommodation, but in his disapproving view, the interior of Ian Griffiths' house spoke of someone who'd never aged out of their late teens. Not only did the place stink of joss sticks, to which Strike had a strong aversion, because they'd been one of the signature smells of the various houses to which Leda had dragged him in childhood, but the sitting room into which Griffiths led them was cluttered with kitschy objects that Strike mentally classed as 'tat': Day of the Dead figurines, snow globes filled with glitter, a Rastafarian teddy bear, scatter cushions in psychedelic patterns and a framed poster of Jesus smoking a joint were among the objects for which Strike would have had no earthly use. Candles had been stuck in empty wine bottles, ramshackle shelves held a combination of LPs and CDs, and a keyboard and two more guitars stood in the corner, though Strike noted grudgingly that the place seemed

basically clean.

There were a lot of framed photographs, the largest of which showed a pretty dark-haired woman in a tie-dyed shirt and beaded necklace who had her arms around an equally pretty little girl. The same child featured in other photographs, in two of which she was wearing school uniform.

Seeing Robin's eyes on the photographs, Griffiths said,

'I lost my wife seven years ago. Breast cancer.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry,' said Robin.

'Thanks,' said Griffiths. 'We moved to Ironbridge to be near my brother and his wife. Chloe's all grown up now and interrailing with her boyfriend, so it's just me at the moment. What d'you take in your tea?'

When they'd given their requests and Griffiths had left to make the drinks, Strike and Robin sat down on the sofa, which was covered in a throw patterned with a mandala. Robin, who knew exactly what Strike's feelings would be about their host's taste in décor, might have passed comment, but chose instead to get out her notebook.

'You question him,' said Strike in a low voice. 'I'll take notes. Think he likes you better than me.'

'Fine,' said Robin, returning her notebook to her pocket.

Griffiths returned after five minutes with three mugs of tea and a plate of Tunnock's Teacakes. Strike thanked him and placed his mug beside him on a rickety wicker tray with legs, which meant shifting aside the gold figurine of a small boy apparently about to take a piss and a large purple candle studded with crystals.

'You're a musician, Mr Griffiths?' asked Robin.

'Yeah,' he said. 'I give piano and guitar lessons. Play in a band. Bit long in the tooth to get that record deal now, but we do pubs and weddings and stuff.'

He sat down opposite them and started unwrapping a teacake, saying,

'Sorry I was a bit… there's been a lot of trouble. About Tyler, I mean.'

'What kind of trouble?' asked Robin. Strike's pen was hovering over his notebook.

'Dilys didn't tell you?'

'No, but we know Tyler did something that made people in Ironbridge unhappy with him,' said Robin. 'We saw online that people didn't want to have to look at him, in photos.'

Griffiths swallowed a large mouthful of teacake, then said,

‘He was hounded out. Lynch mob, that’s what it was.’

‘What happened?’ asked Robin.

‘It’s a long story.’

‘We’d like to hear it, if you wouldn’t mind telling us.’

‘Huh,’ said Griffiths. ‘People round here would say you’re asking the wrong person.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Because I’m the only person who’s on Ty’s side, other than his gran… There was a car crash, see… and people blamed Ty for it.’

‘He was driving, was he?’

‘No, that’s what’s so bloody… they just wanted someone to blame.’

Robin waited. Griffiths set down his plate, with its half-eaten teacake, and said,

‘Ty was going out with this girl, Anne-Marie, see. She was a good friend of my Chlo’s, so I knew her. Nice girl. Live wire. Ty was mad about her. Told me he thought she was the one, and all that…

‘But then the bloody Whiteheads moved into a big house up the road, see. Plenty of money. He’s an architect, she’s a yoga teacher. Hot tub out the back, Range Rover in the drive – you know the type. People falling over themselves to get invited to the dinner parties.

‘Well, they had two boys. The younger one, Hugo, was a big mouth, real Flash Harry type. Younger’n Ty, he was twenty or something.

‘Anyway… Anne-Marie fell for Hugo, see. He’s a lovely lad, Ty,’ said Griffiths. ‘He’s never going to set the world alight, brains-wise, but he’s a really nice guy. Worked in a garage over in Dawley, good with his hands. I know him well, I gave him guitar lessons. He talked to me a lot. And he hasn’t had it easy. His parents… well, I say parents,’ said Griffiths, ‘he was adopted, see, but when he was one, his adoptive mum buggered off. Never wanted anything to do with him after that. No idea where she went. His dad married again, but neither of them really gave a toss about Ty. They both like a drink and a party, and when Ty’s stepmother inherited some money, Gill and Ivor buggered off to Florida. That’s where they are now. Sod Ty. He was left squatting in the old house until it was sold.’

‘But it hasn’t sold yet,’ said Robin, glancing through the back window at the Powells’ house.

‘No, because they haven’t had an offer they like, see That’s Ivor. He’s the type who wants to get every penny he can…’

Strike, who was making notes, thought instantly of Greg.

‘Couldn’t Tyler have gone with them to Florida?’ asked Robin.

‘Nah,’ said Griffiths. ‘Ty likes Ironbridge. ’S’all he knows, see. Anyway, they didn’t want him. As far as they were concerned, he was twenty-five, time he was off on his own. So, Anne-Marie’s left Ty for Hugo, and he doesn’t know when he’s going to be homeless – Chlo and me wanted to offer him our spare room, but – well, that was before…’

‘Before?’ Robin prompted him.

‘Argh, it was difficult for Chlo,’ said Griffiths uncomfortably. ‘She an’ Ty were good friends when we first come here, but after what happened happened, people were turning on everyone who stuck up for Ty, so I s’pose… I mean, you can’t blame her, really. But she changed her mind. She didn’t want Ty living here, not after the crash…

‘I don’t know the ins and outs of what happened that night, but basically: there was some concert in Birmingham a group of them wanted to go to, but Hugo couldn’t get a lend of Daddy’s Range Rover, so he asked Ty if he and Anne-Marie could get a lift with him, see. There was nothing in that,’ said Griffiths quickly. ‘Ty’s good-natured, see? He’d do anything for anyone. But at the last minute, Ty says he’s feeling ill, see, but that Hugo can still borrow his car. Ty loves cars. He got this one cheap and did it up. It was his pride and bloody joy, so people are effing deluded thinking…

‘Anyway… Hugo had only just passed his test, and he crashed it. Anne-Marie was killed outright and Hugo was in a coma for three months. Brain dead, but his mother didn’t want to pull the plug.

‘People round here were upset,’ said Griffiths, ‘obviously. Anne-Marie was local, grew up in a flat over a sweet shop on the High Street. Everyone knew her. And Hugo being in the coma, and the Whiteheads being everyone’s flavour of the month…

‘And then the Whiteheads started putting it about that it couldn’t have been Hugo’s driving, see. There must’ve been something up with Ty’s car – it wasn’t roadworthy, or whatever. But then people started saying something had been *done* to the car. Tampered with. They said Ty fixed the car to crash. Revenge, see, on Hugo and Anne-Marie. Bullshit,’ said Griffiths fiercely. ‘Pure bullshit. But the rumours just went on, and everyone was

looking sideways at Ty. Finally he came to me and said he'd had enough, he just wanted to clear – hang on,' said Griffiths suddenly, getting to his feet and peering out of the window on to New Road. 'That's Dilys, she must've been up the church. I'll get her, shall I?'

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I spoke to her, but she merely jabbered
In the old style; both her eyes had slunk
Back to their pits; her stature shrunk;
In short, the soul in its body sunk
Like a blade sent home to its scabbard.

Robert Browning
The Flight of the Duchess

Dilys Powell was a small, saggy-cheeked woman with wispy white hair, who looked frail and ill. She was wearing a thick tartan winter coat and entered the room very slowly, using a walking frame, a large black handbag over one arm.

‘Hello, Mrs Powell,’ said Robin, getting to her feet. ‘I’m Robin Ellacott. We spoke on the phone about your grandson, Tyler?’

Dilys’s only reply was a sniff.

‘She was up the church,’ said Griffiths, guiding Dilys to a chair. ‘It’s where her husband’s buried. I’ve been telling them about the car accident, Dilys,’ he told the old woman, raising his voice. ‘About Hugo and Anne-Marie, and why Tyler left Ironbridge.’

‘He never did nothing to that car,’ mumbled Dilys.

‘That’s what I told them,’ said Griffiths.

‘Never did nothing,’ repeated Dilys. She released the walking frame, then sank, with Griffiths’ aid, into an armchair.

‘We were hoping to ask you some questions, Mrs Powell,’ said Robin, ‘about why you thought the man in the vault could have been Ty—’

‘Took off,’ said Dilys. ‘Never told me where he was going. Told *him*,’ she said, with an aggrieved glance at Griffiths.

‘Only—’ began Griffiths.

‘Silver,’ said Dilys.

‘What about silver, Mrs Powell?’ asked Robin.

‘He was talking about silver. On the phone.’

‘Tyler was?’

‘Yer.’

‘What did he say about silver?’

‘I dunno.’

‘Who was he talking to? You?’

‘Jones, probably.’

‘Who’s Jones?’ said Robin.

‘His friend,’ said Dilys. ‘Up Higwell Farm, by Apeton.’

‘What’s Jones’ first name?’ asked Robin.

‘Wynn,’ said Dilys, as Strike’s pen moved rapidly across the page.

‘Is Wynn a good friend of Tyler’s?’

‘Yer,’ said Dilys, scowling. ‘I don’t like him.’

‘Why’s that?’ asked Robin.

‘Rude,’ said Dilys. She turned to look at Griffiths. ‘I need the loo.’

‘Right ho,’ said Griffiths, getting up again. He helped Dilys out of the armchair and guided her hands back on to the walking frame. ‘First on the left, down the hall.’

Dilys left the room slowly. Once she was out of earshot, Griffiths said quietly, ‘She’s gone downhill a lot since Ty left. He was good to her, did her shopping and that. She took it hard, him leaving, ’specially after his parents left for Florida. Ivor’s Dilys’s son. We all offer to help her, but Dilys likes her independence.’

‘There’s a great-niece, isn’t there?’ asked Robin. ‘I spoke to her before Christmas.’

‘She doesn’t live round here, she’s back at uni,’ said Ian. ‘I wouldn’t mention her. Dilys’s cat, that she was supposed to be feeding, died when Dilys was in hospital. The cat was ancient, but Dilys hasn’t forgiven the girl, and when Dilys loses her temper, believe me, you know it. She’s been worse since she slipped on the ice last autumn. Knocked herself out, going down the hill. She was lying out there in the dark for a couple of hours and nobody realised. She was in hospital a month and – shit,’ said Griffiths, jumping up as a muffled thump issued from somewhere out of sight. He left

the room. They heard another couple of thumps, Dilys saying, ‘That wasn’t me! I can do it!’ then the sound of a closing door. Griffiths re-entered the room.

‘’S’all right, she just hit the hall table,’ he said.

‘So Tyler never mentioned silver to you?’ asked Robin.

‘No, he just told me he’d got a job in a pub, somewhere down south. Dilys was angry I never told her that, see, but I thought she knew. Anyway, I dunno if Ty was telling the truth. He didn’t give me the name of the pub or anything. He might just’ve wanted me to think he had a plan.’

They heard a distant flush.

‘You’ve been to Belgium,’ Strike said to Griffiths.

‘What?’ said Griffiths.

Strike lifted the small gold figurine from the table beside which he was sitting. ‘This is the Manneken Pis, isn’t it? Copy of the Belgian statue?’

‘Oh – Chlo sent me that, from interrailing. Family joke. Find the tackiest souvenir you can, wherever you go.’

‘Ah, right,’ said Strike, setting the thing down again. He supposed that explained the glittery Virgin Mary and the neon pink Thai elephant on the shelf over Griffiths’ head.

‘Mrs Powell was interviewed by the police, wasn’t she?’ asked Robin.

‘Yeah,’ said Griffiths, ‘but I don’t think it went anywhere. Ty took all his stuff with him when he took off, see, so there was no ruling him out on DNA. Like I say, he was kind of squatting in the house after Gill and Ivor went to Florida. They got rid of most of the furniture before they put the place up for sale.’

‘Have they been in touch with Tyler, do you know?’ asked Robin.

‘No idea, you’d have to ask Dilys, but like I say, they’re not very concerned parents.’

Dilys shuffled back into the room a few minutes later and was again helped down into her armchair by Griffiths. Rather than thanking him, she scowled up at him.

‘Your Chloe stopped talking to Ty, and they was supposed to be friends.’

‘She didn’t, Dilys,’ said Griffiths. ‘She was just off on her trip, so—’

‘Tyler didn’t have nobody on his side,’ said Dilys. ‘Nobody. All of ’em saying he’d done something to the car. He never. He never did.’

She seemed both angry and upset, her hands moving restlessly in her

lap.

‘When did Tyler leave Ironbridge?’ asked Robin.

‘Months,’ said Dilys. ‘Months ago.’

‘Must’ve been… May, Dilys?’ said Griffiths. ‘I know it wasn’t long after Chloe’s birthday.’

‘They was supposed to be friends, but she left and never stood up for him,’ said Dilys, for whom this seemed a very sore point.

‘Only because she was off inter—’

‘Looking at his phone, all the time. Defending himself, he said. On the internet. I told him, “stop looking at what they’re saying, you’re only upsetting yourself”.’

‘Have you heard from him since he left, Mrs Powell?’ asked Robin.

‘He whatsitted me,’ she said, gripping and releasing her hands in her lap. ‘But then he stopped.’

‘You mean WhatsApped?’ suggested Robin tentatively.

‘Yer,’ said Dilys.

‘Can you remember when the messages stopped?’

‘What?’ said Dilys, scowling as she raised her hand to her ear.

‘Could I see the messages?’ asked Robin more loudly.

‘What for?’

‘To see the dates,’ said Robin.

Griffiths lifted Dilys’s bag off the floor and gave it to her. Mumbling under her breath, Dilys fumbled in its depths, at last retrieving an old Nokia. Breathing laboriously, she stabbed at the buttons, and after a protracted wait, handed the phone to Robin, who looked down at a short series of messages.

Tyler Powell

Hi gran hope your ok

Dilys Powell

my knees so bad I cant hardly walk

Tyler Powell

I’m sorry can’t you call Doris?

Dilys Powell

I can’t be bothering Doris all the time. when are you coming back?

Dilys Powell

are you ignoring me?

Dilys Powell

Ignorant bastard

Dilys Powell

after all ive done for you

Tyler Powell

Gran I’m not ungrateful but I’m busy Ive got a job

Dilys Powell

so your happy me being a prisoner in my own house

Dilys Powell

I can’t do shopping or nothing

Dilys Powell

you can forget me leaving you my money after this

Dilys Powell

Ungrateful little bastard

Tyler Powell

ok fine im an ungrateful bastard

you'll be better off not hearing from me then

Dilys Powell

Where are you?

Dilys Powell

I need to know where you are

Dilys Powell

Im bad my knees playing up

Dilys Powell

where are you Tyler

Dilys Powell

Ive called the police

Dilys Powell

tell me where you are im worried

The last message from Tyler had been sent on the sixteenth of June the previous year. Dilys's final message to him had been sent in October.

However, directly above this WhatsApp chat was another, which Robin, seeing the name 'Tyler', surreptitiously opened, scrolling back to the first message, which had been sent on July the twelfth of the previous year.

07700 903361

Gran this is my new number

07700 903361

Gran I got rid of my old phone because I was getting people hassling me on it so you need

to use this one for me now. Griff can have it but nobody else, ok?

Dilys Powell

Who is this?

07700 903361

It's Tyler. You need to use this number for me now.

Dilys Powell

Is that you Wynn Jones

07700 903361

No gran it's me, Tyler. I'm going to call you now all right?

07700 903361

Gran answer the phone it's me Tyler

07700 903361

Gran THIS ISN'T WYNN IT'S ME

The last of these messages had been sent shortly before Christmas.

'Would you mind if I take copies of these, Mrs Powell?' asked Robin.

'All right,' said Dilys, and Robin photographed both chats with her own phone.

'And would it be all right for me to take the number for Tyler's father?' Robin asked, seeing Ivor Powell's name on an older WhatsApp thread.

'Yeah, all right,' said Dilys again.

Robin saved the number, then handed back the Nokia.

'Have you spoken on the phone to Tyler since he left, Mrs Powell?'

'No,' said Dilys. 'That's not him. It's that Jones playing games.'

'Wynn Jones from Higwell Farm?'

‘Yeah.’

‘You think he’s been calling you, pretending to be Tyler?’

‘What?’

‘You don’t think it’s really Tyler who’s been calling you?’

‘Rude,’ said Dilys. ‘And he was a good boy before all this.’

‘Have you spoken to Tyler since he left, Griff?’ asked Robin.

‘Not since June,’ said Griffiths.

‘He seems to have wanted you to have his new number,’ said Robin.

‘That’s not Tyler, that other one,’ said Dilys mutinously. ‘I can tell the difference.’

‘You called the police in late June, Mrs Powell, did you?’ said Robin, looking down at the messages again. ‘Was that because you saw the news stories about the—?’

‘He said “silver”,’ said Dilys stubbornly. ‘I heard him.’

‘You know the shop where the body was found was masonic?’ asked Robin.

‘What?’

‘It stocks things for the Freemasons. Was Tyler interested in Freemasonry, at all?’

‘Freemasons?’ said Dilys. ‘With the funny handshakes?’

‘Yes, them,’ said Robin.

‘No, he wouldn’t be into all that,’ said Dilys impatiently. ‘He works in a garridge.’

‘Did he know anything about silver?’ asked Robin. ‘Hallmarks, antiques, anything like that?’

‘No,’ said Dilys mistrustfully, ‘but he could learn. He’s not stupid.’

‘What were Tyler’s interests? Mr Griffiths has already told us he liked cars.’

‘Loved his car,’ said Dilys. ‘Did it all up himself. He knew engines.’ As though refuting an unspoken accusation, she said again, ‘He’s not stupid.’

‘Anything else he was interested in?’ asked Robin.

‘Football,’ said Dilys. ‘Wolves. He loves Wolves.’

‘Yes,’ said Robin. ‘We’ve just seen the plaque on the wall along the lane. Billy Wright. Did you know the man who was working at the silver shop was calling himself William Wright?’

‘Yer,’ said Dilys, nodding. ‘Billy Wright.’

‘Could I check a few more details?’ asked Robin. ‘How tall was Tyler?’

‘Taller’n *him*,’ said Dilys, pointing a shaking hand at Griffiths.

‘Not difficult,’ said Griffiths, with a rueful smile. ‘He must be about five six, eh, Dilys?’

‘Did Tyler have any distinguishing marks? Scars, or—’

‘Birthmark,’ said Dilys.

‘Really? Where?’

‘On his back,’ said Dilys.

‘Is he left- or right-handed?’

‘Right-handed,’ said Dilys.

‘D’you know what blood group he is?’

Dilys shook her head.

‘Did he know anything about guns?’

‘Guns? Yer, a bit,’ said Dilys.

‘Really?’ said Robin.

‘Yer,’ said Dilys. ‘He used to have an air rifle. He wanted to join the army, but they wouldn’t take him.’

‘Did he?’ said Griffiths, looking surprised.

‘That was before you moved here,’ said Dilys, who seemed to take some satisfaction in the fact that there was something about Tyler that Griffiths didn’t know. ‘Upset when he didn’t get in. Heart set on it.’

‘Why wouldn’t they take him, Dilys?’ asked Robin.

‘He’s allergic to peanuts,’ said Dilys. ‘Nearly died once, when a kid at school gave him one.’

‘How awful,’ said Robin.

‘I never knew he was allergic to peanuts,’ said Griffiths.

‘Yeah, well, there’s a lot you don’t know,’ said Dilys rudely.

‘Did Tyler work out, at all?’ Robin asked.

‘He worked at a garridge,’ Dilys said again.

‘Did he like to keep fit?’ asked Robin, raising her voice again.

‘Yeah, he was fit.’

‘Lugging tyres around all day,’ said Griffiths.

‘He’s not stupid,’ snapped Dilys again.

‘Did he ever know a girl called Rita?’ asked Robin.

‘Rita who?’ said Dilys. Her hands continued to move restlessly in her lap.

‘We don’t know her surname,’ said Robin. ‘Did he know anyone with the first name Rita?’

‘There’s no Rita round here,’ said Dilys.

‘Did you ever hear Tyler talking about a Rita?’ Robin asked Griffiths. ‘Or a Rita Linda?’

‘No,’ said Griffiths. ‘The only girl I ever heard him talk about was Anne-Marie.’

‘No better’n she should’ve been,’ muttered Dilys. ‘Look at the bloody trouble she caused.’

There were two ways of looking at that statement, Robin thought.

‘Tyler was upset when he split up with Anne-Marie, was he?’ she asked.

‘He didn’t care. Why should he care? She was with everyone, that one.’

‘He was cut up when she died, Dilys,’ said Griffiths reproachfully.

‘Soft-hearted,’ said Dilys. ‘Dead’s dead.’

‘Mr Griffiths was telling us about the Whitehead family,’ said Robin.

‘Them!’ said Dilys, her hands trembling in her lap. ‘Gawn now, after all the trouble they caused.’

‘They moved,’ explained Griffiths. ‘After Hugo died.’

‘Any idea where they went?’ asked Robin.

‘I know they were from the Home Counties orig—’

‘Good riddance. Spreading lies,’ said Dilys. ‘Saying it was Tyler’s fault. And everyone believed it.’

‘I didn’t believe it, Dilys,’ said Griffiths, ‘and nor did—’

‘Your Chloe just buggered off and left him to it. Nobody stuck up for him.’

Dilys pursed her lips, as though to stop herself crying.

‘When you read the news reports about the body in the vault,’ Robin said, as compassionately as she could, ‘what made you—?’

‘’Cause it was like him and he said “silver”,’ said Dilys. ‘I heard him, on the phone.’

‘Did the police come and see you, after you called the helpline?’ asked Robin.

‘Useless,’ said Dilys. ‘Useless.’

‘They interviewed you, did—?’

‘Come see me,’ said Dilys. ‘Useless.’

‘One other thing, Mrs Powell: did Tyler ever talk about a man called Oz,

or a man in the music business?'

'Oz?' said Dilys. 'Who's Oz? What are you, reporters?'

'No, Mrs Powell, we're private detectives,' said Robin. 'We spoke, on the phone. I asked if we could—'

'I need to get home,' said Dilys suddenly. 'I need to go.'

She seemed overwhelmed and a little confused, batting away Griffiths' help as she struggled out of her chair. Robin could tell there was no point trying to persuade her to stay. Dilys grasped her walking frame, accepted her bag from Griffiths without thanking him, then set off at a snail's pace for the back door.

'I can manage,' she snapped at Griffiths, when he made to follow her.

'Sorry,' said Griffiths quietly, once Dilys was shuffling up the garden path.

'No, we're grateful for the tea and the information,' said Robin, getting to her feet. Beside her, Strike was having some difficulty doing the same: his knee was refusing to cooperate. Robin took her card out of her purse and handed it to Griffiths.

'If you remember anything else, could you let us know?'

'Yeah, of course,' said Griffiths, tucking the card in his jeans pocket. 'This whole thing – it was an accident and people wanting someone to blame. Small-town gossip. You know what it's like.'

Robin's thoughts flew unhelpfully towards Masham, and the fact that her rape had been leaked onto the internet.

'Yes,' she said, 'I do know.'

With a low groan he failed to suppress, Strike succeeded in leaving the sofa.

'Yeah, cheers,' he said, trying not to grimace in pain as he held out his hand to Griffiths. 'Big help.'

68

And long we try in vain to speak and act
Our hidden self, and what we say and do
Is eloquent, is well—but 'tis not true!

Matthew Arnold
The Buried Life

'I think we can get back down to the High Street that way,' said Robin, looking at an almost vertically descending lane just around the corner from Griffiths' house, which seemed to lead towards the foot of the hill, 'but—'

'I'd rather go back the way we came,' said Strike, which wasn't entirely true: what he'd rather have done was get into a cable car that would take him painlessly back to his car.

They retraced their steps in silence. The ascent of New Street had been bad enough; the descent was placing so much strain on Strike's right knee he was afraid at every step it was going to buckle. Dilys hadn't yet reached her house. She was ambling along very slowly with the aid of the walking frame in the distance, small and squat in her tartan coat, but as Strike and Robin were moving in such dilatory fashion themselves they barely gained on her, and Dilys had let herself into her cottage and closed the door before they drew alongside it.

'D'you want to eat something while we debrief?' said Strike when they finally reached the bottom of the street, trying not to wince and hoping it wasn't obvious how much he was sweating.

'OK,' said Robin.

'There's a pub where I left my car,' said Strike, so they headed for the Swan Taphouse, a large, light grey hotel that faced the slow-moving river. Wooden tables were set outside, sheltered by square blue umbrellas. Strike

fixed his eyes on the nearest bench until he reached it. Having dropped onto it with relief, he caught Robin's eye, and remembered that women tended not to share his indifference to cold.

'If you'd rather go inside—'

'No,' said Robin stiffly, torn between irritation that he hadn't consulted her and reluctant compassion, because she could tell that he was in agony, 'it's fine. I'll get some drinks; what d'you want?'

'Zero-alcohol beer,' said Strike. 'Any kind.'

A barmaid came out of the building shortly after Robin had entered it. Though clearly surprised to find customers who preferred the beer garden to interior seating in January, she handed Strike two paper menus. He took out his notebook, but watched the khaki-coloured water, and people walking along the bank with their dogs, until Robin reappeared with his beer and a tomato juice for herself.

'So,' said Strike, when she'd sat down opposite him, 'thoughts on Powell?'

'Well, he mentioned silver,' said Robin, 'allegedly – but…'

'He might've been talking about a car he was re-spraying at his garage, yeah,' said Strike. 'Although there must be pubs called the silver something. Think "Silver"'s a surname, too, unless that was just Long John.'

He'd hoped this might raise a flicker of a smile from Robin, but was disappointed.

'Well, we should definitely speak to this friend of Tyler's, Wynn Jones,' Strike continued. 'We could go and find the farm after we've eaten.'

'I can't hang around that long. I'm supposed to be watching Fyola Fay's house first thing tomorrow. You can do Jones alone.'

'Right,' said Strike. *And you've got to go and look at more houses with fucking Murphy, of course.*

Both were having difficulty looking the other in the eye. The bench put less space between them than the table in the Tontine Hotel, and Robin, determined to keep talk on work matters, and not to give Strike any pretexts for asking about her coldness, said,

'Tyler seems a good candidate for visiting Abused and Accused.'

'Yeah, he does,' said Strike, while Robin pulled out her phone to examine the pictures she'd taken of the WhatsApp messages between Tyler and Dilys.

‘Tyler’s last message from his old number was just before Wright was murdered. Then he sends her a new number, saying he’s being “hassled” on the old one. She thought Wynn Jones was pretending to be him, for some reason… I’m going to try that number.’

The phone rang a few times and then a pre-recorded message played.

‘This is Tyler, I’m busy, leave a message and I’ll get back to you.’

‘Hi Tyler,’ said Robin. ‘My name’s Robin Ellacott and I’d really like to talk to you if possible.’ She dictated her own mobile number, then hung up.

‘Coincidental timing, him starting to text from a new number right after Wright was murdered,’ said Strike.

‘Yes,’ said Robin, still examining the messages rather than looking Strike in the eye. ‘Although people *were* angry with him. In those Instagram comments I found, they were demanding Chloe Griffiths take down her pictures of him, because they didn’t want to look at him. He might well have got sick of getting horrible texts or calls.’

‘True,’ said Strike, whose overriding aim at the moment was to ease the tension between himself and Robin.

‘But the police must have seen these messages,’ said Robin, still looking at the phone rather than her partner, ‘and they didn’t rule him out, so presumably they haven’t got credible evidence he’s still alive.’

‘Or they stopped bothering looking once Truman decided it was Knowles,’ said Strike. ‘Said it before, who cares when young men go missing?’

‘He seems to have tried calling Dilys,’ said Robin, still scanning the messages, ‘but if he really wanted her off his back, why wouldn’t he just tell her where he was?’

‘Might not have trusted her with his whereabouts,’ said Strike. ‘She might’ve blabbed his location or tried to send someone to fetch him back… that said, the whole fake name and disguise thing seems a bit extreme for Powell, and I can’t see why the hell he’d want to work in a masonic silver shop. Good mechanics are always in demand. Why not go and do that somewhere else?’

‘Unless he really *did* have something to do with that car crash and he was scared he was going to be arrested for it?’ said Robin.

‘I’m struggling to see how him tampering with brake lines or steering before they left for the concert could’ve resulted in a fatal crash on the way

back. That'll've been looked into. There'll have been an inquest.'

'But there's a connection with the name William Wright.'

'True,' said Strike, scratching his chin. 'Well, if Powell doesn't call you back we should have a word with the Whiteheads, if we can find them. If they genuinely think Powell sabotaged the car, they had a motive, so that needs ruling out. Then we've got the birthmark on Powell's back. Was the Salem cross carved into the body to get rid of a distinguishing mark?'

'And they did the ears, eyes and hands for fun?'

'You're forgetting the penis,' said Strike, which was inaccurate; Robin hadn't forgotten. 'Trouble is, you could make a case for the mutilation to be to disguise any of our possible Wrights.'

Both drank their soft drinks, looking at the Severn rather than at each other. Robin was wondering when she was going to tell Strike about the man with the masonic dagger. Before she could speak, the barmaid returned to take their food order. When Strike had ordered beer-battered haddock and Robin, chicken nachos, the former said,

'On the subject of masonic stuff, I haven't told you: I ran into Fergus Robertson on the train to Scotland. Turns out Lord Oliver Branfoot is a mason and he's a member of the Winston Churchill Lodge, which meets in one of the temples at Freemasons' Hall, and is also the lodge of—'

'Malcolm Truman,' said Robin, conscious of an increasingly familiar sinking feeling.

'Yeah. Apparently Branfoot changed lodges a few years ago, and the Winston Churchill's full of coppers.'

He'd registered the sudden blankness of Robin's expression, but before he could continue, she said,

'There's something I haven't told you, either. Last night, after I interviewed Valentine Longcaster—'

'Oh, he talked to you, did he?' said Strike, experiencing his own feeling of dread. He'd been expecting, and counting on, Longcaster to tell Robin to get lost.

'Yes,' said Robin.

'Slag me off?'

'A bit.'

'What did he say? I knocked Charlotte about? Screwed around? It's my fault she topped herself?'

‘Something along those lines, but—’

‘I never laid a finger on her in anger, except to stop her hurting herself,’ said Strike.

How many more blows to the gut was he supposed to take? How much more self-respect had to be stripped from him, in front of the person whose good opinion mattered more to him than any other’s?

‘OK,’ said Robin, ‘well, that’s not what I—’

‘Did he have anything useful to say about Fleetwood, or was it wall-to-wall Charlotte as saint and me as bastard?’

‘He didn’t say anything very useful about Fleetwood, no,’ said Robin, keeping her tone measured. ‘But he was definitely twitchy about us going near his sister Cosima, and generally evasive on the subject of why Rupert gatecrashed Legard’s party. But,’ she said, taking a deep breath, ‘that isn’t what I was going to tell you.

‘I was followed when I left the restaurant where I interviewed Longcaster.’ She didn’t want to admit the next bit, but honesty compelled her to do so. ‘I think he tailed me from my flat yesterday morning and I didn’t realise. He was wearing a – well, he was wearing a gorilla mask by the time he caught up with me—’

‘*What?*’

‘—but I’d noticed him before, on the industrial estate where I was waiting for Longcaster; he was wearing the same green jacket. He didn’t make his move until I was completely alone and there was no one else—’

‘What move?’ said Strike.

‘He pulled out a knife,’ said Robin. ‘And—’

‘He *WHAT*?’ said Strike, so loudly a woman passing with a Bichon Frisé looked round.

‘I’m trying to tell you “what”,’ said Robin, in a low voice. ‘He pulled out this – well, it was a masonic dagger. I know, because he threw it at me. I’ve got it at home. It was a warning, not an attack,’ she said, because Strike was looking dangerous. ‘He said, “stop, and you won’t get hurt”. He was trying to scare me,’ she said, omitting to mention that her menacer had achieved this objective, ‘there was never any question of him actually—’

‘*Why the fuck didn’t you call me after this happened?*’

‘What could you have done?’ said Robin coolly. ‘You were in Scotland.’

‘I told you, and you agreed, if you went anywhere alone, you were to tell

me. We agreed, after Shanker, after that bloke in Harrods, and with all these fucking phone calls, the last one *specifically* targeting you—'

'"Bitch" might have meant Kim or Midge, and I can't ring you literally every time I'm somewhere alone,' said Robin, her tone no longer measured. 'It was a well-lit residential street, and he didn't actually hurt—'

'You realise there was a fucking "G" painted on the street door on New Year's Eve?'

'What? No, I didn't! Why didn't you tell—?'

'And this bloke said "stop"?'

'*Why didn't you tell me a "G" was painted on the door?*'

'Somebody's clearly decided you're the weak link—'

The moment the words had left his mouth he wished them unspoken. Robin had blanched in anger. Kim's jibes about her lack of police training and her own awareness that she should have spotted her tail the previous day were doing battle with her desire to point out Strike's sheer audacity in suggesting she was the person letting the agency down, when his shenanigans with women were drawing down so much negative press—

'I didn't mean "weak link" in terms of – I mean,' Strike blustered, 'you're a woman, aren't you, and Branfoot knows he's got something his goons can scare you with—'

'We haven't got a *shred* of evidence Branfoot's got anything to do with those men,' said Robin furiously.

'Who else connected to this case has got a bunch of thugs to do his bidding? "Or he might send someone," Wright said. *You're* the one who spotted Branfoot's pal from Ramsay Silver in the paper. Branfoot's at the same fucking lodge as the senior investigating officer—'

'I know that, I'm capable of retaining information you told me two minutes ago! But as *I'm* not the one who's given Branfoot an excuse to slag us off in the tabloids—'

Stung on the raw, Strike now lost his cool himself.

'Sure it's bad press worrying you?'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Don't want us investigating a masonic lodge full of Met officers?'

'This has got nothing to do with Ryan!' said Robin, angrily and untruthfully. 'I know the lodge thing's a bit fishy, but we haven't got—'

'"A bit fishy"? It stinks like a fucking prawn trawler! Why did Branfoot

move lodges? Why did he decide to go where the police were?'

'I don't—'

'Don't give me that, we know he's dodgy as fuck. Jimmy Savile was cosying up to his local police force for years, having them over every Friday for drinks.'

'You *seriously* think Truman knew Branfoot was behind the murder and agreed to cover it up?' said Robin scornfully.

'It doesn't have to be that crude! I'm not claiming Truman knows Branfoot put out the hit—'

'Why would Branfoot have someone killed in a masonic silver shop?'

'Because he was mates with a bunch of masonic policemen who literally meet next door, he knew they'd be predisposed to hushing anything up that looked masonic, and he'd be able to exert maximum influence over the investigation! Branfoot either lucked out, and his mate Truman was put in charge, or Truman pulled his own masonic strings to make sure he got the job!'

'And why would Branfoot have ordered a sash be put on the body, and a masonic hallmark carved into it?'

'What if it was *meant* to be overkill, to look like somebody trying to frame the masons, and Truman fell right into the trap, and rushed to deny any connection, egged on by Branfoot?'

'So Truman risked his entire career to keep Branfoot happy?'

'*Listen to what I'm saying* – it doesn't have to have been done for Branfoot specifically! Truman might've risked his career because masonry is his big thing, the centre of his emotional and social life! It means that, to some men! But if you're going to look me in the eye and tell me there aren't men who're flattered by association with the aristocracy, and wouldn't get an ego thrill from chumming around with Lord Oliver Branfoot off the telly —'

'I'm not saying that, but—'

'—then you'll concede that Truman might've been easily influenced by Branfoot pushing the idea that someone was trying to frame the masons, in which case, the Knowles thing would've been manna from heaven to Truman. He paid a professional price for getting it wrong, but he's still trotting along to Freemasons' Hall every month, which should tell you something about his priorities in life!'

‘We’ve pieced together a story about Branfoot and we haven’t got a *shred* of proof it’s true,’ said Robin hotly. ‘The cipher note and Branfoot’s friend shopping in Ramsay Silver and Branfoot bashing private detectives and Dick de Lion – they could all be completely unconnected!’

‘This, from the person who’s been urging me to make enquiries about a Belgian woman whose name vaguely resembles Rita Linda,’ said Strike, and instantly regretted it, as Robin’s face flooded with colour.

‘I said from the start she might not be relevant, and for the record, she was Swedish, not Belgian—’

‘My point—’

‘I understand your point, thanks, weak leak though I am, and if we’re talking about missing the point: has it occurred to you that both times I’ve been threatened, I’ve been trying to talk to people about Rupert Fleetwood?’

‘Both times you were threatened, it was in places it was easy to get to you without getting caught,’ said Strike. ‘How would the men following you have known who you were off to speak to? You’ve just told me gorilla mask guy tailed you from your flat!’

‘OK,’ said Robin, returning to the offensive, ‘explain this: why would a porn star go and work in a masonic silver shop?’

‘Set up,’ said Strike.

‘Set up, how? By who?’

‘What if what was meant to have happened to Knowles genuinely happened to de Lion? What if he thought he was going to help nick a load of silver? Just because Branfoot’s a shit doesn’t mean de Lion was an angel. We know nothing about him, he could be a crook himself. What if Oz and Medina lured de Lion to Ramsay Silver, telling him he’d be able to make a hundred grand off the back of it? Then the taking of the Murdoch silver makes sense – it was to make this look like a burglary and incidental murder, when in fact it was a murder and incidental robbery.’

‘And where’s the silver now?’

‘I don’t bloody know, anywhere! Buried in the woods. Some anonymous lock up. Branfoot’s minted, he doesn’t need it.’

‘I can’t help noticing,’ said Robin, her tone now steely, ‘that your attitude to the Met and your attitude to the SAS are somewhat different.’

‘What?’ said Strike, thrown.

‘Freemason Niall Semple couldn’t possibly be involved in a theft of masonic silver, because he’s the best of the best, speaks fluent Arabic and navigates by the stars, whereas Freemason Malcolm Truman—’

‘Truman and Branfoot are in the same fucking lodge! Why’s Branfoot after us? Why the sudden interest in the private detective business?’

‘Maybe his wife’s having him tailed and he found out! Maybe the papers are sniffing around him, because of all the rumours about his sex life!’

‘You told me, at the beginning of this case, it didn’t matter if Murphy—’

‘*This isn’t about Ryan!*’ Robin said, her anger fuelled by the knowledge that she was at least partly lying. ‘What’s it going to do to our Met contacts, if we start trying to discredit policemen?’

‘The Met’ve already put Truman on gardening leave, they’d probably be delighted to have a reason to bloody sack him! If you think Wardle, Layborn and Ekwensi would stop talking to us because we helped the force get rid of a proper wrong ’un, you’ve got a lower opinion of them than I have!’

‘It’s your *attitude* I’m talking about – totally prepared to believe the worst of the police, whereas—’

‘There are plenty of cunts in the army, as I should know, because I was bloody in it—’

‘You said you were going to “go in hard” on Branfoot – you think he’ll keep his mouth shut, if you start insinuating—?’

‘Murphy know we’ve got pictures of the body, by any chance?’ asked Strike. ‘Hacked off about it, is he?’

Robin felt the blood rush to her face again.

‘That’s not—’

‘Oh, *isn’t* it?’

Incensed, Robin got to her feet.

‘I need to get back down the road. I’m tired and I need time to prepare for Fyola Fay.’

‘You’re not going to wait for your food?’

‘I’m not hungry,’ snapped Robin, drawing her car keys out of her pocket, the sight of which made Strike say,

‘I’m buying a new fucking Land Rover.’

‘What?’

‘Plain English, isn’t it? We need a new Land Rover. You can’t keep

hiring cars, the business can't—'

'I'll get something else, I just haven't found anything I can aff—'

'Which is why—'

'I can't take a loan of that size from you,' said Robin.

'Then don't,' said Strike. 'The business will own the Land Rover, but you'll be driving it, so find something appropriate and send me the details.'

'Fine,' said Robin, her voice icy.

She turned and walked away, but before Strike could begin to process what had just happened, Robin had turned again and was striding back to the table.

'I forgot,' she said, which was a far bigger lie than the claim she wasn't hungry. 'There's another thing.'

'What?'

'Dev told me Bijou Watkins called the office. What did she want?'

For a split second, Strike looked just as stunned as she'd expected. Then he said,

'She wanted some advice.'

'Oh, really?' said Robin, glaring down at him. 'Advice on…?'

'She thinks Honbold's playing around on her,' invented Strike.

'Is that right?'

'Yeah. I told her to contact someone else. Said I didn't want the job.'

'So I can tell Dev there won't be any more bad press about you and women?'

'I'll tell him myself,' said Strike.

'Great,' said Robin, 'because we don't want to lose Dev. See you at the office.'

She walked away and this time, didn't turn or look back.

The barmaid now reappeared with two large plates of food.

'Oh,' she said, watching Robin marching away up the street. 'Do you —?'

'I'll eat them both,' growled Strike, shifting his notebook out of the way.

PART SIX

There was silver there without a doubt, and the many thin veins they came across lured them on with constant hope of mighty pockets and deposits of which these were but the flying indications.

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

69

Weary of myself, and sick of asking
What I am, and what I ought to be,
At this vessel's prow I stand, which bears me
Forwards, forwards, o'er the starlit sea.

Matthew Arnold
Self-Dependence

So that was that, thought Robin: Strike had lied to her face. He who berated her for not immediately informing him of a minor incident (for the purposes of her present resentment, it suited Robin to minimise the impact on her of the gorilla-faced, dagger-waving stalker) was deliberately concealing a further risk to the agency of scandal and press intrusion (and it suited her to attribute all her rage and hurt to this, rather than investigate the weight in the pit of her stomach, which grew heavier every time she thought of Strike as a father).

As she and Barclay entered Wycliffe Road in the latter's car early the following morning, Robin had yet another source of aggravation: a smarting right eye, from which tears kept leaking. The previous evening she'd chopped up a lot of very hot chilli peppers in her kitchen, and evidently she hadn't washed her hands thoroughly enough afterwards, because in touching her eyelid she'd inflamed her tear ducts. The chilli-chopping had been part of a project she didn't intend to tell Murphy about, firstly, because he still didn't know about either the man in Harrods, or the one with the masonic dagger, and secondly, because it was illegal to carry or use pepper spray in the UK. Nevertheless, Robin felt a little safer this morning, knowing that she was carrying a potent mixture of chillies, cayenne pepper, garlic and vinegar in a clear plastic spray-bottle in her handbag. She'd

worry about the legal consequences later, if she had to use it. The internet had advocated the spray as a way to repel garden pests, but she might be on flimsy legal ground should she claim she was carrying it around in her handbag for the benefit of three pot plants she'd left at home. Nevertheless, if Robin had any choice in the matter, no more men would seize her by the neck from behind without suffering consequences, nor would any of them get near enough to her to wave even blunt daggers in her face.

Barclay parked a short distance away from the maisonette where Fyola Fay, whose utility bills were addressed to Fiona Freeman, lived with her boyfriend, a very large, muscled and entirely bald porn director called Craig Wheaton, whose personalised number plate read, in part, GYM. Fiona used social media only to promote new films she'd been in, or tease her OnlyFans account. Her most recent post was an advertisement for a fleshlight modelled on her own genitalia, with the tagline *Get Inside Your Favourite Star!* Thus far, the agency's surveillance hadn't identified any times when Wheaton was regularly absent, and Fiona at home. Robin definitely didn't want to attempt an interview until she was sure Wheaton was out of the way, because she'd once before spoken to a woman whose partner had returned unexpectedly, physically assaulting Robin in his fury at finding her in his house, and she didn't want a repeat. The plan was that Barclay would keep an eye on Wheaton if he went out. If the couple stayed home all day, nothing would be attempted.

'Poke me if I fall asleep,' said Barclay, with a yawn. 'Ah was on Mrs Two-Times till two this morning. Mind, it's nice not tae be pukin'.'

'When were you puking?' asked Robin, mildly interested.

'Did Strike not tell ye about the prawn?'

'What prawn?'

'Ate one, accidentally, coupla weeks ago, while I was watchin' Plug's mum's house. Bought a sandwich from some shithole that doesnae label their stuff properly. You put seafood anywhere near me, I turn into a double-ended fuckin' volcano. Strike had tae come an' take over for me. It was that night you caught that cleaner upskirting.'

'Oh,' said Robin.

She looked back at Fiona Freeman's front door, thinking of that night, and her conviction that Strike had been with Bijou Watkins, either for a clandestine hook-up, or to sort out the mess of Bijou's baby's paternity. So

he hadn’t been with Bijou, after all. But did that change anything? Strike was still hiding the truth from her, wasn’t he? Still failing to admit that another explosion of sordid press might be about to jeopardise the agency?

‘Aye, aye,’ said Barclay, as the sitting room curtains opened in Freeman’s maisonette, and they caught a glimpse of Fiona wearing a lime green sports bra and leggings.

‘Shit,’ said Robin, as Fiona’s platinum head vanished. ‘Looks like she’s going to the gym.’

‘Could have a treadmill at home,’ said Barclay.

Twenty minutes passed, then the front door of Freeman’s house opened and Wheaton emerged alone, wearing a tracksuit. He jogged down the steps and got into his car.

‘I’m going to chance it,’ said Robin, opening the passenger door.

‘OK, good luck.’

‘Keep in touch,’ said Robin.

She loitered on the street for a further ten minutes to make sure Wheaton wasn’t going to double back for something he’d forgotten, then crossed the road, climbed the steps and rang the doorbell.

A few seconds later, Fiona opened up. From her online research, Robin knew that Freeman was twenty-three. She was a well-built young woman, literally every visible inch of whom had been embellished or enhanced to send one loud, crude signal: long platinum hair and a deep artificial tan; thick eyelash extensions and pointed, neon pink false nails; fake breasts, filler in her lips and cheekbones – even her toes were adorned with rings and nail varnish, and there was a chain tattooed around her right ankle.

‘Fiona, my name’s Robin Ellacott. I’m a private detective, I work with a man called Cormoran—’

Fiona made to slam the door. Robin shoved her foot in the gap and said, very fast, ‘We’re investigating the body in the silver vault. We know you think it was Dick de L—’

‘Get out. *Get fucking out!*’ panted Fiona, in a voice almost as deep as Pat’s.

‘Anything you say would be in complete confidence – nobody needs to know you spoke to me. It’ll be better for you if you talk—’

‘Fuck – *OFF*!’

In danger of having bones in her foot broken, Robin withdrew. The door

slammed. Robin remained where she was, on the doorstep, now slightly dishevelled and breathless.

A minute later, Fiona appeared at the window beside the door.

‘FUCK OFF OUT OF HERE!’ she bellowed through the glass.

‘It’ll be better for you if you talk to me!’ Robin shouted back.

Fiona flipped her the finger and disappeared again. Robin remained where she was, hoping that her vague threats might work, once they’d had time to percolate.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw another flash of lime green. Fiona had returned briefly to the window to see whether Robin was still there, but whipped herself back out of sight again.

Five more minutes passed. Robin wondered whether Fiona was waiting for Wheaton to come home and deal with her. Then the front door opened a crack.

‘I told you to *fuck off,*’ said Fiona. ‘Fuck *off.*’

‘It’s either talk to me, in which case I can protect your identity, or you can explain in court why you wrote that note,’ said Robin. ‘That’s the choice.’

For a few more seconds the door remained open just a crack. Then, it opened six inches.

‘I dunno what you’re fucking talking about,’ said Fiona. ‘I never wrote no fucking—’

‘Yes, you did,’ said Robin. ‘You wrote an anonymous note in a masonic code and put it through our agency’s door.’

‘You’re out of your head. I never—’

‘You were caught on camera,’ Robin bluffed. ‘We can prove it was you.’

Fiona’s fake tan was too opaque to enable Robin to see whether she’d blanched, but a taloned hand flew to her mouth and the pupils of her light blue eyes dilated. She remained stock still, apparently robbed of speech, the other hand gripping the door.

‘Just tell me what you know, and I’ll leave,’ said Robin.

The neighbour’s front door opened.

‘Get in,’ whispered Fiona, backing away to allow Robin entrance, and clearly frightened of her neighbour knowing what was going on.

Fiona appeared to be close to hyperventilating. She led Robin towards the kitchen, one taloned hand still covering her mouth, her enormous,

cosmetically enlarged buttocks undulating beneath the lime green Lycra. There was a butterfly tattooed just above her waistband. Robin took out her mobile, set it to record, and hid it in her bag again.

The kitchen was white-walled, with a white island in the centre, on which sat a clean ashtray, a pack of Marlboro Lights and an iPhone in a pink sparkly case. An expensive-looking exercise bike faced French windows overlooking a small backyard. The décor was dominated by a framed blown-up black and white photograph of Wheaton and Fiona from the waist up, both naked. He stood behind her, muscles oiled, bending to kiss her on the mouth, his hands over Fiona's breasts.

Fiona started pacing in the tight space between kitchen island and bike. 'Craig's gonna kill me,' she gasped, through the fingers still covering her mouth. 'He's gonna go fucking *nuts*.'

'Craig's your partner?' said Robin, pretending she didn't know.

'Yeah.'

'He doesn't know about the note?' Robin said.

'No, he doesn't know about the fuckin' note, of course he fuckin' doesn't!' said Fiona wildly.

'You'll probably just be confirming things we already know,' said Robin.

'Other people have talked?' said Fiona, stopping in her tracks.

'Yes,' said Robin. It was semi-true. Shanker had talked.

'And what've they said?'

'That the man in the vault was killed because he had information on somebody rich and important.'

'Oh *fuck*,' moaned Fiona, starting to pace again.

'I promise you, we can keep you out of this, if you tell us what you know.'

'You can't keep me out of it, I'm up to my fucking *neck* in it now, Craig's gonna fucking *kill me*!'

A suspicion now crossed Robin's mind, a suspicion she knew better than to voice at this early stage of the interview.

'Do you know Dick de Lion?' she asked.

'His name's Danny,' said Fiona, her plump lips quivering. 'Yeah, I know him. I've worked with him.' She burst out, 'I warned him not to get involved, I *warned* him!'

‘Involved in what?’ asked Robin.

Fiona snatched her cigarettes off the island top, crossed to the French windows, opened them and lit up. She took a deep drag and exhaled towards the garden, which was paved, with plants in pots, and a bright pink table and chairs.

‘What’s Danny’s surname?’ asked Robin.

‘Same. De Lion’s his real one.’

‘What was it you didn’t think he should get involved in, Fiona?’

Fiona took another drag on the cigarette and again exhaled towards the garden, waving her free hand to try and keep the smoke out. Robin decided to back off a little.

‘Where’s Danny from? London?’

‘No,’ said Fiona, ‘he comes from this, like, weird place – there aren’t any cars. I thought he was joking but it was for real. There was no cars there, just, like, horse-drawn carts and tractors. I think it’s an island. I thought he was bullshitting, but he wasn’t. He showed me pictures.’

‘What was the place called, can you remember?’

Fiona shook her head.

‘How old is Danny, d’you know?’

‘Twenty-five.’

‘Has he been in the adult industry long?’

‘Long as me, probably,’ said Fiona. ‘Two, three years.’

She threw a desperate glance at Robin.

‘I don’t know what the guy’s name is, the rich guy. Craig’s never told me. Just that he’s on the telly sometimes.’

Fiona was shivering slightly in the cold, but her craving for nicotine overrode her desire for warmth, because she took yet another deep drag on her cigarette and blew the smoke garden-wards.

‘How did Danny meet this man?’ said Robin, feeling her way. ‘Did Craig introduce them?’

Fiona nodded, not looking at Robin.

‘And Danny and the rich man entered a relationship?’

‘*No*,’ said Fiona, with a scornful laugh.

‘From what we already know,’ said Robin, taking a chance, ‘it sounds as though Danny was blackmail—’

‘No, he wasn’t,’ said Fiona quickly, turning back to Robin again, ‘he

never *black* – it was a joke! Craig told me Danny and the rich guy had a row, and that the guy had, like, contacts and stuff… said he knew rough people, had the police in his pocket… and then Danny disappeared.'

'When?'

'I dunno… end of May last year?'

'How does Craig know the rich man?' asked Robin.

'From when he was a kid,' said Fiona. 'I dunno exactly how.'

Robin's phone buzzed. She took it out to see a text from Barclay.

Wheaton food shopping. I'll alert when he gets back in the car.

Robin slid the still-recording phone back into her bag and said,

'So Craig told you Danny was the body in the safe?'

'Yeah,' said Fiona, starting to cry. 'He told me to… to stop bloody asking people where Danny was… unless I wanted to go the same way…'

'Is Danny the only young man Craig's introduced to the rich man?'

Fiona shook her head, still crying.

'There are others?'

'Yeah… girls as well… the rich guy's bi. Craig told me he's married to a woman, but he likes both.'

Fiona took another drag on her cigarette and wiped her eyes on the back of her hand.

'How did you know we're investigating that body, Fiona?'

''Cause I heard Craig on the phone to the rich guy… he always speaks different when he's talking to him… an' I heard him say "Cameron Strike" and that he hadn't seen him around or anything… Craig sounded scared. So I Googled Strike and I saw he was a private detective.'

Fiona padded out into the garden in her bare feet, stubbed out her cigarette on a paving slab, flicked the stub into next door's garden, closed the French windows and walked, still crying, to the kitchen island, where she sat down, supporting her forehead on her hand.

Robin's phone buzzed again, and within seconds, Fiona's pinged. Both reached for the mobiles, and Robin read,

Wheaton back in car with food shopping but stationary

and texting.

‘It’s Craig,’ whispered Fiona, texting her partner back.

‘Is he coming home?’ asked Robin, trying to sound casual.

‘Not yet… wants to know what we need from the offie…’

Robin slipped her own phone back into her bag.

‘I thought,’ said Fiona, getting up again, and taking air freshener out of a drawer in the island, ‘I could tip this Strike off, with a note – ’cause Craig reads my emails and texts and everything…’

She sprayed the freshener liberally around the kitchen, then hid her cigarettes behind a mixer in a wall-mounted cupboard.

‘Danny just wanted a bit of money,’ she said croakily, returning to her seat. ‘That’s not a crime. He’d never had much. He thought he was on to a good thing with that rich guy, but he was pushing his luck. I *warned* him.’

‘How was he pushing his luck?’ asked Robin.

‘Well – like – the rich guy paid for Danny to get veneers done, right, because Danny had really bad teeth. And Danny added a bit – a little bit – to the bill. He kept doing stuff like that. Trying to squeeze a bit more out of the guy, you know? I said to him, “be careful”, but he said he was the guy’s favourite and…’

‘Is that what they rowed about?’ asked Robin. ‘The rich man realised Danny was trying to take more money than he’d agreed to?’

‘Yeah,’ said Fiona. ‘It was starting to add up. He sort of cornered Danny about it, and that’s when Danny said the – the thing he said – for a joke. It was just a joke. But the guy took it seriously. He told Danny what he’d just said was blackmail.’

‘But Danny and the man weren’t having sex?’

‘No,’ said Fiona.

‘Then what could Danny blackmail him about?’

‘Well… this guy likes secretly watching and filming. He gets off on them not knowing he’s there.’

‘But Danny knew the man was there?’

‘Well, yeah. All the – some of them knew, yeah.’

‘Where did the filming happen?’

‘The guy’s got a flat, with a two-way mirror. He had it all kitted out… Craig fronted for him, with the builders.’

‘Craig pretended it was his flat? That the alterations were for him?’

‘Yeah, exactly.’

‘D’you know where the flat is?’

‘No. I just know that’s where it all happened.’

‘So, the rich man hires adult actors to be in his private films?’

‘Yeah. He doesn’t want to use sex workers. He doesn’t trust them. He’s just making his own films, for private use. It’s all legal. He pays good money,’ said Fiona. ‘*Really* good. That’s why Danny kept going back.’

‘But only some of the people filmed know the man’s watching?’

‘Well, yeah,’ said Fiona huskily, looking at her neon pink nails rather than at Robin. ‘The pros all know, but not the… not the amateurs… Craig told me, there’s always someone there who didn’t know they were being filmed. One time it was a girl who works for the rich guy, she’s, like, an assistant, in his office. One of the pros chatted her up in a bar and he took her back to the flat, and she thought it belonged to him, and she was wasted and the rich guy watched this guy doing her, and filmed it. And he did the same thing to two young guys who’re part of some charity thing the rich guy runs. He got two pro boys to lure them back to the flat, and the rich guy filmed it all and watched. But the amateurs were all up for it,’ said Fiona quickly. ‘It wasn’t rape. They weren’t drugged or nothing. Nobody was underage. They were all consenting.’

But not to being watched and filmed, thought Robin. Even Fiona seemed to know what she’d just described wasn’t entirely innocent, because she added, ‘Craig told me the pros had to persuade the amateurs to take money, at the end. Like, for a taxi or whatever, but, like, more than they needed. So, you know, they were on film taking cash.’

Robin’s mobile buzzed again.

Wheaton back in car, looks like he’s heading home.

‘Does the rich man ever appear on camera himself?’ Robin asked.

‘No, never. He’s behind the mirror.’

‘So what did Danny say to the guy, that sounded like blackmail?’

‘The bloke was having a real go at him about the money, so Danny said, “I bet my *indie* films’d do well, if I give ’em more publicity.” And the guy

went fucking apeshit. Danny was scared. He tried to pretend he wasn't, but he was.'

'Craig's really never told you the man's name?'

'No, never. He says it's more'n his life would be worth, telling people.'

'Other than that he's rich, and sometimes on TV, has he mentioned any other personal details about the man at all?'

'Only that his wife doesn't know about the flat.'

'And he's a Freemason,' said Robin, as though she already knew beyond doubt that this was the case, and the unsuspecting Fiona nodded.

'This is my card,' said Robin, handing one over as she hoisted her bag back over her shoulder. 'If you remember anything else about that man, please call me. Nobody else is going to know you've spoken to me, other than Strike.'

'So… Danny *was* the guy in the safe?' said Fiona tearfully, following Robin back up the hall.

'I don't know,' said Robin. 'But if you text me your number, I'll let you know who it was, as soon as we've found out.'

Robin passed outside onto the top stone step and then turned to face Fiona again. Strike's words, 'we aren't fucking social workers', ran through her mind as she said, 'You don't have to stay with him. You could do something else.'

'What?' said Fiona.

'I don't… it doesn't sound to me as though Craig treats you very well,' said Robin. She was ten years older than Fiona, but felt ancient as she said it. 'Men who read all your emails and texts – I was with a man who listened to my voicemail messages and didn't pass them on. It ended badly. But,' she added, 'I know it isn't any of my business.'

'No,' said Fiona, 'it isn't.'

Robin heard the front door slam behind her as she reached the pavement. Shortly before she reached the corner, she glanced back. Fiona was watching her from the front window; Robin expected her to raise her middle finger again, but the girl's expression was simply blank.

70

Life, misfortune, isolation, abandonment, poverty, are battle-fields, which have their heroes,—heroes obscure, but sometimes greater than those who become illustrious.

Albert Pike
Morals and Dogma of the
Ancient and Accepted Rite of
Scottish Freemasonry

On Tuesday morning, Strike sat down to eat breakfast beside an attic window fogged with condensation, and saw that Robin had emailed him overnight. Ever since she'd told him she wasn't coming to Scotland with him to interview Jade Semple she'd chosen to email when, normally, she'd have phoned. He'd also noticed that these emails were never prefaced with a salutation.

Audio file of Fyola Fay interview attached. Important points: Dick de Lion's real name is 'Danny', he comes from an island with no cars and disappeared end of May.

Fyola Fay's partner knew the rich man 'when he was a kid'. I've done some research: Craig Wheaton spent his teens in a boys' care home partly funded by Oliver Branfoot's trust.

Also attached, possible Land Rover.

R

Strike picked up his mobile and called her.

‘Just seen your email.’

‘Oh, right,’ said Robin coolly.

‘Bloody good work. You’ve found the link between Branfoot and de Lion.’

‘An indirect link, yes,’ said Robin, unfortunately reminded of the ‘weak link’ comment Strike had made in Ironbridge. Strike was speaking as though everything was normal between them, and even though she didn’t want any conversation in which she might become angry or, worse, tearful, his matter-of-fact tone grated. She was damned if she was going to apologise for anything she’d said at the Swan Taphouse, but she was riled by the fact that Strike didn’t seem to feel he ought to make any amends.

‘Well, I’ve just found Rupert’s friend Tish Benton, or her parents, anyway,’ said Strike.

Robin suspected this was supposed to show her he hadn’t forgotten about Decima.

‘Yes, I found her too,’ said Robin coolly. ‘She’s got an Instagram page, but it’s set to private. I’ve sent her a follower request.’

‘Great, because the parents were very suspicious when I told them who I was. I’ve left contact details and asked Tish to call me but I’m not hopeful.’

‘OK, well, there’s something else I wanted to say to you,’ said Robin. ‘I want to put surveillance on Albie Simpson-White. I don’t care how we bill for it, but I’m happy to give up free time to do it, or cover for the others while they do. I don’t feel right about spending Decima’s money to investigate all these other possible Wrights, if we’re not actively trying to get resolution for her, too.’

‘All right,’ said Strike, who sounded resigned, ‘we’ll start watching Simpson-White.’

‘Thank you,’ said Robin stiffly.

‘I had no luck with Powell’s friend Wynn Jones,’ said Strike. ‘He wasn’t at the farm. Allegedly he’s had some kind of accident with a tractor. They didn’t seem keen on telling me how to contact him, but I left a card. Don’t suppose Tyler Powell’s called you back?’

‘No,’ said Robin. She was now regretting leaving her real name on Tyler’s supposed phone. If he was alive but hiding away from persecutors in his home town, he’d almost certainly rather not speak to a private

detective, especially if he suspected she'd been hired by the Whiteheads.

'And we've had another one of those anonymous calls,' said Strike.

'The man or the Scottish woman?'

'Man,' said Strike. 'Apparently he said, "Stop, or you'll be refined like silver in the furnace of affliction." Pat took it down in shorthand, so it's accurate. I've looked it up, and it's a rough approximation of a quote from the Bible, about Elijah.'

'Right,' said Robin.

Strike now clicked on the link to a second-hand Land Rover she'd sent him with her email.

'The Defender 90 looks good,' he said. 'Want to go and see it?'

'Yes, OK,' said Robin. 'I could go on Sunday afternoon. Is that everything?'

'Yeah, I think so.'

Robin hung up without saying goodbye. Strike set down his mobile, feeling slightly more depressed than he had before phoning her.

He'd barely settled back to work when his phone rang. Wardle was calling to say that their planned curry in town that night would have to be postponed, because Wardle's ex-wife had unexpectedly required him to look after their eighteen-month-old son. The policeman intimated that the few bits of information he had for Strike could just as easily be told by phone, but Strike chose not to take the hint, announcing that he'd bring a takeaway curry round at seven that night, to discuss Wardle's findings in person.

Friends though they were, this would be the first time Strike had ever visited Wardle at home. Their mutual liking, which had been fostered in spite of initial mutual suspicion, had grown through the years, but they'd rarely had a conversation that could be called truly personal; indeed, Strike couldn't offhand think of any men with whom he had deeply personal conversations. However, he was well-enough acquainted with Wardle to know that things must be bad indeed for him to admit to being off work with depression, and knew, too, that the man's recent misfortunes – the death of his brother, the departure of his wife, the move into a bachelor flat, shared custody of his small son, all on top of a highly demanding job – had given him ample cause. The memories of two suicides he'd investigated in the military hovered in the back of Strike's mind. Both the men had seemed

to be coping until suddenly they were dead, and so he made the trip into Brixton that evening, sore as his leg was, and in spite of his own troubles.

As he left the curry house at six with his takeaway in his hand his mobile rang and, with strong misgivings, he saw Bijou's number.

'Oh, thank God,' she said when he answered, a tinge of hysteria in her voice. 'Look, I'm sorry, but you've *got* to take a DNA test. You've *got to.*'

'Have I, now?'

'Andrew's *daring* me to take him to court, but he says, if I do' – Bijou started sobbing again – 'he'll go straight to some journalist called Colin Pepper and say he's sure she's yours!'

'So he'll break his own super-injunction?' said Strike, who was having the not unfamiliar sensation that a hot wire was tightening around his head.

'He's being *awful*, he's *convinced* Ottolie's yours – if I can just show him *proof – PLEASE!*' she wailed. 'This is for you as much as for me!'

Strike, who had the horrible feeling she was right, watched an oncoming double decker speeding towards him and, for a fraction of a second, imagined stepping out in front of it, and erasing himself and every problem along with him, of being lost in black nothingness, in a state of blissful non-being, but the bus passed, and Strike limped on, and he couldn't even muster anger as he said,

'All right. D'you want me to get a kit?'

'No, I'll buy them, but we'll have to meet so I can get the sample from you, and I'll take mine and Ottolie's at the same time.'

'You're being watched,' Strike reminded her.

'I haven't seen anyone—'

'Because they're good at what they do, not because they're not bloody there,' said Strike. 'This needs thinking about. I'll call you back when I've got a plan.'

He hung up and walked on, trying to shove aside his own multitude of problems, the better to concentrate on Wardle's.

The policeman's flat was in a modern block on Brixton Water Lane. Strike buzzed the intercom and climbed two flights of stairs, which did his aching stump little good, and found Wardle waiting in the doorway with his sleepy, pyjama-ed eighteen-month-old son in his arms. This sight gave Strike an extremely unwelcome vision of himself trying to entertain a daughter in his attic flat, so as to enable Bijou to go out on the town, in

pursuit of another wealthy potential husband.

‘He’ll go down soon,’ said Wardle and, slightly to Strike’s surprise – his experience of small children was that their bedtimes were haphazard and often involved a lot of protests and grizzling – Wardle’s son did indeed settle quickly in the spare bedroom, while Strike was in the kitchen, prising lids off plastic tubs of curry. The jingling music of a cartoon was issuing from the sitting room.

The kitchen was as clean and tidy as Strike would have expected, but Wardle had made no effort to make the place homely or to change what Strike guessed was pre-existing décor, because he doubted the policeman would have chosen tiles patterned with root vegetables.

‘Cheers for this,’ said Wardle, sitting down at the table. ‘How much do I owe you?’

‘It’s on me,’ said Strike. ‘Payment for information soon to be received.’

‘Well, you’ve pissed the murder investigation team off, big time.’

‘How’ve I done that?’ said Strike, helping himself to naan bread.

‘Those witnesses, Wright’s neighbours. Daz and someone.’

‘Mandy, yeah. What about them?’

‘They’re denying they told you anything.’

‘Ah,’ said Strike.

He wasn’t surprised. Daz and Mandy’s immediate, reflexive reaction to being called on by police a second time would, he was certain, be to deny everything, without pausing to consider that they could be storing up far more serious trouble for themselves in continuing to deny that they’d hidden evidence from the police.

‘And one of them let it slip that you’d given them money.’

‘Which they took, in exchange for the information. Does the Met think I shower banknotes on people with nothing to tell me?’

‘I’m just warning you,’ said Wardle, ‘that’s the line the team’s taking, that you’re trying to build up your rep by pretending to have found stuff they didn’t.’

‘So nobody’s following up Oz and Sofia Medina?’

‘I didn’t say that,’ said Wardle. ‘One of the women on the team – name’s Iverson – thinks Daz and Mandy told you the truth and that it’s worth looking into the Oz bloke. Murphy knows Iverson,’ he added. ‘Knows her bloody well, actually.’

Strike felt a flicker of interest unrelated to the case.

‘Yeah?’ he said.

‘Yeah,’ said Wardle. ‘They had a good grope in the pub a while back.’

‘How long ago was this?’ asked Strike, trying to sound casual.

‘Back when he was splitting up with his wife,’ said Wardle, and the tiny shoot of – not exactly hope, but something resembling it – withered and died inside Strike. ‘I told you before, he was a proper arsehole when he was drinking, nothing in a skirt was safe. He’s been in a bloody bad mood lately, apparently. Iverson says, if she didn’t know better, she’d think he was drinking again. Mind, he’d have good reason.’

Much as Strike would have liked to believe Murphy had fallen off the wagon he thought that was too much to hope for.

‘Why’d he have good reason?’ he asked.

‘He was on that gangland shooting, with the kids.’

‘So I heard.’

‘Well, he was the one who fucked it up. He arrested the mother’s boyfriend, who’s admittedly a violent, vengeful fucker with a record, but Murphy had sod all evidence.’

Strike, who assumed Robin already knew all this, knew that even if she didn’t, he’d only make himself look like a prick if he brought any of it up, so he didn’t pursue the subject.

‘Anyway, I checked out that Calvin Osgood’s alibi for you,’ said Wardle. ‘It’s sound. He really was in Manchester when he said he was.’

‘Thought so, but wanted it confirmed,’ said Strike, shoving one of the plastic containers towards Wardle. ‘Have some, it’s good.’

The policeman helped himself to chicken Madras. He looked as though he’d lost weight recently, and, unlike Strike, he hadn’t had much to spare in the first place. Wardle had been boyishly good-looking when he and Strike first met, but he seemed to have aged far more than the seven years that had passed since, and was now very grey around the temples.

‘This Iverson,’ said Strike, ‘has she looked at Oz’s Instagram account? Because Robin found out a missing girl was in communication with him, name of Sapphire Neagle.’

‘Dunno,’ said Wardle. ‘She probably thinks I’m too matey with you to give me much. I know the team’s seriously fucked off at Truman, though. Did you know he’s a Freemason?’

‘I did, yeah,’ said Strike, glad Robin wasn’t present to hear this.

‘There’s a lot of muttering that Truman wanted that body to be Knowles, to turn attention away from where the killing happened. Nobody needs a bloody Freemasonry-in-the-Met story… Did you know they’ve ruled out those four blokes in Wild Court?’

‘I did, yeah.’

‘So now they’re trying to work out how Wright and his killer got to the shop, because there doesn’t seem to be camera footage of them anywhere.’

‘A Peugeot was involved, wasn’t it?’

‘That the silver car they think picked up the killer at three in the morning?’

‘Yeah. I assume they’ve tried to trace it?’

‘Yeah, but no dice. They’re combing through camera footage, but it disappeared into a residential area and got lost.’

Strike had just picked up his knife and fork again when his mobile rang and, seeing that it was Robin calling, answered at once.

‘Hi, are you free to talk?’ she said. Cheered by the fact that she’d called him instead of emailing, Strike said,

‘Yeah, of course, give me a minute.’

He got up from the table and pointed at the front door, signalling to Wardle that he needed privacy for this conversation.

‘Right,’ said Strike, who’d now let himself onto the landing outside Wardle’s flat, ‘fire away.’

‘I’m in casualty – I’m fine,’ she added quickly. ‘Plug’s here, with his son. The son’s been injured, badly, on his face. Bitten. Strike, I think I know what’s going on.’

‘What?’

‘Dogs. Dangerous dogs. The boy was bitten in that house in Carnival Street where they put whatever animal was in that allotment shed. They were both unmarked when they went in. Twenty minutes later, Plug half-carried his son out, with blood all over his face.’

‘Fuck,’ said Strike, thinking of the compound outside Ipswich. ‘Dog fights. That’s it, isn’t it? The cash is for bets, or buying dogs… OK, good work, now we know what we’re dealing with. With luck, a doctor might call in the police once they see what the injury is.’

‘Plug looks absolutely furious. I’ll bet you anything he’s going to

pressure the boy not to say what really happened – say it was a stray dog, or something.'

'Yeah, he probably will, in which case it'll be on us to nail him. Easier now we know what we're trying to prove. Have you done anything about that Land Rover, by the way?' Strike asked, keen to keep fostering this slightly more amicable atmosphere.

'Yes, I've made an appointment to go and see it Sunday afternoon. I'd better go, the boy's been taken away to get stitched up.'

'OK, bye,' said Strike, and he returned to Wardle, who was opening his second lager.

'Robin,' Strike said.

'Ah,' said Wardle.

'Listen, I'm grateful for the info,' Strike said, sitting down again. 'Good to know there's still someone in the Met who doesn't think I'm an arsehole.'

'They've got their own share of arseholes,' said Wardle, and Strike noticed the use of 'they', as opposed to 'we'.

'Were you serious,' he asked, 'about leaving?'

Wardle drank more lager before answering.

'I dunno,' he said. 'My mum's just died.'

'Shit,' said Strike, who'd had no idea of this. 'I'm sorry.'

'Yeah. Last month. She was never right, after my brother,' said Wardle. 'Broke her heart.'

His words were coming as though each adhered to his throat, and needed to be pulled up, with effort.

'She chose not to go for a second round of chemo… raised us both as a single mum. We were her life. Terry dying half-killed her, and then April left me, and she didn't see nearly as much of Liam any more.'

'Liam?'

'My son,' said Wardle, with a faint smile. 'The kid you just saw me put to bed.'

'Oh, yeah, of course.'

'Anyway… Mum left a lot more money than I expected. She came into an inheritance herself, right before she died… never got to enjoy it. Before she went, I kept telling myself I'd be mad not to hang on at work for the pension, but with what she left, I could still see Liam right.'

The policeman sighed, then said,

‘Shall we go and sit on better chairs? I spend all night in here on my laptop, sometimes, getting a numb arse…’

The sitting room held a three-piece suite, a television and little else. As Strike passed over the threshold, a distant wail of ‘*Daddy!*’ was heard.

‘Shit,’ muttered Wardle, and he left for the spare bedroom.

Strike sat down on the sofa, lager in hand, eyes on the television screen, thinking of that wailed word, ‘daddy’. He’d never used the word to address any man in his life, because the nearest thing he’d ever had to a father had been Ted. A very long time ago, as a boy, he’d longed to be able to say it to Rokeby, to be able to talk about him as ‘dad’, but he never had. Strike had been a stickler for accuracy, even as a child. You didn’t call a man you’d met for ten minutes your dad. He imagined the baby girl to whom Bijou had recently given birth calling him ‘daddy’, and drank more lager.

The cartoon Wardle’s son had been watching had finished. Some kind of comedy news quiz had taken its place, and Strike suddenly realised he was looking at Lord Oliver Branfoot, who sat hunched behind a lit-up podium beside a young comedian.

Large, overweight and round-shouldered, Branfoot was wearing a suit that looked as though he’d slept in it. His dark hair was either badly cut or messed up to seem that way, while his large, fleshy nose and droopy eyes gave him the droll look of a giant garden gnome.

The quiz host was speaking.

‘Of what did President Trump say this week, “the enemies keep saying it’s terrible”?’

Branfoot hit the buzzer first.

‘His hair?’ he said, in a plummy voice, which got an easy round of laughter. ‘Weally,’ said Branfoot, straight-faced, blinking at the studio audience as though surprised by their reaction. ‘Sewiously. It must be that.’

‘You’re a fine one to talk,’ said the comedian sitting next to Branfoot, which earned another round of cheap laughter.

‘I’m afwaid I take sewious offence at that wemark,’ said Branfoot, mock-dignified. He always seemed to step up his usage of words with ‘r’s in them when on television, milking the comedy value of his speech impediment. ‘I may not be Wichard Gere, but I don’t walk about with what appears to be Shwedded Wheat on my head.’

‘The answer,’ said the host, over the audience’s renewed mirth, ‘is his Twitter account.’

‘’S’all right, he just called out in his sleep,’ said Wardle, reappearing in the room. ‘Oh Christ, not that Branfoot prick. Why do they keep inviting him on these things?’

‘Because he’s happy to play the jackass,’ said Strike.

‘I’m not sure that’s an act,’ said Wardle.

‘It’s a great act,’ said Strike, staring stonily at the screen. ‘That fucker knows *exactly* what he’s doing.’

71

But I persist, because I have my spice
Of intuition likewise…

Robert Browning
Balaustion's Adventure

Notwithstanding Robin's offer to forfeit her own free time so that they didn't have to sacrifice their own, adding Albie Simpson-White to the roster of people who needed following by the agency caused a degree of exasperation among the subcontractors. Robin knew they felt that trying to keep an eye on Plug, the house in Carnival Street where they believed a dangerous dog or dogs were being kept, and Plug's dog-breeding and -fighting associates in London and in Ipswich, while also watching Mrs Two-Times and filling the gaps in the silver vault case the two partners couldn't cover alone was quite enough work to be getting on with.

Predictably, Kim Cochran was the person most open about her disdain for the new job. Robin suspected Strike must have told the subcontractors that following Albie was Robin's particular wish, because she'd overheard Kim saying to Shah, 'So we're just traipsing around after this Simpson-White in case he leads us to his missing mate?' Then, catching sight of Robin in the inner office, Kim had given yet another of her little laughs and said,

'Well, stranger things have happened. Maybe I'll win the lottery this week, too.'

I wish you would *win the bloody lottery. Then maybe you'd leave,* thought Robin angrily on Sunday at midday, while following Albie from his flat to the Tube. She was supposed to be passing the job to Kim in a couple of hours' time, and if there were any more supposedly funny comments

during the handover, she thought she might well be putting the woman firmly in her place.

Fortunately, the weather remained as cold as ever, which made Robin's choice of a beanie and a scarf in which she was hiding most of her face seem perfectly natural. As she'd already met Albie, she was also wearing a black wig and a pair of glasses. Albie hadn't even looked at her; he was listening to music on his headphones, one of his large feet tapping along in time. Robin was therefore temporarily free to think about the two-bedroomed house she and Murphy had viewed on Wednesday.

It stood at the end of a terrace – which meant it received plenty of light – would need little renovation and was convenient for the Tube. Murphy still had misgivings about the size, but when Robin reminded him of how much above their maximum budget the three-bedroomed house in Wood Green had gone for, he agreed to put in an offer on this one, which had been accepted that Friday.

Robin was relieved the decision had been made, and told herself that this feeling was happiness. She'd even phoned her mother and told her that she and Murphy were moving in together, and Linda had been predictably delighted, although after expressing her pleasure she'd confided that Martin and Carmen were rowing non-stop, which Linda thought was the cause of baby Dirk's fretfulness. This hadn't helped Robin's now almost constant state of anxiety and guilt. She still hadn't sent either of her new nephews presents.

Ever since the man in the green jacket and gorilla mask had threatened her, she'd been jumpy, constantly checking behind her for any sign of being followed. The number of things she wasn't telling Murphy was also weighing heavily on her conscience. Strike's theory about Malcolm Truman interfering in the investigation to protect the Freemasons was starting to look worryingly credible, and Robin could only imagine what Murphy's reaction was likely to be, should they manage to prove that it had been Danny de Lion in the silver vault, and that the lead investigator had deliberately tried to obfuscate his identity at the urging of a masonic friend.

Albie got off the Tube at Notting Hill Gate station, and Robin followed him up Pembridge Road and round a corner, where he entered a pub called the Sun in Splendour, which had a curved, bright yellow frontage. Robin texted Kim her location, then entered the pub to see Albie sitting alone at a

table, drinking a pint.

Robin didn't dare get too close to him, so she ordered herself a tomato juice and remained at the bar, intermittently watching Albie in a mirror, and looking at her phone to bolster the impression of a woman waiting for a tardy friend.

On opening WhatsApp, Robin saw she'd just received a new and very long message from an unknown number.

Hello this is Chloe Griffiths, Ian Griffiths' daughter. Dad's asked me to get in touch with you as like a character witness for Tyler Powell. I wasn't going to but my boyfriend thinks I should tell you the truth, even if Dad doesn't want to hear it.

I know Dad's told you Tyler definitely didn't have anything to do with that car crash and I'm not saying he did, but I know for a fact Tyler isn't the nice sweet guy Dad thinks he is. Dad thinks anyone who likes Steely Dan and wants to learn the guitar must be a good guy, but Tyler isn't.

He gets really pushy with girls when he's drunk, he's done it to lots of friends of mine. Dad feels sorry for him, he thinks Tyler's desperate for love or something, because his parents aren't very nice to him, so he thinks it's all harmless but it isn't. Anne-Marie only went out with Tyler a couple of times, and he started talking about them getting married. Dad thought that just showed Tyler wants a proper family of his own, but Anne-Marie was really freaked out by him being so intense and possessive when they'd only dated twice and Tyler was really angry she dumped him and was talking all kinds of shit about her.

Another girl I know called Zeta had a bad experience with Tyler as well but she never went to the police about it, even though a bunch of us said she should, but she said she had no proof. I don't want to say what happened

because she might not want to talk about it but you can try and talk to her. Her number's 07700 942369.

Tyler and me were sort of friends when we first moved in opposite, because I used to feel sorry for him and my mum had just died and he was nice about that. He's a bit slow, and I could tell he was unhappy at home, but then he started making excuses to come over to our house all the time and I think he only took guitar lessons with Dad so he could try and flirt with me. Tyler's the type that thinks if a girl's nice to him she wants to get with him. When I told him I had a boyfriend he turned really nasty and stopped coming for guitar lessons and his gran started being horrible to me.

Anne-Marie was one of my best friends though and honestly half the reason I wanted to go interrailing was so I didn't have to think about her dying all the time and also people were kind of ganging up on me too, because Dad was going round defending Tyler to everyone and people thought I must think the same because Tyler and I used to be friends.

I can't prove Tyler did anything to the car that night, but him packing up and leaving Ironbridge is really weird, because he never wanted to live anywhere else before. Dad can't complain I've told you the truth, just because he doesn't want to hear it.

Seconds after Robin had finished reading this message, Strike called her.

'Hi, where are you? Can you talk?'

'Yes, I'm in a pub,' said Robin, checking Albie in the mirror.

'My old SIB mate, Hardy, is going to be in town for a family wedding next week and he thinks he can wangle us a private tour of Freemasons' Hall. Want to come and see Temple Seventeen?'

Robin hesitated. She had a great curiosity to see inside Freemasons'

Hall, especially on a private tour, but she remained angry at Strike.

‘No, we’re overstretched as it is. You stick with Semple and I’ll keep going on Tyler Powell. I’ve actually just had a message from Chloe Griffiths, Tyler’s ex-neighbour. I’ll forward it to you.’

‘OK,’ said Strike, who was disappointed about Freemasons’ Hall; he’d been certain she’d want to see it. ‘You’re seeing the new Land Rover this afternoon, right?’

‘Yes,’ said Robin. ‘I’d better go, I’m handing over to Kim in a minute.’

As she said it, she saw the subcontractor enter the pub.

‘Bye,’ Robin said to Strike, and hung up.

‘Albie’s the blond guy sitting on his own,’ Robin told Kim without looking at her, as both stood facing the bar, though apparently unconnected to each other. ‘You’ll be able to get nearer to him than I c – ah,’ said Robin, watching the mirror. A good-looking young woman with shiny, near-black hair had just entered the pub and waved at Albie.

‘We’re very interested in a girl called Tish Benton,’ said Robin quietly to Kim, as the newcomer bought herself a drink at the far end of the bar. ‘That could be her. If you can get near enough to hear her name, that’d be great.’

‘Yes, I think that’ll be within my capabilities,’ said Kim.

‘Glad to hear it,’ said Robin tartly, and she left.

72

… we made a league together, notwithstanding that my gods were not thine; because we were brethren in the sacred mysteries…

Albert Pike
The Ancient and Accepted
Scottish Rite of Freemasonry

Unbeknownst to Robin, Strike was currently preoccupied with an investigative problem he considered even more pressing than the identity of the body in the silver vault.

Having racked his brains for the best way to throw off the surveillance under which Bijou's former lover had placed her, and for a discreet venue suitable for the provision of DNA swabs, he'd decided to call again on his extensive knowledge of London's five-star hotels. On the same cold, damp morning he'd arranged to meet his old friend Graham Hardacre for a tour of Freemasons' Hall, Strike hung around in his attic flat until ten past nine, by which point he thought it reasonable to suppose that Bijou would be awake but still at home, without eavesdroppers or passers-by to listen in. He reached for Ted's fisherman's priest and sat weighing it in his hand as he waited for her to answer, which she did within a few rings.

'Hello?'

'It's me,' said Strike. 'I've got a plan for the DNA test.'

'Oh, thank God,' said Bijou fervently. 'Today?'

'Day after tomorrow,' said Strike. 'But you cannot tell *anyone*—'

'I won't!' said Bijou shrilly. 'For God's sake, do you think I *want* people knowing?'

'Right, well, I've booked a room at the Savoy,' said Strike.

'The hotel?'

'No, the cabbage,' said Strike irritably. 'Of course the bloody hotel.'

‘We can’t meet at a hotel, that’ll look—’

‘*Listen,*’ said Strike, who’d anticipated her quibbles and was in no mood to humour them. ‘It’s the hardest bloody hotel in London to find your way around, it’s a maze in there. It’s got two entrances, front and back, and three different lifts going to different parts of the building. They’re discreet and professional, and they’re used to celebrities, so they won’t let themselves get tricked into giving out any booking information. Nobody’ll be able to tail you to the room, or prove who you met or what you did in there, as long as you follow my instructions.’

‘But—’

‘What’s the likelihood of us meeting to fuck in an expensive hotel, in the city where both of us have flats, when you’ve got a baby with you? You’re there to meet an old American friend who’s only in town for twenty-four hours, on business, but wants to meet the baby. You’re having coffee in her room at four o’clock. That’s what you say, if you need a story.’

‘OK,’ said Bijou uncertainly.

‘Have you got a pen?’

‘Yes,’ she said, and he heard her rummaging. ‘Go on.’

‘You’re going in the front. No furtiveness, you’ve got nothing to hide. Go straight through the lobby, down the steps, turn left and then right. That takes you to the red lift.’

‘Red lift,’ repeated Bijou, who was clearly making notes.

‘If anyone’s following you, it’ll be obvious, because they’ll have no choice but to get into the lift with you. If anyone *does* get in – and I don’t care how innocent they look – get out. Fake having forgotten something, or realising you’re at the wrong lift – there’s a green and blue one, too. If whoever got in the lift with you gets out when you do, you stop dead and make it clear you think their behaviour’s odd.’

‘How?’

‘Stare at them. Make it clear you’re suspicious. They need to know they’ve blown their cover, that they’re risking you confronting them or reporting them to a hotel worker for following you.’

‘What if they ask where I’m going? What if they confront *me*?’

‘Then you either tell the story you’re meeting an American girlfriend upstairs, or ask why that’s any of their business. Do *not* get in a lift with anyone, all right?’

‘All right,’ said Bijou.

‘Once you’re in the lift alone, press the sixth-floor button. That’s not where you’re getting out, but we want them scurrying up to the top while you’re going back down to the fourth. I’ll already be in the room waiting for you. We do the swabs, and I leave immediately via the back of the hotel. You stay in the room for at least a couple of hours, to make the coffee with the friend story stick. Then you go back out through the lobby at the front.’

‘All right,’ said Bijou, ‘but it’s going to be really expensive, taking a room at the Savoy, and I’m not getting paid at the—’

‘It’s fine, I’ve already paid for it,’ said Strike.

‘Oh,’ said Bijou. ‘Well, I’ll pay half, if you—’

‘There’s no need. I just want this sorted out.’

Having given her the room number, Strike hung up.

He replaced the priest on the windowsill and got to his feet, trying not to think about the likely press massacre should Dominic Culpepper realise there was a story combining Strike, a gorgeous brunette, an accidentally conceived baby and a well-known barrister who was the scourge of the tabloids, nor to imagine that story’s effects on Robin and the rest of the agency. Strike had detected a definite lack of warmth in his recent interactions with Shah, and had a nasty feeling this might be because Shah knew Bijou had called the office.

He was heading downstairs without intending to enter the office, because he wanted to be in good time to meet Hardacre, when Pat, seeing him pass, called out to him from behind the glass-panelled door.

‘What’s up?’ asked Strike, looking in.

‘That Scottish Gateshead’s just called again,’ she said, looking cross. ‘Bloody rude.’

‘The woman who wants to meet me in the Golden Fleece?’ said Strike.

‘Yeah,’ said Pat. ‘Very angry you haven’t called her back. Swearing.’

‘I haven’t got her number,’ said Strike. ‘What was she saying this time?’

‘Something about an engineer and people are out to get her. Swearing her head off.’

‘OK, well, if she calls again, try and get contact details.’

He was about to set off downstairs again when he changed his mind and walked through into the inner office instead, where he made a note and pinned it on the corkboard beneath the picture of Niall Semple. Scottish

woman. Engineer. People out to get her.

‘If that woman *does* call back,’ he told Pat on his way back to the glass door, ‘ask if she’s blonde and has got anything tattooed on her face.’

‘On her *face*?’ said Pat.

‘Yeah, you know, the thing on the front of your head,’ said Strike, and left.

Hardacre had suggested meeting in a pub called the Freemasons’ Arms, which lay a short distance from Freemasons’ Hall, because, as he’d told Strike by text, ‘we might as well do the thing properly’. However, as Strike saw when he entered, the pub was disappointingly free of masonic emblems, placing an emphasis instead on old football photographs.

Hardacre was already at the bar. Barely five foot eight, the SIB man had become tubbier since Strike had last seen him, and lost more of his mousy hair, though his amiable, nondescript face was far less lined than Wardle’s. The pair exchanged their usual half-hug, half-handshake.

‘You’re thinner, Oggy.’

‘Not thin enough,’ said Strike, whose knee and hamstring had resented the ten-minute walk. ‘You look well. How’s the family?’

‘All good, yeah,’ said Hardacre. ‘Quick pint before we get you initiated?’

‘Yeah, go on,’ said Strike. ‘But they take all money and metal off you first, don’t they?’

‘Been reading up?’ said Hardacre, with a grin.

‘Just wondering whether alcohol’s a good idea when I’m about to be hopping around in the dark,’ said Strike.

‘Think they’d make an exception for your leg, unless you habitually use it as a weapon.’

‘Not often,’ said Strike, ‘but it’s been known.’

They took their pints to a table near the window.

‘So,’ said Hardacre, ‘what’re we looking for?’

‘Museum and Temple Seventeen,’ said Strike.

‘Museum won’t be a problem, but they don’t usually let the public into temples, other than the Grand Temple. Why’re we interested in number Seventeen?’

‘William Wright was interested in it, or so my informant says,’ said Strike.

‘Very specific, wanting to see just one temple.’

‘Said informant isn’t overly trustworthy. I’m checking it out on the off-chance. Don’t suppose you’ve got anything else on Niall Semple for me?’

‘A bit,’ said Hardacre, dropping his voice, ‘but you need to keep this on the down low, Oggy. I’ll be deep in the shit if they find out I’ve passed it to you.’

‘There’ll be no publicity,’ said Strike, considerably more sympathetic to this request than he’d been to the almost identical one made by Ryan Fucking Murphy.

‘Name Ben Liddell familiar to you?’

‘No,’ said Strike, ‘but I know Semple’s best mate was called Ben and I know he got killed in the same operation where Semple sustained his traumatic brain injury.’

‘That’s him. Well, Semple seems to have been very fucking angry about that, and from what I heard – I shouldn’t know any of this, Oggy – he showed extreme animosity to the Regiment once he was compos mentis again and even made noises about press exposure regarding the botched operation where Liddell died.’

‘That’d explain a lot,’ said Strike, thinking of Ralph Lawrence, the alleged MI5 operative, and his obvious preference for Strike giving up attempts to find Semple. ‘What d’you know about the operation?’

‘Nothing,’ said Hardacre, ‘and frankly, I don’t want to know.’

‘Has this Ben Liddell got any next of kin?’

‘No idea.’

‘OK… can I ask you a couple of masonic questions?’

‘Yeah, go on.’

‘Wouldn’t happen to know what gow-too is, would you?’

‘Gow-too?’ said Hardacre. ‘How’re you spelling it? G – A – O – T – U?’

‘Haven’t seen it written down,’ said Strike. ‘What would it mean if it’s that?’

‘Masonic acronym. Great Architect Of The Universe.’

‘God, in other words?’

‘Yeah. Why?’

‘We’ve got an anonymous caller who’s allegedly got GAOTU on their side. I thought Freemasonry wasn’t supposed to be a religion?’

‘It’s not,’ said Hardacre.

‘But you believe in God.’

‘You’ve got to believe in a single higher power to be a mason. Doesn’t have to be any particular God.’

‘This, in spite of the fact that most of the symbolism is Christian and weighs towards the Crusades?’

‘Still only symbolism,’ said Hardacre. ‘We aren’t aiming to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem any more. Just to erect it in our own pure hearts.’

Strike snorted, then said,

‘Ever read any A. H. Murdoch?’

‘Not much,’ said Hardacre. ‘The language is pretty flowery and obscure. I prefer *Bridge to Light*.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Popular introduction to the Scottish Rite.’

‘Bridges are a thing in Freemasonry, are they?’

‘What d’you mean, “thing”?’

‘Bridges have cropped up a bit,’ said Strike.

‘How?’

‘Semple freaked out about crossing a masonic bridge on a run, and I’ve got some Scottish woman calling the office, who thinks something’s hidden under a bridge.’

Hardacre drank some beer, eyed Strike thoughtfully for a moment or two, then said, ‘There’s a bit in *Morals and Dogma*, another key text on the Scottish Rite, about a bridge. “The retreating general may cut away a bridge behind him, to delay pursuit and save the main body of his army, though he thereby surrenders a detachment to certain destruction.” It says such action isn’t unjust, but “may infringe some dreamer’s ideal rule of justice”.’

‘Interesting,’ said Strike. ‘That might chime with Semple being angry his mate Liddell had been sacrificed.’

‘Yeah. And when you’re inducted into the fifteenth degree, there’s a bridge, too.’

‘What, literally?’

‘They don’t generally hammer one together out of wood in the middle of the temple, no,’ said Hardacre, ‘but there’s a symbolic representation of one.’

‘What happens – troll jumps out and gets you, if you get the password wrong?’

‘Ha ha,’ said Hardacre. ‘You cross the bridge, over a river in which body parts are floating—’

‘Body parts?’

‘It’s symbolic, Oggy,’ said Hardacre.

Slightly to Strike’s surprise, his old friend seemed half-embarrassed, half-defiant, so he decided to leave off flippant comments about Freemasonry, for the moment.

‘How highly would you say masons prize the medals—’

‘Jewels,’ Hardacre corrected him.

‘—jewels they get for achieving the degrees?’

‘Well, they probably wouldn’t want to lose them. Why?’

‘Because Semple seems to have either taken something valuable, or something he thought was valuable, with him to London – or picked it up here, I suppose. He had a briefcase handcuffed to him, last time he was seen.’

‘If he’d got obsessive about Freemasonry, he might’ve thought it was important to keep his regalia with him,’ said Hardacre.

‘What would regalia comprise? Sash? Apron? Medals – jewels, I mean?’

‘All of the above, probably,’ said Hardacre. ‘I had a look for any masonic connection with the name William Wright, by the way. A Captain William Wright of Ardwick Lodge died in the First World War.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘East Lancashire. The lodge is still active.’

‘Was he well known, this Wright? Would most Freemasons have heard of him?’

‘Doubt it,’ said Hardacre. ‘The only claim to fame I found is that he drowned at sea. How’s the case going, in general?’

Strike treated Hardacre to a succinct précis of recent events, including the anonymous calls to the office and Robin’s encounter with a masked, dagger-waving man, though omitting any mention of gorillas.

‘Shit,’ said Hardacre. ‘But this all points one way, surely?’

‘Heavy-handed misdirection?’

‘Well, obviously,’ said Hardacre, with a laugh. ‘Brandishing a masonic dagger in the street – you think a genuine mason would do that?’

‘Could be a masonic nutter,’ said Strike. ‘But I agree, the masonic touches are probably a smokescreen.’

‘Got to be,’ said Hardacre.

‘Can’t imagine a Freemason committing murder, then?’

‘Wouldn’t go that far,’ said Hardacre. ‘Never forget what Albert Pike said.’

‘You’ll have to remind me.’

‘“Masonry does not change human nature, and cannot make honest men out of born knaves.”’

Pints finished, they headed out into the bright sun. Ten minutes later, Hardacre was speaking in a low voice to a woman at the front desk in the marble lobby of Freemasons’ Hall, which was high-ceilinged, with a gilded cornice.

‘You’re in luck,’ said Hardacre, rejoining the detective, ‘give it half an hour and we can have a look at Temple Seventeen. There are people in there right now. Museum first?’

So they climbed the broad staircase to visit the first-floor museum.

There were several pieces of masonic silverware on display, though exactly what benefit would have accrued to William Wright from peering at them remained mysterious to Strike.

‘Look here,’ said Hardacre, beckoning Strike over to a small oil painting on the wall. ‘That’s your bloke. Alexander Hughson Murdoch.’

The painting showed a stern-looking, grey-haired Victorian gentleman with mutton-chop sideburns and eyebrows of the kind that suggested sagacity, dressed in the ornate robes of a Grand Master, complete with apron embroidered in gold, and a gold chain around his neck. Painted in the background was the silver nef that had been stolen from Ramsay Silver, a miniature replica of the ship that had taken the first Freemason to America. The short biography beside the picture covered Murdoch’s birth in Edinburgh, his emigration to America, and his triumphant journey from pauper to multimillionaire.

While Strike continued to browse the contents of the glass cabinets, Hardacre visited the shop opposite the museum, returning a few minutes later.

‘Woman on the till says the museum was interested in bidding on some of the Murdoch silver, but they missed out to your Ramsay bloke.’

Strike glanced over Hardacre’s shoulder at the shop.

‘Do they sell daggers in there?’

‘Didn’t see any,’ said Hardacre. ‘But you can get them easily enough. They’re for sale online.’

‘And anyone can buy one, can they? You don’t need to give a password or show your All-Seeing Eye tattoo?’

‘I usually send ’em a picture of my Prince Albert, but just for a laugh,’ said Hardacre. ‘No, anyone can buy them.’

He checked his watch.

‘We can probably get into Seventeen now.’

‘How common would it be for a mason to change lodges, in your experience?’ asked Strike, as they left the museum to walk along a marble-floored passage.

‘Not that unusual,’ said Hardacre. ‘People move to different towns. You might just find one you like better, or you’d rather not see someone you’ve fallen out with.’

‘I imagined the brethren would be in such a state of fraternal goodwill that would never happen.’

‘Just told you, masonry doesn’t change human nature. Why’re you interested in people switching lodges?’

‘Idle thought. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about the Winston Churchill? It meets here.’

‘So do about a thousand other lodges,’ said Hardacre. ‘There’s a rumour one of them uses actual human skulls in their rites. Norwegian, if the rumour can be believed, but don’t quote me. I don’t want to be excommunicated.’

A suited man was walking towards them holding a long staff topped with a cross of Salem. Strike let the man move out of earshot before saying, ‘Does the Pope mind you wandering around with stuff like that?’

‘He’s not keen on us generally. Too many non-Christian gods allowed.’

A few minutes later they arrived at a wooden door bearing the number Seventeen, which Hardacre opened. The room was panelled in dark oak, with enough chairs set around the chequerboard floor to seat eighty. Behind a thronelike seat was a large chained swan carved onto the wall.

‘Symbol of Buckinghamshire,’ said Hardacre, pointing. ‘This temple was funded by Freemasons from the county. It’s where three of the oldest – pre-1717 – lodges meet.’

‘And what’s all this?’ said Strike, turning to point at the strange

assemblage of objects in the middle of the chequerboard floor.

‘Now, there, I’d have to kill you if I told you,’ said Hardacre.

Ten banners hung from poles faced each other on the black and white carpet, and Strike’s eye was drawn immediately to the lion beneath the word Judah. On the floor lay tools including a spade and a pickaxe, an aged book that was embossed with the lodge’s name, and a group of three-dimensional geometric objects carved out of white stone.

‘This is set up for some rite, is it?’ he asked Hardacre. ‘This stuff wouldn’t usually be here?’

‘No,’ said Hardacre.

Strike glanced around the rest of the chamber. He noted the ‘rough’ and ‘perfect’ ashlars – cubes of stone representing the uninitiated and educated masons – sitting beside chairs that evidently belonged to masons having some elevated ceremonial role.

‘Can’t say it’s obvious what William Wright wanted to see in here,’ he said at last, after giving the place a comprehensive look, ‘but that’ll do me.’

As they left the temple Strike asked,

‘D’you still maintain masons aren’t allowed to use membership to advance their personal interests?’

‘It’s right there in the rules, Oggy,’ said Hardacre. ‘We’re not allowed to discuss politics or religion during meetings, or do business deals.’

‘But, as you’ve already pointed out, masonry doesn’t change human nature.’

‘Have it your own way,’ said Hardacre, good-humoured as ever.

As they emerged from the hall into the sunlight, the conversation shifted easily to mutual military friends, and Strike mentally filed away GAOTU, the chained swan and the symbolic significance of bridges to be pondered later, when he had the time.

73

I knew the mass of men conceal'd
Their thoughts, for fear that if reveal'd
They would by other men be met
With blank indifference, or with blame reproved;
I knew they lived and moved
Trick'd in disguises, alien to the rest
Of men, and alien to themselves—and yet
The same heart beats in every human breast!
But we, my love!—doth a like spell benumb
Our hearts, our voices?—must we too be dumb?

Matthew Arnold
The Buried Life

At eight o'clock the following evening, Robin, who'd been informed by Two-Times that his wife would be celebrating a female friend's birthday at Coya, a Latin American restaurant in Mayfair, sat down to watch his so far blameless spouse drinking and eating with seven other women. Loud music pounded in the dimly lit basement room, which was swathed in lush greenery to suggest the rainforest. Robin, who'd been home to change, was wearing an old blue dress, the opal pendant her parents had bought for her thirtieth birthday and the matching earrings Murphy had given her for Christmas. On checking her reflection before leaving her flat she'd remembered the night when she'd worn exactly the same outfit, and Strike, she was certain, had come close to kissing her on the pavement outside the Ritz.

As she'd thought it might look conspicuous to eat alone, Robin had asked Midge to join her, but the latter hadn't yet arrived, so Robin sat

writing in her notebook while casually keeping a covert eye on Mrs Two-Times' party, who were all around Robin's own age, in high spirits and clearly intent on getting as drunk as possible, as quickly as possible.

Robin had just looked up from her notes for a third time in hopes of seeing Midge when she saw a suited Strike walking towards her instead, and experienced an electric shock in the pit of the stomach.

'Midge and I swapped,' he said, sitting down opposite her. 'Thought we should have a catch-up on the silver vault case, because I've had a very good twenty-four hours on the information-gathering front.'

'Yes, I read your file note about Temple Seventeen,' said Robin.

'I got a bit further on Semple last night. His best friend Ben Liddell, who was also Scottish, and was killed in the operation where Semple got his brain injury, has only one living relative: a sister called Rena. I'm starting to wonder whether she isn't our Scottish Gateshead.'

'Really?'

'Yeah. She might even be the woman Jade Semple overheard Semple planning to meet. The Gateshead called again yesterday, babbling about an engineer to Pat. The pub where Jade overheard Niall arranging to meet the woman was called "The Engineer". The Gateshead seems worried about going back there, which is why she wants to meet me in the Golden Fleece instead.'

'Right,' said Robin, deliberately unenthusiastic. Apparently indulging in speculation about Swedish Reata Lindvall was pointless, but it was fine for Strike to make assumptions about an unknown woman because she was Scottish.

'But I've got a load more than that,' said Strike, unaware that he'd just annoyed Robin even further. 'Look at this.'

He handed Robin his phone and she looked down at a news story dated 2010, topped by a picture of Jim Todd staring sullenly at the camera, captioned 'Todd Jameson'. The cleaner had had more hair in the photograph, but the wide mouth and tiny eyes were unmistakeable. The headline read: **BATTERSEA RAPIST JAILED**.

'Category two rape, seventeen-year-old girl, sentenced to ten years, out in five,' said Strike.

'How on earth did you find this?' said Robin, momentarily forgetting her antagonism.

‘Told you I thought Todd might be using a fake name. Started searching variations on Todd and James and that came up. Surprising how often people stick close to their birth names when choosing a fake one.’

Robin handed Strike back his phone. Strike, who’d recognised both the dress and the pendant Robin had worn to the Ritz on the night he’d almost kissed her, was reminded how recently he’d hoped for a situation like this – both of them dressed up, alone in a restaurant – to make the declaration he was now certain would have been fruitless.

‘There’s more,’ he said, trying to dispel this miserable thought. ‘Once I got Todd’s real name, it wasn’t too hard to find out he’s got a brother who’s a Conservative borough councillor. I rang the guy up. He wasn’t best pleased to hear from a private detective who’s interested in his pervert brother, but he became a lot friendlier when I asked him how old his grandmother is.’

‘He’s a mason?’

‘Certainly is. He jumped to the conclusion that we’ve been hired by Kenneth Ramsay to quash all masonic rumours around the murder. Needless to say, I didn’t correct him.

‘Bottom line: when Todd got out of jail after the Battersea rape, he went to his brother looking for money. His brother told him to sling his hook, and Todd threatened to spill a lot of family secrets to the local press, including the fact that their mother used to be on the game. Big brother caved and managed to get Todd a couple of cleaning jobs with some fellow masons, to keep him in gambling money. By the sounds of it, all Todd cares about is cards and girls.

‘Anyway, the brother assumed I already knew that Todd’s sex offending goes back years. I played along, probed a bit, and Todd was arrested in Belgium in ’97.’

‘*Belgium?*’ said Robin, shocked.

‘Yep. He was working as a coach driver, moving young Eastern European girls between brothels and abuse rings, and he was doing it under the name “Jim Philpott”, which was his mother’s maiden name. Look at this.’

Strike brought up a fresh article on his phone and handed it to Robin. There, among seven other mugshots dating from 1997, were Todd’s familiar tiny eyes and wide mouth, though back when the picture had been taken

Todd had a full head of dull brown hair. Bruising to his upper cheek suggested he'd put up a fight when Belgian police had cornered him. He'd been arrested as part of a pan-European grooming and trafficking gang that lured young women with promises of modelling careers, or jobs as housekeepers for wealthy people in the UK.

Todd, Robin saw, had served twelve months for his crimes, receiving the shortest term of any of the men arrested. None of the girls rescued had accused him of physical abuse, only that he'd knowingly moved them around between brothels and groups of abusers in France, Germany, Luxembourg and Belgium. Robin was sceptical that Todd's role had been confined to chauffeur: there was no guarantee that every single victim had been found, and his subsequent conviction for rape in the UK suggested he'd been lucky to escape a longer sentence. However, as Robin saw, Jim Todd had been in jail when Reata Lindvall and her daughter vanished, so he definitely couldn't have killed them.

'Interesting,' she said, passing Strike back his phone.

Still hoping for an improvement in the atmosphere, Strike said,

'I've also found out what that text was, that made Pamela leave the shop early.'

'How?' said Robin, failing to repress a note of professional rivalry. She considered Pamela her own witness, and had been proud of getting so much information out of the woman.

'Tracked down her husband and talked to him this afternoon. They're separated. Pamela chucked him out, because he shagged an old girlfriend he found on Facebook.'

'So what did the text say?'

'It was supposedly from the old girlfriend, telling Pamela that she and the husband were having an affair and were deeply in love, and asking Pamela to meet her at Debenhams café on Oxford Street to discuss the matter. However—'

'It wasn't really from the girlfriend?'

'Precisely. Burner phone. Pamela got home on Friday after waiting in Debenhams café alone until closing time. She let rip at her husband, who panicked and gave himself away by saying "it was only once", before realising the text had been sent from an unknown number. So, someone knew enough about Pamela and Geoffrey's private life to know exactly how

to lure Pamela out of the shop – Geoffrey says she was already suspicious about the true nature of his reinvigorated friendship before she got the fake text. I asked Geoffrey who might have known about all this, and he said he and Pamela had a couple of rows about it, back when he was running Bullen & Co and she was working at Ramsays.'

'So anyone in either shop might have overheard?'

'Exactly. The other thing Geoffrey told me was that it was definitely the genuine Oriental Centrepiece in the crate that arrived at Bullen & Co, which he opened to check the contents. He's an expert on antique silver, so I think we can take his word for it.'

'Right,' said Robin, trying not to feel aggrieved that Strike had found all this out, rather than her. 'Well, I've spoken to Ivor Powell, Tyler's father, in Florida.'

'And?'

'He said he's had a few texts from Tyler and that he's working in a pub. He seemed annoyed I was bothering him with what he called Dilys's "rubbish" and refused to send me Tyler's texts. I wouldn't be surprised if he hadn't had any at all. He gave the impression he simply didn't care about Tyler.'

A waiter arrived at the table to take Strike's drinks order. When he'd departed, Strike said,

'That message from Griffiths' daughter about Powell was interesting.'

'Yes,' said Robin. 'It certainly paints a different picture of Tyler to the one her father was pushing.'

'Pat hasn't found Powell in any pubs called "the silver something" yet. 'Course, he might be doing a Todd and going under a different name. A different different name to William Wright, I mean.'

'I've also looked into the car crash that killed Anne-Marie Morgan and Hugo Whitehead,' said Robin. 'It really does look like Hugo just lost control of the car in the storm. The Mazda's anti-lock braking system failed and it skidded into the back of an articulated lorry, the airbags failed to deploy and the car went up in flames. I assume people in Ironbridge latched onto the anti-lock brakes failing, but in those conditions it was likely, especially if Hugo was driving too fast.'

'So we don't think Powell fled Ironbridge because he had a guilty conscience?'

‘He might not’ve caused the crash,’ said Robin, ‘but I’d still like to hear what that other girl, Zeta, who had a bad experience with him has to say.’

Strike’s beer arrived, served by a waiter asking if they were ready to order food. Strike ordered beef, Robin chicken, and the waiter retreated again. Mrs Two-Times’ group erupted into shrieks of laughter; Robin glanced over to their table to see Mrs Two-Times flicking her expertly coloured hair out of her eyes, talking to a very handsome, dark-eyed waiter.

‘I’d imagine it’s occurred to you that we’ve got an unusual number of sex offenders congregating around this crime?’ Strike asked Robin. ‘McGee felt up a workmate on a previous job, Todd’s a rapist and trafficker, Oz appears to groom young women—’

‘You probably won’t like my answer to that,’ said Robin.

‘Which is?’

‘That men perennially underestimate how many of their fellow men are perverts and predators. You know what they say: “all women know a rape victim, no man knows a rapist”.’

Strike decided to retreat to slightly safer territory.

‘This feels like a pro job, not a first kill. There aren’t many people cold-blooded enough to spend a couple of hours with a fresh corpse, carving it up and dissecting it, late at night in an underground vault. That took strong nerves.’

‘You think Oz is Shanker’s hired hitman?’

‘If it *was* a hit, Oz must be the guy, yeah, but I’ve still got questions. If I was hiring an assassin,’ Strike said, lowering his voice, ‘I wouldn’t go anywhere near a sex offender. Look at Todd. He’s on the sex offenders’ register, he knows what he’s risking if he gets arrested, and he still can’t control himself. A man whose life’s dominated by impulses like that can’t be trusted to keep his mind on the job, and the few mistakes Oz made during the commission of this crime are all sex- and woman-related.’

‘Using the same persona twice, you mean?’

‘For starters, yeah, that was sloppy. I imagine he took the view it worked great on Medina and he’d got clean away with it, so why not use “Oz” again, as he’d put work into it. But it was bloody over-optimistic thinking fourteen-year-old Sapphire Neagle’s going to keep her mouth shut about a bloke showering her in rubies.’

‘She never told anyone his name, though,’ said Robin.

‘She still blabbed that she’d met an exciting older man who’d promised she was going to be a backing singer. And that’s not the only reckless thing he’s done. Why visit Medina at home? I think he likes the risk, the thrill, the getting as close to them as he can. It was the height of bloody stupidity to press for pictures of Gretchen and Medina together. He might’ve thought that’d give him a hold over Gretchen, but it was always just as likely to make her keener to see him arrested. Biggest mistake of all: using Medina in the burglary when she was clearly a blabbermouth. Why use *her*, specifically? If you need a woman for the job, why not pick someone steady and reliable who’d keep their mouth shut?’

‘Maybe he didn’t know any other women who’d be happy to drive a getaway car?’ said Robin.

‘Or maybe he couldn’t resist using a girl he knew he was going to end up raping and murdering. Medina was a cherry on top of the cake. A self-awarded bonus. That’s where Oz’s self-control fails: girls.’

There was another silence, during which both partners followed their own trains of thought, until Strike said,

‘There are still anomalies, though. Shanker told me the hitman was a “mouthy nutter”, but barring the sex stuff, Oz seems efficient and controlled. Clearly an arch-manipulator. A good actor. Even if he got careless around Medina, when all’s said and done, we’re still no closer to finding out who owns the curly hair and sunglasses than we were when we first heard about them.’

‘I think that curly hair’s a wig,’ said Robin, ‘chosen to mimic the real Osgood.’

‘Think you could well be right about that,’ said Strike.

‘But Mandy’s denying she ever saw the curly haired man and the girl with long black hair,’ said Robin, who’d read Strike’s note in the file.

‘Yeah, and the trouble is, without a sighting of a girl matching Medina’s description and a bloke matching Oz’s in Wright’s house, the working assumption that Oz is the killer falls apart.’

‘There’s still the email sent to Osgood from Ramsay Silver,’ said Robin, ‘and there’s Gretchen’s testimony that Sofia was dating an older man called Oz, and the total strangers who emailed the real Osgood about a van for sale, and a problem, and a prank involving a girl.’

‘You don’t need to convince me, I’m already convinced,’ said Strike.

‘I’m certain Oz and Medina emptied Wright’s room and I’m certain they were the couple in the getaway car, but the murder investigation team are taking the line that Mandy cooked up her story on the spot because I’d paid them for an interview and she wanted to give value for money.’

Their food arrived. As Strike picked up his knife and fork he said,

‘Kim told me the girl Albie Simpson-White met in the pub wasn’t Tish Benton. Her name’s Clarissa and all she talked about was her upcoming holiday to Sicily. One funny thing, though: the girl’s living in Pembridge Gardens, almost opposite a lodge for female Freemasons.’

‘Did Kim put a note in the file?’ said Robin, who hadn’t had a chance to check. ‘Or did she just call you with this news?’

‘She called me, I don’t know about the file,’ said Strike. ‘Why?’

‘Because it seems to be my line of enquiry when she wants to bitch about it, but your line of enquiry when she’s got news,’ said Robin acidly, and immediately regretted it. She went on in a less combative tone: ‘I’m going to try and talk to Cosima Longcaster this week. Find out why Rupert crashed that birthday party.’

‘Great,’ said Strike. ‘That’d help, because Decima’s agitating for another update.’

There was yet another silence, both partners now thinking of Bar Italia, and their row about their responsibilities to Decima, but naturally, neither gave any sign of this.

‘The new Land Rover’s great,’ said Robin.

‘Good,’ said Strike. ‘How’s the house hunting going?’

‘We’ve found one we like. Our offer’s been accepted.’

‘Ah,’ said Strike, with the same old feeling of being punched in the solar plexus. ‘Congratulations.’

‘Thanks,’ said Robin, her eyes on her food.

74

… so the game is ended
That should not have begun.

A. E. Housman
XIV: The Culprit, Last Poems

The knowledge that Robin and Murphy were definitely moving in together was still lying like lead in Strike's stomach when he entered the Savoy Hotel from the Thames-facing side of the building at half past three the following afternoon. He collected his key card from the reception desk in the grand green and cream lobby, then proceeded upstairs in the red lift, the walls of which were lacquered and patterned in gold. He was confident he hadn't been tailed, yet as the small red and gold box moved upwards, he felt as he imagined guilty men did, walking into court for sentencing.

The long, deserted corridor into which he emerged was carpeted in eau-de-nil and lilac, muffling his footsteps. He turned, unobserved, into the 'Superior Queen' he'd booked, which overlooked a chilly courtyard. The room was vaguely Art Deco in style and had cost Strike several hundred pounds.

He sat down in the upright chair at the desk and turned on the television, seeking distraction, but a few minutes spent watching President Trump justify his decision to curtail the emigration of Muslims to the States caused him to turn it off again. He opened emails on his phone and saw a long, miserable one from Decima Mullins, repeating every similarity between Wright and Fleetwood she'd already shared with him. Having skimmed this, he put his mobile aside in favour of the only available reading material in the room, a thick magazine catering to those who either bought, or coveted, luxury goods.

The cover showed a very beautiful young blonde wearing a large amount of diamonds, and the tagline beneath the picture caught Strike's eye.

COSIMA LONGCASTER: IT GIRL EXTRAORDINAIRE

Strike flicked past advertisements for men's watches, crocodile-skin handbags and platinum fountain pens until he found four pages of pictures of Cosima modelling further diamond necklaces and rings, her blonde hair flying in a wind machine. On the fifth page was something loosely resembling an interview.

Favourite food: Anything spicy, the hotter the better!

Favourite drink: I have my own cocktail at Dino's, the Cosmic – tequila, ginger and honey. Yum!

Your idea of a good time? Any night at Dino's, my home from home.

Secret passion? I'm a total true crime addict. Anything about unsolved murders.

Best gift you've ever been given? Daddy gave me an incredible, unset pink diamond for my eighteenth. I'm still deciding how I'm going to wear it.

Something nobody knows about you? I did one of those ancestry testing DNA kits and turns out I'm 3% Neanderthal!

Strike threw the magazine back down again.

There was a knock on the door. He got up and opened it. Bijou was standing outside, looking harried, her hands on the handle of an expensive-looking pushchair.

'Anyone follow you?' said Strike, backing away to let her enter.

'I think, maybe, a dark woman, but she didn't get in the lift with me.'

'Did you go up to the sixth floor before coming here, like I told you?'

'Yes, I did everything you said,' she snapped.

Strike glanced up and down the corridor outside. It was empty. He closed the door, locked it and turned to see Bijou divesting herself of her coat. She was slightly heavier than she'd been during their extremely brief liaison, but she still looked good, her brunette hair glossy, her blue eyes bright against her olive skin. Instead of the figure-hugging dresses he associated with her, she was wearing a thick cream sweater and jeans.

The baby in the pushchair was fast asleep; Strike could see tightly closed eyes beneath a pale pink hat. He'd wondered whether he'd know, on seeing the child, whether they were genetically linked, but it looked like a bald monkey and he felt nothing except antipathy tinged with apprehension.

'I've got the kit in here,' said Bijou, rummaging in her bag and bringing out a cardboard box. 'You just have to swab the inside of your cheek and put it in this liquid. I'll do ours now, as well.'

For no real reason he could think of, Strike retreated to the black and white bathroom so that she couldn't watch him taking the swab. Once done, he returned to the bedroom, where Bijou sat staring blankly at the parchment-coloured walls and gold, flowered carpet.

'There you go.'

Her fingers brushed his as she took the sample; he withdrew his hand as though burned.

'Right,' he said. 'Let me know as soon as you've got the results.'

'And that's it, is it?' said Bijou in a tearful voice.

'What did you expect?' asked Strike, his hand on the door handle.

'There's just – there's no need to be so *foul* about all this!'

'You've led a bloody sheltered life if you think this is foul,' said Strike, and he left.

75

Thus minded then, two parties mean to meet
And make each other happy.

Robert Browning
Half-Rome

Robin was standing outside the Longcaster house in Belgravia the next day when Strike called her.

‘News,’ he announced baldly. ‘Kenneth Ramsay just called to tell me Jim Todd’s disappeared. He didn’t turn up to work at Ramsay Silver on Thursday, didn’t go to the Kingsway office on Friday, isn’t answering his phone and nobody’s answering the door at his flat. I’m wondering whether he recognised you on the Tube and got the wind up. There are pictures of you online. He could’ve connected you to me.’

‘Oh,’ said Robin, with a sinking feeling. She really didn’t want to be the reason Todd had disappeared. She could just imagine the witticisms Kim would make about that.

‘S’pose he might’ve quietly snuffed it in his flat, like McGee, but if he has, that seems a major coincidence. I’m going to try and speak to Todd’s neighbours when I’ve got time.’

When Strike had hung up, Robin was left feeling professionally inadequate, in addition to all her other worries. Todd gone, possibly because of her; Albie Simpson-White hadn’t led them any closer to Rupert Fleetwood; and her efforts to speak to Cosima Longcaster still hadn’t borne results.

Cosima, as Robin had already discovered, wasn’t an easy person to engage in conversation. The twenty-one-year-old lived with her parents in a large house in Belgravia, five minutes’ walk from her father’s club, Dino’s.

Judging by Cosima's Instagram account, which had twenty thousand followers, her primary occupation was socialising and taking selfies, with occasional modelling jobs on the side. Thin, with long, baby-fine blonde hair, a peaches-and-cream complexion and colt-like legs, Cosima posted pictures to her Instagram at least twice a day, sometimes trying on different outfits in her walk-in wardrobe, but usually posing with friends in various trendy restaurants and clubs. She also spent a lot of time at Dino's.

The primary difficulty in getting within questioning distance of Cosima was the thick cordon of people constantly surrounding her. The girl was either at home, surrounded by uniformed staff, or amusing herself with large groups of friends in places where entrance required a great deal of money, or membership. When she travelled, it was by Uber or in one of the family's cars, with a chauffeur, so she was free to drink. She never seemed to walk anywhere, unlike her father, whose invariable routine was to leave his house at precisely midday, stride briskly to Dino's for lunch, and stay there until the early hours of the following morning.

Dino Longcaster was a tall, heavy man, always impeccably suited, with a dark complexion and pronounced eyebags. His unusually large, round head, with its slicked-back dark grey hair, resembled a cannonball, and his default expression was one of boredom bordering on disdain. Knowing how he'd bullied Rupert Fleetwood, Robin found it almost pleasurable to dislike the man to whom she'd never spoken, seeing superciliousness in everything from the cast of his face to his perfectly knotted half-Windsor.

Robin spent the next few hours waiting for Cosima to emerge, but was finally forced to leave without having glimpsed her, for her evening off with Murphy.

He'd booked them a table at his favourite gastropub in Wanstead, the Duke, which at least meant Robin didn't need to go home first to change. She touched up her make-up on the Tube, and emerged into the chilly night, checking regularly behind her that she wasn't being followed, as she now did every time she was alone in the dark.

She'd gone only twenty yards when her mobile rang. It was her mother again. Robin suspected she was about to hear news that wouldn't cheer her up.

'Hi Mum.'

'Oh, Robin,' groaned Linda.

‘What’s happened?’ said Robin in panic.

‘We think they’ve split up. Martin and Carmen. He won’t talk about it, but he’s slept here the last three nights.’

‘Oh God,’ said Robin, again glancing over her shoulder; the street was empty. ‘So Carmen’s alone at home with an ill baby?’

‘He’s not really *ill*, but yes, she’s all alone with him. I don’t know what to do. She’s never seemed very keen on us, and I called this afternoon to offer help, but she didn’t pick up.’

There was nothing Robin could say or do to fix this situation, but she listened patiently until a beeping in her ear told her another caller was waiting.

‘Mum, I’m really sorry, I’ve got to go. I’ll ring tomorrow.’

Switching calls, she said,

‘Robin Ellacott.’

‘Hello,’ said a timid, girlish voice. ‘This is Zeta.’

For a few steps, the exhausted Robin couldn’t for the life of her recall who Zeta was.

‘I… I don’t understand how you got my number,’ said the girl.

‘Oh,’ said Robin, as the realisation hit her: Zeta, the girl to whom Tyler Powell had allegedly done some harmful thing in Ironbridge. ‘Your friend Chloe Griffiths gave it to me.’

‘Oh,’ squeaked Zeta. ‘I… I wish she hadn’t.’

‘I was only calling for background,’ said Robin, trying to sound reassuring. ‘Nothing you tell me will be passed on.’

‘What do you want to know?’ Zeta asked in trepidation.

‘Chloe told me you’d had a bad experience with Tyler,’ said Robin.

‘I don’t want you to tell the police!’

‘I won’t,’ Robin reassured her hastily.

‘Because I haven’t got any proof! He’ll just say he didn’t!’

‘I understand. I’d still like to know what happened.’

‘Well… I was really drunk in the Jockey & Horse. The pub. And I was talking about Anne-Marie, and Hugo, and the crash – you know about that?’

‘Yes,’ said Robin.

‘I don’t want trouble. I don’t want Tyler coming back to… to get me, or anything.’

‘I won’t tell the police,’ Robin reassured her again.

‘Well, Tyler was there and I didn’t realise. Someone must have told him what I was saying and he came up to me, and he was really angry. And a week after, when I was walking home up Wellsey Road, in the dark, a car came up onto the pavement. It missed me by, like, a few centimetres.’

‘Could you see who was driving?’

‘No, the headlights were too bright.’

‘But you think it was Tyler?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Did you recognise his car?’

‘No, but he works in a garage. He could’ve borrowed any of them cars.’

‘Right,’ said Robin. ‘What exactly had you been saying about the crash, Zeta?’

‘The same everyone was saying. Tyler used to boast about sato – sabotaging cars if he didn’t like the people who brought them in his garage. Everyone knew.’

‘I see,’ said Robin.

‘Don’t tell the police,’ said Zeta.

‘I won’t,’ said Robin. ‘D’you—?’

‘Bye then.’

Zeta hung up.

A great listlessness rolled over Robin as she walked on. She was sick of bullying, callous, deviant men, but she had to show Murphy a cheerful face when she arrived in the pub for what was supposed to be a celebration of their offer on the house being accepted, because it wasn’t Murphy’s fault if Tyler Powell used his driving prowess to terrify young women, or if Lord Oliver Branfoot and Dino Longcaster enjoyed humiliating those less rich and influential than themselves, or if Craig Wheaton policed his girlfriend’s emails and texts. It couldn’t be laid at Murphy’s door that Niall Semple had abandoned his new bride shortly after her miscarriage, or that Jim Todd had raped a schoolgirl, that Larry McGee was so addicted to porn he couldn’t stop watching it, even at work, or that an unidentified man, or men, were using Robin’s own rape to intimidate her. Checking over her shoulder yet again, and touching the homemade pepper spray in her bag for reassurance, Robin reminded herself that millions of males, Murphy, her own father and brothers among them, weren’t depraved, violent or sadistic, but kind and decent people. The trouble was that kind and decent men rarely cropped up

in criminal cases. Her job, she knew, was in danger of warping her worldview, and she thought how nice it would be to take some time off, to get away from bitterly cold and dark London, and not have to think about the grubby underbellies of men's lives – but not yet. Not now. There was too much to do.

Murphy was already sitting at a wooden table with a pint in front of him when Robin entered the pub.

'You look gorgeous,' he told her.

'You're a liar,' said Robin, kissing him. 'I look like I feel. Wrecked.'

Having been on her feet all day it was a relief to sit down, and Robin ordered a glass of wine hoping, as with the whisky on Christmas Eve, that it would make her feel more celebratory.

'Listen,' said Murphy, once they'd toasted the new house, and Robin had taken a large gulp of wine, 'I'm not having a go here, all right?'

Oh God, now what? thought Robin.

'Why didn't you tell me they've ruled out Jason Knowles as the body in the silver vault?' said Murphy. His tone was light, but his gaze was searching. 'You knew, didn't you?'

'Yes, I knew,' said Robin, too tired to lie. They were moving in together; she needed to be honest with him, at least wherever honesty was practicable. 'Kim Cochran told us the team working the case had ruled him out. I didn't tell you because I know you didn't want us to investigate the body in the first place, and you said that thing about "showing up the Met", so I felt awkward about mentioning it.'

'Right,' said Murphy. 'So, d'you know who it was, in the vault?'

'No,' said Robin, with a slight ripple of guilt as she thought, again, of Dick de Lion and Lord Oliver Branfoot.

'Would you tell me if you did?'

'Ryan, come on. You think we'd hide information like that from the police?'

'No,' said Murphy, 'I don't think you'd hide it from the *police*, but I wondered whether you'd tell *me*, specifically.'

'Well, of c—'

'Because I know I've been an arsehole about it,' said Murphy.

Robin reached for his hand and squeezed it.

'I understand how you felt,' she said. 'I know why you didn't want us

barging in. The case was really sensitive. I get it.'

Murphy took a sip of his beer, then said,

'I heard Strike tipped them off that Knowles' body went to "Barnaby's".'

'Yes,' said Robin.

'Have you found out what Barnaby's is? Or who it is?'

'No,' said Robin, reminded yet again that she still hadn't bought her new nephews presents.

'Who's this contact Strike's got, who knows all this inside stuff?'

'I couldn't tell you even if I wanted to. I don't know his real name.'

'He's clearly well informed,' said Murphy.

'Yes,' said Robin.

'A crim, obviously.'

'Yes,' said Robin again. She drank more wine, still holding Murphy's hand.

'Well, I've got some info for you, if you want it,' said Murphy. 'About that Peugeot. The getaway car.'

'Seriously?'

'Yeah. It's going to be made public – their first step in admitting Truman fucked up. But you can have it early.'

Robin released Murphy's hand to dig in her bag for her notebook. Murphy laughed.

'What?' said Robin.

'Whenever you get a sniff of intel, you get the same look on your face…'

'What look?'

'I saw it the day I first drove you home, when I told you we'd arrested Phillip Ormond. Like a dog seeing a rabbit. Concentrated. Intense.'

'Oh,' said Robin.

'I like it,' said Murphy.

A waitress arrived to take their food order. When she'd left, Murphy lowered his voice and said, 'The Peugeot was hired from a car rental in Reading, late on the Thursday.'

'Who hired it?' said Robin.

'A young blonde.'

'A *blonde*?' said Robin, thinking of Sofia Medina.

‘Yeah. Why?’

‘Because…’ They were moving in together. She needed to be honest with him, where honesty was practicable. ‘There’s a girl called Sofia Medina, a Spanish student, who we think might have had something to do with the man in the vault’s killing.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, but she had long black – oh,’ said Robin, struck by a sudden thought.

‘“Oh”, what?’

‘Sofia had wigs. She wore them for her OnlyFans videos, a witness told m – no, wait. Were the blonde and brunette the same size?’

‘What?’ said Murphy, understandably confused.

‘Same height, I mean,’ said Robin, thinking of tall, skinny Sapphire Neagle, who’d been nicknamed ‘Olive Oyl’.

‘No idea,’ said Murphy.

‘OK, forget that,’ said Robin. ‘Go on about the blonde.’

‘She presented a fake driving licence at the hire place.’

‘D’you know the name on it?’

‘No,’ said Murphy. ‘Anyway, the team have had to trawl through hundreds and hundreds of hours of footage to try and piece together what the vehicle did, and it wasn’t easy, because the plates were changed and it went in and out of areas where there’s no CCTV.

‘She left the car rental and turned off the M4 towards Whistley Green – it’s a village – and was lost from view overnight. Late Friday morning, she reappeared on the M4 with fake plates and drove to Dalston.’

‘Dalston,’ repeated Robin, who was scribbling. ‘She’s still alone in the car at this point?’

‘Yeah,’ said Murphy. ‘She disappeared off camera in Dalston, but they’re pretty sure she entered this semi-derelict line of garages that are due for demolition. Then there’s a period of hours during which the car’s not seen, but the blonde’s caught on camera, on foot.’

‘Going where?’

‘She enters Dalston Junction station. They still haven’t pinned down where or when she got out. But a girl with long dark hair comes out of Dalston Junction around six o’clock in the evening, wearing different clothes—’

‘Ah,’ said Robin, still scribbling.

‘—and drives the car to Newham.’

Though she gave no outward sign, Robin felt an inward shiver. If the murder investigation team had disbelieved Mandy at first, they must have changed their minds now. Aloud, she asked, ‘Did it go to St George’s Avenue in Newham?’

‘I don’t know, maybe. Then it’s spotted in Holborn, late at night. Blonde back at the wheel. Shortly after three a.m., it picks up a man from the end of Wild Court. The couple drive off through camera-free areas again but they’re caught briefly back on film in Newham,’ (yes, thought Robin, the police would definitely have changed their minds about Mandy’s story now) ‘round five in the morning, then head off towards Orpington in the direction of Petts Wood, where they’re lost from sight again, but put the original plates back on. The car reappears on the M4, and the blonde returns the car to the Reading hire place in good nick. She’s just visible on the edge of the car park camera, getting into a van afterwards, but the plates aren’t visible. Van leaves – and if they know what happened next, my contact hasn’t told me.’

‘What make was the van?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Has anyone searched Petts Wood for the silver?’

‘Probably, I’m not sure.’

‘Is your contact the same woman who—?’

‘The one I spoke to before, yeah.’

‘She didn’t try and seduce you in return for the info, did she?’

Robin said it because she knew it would give pleasure. He grinned.

‘You’ve got no competition there, trust me. What happened in the pub that night – she was there. That was it. She was just – there.’

Reminded of Strike and Nina Lascelles, Robin drank more wine, then said, ‘Thanks, Ryan. I really appreciate this.’

‘No bother,’ said Murphy. ‘So, we should have the survey back tomorrow.’

‘Survey?’ said Robin blankly, and then, ‘Oh, on the house, yes, of course.’

‘It’d better not have bloody dry rot.’

‘It looked in really good repair,’ said Robin. ‘I’m sure it’ll be fine.’

They talked about the house until their food arrived, at which point Murphy sipped his pint, then lowered his voice again.

‘So, listen… I don’t need an answer or anything tonight, all right? There’s no pressure. I’m just trying to learn from my mistakes.’

‘What mis—?’

‘I should’ve had a conversation with Lizzie, before we got married. About kids.’

Robin suffered a plummeting sensation in her stomach.

‘I mean, seeing as we’re moving in together and everything,’ said Murphy. ‘I just want to know what you’re thinking. After what happened.’

An unpleasant thought flashed through Robin’s head: that he’d just given her the intel on the Peugeot to soften her up for this conversation; that he thought receipt of information would make her more willing to talk about frozen eggs.

‘OK,’ she said. ‘Well, I… don’t know. That’s the truth. I just don’t know.’

Murphy looked expectant, so Robin said,

‘I used to think I wanted children. Or maybe I just expected to have them, I don’t know. Then I got this job, which I love more than any – well, I don’t love it more than you,’ she said hastily, because that was what you had to say, wasn’t it, sitting opposite the man you were going to live with? ‘But I can’t imagine doing this job and trying to raise a family, with the hours and the stress and – not the risk, I’m not looking for risk,’ said Robin, her homemade pepper spray in her bag, the masonic dagger hidden in her sock drawer, ‘but yes, I’d probably be more risk-averse if I had children, too… maybe there’ll come a time when I do really want kids, but I – I can’t guarantee that. I can’t promise it’ll happen. I just don’t know. So if it’s a deal-breaker…’

‘It’s not,’ said Murphy. ‘I just wish I’d had this conversation with Lizzie before we got hitched, because I didn’t know she definitely didn’t want them, and I did.’

Wondering whether he’d looked up the odds of a live birth with IVF, Robin said, ‘I know I need to make a decision about egg freezing. I know time’s not on my side.’

The feeling of constriction she’d experienced back in that sea captain’s house in Deptford, which she’d thought she’d left behind for ever, had

returned.

76

How shall I name him?
This spare, dark-featured,
Quick-eyed stranger?

Matthew Arnold
The Strayed Reveller

Strike's anxiety about the results of the DNA test had become acute by the fourth afternoon without news, so he called Bijou while walking towards the shabby street in Holborn where the vanished Jim Todd, or Todd Jameson, as Strike now knew him to be, had lived until very recently.

'I haven't heard anything yet,' Bijou snapped. 'I'll let you know when *I* do!'

'You're sure the samples got there, are you?'

'Yes, I had an acknowledgment email!'

'Some of these places get back to you within a couple of days,' said Strike.

'There's been a weekend,' said Bijou, with what Strike considered a deplorable lack of concern. 'I told you, I'll be in touch when I hear anything.'

He walked on, hamstring aching, his mood dark. Not only was he on tenterhooks about the DNA results, relations with Robin continued to be icy. Her latest communication was a long email detailing the movements of the hired Peugeot used in the Ramsay Silver theft and murder, crediting Murphy for the information in a way that suggested, passive-aggressively, that Strike ought to pass on his thanks to the CID officer. Strike had simply responded 'very interesting, let's discuss'. He'd followed this up with a brief text telling her he wanted to put surveillance on Lord Oliver Branfoot

to try and find out the location of the flat where the covert filming was taking place. Robin hadn't responded, probably, Strike thought, because she was still angry he was trying to prove the Freemasonry connection between Oliver Branfoot and Malcolm Truman.

He arrived outside the busy Lebanese restaurant above which Todd had been living and rang each of the bells beside a grubby grey-painted side door without any response. He therefore took up a position in a doorway opposite, watching and waiting.

The restaurant operated a takeaway service as well as seated dining, and appetising smells trailed after those who passed Strike with their recently purchased dinners. Dusk had fallen when, at last, a short young brown-skinned man, wearing a stained white tunic that suggested he was a kitchen worker, rounded the corner of the street and approached the grey door. Strike crossed the road at once, reaching his target just as the man put his key in the lock.

'Evening,' said Strike. 'Would you happen to know if Jim Todd's in?'

'Todd?' repeated the young man, blinking tired, bloodshot eyes. He had thick black brows, and a faint but perceptible Punjabi accent. 'You know him?'

'Not well.'

'Where is he?'

'That's what I was hoping to find out,' said Strike.

'He's your friend?'

'No,' said Strike. 'Just looking for him.'

'He owe you money?'

'No,' said Strike. 'Why?'

'He owes me money. Fifty quid,' said the young man. 'Tell him that, when you find him.'

'Lent him cash, did you?'

'Won it off him.'

The young man turned his key in the lock, which was stiff.

'How did you win it?' asked Strike.

'Poker,' said the other, as the door opened.

'You wouldn't happen to be one of the people who were playing poker overnight with Todd on the night of June the seventeenth to eighteenth last year?'

The young man looked taken aback and not a little wary at this question.

‘I’m a private detective,’ said Strike, pulling out a card. ‘I’m investigating a murder. Did you have to talk to the police about Todd? Confirm an alibi?’

‘Yeah,’ said the young man.

‘He was definitely playing cards with you that night?’

‘Yeah,’ said the other.

‘Until what time?’

‘Four. He wanted to keep the game going. Wasn’t even winning.’

‘When did you last see Todd?’

‘I dunno… week, maybe? Why’re so many people after him?’

‘There’s been someone else?’ said Strike. ‘Apart from me and the police?’

‘Yeah. ’Nother guy came looking.’

‘When?’

‘Dunno,’ said the young man vaguely. ‘Wednesday?’

‘White guy?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Curly hair?’ said Strike.

‘I don’t know,’ said the kitchen worker. ‘He was wearing a hat.’

‘Wasn’t wearing sunglasses indoors, by any chance?’

‘Yeah,’ said the young man, mildly surprised by what he clearly thought was a lucky guess.

‘Did you talk to him?’

‘Yeah. He was banging on Todd’s door. I was trying to sleep. I went outside and said, “Todd’s gone. Fuck off making that noise.” He said, “where’s Todd gone?” I said, “I don’t know, but he owes me fifty quid.” He said, “you’ll never see that”, and he left.’

Strike pulled out his wallet and extracted five tenners.

‘Your help could be very valuable to me,’ he said. ‘Can you remember anything else about the man who came looking for him? Facial features? Build? Clothing? Accent?’

Eyes on the tenners, the young man said, ‘He wasn’t as big as you.’

‘OK. Anything else?’

‘When he walked away… it was funny.’

‘A limp?’

‘Kind of.’

‘Is Todd’s room still empty?’

‘No, my friend’s taken it.’

‘Would your friend mind me having a look?’

‘I can ask him.’

He led Strike into a stairwell that smelled worse than Daz and Mandy’s, back in Newham. There was a slight suspicion of stale urine. A fluorescent light overhead was flickering.

Strike hauled himself up by the banister behind the kitchen worker. The building had clearly been adapted so as to house as many tenants as possible, and Strike doubted the alterations had been done with planning permission. A door ahead stood ajar, revealing a grubby shower room. Four more doors had been crammed in. His guide knocked on the second.

‘Gagandeep?’

After a minute’s conversation in Punjabi through the flimsy door, a second brown-skinned man opened up. He was tall, bearded, equally exhausted-looking and wearing nothing but boxer shorts. Understandably suspicious, he turned to his housemate and another conversation in rapid Punjabi ensued, at the end of which Gagandeep permitted Strike to enter.

The room, the dusty window of which looked straight on to the brick side of a building opposite, was small and contained a few pieces of very old, cheap furniture. The narrow bed, Strike thought, must have been uncomfortable for the almost spherical Todd. There was flaking paint on the walls, a naked overhead bulb and a much-stained carpet.

‘Did Todd leave anything behind?’ asked Strike.

‘Yeah,’ said Gagandeep.

He crossed to the wardrobe and opened it to reveal his clothes lying partially piled beneath an inadequate number of wire hangers. After a few seconds’ digging, Gagandeep retrieved an old hardbacked book, which he held out to Strike: *Know When To Hold ’Em: Win Big Every Time.*

‘I’d like to buy that from you,’ said Strike, pulling more cash from his wallet before handing five tenners to his first helper. ‘And if either of you see the man who was banging on Todd’s door again’ – he pointed at the card in the kitchen worker’s hand – ‘call me. There’s more money in it, if you can give me a lead on him.’

77

What of a hasty word?
Is the fleshly heart not stirred
By a worm's pin-prick
Where its roots are quick?

Robert Browning
A Lovers' Quarrel

Robin's Valentine's Day started badly. Murphy had stayed over at her flat. In addition to a card, he'd bought her a plush dog with a heart in its mouth, in allusion to his previous offer to buy her a puppy. After Robin had laughed and kissed him, he said,

'You can take him with you on surveillance or whatever you're doing tonight. Valentine's date by proxy.'

Robin chose to ignore this broad hint that Murphy was still annoyed she had to work that evening, but the residual guilt and annoyance it had caused was still with her that afternoon, while watching Mrs Two-Times, who was shoe shopping alone. When Robin's mobile rang, she was relieved to see the office number rather than her boyfriend's.

'Hi, Pat.'

'A man called Wynn Jones called,' said Pat. 'Friend of that Tyler Powell's.'

'Oh, good,' said Robin, who'd phoned the farm at which Jones worked and left a message, asking him to call her. 'What did he say?'

'That he doesn't want to talk to you. He says he knows who's hired you.'

'Did he say who?'

'"Fucking Faber Whitehead",' quoted Pat sniffily.

‘That’s the father of the boy who crashed Tyler’s car,’ said Robin. ‘I don’t suppose you saved Jones’ number?’ she added hopefully.

‘I did, yeah,’ said Pat.

‘Please could you send it to me?’ said Robin, as a beeping in her ear told her she had a call waiting.

‘Will do,’ said Pat, and she rang off, leaving Robin to check the screen of her mobile. When she saw Murphy’s name, she had a strange sense of foreboding. Sure enough, when she answered, his first words were:

‘We’ve been fucking gazumped.’

‘What?’

‘Some bastard’s offered the seller another five grand. The estate agent’s just called me.’

‘Oh, shit,’ said Robin.

But she was shocked by the relief that had just washed over her.

‘You don’t sound exactly upset,’ said Murphy.

‘Of course I’m upset, but I’m in the middle of Selfridges, Ryan, I can’t burst into tears without attracting attention,’ said Robin quietly, while Mrs Two-Times tried on a pair of emerald green stilettos. ‘What’s the estate agent’s advice?’

‘Offer more, obviously.’

‘OK, well – d’you want to? Or shall we look for something el—?’

‘I don’t fancy another twelve months of this. I’ve had to virtually drag you just to see three bloody houses.’

‘That isn’t true,’ said Robin, taken aback by his sudden aggression, and certain he was pushing for an argument to vent his frustration about the gazumping. ‘I like this one, I was the one who argued for getting it, remember?’

‘But you’re happy to let it go and keep looking.’

‘I’m not *happy*, I’m just asking whether we can afford another five thousand!’ said Robin, as Mrs Two-Times admired herself in a full-length mirror.

‘What’s the end game, finish up with something even smaller?’

‘I haven’t got an “end game”, I’d just rather we didn’t bankrupt—’

‘Well, it’s not like you need to save for a new car, now Strike’s bought you a Land—’

‘*He* didn’t buy me a Land Rover, it’s owned by the business of which

I'm a partner,' said Robin, keeping her voice low with immense difficulty, because she'd now lost the struggle not to become openly angry, 'and if you've got something you want to say about the smallness of houses, go right ahead and say it.'

'I'm not—'

'Oh, *aren't* you?' said Robin in a loud, furious whisper. 'Don't tell me "no pressure", then hint that I don't want space for kids!'

'That's in your head, not mine!'

'Don't gaslight me, Ryan, I'm not a fool. I've got to go.'

She hung up.

A few minutes later, Murphy called her back. Robin didn't pick up, because she was still feeling anxious and upset, not only about this fresh burst of temper from Murphy, but by her own feeling of relief, which she knew was telling her something that she'd been suppressing and denying ever since she'd first agreed to move in with him.

For the second time in a few days, Robin imagined fleeing somewhere warm and light, where she'd have space to decide what she really wanted. Distance, she felt, might give her perspective; unfamiliar surroundings might jolt her out of this pattern of agreeing because she felt she ought to agree, because when you said 'I love you', certain obligations ensued. She reminded herself yet again about how kind and considerate Murphy had been after the ectopic pregnancy, and following her long stay at Chapman Farm, not to mention how open and upfront he'd been in the discussion about children. She thought – knew – she loved him, but when he phoned her a third time, she let him go to voicemail again.

Robin handed over surveillance of Mrs Two-Times to Midge at four o'clock, then set out for the garage where the new Land Rover was parked, because she was supposed to be taking over from Strike, who was watching the house in Carnival Street where Plug Junior had received his dog bites, and which Plug Senior was currently visiting. She'd just put the key in the ignition when a text arrived from Murphy.

Seeing as you're not answering my calls, I'm texting. This isn't how I wanted Valentine's Day to

go. I hoped you'd be as disappointed as I was about being gazumped, but you didn't sound it, that's all I was saying. I said the thing about small places because we both like a bit of space. It wasn't anything to do with kids.

Bullshit, thought Robin, and she typed back,

You talked about me having an 'end game'. What 'end game'? I don't appreciate the remark about the car, either. I'd have thought you'd be glad I didn't have to lay out thousands of my own money when we're trying to buy a house together, but any chance to drag Strike into an argument, you take it.

Robin's phone buzzed several more times while she was driving to Haringey, but she ignored the new texts. A tight knot of anxiety and fear had lodged behind her rib cage, though of what she was afraid she couldn't have said. Being honest with herself? Being honest with Murphy? The fallout that was likely, if she expressed the slightest reservation about moving in together? Why had she let herself get pulled along into this situation? Hadn't she learned anything about listening to her own doubts, from the calamity that had been her short-lived marriage?

But this isn't the same, she argued against herself. *He's not Matthew.*

Carnival Street comprised a terrace of dilapidated houses on one side and a scrapyard running the length of the other. Robin arrived to see Strike's BMW parked just a few spaces ahead of her. Assuming he'd leave now he'd seen her arrive, Robin parked, took out her mobile and saw a text

from her mother.

Martin and Carmen back together xxx

Great, Robin texted back, before turning to Murphy's latest messages.

I don't take every chance to drag Strike into arguments, because I know what happens when I mention him. You go off on one.

The next text read:

I wanted us to get a place we could live in long-term, not somewhere that starts feeling cramped within months. I get the impression you'd rather keep everything as temporary as possible, as if we're students who might move on within a year. And I don't think it's a hanging offence to want spare bedrooms.

The last said:

Just because I wanted an open conversation about it the other night, you make this all about kids. I'm not pressuring you, but I'm not going to apologise for wanting them, either. All I

want is two-way honesty.

The passenger door opened. Robin jumped, her hand moving instinctively for her bag and the pepper spray before she registered that it was Strike climbing into the car.

‘Got a few things to tell you.’

‘OK,’ said Robin, putting her mobile down and trying to focus.

‘Plug’s mate in Ipswich who got done for animal cruelty headed for the compound an hour ago, with a dog in the back of his van that, and I quote Barclay verbatim, “looks like a fucking tiger”. Apparently a lot of other blokes have rolled up since, all in vans, and on an unrelated subject – shit.’

Plug and a friend had just emerged from the house, dragging a gigantic dog that looked to Robin the kind of creature that might guard the gates of hell: a muzzled, snarling, jet black, heavily muscled cross between a Rottweiler and a giant Bulldog. It took the combined efforts of both men to force it into the back of Plug’s van.

‘Don’t you want to—?’ Robin began, as she turned on the engine.

‘No,’ said Strike, pulling on his seatbelt, ‘I’m coming.’

78

More than I, if truth were told,
Have stood and sweated hot and cold,
And through their reins in ice and fire
Fear contended with desire.

A. E. Housman
XXX, A Shropshire Lad

‘Fucking typical it kicks off the night Barclay’s on them,’ said Strike, pulling his phone out of his pocket. ‘He needs to clear out. The blokes who dragged him off that roof are probably there.’

He called Barclay, informed him that he and Robin were on their way, and that he should leave before he was spotted.

‘Strange night to have a dog fight, Valentine’s Day,’ commented Robin, once Strike had hung up.

‘I don’t think we’re dealing with born romantics here.’

‘At least he hasn’t brought his son along,’ said Robin. ‘God, I feel sorry for that boy.’

‘Yeah, I can’t imagine it’s much fun having Plug as a father… did you read my email about the bloke in sunglasses who went looking for Todd after he moved out?’ asked Strike.

‘Yes, I’ve read all your emails,’ said Robin, a little more snappily than she’d meant to.

‘Everything all right?’

‘Yes, fine,’ said Robin quickly. The last thing she wanted right now was a discussion about her mood. ‘You were going to say something else before he came out of the house. “On an unrelated subject…”’

‘Oh yeah,’ said Strike. ‘I think I’ve identified Danny de Lion.’

‘You’re kidding?’

‘Nope. Still don’t know whether he’s dead or alive, but there’s a record of him on Sark, which fits everything you got out of Fay: no cars, only tractors or horse-drawn carts, small island. If I’ve got the right bloke, his real surname’s de Leon with an ‘e’, not an ‘i’. He’s the right age and there are a couple of old photos floating around online that look like him, before he got into peroxide and fake tan, and he’s still got a mother and brother living on Sark. D’you know what the Sark flag looks like?’

‘No,’ said Robin.

‘Cross of St George with two lions passant in the upper left quadrant.’

‘Oh God,’ said Robin, unable to help herself. The agency proving Malcolm Truman had conspired to hush up the facts around William Wright’s killing certainly wasn’t going to help the strain on her relationship with Murphy, although admittedly she was currently so angry with him this was troubling her slightly less than it would before he’d called about the gazumping.

‘I can’t find a landline number for de Leon’s mother or brother,’ Strike continued, ‘but Sark’s so small, I’m considering going out there to bang on their front doors. I won’t bill Decima,’ he added, before Robin could protest. ‘I’ve got the cash from Ted and Joan’s house, I’ll pay out of my own pocket.’

‘You think de Leon was Wright, don’t you?’ said Robin.

‘I wouldn’t bet on it yet,’ said Strike, ‘but he’s the only one I can find a coherent narrative for: he was a blackmailer and got polished off in the vault because it gave Branfoot maximum control over the investigation. However, we’re a long way off proving that, which is why I want to go to Sark. If de Leon’s family have had contact with him since June the seventeenth last year, we can rule him out. If they haven’t, I’ll go to Fyola’s boyfriend and try and scare him into telling me where Branfoot’s doing his secret filming. Finding out the address of the flat where he keeps his camera and two-way mirror will scare off his goons, if anything does.’

Robin’s mobile rang and connected at once to Bluetooth, revealing Murphy’s name.

‘Ignore that,’ she said, as the phone continued to ring. ‘So you’re inclined to rule out Semple and Powell?’

‘Not yet,’ said Strike, who was far more interested in the fact that Robin

was ignoring Murphy's call on Valentine's Day than he was in Niall Semple or Tyler Powell. 'Must admit, since I met Hardy I've been rethinking Semple a bit.'

'In what way?'

'It was just… seeing Freemasons' Hall and listening to Hardy. I maybe… projected too much of my own stuff on to Semple.'

Murphy rang off. The ensuing silence seemed particularly loud.

'What d'you mean, you projected…?' asked Robin.

'I haven't got much use for religion or mysticism, so I s'pose it made far more sense to me that an ex-member of the SAS would've tried to get back to active service on his own, rather than that he went down a masonic rabbit hole. But he *was* brain injured, and that bridge thing's nagging at me a bit…

'I downloaded a book Hardy mentioned to me, *Bridge to Light*. It's an introduction to the masonic degrees.'

Strike opened Kindle on his phone to look at the passages he'd marked the previous evening.

'Hardy told me there's a bridge in the ceremony of induction into the fifteenth degree, when you become a Knight of the East. Jade Semple told me whatever degree Niall had reached was called "Knight of something". During initiation, the candidate has to cross a bridge over a river with "bodies and human limbs and heads floating in it". The candidate finally reaches "the treasure chamber of King Cyrus, which contains the sacred treasures… the Ark of the Covenant, golden candlesticks, the altar and the gold and silver vessels".

'I s'pose I've been assuming it was either/or for Semple, that he had a binary choice between war or Freemasonry, but this,' said Strike, indicating the book on his phone, 'is crammed with references to being a spiritual soldier. In fact, when you become a Sublime Prince of the Royal Secret, you become "God's soldier to war against fanaticism, intolerance, bigotry and all the evils which have made a hell of earth", which isn't a million miles away from:

> *We are the Pilgrims, master; we shall go*
> *Always a little further; it may be*
> *Beyond that last blue mountain barred with snow*
> *Across that angry or that glimmering sea…'*

'What's that?' asked Robin.

‘Poem by James Elroy Flecker,’ said Strike. ‘Adopted as a kind of mission statement by the SAS. It’s carved into their mess bar at the base in Hereford and it’s on the clock tower, which is inscribed with the names of men killed in service. One poor bastard survived commando operations, then got killed in a bloody hit and run in America.’

‘You’ve been inside the SAS base?’ asked Robin, with some curiosity.

‘Once. Part of an investigation in the SIB. Have to say, their haul would give Kenneth Ramsay a run for his money.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘They’ve got entire glass cases full of silverware, and let’s just say a few valuable souvenirs formerly belonging to dictators might’ve found their way into SAS pockets while surrenders were being taken. They’ve got Uday Hussein’s personal pistol in a case on the wall. Took it from beside his dead body. The general feeling on the keepsakes is, “you want ’em, come and get ’em”. Doubt anyone fancies their chances.

‘What bothers me about Semple as Wright, though, is that I can’t see who’d want to bump him off. Murdering him discreetly in the basement of a silver shop without claiming responsibility doesn’t really seem Islamic State’s style.

‘With Tyler Powell, it’s the other way round. We’ve got a clear motive for revenge, because people believed he was responsible for two deaths himself, but we still come back to: why kill him in the vault? Powell sounds the reverse of Semple: a fairly blunt instrument. Why go through all the levels of deception, with all the things that could go wrong, just to get him undercover in a silver shop and murder him somewhere so inconvenient?’

‘Especially when they could just have fed him a peanut,’ said Robin, and Strike laughed. ‘What about Fleetwood?’

‘He’s still tied with Powell as highly unlikely, as far as I’m concerned,’ said Strike, ‘but I haven’t forgotten him. Kim’s on Albie again tonight. Finding Tish Benton would help…’

Another silence fell and Robin felt compelled to break it.

‘Has Pat made any progress on Hussein Mohamed?’

‘Yeah, there are three of them registered as living in the Forest Gate area. I think it’s going to come down to old-fashioned shoe leather and door-knocking.’

‘I think he *is* going to Ipswich,’ Robin said, as they followed Plug’s van onto the M11.

‘I’ve been looking at Todd’s poker book, the one he left behind,’ said Strike. ‘There are pencilled notes in the margins that are interesting.’

‘Saying what?’

‘It’s not what he wrote, he was only jotting down bits of his own poker wisdom. It’s how he writes. I’ll lay you odds Todd’s dyslexic. The spelling’s all over the place, and that’s even with correctly spelled text to guide him.’

For a second or two, Robin didn’t understand why this was significant.

‘Oh,’ she said, as the realisation hit her. ‘William Wright’s CV?’

‘Exactly. Full of misspellings, Pamela said.’

‘You think Todd wrote it?’

‘I think it’s a strong possibility. Todd would’ve known exactly what Kenneth Ramsay was looking for, and could have tailored Wright’s CV to fit – the jujitsu, previous work in an antiques shop and so on. Somebody helped Wright learn enough about silver to pass the interview, as well. Todd worked at Ramsay Silver for two years before Wright showed up, and I’d imagine anyone in sustained contact with Kenneth Ramsay would end up knowing more about masonic silverware than they ever wanted to.’

‘You think it was Todd who put Wright’s email address on the “for interview” list?’

‘I do, yeah. Then he panicked when he heard Pamela didn’t like the CV, and added Wright’s name to the interview list without her noticing. I didn’t buy his claim that he didn’t know how to get on the computer when I spoke to him. I think Todd helped Wright get that job, and I think he knew *exactly* what was happening at Ramsay Silver on the night of June the seventeenth, which is why he insisted on continuing to play poker until four in the morning, to make sure he had a rock-solid alibi.

‘Anyway, I’m currently trying to track down Todd’s ex-hooker mother to see if she knows where he is… Did you see, Patterson’s been sentenced?’

‘Yes,’ said Robin. ‘Two years.’

‘Not nearly fucking long enough for me,’ said Strike. When Robin didn’t respond, he said, ‘I see they’ve put out a request for information on that silver Peugeot.’

‘Yes,’ said Robin, who’d seen blurry pictures of the car online that morning. In spite of the new appeal, there’d been no admission as yet that

the police had rethought their identification of Jason Knowles.

'If both the blonde and the brunette drivers were Medina,' said Strike, 'I'm not sure why she didn't keep the wig on throughout.'

'I'd imagine a wig would be very hot and itchy, with the amount of real hair she had,' said Robin.

'Or perhaps a blonde was supposed to be doing part of the job, and a brunette doing the rest, and nobody was ever supposed to put them together,' said Strike.

The sun was setting and Plug had just put on the lights of his white van when Strike's mobile, which was still in his hand, buzzed. Out of the corner of her eye, Robin saw him read something. He remained completely motionless for nearly thirty seconds. Glancing sideways, Robin saw his apparently stricken face.

'What's happened?'

'I… nothing,' said Strike.

'Don't give me that,' said Robin. 'Is it more Culpepper stuff?'

'No, it's…'

Dazed with relief, Strike could think of nothing to say but the truth.

'Just found out I'm not a father.'

'What?' said Robin faintly.

'I didn't want to tell you—'

Strike felt almost drunk with the release of tension, and his mouth appeared to be acting independently of his brain. He'd only known this sensation a couple of times before in his entire life: arriving through flooded countryside at the old house in St Mawes, in time to reach his aunt's deathbed; finding Charlotte alive, at last, in hospital, forty-eight hours after he'd found her torn-up dress.

'—until I was sure.'

'About what?'

'Bijou Watkins had Honbold's baby early,' said Strike, 'and he thought it might be mine. I did a DNA test, she's just forwarded me the results, and it's nothing to do with me. Jesus fucking Christ,' said Strike, running a hand over his face before reading out Bijou's text. '"I've only just seen this, sorry for the delay" – fuck's sake – but she knew all along it wasn't mine, so I assume she wasn't shitting herself about the results.'

He glanced sideways at Robin, whose gaze was fixed on Plug's tail-lights.

'I know I should've told you,' said Strike. 'I just – after all the other Culpepper shit – I wanted to know for certain what I was dealing with.'

Almost against her will, the vice-like grip of anger and anguish that had been with Robin ever since Ilsa had told her about Bijou's baby was loosening.

'When did you take the test?'

'Thursday. Met her at the Savoy. Cheek swab. Handed it all back to her and if I never see her again, it'll be too fucking soon.'

He glanced at Robin's profile.

'You can say it.'

'What?'

'I'm a stupid, reckless fucker who'd have deserved it, if it had been mine.'

'I wasn't going—'

'I'll say it, then. I'm a stupid, reckless fucker and I'd've deserved—'

'Accidents happen,' said Robin, who wanted to know how much Strike would tell her.

'It wouldn't have been an accident, not from her end. Ilsa told me she's adept at waste-bin salvage. *Christ,*' said Strike again, running his hand through his hair as he looked around. 'Why isn't there booze in here? We should keep a bottle handy.'

'So you can celebrate every time you find out you're not a father?'

'There won't be another time, I can promise you that,' said Strike. 'No more women who're walking red flags. I had no excuse for not seeing trouble when it's right in front of me, I had sixteen years' fucking experience.'

'So, then,' said Robin, 'why disregard the red flag?'

'Because sometimes,' said Strike, all caution gone, 'if you can't get what you want, you take what you can get.'

Confusion and trepidation flooded Robin. What did he mean? What, or who, did he want? Was there yet another woman she didn't know about, for whom he yearned? Was he talking about the dead Charlotte, now forever beyond hope of reform or reunion? Or was he hinting…? But she couldn't make herself ask. She was scared of taking a step that might put her in

possession of information that would have ramifications way beyond deciding whether she and Murphy should put in a higher bid on a house.

Beside her, Strike was thinking, *ask me. Ask me what I mean and I'll bloody say it. Ask.*

Neither spoke. They drove on in silence.

79

… to Haides' realm descended he
To drag into the light the three-shaped hound
Of Hell…

Robert Browning
Herakles

Over an hour later, Plug's white van indicated left and turned up the road that led to the compound on waste ground, north of Ipswich.

'What's the plan?' said Robin, peering through the darkness ahead, Plug's tail-lights the only things clearly visible.

'If at all possible, gain admittance by trying to look as if we've got our own dangerous dog in the back,' said Strike. 'This is where a Land Rover comes in handy.'

'OK,' said Robin, 'but – shit – I don't think this is going to work, Strike, I think they're taking names…'

A bearded man holding a flashlight was standing at the end of the dirt track that led to the compound. Plug wound down his window; he and the sentinel exchanged a few brief words, and the latter waved him on. Robin glanced in her rear-view mirror and saw another van creeping closer, this one blue.

'Worth a try,' said Strike. 'Keep going.'

The burly man was looking past the Land Rover to the blue van. He grinned, waved, indicated casually that the Land Rover should proceed, and strolled past it, presumably to speak to a friend.

'Good job,' said Strike, as Robin accelerated up the track.

The sound of distant, low-pitched shouts grew louder as they approached a patch of rough ground on which many cars and vans were

parked. Over to the left they could see a crowd of men in silhouette, all surrounding something unseen that was illuminated by the headlights of three parked vans.

Robin parked. Twenty yards away, Plug had got out of his van, barely discernible in the darkness. Outbuildings surrounded them, and wire pens behind which enormous barking dogs scrambled.

'After I get out, turn the car round,' said Strike.

'What d'you mean, "get out" – we can film from here!' said Robin. She didn't like the look of the crowd, nor was she enjoying the growls, yelps and howls issuing not only from the arena, but from surrounding vehicles.

'If I can get footage of faces, we've got a prosecution, but I want the car facing the road in case I need a quick getaway. Stay here and keep the doors locked.'

Before Robin could protest further, Strike had got out of the car. Robin watched him walking away towards the crowd, moving carefully over the rough ground. As far as Robin could see, she was the only woman present.

She turned the Land Rover around so that its nose was pointing back towards the road. Only then did she remember that Murphy had texted her while driving, so she took out her mobile.

This is a great fucking Valentine's Day.

'Whose fault's that?' said Robin angrily, throwing her mobile down and craning around to watch the mass of silhouetted men that Strike had now joined.

Given his height, Strike had no difficulty seeing what was going on in the centre of the baying crowd. Two enormous dogs, one grey, one brindle, both bandy-legged with blunt noses, were locked together in the dirt, rolling and snarling and already bleeding. Many of the men watching were filming. Strike took out his own mobile and switched to record.

The visibility was poor, because the headlights were angled to shine on the dogs, not the men, but he thought he recognised the shadowy face of Plug's friend from the train. The man who'd had the ledger in Ipswich was accepting cash from a couple of latecomers. By shifting position, Strike isolated his target and zoomed in on Plug while the latter cheered and

punched the air, goading the dogs on. Strike could see two knots of men in the crowd, fighting to control the pair of dogs who were due to fight next, both of them muzzled and almost too powerful to hold.

In the middle of the ring, the grey, which had a torn face, was now gripping the brindle dog by the neck. As Strike watched, life and blood started to drain from the brindle, its legs twitching ever more feebly as blood flooded from its jugular. At last, a shaven-headed man entered the ring, making a boxing referee's 'it's over' slashing motion with his arms. Half the crowd, including Plug, roared their approval, while the other half booed. The owner of the grey dog ran forwards with two other men; they prised the animal's jaws off the corpse, succeeded, after some difficulty, in muzzling it, and pulled it out of the makeshift ring by a heavy chain lead.

Strike kept filming as the dead dog was dragged out of the arena by two more men. Plug was bantering with friends on either side of him. One of the owners of the dogs who'd be next to fight was kicking his animal in the ribs, laughing as it became steadily more enraged.

'Who're you?' demanded a voice beside Strike.

'Fuck's it got to do with you?' said Strike, deliberately aggressive, looking down at a broad, much-tattooed man with face piercings.

But he thought it might be time to leave. Slipping his mobile back into his pocket, he set off back across the dark and uneven ground, squinting to try and make out the Land Rover.

'Oi! *You!*'

Strike sped up as best he could, yet trying to exercise caution; he didn't want to trip, not with dogs that dangerous behind him. There was more confused shouting, but he thought he heard,

'*Get his fucking phone!*'

Robin spotted Strike in silhouette, moving as fast he dared over the rough ground. She flung open the car door, but as she did so, she saw a gigantic bulldog-like creature, illuminated by the flashlights of an oncoming group of men, which had been unmuzzled and released, and was heading straight for Strike.

'*Gawn, Lennon!*' said one of the pursuant men, urging the dog on, and Robin knew the now staggering Strike wasn't going to reach the car before it reached him. She plunged her hand into her bag, but too late; the dog had leapt from behind, hitting Strike in the back of the knees; he buckled and

the animal sank its teeth into his thigh.

‘FUCK!’

Robin scrambled out of the car. The shadowy figures of the sprinting men were growing larger, but she aimed the pepper spray at the mauling dog’s face and squeezed at short range. With a frantic yelp, the half-blinded dog released its grip.

‘GET IN, *GET IN!’* Robin shouted, but Strike had not only been bitten, he’d taken a lot of pepper spray to his face, with the result that he couldn’t see. Groping blindly towards the place he thought the car was, he managed to drag himself up and inside. The giant dog was howling and wiping its face frantically on the ground to try and relieve the burning, but the threat now came from the men who were mere yards from Robin. Holding her breath and closing her eyes, Robin sprayed the air thickly in front of her, then jumped back inside the car after Strike, slamming the door as one of the closest men let out a yell of pain, clutching his eyes in the noxious vapour.

Fists rained down upon the car’s windows, but Robin had already started the engine. She slammed her foot flat to the floor, and the Land Rover hurtled off down the dirt track, leaving a choking, coughing knot of men in its wake.

80

The world to them was stern and drear,
Their lot was but to weep and moan.
Ah, let them keep their faith sincere,
For neither could subsist alone!

Matthew Arnold
Euphrosyne

‘Jesus *fucking* Christ – what was in that bottle?’ gasped Strike, who hadn’t put on his seatbelt, being unable to see, tears flooding from his eyes.

‘Pepper spray, I’m sorry, I’m really sorry, it was the only way—’

Robin took the turn into the road at speed, then looked sideways at Strike, one of whose hands was pressed to his inner thigh, blood seeping through his fingers.

‘Oh God, Strike – d’you need casualty?’

‘No – ’m fine—’

‘There are tissues in the glove compartment.’

Strike groped blindly for the catch, his rapidly swelling eyes burning.

‘We need a hospital,’ said Robin, looking back at his crotch.

‘No we don’t,’ Strike said through gritted teeth, pressing a wad of tissues against his inner leg. ‘Mind you, if the fucker had been an inch higher, I wouldn’t’ve had to worry about fathering anyone ever again. It nearly had both my bollocks off.’

He dug his free hand into his pocket and was relieved to find his mobile in it. If he’d dropped it, he’d have lost his sight for no reason.

‘I’m really, *really* sorry,’ said Robin, fighting the hysterical impulse to laugh, ‘it was the only way to get that dog off—’

‘I know. I’ll be more grateful once I’m sure I’ve still got eyeballs… the

UN should know about that bloody spray,' Strike gasped, wiping his wet face with the sleeve of his free arm. 'If Saddam had had that, nobody would've blamed us for going in.'

'We'll find somewhere to stop – get some milk—'

'Milk?'

'It's the best thing for chillies in your eyes. I had to look it up when I touched mine after making the spray.'

At last, Robin spotted a garage and pulled in. The bored-looking teenager at the kiosk window didn't question her urgent request for milk, but handed over a couple of cartons, along with another box of tissues.

Robin got back into the Land Rover, poured some milk on tissues and put them into Strike's hands. He pressed the two wads on his eyes and after a while mumbled, 'Feels a bit better.'

'Good. How's your leg?'

'Fine. I've got blood on the seat, though, sorry.'

'The car's both of ours, not just mine,' said Robin.

Strike leaned his head back, pressing milk-soaked tissues to his eyes.

'Pity the fucker didn't go for the prosthesis, like that Jack Russell, remember? It'd have broken its bloody teeth.'

A few minutes passed, Strike still leaning back in the passenger seat, eyes covered. After a while, Robin poured milk onto new tissues.

'Here,' she said, pulling one of his hands from his face and putting the new pads into it.

'Thanks,' he muttered.

They continued to sit on the otherwise empty forecourt, cars swishing past in the dark, and Robin, watching Strike, who couldn't see her, felt suddenly and strangely as though he'd come back into focus. He was infuriating, stubborn and secretive when she wished he'd be open, but he was also funny and brave, and he'd been honest tonight when she'd expected him to lie. He was, in short, her imperfect best friend.

'Listen,' said Strike, milk-sodden tissues still clamped over his smarting eyes. 'I've never thought you're a weak link.'

Robin laughed, though she was glad Strike couldn't see her, because her eyes had filled with tears.

'That was a very poor choice of fucking words. You're not the only one with shit in their past. Some bloke could come up behind me and yell

“bang” in my ear, couldn’t they? All I meant was…’

‘I know what you meant,’ said Robin.

‘I’ve been worried, that’s all.’

‘I know,’ said Robin quietly.

‘Want to come to Sark with me?’

‘What?’

‘It’s a very small place. We can cover it twice as quickly if we go together.’

He’d noticed that the strain between them had lifted. He was in too much pain to analyse why the change had happened, but he intended to make the most of it.

Robin imagined getting on a plane and flying to Sark. Perspective, light, the sea…

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘OK.’

She restarted the car. Strike’s eyes were still stinging and swollen, his thigh wound was becoming progressively more painful, he probably needed a tetanus shot, but he was suddenly happier than he’d been in months.

PART SEVEN

‘The silver’s there all right,’ he said, time and again, ‘it only wants finding,’ and he pushed ahead, here and there, wherever he thought the chances most favourable.

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

81

See, therefore, that first controlling your own temper, and governing your own passions, you fit yourself to keep peace and harmony among other men, and especially the brethren.

Albert Pike
Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Rite of Scottish Freemasonry

It took a full forty-eight hours for the whites of Strike's eyes to recover from the pepper spray, during which time he had an emergency tetanus shot and passed his video footage of the dog fight, and the names and addresses of Plug and his friends, to police in Ipswich. The bites to Strike's inner thigh meant walking was even more painful than usual, yet his mood remained buoyant throughout. Not only had Robin agreed to go to Sark with him, she'd chosen not to answer Murphy's phone call on Valentine's Day, and her feelings towards Strike seemed to have reverted to their usual state. Admittedly, Strike didn't know exactly what that state was, but their friendship, at least, appeared to have been mysteriously and completely repaired. The universe had apparently decided that, instead of being the butt of a cruel cosmic joke, Strike was to be granted a modicum of hope, and so elated was he, both by the restoration of normal relations with Robin and the fact that he hadn't fathered a daughter, he was now daring to wonder whether he might have a chance to make the declaration he'd so recently deemed impossible, at some propitious point on the island of Sark.

The earliest he and Robin could travel to the island was on Wednesday of the following week, because the ferry from Guernsey didn't carry passengers on Monday or Tuesday in the off-season. Pat had booked the detectives rooms at the Old Forge, the only B&B open in February, and

Strike had looked up the house online. It might not have quite the views of that Lake District hotel he'd chosen with such high hopes, but possessed its own rustic charm. Better yet, he and Robin would be completely alone in the remote house: the owner, and provider of breakfast, lived off-site.

Meanwhile, Robin and Murphy had done a lot of talking since Valentine's Day. Murphy had offered a full apology for having become antagonistic in the aftermath of the gazumping, which made Robin feel obliged to make a concession of her own, so she told him with only partial honesty that she'd dragged her feet over looking for a suitable place to live, not because she didn't want to cohabit, but because both their lives were currently busy and stressful even without the addition of house-hunting. She said she was happy to make an increased offer on the two-bedroomed house if Murphy was, and tried to ignore the way her spirits sank slightly when he agreed. Murphy then took the conversation back to children, only, he emphasised, because he wanted them to be completely honest with each other, not because he was pressuring her for a decision. Out of an obscure desire for propitiation, and because she felt guilty about her recent half-truths and outright falsehoods, Robin disclosed for the first time that she'd been to the GP for a check-up, and learned there that the odds of a live birth with IVF were far lower than she'd have guessed. Murphy did a poor job of concealing his happiness that she'd talked to a doctor at all, clearly imagining this meant she was contemplating imminent egg freezing. Hoping to capitalise on this goodwill, Robin told him she'd be going to Sark the following week, for work.

Murphy took this news well enough, but when they met for a takeaway at Robin's flat on Monday evening, two days before she was due to fly out to Guernsey with Strike, Murphy pointed out, apropos of nothing, that the two of them had never yet taken a foreign holiday together. Robin agreed that this would be a nice thing to do and hoped the subject might rest there.

Shortly after they'd got into bed and Robin had turned out the light, there was a silence that felt laden with the unspoken. Robin felt certain something was coming that she wouldn't want to hear. Then Murphy said in the darkness,

'What would you have wanted to do, if it hadn't been ectopic?'

'What?' said Robin, although she'd heard him quite clearly.

'What if the pregnancy had been viable? What would you have wanted

to do?’

Robin felt as though the bed had melted away beneath her. It was the question she’d dreaded, the question she hadn’t dared ask herself, and she knew why he’d posed it when they couldn’t see each other’s faces. Every second seemed to span an hour. At last she said,

‘That’s not a fair question.’

She waited for him to speak, but he didn’t, so she said,

‘I didn’t know until it was all over. I had no choice. It – the embryo – whatever it was – it was dead before I knew.’

‘But if it hadn’t been. If you’d had the choice.’

‘*That’s not a fair question.*’

Robin’s voice had wavered out of control.

‘It was an accident,’ she said. ‘A mistake. It shouldn’t have happened at all.’

‘But if—’

‘I don’t know, Ryan. I don’t know how I’d feel if I got pregnant accidentally with a baby that could survive, and I’m never *going* to know, am I?’

‘I didn’t—’

‘Want to upset me? Want a row? Why now? Why ask me this tonight?’

But she knew why. It was because of Sark, because of Strike; Murphy might not be doing it consciously, but she could tell he simultaneously wanted to punish her and push her into admissions that were either reassurances or rebuffs.

He became conciliatory once he heard the pain in her voice, and Robin, too tired to want an argument, forced herself to respond in kind. The short conversation that followed resolved nothing, and while it ended with Robin in Murphy’s arms, she had to force herself to lie there quietly, with the familiar twist of anger and distress in the pit of her stomach.

‘You all right?’ said Pat gruffly, removing her e-cigarette to ask the question, when Robin entered the office the following morning.

‘Fine,’ said Robin.

She’d just seen something on Instagram which, while not dispelling her personal troubles, had at least forced them to the back of her mind.

‘D’you know where Kim is?’ she asked Pat.

‘She’s in Forest Gate, trying to find that Hussein Mohamed’s house.’

‘How’re you getting on with Powell?’ asked Robin, looking at the long lists of pubs with ‘silver’ in the name, most of them crossed out, that lay on the office manager’s desk. Silver End, Colchester; Silver Ball, Cornwall; Silver Hind, Lymington…

‘No luck. Has he told you’ – Robin knew Pat was talking about Strike, whom she always called ‘he’ when he wasn’t around – ‘there’s only one B&B open on Sark? You’re out of season.’

‘I know. It doesn’t matter, it’s not as though we’re going on holiday,’ said Robin, almost as though Murphy could hear her, and, keen for a change of subject, she said, glancing at the aquarium,

‘The fish are doing well.’

‘He doesn’t like the black one,’ said Pat.

‘Who, Strike?’ said Robin, looking at the knobble-headed fish as it undulated slowly through the plastic plants.

‘I told him it looks like him,’ said Pat, and, miserable though Robin felt, she laughed.

Her mobile buzzed and she looked down to see a picture sent by her mother, which showed Stephen and Jenny side by side with Martin and Carmen, both mothers holding their baby sons; fat Barnaby and the fragile-looking Dirk. With yet another pang of guilt, Robin was reminded that she still hadn’t bought either of her new nephews presents.

She moved into the inner office, sat down at the partners’ desk and was about to call Kim when her mobile buzzed with a text. To her surprise, she saw a message from Wynn Jones, Tyler Powell’s friend, whom she’d texted the previous day, reiterating her request for an interview, and assuring him that she wasn’t working for the Whiteheads.

Jones’ text had a picture of Robin that had appeared in the press two years previously. He’d written: **Is this you?**

Yes, Robin texted back. **Why?**

To her displeasure, Jones responded with a drooling emoji.

Robin knew the world was full of young men whose instinctive reaction to any passable-looking woman was sexualised banter. She also knew that, in the interests of fostering this new line of communication, she should respond with a laughing emoji. She did so, unsmiling, then took a deep breath, and called Kim Cochran.

‘Hi,’ said Kim, answering within a few rings. ‘What’s up?’

‘Any luck with the Mohameds’ house?’

‘Not yet,’ said Kim.

‘Right,’ said Robin. ‘Well, I wanted to talk to you about the dark-haired girl Albie Simpson-White met, in the Sun in Splendour.’

‘Clarissa, yeah. What about her?’

‘Well, for a start, her name isn’t Clarissa,’ said Robin. ‘That was Laetitia Benton, the girl we’ve been trying to trace.’

‘No,’ said Kim, with complete confidence, ‘her name was Clarissa, he was calling her “Riss” or something for short.’

‘Laetitia Benton’s friends call her “Tish”,’ said Robin, ‘and I *know* that was her, because she’s just accepted my follower request in Instagram. The most recent pictures are of her on holiday, not in Sicily, which is where you said she was going, but in Sardinia.’

‘OK, fine, I misheard,’ said Kim dismissively. ‘But we know where she’s living now, so when she comes back from Sardinia—’

‘Thanks to you not taking that bit of surveillance seriously, we’ve missed an opportunity to speak face to face with one of the people who was closest to Rupert Fleetwood before he disappeared. She was our best lead.’

‘I always take surveillance seriously,’ snapped Kim, ‘but that pub was very noisy, and I’m not the only one who’s made a mistake late—’

‘Did you tell Strike you might not have heard correctly?’ asked Robin.

‘I thought I *had* heard correctly, so why would I tell him I hadn’t? Sorry, but I think you’re making a really big deal out of this, for some reason. You can email her, can’t you?’

‘I’d have thought a woman of your experience would know that it’s far harder for witnesses to refuse to talk in person,’ said Robin.

‘“Witnesses”,’ scoffed Kim. ‘We don’t even know that she knows anything!’

‘So you only put in effort when you’ve decided it’s worth it?’

‘No,’ said Kim, with yet another of her little laughs, ‘but—’

‘You know I’m a partner in this agency, right?’ said Robin.

‘Yes, obviously I—’

‘Then you might want to watch your tone.’

‘I’m just pointing out—’

‘An apology would be great,’ said Robin.

‘OK, fine, I’m sorry!’

Robin hung up.

Her outburst of anger hadn't provided the catharsis she'd been seeking.

She looked down at her mobile to check whether Wynn Jones had texted again, but he hadn't, so instead she switched on her computer and went to the missing persons' website where Sapphire Neagle was listed. The girl still hadn't been found.

After sitting in thought for a couple of minutes, Robin brought up the interior footage of Ramsay Silver she'd saved.

The existence of a blonde who'd driven the Peugeot 208 had reminded Robin of something to which she'd previously attached no importance. She fast forwarded, then pressed play as the blurry figure of the blonde customer entered Ramsay Silver.

Her face was impossible to make out, but her build was discernible: short, slim yet curvy. Definitely not, as Robin had wanted to check, a girl who might credibly have been nicknamed 'Olive Oyl'. Yet she looked young from the way she moved between cabinets. Her hair, which was wavy and fairly short, was a whitish blur. She was wearing a dress, rather than Medina's pink top and jeans, but carrying a fairly large tote bag over her shoulder. Could it contain a change of clothes?

Robin watched her speaking to Pamela. Pamela donned her white gloves to open a cabinet. Wright came upstairs and heaved one of the medium-sized crates off into the vault.

Todd arrived, but Robin was still watching the blonde. It did seem an odd place for a young woman to shop… of course, she might have a masonic relative…

Now Wright and Todd lifted the largest crate and disappeared from view again, while the blonde, still being attended to by Pamela, pored over something small from the very same glass cabinet from which Kenneth Ramsay had extracted the triangular pocket watch and the orb charm to show Robin.

Pamela opened the cabinet. Something undistinguishable was chosen by the blonde and Pamela moved to the till while Wright reappeared, followed a while later by Todd.

The blonde customer left, now holding a little black bag containing her purchase. Pamela descended the stairs to the vault.

Robin let the footage continue playing while thinking about the blonde

and the brunette who'd both driven the Peugeot 208. Two young women, or one young woman swapping clothes and wigs? She strongly suspected the latter, and that the woman in question had been Sofia Medina.

Onscreen, the blurry figures of Wright and Todd were gesticulating at each other, Todd clearly indicating that he wanted to leave, and Wright, from his agitated hand movements, protesting. Todd departed. Wright now stood alone, back to the camera. At 17.55, he crossed the shop to use the crank and began to lower the metal blinds over the shop windows.

Robin reached out and pressed pause. She'd just noticed something she hadn't registered before. She rewound.

It was almost imperceptible, but Wright had tripped slightly on his walk towards the window. Robin was instantly reminded of a murder victim in a previous case who'd been seen to turn her heel as she'd left work. In that instance, the explanation had been that she'd been drugged, but that seemed most unlikely in Wright's case. Perhaps he was just tired; he'd done a lot of lifting and carrying. Nevertheless, Robin rewound and watched his slight stumble again, squinting in an effort to make the figure clearer, to no avail.

It looked as though his foot had hit some small obstacle, but due to the many glass cases packed onto the shop floor and the poor quality of the film, it was impossible to see what might have made him trip. After watching the incident five times in a row she was no wiser, and turned the recording off. As she did so, another Wynn Jones text arrived.

Wouldn't mind being frisked by you

Just in case Robin had missed the subtle joke, he'd added two water-drop emojis, which, as Robin knew full well, could denote sweat or ejaculate. Less amused than ever, she nevertheless replied with another laughing emoji.

82

Clay lies still, but blood's a rover;
Breath's a ware that will not keep.
Up, lad: when the journey's over
There'll be time enough to sleep.

A. E. Housman
IV: Reveille, A Shropshire Lad

In spite of her tiredness, and notwithstanding lingering feelings of guilt and anxiety that were rapidly becoming habitual, Robin arrived at Gatwick at six o'clock the following morning in a state of relative cheerfulness and excitement because she was getting her wish of leaving London, however briefly.

She entered the airport pulling her small wheeled suitcase behind her and scanning the check-in desks for her partner, but saw no sign of him. Strike's last text to her had been at ten o'clock the previous evening, when he'd been on the still-at-liberty Plug. Robin had just joined a queue when she spotted Strike walking towards her, a kit bag over his shoulder, unshaven, baggy-eyed with tiredness, and limping slightly.

'Up all fucking night,' were his first words as he joined her.

'Why?'

'Plug still hasn't been fucking arrested. This is getting grim.'

'What d'you mean?'

'He had a couple of smaller dogs in his car. Drove to fifteen Carnival Street again – that black monstrosity clearly didn't die in the Valentine's Day massacre – and took the dogs inside, by the scruffs of their necks. Fucking horrible noises ensued – sounded like the black monster was ripping them apart.'

‘Oh my God,’ said Robin.

‘I’ve called the RSCPA and told them they need to get to Carnival Street, asap. Sooner that thing’s put down, the better. Anyway, Plug then drove to fucking Barking.’

‘Appropriate.’

‘What? Oh, yeah… well, I think that black hellhound’s got a sister, because round five in the morning, Plug came out of a shithole of a house carrying a puppy that looked just like it.

‘Anyway, I had his uncle on the blower, first thing. He’s bloody furious Plug hasn’t been arrested yet. Came close to blaming me.’

‘How’s that your fault?’

‘Clients, innit,’ said Strike. ‘We’re supposed to be able to work magic. I told him the police’ll be trying to identify and bag as many of the ring as possible simultaneously, so they don’t tip off the rest, but apparently it’s my job to make them work faster.’

Bags checked in, they proceeded to the departure lounge, where Strike consumed a couple of espressos in an attempt to wake himself up. This wasn’t the way he’d planned setting off to Sark. Given the declaration he was hoping to make there, he’d wanted at least to have a shower first, and he was currently too exhausted to come up with much in the way of sparkling repartee. Robin, who could see he was struggling to keep his eyes open, decided to wait until they were on the flight before engaging in the conversation about Belgium and Reata Lindvall she was burning to have. At the same time, and even with Strike so sleepy, she enjoyed an ease she hadn’t felt much lately, and she knew part of the reason was that nobody was about to spring a conversation about lost babies or frozen eggs on her.

At last they filed onto the plane, Robin letting Strike take the window seat, because he was large enough to inconvenience both neighbours if he sat in the middle. The young man on Robin’s left was speaking volubly in French to his friend across the aisle, so she felt safe to say to Strike,

‘I did a lot of reading on Reata Lindvall last night. I know you don’t think—’

‘Forget what I said before,’ said Strike, slightly more alert for his ingestion of caffeine and thinking he should capitalise on what might be a temporary spurt of energy. He was prepared to disavow almost anything he’d ever said if it would further his prospects with Robin, and while he had

new information of his own to share, he was more than happy to listen to her first.

'OK,' said Robin, 'well, I know Jim Todd can't have killed Reata and her daughter, because he was already in jail for the trafficking, but he does seem well connected, criminally speaking. As well connected as Jason Knowles, in his way.'

'Yeah,' said Strike. 'Shame he's too old to have been one of Branfoot's promising young thugs. That would've fitted in nicely. He could've recommended Oz to Branfoot as the hitman.'

'Oz sounds younger than Todd, doesn't he? But not *really* young.'

'Agreed,' said Strike, 'but he and Todd seem to have an identical taste in victims: teenagers and very young women. I think it's within the realms of possibility that they met through the trafficking stuff.'

The plane began to move.

'Well, I found out a few new things about the Lindvall murders last night,' said Robin. 'I was combing through old news reports, and obviously they're mostly in French, so it wasn't easy, but the human remains they found in the woods are interesting – more for what was missing than what was there.'

'Which bits were missing?'

'Heads, hands and feet,' said Robin. 'The bone fragments they retrieved were so small they couldn't even tell whether they'd come from an adult or a child. Whoever the bones belonged to seemed to have been dismembered, and the bones were then baked to make them easier to crush.'

Pushed back into her seat as the plane's nose rose into the air, she brought up a saved article on her own phone, which showed pictures of the woodland beside the Lac d'Ougrée.

'I know wild animals might've dug up or carried off bits of the corpses in the years before the remains were found,' said Robin, 'but it seems very convenient foxes would have removed the exact parts that might have led to an ID.'

'It does, yeah,' said Strike. The caffeine was wearing off quicker than he'd hoped, but he was forcing himself to concentrate, partly out of a desire to ingratiate himself, but also because his interest had been genuinely awakened. 'So we've got a definite overlap in the m.o. of the Lindvalls' killer and William Wright's?'

‘Exactly,’ said Robin, ‘but there’s more. Most of the old articles I’ve found take it for granted that Reata and Jolanda were both in the woods, because clothing and belongings from both were found there, but the most detailed contemporary account I’ve found, which I had to translate into English, says the bone fragments only showed one set of DNA. The trouble is, Reata and Jolanda both had unknown fathers, and Reata’s mother had been cremated, so there was no way of telling whether the fragments were the mother’s or the daughter’s, and of course the belongings in the woods had rotted and rusted and were untestable, and the accused boyfriend had chucked all their stuff at home.’

‘Makes you think,’ said Strike, not entirely honestly. In spite of his best efforts, he was feeling increasingly groggy.

‘And then the case became really politicised,’ said Robin, swiping right to show a picture of a women’s march proceeding along a bridge over the River Meuse, near the Lac d’Ougrée. ‘Did you read about the protests while the trial was going on?’

‘Angry women,’ said Strike, as the plane hit a small amount of turbulence and he and Robin bumped elbows.

‘Yes,’ said Robin. ‘Maes’s defence team argued Reata had neglected Jolanda, found her an inconvenience, regretted not having her adopted, and killed her, possibly accidentally, in a fit of temper. The defence argued that the possessions of Reata’s found at the burial site could have been planted by Reata herself, in the hope people would think she was dead, as well as Jolanda.’

‘Pretty thin,’ said Strike.

‘I know. You can see why it became a real *cause célèbre* for feminists. I’m not saying the jury was swayed by that, but objectively speaking, they had no concrete proof that two people had been murdered. All that’s beyond doubt is that parts of one body were in the woods. But Maes was the only person claiming Reata was a neglectful mother. Other witnesses said she loved Jolanda. Meanwhile the prosecution argued that the bone fragments found were more likely to be Reata’s, because Jolanda’s would have been smaller and easier to hide. Maes still sticks to it that he’s innocent. He’s got a little online fan club of men who think he was framed by Reata. There are supposed sightings of her after she disappeared, but none of them look very credible.’

In spite of Strike's best efforts, Robin could tell he wasn't finding what she was telling him of gripping import, so she reverted to a more obviously relevant subject.

'I'm making some headway with Powell's friend Wynn Jones, by the way. We've been texting back and forth.'

'Really?' said Strike, fighting another yawn. He was finding the plane's motion distinctly soporific.

'Yes. He's actually been a bit—' The word that came to Robin's mind was 'creepy', but reflecting that, compared to some of the men involved in this case, Jones' behaviour was more oafish than sinister, she said, '—flirty.'

'Has he, now?'

'Yes. He Googled pictures of me going in and out of court,' said Robin. 'Anyway, I think I've managed to convince him the Whiteheads aren't our clients. I told him we're working for a woman and he said "it's Dilys, isn't it?" I said I couldn't confirm that, but he told me Dilys had called him, worried that Tyler was the body in the vault, and he – Jones – told Dilys she was soft in the head.'

'Might explain why Dilys thinks Jones is rude.'

'That's what I thought. Anyway, I'm hoping to get him to FaceTime me and press him on why Powell mentioned silver on the phone to him, because he's ignored that question twice.

'But while we're on Powell: I don't feel great about this, but I really do think I should try and talk to the Whiteheads. Just to find out whether there was any concrete reason for thinking Powell sabotaged his own car, or if it was just a rumour. And there are a couple of other things,' said Robin. 'This might be absolutely nothing, but—'

She realised, mid-sentence, that Strike had sunk into a doze, head against the window. As she looked at him, he let out a loud, deep snore. To her left, the Frenchman laughed.

''E's tired, your 'usband.'

'Yes,' said Robin, tugging the in-flight magazine out of the pocket in front of her. 'He works nights.'

Fifty minutes later, as the plane began its bumpy descent, Strike woke with a start.

'Shit,' he mumbled. 'Sorry.'

‘It’s fine,’ said Robin.

‘Was I snoring?’

‘A bit.’

Strike wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, afraid he’d also been drooling.

‘Don’t think I snored as badly as this before my nose got broken,’ he said apologetically.

‘How did that happen?’ said Robin, who’d never asked.

‘Boxing. Uppercut from a Welsh Grenadier. He got lucky.’

‘Of course he did,’ said Robin, amused.

‘He did,’ Strike insisted. ‘I knocked him out the following round. You were telling me more about Lindvall,’ he added.

‘I’d finished,’ said Robin untruthfully. ‘That was it.’

Strike falling asleep while she was talking had temporarily dimmed her enthusiasm for the subject.

Strike yawned, then said,

‘Did you know they found silver on Sark in the nineteenth century?’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. Nineteenth century. They hit a good vein, thought they’d struck it rich, and poured money into the mines, but the vein petered out. Cost a fortune, because they were digging out under the sea and they needed pumps to keep the water out. Then a shaft caved in, drowning ten miners, and that was the end of Sark silver. Ruined the Seigneur.’

‘Who’s the Seigneur?’

‘Feudal ruler of Sark. It’s a weird place,’ said Strike. ‘Last feudal system in Europe, till 2008, when they decided to try democracy instead.’

Robin’s fantasies of warmth and light were dashed by her first sight of Guernsey, where it was chilly and wet. She and Strike took a taxi from the airport to the town of St Peter Port, from which they were to catch the ferry to Sark. The talkative taxi driver made further discussion of the case impossible until they’d left him outside the ferry ticket office, where they were informed that, in addition to their ferry tickets, they should purchase luggage labels, which would ensure their bags were transported to their lodgings by tractor on arrival on Sark.

‘How’re your sea legs?’ Strike asked Robin as they walked towards the harbour, rain peppering their faces as they looked out over the choppy grey

sea.

‘They’ve never been tested much,’ Robin admitted.

‘Ah well,’ said Strike. ‘Short trip.’

Only as he began to descend the long, steep, wet, grilled-metal ramp down to the ferry did it occur to Strike that he should have thrown his walking stick into the kit bag he’d packed, necessarily hastily, that morning. He walked slowly, his right knee trembling on every alternate step, holding tight to the handrail, while Robin watched in some trepidation. However, Strike reached the interior of the small ferry without mishap and, not wanting to take any more chances, sat in the first row of cold plastic seats, directly opposite a sign reading: *Sark Shipping reserves the right to refuse embarkation and passage to any person who appears to be in a drunken state*.

The engines roared into life, and the ferry heaved away from the dock.

‘Eyes on the horizon if you feel ill,’ Strike advised Robin, and she thought immediately of Christmas Eve, her jerky vision, and Murphy’s hunched, angry back.

83

‘And our men – well, they’re Sark, and there’s more’n a bit of the devil in them.’

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

‘Not too bad,’ said Strike, forty-five minutes later.

‘No,’ said Robin, although in fact she hadn’t found the movement of the old ferry very pleasant and had indeed spent the last twenty minutes staring out at the horizon without talking.

‘Careful on the steps,’ called a young ferryman behind them. ‘They’re slippery.’

Cursing himself anew for forgetting his stick, Strike moved at a snail-like pace up the steep stone steps of the harbour, which were indeed dangerously slimy, even though the rain had now passed off. At last, leg throbbing, he reached the top of the flight to see three tractors, one of which was pulling open-sided passenger trailers that were already almost full of people, and two of which were being loaded with luggage.

‘Squeeze on,’ shouted the ticket collector, beckoning Strike and Robin forwards. ‘Gawn, there’s room!’

Robin found a narrow strip of seat beside a large man in a paint-stained beanie hat, while Strike crammed himself in beside two women who had shopping bags perched in their laps. Robin couldn’t see how the vehicle could possibly hold any more people, but the last two ferry passengers, both male and clearly local, judging by the greetings they threw the tractor drivers, ambled up and, seeing no seat space, simply climbed onto the edge of a trailer, unconcerned, remaining standing while clinging on to the metal poles holding up the roof.

The tractor driver started up the engine, and towed the line of trailers

through a short tunnel in the hillside, then up a very steep road, Robin worrying unnecessarily about the standing men, who seemed oblivious to any danger. A couple of minutes later, the tractor arrived at the top of the hill and came to a halt outside a cream-painted pub, the Bel Air, over which both the Sark flag and Union Jack fluttered. All passengers disembarked and set off in different directions on foot, leaving Strike and Robin alone to take stock of their surroundings, while the tractor bearing their green-tagged luggage disappeared from view.

Ahead stretched something in the nature of a high street, though to people used to London it had a very strange appearance: no cars, single-storey buildings, and a thoroughly sleepy air.

'Right,' said Strike, 'de Leon's mother lives on Rue des Laches, which is supposed to be close.'

He was wearing the pinched expression that told Robin he was already in a lot of pain. They headed a short distance up the road, which was really a dirt track, level though puddled, with stones protruding here and there. Only now did Robin fully appreciate the implications of a total lack of buses or taxis; they had a lot of walking ahead, because they'd arrived on the east of the island and their B&B lay to the south.

To her relief, the first wooden signpost they reached pointed them left, towards the Rue des Laches. They proceeded along a second track, with fields on one side and houses on the other, until Strike said,

'That's it, there.'

The low-roofed house was painted pale blue and looked rather shabby. A couple of bare-branched apple trees stood in the front garden. As Strike and Robin walked up the front path, a burly, bearded man rounded the corner of the building, pushing a wheelbarrow full of logs.

'Morning,' called Strike. 'My name's Cormoran Strike, this is Robin Ellacott, and we're looking for Mrs de Leon.'

'She's gone over to St Peter Port,' said the man suspiciously. 'What d'you want with her?'

'To ask her about her son, Danny.'

'Oh yeah?' said the man, setting down the handles of the wheelbarrow. His expression had hardened. 'Why?'

'Can I ask who—?'

'I'm his brother,' said the man. 'Older brother. Richard de Leon.'

To Robin’s alarm, Richard now picked up one of the short logs in his wheelbarrow and, holding it in the grip of one hand, advanced on them slowly. She was reminded of Ian Griffiths bursting angrily out of his house in Ironbridge clutching his guitar, but the elder de Leon brother presented a very different calibre of threat. While shorter than Strike, his forearms were massive, and the broken veins in his face suggested long days of hard labour, out of doors.

‘What’s Danny to you?’ he said.

‘Just wanted to know whether you or your mother have heard from him lately,’ said Strike.

‘No,’ said Richard. ‘We haven’t.’

‘He hasn’t come home to Sark, then?’

‘No,’ said Richard. ‘He hasn’t.’

‘Have you heard from him lately?’

‘No,’ said Richard, for the third time. ‘He’s not here. Haven’t seen him, haven’t heard from him.’

‘For how long?’ asked Strike.

‘What d’you wanna know that for?’

‘We’re investigating an unidentified body,’ said Strike, reaching a hand into his pocket, but keeping his eyes on the log in Richard’s hand. ‘Friends of Danny’s in London are worried it was him. This is my card.’

De Leon all but snatched it from Strike’s hand and glared at it suspiciously.

‘“Private detective”?’ he said, with a snort, as though Strike had handed him a joke item.

‘That’s right,’ said Strike.

De Leon looked up at the detective with dark, bloodshot eyes. The resemblance between him and the fake-tanned, blond man who adorned the office corkboard was slight.

‘What’re you really after?’

‘I’ve just told you,’ said Strike. ‘If you say Danny’s not here—’

‘Not a matter of me saying it, he’s not,’ said Richard loudly. ‘You calling me a liar?’

‘No,’ said Strike, ‘I’m saying—’

‘He’s in London,’ said Richard. ‘All right? He went to London.’

‘And how long has it been since you heard from him?’

‘How’s that any of your business?’

‘Because if you’ve heard from him since last June, he can’t be the dead man we’re trying to identify,’ said Strike.

Richard de Leon glared up at Strike for several seconds before saying,

‘No. We ain’t heard from him since June.’

‘Right,’ said Strike. ‘Well, thank—’

‘You stay away from my mother,’ said de Leon, and now Robin remembered Valentine Longcaster issuing a similar implied threat, about his younger sister. ‘You don’t go fucking *near* our mother, you hear me?’

‘I’d be hard put to go anywhere near her, seeing as she’s in Guernsey and I don’t know what she looks like,’ said Strike. ‘Thanks for your help, though.’

He wasn’t certain the log in de Leon’s hand wouldn’t be deployed once they turned their backs, so Strike gestured at Robin to go first. Both regained the road without sustaining any injury from flung wood, but Richard de Leon continued to glare at them until they passed out of sight.

‘D’you believe him?’ said Robin quietly, as they headed back up the Rue de Laches.

‘Not sure,’ said Strike. ‘There were odd features about that conversation.’

‘I’d have expected a bit more concern, wouldn’t you? After hearing there’s a body out there that might be Danny?’

‘I would, yeah,’ said Strike. ‘Didn’t blink, did he? Just wanted us to piss off.’

‘Maybe he and Danny don’t get on? Maybe he doesn’t care whether Danny’s alive or dead?’

‘Or he knows exactly where Danny is, and thinks we’re after him.’

‘Assassins sent by Oliver Branfoot?’

‘If that’s what he’s worried about, it means Danny and his brother are in each other’s complete confidence – which they might be, I s’pose,’ said Strike. ‘I tend to forget there are siblings who actually tell each other everything.’

‘Don’t you?’ said Robin.

‘Christ, no,’ said Strike. ‘Do you?’

‘No,’ admitted Robin, thinking of her disastrous Christmas.

‘Fancy something to eat while we plan next steps?’

They walked back to the Bel Air pub, which seemed the most likely place to find food, Strike's limp becoming ever more pronounced. As Robin paused to pat the Golden Retriever that exited a small ice cream shop to greet them, she said,

'Actually, I'll see you in there. Something I forgot to bring – want to see if I can buy one.'

Wondering whether she was going to call Murphy, Strike proceeded alone past the pub's bathrooms, which lay on the opposite side of a small yard, and were labelled Men/Hommes and Women/Femmes, and entered the Bel Air.

A few locals were watching horse-racing on the large flatscreen in the front room, which was carpeted in red. The pub made Strike think of his old Cornish local, the Victory, having a distinctly nautical air that extended, in the second of two rooms, to a bar fashioned out of a wooden rowing boat. He bought himself a pint, enquired about food, was informed that pizzas were all that were on offer, ordered two, then went and sat down, with relief, at a table in the corner, beside a wall full of framed old music posters, featuring not only the Beatles and Bowie, but his father's band, the Deadbeats.

Robin, meanwhile, was walking up the main street, the Avenue. Barring a shop selling silver jewellery, nearly everything was closed, but at last she spotted a kind of general store, which was open and which seemed to provide everything from basic household goods to greetings cards and toys. She was just about to enter when, glancing left, she saw a large figure walking towards her, and recognised Richard de Leon. Catching sight of Robin, he turned hastily and strode back towards the Rue des Laches.

Robin carried her purchase, a walking stick with a rubber handle, back to the pub. Drawing level with the Rue des Laches she looked down the lane, but Richard de Leon appeared to have retreated back into his mother's house.

She found Strike in the back room of the Bel Air, where she handed him the stick.

'Yes, you *do* need it,' she said in exasperation, as Strike opened his mouth to remonstrate. 'We've got to walk to the B&B after this. Strike, come on, I even got it in army green so nobody'll think you're a big girl's blouse.'

Strike grinned, though reluctantly, because he could just imagine Murphy striding, unimpeded, over the island, possibly with his bloody gym bag and water bottle.

‘Should’ve brought one with me,’ he admitted. ‘Thanks. I’ve ordered you a pizza, it was all they had.’

‘Great,’ said Robin. ‘I’ve just run into Richard de Leon again, by the way. He wasn’t threatening,’ she added, forestalling Strike’s question. ‘He didn’t say anything at all, just spotted me and turned back the way he’d come.’

‘Strange,’ said Strike, as a group of people settled at a neighbouring table. He took a sip of his zero-alcohol beer, then said, in a lower voice, ‘I was going to tell you this before I fell asleep on the plane. That Scottish Gateshead I thought might be Niall Semple’s dead best mate’s sister? I think I’ve found a few traces of her online over the weekend. She’s started and abandoned two different Twitter accounts and a Facebook page over the last seven years. See for yourself.’

Robin flicked through the pictures on Strike’s phone. Rena Liddell’s posts were often cryptic and occasionally garbled. She seemed fond of random pictures of clouds, doorways and blurry shots of the backs of passers-by, but not of selfies. Her profile picture on all three accounts was a cartoon picture of a purple and blue bat.

‘Zubat,’ said Robin.

‘What?’ said Strike.

‘Her avi, it’s a Pokémon called Zubat. My brother Jon was mad about Pokémon when he was a kid. But she’s calling herself @Mirbat, not @Zubat.’

‘That’s one of the things that made me almost certain it was her.’

‘*You* like Pokémon?’ said Robin, laughing as she looked up.

‘No,’ said Strike, ‘Mirbat’s a coastal town in Oman. There was a battle there in 1972: nine SAS guys versus two hundred and fifty Communist rebels. The SAS won.’

‘*Nine against two hundred and fifty?*’

‘Best of the best,’ said Strike, just as he had in Ironbridge. ‘Wouldn’t be surprised if Rena heard about the battle from her brother, hence the name.’

Robin scrolled down through Rena’s chaotic and garbled output. A preoccupation with Muslims and the danger Rena felt they posed to the UK

were very evident throughout her posts. A few of her tweets had been reported and taken down. Judging by those that remained, Robin suspected they'd been extremely Islamophobic.

'I think we're talking serious mental illness, addiction or both,' said Strike. 'She posts in spurts, with hiatuses for months, but she's been writing less and becoming more incoherent lately. However, if you look back to 2015, she managed to say something when she might've been on the right meds…'

Robin scrolled backwards and saw:

> there telling me my brother\s dead I don't think hes really dead. don't believe it.

''Course,' said Strike, 'if Richard de Leon's telling the truth and he hasn't heard from Danny since June the eighteenth last year, Rena Liddell becomes irrelev—'

Strike's mobile rang in Robin's hand.

'Wardle,' she said, handing it back.

'I'll take it outside,' said Strike, with a glance at the group at the next table.

The walking stick, Strike had to grudgingly admit, was helpful and enabled him to get out into the courtyard more speedily than he would have done without it.

'What's up?' he asked Wardle.

'Hi,' said the policeman. 'Nothing urgent. I just wanted to ask… were you serious about a job at the agency?'

'Yeah, of course. We probably couldn't match the salary you're on, though.'

'Yeah, I know,' said Wardle. 'I'm thinking about it. Like I said, with Mum dying, I can still see Liam right.'

'We could use you as soon as you want to work,' said Strike, although it occurred to him as he said it that he hadn't yet discussed this with his detective partner. Absent-mindedly turning to face the high street, he saw Richard de Leon exit the Rue des Laches, glance around, spot Strike watching him, and beat a hasty retreat back down the track from which he'd

just emerged.

Meanwhile, in the pub, a barman had just arrived at Robin's table with two pizzas.

'On holiday?' he asked, as he set them down.

'Not really,' said Robin. 'We're looking for a man called Danny de Leon.'

'Danny?' said the barman cheerfully. 'He's up at Helen Platt's, just seen him. Clos de Camille, on Rue de La Seigneurie. He's doing her garden.'

84

What so false as truth is,
False to thee?
Where the serpent's tooth is
Shun the tree…

Robert Browning
A Woman's Last Word

Pizzas eaten, Strike and Robin emerged half an hour later from the Bel Air and set off up the Avenue beneath a sky still threatening rain, and following the verbal directions given to them by the helpful barman. As they passed the small, low-built shops that were either empty or closed, Strike said, 'What would you say are the chances our friend Richard was trying to sneak off up the road to warn his brother we're after him?'

'High to very high,' said Robin.

'Why didn't he just phone him?'

'Maybe he has,' said Robin. 'Or maybe he waited for you to go back into the pub so he could dash up there. He might be waiting for us at Helen Platt's. Hope he hasn't brought his log.'

Strike laughed, but didn't quip back, because even with the stick he was finding the Avenue harder going than he would have done had it been tarmacked, and didn't want to look or sound like a man struggling with the terrain, not when Murphy would probably be vaulting gates if he was here, the limber fucker.

'I don't understand why this place is British,' said Robin, as they turned right into Rue de la Seigneurie. 'All the place names are French and we're nearer France than Britain.'

'I don't think it *is* British, strictly speaking,' said Strike, still trying

determinedly not to wince or pant. ‘The Seigneur used to hold the island for the British monarch, or something. All goes back to William the Conqueror.’

They passed a church and graveyard and the local police station, both old, low buildings of stone, and after a further five minutes found themselves passing attractive houses. Ahead, in the distance to the left, they could see the tower of what Strike knew from maps was the Seigneurie, the large stone building where the current Seigneur lived.

‘That’s it,’ said Robin suddenly, pointing at a house painted light pink. ‘Clos de Camille.’

It was rather better maintained than the de Leon family residence, the camellia tree for which it was named standing proudly beside the front door. However, nobody answered when Robin rang the doorbell.

‘Maybe Richard *has* called to warn him,’ she said, rejoining Strike in the street.

A painted side gate stood open, through which they could see into a long and well-tended garden.

‘There’s a bloke with a spade,’ said Strike, squinting at a figure in a bright yellow jacket, who seemed to be working at the far end of an expanse of lawn. ‘We could—’

Robin’s mobile rang.

‘Sorry,’ she said, with a sinking feeling, seeing Murphy was calling. ‘I need to—’

‘OK, I’ll see you in there,’ said Strike, and he left her, going through the open gate, making liberal use of his stick as he walked out onto the lawn in the direction of the distant gardener. Robin waited until her partner was out of earshot, then answered her phone.

‘Hi,’ said Murphy. ‘How’s Sark?’

‘Cold,’ said Robin, watching Strike move slowly towards the distant man in the yellow jacket, who still had his back to the road.

‘Found what you were looking for?’

‘Possibly. I don’t know.’

‘Listen, I wanted to talk about Monday night.’

Robin, who’d thought she’d been sufficiently affectionate when she’d said goodbye to Murphy on Tuesday morning to avoid a post-mortem, thought, *oh God, not now.*

‘Ryan, I’m mid-job. We can talk about it when I get back.’

‘Which is when?’

‘Tomorrow, if we’re lucky,’ said Robin, watching Strike. The figure in the yellow jacket still hadn’t turned around.

‘It’s been playing on my mind, that’s all,’ said Murphy. ‘I genuinely didn’t mean to upset you, with what I said, I was just trying—’

‘*Please*,’ said Robin, through clenched teeth, ‘don’t say you were trying to be honest.’

‘You don’t want—?’

‘Of course I want honesty between us, it just seems like it’s becoming a catch-all excuse to force conversations I—’

‘I wasn’t trying to force anything, I’m trying to understand—’

‘And I gave you my answer,’ said Robin, trying to hold herself together. ‘I answered you honestly. I don’t know what I’d have done if the baby had been viable, and I don’t think it’s fair—’

‘Were you sad? At all? About the baby?’

‘*Yes*,’ said Robin, her voice breaking. ‘Yes, I’ve cried about the baby. Is that what you need to know? That I’m not inhuman?’

‘I never—’

‘Be honest, Ryan. You want me to behave as you think a woman should behave.’

‘What’s that supposed—?’

‘You wanted me to sob in your arms about our lost child and say I wanted to get my eggs frozen immediately, so we can make a replacement.’

‘That’s not—’

‘Look, I’m working,’ said Robin, watching Strike, who was now within easy calling distance of the gardener. ‘I’d rather—’ She gasped, then exclaimed, ‘Oh my God – I’ve got to go!’ and hung up.

Cormoran Strike had just taken a spade to the face.

85

‘You don’t know our Sark men… They do things first and are sorry after…’

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

Danny de Leon had swung his spade so forcefully at Strike’s head that it had knocked the latter over. From his suddenly prone position in the wet grass, Strike saw the panicked young man drop his weapon and begin to run towards the house, while Robin sprinted towards them.

‘Don’t you fucking dare!’ Strike yelled, afraid de Leon would employ violence on Robin, too, but Robin, bracing herself, and given an advantage by the fact that de Leon had looked back at Strike when he’d shouted, bent low and tackled him around the waist, hooking her leg around one of his and causing both of them to topple over, though Robin got the worst of it, hitting the ground hard with de Leon on top of her.

‘We’re detectives, we’re not after you,’ she managed to gasp, in spite of being winded. ‘We came to Sark to find out whether you were OK!’

He was trying to fight free of her while she clung with all her might to his yellow jacket. Strike, meanwhile, had managed to get to his feet and, forgetting the walking stick, hobbled ill-advisedly towards the struggling pair, slipping on grass as he came, almost falling again, reaching them just in time to seize de Leon before he could break free from Robin, and drag him into a standing position.

The fake tan and the peroxided hair were no more. De Leon’s hair was what looked like its natural dark brown, and the perfect teeth for which Lord Oliver Branfoot had paid stood out, very white, against a face that was now naturally weather-beaten as opposed to fake tanned. He was short, strongly built and handsome, and continued to struggle with Strike until the

latter shook him and bellowed, ‘FUCKING GIVE IT UP, WE’RE NOT HERE TO KILL YOU!’

‘We were worried you’d been murdered,’ panted the dishevelled and grass-stained Robin, clambering back onto her feet. ‘We thought you were a body—’

‘In a safe,’ said Danny, and immediately looked as though he wished he hadn’t. He’d stopped resisting but seemed both angry and scared. Raising his hands to his ears he said, ‘My earbuds—’

‘Forget your fucking earbuds,’ said Strike, whose jaw was bleeding and rapidly swelling. ‘We want to talk to you.’

Danny looked as though he’d have liked to refuse, but looking up at Strike, some of the fight seemed to go out of him.

‘Fine,’ he muttered. ‘We can go in the house.’

‘What about the owner?’ said Strike.

‘She’s out. She’s gone shopping on Guernsey with my mum.’

‘I’ll get your stick,’ Robin told Strike. ‘I’ll see you in there.’

So Strike stumbled off in the direction of the house, jaw throbbing, knee extremely painful for his run over slippery grass, and still holding on to Danny’s jacket in case he made a break for it, while Robin headed for the end of the lawn where she picked up Strike’s walking stick and found Danny’s earbuds, one of which had been crushed by a man’s foot.

The back door of Clos de Camille led directly into a neat kitchen with pale pink walls, hung with small seascapes that reminded Strike of Ted and Joan’s house in St Mawes. Danny had just sat down at the pine table when Robin entered with Strike’s stick.

‘You need to clean that,’ she said, looking at Strike’s face, where a livid cut had been made by the spade. ‘It’s bleeding and filthy.’

Strike moved to the sink and busied himself with soap and water, while Robin opened the door of the fridge freezer and found a packet of frozen peas. She handed the packet to Strike, who muttered thanks while drying his face with kitchen roll.

Now a fourth person arrived via the back door: Richard de Leon.

‘Oh Christ, what d’*you* want?’ cried Danny.

‘The fuck’s going on?’ demanded Richard.

‘Your brother just smacked me in the face with a spade,’ said Strike, the bag of frozen peas clutched to his jaw.

‘*Why weren’t you answering your fucking phone?*’ Richard demanded of his younger brother.

‘I was listening to music, all right?’

‘As we’ve already told you, Mr de Leon,’ said Robin, trying to defuse the situation, because both de Leon brothers looked on the verge of outbursts, possibly of physical violence, ‘we were worried your brother was dead.’

‘Well, he’s not, is he?’ said Richard.

‘Thanks for that,’ said Strike, frozen peas still pressed to his face. ‘We weren’t sure.’

‘Well, why’re you after him, if he’s not—?’

‘This isn’t complicated,’ said Strike, who now lowered himself onto a chair at the kitchen table, his knee excruciatingly painful, and more than willing to vent his own temper on anyone who presented a target. ‘A man was murdered, we got tipped off it was your brother, we look for your brother, he’s alive, it wasn’t him. I’ll draw it for you, if you want.’

‘You’re not helping, all right?’ Danny said resentfully to Richard. ‘Just *fuck off out of it*!’

‘Will I, fuck?’ asked Richard, and then, rounding on Robin again, who he seemed to feel was most likely to give him a rational response, ‘All right, you know he’s alive – why’re you still here?’

‘Because we’d like to ask him some questions about Oliver Branfoot,’ said Robin.

Richard looked from Robin to Danny and back to Robin again.

‘It’s real?’ he said, now looking more shocked than angry. ‘This Branfoot thing? It’s for real?’

‘I *told* you it fucking was!’ said Danny.

‘Yeah, but you talk a lot of shit, don’t you?’

‘Why don’t you just f—?’

‘It’s real,’ said Robin.

‘How do we know you’re not working for him?’ said Richard.

‘Is it likely we’d mention his name, if we were?’ snarled Strike. He could tell he was going to have a hugely swollen face when they arrived at the B&B.

‘Danny,’ said Robin, ‘how d’you know Lord Branfoot thinks you were the man in the safe?’

‘I was told,’ said Danny.

‘Who by?’

‘I’m not telling you that, no chance. They’ll be in for it next.’

‘You tell us, fuckwit,’ said Richard, who now dragged a third chair out from the table and sat down.

‘What’s it matter who tipped me off?’

‘Was it another actor in Branfoot’s private films?’ asked Robin.

‘I just told you, I’m not – *how d’you even know about any of this?*’

‘Your friend Fiona put an anonymous note through our office door,’ said Robin. ‘Her boyfriend told her you were the body in the vault, and she believed him. She’s very worried about you.’

‘I know, she kept calling me,’ said Danny, ‘but I couldn’t tell her I was all right, could I, because fucking Craig woulda told Branfoot, if he’d known where I was!’

‘She says Lord Branfoot threatened you, after he paid for you to get your teeth fixed.’

‘He paid for your fucking *teeth*?’ cried Richard.

‘Yeah,’ said Danny, ‘so what?’

‘*Why couldn’t you pay for your own fucking teeth?*’

‘He offered, OK?’

‘This is the fucking problem!’ said Richard, jabbing a thick forefinger at Danny. ‘You always want something for fucking nothing!’

‘Branfoot got plenty out of me back, don’t you fucking worry!’

‘What made you come back to Sark, Danny?’ asked Robin.

‘I was – never mind,’ muttered Danny.

‘*You tell the fucking truth!*’ roared Richard.

‘I was getting a bad vibe!’ shouted Danny. ‘All right?’

‘What fucking bad vibe?’

‘From Branfoot?’ said Robin.

‘Yeah,’ said Danny.

‘What happened?’ said Robin, trying to forestall Richard.

‘I was… walking home one night,’ said Danny haltingly, ‘’n I was followed. Big geezer. I sped up, he sped up. I started to run, so did he. Taxi come along and I flagged it down. I looked back, the bloke was running off in the opposite direction… Branfoot knows people, rough people through his – you know – his bullshit charity stuff. Blokes who’ve been in jail and

are up for a bit of cash… he told me once he's the only man in London who knows as many pigs as criminals… I stayed home for a few days after I was followed but then I saw the geezer again. He was hanging round in the street, looking up at my windows.'

'Is that when you decided to come home?' asked Robin.

'Not straight away. But then this mate of mine called and said fucking Craig was going around talking about how I was gonna be "taken care of". So – yeah – I packed a bag, waited till the bloke hanging around left for the night, called a taxi and went straight to the airport.'

'The friend who tipped you off that Branfoot was going to "take care of you",' said Robin, 'is this the same person who told you Branfoot thinks you were the body in the silver shop?'

'Yeah,' said Danny. 'The bloke who was meant to kill me must've told Branfoot that was me.'

It was apparent to Robin from Richard's expression that he'd previously taken Danny's account of what had made him flee London as either exaggerated, or complete fiction. The arrival of two strangers in pursuit of his brother had clearly come as a shock, but Robin could tell that listening to Danny repeating his story to a third party, especially a third party who was providing confirmation of it, had tipped Richard into a state of alarm he'd hitherto escaped.

'Well, Branfoot's not gonna think that body was you for ever, is he?' Richard said hotly. Pointing at Strike and Robin he said, 'If they found out, so can bloody Branfoot! How long d'you think it'll take for him to work out you just came home to Mum?'

'Look, just *fuck off* out of this, it's got nothing to do with you!' said Danny angrily, standing up so quickly his chair fell over backwards.

'Danny, please sit down,' said Robin. '*Please*. We want to help.'

She looked at Strike, inviting his agreement, but as Strike currently wanted little more than to thump Danny himself, he said nothing.

'*You*, help?' Danny said to Robin, and she heard the fear beneath his aggression. 'How can *you* bloody help? You're making it bloody worse! I'm safe as long as he thinks I was the body in the vault, and here's you trying to prove it wasn't me!'

'Well, the obvious way to remove the threat would be to—'

'*No*,' said the de Leon brothers together.

‘He’s not bloody going public,’ said Richard.

‘I’m not talking to the press, no fucking way,’ said Danny.

‘Our mum doesn’t know what he’s been up to,’ said Richard. ‘And she’s not gonna know, either. She only lost our dad last year.’

‘If I talk, Branfoot’ll make *sure* I’m bloody finished off,’ said Danny.

‘But what Branfoot’s doing is illegal,’ said Robin. ‘He’s filming people without their consent, and if—’

‘They all took money on film, there’s no proof,’ said Danny. ‘If I talk—’

‘But your brother’s right, Danny. When that body’s identified—’

‘Then I’ll go somewhere else,’ said Danny wildly.

‘You’re going to live in hiding for ever?’

‘If I have to!’

‘Christ almighty, what a *fucking* mess!’ exploded Richard, also standing up. ‘I stuck up for you with Dad, Dan, but Christ’s sake, I’m starting to think he was—’

Danny lunged at his brother; Richard parried his punch, but Danny kept attacking, driving Richard, who appeared not to want to retaliate, back up against the kitchen cupboards. Strike now dropped the packet of peas, heaved himself back onto his feet, interposed his bulk between the brothers and pushed Danny backwards with one large hand on the younger man’s chest.

‘Pick up that chair and *fucking sit down*,’ he said, ‘and bear in mind that I still owe you one for the fucking spade.’ He pointed at Robin. ‘She’s nicer than I am. My interest in your well-being ended when I found out you were alive. Trouble is, Branfoot’s going after *us* now, because he thinks we’re going to prove you *were* the body in the vault, and he appears to have sicced the goons who were after you on to our agency. *She’s* already been threatened with a fucking dagger.’

‘I can’t believe this,’ said Richard, passing a hand over his mouth. ‘I can’t fucking believe it.’

Danny, who’d remained on his feet against Strike’s orders, now shouted at his brother, ‘*You know why I left!*’

Some of the fight seemed to go out of Richard, who hitched up his trousers, looking uncomfortable.

‘Yeah, I know why… and I’m not saying you were wrong to leave, Dan. But why’d you have to do *that* for a—?’

‘You’re the one who said I’m useless at everything else!’

‘I never said you were useless at everything else, you bloody liar, I said you’d never make a fucking builder!’ shouted Richard. ‘They’re the only choices in London, are they? Dry stone walling or getting your cock out?’

Strike now picked up the fallen kitchen chair and righted it.

‘*Sit*,’ he told Danny for the second time. Looking defeated, Danny complied.

Richard took a chair, too, and so did Strike, whose right knee was trembling worse than ever.

Addressing Robin from under his thick eyebrows, Richard muttered, ‘Our dad was… hard on Dan. But why d’you have to get involved with all *that*, though?’ he said miserably, turning to Danny.

‘I dunno,’ said Danny. ‘I needed money – it just happened!’

‘Coke’s what happened, you little prick,’ said Richard.

‘Not a little prick,’ muttered Danny. ‘Or I couldn’t’ve paid for the coke.’

‘Ha bloody ha,’ said Richard. He looked sideways at Strike. ‘So what now?’

‘We tell Branfoot he’s alive,’ said Strike implacably.

‘We can’t!’ said Robin.

‘You want to spend the next couple of years looking over your shoulder for a bloke with a dagger, do you?’ said Strike angrily. ‘It was blunt last time, it might not be, next. Branfoot knows proper criminals, he’s made bloody *sure* he knows them.’ He now addressed Danny. ‘You either tell the press about Branfoot and make him too scared to make a move on you, or *we’ll* tell him. There’s no third option here. It’s going to come out.’

The de Leon brothers looked as though they, too, had been hit with spades. Robin picked up the frozen peas from the floor and handed them back to Strike, who said ‘cheers’ and pressed them back against his throbbing jaw. At last, Richard said, ‘He’ll talk to the press, once we’ve prepared Mum.’

‘Oh God,’ said Danny, slumping face down onto the kitchen table.

‘Well, we’ve got to tell her,’ said Richard angrily. ‘It’ll be the biggest story in Sark since the bloody German occupation.’

‘I should’ve killed myself,’ said Danny, his voice muffled.

‘Who’ll that help, you stupid sod, except Branfoot?’

‘He’ll go public,’ said Richard to Strike. ‘Just give us a few days.’

Strike glanced at Robin, who looked pleadingly back at him. With extreme reluctance, he said, ‘It needs to be soon. I want Branfoot off our backs.’

‘All right. We’ll explain to Mum – although how the *fuck* we’re going to explain this – aw, don’t start!’ he said to the back of his brother’s head, because Danny, who was still face down, had started to sob.

‘Have you still got my card?’ Strike asked Richard.

‘Yeah, at the house.’

‘I want your phone numbers, as well. Branfoot needs exposing *quickly.* Leave it much longer and it might be one of us who gets bloody murdered.’

Richard gave both mobile numbers and Strike typed them into his phone, while Danny continued to sob. This done, Richard stood up.

‘I’ll see you out.’

Leaving Danny face down on the table, they walked back to the street around the side of the house, Strike in serious pain and leaning heavily on his stick. When they reached the road, Richard said, ‘You don’t wanna judge… see, our dad was a shit to Danny,’ he said uncomfortably. ‘He was… you know. Whatsit. Homophobic. They never got on. That’s why Dan left. That’s why he went off the rails, the silly sod. He run off and done what Dad thought men like him do, see? Rebellion,’ said Richard. ‘That’s what it was.’

‘I understand,’ said Robin.

Strike, whose injury was smarting all the more for contact with the chilly air, said nothing. The side of his face felt as though it had been inflated with a football pump.

‘Silly sod,’ repeated Richard. ‘I didn’t realise… he was always one for tall tales, you know? I thought he was making half of it up. Thought he imagined that the guy was chasing him. This is all… it’s a shock, you know?’

‘Of course,’ said Robin. ‘We really don’t want Danny to come to harm.’

Richard glanced at Strike, who made a non-committal noise, but only to keep Robin happy.

‘All right, well, like I say – give us a few days,’ said Richard. He heaved a deep sigh. ‘Mum thinks Danny’s been working at a Savile Row tailors. He’s been telling her about all the celebrities he’s been measuring up for fucking tuxes.’

86

All that gay courageous cheer,
All that human pathos dear;
Soul-fed eyes with suffering worn,
Pain heroically borne,
Faithful love in depth divine—
Poor Matthias, were they thine?

Matthew Arnold
Poor Matthias

‘Shall we find somewhere to sit down?’ were Robin’s first words, once Richard de Leon had returned inside Clos de Camille. Though the gash made by the spade had stopped bleeding, the left side of Strike’s swollen face was turning purple as the bruises rose to the surface.

‘I’m fine,’ he said, well aware he must look anything but.

‘Well, I could use a coffee or something, after all that,’ said Robin.

To her relief, because she’d feared they might have to return to the Avenue to find somewhere, an establishment on Rue de la Seigneurie was open for custom, though this necessitated an upstairs climb to the Captain’s Bar, where portholes were painted on the sloping eaves. No longer in a fit state to appreciate nautical décor, Strike slumped into a seat by the window and on being informed by Robin that the place didn’t serve coffee, asked for the beer he really wanted.

‘Alcoholic,’ he added, because in the absence of painkillers he was happy to improvise, and Robin was immediately reminded of Christmas Eve, and Murphy’s sudden rage because she’d questioned him on the alcohol content of his pint.

‘So… that’s it,’ said Robin, when she rejoined Strike at the table with his

beer and her own tonic water. ‘De Leon’s out. He was your favourite for Wright, as well.’

‘He was, yeah,’ admitted Strike. ‘I could see a reason for him being polished off in the vault, but I can’t see why the hell Powell or Semple—’

‘Or Rupert—’

‘Or Fleetwood, if we must – had to die there.’

‘Nor can I,’ said Robin. After a moment or two she said, ‘D’you think the dead man was someone else entirely, who was killed for reasons we don’t know?’

‘I think that every other hour,’ said Strike. ‘But if it *was* someone we’ve never heard of, the police don’t seem to have heard of them either, and it seems bloody odd literally nobody’s come forwards to say it might’ve been that man. But I think it’s safe to conclude that whoever Oz is, he’s not the man Branfoot paid to kill de Leon. Shanker’s been hoodwinked. I’ll have to let him know the supposed killer’s full of it.’

Rain began to fall again as they sat beside the window and each sipped their drinks.

‘So, it turns out there *are* brothers who tell each other everything,’ said Robin.

‘Doubt Danny wanted to tell him,’ said Strike. ‘Probably thought he might need Richard as back-up, if Branfoot’s henchman turned up.’

‘They’re fond of each other, though, you could tell… Have you seen Al lately?’ she asked, referring to the only half-brother with whom Strike had contact.

‘No,’ said Strike. ‘Still pissed off I didn’t want to reconcile with Rokeby after finding out he had prostate cancer. We haven’t talked since.’

‘I like him,’ said Robin, who’d met Al only once, but retained the memory of someone who seemed both fond of and impressed by his older brother.

‘So you keep telling me.’

‘You do, too,’ said Robin, smiling.

‘He’s all right,’ said Strike, with a slight shrug. ‘We’ve just got fuck-all in common.’

‘Like Martin and me,’ said Robin, who then clapped a hand to her forehead and gasped, ‘oh, bugger.’

‘What?’

‘I forgot to call Mum back yesterday, about Dirk.’

‘About what?’

‘Dirk, Martin’s son. My newest nephew. He was supposed to be going home yesterday. There were some problems with the birth; he’s got a paralysed arm.’

‘Shit,’ said Strike.

‘They think it’ll resolve,’ said Robin.

‘Your family’s been doing a lot of breeding lately.’

Robin experienced again that slight inner wince that was now accompanying all mention of babies and pregnancy, unaware that Strike had noticed a slight external flinch.

‘Listen,’ she said, keen to get off the subject, ‘I doubt we’re going to be able to get a takeaway for dinner, I haven’t seen anywhere that’s open. Why don’t I go and buy some food we can cook at the Old Forge this evening?’

‘It’s raining.’

‘Which is why it’s lucky I’m not made of papier mâché.’

‘OK, I’ll come,’ said Strike, picking up his pint with the intention of downing it.

‘No,’ said Robin. ‘You stay here and rest your leg. Don’t look at me like that, we’ve still got to walk to the B&B afterwards. Just let it settle down a bit, I’ll be back soon.’

Robin left Strike to stare back out of the window, feeling as though he was some creaky old codger being looked after by a granddaughter. He hadn’t yet seen his face in a mirror, but he knew the spade injury must look bad, because it was drawing covert looks from the men playing pool. His knee, which he’d twisted during his unwise dash over wet grass in pursuit of Danny de Leon, also felt dangerously swollen again. Wondering how far away the B&B would prove to be, he watched a trickle of primary-age children running past outside, clearly just released from school, all healthy and nimble. He was still exhausted, knew he looked terrible, and, after the unforeseen physical challenges he’d already met on Sark, was in nearly as poor a state as he’d been on the occasion, over a year previously, when Robin had told him he wasn’t fit to walk upstairs with her, into what he’d feared might be a murderous trap. This wasn’t the way he’d wanted the trip to go, and, to compound his feeling of misery, he wondered whether Robin’s odd look when he’d mentioned breeding didn’t indicate that she’d

soon have – or, perhaps, already had – something to tell him that would indicate a cementing of her relationship with Murphy that no declaration of his could weaken.

It took Robin almost an hour, firstly to find the supermarket, then to load up a bag with the ingredients for spaghetti carbonara, adding wine she felt they deserved and painkillers and alcohol wipes for Strike's face. She returned to the Captain's Bar because she didn't want Strike to have to walk alone to meet her, given the state of his leg. By the time she returned, the bruising and swelling of his jaw was even worse, giving his face a very lopsided appearance.

'How does it feel?' Robin asked.

'Still not as bad as that bloody spray of yours.'

Strike forced himself back into a standing position.

'I can carry one of those,' he said, holding out his hand.

'It's fine, I can—'

'Give me one of the fucking bags, I've got one hand free and one good leg.'

'All right, all right,' said the exasperated Robin. 'There, happy?'

'Ecstatic,' said Strike, and they moved off towards the stairs.

As they walked back along Rue de la Seigneurie, unavoidably slowly, because Strike was now severely impeded by his twisted knee, he said, 'What would you think of Wardle coming to work for us?'

'Wardle?' said Robin, in surprise. 'Would he be interested?'

'He would, yeah.'

'Well, he'd be great,' said Robin, 'but can we afford him?'

'He's not expecting the salary he's on in the CID. Cost-benefit; we could take on more work with another subcontractor. I think he'd more than pay for himself.'

'What's made him want to leave the police?'

While Strike explained the combination of personal circumstances that had made Wardle keen on a change of career, Robin had time to remember that Murphy didn't like Eric Wardle. He'd never explained why, but usually had a critical comment to make whenever his name came up. However, it wasn't up to Murphy who the agency hired, any more than it was up to him which cases they decided to investigate.

The rain had passed off again, but the light was rapidly fading and, their

progress being so slow, the sun had set before they reached the lonely lane along which the Old Forge was supposed to lie. Soon they were immersed in velvety darkness.

‘The stars are incredible, aren’t they?’ said Robin, looking upwards. In the absence of street lights, they shone hard and bright against the deep black, every constellation clearly marked.

‘Yeah,’ said Strike, who might, under other circumstances, have attempted to wax poetic, but was now in a lot of pain and mainly concentrating on the damp, uneven terrain, which Robin was illuminating with her phone torch. The wind was whispering through the hedgerows; Robin kept glancing back, expecting to see a vehicle behind her, but it was a relief to think that nobody in a gorilla mask was about to appear.

‘I think this is it,’ she said at last, as a building loomed to the right.

Forbearing to say ‘Christ, I hope so,’ Strike followed her carefully up a short gravelled drive, down a few stone steps, and at last, with enormous relief, through the unlocked door of the B&B, where Robin turned on the lights.

They stood in a large hallway, with a wooden walkway overhead connecting two upstairs bedrooms. To the right was a bedroom, to the left, a shower room. Their bags, still with the green tags attached, were sitting in the middle of the wooden floor.

‘D’you want to take the ground-floor bedroom?’ said Robin.

‘Cheers,’ said Strike. ‘All right if I get a shower before we eat?’

‘Of course, I’ll cook,’ said Robin, taking the bag of shopping from him.

Their fingers touched as he handed it over. Robin felt a tiny thrill pass through her, and then a sudden sense of mingled excitement and panic.

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… we shall be
But closer linked—two creatures whom the earth
Bears singly—with strange feelings, unrevealed
But to each other…

Robert Browning
Pauline

The Old Forge's kitchen contained an Aga set into a brick wall, and had enough seating for eight people. Wooden model lighthouses stood on the window sills, but the depth of the darkness outside obscured any view of coast or sea.

Robin had been cooking and drinking wine for ten minutes when her mobile buzzed and she guessed it was going to be Murphy. Taking her carbonara sauce off the heat, she reached for it and read:

Maybe this is insecurity, but it's the truth. You say you love me, but I feel like you withhold part of yourself from me. Sometimes I even feel like you're humouring me. I've felt all along like I'm dragging you into living together, but I can't remember you ever showing real enthusiasm for it and when I told you we'd been gazumped, I couldn't hear any disappointment.

What you said about the baby earlier: you're wrong. It isn't that I want you to act like I think women should act, it's that you've never once acknowledged that it was our kid you lost. I've felt like I can't show any sadness about the

baby because it'll make you feel pressured.

There's a distance between us sometimes and I don't know if that's just who you are, and this is how you love, or whether you're fooling both of us about what you really feel. And if it's the second one, I'd rather know now.

Robin stood staring at this message, so shocked she was only recalled to her surroundings when she realised the cheese sauce was starting to spit in the pan, and turned hastily back to attend to it. Cold waves of panic and fear were breaking over her. So Murphy knew… what? She loved him, didn't she? Yes, she thought – knew – she did. But he'd sensed…

Strike entered the kitchen, still leaning on his stick but feeling better for having showered, his wet hair looking little different than it usually did.

'Smells great,' he said, and he set about laying the smaller of the two tables in the room.

'How's the face?' asked Robin.

'Had worse,' grunted Strike.

'There are alcohol wipes at the bottom of the bag if you need them.'

When she'd tipped the spaghetti into a large dish and placed it on the table, Robin said,

'Give me a mo – dig in, don't wait,' and headed out into the hall, picked up her holdall and took it upstairs, choosing the nearest bedroom at random, which was decorated in yellow and contained three beds, including a double: designed, as she dimly registered, for a family… Sitting on the bed, she read Murphy's message again, then typed out her answer, sentence by painful sentence.

You know I love you.

Did she, though? Really? Trying to tamp down yet another upsurge of anxiety and guilt Robin continued,

I don't know what you mean about distance.

Didn’t she? Perhaps she did – but wouldn’t any couple be feeling some strain, after her long stay at Chapman Farm, Murphy’s terrible shooting case, the hassle of house hunting, and, of course, the ectopic pregnancy?

Robin typed on:

I was sad about the baby, I’ve cried about it, but finding out I can’t have kids naturally was horrible. I’m still processing it, and you pressuring me to talk about it, and make decisions about my eggs, isn’t helping. Please understand that I need time to get my head around what happened and what I’m going to do next.

That, at least, was honest.

Can we please talk about this properly once I’m home? I’m with Strike, we’re still working, and I can’t have a conversation about this without him hearing.

She hesitated, reminding herself of the good times she’d had with Murphy. She knew him to be a good, kind man, didn’t she? So she ended:

I really do love you xxxxx

She pressed send, feeling a hollowness that had nothing to do with hunger. Her phone buzzed; she was afraid of what she was about to read, but looking down, saw only another text from Wynn Jones.

So is the only way I get to speak to you being interviewed?

Yes, Robin texted back automatically. Then, not wanting to stay upstairs for too long in case Strike asked whether everything was all right, she headed back down the wooden staircase.

‘Sorry,’ said Strike as she walked back into the kitchen, his mouth full of

spaghetti, ‘starving.’

‘It’s fine, I told you not to wait,’ said Robin, with forced cheeriness, topping up her wine glass. ‘I think I’m getting close to talking to Wynn Jones. He’s just texted me again.’

Strike swallowed.

‘Great. This is fantastic, by the way.’

‘Good,’ said Robin, sitting down opposite him.

‘So, did you find out how Dirk is?’

‘Wh – oh, my nephew? Yes,’ said Robin, who had indeed called her mother on the way to the supermarket that afternoon. ‘They’re happy with him. They’re still hopeful his palsy thing will clear up.’

‘What was the issue?’

‘It was a difficult birth,’ said Robin. A lump seemed to have lodged in her throat again. *You’ve been left with quite a lot of damage…* She took another swig of wine. ‘His nerves were torn, and he was premature, as well.’ *The embryo couldn’t get past the scarring, you see…*

‘Smaller than the eleven-pounder, then?’

‘Much,’ said Robin with difficulty, remembering the bumpy ride on the gurney, and the icy feeling of the ultrasound wand.

Strike took another large mouthful of spaghetti. Notwithstanding the throbbing of his face and leg, he knew that the moment was fast approaching when he was going to tell her he loved her. What was required now was a bit of easy conversation, hopefully involving a few laughs, and more wine, to loosen inhibitions. He might initiate a bit of subtle probing about the state of her relationship with Murphy, and then…

‘So, from what you’ve seen, would you fancy living on Sark?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know,’ said Robin, who was having difficulty dispelling thoughts of Murphy’s text, and finding it hard to swallow her pasta, because of the lump in her throat. ‘It’s very pretty.’

‘I thought we’d see more horses.’

‘They probably only get the carts out in summer,’ said Robin. ‘For tourists.’

‘Yeah. I’d be all right if they let me have my own tractor, but—’

Strike suddenly realised, to his great consternation, that Robin was crying, though trying to conceal the fact. He swallowed hastily.

‘What’ve I—?’

‘It’s nothing, it’s not you,’ said Robin in a high-pitched voice. She got to her feet, stumbled towards the kitchen roll and tore off a few sheets. ‘Ignore me, just ignore me, I’m sorry.’

‘Why—?’

‘It’s n-nothing,’ said Robin again, leaning up against the side, but she couldn’t stop crying.

‘Don’t give me that, what—?’

‘I… lost a baby.’

‘*What?*’ said Strike, horror-struck.

Unable to keep it in any longer, unable to pretend, unable to cope alone with the burden of her own confusion and guilt, Robin blundered back to the table, sat down, and told the short and brutal story of her accidental pregnancy, through sobs.

‘Shit,’ said Strike. ‘I’m… sorry.’

He had no idea what else to say. He didn’t know what this meant, for Robin or for her relationship, didn’t know whether she was mourning the loss of the child, whether she’d wanted the baby. He watched helplessly as Robin fought unsuccessfully to regain control of herself.

‘I don’t know why I’m so – oh *God*.’

Unable to stop herself crying, she slumped forwards on the table, just as Danny de Leon had done earlier, face hidden in her arms, her hair falling into her plate of spaghetti. Her loyalty to Murphy mingled with her conflicted feelings about the text he’d just sent her, and she was battling a powerful urge to let out the things she hadn’t dared say to any other human being.

Strike could think of nothing to do except reach across the table and lay a large hand on her shoulder while she cried. He’d rarely been at such a loss, or so afraid of saying the wrong thing.

‘Did you… want it?’

‘No,’ said Robin, her voice halfway between a squeak and a moan. ‘It was a complete accident. I didn’t even know – until it was all – all over… oh God, I’m sorry…’

‘Stop apologising,’ said Strike. In his total ignorance of what might be involved in ectopic pregnancy, he said, ‘What… how long were you in hospital?’

‘Only a couple of nights,’ said Robin, raising her wet face, still trying to

regain control. ‘It wasn’t a big – not a big deal. It’s just that it happened because… the rapist… when I was nineteen… he gave me an infection and that’s why I can’t… I don’t know why I’m doing this!’ she said a little hysterically, as more unquenchable tears fell, and she frantically wiped her face.

‘Does Murphy – Ryan—?’

‘He’s been great, but he really wants kids.’ Robin blew her nose on the kitchen roll, then took a deep breath. ‘I can’t fault him, he says he wants me, whether or not I can have them, and he’s been really kind since it happened…’

‘Good,’ Strike forced himself to say, although it was possibly the most insincere monosyllable that had ever passed his lips. ‘’Course,’ he added, ‘he’s not stupid. He knows he won’t ever find anyone like you again.’

‘Thank you,’ Robin mumbled, mopping her eyes with her left hand, but her right found Strike’s, and squeezed it.

‘And by the sounds of it,’ said Strike, ‘you could still – if you wanted—’

‘But I don’t know whether I *do* want kids,’ said Robin, and her relief at saying this to someone other than Murphy felt like taking off a tourniquet. ‘If I had a baby, I couldn’t do *this* any more. I’m sure there are women who could do both, but I don’t think I’m one of them. It isn’t that I don’t like kids, I can totally see why people want them and love having them, I get it, as much as you can when you haven’t done it yourself, but I love *this* so much. It wouldn’t be the same if I had children, I’d be more worried about taking risks, I’d feel guilty about the hours, it would mean divided loyalties, and I’m worried I’d resent them for having to give this up, or not being able to give it what I can give it now. Is that selfish?’ she asked, looking at Strike with tear-filled eyes.

‘Bloody hell, it’s the opposite of selfish,’ said Strike robustly. ‘If everyone thought properly about having kids before they did it, there’d be a lot fewer fucked-up people in the world.’

‘The doctors say I should freeze my eggs, and Ryan wants me to, he paints it as me having options… maybe I should,’ said Robin, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. ‘Maybe that’s the smart thing to do… it’s just all been *forced* on me, and finding out that that fucking rapist took the chance away from me…’

She wiped her eyes, noticed the cheese sauce on her hair, and wiped that

off, too.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Strike again, at a loss as to what else to say.

‘It’s fine,’ said Robin, blowing her nose. ‘It was nothing, compared to what you went through.’

‘What, my leg? It’s different, not worse,’ said Strike. ‘Once you’ve been inside a military hospital, trust me, you count your bloody blessings. My amputation was below knee. That’s a whole different ball game to above the knee. I’m not paraplegic. Didn’t have my genitals blown off, I’ve still got my sight – just, after that bloody spray. I do fine.’ Afraid that it might be too soon for humour, he nevertheless added,

‘Obviously a blow, knowing I’ll never dance *Swan Lake* again.’

To his relief, Robin laughed.

‘D’you ever think about the person who planted the IED?’

‘Not much,’ said Strike. ‘He did what he thought he had to do. It wasn’t personal.’

‘I don’t s’pose it was personal with my rapist, either,’ said Robin.

‘That’s different,’ said Strike again.

Robin took a deep breath and said,

‘I’m really sorry I laid all this on you.’

‘What friends are for,’ said Strike.

But he’d never been in such a quandary as the one he now faced. Could he really tell her now, when she was reeling from a recent pregnancy loss, ‘Here’s something you might want to factor in when thinking about the future: I love you’?

‘Let’s just talk about the case,’ said Robin, withdrawing her hand from his. ‘Please.’

‘All right, but let’s eat first,’ said Strike.

So they ate, each consumed by their thoughts. Strike was furiously pondering what to do for the best, trying to examine the question from all sides. She’d just shared something deeply personal. Didn’t that open the door for him to do the same? They were alone together at last, in the most remote place they were ever likely to visit, where nobody else could reach them or interrupt. Wasn’t it madness to let this chance go? Yet he was afraid that by speaking now, when Robin was clearly already in a state of crisis, he’d transform himself, perhaps for ever, from friend and confidant into another source of pain and confusion.

Robin noticed Strike's slight scowl, and wondered whether he was thinking her as chaotic and careless as she felt herself to be, for getting into such a mess, for slumping into her spaghetti and sobbing, and she had a sudden mental image of Kim Cochran, always neat and professional and cheerful, her personal life in perfect order. *We've all made mistakes. Admittedly, I never* married *one of mine…*

When both had finished their dinner, they moved at Robin's suggestion into the sitting room next door, which had a beamed ceiling and a brick fireplace with a wood burner, Robin carrying the wine.

'Fire?' suggested Strike, because the room was chilly, and while that didn't much bother him, he knew from experience it tended to bother women.

'Great,' said Robin, who'd already pulled a throw off the sofa to wrap around herself.

She looked around the low-ceilinged room, at the ship in a bottle and a china horse standing on the mantelpiece, at yet another seascape on the wall and the array of pamphlets advertising the attractions of Sark spread on a side table, and thought how much she'd have liked being here if not for that text of Murphy's. She felt physically tired, but craved mental stimulation, and was conscious, too, of a desire to prove to Strike that she was still up to the job, no matter her personal problems.

'So,' she said, while Strike was busy with old newspapers and logs, 'we're back at the question of why Wright was killed in the vault, if it wasn't a masonic double bluff.'

'Yeah,' said Strike, whose spirits had sagged at these words. She wanted to talk about work. Was this a deliberate closing of the door on any more personal conversation? Was she as aware as he was of the unusualness of this situation – the isolated house, the hundreds of miles between them and London – and seeking to restore relations to a professional footing? With reluctance, and a heaviness of heart, he reached the conclusion that bringing up his own feelings right now would be a mistake; possibly an irrecoverable one.

'All right,' he said, having successfully lit the fire, closed the door on the wood burner and dragged himself back up into a standing position by using the mantelpiece beam, 'what reasons do people have, for killing in particular places?'

‘I don’t know,’ said Robin.

Strike poured himself more wine and sat down in a wicker chair, which creaked loudly.

‘I can think of four.’

‘Really?’ said Robin, taken aback.

‘Yeah. Chance, convenience, opportunity and necessity.’

‘Well,’ said Robin, pulling the throw tighter around herself, soothed by having an intellectual exercise to engage her mind, and grateful for the fire, ‘it definitely wasn’t chance, was it? Wright and his murderer didn’t find themselves in that vault at that time in the morning by chance. It was pre-arranged. Organised.’

‘Agreed,’ said Strike.

Robin drank more wine, trying to focus.

‘What came after chance?’ she asked.

‘Convenience. Covers domestic murder, in particular. I think we can discount that. As far as places to commit murder go, I’d struggle to think of one more inconvenient than an underground silver vault.’

‘So, then – opportunity?’

‘Opportunity would fit fine if the killer had been Kenneth Ramsay, Pamela Bullen-Driscoll or Jim Todd. The vault might well have been one of the very few places they’d have had the chance to bash a strong young man over the head from behind, without witnesses. Unfortunately, they all have unbreakable alibis. So we’re left with necessity. The vault was literally the only place the killing was possible.’

Correctly interpreting Robin’s lack of response Strike said,

‘I can’t think why it would have been necessary to do it there, either. Even if we accept the premise that Wright was lured to his death on the promise of a cut of the proceeds from the robbery, why did the killer make it so difficult for themselves? If a victim’s after easy money, there are a hundred other scenarios they could be persuaded into, and they’d be bound to offer the back of their head at some point. Why *there*?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Robin again. ‘I feel as though we’ve got a lot of pieces from different jigsaws.’

‘We have,’ said Strike. ‘Semple, Powell, Fleetwood – Knowles, come to that… fuck knows what “Barnaby’s” is.’

Watching the dancing flames Robin said,

‘How often do you think there’s a murder case where both the killer and his victim were pretending to be someone else?’

‘Infrequently, I’d imagine,’ said Strike, ‘but I’m sure more killers would do it that way, if they could arrange it. Wright’s false identity worked brilliantly in his murderer’s favour. When you can’t identify the victim, it’s bloody difficult to see why anyone wanted them dead.’

Both watched the flames dancing in the wood burner for a while. Then Robin said,

‘I keep thinking about Wright. The way Daz and Mandy described him… he sounded…’

Robin’s voice trailed away. She drank some wine.

‘“Sounded”?’ Strike prompted her.

‘Well, a bit… lonely, or lost, or something… It seems so silly to go downstairs to your neighbours and eat a takeaway and smoke dope with them, and let them get a really good look at you, if you’re in disguise because you’re planning a burglary. If Wright knew he was only going to be there a short time, why get friendly with Mandy and Daz? And ordering weights to his flat – why would you do *that*, if you knew you’d only be there a month?’

‘Two very good points,’ said Strike.

‘D’you still think Todd wrote Wright’s CV?’ Robin asked.

‘I do, yeah,’ said Strike. ‘Ergo, Wright thought Todd was an associate, maybe even a friend… but that throws up more questions, doesn’t it? If Todd was a double agent, convincing Wright he was on his side, but actually luring Wright to the vault for Oz to kill, we arrive back at the perennial question, why did the murder have to be in the vault? And why the hell would Wright have agreed to walk into the vault at one o’clock in the morning, with the man he was running from? This isn’t a Shakespearean comedy, where a man styles his hair differently and instantly becomes indistinguishable from his own sister. A curly wig’s hardly an impenetrable disguise.’

‘Wright might never have met Oz before, or known what he looked like.’

‘Then it’s just as strange that he agreed to walk into the vault with him at one in the morning. Mandy said Wright told her and Daz “or he might send someone”. Wright knew he might not recognise the man who came for

him.’

‘I know Reata Lindvall probably *wasn’t* “Rita Linda”,’ Robin said, remembering Strike’s glazed expression on the plane, ‘but *say* she is, for the sake of argument – maybe Todd told Wright what had happened to her, after learning the truth in his Belgian jail?’

‘That crossed my mind after I heard Todd was in prison in Belgium,’ said Strike, ‘but if Wright thought Todd was his mate, why would Wright share the information with the press? That’d blow Todd’s incognito, remind the world he’s a convicted rapist, point the police and press right back towards him, and set Todd up for concealing evidence.’

Almost a minute passed as each pursued their own thoughts. Then:

‘That email sent to Osgood from Ramsay Silver…’ said Robin, freeing herself from the throw to tug her phone out of her pocket. Having found the message, she read it aloud.

‘“Dear Mr Osgood (Oz), I can help you with something that I know has been a problem for you if you would be happy to meet me.”’

She looked up at Strike.

‘It *has* to be Wright who sent that email. Todd wouldn’t have emailed Oz from work, not if they were accomplices.’

‘Soundly reasoned, as far as it goes,’ said Strike, ‘but did Wright mean to email Oz the fake music producer, or Osgood, the genuine one?’

‘What if Wright knew Osgood had an imposter, and was going to tell him who it was? The inclusion of “Oz” might’ve been a hint?’

‘That’d fit,’ said Strike, ‘but it’s not the only explanation. What if Wright was offering to help with a problem that was going to be resolved down in the vault at one in the morning?’

‘What kind of problem could Osgood have had, that meant going down to the silver vault at one in the morning?’

‘Well, for instance, “I’m currently lacking a hundred grand’s worth of masonic silver,”’ said Strike, and Robin laughed.

‘It’s tempting to try and fit Semple into all this,’ Strike continued, ‘because his mental state might explain some of the anomalies – putting too much trust in Todd, smoking dope with the neighbours. Possibly he *did* have a fixation about the Murdoch silver…’

‘But you could fit Powell into it, too,’ said Robin. ‘He wanted a fresh start and we know he wasn’t the brightest bulb in the box, which could

explain him trusting Todd too much, and not recognising the danger posed to him by Oz.'

'True, but like I said in Ironbridge, a masonic silver shop seems a particularly weird place for a mechanic to choose to work. Plus, nobody seems to have given too much of a shit about Powell except his grandmother, and her interest seems to be largely that he wasn't doing her shopping any more. I think that car crash was a genuine accident. Do we honestly think the nice middle-class Whiteheads, bereaved or not, hired assassins to search the length and breadth of the UK for Tyler Powell?'

'No,' admitted Robin, 'but Tyler might have thought that's what was going to happen… we're forgetting Rupert Fleetwood.'

'I haven't forgotten him,' said Strike, 'but I'll tell you one thing: it makes no sense for Todd to have written a CV for Fleetwood, who'd have known perfectly well how to write one – and given his expensive private education, I'd be stunned if he couldn't learn enough about silver to pass that interview without needing Todd at all. On the other hand, I find it very credible that Powell would've been happy for someone else to take charge of that part of the job, and the same might apply to Semple. We don't know what his reading, writing or concentration were like, post-injury, and he'd probably never written a CV in his life. Men in the Special Forces don't need them.'

'I'm *sure* Rupert's still alive,' said Robin, 'but wouldn't you have expected some sign of him by now? He must know we're looking for him. Sacha Legard must have checked where he is, after you spoke to him. And I'm *certain* Albie Simpson-White knows what happened to him. And yet Rupert hasn't done anything to stop us trying to find him, or to put Decima out of her misery. He must know that would be kinder, in the long run – and what about his son? Doesn't he care about him at all?'

'No idea,' said Strike.

'He's another one who seems to have acted really inconsistently,' said Robin. 'Albie really did make him sound like a good person, you know. He *swore* Rupert loved Decima, and yet he's gone without a word… I've *got* to try and corner Cosima Longcaster,' said Robin, with determination. 'I'm going to try and do that this week… Listen, would you mind if I turn in? I'm so tired – you must be, too, you were awake all night.'

'Yeah,' said Strike. 'I could use an early night.'

‘I’ll just wash up,’ said Robin, freeing herself from the throw she’d wrapped around herself.

‘I’ll do it, you cooked. It’s a pan and two plates,’ said Strike, rising with difficulty out of his chair, with the help of his stick. ‘Go to bed. I’ll take care of it.’

When Robin had gone upstairs, Strike limped back to the kitchen, feeling thoroughly miserable. It wasn’t much comfort to think he’d done the right and decent thing in not forcing his own emotional crisis on Robin when she was clearly in the middle of a serious one of her own, but his last glimmer of hope had now fizzled into darkness, leaving him full of self-recrimination. He had nobody but himself to blame for the fact that he’d been forced, in what was likely to be the most auspicious setting for romance he and Robin would ever visit together, to listen to her outline her plans to preserve her eggs for Murphy.

A framed affirmation stood on the sill over the sink where he washed up the dinner things. It read: *Always end the day with a positive thought. No matter how hard things were, tomorrow is a fresh opportunity to make it better.*

Strike cast this a dark look as he dried his hands, then hobbled off across the hall towards his bedroom.

88

But she had mistaken her man. Perhaps she had not met many like him.

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

The injury to Strike's face looked even worse the following morning, the swelling slightly diminished but livid blue bruises dappling his skin. His face continued to ache and he chose not to shave, for fear of reopening the gash left by the spade.

Before heading back to the ferry, he and Robin walked a little way along La Coupée, which lay just beyond the Old Forge: a high, narrow isthmus connecting the main island from Little Sark. While a windswept Robin was looking down at the turbulent grey sea, Strike, who'd just checked his phone, said, 'We might be lucky to get back today.'

'Why?'

'Storm Doris just hit the UK,' said Strike. 'Ninety mile an hour winds. They've grounded a ton of flights.'

Sure enough, when they arrived at the airport on Guernsey it was to find their flight had been delayed and rumours flying between tetchy passengers that it would be cancelled. Robin caught herself hoping it would; that she and Strike could just retire to a Guernsey hotel and that she'd be able to enjoy another evening away from London with a clear conscience. However, an hour after the scheduled departure time they were allowed to board.

The descent into Gatwick was nerve-racking, and at one point Robin instinctively grabbed Strike's forearm as the plane zig-zagged on its approach to the runway, buffeted by gale-force winds. However, they landed without mishap to a round of applause from the passengers,

excluding Strike, for whom the forearm-grabbing had been bittersweet, and who'd happily have endured a far rougher descent for prolonged physical contact.

Though London still bore traces of the battering it had taken from the storm, the following day was calm, bright and cold. A tree had been blown over in the Richmond street where Two-Times and his wife lived, and Strike watched men in yellow jackets dealing with it while sitting in his BMW, glad to be able to keep the weight off his leg after all the walking he'd done on Sark, his jaw still painful, and feeling even more depressed than he had at the Old Forge. He could draw no comfort from the memory of Robin clutching his arm on the plane or holding his hand in the kitchen, because she and Murphy would soon be living together, and whether or not she wanted children now, the direction of travel was plain to see; Murphy putting on subtle pressure, Robin finally caving, and then realising, as she'd said back on Sark, that she couldn't detach from her child sufficiently to work as she worked now…

Kim was supposed to be taking over surveillance on Mrs Two-Times at seven that evening, but with ten minutes to go, Strike received a text from her.

Really sorry, personal emergency, are you all right to stay on her? I'll be there as soon as I can.

As he was tired and hungry in addition to feeling depressed, Strike wasn't best pleased by this message, but he returned an affirmative answer, only to see Mrs Two-Times emerge alone from her house a few minutes later, climb into an Uber, and set off in the direction of central London. Strike followed in his BMW, hoping she wasn't going too far; he really wanted to get home. While watching her check her make-up in the back seat of the car, Strike wondered whether Two-Times wouldn't end up ditching her, as he'd done a previous girlfriend who'd proved disappointingly monogamous. It was a shame, Strike thought, that he didn't have the same fetish as Two-Times; he'd be having the time of his life if he derived pleasure from knowing the woman he loved was fucking someone better-looking.

Mrs Two-Times' driver dropped her outside the St Martins Lane Hotel. Strike found a parking space, then entered the spacious white-floored lobby, which was decorated with such objects as giant chess pieces and a sofa draped in fake fur. Trying not to limp too obviously, he crossed to an information desk and was informed that there was a restaurant and café. He went to check both, but neither showed any sign of his target.

Now wondering whether Mrs Two-Times hadn't actually disappeared into a bedroom for an assignation, he asked a passing staff member whether there was anywhere else he might check for his date, and was directed to the Blind Spot, a secret bar, admittance to which was gained via a hidden white door with an outstretched golden hand as a handle. Strike was in no mood to find this charmingly whimsical.

The room inside was long, narrow and so dark that he nearly fell on his face by snagging his fake foot on the edge of a rug. Having regained his balance, he spotted Mrs Two-Times at the far end of the room, barely illuminated by a small shaded lamp and sharing a booth with two other women. A waiter directed Strike to the only vacant table, which was a leather booth positioned so that Strike was forced to keep an eye on Mrs Two-Times in a large mirror on the opposite wall, which gave a partial and distorted image.

Speakers over his head were playing 'Itchycoo Park'.

I feel inclined to blow my mind…

The waiter handed him a cocktail menu. *Fuck it.* He was a ten-minute walk from the office; he'd leave the car where it was; he deserved alcohol. Having flicked impatiently past the cocktails, all of which were themed for different cities and countries, he ordered a double Ardbeg and attempted to find a way to extend the leg bearing the prosthesis in the narrow space between table and leather sofa.

Strike's drink arrived shortly after he'd texted Kim the new location. He took a large gulp of the smoky whisky, disinclined to order expensive bar snacks, in spite of his hunger, because he was hoping not to be there long. All around him in the dim lighting sat couples, their faces illuminated by small puddles of light cast by the lamps, so, hoping to look like someone waiting for a girlfriend, he took refuge in his phone, searching online records for Jim Todd's mother, a task he'd been doing intermittently all day.

Nancy Jameson was proving difficult to locate, because she'd alternated

between her married and maiden names. Strike had found several court judgments against her, mostly for disorderly conduct, but also for shoplifting, though the last of these dated from five years previously. Strike knew she might be dead, but persisted in looking for her, because the mundane task was keeping his mind off his other troubles. When he'd finished his first whisky, he ordered another.

By eight o'clock, with Françoise Hardy singing over the speakers, and Strike on his third double Ardbeg, his mobile rang with a call forwarded from the office. Raising it to his ear, he said, 'Strike.'

The line was bad. For a few seconds, nobody spoke, but Strike could hear a crackling noise. Then a notably deep, male voice said, 'This is Rupert Fleetwood.'

It was a few seconds before Strike registered what had just been said; two and a half double Ardbegs hadn't improved his powers of concentration. Fumbling hastily for the notebook in his pocket, he said, raising his voice over Françoise Hardy: 'It's good to speak to you, Mr Fleetwood.'

'You've been looking for me,' said the deep voice.

'Yes,' said Strike.

The unexpectedness of the call, coming so soon after Robin had expressed surprise that Fleetwood hadn't been in touch with them, had caught him off-guard.

'Your ex-girlfriend's very worried about you.'

There was no response.

Oui mais moi, je vais seule

Car personne ne m'aime…

'Where are you, currently?' asked Strike, who'd managed to get his notebook open and was trying to find his pen.

'That doesn't matter,' said the deep voice. 'Just tell Decima I'm all right.'

'That won't make her very happy, I'm afraid,' said Strike, switching his mobile phone to his left ear, so he could write. 'She doesn't believe you'd ever have left her. She thinks the reason you haven't been in touch is that you're dead.'

He waited, but there was no response.

'At a bare minimum, I think she'd like to know why you disappeared,'

said Strike.

‘It wasn’t going to work between us.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘It just wasn’t,’ said the voice. ‘It isn’t her fault.’

‘I’m going to need proof you’re genuinely Rupert Fleetwood if you want me to pass this message on,’ said Strike. ‘Tell me something only he and Decima would know.’

He waited, pen poised.

‘She called me “Bear”,’ said the deep voice.

‘And she and Rupert are the only ones who’d know that, are they? Decima never did it in anyone else’s hearing?’

Comme les garçons et les filles de mon âge

Connaîtrais-je bientôt ce qu’est l’amour?

‘I can think of something only Rupert and Decima knew, before he disappeared,’ said Strike.

‘I stole her father’s silver ship,’ said the deep voice.

‘Plenty of people know Fleetwood stole that ship. I want something only Rupert and Decima—’

The caller hung up.

Strike lowered his mobile, frowning. He wondered whether to call Robin with the news that Rupert Fleetwood, or somebody pretending to be him, had just called, but she was probably with Murphy.

While the whisky wasn’t precisely cheering him, it was at least having a numbing effect, which was better than nothing, so he ordered a fourth, wondering what had become of Kim. This lateness was most unlike her; she was usually punctual to a fault.

His fresh drink had just been set down in front of him when his mobile rang again, also with a call forwarded from the office. Hoping it might be the man with the deep voice again, he answered.

‘Strike.’

‘Aye, it’s me,’ said a loud and angry whisper. ‘Wha’ for are ye waitin’? *Ah need tae meet ye!*’

After a moment’s incomprehension Strike said,

‘Are you the person who’s been calling me about a bridge?’

‘Dunnae talk aboot tha’!’ she said furiously. ‘*Ah need ye tae come!*’

‘Where are you?’ said Strike, trying to tug his notebook out of his pocket

again.

‘Jus’ come tae the Golden Fleece, f’ fuck’s sake!’

‘Where is that?’

‘Ye know where, it’s the only place Ah’m safe, kinda, but Ah’ve gottae be careful, Ah think they’re watchin’ me—’

‘Are you Rena Liddell?’

‘DUNNAE SAY MAH FUCKIN’ *NAME*!’ she howled.

He heard the clunk of a call box receiver being slammed down.

Shit.

Strike was now exceptionally hungry in addition to being slightly drunk, so he caved in and ordered chips and calamari rings from the bar snack menu. Barely had the waiter departed than Kim entered the bar at last.

‘I’m so sorry, I’ve *never* been late for a job,’ she mumbled.

As she sat down beside him, Strike saw by the limited illumination of the booth that he wasn’t the only person with facial injuries. Someone had very obviously gouged Kim’s face, leaving deep, bloody scratches. Her right eye was puffy and Strike could see bruises forming around it.

‘What happened to you?’

‘I – it’s – Ray – you know, my ex?’

Rendered slower in comprehension than he usually was, because of all the Ardbeg he’d consumed, Strike said, ‘The jobless bloke, yeah – *he* did that?’

‘No, it was – I told you he was with someone when we got together, didn’t I? Well, it was her.’

‘Christ,’ said Strike.

‘I opened my flat door and she was standing there, waiting,’ said Kim. ‘Look, I’m really sorry, can I get a proper drink, I really—’

In no position to refuse, given how much Ardbeg he’d already consumed, Strike raised a hand to summon the waiter and, as Kim was now sitting with her face in her hands and muttered ‘anything’, Strike ordered her an Ardbeg, too.

When her drink arrived, Kim took a large swallow then coughed and said, ‘God, that’s disgusting, what is it?’

‘Whisky.’

‘Oh… well, I s’pose it’ll do the job.’

She tipped more down her throat.

‘What made your ex’s ex turn up today?’ asked Strike.

‘Because Ray’s killed himself,’ said Kim baldly.

The image of Charlotte lying in a blood-filled bath swum up out of Strike’s subconscious. He remembered the shock of a previous suspect being found hanged in her garage.

‘Fuck, I’m sorry.’

‘It’s nothing to do with me,’ said Kim quickly. ‘We split months ago, it’s not *my* fault, but she’s looking for someone to blame. *She* was the one pestering him for money all the time. They’ve got kids together,’ she added.

She took another gulp of the Ardbeg.

‘I opened my flat door and she was there on the landing, waiting. She grabbed me by the hair and punched me right in the face. She had me on the floor, then she was kicking me, then she was on top of me—’

‘Isn’t she police?’ said Strike, who dimly remembered what Kim had told him in the Dorchester.

‘Yeah. If she’s that fucking worried about her kids, you wouldn’t’ve thought she’d want to be arrested right after their dad died, would you? My neighbours came out onto the landing, he pulled her off me, and his wife called the cops. I had to give a statement. Then I get outside to my car and find out she’s keyed it and smashed in all the windows. I had to get a taxi here. I don’t know how I’m going to follow Mrs Two-Times home.’

‘I wouldn’t worry about that,’ said Strike. ‘She’s not going to shag anyone else tonight.’

‘Oh God, you’re so nice,’ Kim said, and she leaned into him before draining her glass of whisky. ‘Can I get another one?’

Strike had some misgivings about ordering her a second drink, but he raised his hand nonetheless. If he hadn’t ordered food he’d now be on the way home, but he was starving and wanted his chips.

By the time his food and Kim’s fresh Ardbeg had arrived, she’d twice more leaned into him, pressing her right arm into his left, with breathy little laughs. She seemed understandably shaken by the news that her ex-boyfriend was dead, but he didn’t like the flirtatiousness that was creeping into her behaviour, either on its own terms, or in the context of recent bereavement. Meanwhile, he’d been given only three calamari rings, which didn’t seem much of a reward for staying put. He helped himself to chips.

‘There he is, that’s Ray,’ said Kim, showing Strike a photo on her phone,

though he didn't particularly want to see it. Ray had been a good-looking man with the same kind of thick, prematurely grey hair as Barclay. Strike wondered whether he was being shown the picture because Kim stood beside Ray in a very revealing handkerchief top.

'That was in Ibiza,' said Kim, with a catch in her voice, turning the screen back towards herself and examining the picture. 'Oh God,' she said, with sudden emotion, scrolling through pictures. 'He did it in his car. Exhaust fumes. I don't know why I'm…'

She began to cry. Strike, who didn't want to make any physical gesture of comfort, and was struggling to marshal his thoughts, given his tiredness and the large amount of whisky he'd drunk, said, ''S a shit thing to happen.'

Exactly as he'd feared, Kim now slumped into him and stayed there, sobbing, as Johnny Kidd & the Pirates began singing over the speakers.

When you move in right up close to me

That's when I get the shakes all over me…

Fuck's sake, thought Strike, now unable to reach his chips without dislodging Kim. Glancing down, he saw her mobile lying face up in her lap, showing her, nude, displaying her tan lines in a mirror. He looked away, hoping the lack of a consoling arm around her might persuade her to shift, and after a minute, it did. With another breathy laugh and a whispered 'sorry', she straightened back up, and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

'Oh shit!' she said, with poorly feigned embarrassment, flipping over the mobile. 'I don't know what I'm…' Turning her shining brown gaze fully on him for the first time, she uttered a little gasp. 'Wait – what happened to *you?*'

He was too slow to stop her touching him lightly on the side of the face.

'Spade,' he said, reaching for the last of his chips.

'A *spade*?'

'Yeah. Look, I'm going to have to—'

He raised his hand for the bill, and as he did so, Kim slid a hand onto his thigh.

'You've been so nice. Thank you.'

He reached down, took her wrist and threw her hand back into her lap.

'Don't.'

'What?'

‘You know what. We’re not going to fuck,’ said Strike, more forcefully than he’d have done had he not drunk so much. ‘Ever.’

‘What? I didn’t—’

‘*Enough,*’ said Strike, whose tongue felt far heavier than it should have, but whose anger at himself, and the mess he’d made with Robin, had at last found a target. ‘No more accidental texts, none of it, all right? And keep your fucking nudes to yourself.’

He was hyper-aware of Kim sitting rigidly beside him as he paid his bill. He didn’t doubt she felt angry and humiliated, but he didn’t care. Having paid, he got up with difficulty, pins and needles in his legs, and said, without looking at her, ‘See you at the office.’

He left, and only by a miracle of luck did he avoid tripping over the rug for a second time.

89

Half-way, for one commandment broken,
The woman made her endless halt,
And she to-day, a glistering token,
Stands in the wilderness of salt.
Behind, the vats of judgment brewing
Thundered, and thick the brimstone snowed:
He to the hill of his undoing
Pursued his road.

A. E. Housman
XXXV, More Poems

Robin felt as though she'd been away from London for a fortnight, instead of the forty-eight hours that had actually passed. Worst of all was the jitteriness that had returned almost as soon as the storm-tossed plane had landed. She now realised how safe she'd felt in Sark. She was back in noisy, crowded London, where any of the men you passed might have a gorilla mask hidden at home; she resumed looking over her shoulder every few yards and taking counter-surveillance dashes into traffic and last-second exits from Tube trains.

Nor was this suppressed, ever-present fear the worst of her worries. She and Murphy met for dinner in an Italian restaurant on Saturday evening, and talked. She repeated that she loved him, said she felt no distance and that she definitely wanted them to move in together. She tried not to remember Strike holding her hand across the kitchen table at the Old Forge, or about how understanding he'd been when she'd cried. She had to forget all that. She was moving in with Murphy.

She stayed at Murphy's flat overnight and remained there on Sunday.

They had sex twice; he seemed far happier than he'd been lately, and Robin told herself she was, too.

To Robin's surprise, late on Sunday afternoon, Tyler Powell's friend Wynn Jones sent her his agreement to speaking to her that evening by FaceTime.

'Everything OK?' asked Murphy, observing her expression as she read Jones' text.

'Fine,' said Robin. 'Just someone I'm trying to talk to about Rupert Fleetwood.'

She wondered why she was still lying to him about exactly what she was doing on the silver vault case and supposed it was force of habit.

'Listen, d'you mind if I do an hour at the gym?' asked Murphy.

'No, of course not,' said Robin.

She felt relieved at the prospect of being alone, and even gladder Murphy wasn't present when, ten minutes after he'd left the flat, Strike called her.

'Can you talk?' he asked in a croaky voice.

'Yes,' said Robin. 'Are you all right?'

Strike, who was lying on his bed in his attic room with his prosthesis off, said, 'Yeah, I'm fine.'

In fact, his stomach had been upset all day, which he suspected was the fault of the kebab he'd bought on the way home from the Blind Spot the previous evening, because his hunger had been unassuaged by a few exorbitantly priced chips and three calamari rings. He'd slept late, then lain on his bed trying to ignore his gastro-intestinal discomfort while vaping and continuing to search for Jim Todd's mother online, an ice pack strapped to his painful knee. He'd soon need to put his prosthesis back on, because that evening he was due to tail Plug.

'I've got big news,' he went on, 'I got a call last night from a man claiming to be Rupert Fleetwood.'

'*What?*'

'Yeah. Quite the coincidence, after you saying you were surprised he hadn't been in touch. He gave me the nickname he claims Decima used for him, admitted to stealing the nef, but when I pressed him for something only he and Decima would know, he hung up.'

'Oh,' said Robin.

‘He had a bass voice. I’ve emailed Decima to ask whether that fits Rupert, though knowing her, she’ll say someone must’ve been putting it on. I think I’ve found Todd’s mother, too. She’s in Harlesden, so I’m going to check her out as soon as I’ve got time, see whether Todd’s been in touch. And one other thing,’ said Strike, hoping there wasn’t about to be a row. ‘Kim’s resigned. I’ve just got the email.’

‘*Oh,*’ said Robin again. For the first time in days, her spirits lifted. ‘Why —? Did something happen, or—?’

‘Yeah, something happened,’ said Strike, who’d decided he needed to be honest about this, even if it led to trouble. ‘She turned up for surveillance and she was in a state. Her ex has gassed himself in his car.’

‘Oh my God!’

‘And then *his* ex turned up at Kim’s, to give Kim a hiding. She arrived in the bar and she was crying, she’d been roughed up and… well, she was leaning on me and putting her hand on my leg and—’ He remembered the naked photograph, but decided against mentioning it. ‘I’d had a few. I told her to sod off and she took offence. Well,’ Strike admitted, ‘I was fairly offensive. Anyway, it’s a two-line resignation: “I wish to terminate my contract with immediate effect. Kindly forward the balance of payment.”’

‘Right,’ said Robin, feeling slightly dazed. This was a lot to process in a single phone call. ‘Well… to be completely honest… I’m glad to see the back of her.’

‘Thank Christ,’ said Strike, relaxing slightly. He’d been worried about Robin’s reaction; specifically, that she might be uptight about him having more of what might be generally termed ‘woman trouble’. ‘In better news, Wardle’s handed in his resignation at work, so we won’t be short staffed for long.’

‘Great,’ said Robin. ‘Well, I’ve just had a breakthrough with Wynn Jones. I’ll be FaceTiming him in half an hour.’

‘He still flirting?’

‘If you can call it “flirting”, sending me aubergine emojis,’ said Robin.

‘Sending you what?’ said Strike, on whom this comment was lost. He’d never used an emoji in his life.

‘I’ll explain some other time,’ said Robin. She’d never yet discussed erect penises or the symbols used for them online with Strike, and wasn’t going to start now. ‘I’ll let you know how I get on. Speak later.’

Robin made herself a coffee and, at the appointed time, called Wynn Jones on her laptop. After just a few rings, he answered with the words ‘all right?’

Jones was a heavy-set youth with a double chin and almost no neck. His very short dark hair had already receded to reveal a large expanse of shiny red forehead. One of his eyes was larger than the other, which gave him an unfortunate look of craftiness. With his weathered appearance and his tartan shirt, he’d have blended in easily with any of the land workers Robin had known in Masham, some of them school mates who were uninterested in academic life because they had farms on which to work and, in some cases, to inherit.

Jones was sitting in what looked like a very cramped and none-too-tidy sitting room. The leatherette sofa bore evidence of having been shredded in places by a cat’s claws. Buckled beer cans and takeaway cartons were piled on a low table to Jones’ left and the edge of a dartboard was visible over his head, the surrounding wall pockmarked with holes. Jones was clutching a can of Carlsberg, and though it was barely six o’clock in the evening, he had the slightly sloppy, glazed look of a man who’d already had several beers.

‘Hi,’ said Robin. ‘Thanks very much for agreeing to talk to me, Wynn.’

‘’S’all right,’ said Jones. He glanced off camera and raised his eyebrows at someone or something out of sight; a knowing, amused look.

‘She ’ot, then?’ said a voice off-camera.

‘Yeah, not bad,’ said the smirking Jones.

‘So, as I explained, Wynn,’ said Robin, pretending she hadn’t heard this, ‘I wanted to talk to you about Tyler, because his grandmother thinks—’

‘’E was a body,’ said Jones, and Robin heard gruff chortles from the man off camera. ‘Senile, i’n she? Smart London detective like you shoulda worked that out by now, if you’ve talked to her.’

Chippy distaste for the capital and its denizens was also familiar to Yorkshire-born Robin, so she ignored this comment.

‘Dilys doesn’t believe the man who’s called her since July is Tyler. She thinks—’

‘It’s me, yeah,’ said Jones, looking unabashed. ‘Daft old cow. I’ve told her it’s not. Lugs told me to tell ’er, so I did.’

‘Lugs?’

‘That’s what we call him. “Lugs”. You and Jonny Rokeby’s boy should be paying me, by rights. Telling you stuff you should already know.’

The man off camera laughed.

‘Dilys is always thinkin’ people are tryna trick her,’ said Wynn. ‘Thought the postman had nicked her pension book last year, daft old bat. Lugs is sick of ’er, anyway. Making him do her shopping and all sorts.’

‘Have *you* heard from Tyler since he left?’

‘Yeah, but then he got pissed off with me,’ said Jones, grinning more broadly than ever.

‘Why was that?’

‘Called him a fuckin’ coward, din’ I?’

‘Why did you call him a coward?’

‘Should’ve just fuckin’ thumped all of ’em what were saying shit about him and that crash,’ said Jones, and he took another sip of lager. ‘’S what I’d’a done, if they were talking shit about *me*. Made himself look proper fuckin’ guilty, running away.’

‘So you’re sure Tyler’s innocent, are you?’

‘Why’re you askin’ me that, if you’re on Dilys’s side?’

‘I’m just trying to find out where Tyler’s gone and whether anyone’s hurt him,’ said Robin.

‘Nobody’s bloody *’urt* him, he’s fine! An’ he wouldn’t never of done nothing to his Mazda. Go all the way to Birmingham to fuck with it? Bloody load of balls.’

‘People said the car was tampered with in Birmingham, did they?’

‘“People” didn’t say it. Fuckin’ Faber White’ead did.’

‘This is Hugo’s father?’

‘Yeah. He was putting it about someone on the car park camera, fiddlin’ with it.’

‘Really?’ said Robin. ‘D’you know what that person looked—?’

‘There wasn’t nobody there,’ sneered Jones. ‘White’ead didn’t want to believe his dipshit fucking son was speeding. Sabotage my arse.’

The person off camera laughed again.

‘Tyler was at home the night of the crash, right?’ said Robin.

‘Yeah, ’e ’ad a cold or something.’

‘Were his parents there?’

‘No, they’d buggered off to Florida by then.’

‘D’you know where he’s gone, Wynn?’

‘Yeah,’ said Jones, his smirk widening. ‘But you gotta make it worth my while if I’m gonna tell you that.’

There was yet another bark of laughter in the background.

‘Tyler’s not there now, is he?’ said Robin, struck by a sudden suspicion. ‘Listening to you talk to me?’

Robin heard a door opening and slamming and a lot of chortling.

‘No, ’course not,’ said Jones, grinning more broadly than ever.

‘Could you introduce me to the friend you’ve got there, listening in?’ Robin asked.

The camera made a dizzying spin as Jones turned his phone to face a young man with crooked brown teeth, who was sitting on a sagging tweed armchair. Robin assumed the door behind the latter was the one that had just been slammed, either for comic effect by the snaggle-toothed youth, or by a third party who’d just left. He waved at Robin, leering, and the camera phone swung back towards Jones.

‘Don’t you want to put Dilys’s mind at rest, Wynn?’ Robin asked.

‘I’ve *told* ’er ’e’s gone to work in a pub, an’ *’e’s* told her, and I’ve told ’er it’s not me calling ’er,’ said Jones impatiently. ‘Lugs doesn’t want ’er to know where ’e’s working ’cause ’e doesn’t want the silly old cow bothering ’im, that’s all, but ’e’s *told* ’er ’e’s alive and she keeps saying “stop it Wynn Jones, I know that’s you”.’

Robin decided to try another tack.

‘Tyler stopped talking to you, you say?’

‘Yer.’

‘When was that?’

‘Can’t remember. Round Christmas?’

‘You’re certain it was really Tyler calling and texting you, though?’

‘’Course I am.’

‘Tell me about Tyler and Anne-Marie,’ said Robin, planning to circle back to the name of the pub.

‘Ain’t nothing to tell.’

‘They were in a relationship, weren’t they?’

‘Nah, it was that Chloe Griffiths ’e ’ad the throbber for.’

The young man with bad teeth laughed again in the background.

‘This is Chloe who lived opposite him?’

‘Yeah. Anne-Marie was nothing, ’e didn’t care. Well,’ Jones corrected himself, ‘’e cared she was dead, but not cause they were shagging.’

‘Wasn’t Anne-Marie Tyler’s girlfriend?’ said Robin.

‘Nah. Just mates.’

‘My information is that Tyler was very upset when they split up.’

‘’Oo told you that, bloody Faber White’ead?’

‘I haven’t spoken to the Whiteheads,’ said Robin.

‘It was that Chloe he liked, not Anne-Marie. He had the proper ’orn for Chloe, and she led him on, and the silly sod thought ’e was going to get somewhere, but I coulda told ’im he was wasting his time.’

‘Why’s that?’ said Robin.

‘She got stuff out of ’im, but never done nothing with ’im, and then she dropped him fucking flat and buggers off with another bloke. Snobby,’ Jones added. ‘A-levels and all that. She wasn’t gonna go with some mechanic.’

‘What stuff did Chloe get out of Tyler?’ asked Robin.

‘Bought her a fucking bracelet, all with flowers on, for her birthday,’ said Jones, as though this was an outlandish thing for Powell to have done, and Robin’s mind darted to the silver charm bracelet hidden in her wardrobe, which she’d still never worn. ‘But ’e never got anything back out of her, silly sod.’

‘Did Tyler ever mention silver to you, on the phone?’ asked Robin.

‘Silver?’ scoffed Jones. ‘Why’d he be talking about bloody silver?’

‘I don’t know, that’s why I’m asking. Can you remember any phone conversation where Tyler mentioned silver, or something that might’ve sounded like silv—?’

‘Sylvain, maybe,’ said Jones, apparently struck by a sudden thought. ‘Sylvain Deslandes.’

‘Who’s Sylvain Deslandes?’ said Robin.

‘Wolves left-back.’

‘A footballer?’

‘Yeah,’ said Jones, smirking again at the London woman’s lack of elementary knowledge.

‘Can you remember Tyler talking to you about Sylvain Deslandes, or do you just think it’s possible that happened?’

‘We could’ve talked about ’im, yeah,’ said Jones. ‘Lugs rated ’im.’

‘D’you know a girl called Zeta?’ asked Robin. ‘She was living in Ironbridge around the time Tyler left.’

‘No, I don’t know no Zeta,’ said Jones. ‘I don’t live in Ironbridge, I live in Apeton.’

‘Zeta told me Tyler overheard her talking about him, and he threatened her.’

‘Don’t blame ’im,’ said Jones forcefully. ‘If they was saying shit like that about me, I’d’ve bloody decked ’em – girl or not,’ he added, and took another swig of lager.

‘Did Tyler ever borrow any of the cars at the garage where he worked?’

‘No, ’course ’e didn’t. Why?’

‘Zeta says a car nearly hit her on Wellsey Road, and she thought—’

‘*Wesley* Road,’ Jones corrected her, with a local’s pedantic pleasure in correcting the ignorant out-of-towner.

‘So you do know Ironbridge?’ said Robin.

‘I was at school there, wa’n I? And I go there for a drink sometimes.’

‘But you’ve never run across Zeta?’

‘No, and if she’s saying Lugs fuckin’ tried to run ’er over, she’s a fuckin’ attention-seeking liar.’

‘What about Rita?’ said Robin. ‘Did you ever hear Tyler mention anyone of that name?’

‘Zeta, Rita – ’oo’s next, Peter?’

‘Ryvita,’ said the out-of-sight youth with the crooked teeth, and both young men guffawed.

‘So he never talked about a woman called Rita, or Reata?’ Robin persisted.

‘Bloody ’ell, I jus’ told you, it was fucking Chloe Griffiths ’e liked,’ said Jones impatiently, ‘so Zeta and Rita and all those tossers going on about the crash, they was talking bollocks, and if they was claiming ’e done stuff to them, too, they’re full of shit, all right? Chasing clout off the back of all what ’appened.’

‘Wynn, I’d be really glad if you’d give me the name of the pub where Tyler’s working. I’d just like to reassure Dilys that he’s alive, and that’ll be the end of it.’

‘Maybe I’ll give you the name if you give me something,’ said Jones, and the out-of-sight young man snorted with laughter.

‘Did Tyler have any other friends I might talk to, about where he’s gone?’ said Robin, ignoring the second hint that Jones wanted quid pro quos.

‘No,’ said Jones, and then, ‘well, yeah, he had friends, but nobody knows more’n I know.’

‘Can you please give me the name of the pub where he’s working, Wynn?’

Jones took a large swig from his Carlsberg can, emptying it, then crushed it one-handed and bent down to fetch another; Robin caught a glimpse of a dirty carpet and an overflowing ashtray.

‘Whachew gonna give me?’ said Jones, his fat face even redder for having bent over. He laid his mobile on his lap and Robin now saw a nicotine-stained ceiling and the underside of the can Jones was opening before his face filled the screen again.

‘Don’t you want to put Dilys’s mind at rest?’ asked Robin.

‘That old cow badmouths me, I don’t give a shit whether ’er mind’s at rest or not,’ said Jones. ‘Tell you what—’

Jones’ friend had started laughing harder than ever, although the punchline hadn’t yet been delivered. Robin thought she knew what was coming; it had become ever more likely since that first drooling emoji. Jones either didn’t know Powell’s whereabouts, or had promised his friend he would keep his secrets. He was boorish and childish, and a woman he was unlikely ever to meet was good only for amusing himself and his mates with.

‘—show us your tits and I’ll give ya—’

Robin ended the call.

She slumped back in her chair and rubbed her tired eyes. She couldn’t help thinking that Powell’s friendship with the crudely offensive Jones tended to add weight to the portrait of him given by Chloe and Zeta, rather than the one offered by Dilys and Griffiths. Opening her eyes again, Robin looked back down at her notebook.

For some reason, she was experiencing a tiny, nagging doubt, but she didn’t know why. Had she just missed something, failed to make an important connection? She read back over her notes, but couldn’t see anything obvious, so she tried to remember everything Jones had said, aside from the bits she’d thought important enough to transcribe. *Dilys thinks*

Jones pretending to be Tyler. Bracelet for Chloe. Zeta, Rita, who's next, Peter? Apeton. Wesley Road.

Robin heard the door of the flat open and close; Murphy had returned. He entered the room seconds later, rummaging in his gym bag.

'Oh, for *fuck's* sake – I've left my phone at the fucking gym.'

'Here,' said Robin, holding out her own.

Murphy called his own phone and, after a brief conversation, hung up.

'They've got it at the front desk. Shall I pick up a curry on my way back?'

'That'd be great,' said Robin, yawning.

Murphy departed again. Robin sat thinking about Tyler Powell, for whom she'd never found any social media. Turning back to her laptop, she opened both Twitter and Instagram and began searching for variations on the names 'Lugs' and 'Powell'.

After twenty minutes, she found an Instagram account she thought might, possibly, have been Tyler's: LugzCarz. It featured nothing but pictures of vintage motors interspersed with photos of engines on which the person posting was working. The account had few followers, but two things made Robin suspect it was Powell's: there had been no additions since May of the previous year, when Powell had left Ironbridge under a cloud of suspicion, and beneath a picture of a 1965 Austin-Healey Mark III somebody had replied: *fuck off posting cars like we don't know what you did*. However, as far as clues to Powell's current whereabouts went, the account was useless.

Robin closed down the website, stretched and got to her feet.

Murphy had left his gym bag behind. It had leaked a puddle of clear fluid. Evidently he hadn't put the lid of his water bottle on securely enough.

Robin opened the bag, to find a tangle of damp gym clothes. Sure enough, the bottle contained only dregs, and the top wasn't properly screwed back on.

A faint smell made her sniff her fingers. Unable to believe the evidence of her nose, Robin put her index finger into her mouth.

Still crouched, tasting pure spirit, she felt again that icy wave of shock she'd felt on finding the diamond stud that had flown from the bedclothes in that house in Deptford, the day she'd left Matthew for good. She thought of the upswing in gym sessions and runs that she'd imagined were doing

Murphy so much good. She recalled Christmas Eve, when she'd thought, if she hadn't known better, he'd been drinking, like her brothers. She remembered the night of their worst row.

Blank-faced, she fetched kitchen roll and mopped up the spilled excess on the floor, then set the water bottle, with its incriminating dregs, on the coffee table. She stood for another minute, staring at it, then headed into the kitchen, where she made a methodical search of the cupboards that turned up no spirits whatsoever.

The sky outside was dark; she hadn't noticed night falling. She headed into the bedroom and opened Murphy's wardrobe. Presumably her boyfriend had searched other people's cupboards and drawers in a professional capacity, but private detectives rarely if ever got to rifle through the personal belongings of suspects.

Robin had to stand on tiptoe to access the top shelf. Behind a pile of T-shirts and a small box of foreign currency and old charging leads was a hessian bag that clinked when she touched it. She tugged it down, already certain of what she was about to see.

There were six bottles of vodka inside, one of them almost empty.

90

Yet something seemed to prick
And tingle in his blood; a sleight—a trick—
And much would be explained.

Robert Browning
Sordello: Book the Second

Strike was, yet again, back in Carnival Street in Haringey, watching the house where Plug's friends were keeping the gigantic black dog. He was starting to feel a lot of sympathy for the client's view that it was outrageous Plug hadn't been arrested yet. Strike wasn't overly sentimental about animals; with the sole exception of a snake he'd once succeeded in catching as a boy, he'd never felt the urge for a pet. Nevertheless, what he'd witnessed at the dog fight, and seen of Plug since, had convinced him the sadistic bastard deserved a prison sentence, as soon as possible, thereby freeing both his mother and his son from his bullying and coercion.

Strike was currently standing in a patch of deep shadow beneath a non-functioning street lamp, vaping and waiting for the reappearance of his target. Stars appeared gradually above him, a little more visible than they might have been in a better lit street, though by no means as bright as they'd been when viewed from Sark. Preferring not to brood about the night at the Old Forge, Strike crossed the road and found himself another patch of shadow on the pavement outside the junkyard. A large sign proclaimed that the place was called Brian Judge Scrap and its border fence ran the length of the road. Strike could see the tops of heaps of compacted metal. He wondered whether Robin's old Land Rover had been consigned to such a metal cemetery.

A rusted van passed and pulled up at the entrance of the yard. The driver

killed the lights, got out and went to speak into the intercom beside the gate.

As the man's face was illuminated by the security light over the gate, Strike had the strange feeling he'd seen him somewhere before. He was smaller than average, hairy, fortyish, very dark and not particularly good-looking. Strike had the idea he'd once seen the man wearing a suit and tie rather than the grubby sweatshirt and jeans he was currently sporting, and that he'd been walking along with a group of similarly smartly attired others, but when or where this might have happened, he couldn't think.

Chains clinked from within the yard. The gates began to open. The driver got back into the van, leaving the lights off, and drove inside. The gates closed again.

Where the hell had he seen that man before? At a wedding? A funeral? He associated him vaguely with church, but Strike hadn't set foot in a church more than a handful of times in the past ten years. The dark man most certainly hadn't attended either Ted's or Joan's funerals, nor had he been present in the empty church Strike had spent part of the morning he'd learned that Charlotte was dead.

The door of the house Strike was watching opened. Plug emerged, holding a large, wriggling puppy. Strike took a few photos from the shadows and was about to tail Plug back up the street when he suddenly remembered where he'd seen the van driver before.

A few years previously, Strike and Robin had investigated a cold case that had brought them within the orbit of a pair of violent criminals called the Ricci brothers. The pair visited their father, Niccolò (a gangster who'd been known as 'Mucky' in his pimping and pornography-making heyday), every Sunday at his nursing home. Strike could now visualise the group turning up, children and wives smartly dressed, the two men in suits. The older brother, Luca, had had the more fearsome reputation, but Marco, the younger of the two, and the man who'd just driven a van into Brian Judge Scrap, had his own respectable tally of acid attacks and knifings.

A powerful instinct was telling Strike to stay put, rather than tail Plug, so he watched Plug out of sight without following. Now alone on the otherwise deserted street, Strike asked himself what he was playing at, but had no answer, except that his subconscious, having revealed the identity of the man in the van, seemed to be trying to tell him something else.

He resumed his position in the first patch of shadow in which he'd

lurked, on the opposite side of the street to the scrapyard. Ten minutes passed, with Strike staring at the sign giving the junkyard's name. Then, rather as scrap itself may slide and settle, something in the depths of his mind shifted, and he saw what had lain hidden, and knew why he'd stayed.

Cockney rhyming slang.

Brian Judge.

Judge.

Barnaby Rudge.

As he felt in his pocket for his mobile, a Renault glided to a halt in front of the gates. Marco Ricci slid back out of the yard, got into the car, and it drove away. From inside the scrapyard came a rumbling sound. An odd time to start the noisy business of compacting a vehicle or firing up an incinerator, but under certain circumstances, such jobs might be a matter of urgency.

Shanker answered Strike's call within thirty seconds.

''S'up, Bunsen?'

'Wanted to ask you a question. Do you, personally, have any stake in Barnaby's?'

When Shanker spoke again, he sounded cagey.

'Why're you askin'?'

'Answer me.'

'I ain't ever used it, personal,' said Shanker. 'No.'

'So the police couldn't tie you to anything in Haringey? Specifically, Carnival Street?'

Strike waited for Shanker to deny that Barnaby's was in Carnival Street, but instead, in an ominous tone, he asked, 'Woss goin' on, Bunsen?'

'I'm giving you a heads-up, in return for the one you gave me a few months back.'

''Oo's grassed?' said Shanker furiously.

'Someone was tailed and certain suspicious activity was observed,' said Strike.

'*Fuck*,' said Shanker. Then, 'You ain't wiv a pig right now, are ya?'

'You think I'd call you if I had a copper with me?' said Strike.

''Ow do I know? Know enough o' the fuckin' cocksuckers, dontcha?'

'They speak highly of you, too,' said Strike. 'All right. Just wanted to give you advance warning.'

‘Awright, cheers,’ said Shanker grumpily, and he hung up.

91

… forgive me! I abase—
Know myself mad and monstrous utterly
In all I did that moment; but as God
Gives me this knowledge—heart to feel and tongue
To testify—so be you gracious too!
Judge no man by the solitary work
Of—well, they do say and I can believe—
The devil in him…

Robert Browning
The Inn Album, IV

At exactly the moment Robin heard Murphy's key turn in the lock of the front door again, Strike called her mobile. She refused the call and waited, feeling sick, for Murphy to reappear in the sitting room, which he did seconds later, phone in one hand and a curry in his other.

'Got you chicken Madras,' he said, smiling and holding up the bag.

Then his eyes fell on the open water bottle Robin had positioned on the coffee table in front of her.

'What's that doing there?'

'It spilled,' said Robin. 'In your sports bag.'

'What were you doing rummaging in my—?'

'It leaked out onto the floor,' said Robin. 'I was mopping it up when I realised what it was.'

She stared up at him, waiting, feeling strangely shivery, like someone in the early stages of flu.

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. He looked at the bottle with its vodka dregs, back at Robin, then said, 'I…'

Robin had imagined his possible reactions while waiting for him to return. She'd wondered whether he'd try and pretend this was a one-off lapse, even that someone else had filled the bottle without his knowledge. Life had taught her there were few limits on the lies desperate men were prepared to tell.

Murphy's eyes filled with tears. He dropped the takeaway and sat down in an armchair, face in his hands, and began to sob. There was no question that his tears were genuine: he was making noises that were barely human; strangled, whooping wails, his whole body shaking.

Robin had never seen him cry before, but she offered no comfort. She wanted to hear what he had to say, how many more untruths he was prepared to tell.

At last, he began to talk in broken sentences, not looking at her, and still crying.

'Those kids who were shot… I fucked up… it was all on me… I thought the eyewitness was bullshitting… went and arrested the wrong… it was all on me, I did it… I was sure the fucker had done it… I got rough with him… investigation… complaints…

'I had a beer in the pub… just one… couldn't stop… couldn't fucking stop… you're going to leave, aren't you?'

He looked up at her, red-eyed, face wet.

'You've gone on and *on* about honesty,' whispered Robin, 'and *all this time*, you've been drinking…'

'Not all the time – I swear, not all the time, it's been stop-start – I kept trying to – I'm going back to AA tomorrow. I'll throw all the booze I've got out, you can watch me doing it.'

'You've got more, in this flat?' said Robin, testing to see what he'd say.

'Yeah, in – in the wardrobe,' said Murphy. 'I'll do it right now. Robin, you're literally the best thing that happened to me, I'll make this up to you —'

'What about that night?' she said. 'The night I got pregnant?'

'I wasn't drunk then,' he said quickly. 'It started after that.'

She didn't believe him. Getting up off the sofa, she went into his bedroom to fetch the overnight holdall she'd already packed, and her coat. When she returned, Murphy was on his feet.

'Robin, I swear I'm going back to AA tomorrow, it'll stop—'

‘I need… not to be here,’ said Robin, pulling her coat on. Her insides felt icy. For months now she’d felt guilty about lying to him by omission, while he’d been hiding this gigantic secret.

‘Is this it?’ he said, sounding panicked. ‘It’s over?’

‘I need some time,’ said Robin.

‘Do you love me?’

‘Yes,’ she said automatically.

‘The house—’

‘We need to withdraw the offer,’ said Robin. She’d thought that through as well, while he’d been picking up his phone from whichever pub or bar he’d been in, unless he really had gone to the gym and sat in the café, drinking neat vodka, pretending to be rehydrating after exercise.

‘No,’ said Murphy. ‘Robin, please—’

‘You need to focus on getting sober,’ said Robin. ‘We’re not adding moving house to everything else that’s going on. I’ll call you when I’ve—’

‘Decided how to break it to me gently that it’s over?’ said Murphy, starting to sob again. ‘Robin, don’t go. Please don’t leave. I swear, I’m going to clean up—’

‘I’ll talk to you tomorrow,’ said Robin. She shouldered her holdall and headed out of the front door.

92

My lad, no pair of kings our mothers bore…

A. E. Housman
IX, Last Poems

Strike assumed Robin was having too good an evening with Murphy to bother picking up his call, which somewhat blunted his sense of triumph about his unexpected Barnaby's epiphany. Tired, but with no desire to go home and be depressed in his attic, he had decided to head for Harlesden and the last known address of Jim Todd's mother, Nancy Jameson, née Philpott.

Forty minutes after leaving Carnival Road, he pulled up in a car park flanked on three sides by low-rise blocks of flats. Even in semi-darkness, Magdalen Court looked a dismal place; Strike would have chosen Carnival Street and a view of the scrapyard before this. Litter was strewn everywhere. A small patch of dead grass beside Strike's parking space was covered in cigarette ends. Graffiti covered several grey walls. The buildings were of concrete and in their diluted brutalism looked like cheap homages to the National Theatre. Long grey balconies stretched across each floor, doors set at regular intervals. Squinting upwards, Strike saw Nancy Jameson's flat, number 39, illuminated on the second floor of the middle block. A light was on in her window.

A group of five youths stood vaping a short distance away from where Strike had parked, all eyeing the BMW speculatively. Two of the youths were white, two brown and the last black. Strike headed straight for them, entering a fug of cannabis vapour.

'There's a fiver in it for each of you if that car's in the same state I left it in when I get back downstairs.'

'Wha'?' said one of the white boys blearily; he had long, dry peroxided

hair and was wearing a hoodie emblazoned with the words WACKEN OPEN AIR.

‘Yeah, all right,’ said the black youth, who was tall, wiry, and wore no jacket over his Snoop Dogg T-shirt, in spite of the chilliness of the evening.

Strike headed for the stairwell visible on the corner of the middle building. The interior walls were graffitied, too, and someone had recently either thrown a takeaway curry over the banisters, or vomited. Strike, who’d lived in places like this with his mother, offered up an inner prayer of gratitude that he no longer had to.

He reached the second-floor balcony and knocked on the door of flat 39. Nobody answered.

Glancing down into the forecourt he saw the five youths staring up at him.

‘D’you know Nancy Jameson?’ he called down at them.

One of the two South Asian boys, who had a patchy beard, called back,

‘She’ll be pissed.’

His companions laughed. Strike knocked again. Nobody answered.

He moved to look through the window, but the very dirty net curtains made it almost impossible to make out more than the fact that a lamp was switched on. Nevertheless, after watching for a few seconds, he thought he saw a movement in the corner of the room.

He returned to the front door and knocked a third time. There was no response. He returned to the car park.

‘You know Nancy, do you?’ he asked the bearded youth, as he approached the group.

‘Yeah, she’s a right old bitch,’ said the teenager, to mutters of agreement and laughs from his friends.

‘Seen her lately?’

The boy shook his head.

‘Any of you?’ said Strike, looking around the group.

‘I seen her,’ said the second white boy, who was wearing a Millwall football strip. ‘Wiv a fat bloke.’

‘Younger than herself?’

The boy shrugged. Strike remembered being that age himself; everyone over forty looked decrepit.

‘All right,’ he said, ‘I have reason to believe Nancy might’ve done

herself an injury and is unable to open the front door.'

It was a flimsy excuse, but as the youths would be witnesses to what he was doing in any case, Strike thought he might as well lay the foundation of a defence now. He returned to his car and extracted his bunch of skeleton keys from the glove compartment.

'You gonna break in?' said the bearded youth, in interest.

'It's not breaking in,' lied Strike.

'Can we come?' said the youth in the Millwall top.

'Worried about Nancy too, are you?' said Strike.

'Yeah,' said the second of the South Asian boys, who alone was wearing a coat, and whose acne looked painful. 'We've been dead worried.'

'And you think I ought to get in there and check on her, do you?' said Strike, still thinking of what he might have to tell a lawyer.

The boy with acne laughed.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Def'nitely.'

Strike supposed it was the skeleton keys that interested them, or perhaps they wanted to witness the old woman's drunken outrage at a stranger entering her flat. He doubted there was much else to do in Magdalen Court on a Sunday night in February.

'I need at least one of you to keep an eye on my car,' he said.

'Does the one minding the car get the whole twenny-five quid?' asked the black youth.

'No, but he gets an extra fiver,' said Strike.

'Awright then, I'll stay,' said the boy.

So Strike traipsed back upstairs, the two white boys and the two South Asian boys following in his wake.

'That was Baggy,' he heard one of the boys saying to another, pointing at the curry or vomit splattered at the foot of the stairs, and they all chuckled.

Strike knocked a fourth time on Nancy's flat door without result, so he inserted the key in the lock and turned it. No inside chain had been put up, so he wasn't obliged to shoulder the door or break any part of it.

'What's that fucking smell?' said the bearded youth, pushing forwards, but finding himself impeded by the arm Strike had just thrown up.

'Stay here,' said the detective firmly. 'Do *not* come in.'

The unmistakeable, sickly sweet smell of decaying flesh had just

assaulted his nostrils. He could hear the buzzing of flies.

‘*Stay*,’ he said firmly to the youths, and he proceeded down the narrow hall to look through the open door to his right, where the lamp was still switched on and where an incredibly emaciated cat let out a piteous miaow, trotted past him and escaped onto the balcony.

The bodies of Jim Todd and a woman Strike assumed to be his mother, Nancy, were lying on the dirty carpet in a foul miasma encouraged by the gas fire that continued to blaze. Todd, who was fully dressed, had been stabbed multiple times. His now black blood had soaked his shirt and the floor beneath him. There was evidence that the starving cat had chewed off part of his face. Nancy, a small, slight woman in a nightdress, had been killed with a single knife wound to the chest. The *tache noire*, a horizontal stripe, was visible in her dull, staring eyes, in one of which a maggot was wriggling.

‘FUCK!’

Strike turned: the youths had, of course, disregarded his instruction to stay put. The boy with acne had clapped a hand over his mouth.

‘Out,’ said Strike. ‘*Out!*’

Three of the youths blundered backwards but the bearded boy remained, apparently unable to move. Strike took him roughly by the shoulder of his jacket and marched him out onto the balcony, too late to stop the boy in the Millwall strip yelling down to his mate, who was watching Strike’s car,

‘*They’ve been fucking murdered!*’

‘Shut up,’ snarled Strike. ‘This isn’t a fucking game.’

The door of flat 38 now opened and a woman with a heavily lined face, dyed red hair and a tattooed throat came outside in dressing gown and slippers.

‘Woss going on?’ she demanded angrily.

‘With you in a minute,’ said Strike.

He turned to the boy with acne, who looked very sick and seemed less excited than the others, which Strike felt indicated a level of maturity.

‘Call the police. Tell them—’

‘I said, *what’s going on?*’

‘Just a moment, madam—’ Strike lowered his voice. ‘Tell them two people have been murdered and give them the add—’

‘I ain’t stayin’ if the police are comin’,’ said the boy in the WACKEN

hoodie, and he set off at a jog, pushing the neighbour aside as he went.

'Oi!' she said, glaring after him. 'What's that smell?' she added, striding closer.

'Give the police the address,' Strike continued, still talking to the boy with acne. 'Then go down and wait, so you can show them up here – *do not fucking tell anyone else*,' Strike added, seeing the other two boys were already busy with their phones. 'We don't want fucking sightseers and you don't want to be charged with obstruction of justice.'

This, of course, was an entirely empty threat, but it did the job; both boys shoved their phones back into their pockets.

'I *said*—' began the neighbour ominously.

'There's been an accident,' said Strike, as the three youths headed back towards the stairs. 'The proper authorities are being notified.'

'But—'

Strike stepped back inside flat 39 and closed the door in the woman's face.

No matter that he'd seen plenty of bodies in his life, decaying corpses held no attraction for Strike. Nevertheless, he pulled his coat lapel up over his face to block out the worst of the carrion smell and returned to the sitting room, determined to make the most of the ten or fifteen minutes he was likely to have before the police arrived.

Another glance at the bodies confirmed his opinion that they'd been dead for days, even though putrefaction had undoubtedly been hastened by the gas fire. Todd, he observed, had a head injury, in addition to having been knifed several times in the abdomen and neck.

Strike looked around the small, fairly bare room. The woodchip wallpaper was peeling in places. The TV was at least ten years old. A large, angled, solid crystal paperweight lay on the floor, covered with dried blood and a single grey hair. Otherwise, there was no sign of a struggle.

Strike went to check the rest of the small flat. The bathroom wasn't overly clean, but showed no traces of blood. Nancy's bedroom was cluttered, untidy and smelled unsavoury. The next room was crammed with junk, but the single bed, with its disarranged duvet, suggested that Todd had been sleeping there. A corner of a book was visible beneath the pillow, which Strike moved to expose the title: *How I Made Over $1,000,000 Playing Poker*, by Doyle 'Texas Dolly' Brunson.

A distant siren was growing steadily louder. Strike could hear voices outside: more neighbours were coming out of their flats, massing like coffin flies. Pulling his coat lapel back over his nose, Strike headed out of the flat in time to see the flashing blue light enter the dark forecourt.

PART EIGHT

For months he had been following up a vein which ran out under the sea, and grew richer and richer as he laid it bare. He believed it would lead him to the mother vein…

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

93

You have had your turn and spoken your home-truths:
The hand's mine now, and here you follow suit.
Thus much conceded, still the first fact stays—
You do despise me…

Robert Browning
Bishop Blougram's Apology

Strike's professional life had more often seen him as interrogator rather than interrogated, but in recent years he'd found himself on the uncomfortable end of a police interview far more often than he'd have liked. Admittedly, there'd been occasions when he'd been there as a victim – the previous year he and Robin had been shot at, and the year before that an explosive device had been sent to their office – but this was the third occasion on which Strike had turned up a corpse in London, and that was without taking into account the two that Robin had found. Considering the matter impersonally, he could understand why the Met might be getting touchy about what was starting to look like a predilection, rather than happenstance.

He drove himself to the local police station, accompanied by a uniformed officer, and gave a statement, waiving his right to a lawyer. After listening to Strike's account of how he'd come to find the two dead Jamesons, which included the fact that he'd been hired to identify the body in the Ramsay Silver vault, his interlocutor, an older man with a squint, demanded that Strike hand over his skeleton keys, which didn't bother him, because he had several sets. The officer then left the room muttering about needing to make some calls. The detective remained alone at the scratched grey table for nearly an hour, vaping until told not to by an irate female officer who'd brought him a tepid cup of tea.

When the officer with the squint finally returned, it was to announce that Strike was going to be taken to Scotland Yard. When Strike asked whether he could drive his own car again, he was told ‘no’, and then, almost as an afterthought, placed under arrest.

‘What for?’ he asked, sure of the answer, but wanting confirmation.

‘Breaking and entering,’ said the sergeant with the squint.

It was almost midnight by the time Strike got out of the police car at Scotland Yard. The last time Strike had been here, he’d been genuinely, as opposed to euphemistically, assisting the Met with their enquiries. He was taken to a new interview room on an upper floor and, again, left alone.

Bearing in mind Wardle’s warning that he’d seriously pissed off the murder investigation team he assumed he was about to meet, Strike was intending to be honest as far as was practicable, while maintaining a sensible level of self-preservation. A jury might forgive his ingress into Mrs Jameson’s flat if convinced that he’d thought the two people on the floor might have been saved, so he intended to stick stubbornly to the story of which he’d laid foundations back in Magdalen Court. Should he find the investigative team intransigent, he was holding in reserve a serviceable metaphorical stick and a tempting informational carrot, and was confident both could be deployed to good effect. He therefore took out his vape pen and resumed his quiet enjoyment of nicotine until, at shortly before one o’clock in the morning, two plainclothes officers entered the room: a flabby-looking white man of around fifty, who wore a cheap-looking suit and a constipated expression, and a woman in her mid-thirties who had shoulder-length red hair. If forced to give an opinion, Strike would have called this woman prettyish. She had a large mole on her cheek, teeth with large gaps between them, but a good complexion and attractive green eyes. He had a feeling this might be Murphy’s contact: the woman called Iverson with whom Robin’s boyfriend had once had a drunken grope. Strike wondered whether the pair been summoned from their beds to interview him, or were pulling all-nighters. The man’s uptight expression might have been explained by either.

He switched on the recording device and introduced himself as DCI Northmore and, confirming Strike’s guess, the redhead as DCI Iverson. Northmore gave the date and time, revealing himself to have extremely bad breath, which Strike could smell from four feet away. Northmore invited

Strike to state his name and address, asked him to confirm that he'd waived his right to a lawyer, then informed him that Iverson was investigating the silver vault murder, whereas he was enquiring into the murder of Sofia Medina. Strike was interested in this last piece of information: the Met had evidently reconsidered their opinion that the man and woman seen in St George's Avenue were figments of Mandy's imagination.

Northmore consulted the written notes the uniformed officer from Harlesden had handed over, then said,

'You say you've been hired to identify the body that was found at Ramsay Silver on the twentieth of June last year.'

'That's right,' said Strike.

'Who's hired you?'

'Can't tell you that, sorry.'

'You understand you're under arrest?' said Northmore, who had large grey pouches under his bloodshot blue eyes.

'Yep, grasped that,' said Strike.

'You've forfeited the right to remain silent.'

'I've signed a legally binding contract with my client, who wants confidentiality.'

'Those rules don't apply when it's law enforcement asking the questions, Mr Strike.'

'Nothing I did this evening has anything to do with my client. I entered Mrs Jameson's flat,' Strike continued – he might as well get this bit out of the way – 'because when I looked through her window I not only saw two people lying on the floor, but signs of movement. I thought at least one of them might've been alive, and possibly in urgent need of medical attention.'

'You can't have seen any movement,' said Northmore, and another powerful gust of gingivitis washed over Strike. 'Unless you're claiming you spotted maggots through the window,' he added, with a slight sneer.

'There was a cat in the room,' said Strike. 'The lads who came upstairs with me saw it scarper when I went in. The net curtains were filthy. I couldn't tell it was an animal moving. I thought it was one of the bodies.'

'Why didn't you call an ambulance, if you thought there were two injured people lying on the floor?'

'Didn't want to waste the emergency services' time if they were lying there alive for some reason of their own.'

‘You’ve just said they weren’t answering the door.’

‘Which is why I thought someone needed to get inside urgently and see what was going on.’

They were both, Strike knew, performing for the tape. These exchanges were preliminaries to the important business before them. Northmore was reminding Strike how much trouble he was already in; Strike was laying out the defence he intended to mount, if they really wanted to charge him. The game hadn’t truly begun.

Iverson now spoke, revealing herself, unexpectedly, to be Welsh.

‘Has your client had a baby recently? Or been pregnant, over the last year?’

Strike sincerely hoped his expression hadn’t betrayed him, but the question had come as a shock.

‘Why’re you—?’

‘Wright told one of his upstairs neighbours he had a pregnant girlfriend,’ said Iverson, watching for Strike’s reaction. ‘He said he was saving up for an engagement ring.’

‘The neighbour in question being one of the Mohamed family?’ said Strike.

‘Yes,’ said Iverson.

‘I can’t disclose details about my client,’ said Strike, though the information that Wright had claimed to have a pregnant girlfriend had rattled him.

‘Where did you get the tip-off that Knowles wasn’t the man found in the silver vault?’ asked Iverson.

Noting that they were now acknowledging that they’d been well aware before tonight that Strike was investigating the body in the vault, he replied,

‘A contact.’

‘Same guy who’s previously given you tips on organised crime?’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike.

‘People might think an informant like that would do more good working with the police, than for a private detective,’ said Northmore. The man’s breath really stank; Strike was trying not to breathe through his nose. ‘Or d’you pay him well enough to make sure you’re the only one who gets tips?’

‘Not a question of money,’ said Strike, and Northmore let out a small,

derisive snort, which irritated the detective, though he tried not to show it. ‘This particular contact would collaborate with the Met when hell freezes over.’

‘But we’re to take it on his say so that Knowles went to “Barnaby’s”?’

‘No need to take it on his say so, if I can point you to exactly what and where Barnaby’s is,’ said Strike, deciding it was time to hint at his valuable informational carrot.

As he’d expected, a further silence ensued.

‘You know where it is, do you?’ said Iverson.

‘I do, yeah,’ said Strike. ‘Found out this evening, as a matter of fact.’

‘Convenient,’ said Northmore.

‘Coincidental,’ said Strike.

‘You don’t seem to feel much compunction about complicating or impeding police investigations, Mr Strike,’ said Northmore.

‘When’ve I done that?’ asked Strike.

‘You entered a murder scene without authority just a couple of hours ago.’

‘Nobody knew it was a murder scene before I got in there.’

‘You’ve been interviewing people connected to two open murder inquiries.’

‘The William Wright inquiry was closed when my agency took the case,’ said Strike. ‘You’d identified him as Knowles. I’ve passed on every bit of information that could’ve been useful to you, since we started investigating. Haven’t hidden anything.’

‘Except Barnaby’s,’ said Northmore.

‘Just told you: I only found out what Barnaby’s is this evening.’

‘How much information has DCI Ryan Murphy been feeding you?’ asked Northmore.

Out of the corner of his eye, Strike saw a stiffening of Iverson’s expression. He was surprised they’d named Murphy, on tape. Could the man be under some kind of cloud? Might he even be under investigation?

‘Zero,’ said Strike.

‘Nothing’s been let slip during bedroom talk?’ said Northmore.

‘Haven’t shagged him yet,’ said Strike. ‘Playing hard to get.’

Iverson let out a slight gasp that might’ve been a suppressed laugh.

‘Murphy’s never shared confidential information with me, and to my

knowledge he's never shared it with my partner, either,' said Strike.

'You've had no scruples about illicitly procuring evidence from our team,' said Northmore.

'If you're talking about the photos of the body, Cochran did that on her own initiative,' said Strike, 'and she's now left our agency.'

'Yeah? Why's that? Doesn't like the way you conduct business?'

Suspecting this was an allusion to the recent newspaper stories about his dealings with women, Strike chose not to answer.

'Were you surprised to find Jim Todd dead tonight, Mr Strike?' asked Iverson.

'I was, yeah,' said Strike. 'I went there to try and get his contact details out of his mother, if she had them. I didn't know he was staying with her.'

'What made you so interested in Todd?'

'I think he was the one who helped William Wright get the job at Ramsay Silver.'

He had the impression that this answer wasn't a surprise to Iverson and surmised that the silver vault murder team, too, might have reached that conclusion.

'What d'you know about Jim Todd's movements on the seventeenth of June?' asked Iverson.

'Not much,' said Strike.

'Would you happen to know why he went to Dalston?'

Strike's interest sharpened considerably.

'I'd imagine,' he said, guessing that the Met had been poring over more CCTV footage, 'he was meeting Larry McGee.'

The impassive expressions facing him seemed to indicate that this was the police's conclusion, too, but Iverson said,

'What makes you think that?'

'Because two blokes connected to the Murdoch silver heading out to Dalston, where they had no known reason to be, around the same time' (Strike couldn't be sure it had been at the same time, but was now probing) 'seems highly coincidental.'

By the lack of pushback, he surmised that McGee and Todd had indeed converged in Dalston at the same time.

'What d'you know about McGee and Todd's relationship?' asked Iverson.

‘Other than that Todd worked at Ramsay Silver, and McGee delivered the Murdoch silver there that day, very little. Todd let slip he knew McGee was dead when I interviewed him, though, which seemed strange, because he’d initially claimed not to know who he was.’

‘You’ve been in contact with McGee’s daughter,’ said Iverson.

‘I have, yeah,’ said Strike, ‘but she told me nothing useful, other than that McGee was a creep around women, which I’d already found out from his ex-colleagues at Gibsons.’

‘Offer the daughter money?’ said Northmore.

‘Why would I have offered her money?’ asked Strike, but the policeman didn’t enlighten him.

‘What made you so interested in McGee?’ asked Iverson.

‘I’m interested in everything that happened to the stolen silver. It’s tied to the murdered man I’m supposed to be identifying,’ said Strike. ‘Basic background, isn’t it?’

He hadn’t forgotten that the police’s interest in what had happened to the Murdoch silver immediately before its arrival at Ramsays had been minimal.

Iverson glanced at Northmore, who drew himself up in his chair before asking,

‘Where did you get the idea that Sofia Medina was tied to the silver vault murder?’

‘That wasn’t me, it was my partner. She spotted that the description of Medina’s body and clothing matched the description given to us of a woman who took objects out of Wright’s room in Newham. As you’re aware,’ Strike added, again for the benefit of the recording, ‘when we were told about the man and woman who entered Wright’s place in the hours before and the hours after his murder, we passed the information directly to you lot.’

‘You offered the witnesses money for information,’ said Iverson.

‘Yeah,’ said Strike. ‘They’re skint.’

‘You’ve been throwing a lot of money at potential witnesses,’ said Northmore, and the stench of diseased gums washed over Strike again, ‘which renders their testimony easy to undermine in court.’

‘If you’re telling me the Met’s never recompensed informers—’

‘You paid two of Jim Todd’s ex-neighbours, too. You can’t see how it

might muddy the waters, a well-heeled private investigator wandering around throwing cash at witnesses and suspects?' said Iverson.

The woman had some brass neck, thought Strike. She'd leaked to Murphy, knowing full well who his girlfriend was, and now sat smugly in her navy trouser suit, acting as though she, unlike Strike, had never deviated a hair's breadth from a strict professionalism. Nevertheless, Strike had to admit the case she and Northmore were building against him was a decent one. Prior to the sale of Ted and Joan's house he'd been far from well-off; all earnings had been ploughed back into the business, but it would be only too easy to depict him as the son of a multimillionaire rock star who trampled vaingloriously through open murder investigations, corrupting and perhaps suborning important witnesses to his own ends. Now he understood Northmore's first, strange hint about keeping Shanker to himself by the power of his wallet, rather than sharing him, like some kind of human metal detector, with the police.

'Did you give Gretchen Schiff money?' asked Iverson.

'My partner interviewed Schiff, and no, she didn't give her money,' said Strike, who'd decided it was time to pull out his metaphorical stick. 'Have to say, we were surprised you hadn't got the information about Oz out of Schiff, especially as Medina isn't the only young woman who disappeared after meeting him, is she?'

He had to give Iverson this much credit: she had an excellent poker face. The mention of 'Oz' hadn't caused even a slight tremor of recognition.

'You know he's done this at least twice, right?' said Strike. 'That a girl called Sapphire Neagle vanished after meeting a man who also posed as a music producer, and also gave her a ruby necklace?'

'This interview is about what *you* know, not what we know,' said Iverson.

'Just surprised you haven't appealed for information on him,' said Strike. 'Especially given the van business.'

Strike could tell Iverson really didn't want to ask him to clarify what he meant; it would be an admission of weakness. Finally she said,

'What van business?'

'Oz was looking to buy a van,' said Strike. 'The real Calvin Osgood got an email about it, but he'd never tried to buy an old van. An abandoned van was found in the vicinity of Medina's body, wasn't it?'

He could have said more, could have said that he knew a young woman who'd been either genuinely blonde, or wearing a wig, had got into a van after dropping the silver Peugeot back at the rental centre, but as he owed this knowledge to Murphy, via Robin, he kept it to himself.

'Strange, the way Truman didn't want to look at anything that didn't fit with the body being Knowles,' said Strike.

Northmore's eyes flickered towards the recording device. Strike knew perfectly well he was suddenly worried about what Strike might be about to say on tape, which was precisely why he intended to say it. If they wanted to intimidate him with the possibility of negative press, they needed to know he had stories of his own.

'As we're talking about coincidences, and the corruption of murder investigations,' Strike continued, 'I'm not sure it's public knowledge yet that Malcolm Truman's a member of the Winston Churchill Masonic Lodge, is it? Funnily enough, that's the same lodge Lord Oliver Branfoot joined a couple of years ago. He's been taking a keen interest in me lately, so I've made it my business to return the favour. I generally do return favours,' he said, looking Northmore straight in the eye.

'We're going to take a short break,' said the latter, looking up at the clock on the wall. 'Pausing our interview at one twenty-five.'

He pressed the 'off' button on the recording device, got to his feet and caught Iverson's eye. The pair of them left the room.

Strike sat alone for twenty minutes before the investigators returned, Northmore even grimmer-faced than when he'd left.

'You said you like to return favours, Mr Strike,' said Iverson.

'You know, I'd feel safer if we were still recording,' said Strike, folding his arms. Veiled threats to smear him to the papers and the very real possibility that he was about to be charged with breaking and entering didn't incline him to make deals that could be reneged upon.

After a short pause, Northmore switched the device on again, announced that it was now a quarter to two and repeated the names of those present.

'You said you like to return favours, Mr Strike.'

'Whenever I can, yeah,' said Strike.

'We might be prepared not to press charges on the breaking and entering charge, given that you thought one or both of the Jamesons might have been capable of being saved.'

‘Very decent of you,’ said Strike, with no hint of a smile.

‘But you’ll be receiving a caution for the improper use of skeleton keys.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Strike.

‘Should any information we’ve shared with you tonight be made public, it would of course compromise our investigation,’ said Iverson. ‘The same goes for any personal details you might think you have about DCI Truman —’

‘Oh, I’m completely confident about the details,’ said Strike. ‘I’ve got photographic proof he attends the Winston Churchill Lodge.’

Northmore failed to disguise a slight wince.

‘Even so—’

‘Can’t see why I’d need to share that information with anyone else,’ said Strike. ‘It’s not fun being done over by the tabloids, as I know.’ For the benefit of the recording, he added, ‘And, as I think I’ve already proven by passing you all relevant information our agency’s unearthed, I’m far from wanting to derail police investigations.’

He enjoyed Northmore’s scowl.

‘All that being so,’ said Northmore, ‘we’d be glad to know what, and where, “Barnaby’s” is.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Strike. ‘There’s a scrapyard called Brian Judge’s on Carnival Street in Haringey. Fires up its incinerators and crushes vehicles at odd times of night. Marco Ricci, brother of Luca, was there a few hours ago, dropping off a filthy transit van.’

Northmore and Iverson exchanged glances that gave Strike the feeling that suspicions might have been raised before about the scrapyard or its owner.

Iverson looked again at the clock on the wall.

‘Interview concluded at seven minutes to two.’ Having turned off the tape she said, ‘All right, Mr Strike. You’re free to go.’

Strike was tired, hungry, his leg was throbbing and he’d been forced to leave his BMW in Harlesden. Nevertheless, he felt he’d come through the night on the profit side of the ledger.

94

But when the snows at Christmas
On Bredon top were strown,
My love rose up so early
And stole out unbeknown
And went to church alone.

A. E. Housman
XXI: Bredon Hill, A Shropshire Lad

At five a.m., Robin, who'd barely slept, decided there was no point staying in bed, and got up to make herself coffee.

There were three missed calls from Murphy on her phone, all of which she'd ignored, and several texts, which she'd read as they'd come in. One of them had a video clip attached; Murphy had filmed himself pouring away bottles of vodka down the kitchen sink. Robin wondered what the point of that had been. Did he imagine she thought his hidden stock comprised the entire world's reserves?

His pleading, apologetic, explanatory texts were full of information of which she'd been unaware. He'd been placed under investigation at work and been spoken to by a superior about his drinking, after a colleague had 'ratted him out', knowing he was consuming vodka at work.

He claimed in his overnight texts that he hadn't told her any of this because of the ectopic pregnancy: he hadn't wanted to burden her, hadn't wanted to dump all his problems on her after what she'd been through. He said he'd been consumed with guilt for months, that Robin was far too good for him, that he loved her more than he'd loved any woman, but if she wanted to leave him, he'd understand, because he'd breached her trust in

ways he wasn’t going to try and justify, but he still implored her to stay, to give him another chance, to let him prove himself to her.

The cumulative effect of these texts was not only to rob Robin of sleep, but to fill her with anger, guilt and fear.

Murphy’s story contradicted itself. He’d already been under investigation at work before her hospitalisation, and she was certain he was lying about the night the pregnancy had happened, that he had indeed been drunk when they had sex. While she couldn’t place all the blame on him – it had been her choice to rely on condoms for a while, her choice not to go for the morning-after pill – she did blame him for his explosion of rage when she’d asked if he’d been drinking, which had made her feel so guilt-stricken at falsely accusing him.

And yet… with her eyes on the dark sky, Robin couldn’t lie to herself. She was far from guiltless.

Not once had Murphy criticised her for voluntarily enduring those long months undercover at Chapman Farm, which had left her in such a fragile mental state that she hadn’t wanted to restart taking hormones. He’d been nothing but kind and supportive in the wake of her return to normal life, and it was then (she realised, looking back) that he’d stopped talking to her much about his own work. She’d slid easily into a pattern of not asking him for details, of assuming that a lack of discussion about his job was what he preferred. Would a woman who genuinely loved him not have pushed harder, even if it had caused a row? He’d been duplicitous, certainly, but hadn’t she been a little too willing to be fooled? And hadn’t she been telling her boyfriend lies, either outright or by omission, for months?

Robin drank her rapidly cooling coffee, and remembered the night she’d cried, face down on the partners’ desk, about the lost baby, but also about Cormoran Strike. *You say you love me, but I feel like you withhold part of yourself from me…* was she part of the reason Murphy had turned, again, to drink? *There’s a distance between us sometimes and I don’t know if that’s just who you are, and this is how you love…* she thought of the relief that had washed over her when they’d been gazumped… *Can’t let even Christmas Eve go without sneaking off to text him…* she hadn’t texted Strike, but she’d checked her phone in the hope that he’d texted her… she was so often guilty, not by the letter, but in the spirit…

Could she leave Murphy now, at what was clearly one of the lowest

points of his life? After he'd stood by her, after Chapman Farm, and the pregnancy? What would happen to him, if she left? What if he was fired? She thought about Kim's ex, who'd killed himself after Kim had dumped him. She seemed to see, again, the beautiful face of Charlotte Campbell, viewed through bloody bathwater. In spite of everything, she believed Murphy to be a fundamentally good man. She'd told him, repeatedly, that she loved him.

Unable to bear thoughts that were leading her deeper into misery, Robin went to shower and get dressed. As she dried her hair, Murphy texted her again.

Please don't leave me. Please.

Robin didn't respond. It was ridiculously early, but she didn't care: she'd head to the office and catch up with paperwork.

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Now who beat his head in? Who would be most likely to beat his head in?

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

Shortly after leaving Tottenham Court Road station an hour later, Robin realised that Strike had sent her a text while she'd been on the Tube.

Call when you're awake, I've had a busy night

Robin pressed his number.

'What's happened?'

'I thought you'd still be asleep. Where are you?'

'Charing Cross Road.'

'The hell are you doing up so early?' said Strike.

'Couldn't sleep,' said Robin.

'Know the feeling,' said Strike. He'd taken a taxi back to Harlesden to pick up his car, deposited it in the usual garage, headed back to the office, and then, struck by an idea and feeling far too awake to go to bed, had spent the ensuing hours going back over the silver vault file.

'Where are you?' asked Robin, who could hear background chat and clinking.

'Dunno,' said Strike. 'Where am I? Hang on… Little Portland Café on Little Portland Street. I'm having a full English. Didn't have any dinner.'

'D'you want some company?'

'Yeah, if it's you,' said Strike and, tired and miserable though Robin was, she felt a flicker of comfort at these words.

‘OK, I’ll see you there.’

Shortly before she arrived at the café, she received another text from her boyfriend.

Please just call me.

Another wave of anger and guilt washed over Robin. She needed to decide what she was going to say before she responded to Murphy. She currently had no idea.

When she entered the café, an old-fashioned greasy spoon, where the air was thick with the smell of bacon fat and frying eggs, she saw Strike at a corner table looking as she felt: exhausted and slightly unkempt.

‘What’s happened?’ Robin asked, dropping into the seat opposite him.

‘You all right?’ Strike asked, because Robin looked very pale and tired.

‘Fine,’ said Robin.

She had no intention of telling Strike about Murphy’s drinking: she felt too much loyalty to her boyfriend for that.

‘Want to eat something while I tell you?’

‘Actually,’ said Robin, who hadn’t had breakfast, ‘yes.’

She ordered tea and a bacon roll, and when the waiter had departed, Strike filled her in on his overnight activities, starting with Barnaby’s, moving through the discovery of two corpses, and concluding with his arrest, interview and release without charge, by which time Robin’s roll and mug of tea had arrived, and her mouth was hanging open.

‘Oh – my – *God*.’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike. ‘And there’s more. Iverson asked me whether our client has been pregnant or had a kid recently.’

Robin’s hand flew to her mouth, exactly as Fiona Freeman’s had, when Robin had told her she’d been caught on camera putting the cipher note through the agency’s door.

‘Apparently,’ Strike continued, ‘Wright told one of the upstairs neighbours that his girlfriend was expecting.’

‘Oh no,’ Robin whispered, through her fingers.

‘He could’ve been bullshitting,’ said Strike, who’d expected this reaction.

‘But—’

‘He might’ve been trying to paint a picture of himself as a man with something going for him, for the benefit of his new neighbours.’

‘I know, but—’

‘I got a fuck of a shock when she said it,’ Strike admitted, ‘but this still doesn’t make Fleetwood Wright. For all we know, Powell or Semple might’ve knocked – been expecting kids themselves,’ Strike corrected himself quickly, because after what Robin had told him on Sark, he didn’t want to sound glib about pregnancy. ‘Anyway, I’m even keener to find Hussein Mohamed now, and Shah thinks he’s found the right house.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, just saw it in the file. The wife opened the door to Shah and he saw a wheelchair behind her in the hall. The wife says her husband’s working as an Uber driver. She seemed panicky about getting the knock on the door and shut it in Shah’s face before he could ask about Wright. I think we need to keep an eye on the house and see if we can catch Hussein going in and out between shifts.’

‘Do we tell Decima what Wright said?’

Strike chewed a mouthful of sausage, thinking.

‘I’d rather not,’ he said. ‘Not unless we get something else, something concrete. There was that bloke who called claiming to be Fleetwood, remember?’

‘Has Decima got back to you about that?’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike. ‘Predictable answer. “Everyone heard me calling Rupert ‘Bear’, that man could have been faking a deep voice” – note the tacit admission that Fleetwood *has* got a deep voice – and “everyone who worked at Dino’s knew about the nef being stolen”. She thinks it was someone impersonating him, either for a macabre joke or because they were involved in his killing and are trying to throw us off the scent. Frankly, I think we could frogmarch the living Fleetwood right up to her at this point and she’d still insist he was dead.’

‘Tish Benton’s back from Sardinia,’ said Robin, taking out her phone and bringing up Tish’s Instagram account. ‘I don’t think it was a holiday, or not entirely. She’s got a new job, which is going to mean a lot of travel. We might be lucky to catch her in London, going forwards.’

Strike took the phone from her. A pretty girl with shiny black hair

beamed out of the most recent picture, standing in front of a sign that read Hotel Serenità, with the caption:

> So thrilled to announce that from March 1st I'll be working as #brandconsultant for #ClairmontHotelsEurope!!! #travel #dreamjob #luxuryhotels

'Ah,' said Strike. 'Well, we'll have to try and doorstep her between flights.'

Robin really did look exhausted and miserable, Strike thought, as he passed her back her phone. He couldn't attribute it all to shock about the increased likelihood that Wright had been Fleetwood, because she'd arrived looking pale and sad.

'You sure you're all right?' he asked, remembering her previous admission that she hadn't been able to sleep.

'Yes,' said Robin automatically, 'fine.'

But the desire to unburden herself, if not of everything, then of something, made her add,

'Ryan's… going through a rough time.'

'Ah,' said Strike, who regretted asking, because he wasn't particularly cheered by the thought of Robin sitting up all night to console or counsel her boyfriend. 'I wasn't going to tell you this, but his name came up, in last night's interview.'

'How?' said Robin, in sudden panic.

'They asked if he'd been feeding us information – I denied it, obviously. Said he'd never told either of us anything.'

They sat in silence for a minute. Then Robin said,

'What if he was having some kind of mental crisis?'

'Who, Murphy?'

'No!' said Robin quickly. 'Rupert Fleetwood!'

'Oh,' said Strike, depressed by her protective tone.

'I know you think I'm too soft on Rupert,' she went on, 'but hear me out, please. He's being horribly bullied at work. Longcaster's taunting him about his parents' death in front of guests. He's being chased for cash by a dealer. Everyone's against his relationship. Decima announces she's

pregnant. Say Rupert had some kind of – some kind of meltdown – and stole that nef and only then realised how much worse he'd made his situation. That's a *lot* of stress. Just say he took the job at Ramsay Silver to prove something; that he could make it on his own, that he wasn't afraid of getting his hands dirty, telling himself he'd return to Decima like a hero and —'

'And get arrested for the theft of the nef,' said Strike.

'But if he wasn't thinking rationally?'

Strike swallowed a large mouthful of black pudding before saying,

'I'm not denying Fleetwood's moved up the table of possible Wrights, but answer me this. If he was genuinely happy about the pregnancy, why did he rip up the "lucky T-shirt" he was wearing when she told him?'

'I don't know,' said Robin. 'But if Wright had a pregnant girlfriend, and he *wasn't* Fleetwood, it seems really strange that no other woman has come forward looking for the father of her child. Decima's the only recent mother we know of who thinks Wright might've been her partner.'

'Possibly the woman in question thinks she's just been abandoned,' said Strike. 'The anti-Decima.'

'I still want to know why Rupert went to Sacha Legard's party,' said Robin. 'It's the last known sighting of him and it's really strange he gatecrashed it, given everything that was going on at the time. I'm going to speak to Cosima this week, I'll *force* her to talk to me, somehow… have you heard from Kim since yesterday?'

'No. Why?'

'I wouldn't have expected her to go quietly. I thought she might've come back to you, to persuade you to keep her on.'

'Not after what I said to her in that bar,' said Strike. 'No, I left a message on Pat's desk this morning to pay her the balance of what we owed her, so hopefully that's the end of her.'

'What'll she do now?'

'Join Farah Navabi's new agency, probably.'

'When can Wardle start, d'you know?'

'Wednesday. He wants to get straight on the job and he had some leave in hand. Apparently when he said he was resigning, they weren't overkeen on him hanging around. He thinks they suspect he's joining us.'

Robin glanced around at the rapidly filling café, and dropped her voice.

‘So… Todd.’

‘Extremely dead Todd,’ said Strike, ‘yeah. Exactly the same m.o. as Wright’s murder, minus dismemberment and mutilation. Blow to the back of the head and multiple knife wounds. The mother took a single stab to the stomach. She wouldn’t have taken much effort. Small and skinny.’

‘This is appalling,’ said Robin.

‘It’s not good,’ agreed Strike. ‘I think Oz has committed four murders in eight months, which puts us in serial killer territory, but I don’t think these are thrill killings – not all of them, anyway. I think he enjoyed Medina, but I doubt he got a kick out of Todd and his mother. Todd had simply become a liability, so he had to go.’

‘Because of the upskirting?’

‘I think so, yeah. He knew Todd might’ve made himself of interest to the police again, and I imagine one of the last things Oz would want is Todd in an interview room. What if Todd decided to give up Oz in some kind of plea deal?’

‘Todd *must* have been implicated in the murder of Wright himself, then?’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike, ‘and I think the police are leaning that way too; they’ve connected the dots on Todd and McGee, though I don’t think they know much more than we do. They asked me why they both went to Dalston at the same time.’

‘But Todd had a cast-iron alibi for the actual killing.’

‘He did, yeah, but I’d lay odds Todd wrote Wright’s CV and coached him to scrape through the interview. And another thought occurred to me after I left the police. If Todd found that shithole room in St George’s Avenue for Wright, he might’ve had keys at some point. Could have had spares cut and passed them to Oz. As for all the stuff he fed me about a man in sunglasses watching the shop and Temple Seventeen, and Wright being camp, I think it was all bullshit and attempted misdirection.’

‘So… Oz,’ said Robin. ‘We’re looking at a violent sex offender who kills people who become dangerous to him?’

‘A violent sex offender who shows no mercy to accomplices who can’t refrain from sex offending, even though all the evidence shows *his* self-restraint could use some work.’

‘He hasn’t been caught for any of these murders, though,’ said Robin,

‘which suggests brains.’

‘Agreed,’ said Strike. ‘Brains, and what I suspect is practice. A genuinely unhinged man might erupt into a sudden killing spree, but Oz isn’t unhinged. He’s methodical and controlled – except where girls are concerned. But even there, he hasn’t been caught yet.’

‘And you say four murders in eight months,’ said Robin, ‘but it might be five. We still don’t know what’s happened to Sapphire Neagle.’

‘I wouldn’t hold your breath on finding out, because the police are playing catch-up where Oz is concerned,’ said Strike. ‘I don’t think they connected Medina’s murder and Neagle’s disappearance until I mentioned it this morning and they didn’t seem to know the real Osgood was emailed by a stranger about a van, from which I deduce that they haven’t been back to the real Osgood or tried to retrieve the mystery messages he’s received. On the other hand, they’ve clearly reconsidered their position that the Oz and Medina sightings in St George’s Avenue were made up by Mandy for money—’

‘Finding out the silver Peugeot visited Newham twice probably did that,’ said Robin.

‘My thoughts exactly. They seemed thoroughly pissed off we know Malcolm Truman’s a mason, and even more pissed off at my suggestion that he refused to consider evidence that the body might not be Jason Knowles, which, needless to say, I made sure I said on tape.’

A yawn overtook Strike. When he’d finished, he raised his hand to the waiter to request more coffee.

‘I imagine you’ve noticed,’ he said, once his mug had been topped up, ‘there’ve been no press stories about Lord Oliver Branfoot’s private porn movies? The de Leon brothers aren’t upholding their side of the bargain.’

‘It’s only been a few days. We did agree they could prepare their mother first.’

‘I want Branfoot neutralised,’ said Strike. ‘We’re vulnerable in more ways than one while he’s skulking around, sending thugs to intimidate us. “We think you might have a flat where you make dirty films” isn’t a solid enough basis for a counter-attack. We need proof. An address.’

‘You still think the man who threatened me was Branfoot’s?’

‘Nobody else connected to this case has got blokes at their fingertips who’d be happy to break the law in exchange for a wad of cash, and while

the fucker's got a hotline to Culpepper, we're still at risk of more bullshit press stories. I got a snide remark from DCI Northmore about the way I conduct business. I'd say he'd be fucking delighted to see me done over in the tabloids again. It'd help a lot if we could rule out Powell or Semple. How was Wynn Jones?'

Robin gave a short summary of her talk with Jones, concluding,

'If I had to bet, I'd say he knows where Tyler is, and has promised not to tell. He claims to be convinced Tyler didn't tamper with the car, but Tyler's alibi for that night is really feeble – feeling ill and staying at home in his parents' empty house. But on the other hand, it really does stretch credulity that Tyler followed them all the way to Birmingham to fiddle with the ABS in the car park.'

'It does, yeah,' said Strike. He ran a hand over his unshaven jaw, then said, 'Did you believe Jones, when he said Powell never mentioned silver to him?'

'He kind of scoffed at the idea,' said Robin. 'Maybe they *were* talking about Sylvain Deslandes. Do we keep Pat calling all pubs called the Silver Something? We're running up a lot of man hours for Decima to pay.'

'Yeah, but as we've got fuck-all else on Powell… incidentally, I finally made direct contact with the Scottish Gateshead on Thursday. When I asked whether she was Rena Liddell she yelled "don't say my name" or words to that effect and hung up, so I think it's safe to assume she is. I've left messages on all her old social media accounts, asking her to get back in touch. Christ knows where she is. Not London, from what she's said. I thought she might've gone back to Scotland, but I had a look overnight and I can't find a single Scottish pub called the Golden Fleece. Unless I've missed one, it's a name that only appeals to the English and Welsh…

'Anyway,' he said, 'I'm going to visit Holborn Library this morning.'

'To find out why Scots don't have pubs called "the Golden Fleece"?' said Robin, nonplussed.

'No, because I want to see if they've got any old plans of Freemasons' Hall and Wild Court. I can't find anything online, but the library might have old stuff in a file.'

'What d'you want plans of Wild Court for?'

'Because I still can't fathom how Wright and Oz got to the shop that night. You said before there must be CCTV footage of them heading

towards the shop, but if the police had found it, they'd have released it by now. The only people spotted going into Wild Court around the right time were those four students they've ruled out. So how the hell did two men manage to materialise in Wild Court without being seen by anyone, or captured on camera?'

'I don't know, but how would plans—? Wait,' said Robin, unsure whether to be amused or not. 'You're not suggesting some kind of—?'

'Secret passage between the hall and the shop it backs on to? I grant you it sounds far-fetched, but I want to check when that shop was built, and find out whether any part of the hall was converted to make it. If there's a connection between the two buildings, we'd potentially be looking for two men who entered Freemasons' Hall on the evening after Wright got on the Tube at Covent Garden.'

'But the hall would be closed – oh. You mean to attend a masonic meeting?'

'Possibly. I'm trying to find out which lodges met there that night. If Oz and Wright were both masons, it might explain Wright trusting Oz, even though he knew someone might be coming for him.'

'But if Wright trusted Oz because they were both masons, Oz could have lured him *anywhere*,' said Robin. 'Why meet him at Freemasons' Hall, with loads of fellow masons as witnesses, then lead him away from the meeting just so he could be killed at Ramsay Silver?'

'Why did it have to be done in the vault,' said Strike, frowning. 'Yeah. Right back where we started.'

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… the cold strange eyes of a little Mermaiden
And the gleam of her golden hair.

Matthew Arnold
The Forsaken Merman

News of the murders of Jim Todd and his mother hit the London *Evening Standard* the following day. To Strike's relief, his presence at the scene wasn't mentioned. For once, his own and the Met's interests seemed to have coincided: they didn't want publicity about the fact that the Strike and Ellacott Detective Agency might be ahead of them in investigations into the silver vault murder, and Strike had no wish to encourage journalists back into Denmark Street. The papers didn't seem to have spotted the connection between the murder of Wright and those of Todd and his mother, for which Robin, too, was grateful. She needed no further complications in her severely strained relations with Murphy.

She and her boyfriend met at last on Tuesday evening, back in the Duke pub. Murphy looked as though he'd lost weight in the two days since they'd last seen each other. Slightly hunched and red-eyed, he listened as Robin delivered the speech she'd planned.

'I'm not leaving you,' she began, and tears started in Murphy's eyes; he reached out and grabbed her hand, but Robin pulled it away. 'But we can't pretend everything's fine and normal, Ryan, because it really isn't. I can't move in with you until we've rebuilt some trust.'

'That's fair,' said Murphy. 'That's completely fair. I thought I'd fucking lost you for good,' he said, his voice breaking. 'I love you so fucking much, Robin.'

'I love you too,' said Robin, 'but we *do* need honesty this time. I need

you to tell me exactly what's going on, at work, and with your drink—'

'I went back to AA yesterday,' said Murphy. 'I'd stopped going to meetings. There was so much pressure at work I told myself I couldn't afford the time – but that comes first, now. If this bloody investigation was only over—'

'Why are you being investigated? Drinking?'

'No, it's just the first guy I arrested for the gang shooting,' muttered Murphy, who very clearly didn't want to elaborate, but Robin pressed him.

'But why are they investigating you for that?'

'He… claims I roughed him up.'

'Did you?'

There was a short pause. Then Murphy nodded.

'He's got plenty of previous and his break-up with the kids' mother was fucking toxic. I wasn't the only one who thought he'd done it. I lost it. I'd seen the younger boy with half his head blown off,' Murphy said, knuckles white around his glass of sparkling water. 'Word was, he didn't think the little one was his. I know I shouldn't've… the mother's fucking taken him back, as well, and she's egging him on to sue, because she fucking hates coppers as much as he does.'

'Ryan, I'm sorry, that's terrible. But going forwards, you've *got* to tell me what's going on with you. You can't just bury it all.'

'I know,' said Murphy, reaching again for her hand, and this time Robin didn't pull away. 'I will.'

Standing in the chilly rain on Wednesday afternoon, watching the front of Dino's, Robin told herself she was doing the right thing. She and Murphy had been through a lot together and she truly cared about him. Walking out on him at this point would be wanton cruelty. She'd decide later, when he was back on an even emotional keel, whether… but this was a thought she kept refusing to finish. Charlotte Campbell, in a blood-filled bath; Kim's ex-boyfriend, in his carbon monoxide-filled car. She couldn't leave Murphy now.

Work wasn't proving much of a distraction today. Robin doubted she was going to get much out of shivering beneath her umbrella for hours, even though she'd concluded that her only realistic possibility of speaking to Cosima face to face was when the girl was either entering or leaving Dino's, which was the only place she ever seemed to go without a posse of

friends. The trouble was that there were only a few short steps between the street and the club's front door, over which a doorman in a burgundy tail coat and top hat stood guard. Nevertheless, experience had taught Robin that a sudden, unexpected approach sometimes surprised answers out of interviewees, and the agency's lack of progress in discovering Rupert Fleetwood's whereabouts had decided her on this last-ditch effort.

As she stood there, scanning the rainswept road for some sign of her quarry, the hypervigilant Robin noticed a middle-aged man sitting in a parked Honda Accord a short distance from her Land Rover. He seemed to have been watching her, because he turned his head quickly when Robin looked at him. He had thick greying hair and an unusually small nose, which resembled a button mushroom in the middle of a large, square face. Robin continued watching him, wondering whether she should be worried. He looked larger and softer than the man who'd brandished the masonic dagger at her. She shifted position slightly, hoping to see his number plate, but then spotted Dino Longcaster's chauffeured Mercedes gliding down the road, and recognised Cosima, sitting alone in the back seat.

She almost ran to the opposite pavement. By the time the car pulled up, Robin was waiting, ready for Cosima to get out. The girl took her time about it, first brushing her long hair and reapplying lip gloss while looking in a flip-down mirror in the car's ceiling, and typing out what appeared to be a text before finally putting her belongings in her bag and opening the passenger door.

'Cosima,' said Robin at once, as the doorman came rushing towards the pair, holding a large burgundy umbrella.

The girl looked at Robin in surprise.

'My name's Robin Ellacott. I'm a private detective. I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about Rupert—'

'What?' said Cosima, staring at Robin, while the doorman sheltered her from the rain with his umbrella.

'—Rupert Fleetwood. What did he say to you at Sacha Legard's birthday party?'

'I – what?' said Cosima again, but colour had flooded her pale face. 'I don't – leave me alone!'

'Cosima, you must know Rupert's gone missing,' said Robin, hurrying alongside the girl as she strode towards the entrance of Dino's. 'Your

sister's incredibly worried about him, and—'

'*Leave me alone!*' repeated Cosima shrilly, and ducking out from beneath the umbrella, she ran through the revolving door and disappeared from sight.

The doorman, who was a tall man in his fifties, said,

'You've had your orders. Get out of here.'

'This is a public pavement,' Robin replied coldly.

She retreated into a doorway a short way from Dino's, wondering what her next move should be. She supposed there was a remote possibility that Cosima, like Fyola Fay, might come back to find out what Robin already knew, but she wasn't banking on it.

Robin's eye fell again on the parked Honda Accord containing the man with the nose like a button mushroom. Once again, he turned his head away hastily when Robin looked at him. She couldn't see the Accord's number plate at all from this position. Wondering whether it mightn't be a good idea to move so as to make a note of it, she was distracted by the sound of heavy footsteps to her left, and turned to see Dino Longcaster approaching, large and beautifully suited, with his dully gleaming cannonball of a head.

'I hear you've been pestering my daughter,' he drawled.

'Not pestering,' said Robin, forcing herself to sound unruffled, because Longcaster was intimidating both in size and manner. 'Just asking a question.'

'Could you spare me five minutes?' said Dino Longcaster, looking at her down his long nose. 'Inside the club?'

'Of course,' said Robin.

'Thank you, Joshua,' said Longcaster, as they passed the doorman.

'Mr Longcaster, sir,' muttered the attendant, touching his top hat, and he looked away as Robin passed him, revealing his earpiece and microphone.

A delicious warmth met Robin as she stepped into an opulent hallway full of artfully tarnished mirrors. The walls were covered in midnight blue fabric patterned in gold with stylised 1920s women and greyhounds, the air smelled of amber and sandalwood, and a staircase wound upwards past a multitude of paintings, many of them of dogs. A real white canine Robin recognised as a Pyrenean Mountain Dog was waiting for Longcaster just inside the door, wagging its tail; it thrust its nose into Longcaster's hand, and he patted it.

‘We’ll go upstairs,’ said Longcaster, and he turned to a gorgeous black girl who wore her hair in a chignon and a tightly fitting burgundy dress. ‘Montagu’s empty, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Mr Longcaster, sir.’

‘This way,’ Longcaster told Robin, and he set off upstairs, the Pyrenean Mountain Dog padding after him.

There were more burgundy-clad staff on the upstairs landing, all of them good-looking, all straightening like elegant meerkats at Longcaster’s approach. Robin was busy telling herself that she absolutely refused to be intimidated by this man or by his club, because she’d met far more frightening people than Dino Longcaster during her detective career, but the increase in alertness and nerves that seemed to touch every member of staff they passed told her that it might take a certain degree of gumption not to be frightened of Dino Longcaster.

He led Robin past a couple of doorways bearing the name plates ‘Amarillo’ and ‘Dostoevsky’, finally leading her into an empty room even more opulent than the hallway, which managed to be simultaneously grand and cosy. The walls were covered in a swirling red paisley fabric; there were many more oil paintings, mostly of dogs and horses; a log fire was burning in the grate; scarlet roses were arranged in large crystal bowls; the velvet armchairs were deep and looked welcoming. A backgammon board and a chess set were laid out on small tables, and the impression of a private home was reinforced by the few pictures that stood in silver frames or hung on the walls, some of them black and white, mostly featuring Longcaster himself, or his most photogenic daughter. In one of these pictures, Longcaster was collecting a silver racing trophy from the Queen; in another, he stood in black tie, greeting the Aga Khan at the doorway of his club.

‘Please,’ said Longcaster to Robin, gesturing to a pair of armchairs beside the fire.

He hitched up his trousers at his knees before sitting down opposite her. The dog immediately placed its huge white head in his lap, and Longcaster began to massage it with long, spatulate fingers.

‘May I have the pleasure of knowing who’s been harassing my daughter?’

‘My name’s Robin Ellacott, I’m a private detective, and there was no harassment.’

Still stroking the dog, Longcaster extended his free hand to press a small brass bell on a side table. A uniformed waiter appeared so quickly Robin thought he must have been standing in readiness right outside the door.

‘Martini,’ said Longcaster.

‘Yes, Mr Longcaster, sir. Madam?’

‘No, thank—’

‘Bring her a Majesty,’ Longcaster told the waiter, who smiled and left the room. Longcaster turned back to face Robin. His deep-set grey eyes raked her from head to foot and back up again, before he said,

‘So, you’re trying to track down the jellyfish.’

‘Who’s “the jellyfish”?’ asked Robin disingenuously.

‘*Genus* Fleetwood,’ said Longcaster. ‘*Species* Rupert.’

He reached out a long arm towards a humidor sitting on another low table, opened it and extracted a cigar and a cutter. The dog peered reproachfully up at his master at the cessation of stroking, then, with a kind of low groan, settled down at his feet, head on its paws. Longcaster now set about trimming the end of a cigar, glancing up at Robin to say,

‘You shouldn’t wear black.’

‘What?’

‘Black. It ages you. You can’t be more than, what – thirty-five?’

‘Don’t you think that’s quite a *rude* thing to say to someone you’ve only just met?’ said Robin, forcing herself to sound amused.

‘Nothing rude about it. I’m giving you good advice.’

‘But I didn’t ask for any.’

‘Presumably because you weren’t aware you needed it. S’pose you think black makes you look thin, do you?’

‘No,’ said Robin, ‘it’s just easy.’

‘Good taste has nothin’ to do with *easy*,’ said Longcaster with asperity, now reaching for a large malachite lighter. ‘Black looks elegant on Asian women, on *most* black women, and on *some* dark-haired Caucasians, but there’s nothin’ cheaper lookin’ than black on a blonde.’

‘Well, thanks for your input,’ said Robin. ‘Isn’t it illegal to smoke in clubs these days?’

‘Yerse,’ said Longcaster, puffing energetically on his cigar.

The door opened and the waiter reappeared. He set a martini bearing an olive on a stick at Longcaster’s elbow, and put a champagne cup full of

some virulently ruby-coloured concoction beside Robin.

‘What is this?’ Robin asked Longcaster, looking down at her drink as the door swung closed behind the waiter.

‘Dubonnet and gin. We call it the Majesty because it’s the Queen’s favourite. Always bothers me, thinkin’ of her drinkin’ something that common.’

Longcaster sipped his martini, his dark eyes fixed on Robin, then said,

‘Drink it. I’m hardly likely to bloody poison yeh, am I? Or are you scared I’ll jump on yeh? Needn’t worry about that. I get more excited about a morning piss these days than I do about women.’

‘I prefer to keep a clear head when I’m working,’ said Robin, and she thought how prissy she sounded.

‘I doubt Decima would begrudge you a solitary Majesty.’

Robin chose to ignore this comment.

‘Do you know where Rupert Fleetwood is, Mr Longcaster?’

‘No.’

‘His aunt thinks he’s got a job in New York.’

‘I think that *staggeringly* unlikely.’

‘Why?’

‘Jellyfish aren’t noted for their ability to catch flights to New York. Drink your bloody drink.’

Robin picked up the glass and took a sip.

‘Like it?’ said Longcaster.

‘Yes,’ said Robin honestly.

‘Thought you would,’ said Longcaster. He blew out cigar smoke, then said,

‘I doubt Fleetwood’s gawn far, unless he’s hit a strong prevailin’ current. S’pose he could be *beached* somewhere… small children poking him with plastic spades…’

‘Are you at all worried he might have killed himself?’

‘No,’ said Longcaster, ‘no, I can truthfully say I haven’t had a single second’s worry on that score.’

‘He seems to have been under a lot of pressure, before he disappeared,’ said Robin.

‘I don’t know about *pressure,*’ drawled Longcaster. ‘He staggered out of here under the weight of a prime piece of seventeenth-century Dutch

silverware. Would you say that's suicidal? Or is it the behaviour of a young man who fails to comprehend, as Wodehouse puts it, "the nice distinction between *meum* and *tuum*"?'

'You called the police, didn't you?' said Robin.

'Naturally, but our brave boys in blue aren't overly interested in recovering property for the likes of me. "You're insured, aren't you?" is the burden of their song. You can tell Decima, though, that as soon as I get wind of where the jellyfish is, I'll prod the police in the right direction. I'm sure by now he's realised the thing's impossible to sell. No reputable dealer's going to touch it, not without proof of legal ownership. It's a particularly fine and distinctive example of its type and, unfortunately for the jellyfish, it features in photographs of the Dostoevsky room.' Longcaster took another pull on his cigar, then said, 'Didja know I won it from his father?'

'I did, yes,' said Robin.

'Peter and I were at Eton together. 'S'a matter of fact, that nef wasn't Peter's to gamble with in the first place, it was his wife's. She was bloody livid when she found out what he'd done. Peter didn't have a pot to piss in before he married Veronica. The jellyfish is just like him, hopin' to marry money.'

Longcaster pointed a long finger at a photograph on the wall, which featured two men, one recognisable as a younger Longcaster, the other having a thin, raffish face, and three women. One of the women, who also looked around forty, wore glasses and looked rather stern. The other two were younger, one dark, one fair, and both very beautiful. All five were posing, the women in ballgowns, the men dinner jackets, in front of a gigantic castle over which a yellow flag bearing a black lion flew.

'That's Peter and Veronica, there,' said Longcaster. 'The woman in glasses is Anjelica, Peter's sister – the jellyfish's aunt. She doesn't like me, as I'm sure she'll've told you, if you've spoken to her.' Longcaster stared dispassionately at the picture for a few more seconds, before saying, 'I'm not sure, but I *think* I might've screwed her that weekend. And the dark woman there's an ex-girlfriend of mine. I was resisting her broad hints I should make an honest woman of her at the time, but I was enjoying being between wives.'

'Is that the Fleetwoods' home?' said Robin, staring up at the medieval

castle in the background.

‘’Course it’s bloody not, that’s Gravensteen,’ snorted Longcaster.

He drained his glass, then leaned over and pressed the brass bell again. The waiter opened the door within seconds.

‘’Nother Martini. Nothing for her, she’s dawdlin’.’

When the door had closed again, Robin said,

‘I’ve been told by someone who saw the relationship up close that Rupert genuinely loved Decima. That person didn’t believe Rupert was with her for her mon—’

‘Bullcrap,’ barked Longcaster. ‘Nobody’s going to attach themselves to Decima for her beauty or her charm. The pair of ’em looked like Tweedledum and Tweedledee together – just imagine the moon-faced children. What?’ he said, in response, Robin knew, to the expression on her own face.

‘Just thinking, what horrible things to say about your own daughter.’

‘I reserve the right to speak as I please about my children,’ said Longcaster harshly. ‘Decima’s spiritual home’s a semi-detached in Basingstoke. She likes second-rate things and second-rate people. Now she’s made a bloody fool of herself again and doesn’t want to admit it, which is why she’s hired you.’

‘Rupert’s your godson, isn’t he?’ said Robin.

‘What’s that got to do with anything? You think I should coddle him, because I once knew his parents? The world’s full of godsons. What I need are decent bloody bar staff. I did the jellyfish a favour, givin’ him a job, and all I got in return was an attempt to drain m’ daughter’s bank accounts, and brazen bloody theft. If he thinks he’s hard done by now, it’s nothing compared to what’ll happen when I bloody well catch up with him.’

‘Did you know Rupert gatecrashed Sacha Legard’s birthday party after stealing your nef?’ asked Robin. ‘That he argued with Valentine, and said something to Cosima that made her cry?’

She was certain, by the very slight rise of Longcaster’s eyebrows, that he hadn’t known this. Removing the cigar from his mouth, he said,

‘I think it highly unlikely the jellyfish would have sought out members of my family, after stealing my property.’

‘Well, he did,’ said Robin. ‘It was right before he disappeared. There were a lot of witnesses to the argument. That’s what I wanted to talk to your

daughter about.’

The waiter returned with Longcaster’s second martini. Just as he reached the door, Longcaster said,

‘Oliver, tell Mimi to come here.’

‘Yes, Mr Longcaster, sir.’

Hoping ‘Mimi’ meant Cosima, Robin took another sip of her cocktail, which she had to admit was as welcome as the fire, after standing for two hours in the rain.

‘You wouldn’t be bad-looking if you made an effort,’ Longcaster said, raking Robin up and down with his bored eyes again. ‘Did something better with your hair. Scraping it back like that’s doing you no favours.’

‘D’you tell everyone how they should look and dress, Mr Longcaster?’

‘Only people who need it,’ said Longcaster.

He seemed genuinely frustrated, almost pained, that Robin wasn’t better groomed and attired. She remembered Albie’s description of the man as one who wanted to live in a completely controlled world, that he thought it a sin to be badly dressed or overweight, and she thought of Decima, and what it would mean to grow up with this man as a father.

Cosima now entered the room. Neglecting to thank the waiter who’d held open the door for her, she sat down in a chair between Robin and her father, facing the fire. Robin could tell the girl was extremely ill at ease, though pretending not to be so. She threw back her long blonde hair, smoothed down the skirt of her short red dress, crossed her legs, smiled at her father and said,

‘Hi, Daddy.’

‘I’ve just been informed,’ said Longcaster, ‘that the jellyfish gatecrashed Sacha Legard’s birthday party.’

Cosima gave a forced laugh at the word ‘jellyfish’, but her father didn’t look amused.

‘And I hear you and Valentine spoke to him there.’

‘Only a bit,’ said Cosima. ‘It was nothing.’

‘Why didn’t you alert the police to his whereabouts?’ asked Longcaster. ‘Or call me, so I could do so?’

‘He just – he was there one moment, and then he left,’ said Cosima. ‘There wouldn’t have been time for the police to get him. He just sort of walked in and walked straight out again.’

Her right hand was playing with a set of gold rings on her left. She re-crossed her legs.

‘Sacha told my partner Rupert said or did something to make you cry,’ said Robin.

‘That’s—’

Robin could tell Cosima wanted to deny it, but that meant calling the famous, handsome actor a liar.

‘I think I actually – I wasn’t crying about Rupert.’

‘Sacha says you were,’ said Robin. ‘He says Rupert upset you.’

‘No, he didn’t,’ said Cosima, her colour mounting. ‘You weren’t there, you don’t know what happened. I was upset because he’d just, like, burst in on Sachy’s party, OK?’

‘You just said you weren’t crying about Rupert,’ said Robin.

She expected Longcaster to intervene, to protect his favourite child from her questions, but on the contrary, the club owner was staring at Cosima with a none-too-friendly look on his jowly face.

‘I wasn’t – there was a ton of drama going on that night, OK, I just felt kinda overwhelmed and then Rupert turning up was, like, the final straw, I thought there was gonna be a scene—’

‘What kind of scene?’ asked Robin.

‘Just, you know, that security would be involved and, like, people would think Val and I had invited Rupert or something—’

‘Why would anyone think you’d invited him?’ asked Robin. ‘Neither of you were friends with him, were you? He just worked here for a bit. Wouldn’t people be much more likely to think Sacha had invited Rupert, given that they’re cousins?’

‘Look,’ said Cosima, who’d flushed a deeper red, ‘I was just upset that night, OK, and I was, like, *disgusted* he showed up, after he stole Daddy’s silver thing—’

‘But not disgusted enough to call the police,’ said Longcaster.

‘It was so quick, Daddy, one minute he was there and the next—’

‘He was there long enough to argue with Valentine, wasn’t he?’ said Robin.

‘I think Val just, um, like, he saw Rupert, and I think he tried to get him to leave,’ said Cosima, still flushed.

‘Again, that’s not what Sacha Legard says,’ said Robin. ‘He says Rupert

arrived there looking for a fight. He sought out Valentine, rather than the other way round.'

'Well, I don't – I didn't see everything, it was really crowded, I don't know what happened. *God*, what's the big deal?' said Cosima, with a false laugh. 'Why d'you even *care*?'

'I told you why, outside,' said Robin. 'Your sister's very worried about Rupert. He's disappeared.'

'That's not *my* fault,' said Cosima, but a curious look of panic crossed her lovely face. 'That's not on me. I didn't know – it's not *my* fault.'

'You "didn't know" what?' said Robin.

'I meant, I didn't make him steal the ship thing, it's not *my* fault he went off.'

'That'll do,' said Longcaster, as Robin opened her mouth to reply. He pressed the brass bell beside him again. 'I think we've heard enough from you, Miss—'

'Ellacott,' said Robin.

The waiter who'd previously brought their drinks now reappeared.

'Miss Ellacott's leaving, Oliver.'

Longcaster got to his feet, waking the Pyrenean Mountain Dog, which stretched and wagged its tail.

'Goodbye,' said Longcaster, holding out a hand to shake Robin's. 'Interesting visit.'

'Goodbye,' said Robin. 'Thank you for the drink.'

She caught Cosima's eye once more as she left the room. The girl looked mutinous, but also, Robin thought, scared.

97

But still, as we proceed,
The mass swells more and more
Of volumes yet to read,
Of secrets yet to explore.

Matthew Arnold
Empedocles on Etna

On the rainy evening of the first of March, Strike, tired after an afternoon's tedious surveillance of Mrs Two-Times, which he'd just handed over to Wardle, made a detour to House of Computers on Tottenham Court Road to buy a new laptop. He then dropped in at the Flying Horse, where he called the agency's usual tech man, and received instructions on installing an anonymising browser on to the new device. It seemed foolish not to enjoy a couple of pints and a burger since he was there, so it was half past eight before he finally headed home.

On entering Denmark Street he was surprised to see a light on in the office window, because Robin had the evening off, and Pat was the only other member of the agency who had keys. He climbed the metal staircase to the second floor and entered through the engraved glass door.

Robin was sitting in her usual seat at the partners' desk, a half-eaten pizza at her elbow and a wide variety of research materials spread before her, including the plans of Wild Court and Freemasons' Hall Strike had procured from Holborn Library. She had personal reasons for wanting to stay at the office instead of going home, and one of them was that her anxiety about being followed or threatened remained acute. Absorbed in everything she was reading and examining, she'd lost track of the time and jumped when she heard Strike's key in the lock. Seeing it was him, though,

her heart lifted far more (as she instantly and guiltily realised) than it ought to have done.

‘Sorry,’ she said automatically, before realising this was nonsensical.

‘No need to apologise, it’s your office too,’ said Strike. ‘What’re you doing here so late? Thought you had the night off.’

‘Ryan had to work, so I thought I might as well keep at it,’ said Robin.

This wasn’t entirely true. Murphy was indeed busy, but the second reason Robin hadn’t wanted to go home too early was that she feared her boyfriend might drop in at her flat ‘as a surprise’. He was currently alternating between neediness and tetchiness. The latter was undoubtedly down to the pain of withdrawal after an abrupt cessation of drinking, but he kept trying to pin Robin down with plans, to pepper the calendar with future commitments, seeking guarantees that they’d still be together in six, eight, twelve weeks’ time. The previous evening he’d suggested spending his rapidly approaching thirty-fourth birthday in San Sebastián, where his sister lived. Robin had said she’d think about it. She was currently resistant to any arrangement that couldn’t be easily cancelled.

Depressed by the implication that, for Robin, there was no point going home if Murphy wasn’t there, Strike set down the new laptop on the desk.

‘Your old one playing up?’ she asked, noticing that Strike was wearing the blue shirt she liked.

‘No,’ said Strike, heading towards the kitchen area. ‘I don’t want to leave any trace of what I’m about to look up on the office PC. Dark web. Can’t be too careful, with MI5 keeping an eye on us.’

He took the whisky Robin had given him for his birthday out of a cupboard.

‘Want a drink?’ he called through to her.

‘Can’t, I’m driving,’ said Robin, trying to sound matter of fact. Both of them here, alone, after dark: she was remembering the night they’d spent together on Sark, and also that night when they’d eaten a takeaway curry here together, before she and Murphy had even met, when Strike had told her she was his best friend. She oughtn’t to be thinking about those things. She shouldn’t be noticing Strike’s shirt.

‘Dev just texted me,’ she called out. ‘He wants a week off over Easter if we can manage without him.’

Strike returned to the office with his whisky and glass and sat down

opposite her.

‘A whole week’s going to be a stretch unless we’ve got rid of this bloody silver vault case,’ he said. ‘Is there something up with him, by the way?’

‘Who, Dev? No, I don’t think so. Why?’

‘He’s been fairly brusque with me lately, and I notice he’s coming to you with queries about leave, not me.’

‘He hasn’t said anything,’ said Robin. ‘Um… I might have worked out what that note Niall Semple left for his wife means.’

‘What?’ said Strike, thoroughly taken aback.

‘I’ve been reading that book you downloaded. *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient—’*

‘—and Accepted Whatever of Bollocks, yeah,’ said Strike. ‘How did that help?’

Robin looked at her computer screen and read aloud:

‘*“Question: What is the most occult number?*

‘*“Answer: 5, because it is enclosed in the centre of the series.*

‘*“Question: What is the most salutary number?*

‘*“Answer: 6, because it contains the source of our spiritual and corporeal happiness.*

‘*“Question: What is the most fortunate number…*” You get the idea,’ she said. ‘If I’m right, Niall was leaving Jade an eight-figure code: two, five, zero, six, two, zero, one, six. I suppose it’s too much to hope that opens the Ramsay silver vault?’

‘Doubt it,’ said Strike, as Robin passed a Post-it note to him across the desk and he looked down at the string of numbers. ‘There are no nines. The most worn key on that pad was nine… could be a date, though. Twenty-fifth of June 2016.’

‘Oh God, I didn’t spot that! What happened on the twenty-fifth of June 2016?’

Strike Googled it.

‘Five new species of orchid were discovered in the Philippines.’

‘I was thinking more of what was happening in Semple’s life,’ said Robin, amused.

‘That date’s three weeks after the last confirmed sighting of him alive, so your guess is as good as mine.’

Strike opened his notebook to the page with Spanner's instructions on how to install the anonymising browser. He wasn't thinking about Sark, or of the night they'd eaten curry at the office, or of sharing a bed with Robin after she'd escaped Chapman Farm; he was thinking about how this kind of situation had been exactly what he'd hoped would naturally arise in the course of the silver vault case, and how bloody pointless it had been to take on the damn investigation, in the end.

'I've got another bit of news,' said Robin. 'Hugo Whitehead's father called me earlier.'

'Remind me?'

'His son Hugo crashed Tyler Powell's car.'

'Oh yeah. What did he say?'

'I told him we're trying to trace Tyler Powell and he says he's happy to speak to me, as long as his wife doesn't find out, because it upsets her too much to discuss the car crash, so I'm going to their house on Monday evening, when she'll be at a friend's.'

The office landline rang.

'Could be Rena Liddell again,' said Strike, and he grabbed the receiver.

He could hear traffic.

'Aye… it's me again…'

Strike gave Robin a thumbs-up.

'Hi,' he said, and trying not to panic her, as he had done last time, he asked, 'how are you?'

'Ah need tae meet ye. Ah'm *scared*.'

She started to cry.

'What are you scared of?' asked Strike.

'Ah know they're watchin' me.'

'I want to meet,' said Strike carefully, 'but you're going to have to tell me which Golden Fleece you're talking about.'

'Have ye got people listenin'?' she said, suddenly suspicious.

'No,' said Strike.

'Have ye got a gun?'

'No,' said Strike. 'Why?'

'Ah want one.'

'That's a bad idea,' said Strike firmly.

'Aye, mebbe… I was gonnae… but it's no' righ', not even if they're

Muslims, is it? It's no' righ'… jus' come tae the Golden Fleece, all righ'? It's where he was, Ah can't say more 'n that, can Ah?'

He heard beeping and knew she was in a call box. Possibly she had no more coins, because the line went dead. Strike hastily started pressing 1471 to retrieve the number she'd been calling from when the phone rang again.

'Shit – yes?' he said, answering.

'It's me,' said Midge, who appeared to be in a bar or restaurant. 'Big news on Plug.'

'Hang on,' said Strike, switching to speakerphone, 'I'm with Robin. Go on about Plug.'

'He and a few mates are in the Stapleton Tavern in Haringey and they're planning a stabbing.'

'*What?*' said Robin.

'You know he was keeping his black killer dog with a mate in Carnival Street?'

'Yeah,' said Strike.

'The mate's had it put down. He obviously doesn't want to get nicked for being part of the dog-fighting ring. Plug's doing his nut. The dog was a champion killer, apparently.'

'Shit,' said Strike again. 'Is the revenge attack planned for tonight?'

'I'm not sure,' said Midge, 'but I've asked Shah to come and back me up, just in case. I've got pictures of all of them.'

'Great,' said Strike. 'But be careful.'

'Will do,' said Midge, and she hung up.

'Fuck's sake,' said Strike, wiping his face with his hand. 'Talk about it never rains…'

'Speaking of that,' said Robin reluctantly, 'I think I'm being followed again. Nothing's happened,' she said quickly, in response to Strike's expression, 'but twice now, I've seen the same man in a Honda Accord. He was outside Dino's on Wednesday and he was behind me when I was driving into the office this morning. When I slowed down to park he just drove on, but I've got a partial number plate and a good look at his face. He's definitely not the man who threatened me with the dagger – he's older and fatter. Very small nose, big face, thick grey hair.'

'Shit,' said Strike.

'You might think this is mad,' said Robin, who was trying to make sure

no hint of her ever-present fear made it into her voice, ‘but the way he looked – very neat and respectable, clean-shaven – I don’t see him as one of Branfoot’s young men, and I couldn’t help wondering…’

‘Police?’

‘Well, we know the team working the silver vault case aren’t exactly happy with us. Could they be trying to catch us interfering?’

‘I wouldn’t put it past the couple I met to try and get us for something,’ admitted Strike.

‘Of course,’ said Robin hesitantly, ‘there’s also the possibility he’s—’

‘MI5?’

‘Well, maybe,’ said Robin.

‘Christ, we’ve fucked off a lot of people over this case,’ said Strike. ‘Have you circulated the Accord bloke’s description to the others?’

‘Yes, and the bit of the number plate I got.’

‘Good,’ he said, and took a swig of whisky. Eyes on the plans of Wild Court and Freemasons’ Hall that lay in front of Robin, he asked, ‘Had any luck with those? I haven’t had time to look properly.’

‘Nothing that’s going to help us,’ said Robin. ‘The shop was created out of a couple of storage rooms at the back of Freemasons’ Hall in 1958. There were two doors in the back walls, but they were bricked up when the rooms became a shop.’

‘There was a door on the basement level, was there?’

‘Yes, when it was a downstairs cupboard.’

‘Where exactly was the door?’

‘At the back of the vault, but as I say, it’s gone, bricked up. There’s also a bit of dead space behind the basement wall where the cupboards are, but to get into that you’d have to tunnel through brick as well.’

‘Is it a big enough space to accommodate a lurking murderer?’

‘Maybe a child on their hands and knees,’ said Robin, ‘but the child would have had to walk in through the front door of the shop first, go downstairs into the basement and break their way through the wall to get into it.’

‘And even Kenneth Ramsay might’ve noticed that happening,’ said Strike. ‘So Wright and Oz can’t have got into the basement that night via Freemasons’ Hall?’

‘No,’ said Robin.

‘Then how the hell *did* they get back there without being seen?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ admitted Robin, reaching for another slice of cold pizza. ‘What do you want to look at on the dark web, anyway?’ she said, watching Strike still tinkering with his new laptop.

‘Couple of long shots,’ said Strike, ‘but I’m ready to try almost anything at this point. One thing I wouldn’t mind seeing is Sofia Medina’s OnlyFans account.’

‘It’s gone,’ said Robin, ‘I looked.’

‘Yeah, gone from the surface web, but it occurred to me that it might still be floating around in the cesspit beneath.’

‘Looking for Oz?’

‘Yeah. I know he won’t have been calling himself “Oz” on OnlyFans, but people often adopt usernames that leave clues, even people a damn sight more intelligent than Jim Todd. Rodolphe Lemoine. Sidney Reilly. Laurel Rose Willson – though, admittedly, she was off her rocker.’

‘Who are Rodolphe Lemoine, Sidney Reilly and – who?’

‘Lemoine,’ said Strike, bending down to plug in the new laptop, ‘was a French spymaster in World War Two whose real name was Stallmann, but took his wife’s maiden name for espionage purposes.’

‘Like Todd taking his mother’s maiden name for trafficking purposes.’

‘There you go. Sigmund Rosenblum, otherwise known as the Ace of Spies, presumably liked his initials—’

‘Like Fyola Fay,’ interposed Robin.

‘—exactly – because he rechristened himself Sidney Reilly. And Laurel Rose Willson wrote an invented memoir of her life in a Satanic abuse cult under the name Lauren Stratford, made a load of money out of it before she was exposed as a fraud, then re-emerged as a Holocaust survivor, which she also wasn’t, under the name Laura Grabowski.’

‘Where’s Wardle this evening?’ asked Robin.

‘On Mrs Two-Times,’ said Strike. ‘Thought I’d give him an easy one to get started.’

Robin’s mobile rang. Her heart sank when she saw it was Murphy.

‘Hi,’ she said, getting up and moving into the outer office to stop Strike saying anything to her, because she didn’t want Murphy to know she and Strike were alone at the office together.

‘You’re not home,’ he said.

‘No, I’m still at the office. As you were working I thought I’d take care of some paperwork. How d’you know I’m not home?’ she added, wondering whether he was sitting outside her flat.

‘I swung by on the off-chance, just a coffee or something. I’m heading back into town now.’

‘Oh,’ said Robin. ‘If I’d known you had a free hour, I’d have come home.’

‘So you’re still at the office? Strike there?’

‘No,’ she lied again, with the familiar, gnawing sense of guilt. ‘He’s on surveillance.’

Her call with Murphy terminated, Robin returned to the inner office. She felt guiltier than she had before he’d called, and even though she’d have preferred to stay and talk about the silver vault case with Strike, she said, ‘I’d better get going.’

‘Right,’ he said.

When she’d gone, Strike, well aware he was slipping into a pattern of drinking alone, something he’d guarded against for years, poured himself more whisky before returning to his PC, selecting Tom Waits’ album *Blue Valentine* and pressing ‘shuffle’. He always appreciated the blunt solace offered by his gravel-voiced favourite. Waits sang of desperation, drugs and drunkenness, of unmourned deaths and lives spent in poverty and hopelessness; love, to Waits, was generally doomed or dirty, and death came early, randomly and brutally. Strike had discovered the singer for himself in his teens, and found him a blessed antidote to the guitar-driven seventies rock bands his mother played incessantly.

Romeo is bleeding but nobody can tell,
Sings along with the radio
With a bullet in his chest…

Twenty minutes and one long piss later, Strike returned to his newly configured laptop, ready to enter the badlands of the internet, where the buying and selling of drugs, weapons and stolen data were commonplace, where fake documents could be bought and hackers hired, and where videos of dreadful acts were viewable, for those who found them exciting.

It took him nearly an hour to find an archived version of Sofia Medina’s OnlyFans page, on a website headed DEAD SLAGS, which was devoted to providing fodder for men who liked their masturbatory material to feature

women who'd provably died from male violence, rather than those who were pretending.

He scrolled down through the names and comments of subscribers. Could Oz be 'Fat_Hard_Cock'? 'Bucket O'Jism'? He doubted it. Oz had been seeking real-life contact, and a man pretending to be a wealthy music producer would be unlikely to open the conversation with 'fist yourself'. SkunkB, on the other hand, had posted, 'you're beautiful. I hope you've got a man who's treating you the way you should be treated', to which Medina had replied with three heart emojis. However, if SkunkB had pursued this promising exchange, it wasn't publicly visible.

Tom Waits was still singing.

I'm callin out my bloodhounds, chase the devil through the corn…

The whisky was driving Strike deeper into his depressive trough, but he kept mindlessly scrolling through the cyber swamps, perusing sites offering forged documentation and credit cards from countries as diverse as Ukraine and Thailand, or else what Strike strongly suspected was human merchandise. One heavily encrypted site with the name *Nursery* was peppered with flower emojis. From the context, he suspected this was a substitute for the words 'little girl'.

Telling himself Interpol had enough experts trying to track down forgers and paedophiles without his assistance, he now searched for Daesh execution videos, thinking of the secret mission that had cost Niall Semple his best friend.

Each of the films Strike began methodically opening carried the black and white flag of Islamic State in the corner, bearing a white circle containing, in Arabic, 'There is no God but Allah, and Mohamed is his messenger'. Strike was reminded of the captured Daesh flag he'd seen at the SAS headquarters in Hereford, which was framed, and facing a captured WW2 swastika on the opposite wall. In Strike's view, there was nothing to choose between the two groups. The Nazis had visited unspeakable atrocities on their own people, as well as non-Germans; Daesh murdered many more Muslims than Westerners, and both groups were sadistic beyond the imagination of most human beings. Death was insufficient punishment in their eyes: opponents must also suffer extreme indignity, humiliation, terror and pain before the job was considered done.

He watched, blank faced, as men were burned, shot, beheaded and

drowned. The filming was expert: Daesh wanted the world to know precisely how terrifyingly devoid of human empathy they were. Corpses were thrown by jeering masked men into a deep natural abyss in north Syria called al-Hota. Strike's Arabic was too rudimentary to understand what they were saying, but they appeared to be making a game of it, trying to dislodge a corpse stuck on a ledge with a second man's body. He'd seen al-Hota once, many years before. Local legends were told of the monster that lived in its depths.

Feeling vaguely sickened, he closed down his laptop at exactly the moment his mobile rang. Wardle was calling him.

'Heads-up,' said the ex-policeman, who sounded rather perplexed. 'She's about to ring the office doorbell.'

'Who is?' said Strike, confused.

The bell rang in the outer office.

98

Lovers' ills are all to buy:
The wan look, the hollow tone,
The hung head, the sunken eye,
You can have them for your own.

A. E. Housman
VI, A Shropshire Lad

'I'm sure she hasn't clocked me,' said Wardle, who sounded worried.

Strike turned off Tom Waits, headed out of the inner office, closing the dividing door behind him so as to conceal the whisky, the books and the plans of Wild Court.

'How did she get here?' he asked.

'Cab,' said Wardle. 'Got out on Charing Cross Road – I thought it might be coincidence, but—'

The doorbell rang a second time.

'I might need you to follow her after she's left,' said Strike, 'so hang around.'

He ended the call, then pressed the button on the intercom.

'Strike,' he said.

'I know,' said a female voice. 'I want to talk to you.'

'All right,' he said, 'buzzing you in now.'

He turned on the light in the outer office. While waiting for his unexpected guest to appear, Strike saw movement out of the corner of his eye: the ugly black goldfish with the knobbly growth on its head was floating at the water's surface, flapping its fins helplessly, belly upwards.

The silhouette of Mrs Two-Times appeared on the landing. Strike opened the glass door.

‘Have a seat,’ he said.

‘Thanks,’ she said in a tight voice, walking past him and sitting down on the sofa.

As might have been expected from a woman who spent most of her days shopping for clothes, having manicures and blow dries, she was immaculately dressed and groomed, wearing a coat made of what looked like satin, a form-fitting cream dress and high, strappy black heels. Yet she wasn’t quite as good-looking up close as she appeared at a distance. Her features were small and undistinguished, but she was living testimony to what money, skill and good taste can do for a woman’s appearance: her figure disciplined through diet, her expensively streaked, caramel-coloured hair flattering her skin, her eyes expertly made up to appear twice their natural size.

‘I found out this morning he’s paying you to follow me,’ she said, still in a tight little voice. ‘I recognised the bank account number.’

‘Really?’ said Strike, who could tell denials would be pointless. ‘How?’

‘I used to be his PA. He made me check the standing order to you, once. I made a note of the bank account number. That was when he was with that foreign girl.’

‘The Russian,’ said Strike. ‘Yes.’

‘I wondered whether he’d do it to me, too. Does he *really* think I’m playing around?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Strike, which was true, as far as it went. He wasn’t about to mention his theory about her husband’s sexual peculiarities. ‘I’ve assured him you haven’t given any sign of infidelity.’

‘Hm,’ she said, her eyes travelling over the office before coming back to rest on Strike, her gaze calculating. ‘OK, well, I’ve been trying to think what to do.’

Strike, who detected a threatening undertone in these words, moved behind Pat’s desk and sat down in her computer chair.

‘I *know* he’s playing around on me,’ said Mrs Two-Times.

‘Ah,’ said Strike.

‘Escorts,’ she said. ‘I recognise that bank account, too. There’s a place he’s always liked; he’s been using it for years. That’s why he’s always happy for me to go out with my friends.’

The question of why she’d married such a man had barely surfaced in

Strike's mind before he answered it himself. The designer clothes, the immaculate hair, the long lunches, the giggling exchanges with handsome waiters: presumably these sweetened the strange deal she'd made.

'He's kind of well known in his field,' she said, now examining her perfectly manicured nails. 'I could cause a lot of trouble for him, if I dragged you into it. It'd mean loads of publicity and he wouldn't be able to use you to spy on his girlfriends any more, would he?'

Strike's feeling of foreboding intensified.

'Or,' she said, looking up, 'you could start watching him for *me*, instead. Get proof of the escorts. I wouldn't tell him I'd used you and I quite like the idea of him footing the bills for me to get evidence for a nice fat divorce settlement.'

'That'd certainly be a neat solution,' said Strike.

'You agree, then?' she said.

'Yeah, I think we could shake on that.'

She got up, took a pen out of the pot on Pat's desk and wrote her mobile number on a Post-it note.

'I'd like weekly updates,' she said, tearing it off and handing it to him.

'Fine,' said Strike.

They shook hands. Hers was cold.

'I didn't think it'd last,' she said. 'Men don't change, do they?'

'Well… not often,' said Strike.

She glanced over at the aquarium.

'I think your fish is dying.'

Strike waited on the landing until he heard the street door open and close, then called Wardle.

'Let her go,' he said. 'It wasn't your fault. She's smarter than him, that's all. Come up and have a drink if you want one, I've got whisky open.'

Five minutes later, Wardle arrived in the outer office, to which Strike had already brought his bottle of Arran Single Malt.

'Does that happen often?' Wardle asked, when Strike had told him what Mrs Two-Times had said.

'First time for me,' said Strike.

'Nah, I won't,' said Wardle, waving away the offer of whisky as Strike raised the bottle. 'I was doing a bit too much of that, alone, a few months back. I've knocked it on the head for a while.'

‘Ah,’ said Strike, pouring himself a treble. ‘Good for you.’

‘Is that fish all right?’ said Wardle, looking at the gasping black lump at the surface of the tank.

‘No,’ said Strike.

‘Mash up a pea,’ said Wardle.

‘What?’

‘It’s probably gulped down too much air at the top. Greedy little bastards, goldfish. Scoop it out and feed it a mashed pea. Sometimes works.’

‘The hell d’you know that?’

‘My niece keeps fish. Three different tanks in her bedroom. Just got on to Bettas.’

Having no idea what Bettas were, and zero interest, Strike sat back down in Pat’s computer chair and said, ‘So how long’ve you been off the booze?’

‘Since the night after you came over for that curry. Funnily enough, it was you mentioning me working here. Made me think about… you know… making some changes. I could do a coffee, though,’ said Wardle. ‘Got any decaff?’

‘If we have, it’ll be in one of those cupboards,’ said Strike, who’d never knowingly drunk decaffeinated coffee in his life. As he gulped down more whisky, his mobile buzzed and he looked down to see a text from Midge.

Plug’s gone home. No stabbing tonight.

‘What?’ he said, under the vague impression that Wardle had just said something.

‘I said, “did you hear Murphy’s fallen off the wagon?”’

Wardle had found some decaffeinated coffee and was now making it. Strike, whose heart rate had just increased as though he’d broken into a sprint, said, trying to mask the interest in his voice, ‘You told me someone thought he might be drinking again.’

‘Yeah, well, they were right, he is. He was caught necking vodka at his desk. He’s in a shitload of trouble, one way or another. Probably smarm his way out of it, though,’ said Wardle with a curling lip. ‘Iverson still thinks

he’s fucking misunderstood.’

‘Iverson,’ repeated Strike. His brain felt sluggish.

‘The woman on the silver vault case. The one he groped a few years back.’

‘Oh. Yeah. I met her. Redhead.’

‘Yeah,’ said Wardle, as the kettle came to a boil. ‘What’re you going to say if Murphy gets kicked out and wants to come and work here?’

‘Cross that bridge when I get to it,’ said Strike.

‘Probably try and persuade Robin to leave and set up Ellacott and Murphy, Inc with him, if you don’t take him on,’ said Wardle, his back still to Strike. ‘Or Murphy and Murphy, if he gets his way.’

‘What?’ said Strike again.

Wardle headed back to the sofa holding his coffee.

‘He’s gonna propose.’

‘That a guess?’ said Strike sharply. ‘Or d’you know?’

‘He told Iverson the other week, and she told me, when I told her I was starting work here,’ said Wardle. ‘He probably told her he was going to pop the question to get her to back off. Looked like she was gonna cry when she told me.’

‘Right,’ said Strike, who felt as though he’d turned to ice from the neck downwards. ‘Ring bought and everything, is it?’

‘Dunno,’ said Wardle, taking a sip of coffee.

Mainly because he was afraid his expression might give away his thoughts, Strike turned back to his phone. Midge had texted a second time.

got pictures of his co-conspirators

Strike, who had a blank whine in his ears, typed back **great**, then had to say ‘what?’ again, because Wardle had definitely just spoken.

‘That Kim Cochran. Heard something very interesting about her the other day. Reason she left the force.’

‘Yeah?’ said Strike, still thinking about Murphy and Robin. ‘Well, she’s not my concern any more.’

Whether because Wardle had noticed his colleague’s abstraction or not, he said, ‘So what d’you want me to do, start following Two-Times

tomorrow?’

‘Need to think it through,’ said Strike, forcing himself to concentrate. ‘We’ll have to maintain a pretence of following the wife, because he’ll ask me if he doesn’t see anyone around when he joins her.’

They discussed the ramifications of this double-agent job until Wardle, coffee finished, said he might as well get an early night. Strike, desperate to be alone, told him to leave his mug; he’d wash it with his whisky glass.

When Wardle had left, Strike remained sitting where he was. As he was now forced to recognise, he’d retained a slender hope that in spite of Robin’s talk of egg freezing, something might yet happen to prise her and Murphy apart. But if a proposal was in the offing…

He remembered the sapphire ring that had adorned Robin’s third finger when she’d first started work for him, when she’d occupied the space Pat did now. The ring had represented a hard, blue full stop: nothing doing. She’d married Matthew, in spite of his previous infidelity and what Strike privately thought of as his general cuntery, and it had taken a second, still more blatant, infidelity to blow the marriage apart, but Murphy, alas, seemed faithful… *he’s been great… I can’t fault him… he wants me, whether or not I can have kids… he’s been really kind since it happened…*

Strike got to his feet, realising he wasn’t quite steady on them any more, and returned to the inner office. In shutting down various open tabs on his computer he accidentally turned Waits back on.

Nobody, nobody

Will love you the way that I could

Cause nobody, nobody’s that strong…

He slapped the music off, shut down his computer, turned out the light, then returned to the outer office, where he washed Wardle’s mug and his own glass.

He was on the point of turning out the second light when his eye fell again on the gasping black goldfish at the top of the tank, flailing and gulping pathetically, belly up, its sufferings, if Wardle was to be believed, entirely self-inflicted. Finger on the light switch, swaying slightly where he stood, Strike stared at it, imagining finding it dead and motionless in the morning, floating where it was now fighting for life. Its two tank mates, one silver, one gold, drifted serenely below, indifferent to its plight. The black fish was exceptionally ugly; close to an abomination. It was an added insult

that it bore his name.

‘Fine, you stupid little fucker,’ he muttered, and he headed none too steadily towards the stairway to the attic, unsure whether he had any frozen peas, but prepared – nonplussed to find himself doing it, yet with a vague desire to set something to rights, even as everything else turned to shit around him – to check.

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… perfect honesty, which ought to be the common qualification of all, is more rare than diamonds.

Albert Pike
Morals and Dogma of The Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry

Several things happened in quick succession the following morning to thoroughly destabilise Robin.

Firstly, she was woken at six a.m. by a call from Barclay to tell her she needn't bother tailing Mrs Two-Times, because the woman was spending the day at a spa with some girlfriends, which Two-Times had forgotten to tell the agency. Robin was delighted to have an unexpectedly free Saturday, which she intended to spend on sleep and laundry.

Unfortunately, she was woken again, shortly before nine, by Murphy, who called to inform her that his parents were unexpectedly in town, and to ask her over to his place for lunch.

'I wasn't expecting them, they just turned up,' he said, sounding harassed. 'For a "surprise", because I haven't been in touch enough. So can you come over, because they really want to meet you? I'll cook. Dad wants to watch the football. They're not staying overnight, thank Christ, they're at Mum's sister's.'

It so happened that even though Robin and Murphy were now into the second year of their relationship, Robin had never yet met any of his family. His retired parents lived in Ireland, where his father had been born. Robin had once answered the phone to his mother, who was English, and had made pleasant small talk with her while Murphy was finishing a shower, but this was the sum total of their direct contact. Robin therefore felt

refusing lunch was impossible, so dragged herself reluctantly out of bed and began looking for something suitable to wear among her small stock of clean clothes.

She'd just started running a bath when her phone rang yet again. This time it was Strike. After a brief explanation of the surprise visit to the office from Mrs Two-Times the previous evening, he asked whether Robin could possibly forfeit her day off to cover Two-Times, because literally every other detective at the agency was busy, either keeping watch over Plug and his possibly murderous cronies, who hadn't yet attacked the man who'd had Plug's monstrous dog put down, tracking the movements of Lord Branfoot, trying to catch Uber driver Hussein Mohamed at home or following Albie Simpson-White. Robin thought she heard a note of exasperation when Strike mentioned the last of the names, and assumed she was being reminded, none too subtly, that she was the one who'd added this extra burden to the rota.

When Robin explained that she really couldn't get out of lunch with Murphy's parents five minutes after agreeing to it, Strike said shortly,

'Fine. Better hope Mrs Two-Times doesn't get pissed off we're not doing as she asked, and go to the press, then.'

As this was the first time in years that Robin had declined a job for personal reasons, and as she'd been bearing a heavier workload than all subcontractors lately, she considered Strike's impatient tone quite unwarranted, but before she could say so, he'd hung up.

Now cross in addition to exhausted (whose fault was it that the agency was currently vulnerable to bad press?) Robin took her bath. Once dried and dressed, she opened her bedroom curtains and saw – her eye was drawn to him instantly, as if she'd been expecting him – a man in a green jacket standing on the opposite pavement. He'd turned quickly as the curtains opened, as though to hide his face, even though she couldn't have seen it from this distance without binoculars. Her conscious mind tried to tell her she couldn't be sure, but her gut instinct told her a different story: same green jacket, same build, same height as the man who'd worn the gorilla mask to threaten her with the masonic dagger.

Heart pounding, Robin watched as he sloped away, keeping his face averted. She was certain he'd been watching her windows.

The repeated wearing of the jacket in which she'd already seen him up

close didn’t argue a very bright man. Nevertheless, Robin knew very well that stupid males could be just as dangerous as intelligent ones. She went to check her bag for her rape alarm and pepper spray, telling herself he wouldn’t dare do anything on such a busy street, by daylight, and reminding herself that it was a very short walk from the building’s front door to the Land Rover. She considered calling Strike, but decided against, given how grumpy he’d just been on the phone. In any case, there was nobody free at the agency to come and give her assistance. Now she wished, for the second time in as many months, that she didn’t live alone, before reminding herself that if she’d been living with Murphy, she’d be in an even bigger quandary. He still knew nothing about the man in the green jacket, nor about the small rubber gorilla or the masonic dagger hidden in her sock drawer.

Did Green Jacket have a car? Would he follow her to Murphy’s? Had he done anything to the Land Rover while she’d been asleep, or having her bath? She’d need to check it before she got in, but her pepper spray would be in her hand as she did so. Thus resolved, Robin put on her coat, re-checked the contents of her bag, and left her flat.

The day was cool, clouds sliding across the sun. Robin looked all around and behind her as she walked briskly to her car, but there was no sign of the man in the green jacket. Pepper spray in hand, she bent low to check the underside of the Land Rover, but saw nothing, nor were there scratches on any of the paintwork. She got inside quickly and locked the doors. Now feeling safer, she left her bag open on the passenger seat, pepper spray within easy reach, and set off, checking her rear-view mirror constantly.

The trouble with Blackhorse Road was that it was always very busy. Robin knew that Green Jacket would have had time, if he had his wits about him, to get into a car and follow her, especially if he knew where Murphy’s flat was. She had no idea what car Green Jacket might own, whereas she didn’t doubt he knew exactly which Land Rover to follow.

Robin arrived at Murphy’s flat shortly before midday, still unsure as to whether she’d been tailed. Murphy’s flat door was opened by his beaming mother, a well-dressed, attractive beige-blonde in her early sixties from whom Murphy had clearly got his good looks; she had the same bone structure and full upper lip.

‘How *lovely* to meet you at last!’ she said, and Robin responded as effusively as she could manage, with her mind half on Green Jacket.

If Murphy’s good looks were owed to the maternal line, he’d got his height and hair from his father, a burly Irishman with a deep voice, who also expressed delight at meeting Robin, and said Murphy had been keeping her hidden far too long. Murphy seemed slightly on edge, which Robin attributed to the unexpectedness of his parents’ arrival, and the necessity of cooking for them. He was stuck in the kitchen, so Robin and the two older Murphys sat down together and chatted easily enough, about their relocation to Galway after long years in London, about Murphy’s older sister’s third pregnancy and about Robin’s recent acquisition of two more nephews. Robin noticed that neither of them asked about her job at all, which was odd, because it was how she and Murphy had met. She wondered whether he’d told his parents not to bring up the agency.

Lunch was pleasant enough, although the food could have been tastier; Murphy’s steaks were rubbery and the potatoes slightly underdone. There was wine on the table, of which Murphy’s father partook liberally, cracking jokes, some of them funny.

Robin couldn’t help being reminded of her former in-laws. Matthew’s father, too, had been garrulous, whereas his late mother had been quieter, more polished and watchful, and Robin had always felt that the latter didn’t much like her. Murphy’s mother was far friendlier than her Cunliffe counterpart, yet Robin still detected signs that she was being covertly assessed.

‘We were sorry to hear the house fell through,’ she told Robin.

‘Yes,’ said Robin. ‘It was a shame.’

The longer lunch went on, the more certain Robin became that Murphy’s parents had no idea about his recent alcoholic relapse. Mrs Murphy’s searching look suggested she’d sensed there might be more to the story than that they’d been gazumped for a second time. Perhaps (a dart of unease shot through Robin) Murphy’s parents knew about the ectopic pregnancy. Robin had made her boyfriend promise not to tell *her* parents, but had extracted no guarantees about his.

Over lunch, she learned for the first time why the London-born Murphy supported Liverpool: his father had spent most of his teens in the city and remained a passionate supporter; he couldn’t have tolerated his son supporting anyone else, he told Robin, who laughed politely. Liverpool was playing Arsenal that afternoon, kick-off at five thirty, which was why Mr

Murphy senior hadn't wanted to go out to lunch – you never knew how long these fancy London restaurants would string out a meal. Robin was told repeatedly by both parents how proud they were of Murphy, and the latter looked strained as they said it. Robin found herself longing for match kick-off, because 'we won't be allowed to talk once it starts', said Murphy's mother, with a humorous eye roll. 'I've brought my knitting.'

'Her business partner supports Arsenal,' said Murphy, nodding towards Robin, who felt a very faint sting of animosity in this remark, and it led to a certain amount of good-humoured chaff from his father about how the office was bound to be an uncomfortable place on Monday, then, because Arsenal was about to be thoroughly trounced.

At five o'clock, the three Murphys removed to the sofa and armchair in plenty of time for the start of the game, Mr Murphy sprawling so much that there was very little room for Robin, so she remained at the table where they'd eaten.

Once the match was underway, Robin surreptitiously took out her phone. She'd have preferred her laptop, but she could hardly have brought that with her. Murphy and his father, who were apparently allowed to talk all they wanted, criticised and eulogised various plays and players, while Mrs Murphy concentrated mostly on knitting what looked like a baby's sweater in pink angora.

Robin first checked to see whether Tish Benton (currently at a five-star hotel in Paris, judging by her most recent Instagram photo) had responded to the request for a chat Robin had sent via the Clairmont chain, but there was no response.

'GET IN!' bellowed Murphy and his father in unison, and Robin jumped. Both men were fist-pumping; Firmino had scored for Liverpool. Robin hastily made celebratory noises and affected a broad smile until the Murphys' attention had returned to the TV.

She'd just closed Instagram when a text arrived from her brother Martin.

Could I come stay for a couple of days?

Robin stared at this message, wondering whether Martin had sent it to the wrong person. Not only had her second brother never come to visit her

in London, he was, by some distance, the family member to whom she was least close. She loved him, of course, but as she'd told Strike on Sark, they had very little in common. He'd been insecure in their youth about his siblings' better academic records, and meted out a low but sustained level of persecution to Robin, purely on the basis that she was the only girl. Their friends, habits and life choices could hardly have been more divergent.

Thinking that a simple question ought to make him realise he'd texted the wrong person, she replied:

With Carmen and the baby, you mean?

There was no immediate response, so Robin returned to the line of investigation she'd been pursuing until exhaustion had defeated her in the early hours of the morning.

Shortly after midnight, she'd stumbled across the information that Rupert's paternal aunt, Anjelica, was a historian who'd once been affiliated with the University of Ghent, in Belgium. She'd remained professionally attached to the Belgian university long after she'd moved to Switzerland with her husband, a fellow academic, and shuttled between the two countries while Rupert was growing up. The decision to put Rupert into boarding school seemed to have been made to allow his child-free aunt and uncle to pursue their separate, intellectually distinguished careers.

'Shouldn't have left Sánchez on the bench, should you, Wenger, you wanker?' said Murphy. Murphy senior roared with laughter. Robin ploughed on with her research.

Anjelica had ended her professorship at the University of Ghent in the year 2000, when Rupert was nine years old.

I fink 'e said… didn' 'e say 'e knew what 'appened to 'er? An' din' 'e say we'd see it on the news?

Was it possible that Rupert had heard something, or known something, about the murders of Reata Lindvall and her daughter, relayed to him by his Belgium-based aunt, or one of her colleagues?

'YEEEEES! FUCKING GET IN!' bellowed Murphy while his father roared his approval. Liverpool had scored again, just before half time.

Hastily hitching a smile onto her face, Robin said,

‘Anyone want another tea? Coffee?’

But Murphy’s mother was already heading for the kitchen, her fluffy pink knitting left in her armchair. Mr Murphy senior went for a loudly announced pee.

Robin took out her notebook and wrote: Rupert’s aunt worked in Belgium until he was nine. She had to admit, the information didn’t look much of a breakthrough when written down. As she closed the notebook, Mr Murphy senior re-entered the room, his hand still on his fly.

‘Your Strike’s not gonna be happy, is he?’ he said to Robin, dropping back onto the sofa and taking up two seats with ease. ‘Two-nil already!’

‘No,’ said Robin, forcing another smile. ‘He’s not.’

So you do *know something about my work. You know my partner’s name.*

‘They’re gonna get Sánchez off the bench,’ said Murphy.

‘Yeah, well, no choice now,’ said his father.

Robin accepted a coffee from Murphy’s mother with a smile and thanks; the latter picked up her knitting and settled back in the armchair. When the football match restarted, and the others’ attentions were once again turned yet again towards the television, Robin stood up casually, ostensibly to stretch, but in reality to look out of the window.

She could see no trace of Green Jacket, although there were parked cars in which he might be lurking.

She sat down again and reopened Instagram, now following a different train of thought. Robin had already found two Instagram accounts for Chloe Griffiths. The older account showed various Ironbridge landmarks; the new, many pictures of her and her boyfriend interrailing.

As far as Robin was concerned, the most interesting of the pictures Chloe had posted before Tyler’s disappearance was that of her birthday in April, which she’d celebrated with a party at home: Robin recognised the poster of the dope-smoking Jesus in the background.

The picture was crammed with young people, but the photo centred four of them. There was goofily grinning, large-eared Tyler Powell, whose arm was slung around Anne-Marie’s shoulders, the latter recognisable from press pictures: an insipid-looking girl whose pale face wasn’t flattered by what looked like home-dyed pink hair. Anne-Marie looked perfectly happy and at ease. However, Chloe, who was standing on Tyler’s other side, was wearing a smile that appeared forced. A young man whose face wasn’t

visible, but who had a shock of ginger hair, had his arm slung around Chloe's neck. He was falling forwards, apparently laughing, dragging her with him as his plastic cup of beer spilled. Wynn Jones stood in shadow behind the pair, smirking, whereas Ian Griffiths, beside Jones, and perhaps anticipating spilled beer on his carpet, didn't look very happy.

'SHIT!' bellowed Murphy, and Robin jumped again, hastily affixing a smile to her face before registering that Murphy wasn't celebrating, and that it was Arsenal who'd scored, not Liverpool.

'*Language,*' said Mrs Murphy softly, and Robin was reminded again of her late mother-in-law, who'd always urged a certain po-faced gentility on her family, even at times of celebration or crisis.

Robin returned to the picture of Chloe's birthday party. The young woman was wearing a bracelet of what looked like enamelled violets, and Robin assumed this had been Tyler's birthday gift, worn, perhaps, out of politeness, because it didn't really chime with Chloe's plain black dress. She wondered why Chloe hadn't done as various angry comments had demanded, and taken down pictures of Tyler, although there was a clue in one of her replies.

> **ponzie2** chloegriff take these down nobody wanna see that fucker
> **chloegriff** fuck off telling me what to do

The last post on the old account, which had appeared a few weeks after Chloe's birthday, was a quotation by Sylvia Plath.

'*I lean to you, numb as a fossil. Tell me I'm here.*'

An odd quotation, Robin thought, exhibiting the sort of nihilism she'd have expected of a teenager rather than a young woman in her early to mid-twenties. Was it an expression of grief for her friend Anne-Marie? The old account had been left up, perhaps as an act of defiance towards the censoriousness of Ironbridge, but the new account appeared to represent a conscious turning of a leaf, because this opened with a Plath quotation, too.

'*I felt my lungs inflate with the inrush of scenery – air, mountains, trees, people. I thought, "This is what it is to be happy".*'

The new photos showed Chloe's travels through Europe with a notably

good-looking young man. There were arty photos of cities and the food the couple were eating, some selfies taken alone with picturesque backgrounds, others with her boyfriend. Then, following another train of thought, Robin left Chloe's page for that of Oz.

The account had acquired another thirty followers since Robin had last looked at it, which angered her. It had been used to groom two girls, one of whom was dead. Was the Met taking any action at all, or was it so determined not to take the agency's word for anything that the fake account had been assigned low priority?

Oz's most recent pictures were views of Nashville, with the usual non-specific, intriguing hashtags: #TS6, #SecretProject. One girl in the replies had replied excitedly:

> OMG – TAYLOR SWIFT?????????

To which Oz had replied with a winking emoji.

Another bellow from the sofa announced Liverpool's third goal.

'That's it!' shouted Mr Murphy senior. 'We're done!' He turned and said to Robin, 'send Mr Strike my condolences', in a tone, and with a gloating expression, that convinced Robin Strike had been a topic of conversation between Murphy *père et fils*, and that Murphy had told his father plainly how little he liked Robin's business partner.

Right, thought Robin, and using the Instagram account in the name of Venetia Hall, which she reserved for work, she typed into the comments beneath Oz's most recent post:

> This man is an imposter. He doesn't know Taylor Swift, he isn't working on her sixth album and if you reverse search his pictures you'll find he's stolen all of them.

The match finished, Mr and Mrs Murphy at last made moves to leave, gathering up their things, now intent on getting to Murphy's aunt's on time.

'It's been lovely meeting you,' said Robin, with every bit of enthusiasm she could muster. 'Really lovely.'

She was caught off-guard by Murphy's mother's embrace.

‘We’re so happy to know you, at last.’

But the embrace felt forced, the older woman’s body stiff, rather than yielding.

‘You want to take the odd weekend off, girl,’ said Murphy’s father, winking at her. Apparently he’d guessed she’d been working while they were watching the game. Had Murphy complained about her workaholic tendencies, too?

The three Murphys left at last, their son walking his parents down to their car. Robin returned to the window to check for Green Jacket again, but saw no sign of him. The Murphys talked for five minutes at the front of the building, then the parents departed and Murphy headed back inside.

Robin knew as soon as he re-entered the sitting room that she was in trouble. Nevertheless, she tried to defuse the atmosphere he’d brought back into the room with him.

‘They’re really ni—’

‘If you don’t want to be here,’ said Murphy in a low voice, ‘just say so.’

Robin stared at him.

‘What d’you mean, “if I don’t want to be—?”’

‘You couldn’t have acted more bloody bored if you’d tried.’

‘Hang on,’ said Robin. ‘I was told we weren’t allowed to talk while the football was on.’

‘She didn’t mean it literally! You couldn’t even come and sit with—’

‘Your father was taking up two thirds of the sofa!’

‘You could’ve asked him to move!’

‘I’ve only just met him, I’m not telling him where to sit in a flat I don’t own,’ retorted Robin.

She, too, was suddenly angry. Exhausted though she was, she’d chatted through a lengthy lunch, laughed at all his father’s jokes, answered all his mother’s questions and stacked the dishwasher single-handedly, so Murphy’s parents could have him to themselves over coffee. She’d forfeited her Saturday at a moment’s notice to keep him happy. She’d made every effort to act as though she wanted Liverpool to win the game.

But the real problem, she was sure, wasn’t that she’d remained on her hard seat in the background, but that instead of taking out knitting – especially of a baby’s sweater – she’d taken out a notebook and phone. Possibly Murphy thought her perusal of the internet had, in fact, been

surreptitious texting of Strike, of which he'd accused her on Christmas Eve. *Can you not forget about work for two minutes?*

'I need fresh air,' said Murphy. He turned, and the front door slammed, leaving Robin standing in shock.

Fresh air? Like all the runs you were taking, and the gym sessions you were enjoying?

With stony-faced efficiency, Robin began her search, firstly of the kitchen cupboards. She found no alcohol there, nor in the tiny airing cupboard with the boiler, nor under the sofa or hidden behind Murphy's sparse collection of books. The bathroom was alcohol free; she even sniffed his shampoo and aftershave to make sure. This left the bedroom.

There were no bottles under the bed or in the bedside cabinets. Once again she rifled through Murphy's clothes, taking out the box of charging leads and change, feeling all round the top shelf where he'd hidden the vodka before, but there were no bottles there now, nor was there anything in his gym bag except trainers and a tracksuit.

There was, however, a briefcase at the very back of the wardrobe. Delving into it, her fingers closed over what felt like a small cardboard bag.

She lifted it out and saw that it bore the imprimatur of a high street jewellers. She looked inside to see a small black velvet box, also clearly brand new, with a receipt coiled beside it. With a shock far worse than that she'd felt at seeing the door slam, Robin was suddenly sure what she'd see if she opened the box.

Sure enough, when she lifted the lid, she saw a small diamond solitaire winking up at her, set on a white gold or platinum band.

A wave of sweat passed down her body.

Oh God, no.

She lifted out the receipt, not to see the price, but the date. He'd bought it days before she'd discovered the vodka, before they'd agreed to let the new house go.

Robin replaced the ring and receipt carefully back in their bag and returned it to the old briefcase, then closed the wardrobe door and set about gathering her things. If Murphy really hadn't run off to the pub or the off licence, he'd probably be back soon, full of contrition, wondering whether this time he'd blown everything.

So flustered was Robin when she left the flat that she forgot all about

Green Jacket. However, she arrived safely at the Land Rover and set off, even more frightened than she'd been on arrival: not of sudden physical attack, but of the silver-coloured band hidden in the depths of Murphy's wardrobe: a tiny, sparkling shackle.

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Ha ha, John plucketh now at his rose
To rid himself of a sorrow at heart!
Lo,—petal on petal, fierce rays unclose;
Anther on anther, sharp spikes outstart;
And with blood for dew, the bosom boils;
And a gust of sulphur is all its smell;
And lo, he is horribly in the toils
Of a coal-black giant flower of Hell!

Robert Browning
The Heretic's Tragedy

At half past eight on Monday morning, Strike set off for a journey to the West Country in his BMW. He hadn't needed to set off so early, but he didn't want to run into Robin at the office, nor had he replied to the email she'd sent him about what he considered Rupert Fleetwood's very flimsy family connection to Belgium. Convinced that Murphy had proposed and been accepted, and that Robin's uncancellable lunch on Saturday had been with her future in-laws, Strike required longer than forty-eight hours to build himself up to the congratulatory expression and tone he'd need when they next spoke.

At a quarter to nine Strike received a call from Midge.

'I've got the address of Branfoot's flat,' she said triumphantly.

'Fantastic,' said Strike, his mood very slightly improved by this news, because scaring off Branfoot and his henchmen was one of his top priorities. 'Where is it?'

'Black Prince Road, Lambeth, second floor of smart block,' said Midge. 'Tailed him there last night. He went in around eleven, an hour later a black

guy in leather and a drunk girl went in. Lights went on on the second floor and stayed on for about three hours.

‘At four, Branfoot creeps outside again. At six, the girl staggers out onto the pavement to get into a taxi, looking rough as hell. Half an hour later, the porn sleaze comes out. Got pictures of all of them.’

‘Excellent work,’ said Strike.

‘Cheers,’ said Midge. ‘Right, well, I’m supposed to be catching that Hussein Mohamed between his Uber shifts. Need coffee. Speak to you later.’

Strike drove on down the M40 for half an hour, then Robin called him, as he’d half-expected she would. Steeling himself, he answered.

‘Pat says you’re driving to Hereford,’ she said. ‘Why—?’

‘I’m meeting Rena Liddell. She responded to me last night on one of her old Twitter accounts: “Hereford, 2pm tomorrow” – and Hereford’s got a Golden Fleece.’

‘Wow, great,’ said Robin. ‘Well, Midge has found—’

‘I know, she just called me,’ said Strike, ‘so when I get to Hereford I’m going to call de Leon and warn him I’m about to go to Branfoot myself and tell him I know what he’s up to in that flat, and if de Leon wants to sit on his arse and wait for the story to break without putting a decent spin on his own involvement, that’s his problem.’

‘Well, I’ve got other news,’ said Robin, who was currently in the inner office, and Strike’s stomach clenched.

‘Or rather, Pat has,’ Robin continued. ‘She’s found a pub in Yeovil called the Quicksilver Mail that had a barman for a couple of weeks last June who called himself Dave. He was short and had big ears. They let him go because he wasn’t very good.’

‘Ah,’ said Strike. ‘Well, I’ll be in the rough vicinity of Yeovil in a couple of hours. I could head there after Hereford and show them Tyler Powell’s picture.’

‘That’s a lot of driving in one day,’ said Robin. ‘Hereford and Yeovil aren’t that close to each other.’

‘Sure I’ll manage. Anything else?’

Robin, who didn’t much appreciate the spikiness of Strike’s tone, said, ‘No, I just dropped in to file some receipts, but I’m interviewing Faber Whitehead this evening, as I told you.’

‘OK, I’ll let you go,’ said Strike.

‘Strike,’ said Robin sharply.

‘What?’

‘If you’re still pissed off about Saturday, say so. You gave me literally no notice, and it’s not as if I haven’t forfeited a lot of free time late—’

‘I’m not pissed off about Saturday, I know it was short notice. I was worried Mrs Two-Times was making veiled threats about press, that’s all.’

‘Well, as *I’m* not the one who’s made us a target for the tabloids—’

‘Tabloid attention’s an occupational risk,’ said Strike. ‘Ask your boyfriend.’

As he’d half-hoped to provoke her into doing, Robin hung up.

She stood in fury beside the partners’ desk, staring at her mobile as though she could see Strike glaring back at her. *You total prick.* Robin wrenched open the dividing door so forcefully that Pat looked round, startled.

‘Everything all right?’

‘Fine,’ said Robin. ‘I’ve got some receipts for filing.’

She was halfway to the filing cabinet when she noticed a large margarine tub full of water set beside the fish tank. It contained the black fish called Cormoran, which was swimming lazily around its limited space.

‘Why’s that fish out of its tank?’

‘He’s got me feeding it bloody peas,’ said Pat grumpily.

A card was propped against the tank, carrying instructions in Strike’s hard-to-read handwriting. Diverted in spite of herself, Robin picked this up to read it.

Goldfish are bottom feeders
If they gulp too much air at the surface they can bugger up their balance and start floating upside down.
SOAK FOOD BEFORE GIVING IT IN FUTURE
Feed only small amount of mashed peas until it improves It’s OK to go back in main tank once swimming upright

‘It *is* the right way up now,’ Robin told Pat.

‘Is it?’

Pat joined Robin, both of them peering down at the fish with the knobbly growth on top of its head, stout body waggling, double tail fin wafting behind it as it circled the tub. Long strings of goldfish excrement swirled beneath it.

‘Shall I tip it back in?’ said Pat.

‘I would,’ said Robin. ‘It hasn’t got a lot of space in there.’

Meanwhile the black fish’s reluctant saviour was heading along the M40 while castigating himself for what he’d just said to Robin. A really smart move, he told himself, to behave like a dick in the immediate aftermath of her engagement. It was as though he was determined to push her into leaving and setting up Murphy and Murphy, Inc.

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… necessity alone, and the greatest good of the greatest number, can legitimately interfere with the dominion of absolute and ideal justice.

Albert Pike
Morals and Dogma of the
Ancient and Accepted Scottish
Rite of Freemasonry

Strike deposited his BMW in a multi-storey car park close to the middle of Hereford and set off in search of an early lunch, because breakfast felt a long way behind him. A short walk brought him within sight of a restaurant called the Beefy Boys, which he chose out of an angry self-sabotaging impulse, because what was the point of trying to compete with Murphy in the leanness stakes now? Having settled himself at a table outside so that he could vape and ordered the house speciality, the Dirty Boy Burger, he called Danny de Leon, who didn't pick up. Strike therefore left a voicemail message warning de Leon that the detective agency had now identified the flat where Branfoot was covertly filming oblivious drunks being screwed by porn stars, and that he would shortly be confronting Branfoot with the information. Danny would therefore have to suffer the consequences of not having spoken to the press, which would have mitigated the risk to himself of Branfoot's revenge.

Strike then reached into his coat pocket for Jim Todd's book, *Know When To Hold 'Em: Win Big Every Time*, which he'd brought with him to complete his perusal of Todd's scribbled notes. Opening it at a fresh page, he examined a list of nicknames for various pairs of pocket cards.

King-King – Cowboys
King-Queen – Marriage
King-Jack – Kojak

King-Nine – Canine

He was about to turn this page, on which Todd had only written *poket 8s* without explanation, when a tiny ripple in his subconscious told him not to be so hasty.

77 – walking sticks… (‘I even got it in army green so nobody’ll think you’re a big girl’s blouse.’)

4-4 – sailboats… (‘Eyes on the horizon if you feel ill…’)

Fuck’s sake, was everything going to remind him of Robin? He kept reading until he heard his phone buzz, and took it out in the hope that Robin had sent him an irate text, which would provide him with an opportunity to make a low-effort, typed apology for having been snide about Murphy. However, it was only Barclay, informing him that Two-Times had just ducked into a hotel looking furtive.

Strike sat, phone in hand, wondering whether he should apologise to Robin even in the absence of a first text from her. He knew perfectly well that punishing her for not reciprocating feelings he’d never voiced was the behaviour of a total arsehole. He was still trying to formulate a message that didn’t seem to carry an obvious undertone of ‘I just hate you being with Murphy’ when his burger arrived and he set his phone aside with relief.

The ingestion of a huge cheeseburger, complete with bacon and fried onions, gave Strike’s spirits a slight boost. Having eaten his last chip, he picked up his phone and texted Robin.

I’m sorry about what I said. I’m knackered but that’s no excuse.

He sat watching his phone for a minute, hoping to see the three dots that meant Robin was typing, but nothing appeared.

Having drunk a coffee, paid his bill and had a pee in the Beefy Boys’ bathroom, Strike set off for what Google Maps told him would be a short walk to the Golden Fleece.

On entering the pub Strike found a narrow, cramped and corridor-like interior, and a large television screen showing Sky Sports. Strike bought himself a zero-alcohol beer and was about to take a seat when the barman leaned forwards and said,

‘You Cameron Strike?’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike.

‘You’re to go up there,’ said the barman, pointing towards the door at the rear of the pub.

It transpired that the barman had meant ‘up there’ literally. A very small external paved area contained no tables, but a steep metal staircase leading up to the roof. Strike assumed that Rena Liddell wasn’t aware he had a false leg. He hauled himself upwards with the aid of the handrail, his pint slopping over his hand.

He emerged onto a rooftop space where a few tables and plastic palm trees in square tubs stood on artificial grass. Cross of Saint George bunting wound around the railings, beyond which Strike could see the tall spire of St Peter’s church.

Only one table was occupied. Facing Strike with a half-smile on his lips was the tall, salt-and-pepper-haired, square-jawed Ralph Lawrence, allegedly of MI5. He wasn’t wearing a suit today, but jeans and an open-necked shirt beneath a dark green cashmere sweater, and his blue eyes were concealed behind a pair of Aviator sunglasses.

Strike knew his expression had betrayed both surprise and displeasure, and he also saw that this gave Lawrence satisfaction. With a long drive behind him, an aching knee and hamstring, a forced climb up the stairs at the connivance of a man who knew he had half a leg missing, and a wet sleeve where beer had slopped over it, Strike was hard put to conceal his resentment. As he sat down opposite Lawrence, a kind of Rolodex of theories whirled inside his head, and it halted on the most obvious question.

‘Rena invite me here, or was that you?’

‘She did,’ said Lawrence smoothly, ‘but we were watching.’

‘Where is she?’

‘She’s been sectioned.’

‘Why?’

‘She’s been trying to get hold of a gun.’

‘What for?’

‘You’ve found her social media. You tell me which group of people she might think deserves shooting.’

Strike wasn’t about to fall into that trap. Lawrence sipped what looked like water and, while pulling out his vape, Strike entertained himself for a

moment by imagining slapping it out of the man's hand.

'This is the kind of thing people assume spooks do, isn't it?' he said. 'Get people locked up for being crazy if they know too much?'

'What makes you think Rena Liddell knows anything?'

'She knows something,' said Strike, 'or you wouldn't be sitting here. You'd've let me think she'd just stood me up if you weren't worried she'd already told me something.'

'Maybe I've got questions for you.'

'Go on, then,' said Strike.

'You've clearly had contact with her, other than over social media.'

'Have I?'

'First contact didn't happen there. Who approached who?'

'It's all a bit hazy now,' said Strike.

'Angela told me you think you're funny,' said Lawrence.

'No, she didn't,' said Strike calmly.

'Look,' said Lawrence, and Strike was happy to see he hadn't liked the fact his snide comment had glanced off Strike without leaving a mark, 'I'm doing you a favour here, little though you seem to realise it. You've had online contact with a mentally ill Islamophobe who was trying to get herself a gun.'

'You aren't going to intimidate me by hinting I've had contact with a terrorist,' said Strike. 'I know full well why you're here, and it's got fuck-all to do with guns. You fucked up, warning Rena not to give me the time of day. That's what gave her the idea of contacting me in the first place. If she's become a liability, that's your fault, not mine.'

'Mr Strike, I'm asking for your cooper—'

'And I might've given it, if you hadn't forced me to walk up onto the fucking roof and spill my pint.'

Strike pushed himself back into a standing position.

'There are still civil liberties in this country. You'll have your work cut out, keeping her in a psychiatric facility indefinitely. I can wait.'

He turned and, doing his absolute best not to hobble, set back off down the steep metal staircase. As he'd rashly committed to driving to the Quicksilver Mail pub in Yeovil, he supposed he should get going.

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Indulge me but a moment: if I fail
—Favoured with such an audience, understand!—
To set things right, why, class me with the mob
As understander of the mind of man!
The mob,—now, that's just how the error comes!

Robert Browning
Tertium Quid

Robin was currently too angry at Strike to accept his texted apology. Work was supposed to be the one place in her life where she wasn't subject to men taking out their bad moods on her and she saw no reason to show a good grace Strike himself rarely displayed.

Plug still hadn't been arrested, which irrationally compounded Robin's anger at Strike: she connected his bad behaviour with the breeder of dangerous dogs, who still remained unpunished. Yet again running surveillance on Plug's mother's house that afternoon, it gave Robin no solace whatsoever to tell herself that her tiredness and misery were nothing compared to the exhaustion she'd endured while undercover at the Universal Humanitarian Church. She was sleeping very poorly, and today had awoken at four a.m., convinced she was back in the church dormitory from which she'd had to sneak once a week, to send Strike a report. She'd then lain awake brooding about Murphy until her alarm went off.

He'd called her before she'd even reached home on Saturday, apologising for storming out on her after lunch. As Robin had suspected, his parents had no idea about his recent relapse, nor about the investigation he was facing at work. He'd told Robin that he always found his father's garrulity and boozing hard to take, and that his mother had been

interrogating him remorselessly about the cancelled purchase of their joint house before Robin had arrived for lunch. Robin was certain her suspicions about Mrs Murphy's feelings had been correct; that she thought Robin wasn't the devoted girlfriend he deserved.

She hadn't asked her boyfriend whether his parents knew about the ectopic pregnancy, because she didn't want to hear the answer, but she was certain they did. She also suspected they knew about the diamond solitaire hidden inside Murphy's wardrobe. They'd come over to London to meet Murphy's soon-to-be fiancée, and the possible mother of future grandchildren, while in total ignorance of the things their son had done to make Robin afraid of making long-term plans with him.

She'd accepted Murphy's apology where she hadn't accepted Strike's, because the former had sounded distraught on the phone and she still felt the responsibility of supporting him in sobriety. If there was one good thing to come out of their most recent row, she thought, it was that he'd been left in no doubt that now was a very bad time to propose. She'd have preferred to believe he'd abandoned the idea entirely, but the fact that the ring and its receipt hadn't been returned suggested that he was still hoping that a suitable opportunity might yet present itself.

Plug remained at home until half past five, at which time Robin handed over surveillance to Midge. She ate a sandwich in the Land Rover, then headed off for Beaconsfield in Buckinghamshire, where she was to interview the father of Hugo Whitehead, who'd crashed Tyler Powell's car. As she knew from her online research, the Whiteheads had packed up and left Ironbridge for good shortly after Hugo's funeral.

Robin arrived in Tilsworth Road shortly before seven o'clock. The Whiteheads' house was large, made of red brick and had a double garage. As Mrs Whitehead wasn't supposed to know Robin had visited, she drove the Land Rover a little way up the road to a parking space outside the range of street lights, then walked back to the house.

The front door was opened almost as soon as she'd rung the bell, and there stood Faber Whitehead, who Robin knew to be an award-winning architect. An odd-looking man who reminded her of a beluga whale in glasses, having very pale skin, small eyes and a massive domed, bald forehead, he was wearing a baggy black sweater and jeans, and the lenses of his glasses, which had bright red frames, were so thick they reduced his

eyes to small points.

‘Miss Ellacott?’

‘Yes,’ said Robin, holding out her hand, which he shook.

‘Come in,’ said Whitehead, and after taking her coat and hanging it up for her, he led Robin through the hall into a large sitting room with walls of fashionable dark greige, a coffee table made of glass and a long, low, black and steel sofa with such a deep seat that Robin had the choice of perching on the edge, or sitting back and holding her legs out straight in front of her.

‘Could I get you anything?’ Whitehead asked Robin. ‘Tea, coffee…?’

‘A glass of water would be great,’ said Robin. ‘Thank you.’

While Whitehead was fetching it, Robin glanced around and saw a digital photo frame sitting on a cabinet of black wood. It was displaying a slowly changing succession of family photos and Robin’s eye fell on it as it showed a picture of red-headed Hugo, familiar to her from Chloe Griffiths’ birthday photo. Hugo had died, she knew, at the age of twenty, but here he looked around fourteen and was wearing a rugby strip while pointing at his own mouth, apparently laughing at the absence of a tooth.

‘So,’ said Whitehead, after handing Robin her water and sitting down in an armchair that matched the sofa, holding a glass of red wine, ‘you’re investigating Tyler.’

‘Not exactly,’ said Robin. ‘As I told you in my email, we’ve been hired to try and identify the body in the silver vault. Tyler was considered a possible victim by the police, so we’ve been looking into him. If we find out where he’s gone, we’ll obviously be able to rule him out as William Wright.’

‘Right,’ said Whitehead. He gulped some wine, then said, ‘I know you’ve already spoken to Ian Griffiths and Dilys Powell.’

‘We have, yes. You’re in touch with them?’

‘I’ve made it my business to keep in touch with Griffiths,’ said Whitehead. ‘He reassured me you and your partner were above board.’

‘Oh, good,’ said Robin.

‘Griffiths and I both want Tyler found, though for rather different reasons.’

With a glance towards the darkening window Whitehead said,

‘We must keep this fairly brief, because I’m not sure how long we can count on Lucinda staying out. She nearly cancelled dinner, but I persuaded

her to go. I think it'll do her good. She's on a maximum dose of antidepressants, but she's still… and our elder son, Harvey, he's having to re-do his final year at university. Fell apart completely after what happened to Hugo. Got a compassionate deferral for his finals.'

'I'm so sorry,' said Robin. 'This must be incredibly painful to talk about.'

'It's less painful to talk about it than to think about it, all day, every day,' said Whitehead. 'Lucinda wants me to "move on". We can't discuss it, it upsets her too much. Harvey, though, he's on my side. He knows I'm meeting you tonight. He agrees that the guilty person has got clean away with it.'

'Tyler, you mean?'

'Oh no,' said Whitehead. 'No, no, not Tyler. *Chloe Griffiths.*'

Robin was so taken aback she couldn't think of anything to say.

'You're surprised,' said Whitehead, watching her intently. 'But when I've explained… you know who Chloe Griffiths is?'

'Yes,' said Robin slowly, 'Ian Griffiths' daughter…'

'Exactly, yes,' said Whitehead. He took another gulp of wine. 'Now, you see, there was something the police never made public – CCTV footage. The police ultimately decided it wasn't conclusive enough to use, but there was footage of somebody *getting inside that Mazda in the car park in Birmingham*.'

'Really?' said Robin, thinking of the poor quality CCTV footage that had already done nothing but confuse this case. 'Would you mind if I take notes?'

'No, no, carry on…'

As Robin took out her notebook and pen Whitehead said,

'The police looked into it before discounting it as irrelevant. We were told it was very blurry, and there was thick rain that night, which didn't help, but a figure that looked female moved between the Mazda and the next car, then ducked down out of sight, and the police thought they might have entered the Mazda, but then they decided the person must be just doing up a shoe or something.'

'What made them check the car park footage?' asked Robin.

'They'd got wind of all the rumours that had started up in Ironbridge, about Tyler having tampered with the car, and of course, if it was done

anywhere, it must have been in the car park, because they crashed on the way back. Now, Tyler couldn't have done it. Not only could nobody mistake Tyler for a female, blurred footage or not, he was on the phone over the exact period that person entered the Mazda in Birmingham. The mobile signal confirmed he was speaking from Ironbridge.'

'D'you know who he was talking to?' asked Robin.

'No, but I'm sure the police checked. I know people in Ironbridge said Tyler took off because of the crash, but I know for a fact he'd been thinking about clearing out well before then. I heard him talking to Hugo about leaving.'

'Did he say he wanted to go to London?'

'No, just that he wanted a change, but he had transferable skills, you know, he was a good mechanic. Anyway, it clearly can't have been Tyler who messed with the ABS,' said Whitehead. 'Somebody else must have turned it off. We all knew that storm was coming. It was an undetectable way to hurt them. Anyone would have known the journey back was going to be hazardous, especially for a recently qualified driver.'

Robin, who was making notes, was glad of a reason not to look Whitehead in the eye. She hadn't needed this encounter to learn that even the most intelligent people may be blinded by their passionate desire not to look facts in the face. Hugo had been refused the use of the family Range Rover on the night of his fatal accident. His family must have wondered whether he mightn't have survived, had he only been driving that.

'I can see why people were saying Tyler did something to the car, that he'd faked being ill that night, because, of course, it was his Mazda – he'd have keys. But Chloe and Tyler were friends – she could have pinched them, or had a second set cut without his knowledge. She hung around with him at his garage sometimes, so she could have asked how to fiddle with an ABS system.'

Robin opened her mouth to speak, but Whitehead ploughed on.

'Now, Tyler's friends and his grandmother thought *we* were the ones who started the rumour that Tyler sabotaged the car, but not a bit of it. In the immediate aftermath of the crash, Lucinda and I were at Hugo's bedside around the clock – we had no idea what was being said in Ironbridge. It was only later that we heard what people were saying, and about the CCTV footage. But I could never see why Tyler would have done it, never.'

‘I’ve been told,’ said Robin cautiously, ‘that he was jealous, that Anne-Marie was his former girlfriend?’

‘No, no, that was years previously,’ said Whitehead, waving the idea away with a large white hand. ‘When they were both sixteen or something. There was no question of him being angry about *that.* But when the police realised that it couldn’t have been Tyler tampering with the car in Birmingham, they seemed to rule out *any* possibility of sabotage. Yet there was still that figure on film.’

Who might have been doing up their shoe.

‘Nobody stopped to ask why Chloe Griffiths had suddenly gone off abroad,’ said Whitehead. ‘She’d shown no interest in leaving Ironbridge before the crash – and what the police never took seriously was, *she’d actually made threats to kill Hugo and Anne-Marie.’*

‘Really?’ said Robin.

‘Yes. She had a terrible row with the pair of them, really nasty. We didn’t hear about it until weeks after the crash, but there were plenty of witnesses. She literally screamed “I’ll fucking kill you if you don’t stop it,” at both of them.’

‘If they didn’t stop what?’ asked Robin.

‘They’d made a joke, a simple joke, about her two-timing her boyfriend in Telford with Tyler. There was no malice about it. They were only teasing her. Tyler had given Chloe a bracelet – that’s what triggered the row. Hugo came home quite shaken. He said he and Anne-Marie were calling her “Shrinking Violet” because this bracelet had violets on it, and she was getting more and more irate, and then they hinted that she was two-timing her boyfriend with Tyler, and I can only assume she was afraid the boyfriend would get to hear about it, because she became absolutely furious and screamed at them. A *huge* overreaction, but everyone in the Horse & Jockey heard it – but nobody told the police about her becoming so aggressive and threatening, on such a slim pretext. I asked other people in the pub that night to speak up. *Harvey* urged them to. But the police didn’t want to listen. “Oh, it was just a silly little row” – but to say, to *literally say* she’d kill them – Lucinda and I never liked the girl much,’ said Whitehead. ‘One felt a little sorry for her: no mother, juvenile father, hardly surprising she didn’t have many social graces. She was rather quiet and sulky, but then she’d suddenly turn nasty. I think she’s been rather used to thinking of

herself as a victim, and has been indulged and humoured by her father, and she expects the rest of the world to treat her the same way. Very pretty, but you always felt there was something unpleasant there, underneath. And now she's buggered off abroad, with immensely convenient timing. *That's* why I'm keen not to lose touch with Griffiths. I want to know when Chloe's back in the country.'

'I see. Did—?' Robin began, but Whitehead spoke over her.

'The consensus among the young people, before the crash, was that Chloe was leading Tyler on. He was very obviously smitten with her, but she treated him like a dogsbody, putting him down and so on. He's not the brightest, but a good-natured lad, and unhappy at home. His father, Ivor, is a mean man, so Tyler was always over at the Griffithses' house and he was useful to Chloe, you know. Lifts and so on. And I think it flattered her ego to have this lapdog always around. But the night she threatened Hugo and Anne-Marie she said some very nasty, degrading things about Tyler. She made it quite clear he wasn't good enough for her, and Hugo was shocked – he liked Tyler, really liked him. And after that, Hugo told me Chloe would barely speak to him, it was as though she had a *vendetta* against him and Anne-Marie. Hugo tried to reason with her, but she told him to fuck off. Incredible anger, for something so small.'

'Chloe told me—'

'*You've spoken to her?*' said Whitehead, with almost unnerving excitement.

'Only by WhatsApp. As a matter of fact, she told me she didn't like Tyler, that she'd been friendly towards him because she felt sorry for him, and she did suggest it was possible he'd tampered—'

'There you are, you see, she's *still* trying to pin it on him! Who fanned the flames, about Tyler? Who kept the rumours going? I think it was Chloe. Tyler was disposable to her, a useful patsy. I'm *one hundred per cent certain* that she encouraged the rumours about Tyler having messed with the car. Griffiths himself admitted to me that he first heard the rumour from Chloe. "It's just what the kids are saying, I'm sure there's no truth in it."'

'D'you know whether Chloe had an alibi for that night?' asked Robin.

'The police wouldn't tell us,' said Whitehead. 'They simply didn't want to listen.'

'Did you know a girl called Zeta in Ironbridge?' asked Robin.

‘Zeta? No, I don’t think so. Unless she was in Harvey and Hugo’s friendship groups, I wouldn’t have. Why?’

‘She alleges that Tyler did something threatening to her, after he heard her repeating the rumour about him sabotaging the Mazda.’

‘I don’t really blame him,’ said Whitehead stoutly. ‘Being accused of something like that…’

‘She alleges that he almost ran her over.’

‘Oh, I’m sure that’s not true,’ said Whitehead at once. ‘No, no, that wouldn’t be like Tyler. His friend Wynn Jones, now, I’d believe it of *him*, he’s a proper lout – but not Tyler. You know, I wouldn’t be surprised if he suspected Chloe was behind the crash himself. I’m very, very keen on finding him, and getting some answers, and helping him clear his name… I think we’re going to have to wrap this up soon,’ said Whitehead, with a now nervous glance at the dark sky outside the un-curtained window. ‘If Lucinda comes back early—’

‘Of course,’ said Robin. ‘Just got one more question. If Chloe was using Tyler for lifts, does that mean she didn’t have her own car?’

‘No, but she could have borrowed her father’s, couldn’t she? It was when she didn’t have access to it that she relied on Tyler.’

‘Right,’ said Robin. ‘Well, thank you so much for your time.’

‘You know,’ said Whitehead, leading Robin back into the hall, ‘Hugo *did* like speed, nobody’s pretending he didn’t – he was a young man – but never in those conditions, and not with a passenger. And,’ he added, taking Robin’s coat off its hook and handing it to her, ‘he *knew* the storm was on its way. We all did.’

‘I’m so sorry for your loss,’ said Robin, unable to think of anything else to say.

‘You’ll let me know, if you find Tyler?’

‘If we find him, I’ll ask him whether he minds us letting you know,’ promised Robin.

It was chilly outside. She walked briskly up the street to the Land Rover and got inside, thinking about all she’d just heard. Then she took out her phone and typed out a new message for Chloe Griffiths.

Hi Chloe, this is Robin Ellacott. I’m sorry to contact you

again, but I’ve got a few more questions and I think you’re the only person who can answer them. I do understand how difficult this is for you, and I wouldn’t disturb you again if I didn’t think it was important.

Having sent this message, Robin sat thinking. For some reason, the name ‘Horse & Jockey’ ran through her mind, but she wasn’t sure why. She’d just opened Google to look at the place when the door beside her was wrenched open. Before she could scream, a hand closed around her throat.

103

… mark
What one weak woman can achieve alone.

Matthew Arnold
Merope: A Tragedy

He was on top of her, forcing her backwards onto the passenger seat; she felt the handbrake pressing into her back; she couldn't cry out, because of his hands around her throat; he was crawling on top of her, pinning her down; and she felt her handbag slide into the footwell—

He was trying to force her further into the car and she knew his plan was to drive off with her; she heard her phone fall with a clunk; saw his face in strangely cubic light and shadow, the ferocity, the thick eyebrows—

She managed to free her right hand from beneath him and seized his wrist, trying to drag it from her throat, but with her left, she was groping on the floor, in darkness; it was there, she knew it was there, she'd checked before leaving the flat that morning—

Her fingers closed on the plastic, felt for the nozzle, and now black spots were popping in front of her eyes, but she had it—

The first spray didn't hit him – she felt the sting of it in the air—

The second covered the side of his head and Robin closed her eyes—

She heard him choke, splutter and gasp; the grip on her neck loosened; she sprayed again and again and heard him swear – now he was trying to evade the spray but still kneeling on her—

With every bit of strength she could muster she punched blindly upwards with her right hand and heard the thud of knuckle on bone—

She opened her eyes; they began to water from the noxious vapour now thick in the air, but she knew where to aim, now—

Another spray and another, directly to his face—

She drew breath and her lungs burned, too, but no matter: she screamed as loudly as she'd ever screamed in her life, now hanging on to fistfuls of his curly hair.

104

To envenom a name by libels, that already is openly tainted, is to add stripes with an iron rod to one that is flayed with whipping…

Albert Pike
Morals and Dogma of the
Ancient and Accepted Rite of
Scottish Freemasonry

Strike was currently on the M4, heading back towards London. His detour to Yeovil and the Quicksilver Mail had been pointless: nobody at the pub had recognised Tyler Powell's picture.

'Nah, Dave was quite, you know – porky,' one of the barmaids had told him, sketching an invisible hula hoop around her own middle to demonstrate the sizeable girth of the vanished Dave.

Tempting though it was to believe that Tyler Powell had packed on the pounds to become 'Dave', Strike thought it unlikely he could have gained that substantial a belly in a month, so having thanked them all he returned to his BMW and headed off for London. In spite of his touchily defiant statement to Robin that he'd cope just fine with another few hours' driving, his right leg was cramping. He was also extremely hungry; his Beefy Boys' Dirty Boy Burger now a distant memory. The anger he continued to feel towards Ralph Lawrence kept recurring, like heartburn.

Ten miles from the city, his phone rang.

'It's me,' said a panicky voice. 'Danny de Leon.'

'Got my message, did you?' said Strike. Too tired, sore and hungry for any social niceties, he said, 'I warned you when we met I'd have to go ahead without you if you left it too long to spill the beans.'

'I didn't know who to contact,' said the agitated voice. 'OK? I didn't know how you do something like this—'

‘Then you should’ve called and asked me,’ said Strike. ‘I’ll send you the contact details for a journalist called Fergus Robertson, who’s already interested in Branfoot, but you need to make the call *now* if you’d rather not live the rest of your life known as Branfoot’s predator-for-hire, and make sure you act bloody contrite about what you did.’

‘Make sure I what?’

‘*Act contrite*,’ said Strike loudly. ‘Ashamed. Guilty. If you don’t want to be charged, and you want to avoid his retaliation, expose the fucker *now*.’

Strike ended the call and drove on, wondering whether it mightn’t be a good idea to stop at the next services to eat, rather than waiting until he reached the heart of London.

Ten minutes later, at Heston services, Strike texted Danny de Leon Fergus Robertson’s contact details, noting as he did so that there was still no response from Robin to his texted apology. He then visited the bathroom and, having peed, headed to get some food, thinking of nothing except his own depression and the appropriate noises he was going to have to make when Robin announced her engagement.

When his mobile rang yet again, and he saw it was Fergus Robertson, he let the call go to voicemail. Presumably de Leon had just contacted the journalist and Robertson wanted confirmation from Strike that the man was legit, but as Strike had just reached the front of the queue for food, he ignored the call.

Strike was mildly surprised when Robertson called again while he was waiting for his coffee, and for a third time as Strike was about to take a seat to eat his sandwich.

‘What?’ said Strike, answering at last.

‘I’m trying to do you a favour,’ came Robertson’s impatient voice.

‘Been in touch already, has he?’

‘What?’

‘De Leon. About Branfoot.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I… never mind. What favour are you doing me?’

‘Culpepper’s about to run a fucking massive piece on you. I heard from a mate. He’s got a new source.’

It was as though a frozen snake had slithered down Strike’s oesophagus. He’d thought it was over, done, finished with, but he knew instantly who

the new source was likely to be.

‘Kim Cochran?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What kind of piece is it?’ he said, but he already knew.

‘Apparently you’ve been in a love triangle with a hot brunette and Andrew Honbold. Honbold took out a super-injunction to stop the papers printing that he didn’t know whether the mistress’s baby is his or yours. It’s just been overturned. Public interest: family values crusader cheating on his wife.’

‘The baby’s his,’ said Strike. ‘I’m not the father.’

‘OK, well, if you’ve got proof, now would be the time to sling it at a lawyer,’ said Robertson. ‘It’s probably too late to stop the piece running, but you’ll be able to get it amended.’

‘All right,’ said Strike, marvelling at how calm his own voice was. ‘Thanks for the heads-up.’

He stood up, leaving his sandwich unwrapped and his coffee undrunk, and limped back to his BMW, where he sat for a minute, staring ahead into darkness. If the piece ran, he was fucked. Journalists would descend on Denmark Street yet again. Every insinuation Culpepper had so far made about him would be magnified a hundred times. He’d be That Guy who did all the stuff with those women: Candy the sex worker, Nina, who he’d screwed and spurned, Charlotte, dead in a bath, Bijou, her illegitimate baby and her tabloid-bashing lover. His business would be finished. Everyone who worked with him would be tainted.

He called Bijou. She answered on the second ring.

‘You’ve heard?’ she said, sounding just as panicked as he felt.

‘I have, yeah. Tell me the truth: did you admit to Honbold we’d screwed?’

‘No, *never*! I said I *hinted* we had to people at work, to try and make him jealous! I’ve shown him the DNA tests and he actually said, yesterday, he was sorry he’d doubted me, but *now*—’

‘Right. You stick to the story we never had more than drinks, and so will I,’ said Strike. ‘No one can prove otherwise. I’m going to try and sort this. Got to go.’

He hung up. He could see only one possible solution to his dilemma, and nothing but this extremity could have brought him to it. Strike took a

lungful of nicotine and called his half-sister Prudence.

105

The night my father got me
His mind was not on me;
He did not plague his fancy
To muse if I should be
The son you see.

A. E. Housman
XIV: The Culprit, Last Poems

The townhouse outside which Strike arrived half an hour later was tall and white, with columns either side of the glossy black front door. When he got close enough to see it, he saw that instead of the standard lion's head, the brass door knocker was in the shape of an electric guitar. Strike chose to ring the bell.

He heard footsteps and had just put his hand in his pocket for a business card, anticipating a housekeeper or perhaps even a butler, when the door opened to reveal a tall, grizzled Jonny Rokeby in person, wearing a black suit and an open-necked blue shirt.

'Ah,' he said, grinning as he stood back to allow Strike to pass. 'Come in.'

In youth, Strike knew, Rokeby had been exactly as tall as his oldest son, though he was now a little shorter. Rokeby had allowed his thick mane of shoulder-length hair to go grey, after years of dyeing it a purplish brown. His walnut-coloured face was deeply lined, doubtless due to long sojourns in his holiday home in the Caribbean, as much as from years of drug-taking and drinking. Unlike his eldest son, he was very thin.

'In 'ere,' he said, and he led Strike into a huge drawing room that was furnished in shades of chocolate brown and gold. It felt vaguely familiar,

but in his distracted state, Strike didn't know why.

'Pru says you need 'elp.'

'Yeah,' said Strike. Every particle of him revolted at having to say it, but it was this, or the certain annihilation of the agency. 'I need a lawyer who can act fast. I'm paying, but I imagine you'll be able to get hold of a good one quicker than I can.'

'No problem,' said Rokeby.

He took his mobile phone out of his pocket and pressed a number.

'Denholm, it's Jonny. Urgent. I'm at 'ome, call me…'E'll ring soon as 'e picks that up,' said Rokeby, placing his mobile on the coffee table. 'Wanna drink?'

'I'm driving,' said Strike.

'Wanna no-alcohol beer? I'm off the booze meself. Doctor's orders. Sit down.'

Strike did as he was bidden, on a large brown sofa at right angles to Rokeby's chair. The latter pressed a small bell on the glass table beside him, and a middle-aged Filipino woman wearing a silver-grey uniform appeared.

'Can we 'ave a coupla those not-real beer fings, Tala?'

She left, and Rokeby turned back to Strike.

'What d'you need a lawyer for?'

'Dominic Culpepper's trying to run another story on me,' said Strike.

'What's 'is fuckin' problem wiv you? Why—?'

Rokeby's mobile rang. He picked it up.

''I, Denholm, sorry to ring so late… no, it's me son… no, Cormoran… no, 'e's the one 'oo needs you… yeah… 'e's wiv me now. I'll 'and you over.'

Strike took his father's phone.

'Evening,' said Strike.

'Good evening,' said a dry, upper-class voice on the end of the phone.

'I need help with a story Dominic Culpepper's about to run.'

'On what subject?'

'A super-injunction taken out by Andrew Honbold QC. He wanted to stop the papers printing that he didn't know whether he or I fathered a kid with a woman called Bijou Watkins. I never had a sexual relationship with her, as she'll confirm, and I've got a DNA test that proves the kid's not mine, which Honbold's seen. I can forward you the information

immediately, if needed.’

‘Very good,’ said Denholm. ‘Culpepper, you said?’

‘That’s right.’

‘All right, I’ll get back to you in—’

‘Gimme the phone,’ said Rokeby loudly, gesturing at Strike. ‘Gimme.’

Strike handed it over.

‘Denholm? Make the fucker apologise for that bullshit about the ’ooker as well.’

‘There’s no—’ began Strike.

‘Tell fuckin’ Culpepper,’ said Rokeby, waving Strike down, ‘’e takes all of it back, or Cormoran’ll see ’im in court. *All of it.* I want the prick *shitting himself*… yeah… exactly… yeah. All righ’.’

Rokeby hung up and said,

‘’E’ll be back to us soon as ’e’s contacted ’em.’

‘I didn’t want the other thing dragged into this,’ said Strike, keeping a rein on his temper with difficulty.

‘Why?’ said Rokeby. ‘Z’it true?’

‘No, but—’

The smiling housekeeper reappeared with a tray, which she sat down on the highly polished mahogany table. Once she’d poured out two beers and left, Strike said, ‘I can’t afford years of litigation.’

‘Won’t be years. Denholm’ll sort it. ’E scares the shit out of the fuckers, ’cause they know ’is clients can rinse them.’

‘But I’m not in that financial bracket, so—’

‘I’ll p—’

‘I don’t want you paying for anything, I already told you that. I came here for your contacts, not your money.’

‘Fuck’s sake, lemme do this.’

‘No,’ said Strike.

‘Pride, is it?’ said Rokeby, speaking as though Strike had a sexually transmitted disease.

‘Something like that, yeah,’ said Strike.

‘Then take it out of *your* money. It’s still just fucking sitting there for you.’

‘I don’t want it.’

‘Why?’ said Rokeby, but before Strike could speak he said, ‘Revenge for

your mum? Because you fink I cut ’er off, forced ’er to live poor? I’ll tell you why I stopped her gettin’ it direct, it was ’cause your Auntie Joan called my office an’ said Leda was spunkin’ the money up the wall on boyfriends an’ drugs an’ you didn’t ’ave proper shoes. Leda could’ve ’ad wha’ever she wanted if she could prove it was for you, but she never bovvered askin’ after I put a few safeguards in place. Too much effort. Anyway, you borrowed some of it before, din’t you?’

‘If I wanted to work, I had no choice. Nobody thought a one-legged man who’d never had a mortgage was a good business risk,’ said Strike. ‘And I paid it all back, in case your accountant never—’

‘I know you fuckin’ paid it back, but what was the fuckin’ point? It’s *your money*. It’s legally *yours*. What’re you gonna do when I die, burn it? Give it to a fuckin’ donkey sanctuary?’

‘RNLI, probably,’ said Strike. He drank some beer.

‘For your uncle, right? What was ’is name?’

‘Ted,’ said Strike.

There was an awkward silence in which Strike, who preferred not to look at Rokeby, directed his attention at the gigantic David Bailey portrait of the Deadbeats hanging over the fireplace.

‘Listen, I never knew Gillespie was badgering you to give the money back,’ said Rokeby. ‘’E din’t like what you said about me, when you borrowed it, but I never knew ’e was chasin’ you for it. ’E’s gone now. Retired. I was glad to see the back of ’im, to tell ya the truth… I spent forty years off my fuckin’ face, I let people ’andle fings for me. I’m not fuckin’ proud of it.’

‘I don’t care about Gillespie,’ said Strike. ‘I was always going to give it back. I said so when I borrowed it.’

There was another short pause.

‘You and Pru see a bit of each other now, I ’ear,’ said Rokeby.

‘Yeah,’ said Strike.

‘Funny. You two are the most like me of all of ’em.’

‘I’m just like Ted,’ said a furious sixteen-year-old Cormoran Strike through the mouth of his forty-two-year-old self, and wished he hadn’t.

‘I don’ mean personality,’ said Rokeby, who didn’t seem offended. ‘I mean, self-starters. D’you know what my old man was?’

‘Policeman,’ said Strike.

‘Yeah. Fuckin’ policeman! ’E’d’ve loved you, army and medals and shit. Shame he died before ’e knew I’d produced a proper man. We ’ated each ovver. Chucked me out on the fuckin’ street when I was fifteen. I ’ad to go an’ kip at Leo’s. You know ’oo Leo is?’

‘Your drummer,’ said Strike.

‘Yeah,’ said Rokeby. ‘So I made it out of nuffin’. Same as you.’

‘I didn’t make it out of nothing,’ Strike contradicted him. ‘Not everyone’s got a pool of money they can borrow from, to start a business.’

‘Not everyone’s got a mate called Leo ’oo stops ’em livin’ rough,’ said Rokeby. ‘Shit ’appens an’ luck ’appens. Thass life. You deal wiv the shit an’ make the most of your luck when you can get it, ’cause it don’t come round too often. The ’ole band started ’cause Leo’s mum an’ dad let me go live there, an’ now look. I got so many places to sleep, I forget I’ve got ’alf of them… you’ve ’ad enough shit out of me bein’ your farver, might’s well get somefing good out of it for a change. You know what ’olding on to fuckin’ resentment does? Gives ya fuckin’ cancer.’

Strike forced himself to ask,

‘How are you? I heard—’

‘What, me prostate?’ said Rokeby dismissively. ‘They say it’s all right. Gotta ’ave checks an’ that.’

Another, longer pause followed. Strike drank some beer.

‘Listen,’ said Rokeby. ‘That day at the studio—’

‘I don’t want to talk about that,’ said Strike, willing the fucking lawyer to call back.

‘I know I acted like a cunt. I’d been up all night fuckin’ drinkin’, an’ I’d just done a load of coke to try an’ wake up, ’cause we ’ad to record. Know why I was in a fuckin’ state? ’Cause the night before, Jimmy told us ’e ’ad fuckin’ AIDS. Dirty needles at the Chelsea, the stupid fucker. Then Leda shows up, no fuckin’ warning, dragging you—’

‘I told you, I don’t want to—’

‘I be’aved like a cunt, I’m fuckin’ admittin’ it, all right? I felt bad, after. I wasn’ proud of meself. Should I ’ave done better? ’Course I fuckin’ should. You never done nuffing you’re ashamed of?’

‘Plenty,’ said Strike. ‘I didn’t come here to discuss the past, I don’t need apologies. You were the only one who could help me with this, or I wouldn’t be here.’

‘You’ve got ’air jus’ like Eric Bloom,’ said Rokeby, eyeing it. ‘You know ’oo—?’

‘Lead singer of Blue Oyster Cult, yeah, and I got this hair from my Cornish grandfather,’ said Strike.

‘Well, ’ow was I s’posed to fuckin’ know that?’ said Rokeby. ‘I don’t wanna disrespect ’er, but she put it around, Leda, an’ Eric was the one she ’ad the real fing for, so you can see ’ow I fort, when you was born—’

‘I can see how all of it happened,’ said Strike, through clenched teeth. ‘Forget it. It doesn’t matter.’

‘She give you the middle name “Blue”, for fuck’s sake. What was I supposed to fink? You listen to Blue Oyster Cult?’

‘When Mum was around,’ said Strike. ‘Not since.’

‘I don’t rate it. But they were fuckin’ unbeatable, live. ’Mazin’ live, I gotta give ’em that, an’ Leda loved the gigs. She used to say to me—’

‘What d’you mean, “used to say to you”?’ said Strike, drawn in against his will. ‘It was once, right?’

‘’Course it wasn’t only fucking once,’ said Rokeby impatiently. ‘Twenny times, probably. More. ’Appened every time she was around. She told you it was on’y once, did she?’

Strike didn’t answer. All Leda had ever told him about his conception was that it had happened during the ‘best fucking party’ she’d ever attended, clearly imagining that he’d see it as a matter of pride that he’d come into existence in a New York loft, while surrounded by seventies rock stars and their myriad hangers-on. Her subsequent anger at Rokeby for his refusal to admit paternity until forced into it by a DNA test meant she’d rarely mentioned his name during Strike’s childhood, except to rail against him.

‘It wasn’ on’y once, an’ it wasn’ in the middle of the fuckin’ room on no bean bag, neiver,’ said Rokeby irritably. ‘It’s like Marianne Faithfull and that fuckin’ Mars Bar. People make up bullshit and wanna believe it. It was in a side room an’ nobody was fuckin’ watchin’, ’cause I wasn’t into that and nor was she. An’ I was s’posed to be gettin’ married to fuckin’ Carla a monf later, so obviously I ’ad to say it never ’appened, din’ I? An’ that party was one night after Leda ’ad been at a Blue Oyster Cult gig, so when you come out wiv ’air like Eric’s—’

‘OK if we stop discussing who my mother might or might not have

fucked?’ said Strike through clenched teeth.

‘All righ’,’ said Rokeby, with a shrug. He swigged more beer, then said, ‘Fing about your mum was, she was funny, proper funny. I always liked that. I like a woman wiv a sense of humour. Fuck knows why I married fuckin’ Carla, she’s abou’ as funny as gettin’ your foreskin caught in your zip. Where’d Leda get “Strike” from, anyway?’

‘He was a kid who came to town with the fair,’ said Strike. ‘She left him a week after she married him.’

‘Huh,’ said Rokeby. ‘I always fort she made it up. So you use the name of a bloke you never met?’

‘I use it because it was my mother’s,’ said Strike. ‘Can we drop—?’

‘Listen, I ’ear fings, from the others,’ said Rokeby, leaning forwards. ‘I know you fink I wanna look good to the press, sayin’ we’re in touch, but you’re wrong. I bin tryin’ to keep the papers off your fuckin’ back, ’cause if they fink you might sell me out, they’ll be after you like fuckin’ jackals… wanna sandwich or somefing? I was s’posed to be goin’ out to dinner before Pru called and said you was comin’. I could do wiv somefing.’

Strike’s dislike did brief battle with his extreme hunger, because he’d left his damn sandwich at Heston uneaten, thanks to this business.

‘Yeah, I could do with something,’ he said reluctantly.

Rokeby hit the bell by his side again, then said,

‘Pru says you don’ wan’ kids.’

‘No,’ said Strike.

‘I was too young when I ’ad me first. Didn’ understand what it was. Then, the later ones, I spoiled ’em. Ed’s in fuckin’ rehab again,’ sighed Rokeby. ‘So, why’s that Culpepper fucker after you, anyway?’

‘I proved his wife was having an affair.’

‘Huh,’ said Rokeby, sipping his beer. ‘You wiv anyone? Got a woman?’

‘No,’ said Strike.

‘I was sorry to ’ear abou’ that Charlotte.’

‘Yeah, well,’ said Strike.

‘Gorgeous but crazy,’ said Rokeby. ‘Been there meself. Carla was like that. One day you wake up an’ fink, yeah, great tits an’ beau’ful face, but fuckin’ ’orrible person. I got it righ’ in the end, though. Jenny an’ me bin togevver since ’81, didja know tha’?’

‘I did, yeah,’ said Strike, choosing not to mention that some might not

consider Rokeby's third marriage an unqualified triumph, given his multiple, well-publicised infidelities.

'She's left me free times, then come back,' said Rokeby. 'We b'long togevver, simple as. She's in Australia righ' now, producin' some film…'

Strike's own mobile rang and, seeing Robin's name, he answered.

'Hi, everything all right?'

'I'm… OK,' she said, but he could hear the strain in her voice. 'I'm fine, but I'm at a police station.'

'Wh—?'

'That man who threatened me with the masonic dagger—'

'What?' He stood up and walked towards the drawing room door, unable to sit still while listening to this.

'Please – *please* – don't start shouting at me,' said Robin, and Strike could tell she was crying. '*Please.* I know I fucked up. I didn't see anyone behind me on the way to Beaconsfield, but I should have checked the car – he'd put a tracking device on it.'

'You sure you're all right?' said Strike, though plainly she wasn't all right, and he wasn't sure why he was saying something so stupid.

'Yes, he didn't use a knife, he was trying to – to abduct me, or something, he got in the car—'

'How d'you know it was the same bloke?'

'He was wearing the same green jacket,' said Robin, who was fighting sobs. 'But I used the spray and that's how I got him off me, and there was a man coming down the street who heard me scream and he helped, he dragged him off me and held him down and called the police.'

'Jesus Chr—'

'I've just finished giving my police statement and he's being interviewed… I s'pose this could end up being a good—'

'How the *fuck's* it a good thing?'

'*Please do not shout at me!'* shouted Robin.

'Sorry – sorry, I'm just—'

'At least he's in custody – and Strike, he's got curly hair. He could be Oz. This might be it. His driving licence says he's Wade King, but that's all I know so far. I'll call you back once I know more. They want me to wait here until they've heard what he's got to say.'

'All right,' said Strike. 'Which station are you at? I'll come and pick you

up.’

‘It’s OK, Ryan’s coming to get me,’ said Robin.

‘All right, well – keep me posted… thank fuck for that spray.’

‘I’ll probably need to explain why I had it in my bag,’ said Robin distractedly. ‘God knows what I’m going to say. Speak to you later.’

She hung up, leaving Strike standing in the wood-panelled hall, staring at a Damien Hirst butterfly mandala without seeing it. Recalling himself, he headed back into the drawing room.

‘Everyfing all right?’ said Rokeby.

‘Yeah,’ said Strike. ‘That was my partner.’

‘Robin?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Pru likes ’er. Says she’s a good person.’

‘She is, yeah.’

‘Pru finks you two should be togevver.’

‘Really,’ said Strike.

‘Yeah. She finks you’re in love wiv ’er. Don’ tell Pru I told you that, though, she’ll be pissed off at me.’

The drawing room door opened and the housekeeper entered carrying a second tray, this time laden with two triple-decker sandwiches and fresh beers.

‘’Ow did you—?’ began Rokeby.

‘I started making them when I heard you weren’t going to dinner,’ she said, smiling.

‘Worf your fuckin’ weight in gold, you are, Tala,’ said Rokeby. ‘Fanks, darlin’.’

‘You could still go to dinner,’ said Strike. ‘Don’t let me stop you.’

‘Din’t wanna go in the first place,’ said Rokeby, through a mouthful of sandwich, as the housekeeper departed again. ‘Can’t fuckin’ stand me son-in-law. Danni’s new ’usband, but don’ tell Danni I said that.’

‘We’re not in touch,’ said Strike.

‘’E’s a PR ’otshot,’ said Rokeby. ‘An’ a tosser.’

Strike’s sandwich was very good. The two men ate for a minute, and Strike suddenly realised where it was that Rokeby’s drawing room reminded him of: the Ritz bar outside which he and Robin had almost kissed. Then Rokeby said, ‘Want some advice?’

‘No,’ said Strike, and Rokeby laughed.

‘I ’ate fuckin’ advice, an’ all. That’s why I don’t like Danni’s fuckin’ ’usband. Keeps givin’ me ’is PR perspective, then saying “that’s for free, Jonny”. One of these days I’m gonna ask ’im ’ow much ’e charges to keep ’is fuckin’ mouf shut. I was only gonna say, all that counts, in the end, is if you’re wiv a good person. I learned that the ’ard way. An’ there ain’t as many good people around as you fink. Not *proper* good.’

For a moment, Strike was transported back to Ted’s wake, and Polworth raising his pint to the ceiling. *Proper man, Ted.*

‘Don’t let Robin go, if that’s what you want,’ said Rokeby. ‘Life’s too fuckin’ short.’

The mobile on the table rang and he picked it up.

‘Denholm,’ said Rokeby, passing Strike the phone again.

‘Strike here,’ said the detective.

‘I’ve informed the paper you can provide cast-iron proof you’re not the father,’ said the upper-class voice on the end of the phone.

‘I’ll send it to you now.’

‘No need, he took me at my word,’ said Denholm, ‘which he knows from experience is the wisest, cheapest course. I’ve also told them you never slept with the woman and will take legal action if you’re named. On the other matter, the journalist is going to be spoken to before they decide whether to back down. I gather Culpepper insisted the woman’s story was genuine, but, by the amount of blustering I’ve just heard, I think his superior might have had suspicions at the time. I’ve made it clear, of course, that the damages you’re owed will be mounting for every day they refuse to make an apology, given the harm done to your reputation, and consequences for your livelihood.’

‘Thank you,’ said Strike. ‘I want you to bill me for this. Not my father.’

‘I’m not cheap,’ said Denholm, sounding faintly amused.

‘Sounds as though damages might help cover the bill.’

‘They should,’ agreed Denholm. ‘I’ll be back in touch once I’ve got their decision on the Candy girl, but the baby story is definitely quashed. Withdrawn from the website and a hasty reprint is underway.’

For the second time in as many weeks, Strike felt a wave of almost dizzying relief. He handed Rokeby back his phone.

‘’E sorted it?’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike.

‘An’ what abou’ the prostitute fing?’

‘He’s working on it,’ said Strike. With some difficulty, he added, ‘I appreciate this. Thank you.’

‘I ain’ done nuffing ’cept make a phone call,’ said Rokeby. ‘S’not much. Can I ’ave a favour back?’

‘What?’

‘I wanna keep in touch. Not for me fuckin’ image, not for any of that shit. I don’t like not knowin’ ya. You’re my flesh an’ fuckin’ blood. I know I was an arsehole, all right? I know I can’ go back an’ be daddy now, but I’m old. You never fink you’ll get there, if you’ve lived a life like I ’ave, I should be fucking dead, but I’m old and I don’t wanna die wivvout knowin’ ya. You fink I ’aven’t got the right to be proud, maybe, but I am. I’m proud of ya.’

Rokeby’s bloodshot eyes had filled with tears.

‘You don’t ’ave to take nuffing, I’m not tryna buy ya, I know you didn’ like me offerin’ money, before. I jus’ wanna know you. Jus’ a beer or somefing, not nowhere public. Anuvver beer, when there ain’t some fuckin’ journo after you. One beer.’

Strike looked at him for a few conflicted seconds, then said,

‘Yeah, all right. We’ll have a beer.’

PART NINE

Reasoning from the trend of the cavern, he came to the conclusion that somewhere on that further side there were openings…

John Oxenham

A Maid of the Silver Sea

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Who prop, thou ask'st, in these bad days, my mind?

Matthew Arnold
To a Friend

In spite of what she kept telling Murphy, Robin wasn't 'all right', 'fine' or 'completely OK'. She was constantly on the verge of tears. She kept seeing her attacker's face, distorted by the strange square shadows thrown by the oblique angle of the street light. She seemed to feel the strong hands throttling her. Swallowing was painful. When she looked in the mirror she saw dark grey bruising on her neck; when she showered, she saw more bruises on her hip and stomach, where her attacker had knelt on her. She was having flashbacks to the man who'd nearly killed her when she was nineteen, the gorilla mask inches from her face, the patch of white vitiligo beneath his ear, which she'd noticed and which her police liaison officer had told her later had been key in identifying and convicting him. The eight-inch scar on her forearm seemed to tingle, reminding her of yet another man who'd come at her, out of the dark.

If she told these stories to a stranger, they'd ask how on earth it was possible that she'd tangled with three different men intent on strangling or knifing her, and that was before she mentioned being held at gunpoint, or sexually assaulted by a cult leader. They'd think she was lying, that she was desperate for attention. It was absurd. It was ludicrous. These things simply didn't happen. And if they did happen, they certainly didn't all happen to the same woman. What was she doing to attract this? What was wrong with her?

She was the weak link. She was the one it was easiest to intimidate. For the rest of her life, she'd be dragging her history of victimhood behind her, for anyone to see and to use against her.

She couldn’t say any of this to Murphy. They couldn’t both be having enormous work crises at the same time. If he was worried about her now, when she hadn’t told him half of it – no, she hadn’t told him a hundredth of what was going on – Robin could just imagine what he’d say if he knew Green Jacket had followed her at least twice before, and threatened her with a knife and, she was almost certain, shoved a small gorilla into her hand in Harrods. She couldn’t tell Murphy that her attacker was almost certainly one of Branfoot’s ex-offenders, because that led directly to Malcolm Turnbull, the Met and the masons, and if she told him she’d been tailed by a second man in a Honda Accord, or about the threatening calls to the office, he’d just get angry. *Why didn’t you tell me?*

And the answer to that was simple: because he’d tell her to stop re-traumatising herself, to give up the job that had given her the scar and the bruises, the insomnia and the nightmares, which she didn’t doubt was the advice any sane person would give her. Murphy would want her to retreat into the hermit-like state she’d been in after her shattering rape, when she’d been almost incapable of leaving the house. He didn’t understand that this job had given her back a sense of self she’d lost at nineteen. In addition to every other thing the most recent attack had left her with, she’d been forced to face the stark fact that she’d rather give up anything, Murphy included, than the agency. That realisation made her afraid of speaking to a therapist. She didn’t want her career choice analysed and didn’t want to relive the rape all over again, with a box of tissues within easy reach and a nodding psychologist making notes.

Strike, meanwhile, had insisted over the phone that Robin take time off. They’d argued about it. Robin was terrified of not being able to leave her flat if she spent too long there. Finally, she’d agreed to work from home for a week.

What Robin didn’t know was that Murphy had phoned Strike the day after the incident in Beaconsfield. The conversation had been brief and blunt. Murphy had told Strike that Robin was in a very bad way. Strike responded by saying he’d be happy for Robin to take as long a break as she liked, and it was she who was insisting on a mere five days.

‘She only had a week off after Chapman Farm,’ said Murphy in an accusatory tone.

‘Which was also her choice,’ said Strike.

But when the call had ended, Strike, who was sitting in his BMW watching Two-Times' office, was left with increased concern about Robin's mental health. He didn't need Murphy to tell him Robin should have taken longer off from work after leaving the cult she'd investigated the previous year, nor did he need to be taught about the realities of PTSD, because he'd suffered it himself.

He'd heard a proprietorial note in Murphy's voice that had never been so obvious before, doubtless because he and Robin were now officially engaged, and this had made Strike shorter than he might otherwise have been on the phone. Nevertheless, the call had had its intended effect, which was to remind Strike that he had ethical responsibilities towards Robin, even though she was a partner in the firm and no longer an employee. These musings led him to approach his and Robin's next conversation with a tact for which Strike knew he wasn't generally renowned. When a pretext for getting in touch presented itself on Wednesday, he called her from the office.

'I've got news.'

'Oh good,' said Robin. 'I'm so bored, I'm sitting here watching the Budget.' This wasn't entirely true. The Chancellor of the Exchequer was indeed addressing Parliament on Robin's muted television screen, but in reality she'd been looking at an old and amateurish website devoted to supposed sightings of Reata Lindvall, following her alleged murder.

'Well, firstly: Barclay's nabbed Two-Times. Photos of him coming out of a hotel with a mini-skirted blonde wearing industrial amounts of make-up.'

'Great. Have you told Mrs Two-Times?'

'Yeah, and I think she's going to absolutely rinse him, so it'll be a few years before he can afford to indulge his surveillance kink again. But I've got even better news than that. Guess who's agreed to meet me on Friday?'

'Who?'

'Funny bloke off the telly. Goes on quiz shows a lot. Pays to have porn stars killed.'

'You're joking.'

'Nope. And it gets better. He wants to buy me dinner at the Goring Hotel.'

'Why?'

‘Smarm offensive,’ said Strike. ‘His police contacts must’ve told him by now William Wright wasn’t Jason Knowles, so I’d say he’s even more worried we’re messing with the case. I called his office this morning and said I wanted to talk to him about regulation in the detective business, following his comments in the press. “Oh, absolutely, what a top-hole idea.”’

‘He never said “top hole”.’

‘He did. Also “spiffing”.’

‘You’re making this up.’

‘You wait,’ said Strike. ‘I said I wanted to bring my detective partner. He said he’d be delighted.’

‘Fantastic, I need to get out of this bloody flat,’ said Robin fervently, which was precisely the reaction Strike had been hoping for. ‘The Goring… isn’t that where royalty always stays in London?’

‘I think we’re supposed to be immensely impressed.’

‘Why’s he trying to butter us up?’

‘I’d imagine he’s keen to present as a man who has absolutely nothing personal against us, just a professional interest in regulating the industry. I expect he’s also hoping we tell him everything we know about bodies in silver vaults while we’re eating our lobster thermidor.’

‘I don’t like lobster.’

‘Then order it and leave it untouched. He’s paying,’ said Strike, and Robin laughed. ‘You and I should meet early, in the bar, get our strategy clear.’

‘Great,’ said Robin. ‘What are you up to at the moment?’

‘Back on the dark net.’

‘Doing what?’

Strike doubted she was in a fit psychological state to hear he’d been watching Daesh execution videos again, so he chose to tell the most palatable part of the truth.

‘It took me the best part of twelve hours, but I think I’ve found Rena Liddell asking for advice on how to get a gun, online. She was calling herself “Mirbat” there, too. I thought I might find her somewhere. If she was going to ask me, a complete stranger, for a gun, why not throw it open to the internet? Anyway, she made glancing contact with a bloke who said he might be able to help and she blithely gave him her mobile number. I’ve

got a feeling he wasn't who he said he was. I think he was there to entrap her.'

'Why?'

'The punctuation and spelling were too good and they were asking artful questions. They'll have been disappointed with what they got out of her, because when offered the chance to lay hands on a weapon she started asking whether killing people wasn't wrong, after all. I can't see that they're going to have grounds to keep her forcibly in a psychiatric facility for long. I've left a message on the mobile.'

'Are you sure pursuing her's—?'

'Wise? Will it annoy MI5? Will Ralph Lawrence be pissed off I haven't run for the hills because he told me to?'

'Yes to all of the above,' said Robin.

'He made me climb up onto the fucking roof of that pub to prove a point. I'm not breaking any laws, calling a phone number.'

'I know, but—'

'He wears Aviator shades. Case closed.'

Against her better judgement, Robin laughed again.

'Anything new your end?' asked Strike.

'Not much,' said Robin, taking a deep breath because she wanted to sound casual and offhand when saying the next thing. 'The guy who jumped me in Beaconsfield has been let out on bail.'

'Shit,' said Strike.

He'd known it would happen, but deplored the fact that it had. Strike considered that certain kinds of criminals were treated far too leniently by the criminal justice system, a viewpoint shaped in adolescence by the sight of his stepfather repeatedly committing violence, then being released on bail conditions he ignored.

'Have they told you anything new about him?' Strike asked.

'Not much,' said Robin. 'They still seem to think he attacked me at random, even though I told them about the other times I'd seen him—'

'"Times", plural?' said Strike sharply.

'Please don't start,' said Robin, 'but I – I saw him on Saturday, outside my flat.'

With immense difficulty, Strike prevented himself 'starting' by remembering that he'd been a dick to Robin on Saturday, which had

presumably disinclined her to call him back and mention Green Jacket being on the prowl.

‘So he knows where you live?’

‘Yes,’ said Robin. ‘You know that rubber gorilla, and the masonic dagger he threw at me?’

‘Yeah, strangely enough, both stuck in my mind.’

‘I’ve got them both wrapped up in freezer bags at home. I told the police about them, but nobody’s come round for them yet. They seem to be leaning towards the fact that he’s an opportunist or a stalker, as opposed to someone trying to stop me investigating. They weren’t very interested in me saying a man with the same jacket had been outside my flat on Saturday.’

‘Can’t Murphy make them take this more bloody seriously?’

‘He’s done all he can,’ lied Robin.

‘So that’s all they’ve told you, that he’s out on bail?’

‘And that he lives in a completely different area of London to me. I think they thought that would make me feel safer – though as he definitely knows where I live, it didn’t, really,’ Robin admitted. ‘Anyway, all the usual bail conditions apply: he can’t change address, he’s not allowed to contact me and he’ll be reporting to the police once a week.’

‘Yeah, that’ll stop him,’ said Strike injudiciously, before remembering that that probably wasn’t a very helpful thing to say. ‘What about that older bloke in the Honda Accord? Have you seen him again?’

‘Not since I told you about him.’

‘OK, well, we need to decide how we’re going to deal with this stuff, going forwards.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘You know what I mean,’ said Strike.

He’d deliberately suggested she join him for dinner at the Goring before embarking on this part of the conversation, because he wanted to reassure her she wasn’t being cut off from the case. The lack of response from the other end of the phone told Strike that Robin was waiting on tenterhooks to hear what he was about to say, but the time for prevarication and soft-pedalling was over. He wasn’t going to get as angry as he had in Ironbridge, but nor was he going to shirk what he knew to be his duty, even if Robin didn’t like it. The news that the man in the green jacket had been more persistent than Strike had previously known had more than confirmed his

opinion that stricter security measures must be taken.

‘Someone, probably Branfoot, is trying to scare us off, and you’re the one they’re targeting,’ said Strike.

‘Because I’m—’

‘Because they think they’ve spotted a vulnerability,’ said Strike firmly. ‘And when your opponent’s spotted a vulnerability, you don’t keep presenting it to him, you *defend it*. You’re literally the best I’ve ever worked with. *Ever.* But you had no qualms telling me I wasn’t fit for the job when I was on crutches, and I’m returning the favour. No public transport, no lonely locations and *especially* no more night-time excursions on your own. *None*, until we’ve wrapped up this case.’

‘But—’ said Robin, whose eyes had filled with tears when Strike had said she was the best he’d ever worked with.

‘There’s no “but”,’ said Strike. ‘We’ve had this discussion before. If you aren’t shaken up by all this, you bloody well should be. Doesn’t mean you can’t work, just means you’ll be working differently for a while.’

‘But Strike, I can’t stop night work. If Plug and his friends are plotting revenge on that man in Carnival—’

‘Nothing’s happened so far and that could’ve been hot air and bullshit. Look,’ said Strike, and it cost him some pride to admit he’d remembered her exact words, ‘you told me you “didn’t want to lose me”. *I* don’t want to lose *you*.’

Though Strike couldn’t hear it this time, because she had her hand pressed over her mouth, Robin was crying again. The hot tears trickled down over her fingers, and she didn’t trust herself to speak.

‘I didn’t tell you,’ said Strike. ‘I was at Rokeby’s when you called on Friday.’

‘Where?’ said Robin, in a slightly strangled voice.

‘Rokeby’s,’ repeated Strike.

‘What’s that, a restaurant?’ said Robin, struggling to sound normal.

‘No, it’s the house of Jonny Rokeby,’ said Strike. ‘The man who contributed half my DNA. My father, if you must.’

‘*What?*’ said Robin, the information having precisely the distracting effect Strike had hoped it would. ‘You – *what*? Why? How?’

When Strike had finished explaining, Robin said, stunned,

‘You said you’ll go for a drink with him?’

‘Didn’t have much choice, did I? Not after he dug me out of that hole. But if you check the paper today, you’ll see a retraction and an apology about Candy. They’ve buried it on page sixteen, but still.’

‘Wow,’ said Robin, who’d wiped her face dry with her sleeve and was feeling – even after the imposition of new working conditions – far better than she had at the start of the conversation. It was strangely consoling to be reminded that Strike, too, had made errors of judgement that had threatened not only his peace of mind, but his ability to do the job.

‘What did you think of him?’ she asked. ‘I mean, meeting him properly for the first time?’

‘Liked him slightly more than I thought I would,’ Strike admitted. ‘He was more honest than I expected, about his life. I wouldn’t go out of my way to meet him again if he’d just struck up conversation in a bar. But he was all right.’

‘That’s good,’ said Robin. ‘And I’m really glad about the Candy apology,’ she added, making a mental note to direct her mother’s attention to it.

‘Anyway,’ said Strike, ‘I want you to take a cab to and from the Goring on Friday, all right? And there’s something you can do from home that I haven’t got time for. I’ve been looking through Truth About Freemasons and Abused and Accused for any usernames, questions or personal details that appear on both sites, paying particular attention to anyone who posted before or around June last year, but I haven’t found anything. I’d appreciate it if you did a thorough, systematic search.’

‘We don’t know that Wright ever posted on either site,’ said Robin, who suspected she was being given something unlikely to yield results, but which would keep her safe and occupied in her flat. ‘He might just have been browsing. And how likely is it he used the same username in both places?’

‘If he’s smart, he won’t have done,’ admitted Strike, ‘but it’s worth a try.’

‘All right,’ sighed Robin, ‘I’ll have a look.’

‘I’d also be grateful if you put some more pressure on Tish Benton, because we’re completely stalled on Fleetwood.’

‘I’ve been keeping an eye on her Instagram,’ said Robin. ‘She’s having a great time flying between Clairmont hotels.’

‘Clairmont, did you just say?’ asked Strike.

‘Yes. You know, it’s that massive luxury chain. It was in a hashtag under one of the pictures I showed you, on her Instagram.’

‘Ah,’ said Strike. ‘I should’ve registered that.’

‘Why?’

‘Charlotte’s great-grandfather owned the original hotel. Her mother was born Tara Clairmont. I think she’s still on the company’s board of directors.’

‘Oh,’ said Robin.

‘Which seems an odd coincidence,’ said Strike, but as Robin didn’t respond, he said he’d better get going and rang off, wondering why she hadn’t told him she was engaged, and concluding that she was probably waiting to tell him in person.

The mention of Charlotte had given Robin a strange twisting feeling in her heart that she couldn’t explain, but she didn’t particularly want to investigate. She seemed to be a mass of hypersensitive nerves and really did need to pull herself together, to stop being so thin-skinned and jittery, especially when Strike had succeeded in making her feel better. Nevertheless, she cried more after he’d hung up. Having stumbled to the kitchen to fetch paper towels on which to dry her eyes and blow her nose, she told herself that the real problem was that she was tired, then returned to the sofa and the website about Reata Lindvall, which hadn’t been updated in several years.

The heading at the top of the page read: **ERIC MAES HAS SERVED TEN YEARS FOR A CRIME HE DID NOT COMMIT**.

In fact, Maes had now served sixteen years for the double murder of Reata and her daughter. His photograph showed an angry-looking man with an underbite, heavy eyebrows and a grubby-looking face due to heavy stubble; in fact, he was a most plausible-looking double murderer.

Beneath his mugshot were more photos. On the left were genuine pictures of Reata, on the right, pictures purporting to show her in various locations on the continent following her supposed death.

Spotted Ossendorf bar, June 1999. Hair dyed obviously but note eyebrow shape, one higher than the other. Ossendorf 1 hour drive from Liège!!!!!!

September 2001 lobby Dortmund hotel – Lindvall about to get in lift, hair re-bleached.

April 25th 2002 has gained a LOT of weight and cut hair, but right profile EXACT MATCH.

There was also a photo showing Jolanda at about three years old, dark where her mother was fair, sitting on Reata's lap. Both looked serious, intent, their gaze fixed in the same direction. The absence of smiles on both subjects' faces was taken as damning evidence of Reata's indifference to her child by whoever had captioned the picture: *'A loving mother'. Looks like it, doesn't it?*

The last few photos had been selected to 'prove' how much happier Reata was in Jolanda's absence. One showed Reata wearing a mini dress and dancing to a live band in a crowded, cavern-like venue in Liège, her blonde hair flying.

He told her she reminded him of a Swedish girl he used to know…

Robin clicked away from the website and returned to that of the missing persons' charity where she'd first discovered Sapphire Neagle. The girl still hadn't been found.

With a sigh, Robin went to fetch herself coffee and biscuits. She felt the need of sustenance if she was going to spend days trying to work out whether any of the hundreds of users on Truth About Freemasons and Abused and Accused might connect, however remotely, to one of their candidates for William Wright.

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Had she willed it, still had stood the screen
So slight, so sure, 'twixt my love and her:
I could fix her face with a guard between,
And find her soul as when friends confer,
Friends—lovers that might have been.

Robert Browning
By the Fire-Side

The readjustment of Robin's work schedule would have made it extremely difficult to cover the agency's current jobs, had they not resolved Two-Times. Strike had asked Wardle to prioritise finding out anything he could about Green Jacket, also known as Wade King, and in the meantime, Strike was postponing taking the next client off the waiting list, a man who feared his wife, a high-ranking civil servant, was cheating.

'We should try workin' smarter, not harder,' asked Barclay, when his and Strike's paths crossed at the office on Thursday.

'Like that's ever fucking worked,' growled Strike.

On Friday afternoon Strike returned to his attic flat after several hours' surveillance of Plug, who was still, infuriatingly, at large, to change into a suit for dinner with Lord Oliver Branfoot. While knotting his tie, he reminded himself that he'd have to act better than he'd ever acted in his life when Robin told him she was engaged.

'Congratulations,' he muttered aloud, while looking into his bathroom mirror, which was the only one he had. His reflection looked as though it was announcing a death.

Wardle phoned Strike while the latter was heading down the metal staircase towards the street.

‘Got you a bit on Wade King.’

‘Excellent. Go on.’

‘Thirty-six, was a long-distance lorry driver until a few months back, currently unemployed, lives with a girlfriend in Rainham, one kid. A neighbour suspects him of domestic abuse – the girlfriend wears dark glasses a lot.’

‘Any previous?’

‘Aggravated assault when he was twenty-five. Nothing since. Never been inside.’

‘Any idea how he lost his job?’

‘No,’ said Wardle, ‘but he worked for the company for five years before they fired him.’

‘Interesting,’ said Strike.

It was hardly a surprise to discover that King was violent, but Strike had expected to hear that the man was very young, living in some squalor, desperate for money and recently released from jail: in short, exactly the kind of youth Lord Branfoot could use as a henchman. Why would a man who until recently had had a steady job, albeit one he’d now lost, not to mention a partner and child at home, attempt to abduct a woman, purely for cash? And he’d been a long-distance lorry driver… the dead Todd had also had a long-distance driving job from which he’d been fired. Could this be coincidence?

As Strike travelled by cab towards the Goring, one of the very few five-star hotels in London he’d never visited, he found himself musing once more on the mysterious Oz. Maybe, as Robin had suggested, King *was* Oz? Had the police just arrested then released the man Strike believed had killed at least four people in under a year? He pulled out his notebook and wrote himself a reminder to find out, if at all possible, where Wade King had been when William Wright and Sofia Medina had been murdered.

Upon arrival in the Goring’s cocktail bar he found Robin already seated at a small, round table beside the marble fireplace, framed botanical prints on gold paper on the wall behind her, and looking (which made nothing any easier) as good as he’d ever seen her, with her strawberry blonde hair clean and loose and wearing a high-necked, form-fitting dress of dusky pink, which Strike found sexy in its ostensible demureness. As he approached her, she set down the same magazine he’d read in the Savoy, with the

windswept Cosima Longcaster on its cover.

‘Hi,’ he said, pulling out a velvet chair to sit down, and he added, because what did it matter, now? ‘You look great.’

‘Thought I should make an effort,’ said Robin, trying to deflect the compliment, though it had pleased her. Rather than admitting she’d chosen the pink rather than the black version of the dress because of Dino Longcaster’s unsolicited styling advice, she said, ‘I bought it online, because I needed something to cover my neck.’

‘Ah,’ said Strike. ‘Marks?’

‘Trust me, you don’t want to see what’s under here.’

Try me, thought Strike.

She handed him the menu with her right hand, but her left was out of sight.

‘Have you ordered?’ Strike asked.

‘Not yet. I’m going to have something non-alcoholic.’

Having asked the waiter for a whisky and a mocktail, Strike turned back to see Robin pushing her hair out of her face with a left hand that bore no jewellery whatsoever. Robin, who’d noticed his sharp glance, checked the back of her hand in case there was something there she hadn’t noticed: smeared mascara, for instance, as he’d failed to inform her about in Ironbridge.

‘Any particular reason for not drinking?’ Strike asked, wondering whether abstaining from alcohol was a concomitant of egg harvesting.

‘Just don’t fancy it,’ said Robin, choosing not to say that she wanted to be in full possession of her wits. She’d be getting a cab home, but there was still the walk between pavement and door. ‘Why?’

Strike suddenly decided to carry the battle into the enemy’s territory.

‘Wardle told me Murphy’s fallen off the wagon.’

‘Oh,’ said Robin, far from pleased Strike knew this. She wanted distraction, not discussions about her relationship. ‘Well – yes, he had a lapse, when things were so tough for him at work. But he’s back at AA now. He’s doing fine.’

‘Right,’ said Strike. ‘Still moving in together?’

‘No, actually,’ said Robin. ‘The house fell through.’

‘Ah,’ said Strike. ‘Still looking, then?’

‘It’s on hold just now, with everything else we’ve got on. Anyway,’ she

said, clearly not wanting to pursue the subject of house hunting, ‘I’ve found someone on Abused and Accused who also posted on Truth About Freemasons – that, or two people using the same username.’

‘Seriously?’ said Strike, surprised. ‘What’s the name?’

‘Austin H,’ said Robin.

The word ‘fuzz’ popped incongruously into Strike’s mind; why, he didn’t know, but before he could pursue the subject, a plummy male voice said, ‘Hello, hello!’

Strike and Robin looked up to see Lord Oliver Branfoot, tall and podgy, with his trademark messy hair and drooping eyes, a genial smile curving his full lips.

Beside him, in a skin-tight, knee-length black dress, stood Kim Cochran.

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But Vengeance travels in a dangerous way,
Double of issue, full of pits and snares
For all who pass, pursuers and pursued—
That way is dubious for a mother's prayer.

Matthew Arnold
Merope: A Tragedy

Branfoot's entrance had caused a ripple of excitement to pass through the room. Many heads had turned, and most expressions were amused.

Strike was the first to recover from the surprise of seeing Kim. As he stood to accept Branfoot's handshake, his mental processes seemed to move up a gear, as they were wont to do when he was under pressure. He saw laid out in front of him, like a sequence of toppling dominoes, the trail of events that would have brought this pair together; he felt certain it was Kim who'd initiated contact, and Branfoot who'd gleefully accepted the Navabi agency's expensive assistance in neutralising the threat posed to him by Strike and Robin.

Robin felt her bag slip off her lap and bent down to pick it up, glad of a reason to hide the shock she knew had shown in her face.

'You and Miss Ellacott alweady know Miss Cochwan, I think?' Branfoot said.

'Oh yes,' said Strike.

Neither Kim nor Strike extended a hand to the other.

'Pwease don't let us huwwy you,' said Branfoot genially, as Strike drained his glass of whisky.

'Not at all,' said Strike. 'We're ready for our dinner.'

Robin, who'd picked up her bag, stood up in the knowledge that she

probably looked as she felt: definitely ruffled.

‘The pwess photographs don’t do you justice, Miss Ellacott,’ said the beaming Branfoot.

Robin reluctantly allowed Branfoot to shake her hand. This was the man who’d tried to have Danny de Leon killed, and who was doing his best to sabotage their agency: his flattery added insult to the injuries concealed by the pink dress.

‘Shall we, then?’ said Branfoot, waving a long arm in the direction of the hall.

More heads turned as the foursome headed for the door, and Branfoot beamed back at every smiling face, acknowledging a few with a half salute. Kim walked beside him, looking neither left nor right, her heels an inch higher than Robin’s, every hair on her dark head in place. Robin glanced sideways at her partner, trying to gauge his reaction to this unexpected situation, but Strike’s expression told her nothing. At the same time, Robin’s mind had begun to race, and a suspicion dawned on her as she walked behind Kim, and the more she thought about it, the more certain she felt that she was right.

As they walked through the lobby, with its wallpaper painted with palms, an elderly man gave a cry of delight at the sight of Branfoot and stopped to wring his hand.

‘We need you back!’ he told Branfoot earnestly, while his wife hovered, smiling nervously. ‘You’d win in a landslide!’

‘*Aut viam inveniam aut faciam,*’ said the chortling Branfoot. ‘Watch this space.’

As the three detectives and Branfoot entered the large, grand, white-walled dining room complete with chandeliers and a crimson carpet, Strike said,

‘If you’ll excuse me a moment, I need to make a quick phone call.’

‘Of course,’ said the smirking Branfoot.

In complete ignorance of who Strike was calling, or why, or indeed whether he was actually making a phone call at all, Robin was led, along with Branfoot and Kim, to a round corner table with a snow-white cloth. The waiter’s deferential air was tinged with the same anticipatory amusement shown by others who’d recognised Branfoot. It was as though he was the friend whose arrival is greeted with delight at a party; now the

fun would truly start.

‘*Well,*’ said Branfoot, ‘I’m delighted to meet you, Miss Ellacott. Let me say, I have the *gweatest wespect* faw what you did with wegard to that dweadful cult last year. That was indeed a noble undertaking.’

‘Thank you,’ said Robin.

‘Young people are vulnewable in ways society often overlooks – young men in particular. The otherwise healthy desire faw a *cause*, faw service, faw a mission, leads many young men astway, and what you did was all the more wemarkable given that you have no formal twaining in police work, do you?’

‘Well, I’ve had nearly seven years on the job n—’

‘You were Mister Stwike’s *secwetary*, in fact?’

‘Not exactly. I worked for the agency as a tempor—’

‘As a temp, yes, exactly, that’s what I meant,’ said Branfoot genially. ‘Wemarkable caweer pwogwession! And given your personal histowy you’ve displayed weally *extwaordinary* bwavery.’

Robin might have asked ‘what personal history?’ but didn’t trust herself to do so. Branfoot might be talking about the knife wound on her right forearm, which had been in the press, but if Strike was correct in his theory that Green Jacket was one of Branfoot’s young criminals, Branfoot knew about her rape. She reached for bread and was angry to see her fingers trembling.

‘I understand you’re womantically involved with a CID officer, is that wight?’ Branfoot persisted.

‘I’d rather not talk about my personal life, if you don’t mind,’ said Robin firmly.

‘Oh, ordinawily I’d agwee secwets of the bedchamber should wemain pwivate,’ said Branfoot, still smiling, ‘but Mr Stwike wants to talk about wegulation in your industry, and it’s *pwecisely* the murky overlap of wegulated and unwegulated investigators that concerns me. Indeed, I know it concerns the police themselves.’

Robin looked across the table at Kim.

‘Tell Navabi, the man in the Honda Accord is rubbish.’

‘Sorry?’ said Kim coldly.

‘The PI in the Honda Accord, the grey-haired man with the tiny nose. You should tell Navabi, I’ve spotted him repeatedly.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about, sorry,’ said Kim, but a faint pink blush seemed to indicate that Robin’s shot had hit home.

Strike, meanwhile, was pacing up and down on the pavement in front of the hotel while concluding an urgent conversation with Wardle.

‘I need a name,’ Strike said, ‘and fast, or we’re fucked.’

‘I’ll get back as soon as I can,’ said Wardle, and hung up.

Strike now called Fergus Robertson.

‘Well, well, well,’ said the latter, answering almost immediately. ‘I was going to call you when I got a—’

‘Has Danny de Leon been in touch?’

‘This morning,’ said Robertson, lowering his gleeful voice, ‘and I owe you fucking big time for this. I’m gonna fly out to the Channel Islands Monday and interview him face to face. We’ll need corroboration, obviously, but this could be fucking mass—’

‘So the story’s not about to run?’

‘Jesus fucking Christ, Strike, you can’t slam something like that in the paper without running it past the legal department!’

‘Then you need to get someone with a camera out to Branfoot’s flat on Black Prince Road this evening.’

‘Why, what’s—?’

‘Nothing yet, but I’ll lay you odds before the night’s over he’ll have sent minions to strip out filming equipment and maybe the two-way mirror.’

‘Wait – you’re gonna fucking *warn* the cunt?’

‘If de Leon had talked when I told him to, you’d already have published your scoop and I wouldn’t be sitting opposite the fucker at a dinner table,’ said Strike angrily. ‘I’m doing you a favour here: if you want to salvage your exposé, get someone out to Black Prince Road. I’ve got to go, I’m expecting a phone call.’

He hung up and continued to pace, watched by the Goring’s bowler-hatted doorman, but after a further five minutes Wardle still hadn’t called back. Deciding he couldn’t leave Robin alone with Branfoot and Kim any longer, Strike climbed the steps back into the hotel.

‘Ah, here he is!’ said Branfoot, as he spotted Strike heading for their table. ‘Shall we order before we get down to business? *Cenabis bene, mi Fabulle!*’

‘Catullus wanted Fabullus to provide the food and drink, though,’ said

Strike, sitting down. ‘I thought you were paying?’

This surprised a laugh out of Branfoot.

‘He also wanted Fabullus to pwovide a girl, “pwetty and willing”, don’t forget, but yes, Mr Stwike, I’m paying. So you know Catullus?’

‘Some,’ said Strike.

‘Lucky our gwisly little *woke* fwiends haven’t ever wead him, isn’t it? They’d be burning down our libwawies.’

Branfoot kept up a volley of cheery talk while the four consulted their menus.

‘I can *heartily* wecommend the twuffle-stuffed chicken. Don’t stint yourselves, I shall be starting with the caviar myself, the oysters are wather wonderful here, too…’

Once food had been ordered, and the wine waiter had been dispatched after a fairly lengthy discussion with Branfoot, the latter said,

‘You speak Latin too, Miss Ellacott?’

‘No,’ said Robin.

‘*Pedicabo ego uos et iwumabo, Auweli pathice et cinaede Fuwi.*… those are the opening lines of Poem Sixteen, in which Catullus thweatens to sodomise Auwelius and owally wape Fuwius, because they’d jeered at his soppier poems,’ said Branfoot. ‘Only pwoper way to deal with cwitics, eh?’

‘I’d run that past a focus group before you make it your election platform,’ said Strike, and Branfoot laughed again.

‘Where have we got to, so far?’ Strike asked the table at large.

‘We’ve barely scwatched the surface,’ said Branfoot, with the slight smirk that Robin had noticed never quite left his face. ‘I was congwatulating Miss Ellacott on the important wole your agency played in closing down the UHC and adumbwating some of my concerns wegarding the pwivate detective business. Miss Ellacott has been playing her cards vewy close to her chest.’

‘Right,’ said Strike. ‘Well, I’m sure you’re a man who appreciates plain talking, so shall we get right down to it? You became very interested in us shortly after we started investigating the body found at Ramsay Silver last summer.’

‘This is the case in which you were hired by Decima Mullins?’ said Branfoot.

Robin felt a sudden dread that had nothing to do with her own affairs.

‘Told him everything, have you?’ Strike said to Kim, on whose face a faint pussycat smile now appeared. ‘Broken your NDA?’

‘Farah and I decided we ought to look into Decima Mullins after I left the agency,’ said Kim. ‘You never told me she had a baby she’s trying to hide. I wasn’t sworn to secrecy on *that*.’

‘You total bitch,’ said Robin, taking Strike by surprise. Kim smiled more widely and Branfoot laughed.

‘A baby’s a matter faw celebwation, shawly?’ he said.

‘Except that she’s losing her mind as well as her restaurant,’ said Kim, ‘and you two have been milking her for every penny while you go on jaunts and do pointless surveillance, pretending to find out who that body was. She was at casualty two days ago, convinced the baby’s ill because it won’t stop crying. That’s who you’re exploiting. *And* you’ve been colluding in hushing up the kid. I suppose if you’d alerted a social worker you might’ve been letting someone in on the situation who’d have stopped you milking her for cash.’

‘Nice angle,’ said Strike appreciatively. ‘Yeah, I can see how the press could spin that. Well-to-do restaurateur with her secret baby, got a delusion about her ex-boyfriend, newsworthy detectives stringing her along… not bad at all.’

The wine arrived. When Robin refused any, Branfoot chortled.

‘My word, I’ve never met anyone who’d turn down a Montwachet ’92. Still, all the more faw us, eh, Mr Stwike – or may I call you Cormowan?’

‘Feel free,’ said Strike.

Once the wine waiter had departed, Strike said,

‘So, what’s the deal? We stop investigating the body in the vault, and you don’t talk about Decima and her baby to the press?’

‘I have no *personal* intewest in the matter, you understand,’ said Branfoot, ‘but this is *pwecisely* the kind of thing I feel should be maw stwictly wegulated. Financial exploitation of vulnewable people, exowbitant fees faw vewy little gain, a notably lax attitude to child pwotection – now, I don’t deny you two have done some pwaiseworthy things, but – to speak completely fwankly – I have excellent police contacts thwough my chawitable twust and – cowect me if I’m wong – you were questioned wecently about cowupting witnesses. Dangling money in fwont of them, which of cawse wenders their evidence suspect in court.’

‘Well, it sounds like you’ve got us properly stitched up,’ said Strike. ‘Is that everything?’

‘Not quite,’ said the smiling Branfoot. ‘Miss Ellacott’s boyfwiend – I apologise for bwinging him up again—’

Three *amuse-bouches* now arrived for each of them. The waiter gave loving descriptions of each, but Robin didn’t hear a word of it. She felt slightly sick. If Murphy’s career was ruined through association with her…

‘Where was I?’ said Branfoot, when the waiter had left again. ‘Oh, yes: DCI Murphy. Yes, I’m sowwy to have to mention this, but he’s welevant. In wather a lot of twouble at work, isn’t he? Between the dwinking and the wongful awest? And he’s been passing you infawmation beneath the counter, to boot.’

‘No,’ said Robin, ‘he hasn’t. The only person who’s passed us confidential information she shouldn’t have is sitting right opposite me.’

Branfoot laughed.

‘I can tell yaw not in politics, Miss Ellacott. Does DCI Murphy pass the *smell test*? The public don’t like law enforcement officers who make wongful awests, and wough up suspects, and leak information on murder cases to whichever pwetty young woman they happen to be sleeping with – and that’s befaw we get to the daytime dwinking. So if you’ll forgive me faw saying so, I think the pwess will find your pawamour smells wather whiffy.’

‘Well, you certainly seem to have got the goods on us,’ said Strike. He turned to Kim. ‘Picked up anyone good in Lambeth lately?’

‘What?’ said Kim.

‘Anyone been chatting you up in the vicinity of Lord Branfoot’s office? Anyone who owns a flat on Black Prince Road?’

Kim’s expression became strangely blank. She stared at Strike, and Robin, though she knew she should deplore such a thing, found herself hoping that Kim had indeed allowed herself to be talked into going back to that flat. Then she looked at Branfoot.

The mask of the genial buffoon had melted away. His eyes burned dark in the usually comic, gnome-like face, and suddenly it was easy to imagine him handing over an envelope of cash to a dangerous young criminal, and telling him that he wanted a second young man murdered. Yet she thought she read calculation rather than panic in Branfoot’s expression. Perhaps he

was reminding himself of the panoply of lawyers, politicians, police, masons and press contacts available to him, should the danger he'd just glimpsed become acute, just as Robin herself had found reassurance in the feel of the pepper spray in her bag.

Strike's mobile buzzed. He pulled it out of his pocket and saw a two-word text from Wardle:

Ed Billings

He returned the mobile to his pocket. The waiter reappeared to take away the plates on which the *amuse-bouches* had arrived. Then Strike said,

'One of the "jaunts" Miss Cochran's just mentioned us taking was to the island of Sark, although you'll be pleased to hear we didn't bill Miss Mullins for that. Ever been to Sark?'

Branfoot didn't answer. His sudden, uncharacteristic stillness was less of a prey animal than of a carnivore preparing to attack.

'Interesting place,' said Strike conversationally. 'Lots to see. And guess who we met there? An acquaintance of yours.'

Strike helped himself to a bread roll. The silence continued unimpeded until the starters arrived.

There was a good deal of fuss in assembling the component parts of Branfoot's caviar. Strike, who'd ordered Cornish mackerel, had taken a couple of mouthfuls in the time it took for the waiter to have placed the egg whites, the blinis, the raw onion and the caviar to his symmetrical satisfaction. When at last the waiter had departed, Strike said to Branfoot,

'I'd've given a grand to hear your hitman explain why he had to kill de Leon in the vault of a masonic silver shop. What did he do, pass it off as a bit of 3D chess? Masonic overkill – useful you being a mason, you'll be able to head them off? Don't get me wrong, it fits together. I seriously considered the possibility you'd been pulling a double bluff, especially as you've been behaving like a man who believed his hit had come off. But long investigative experience has led me to the conclusion that if you can have a face-to-face chat with a bloke, he's definitely not dead.'

Robin had to admire Branfoot's sangfroid. Seemingly unruffled, he was piling caviar onto a blini. Kim, on the other hand, hadn't touched her spiced

duck liver terrine.

‘If you were thinking of sending a second hitman after de Leon,’ said Strike, ‘you should know, it’s too late. He’s already talked. So, since we’re totting up items we think might interest the papers, there’s the Winston Churchill Lodge, to which both you and Malcolm Truman belong, the flat on Black Prince Road, your longstanding association with porn producer Craig Wheaton, photos of you and various adult actors going in and out of the flat, and, from what I hear, a sizeable list of people who, once they realise they’ve been covertly filmed fucking porn stars—’

Kim, who’d picked up her fork, dropped it on her plate with a clatter. Strike grinned.

‘I didn’t think he’d have been able to resist getting you on film,’ he said to her. ‘What did he do, take you to a local bar, introduce you to some good-looking bloke, then retire with apologies? Well, now you know. He wasn’t going home to the wife, he was sneaking off to the flat to wait behind the mirror, flies down, cock in hand.’

Still, Branfoot didn’t speak. He was continuing to eat caviar.

‘Now, I might be wrong,’ said Strike, ‘but I think masonic policemen, a TV rent-a-gob, secret filming, a bunch of porn stars and a bungled hit will be of far more interest to the papers than a woman who didn’t want her family to know she had a baby, and hired us to find out whether her son’s father is still alive. But I’ve got a recording of you making implicit threats to expose her,’ he added, tapping the mobile in his breast pocket, ‘so we can add blackmail to the list.’

Robin waited for some kind of outburst from Branfoot, but he merely stared at Strike across the table, mechanically chewing his last blini. At last, he got slowly to his feet and, looking down at Strike, said,

‘You can pay faw your own fucking dinner.’

He threw down his napkin, and, without so much as a glance at Kim, he walked out.

Kim was white-faced and seemed pinned to her chair by shock. Strike raised a hand to hail a watching waiter.

‘Could you cancel Lord Branfoot’s main course, please?’ he said. ‘He’s been called away unexpectedly. And cancel hers, as well,’ he added, pointing at Kim.

‘Are you—?’ began the waiter.

‘She’s sure,’ said Strike.

The confused waiter retreated.

‘So,’ said Strike, turning to Kim. ‘Your turn. You told me you left the force because of “politics”.’

‘I did,’ said Kim.

‘What’s political about giving a co-worker a blow job in a car while you’re both supposed to be on duty?’

Kim’s face grew scarlet.

‘That didn’t happen. People said it did, but it didn’t.’

‘So why’s Ed Billings’ wife chucked him out?’

‘It *didn’t happen* – that was a total – it was a rumour started by Ray’s ex!’

‘You didn’t give a shit what was true when you went to Dominic Culpepper and told him I’d fathered a baby with Bijou Watkins. *Don’t even think about fucking bullshitting me*,’ he added, when Kim opened her mouth. ‘I know it was you. But once the press have got hold of the film Branfoot took in his fuck pad in Lambeth, and found an ex-policewoman on camera, it’ll take them two minutes to find out you left because you were caught blowing a married colleague—’

‘I didn’t do it, it’s a lie, I *didn’t*—’

‘Oh, they’ll probably shove in a couple of “allegeds”, but from that point on, nobody’s going to care who else was in that flat. You’ll be the headline for weeks,’ said Strike.

‘You can’t—’

‘Watch me,’ said Strike. ‘How did Branfoot know details of Murphy’s work life? *You told him.* How did he know about Decima’s baby? *You told him*. But I promise you this: unless you keep your fucking mouth shut about those things going forwards, there will be no holds fucking barred our end. I’ll make it so no detective agency in the UK will touch you. Affairs with married men, Ray’s suicide, blowing Billings, popping off to Black Prince Road to film a bit of amateur porn – you think you’re fucking Teflon, but I’ll make sure so much muck sticks to you no power hose’ll get it off, and I won’t give two shiny shits how much of it’s true.’

Kim’s blush had faded to white again. Her eyes had filled with tears.

Strike returned to his mackerel, acting as though she’d ceased to exist. After a minute, Kim got up unsteadily and walked out of the restaurant.

‘Is it wrong,’ said Robin quietly, ‘that I really, *really* enjoyed that?’

‘If that was wrong, I don’t want to be right,’ said Strike through a mouthful of mackerel.

‘How did you—?’

‘Wardle. He tried to give me details of why she left the other night, but I was preoccupied with other matters.’

Remembering what those matters had been, he took another gulp of the Montrachet ’92, then said,

‘Wardle’s found out more stuff about Wade King of the green jacket.’

‘Really?’ said Robin, trying to sound simply interested. The mention of the man’s name had triggered a vivid memory of his face, distorted by cubic shadows.

‘He was a long-distance lorry driver until he got sacked.’

‘Long distance,’ repeated Robin. ‘Like—’

‘Our late friend Todd. Precisely.’

‘Has King been travelling to the continent?’

‘Probably. A lot of them do.’

Robin lowered her voice.

‘You think the trafficking ring’s still in operation?’

‘I think it’s possible.’

‘So, this looks as though King *could* be Oz?’

‘I think that’s possible, too. I’m trying to find out where he was the weekend of June the seventeenth to nineteenth of last year. In the meantime, our security measures remain in place, all right? You stick to daytime jobs and no evening work on your own.’

Robin chose not to argue the point. Relieved by the absence of pushback, Strike said,

‘Go on with what you were telling me in the bar, about Austin H.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Robin. ‘Well, on Truth About Freemasons he asks if the masons protect each other.’

‘Think I saw that,’ said Strike, frowning slightly. ‘Didn’t someone respond saying he was thinking of the Mafia?’

‘That’s right,’ said Robin.

‘Fuzz,’ said Strike experimentally.

‘What?’

‘He didn’t say anything about “fuzz”, did he? I’ve got a feeling I saw the

name Austin in connection with “fuzz”.’

‘As in the police?’ said Robin, puzzled.

‘No idea… it’s gone. I’ll go and have a look myself. What did Austin say on Abused and Accused?’

‘That his girlfriend’s father was spreading nasty rumours about him, and he wanted to know how to stop it. Most of the responders advised punching the father.’

‘Yeah, I noticed they’re not really talk-it-through types on Abused and Accused.’

‘But that *might* fit Rupert, mightn’t it?’ said Robin.

‘Maybe,’ said Strike, though he sounded sceptical. ‘But if “rumours” means Dino Longcaster telling people Fleetwood had nicked his nef, they were true. The one thing literally everyone seems to agree on, Fleetwood himself included, is that he did, in fact, nick the nef.’

Strike sat in thought for a further minute, then said,

‘I might have more information on Fleetwood on Monday. Following a lead. Might go nowhere. I’ll tell you if it comes off.’

Being honest about the lead he’d decided to follow up on Rupert Fleetwood would mean mentioning Charlotte, and nearly every time he’d done that lately Robin had immediately shut the conversation down.

A waiter arrived to clear their plates. Once he’d departed Strike said,

‘Christ knows how much they’re about to sting us for, but let’s have puddings. Might as well be hanged for a sheep and all that.’

Both of them thought, immediately, of the silver sheep charm on the bracelet Robin had never yet worn.

109

Wind, wave, and bark, bear Euthukles and me,
Balaustion, from—not sorrow but despair,
Not memory but the present and its pang!

Robert Browning
Aristophanes' Apology

Strike rose at five o'clock on Monday morning and set off for Northumberland in darkness, choosing to drive himself, partly because the train wasn't much quicker, but mostly because Heberley House, the mansion in which Charlotte had spent most of her childhood and teens, was difficult to access without a car.

He'd had a broken night. The Daesh execution videos he'd been watching had chosen to resurface, belatedly and in full Technicolor, in his sleep. He'd watched again as a line of bound, kneeling prisoners in Guantánamo Bay-inspired orange jumpsuits, each of their faces hidden by a sack, were shot through the back of the head, bloody holes appearing in the sacks as their faces were blown outwards. He'd seen more men beheaded, others being burned alive in a cage, and a hooded man chained to a metal dumbbell, dragged onto the balustrade of a bridge, then rolled into the river below, where he sank without trace.

He'd also relived in his sleep his own, personal encounter with al-Qaeda: the yellow dirt track and the young man running away, dragging a child; the IED that had torn driver Gary Topley's body in two, ripped off half of Richard Anstis's face and blown away Strike's lower right leg and foot.

He'd woken, drenched in sweat, and vaped for a while. He didn't need a psychologist to tell him that it was an imminent trip to Heberley that had

stirred up these memories. Charlotte was forever entangled with memories of the injury that had ended his military career, because she'd come back to him, and stayed, and helped him recuperate before, inevitably, the deep, irreconcilable rifts between them had begun to widen once more.

Tired and gloomy, he drove northwards to a house he'd happily have never seen again. He had no fond memories of Heberley, which he'd visited as little as possible during his and Charlotte's long, frequently fractured, relationship. Charlotte had always been at her most tense and volatile there, she and her mother sliding past each in the dining room and corridors like hostile cats. Ned Legard, Charlotte's late stepfather and Sacha's father, had been amiable enough, but was often absent, requiring regular stretches away from his wife to maintain even the pretence of a functioning marriage.

Lady Tara Jenson (formerly Tara Clairmont, Tara Campbell, Tara Longcaster and Tara Legard) had always deplored her daughter's relationship with Strike, an opinion she'd been at few pains to disguise. Strike had been unfazed by her disdain even as a youth. Not only had he rarely met a person he disliked more, but his upbringing had equipped him with a resilience unlikely to be severely tested by icy silences punctuated with explosions of temper. However, as long as he could inveigle his way through the electric gates today, he was confident Tara would talk to him. Like her deceased daughter, she always enjoyed a chance to display her formidable powers of invective; it energised and elated her to lose control.

He'd called ahead to check that Lady Jenson was in residence, posing as a Cartier salesman who was entrusted with the delivery of an important necklace. This choice of cover had been influenced by the twin facts that Tara was exactly the sort of woman to whom exorbitantly priced necklaces were delivered in person by slavish salesmen, and her birthday fell in March, though Strike could no longer remember the exact date. Sacha was currently filming in America, which had a double benefit: he wouldn't be at Heberley House to interfere, and might, plausibly, have chosen to send his mother a suitably expensive birthday gift.

The further north he drove, the more razor-sharp memories sliced Strike's thoughts: Charlotte, running barefoot, sobbing, down the long drive, away from yet another row; Charlotte, laughing manically as the pair of them drove this road together, swearing she'd slap her mother around the face if she 'started'; Charlotte, drunkenly crying in the small lodge that had

once housed a gamekeeper, where she'd taken refuge one particularly acrimonious midnight, with Strike.

He found it hard not to reflect on the irony of his position. He'd taken this route long ago when young and in love, and now he was middle-aged and in love, as hopelessly, though for different reasons, as he'd been at nineteen. He remembered quoting Catullus at Charlotte on the night they'd first met. He'd wanted to impress, to prove a young man who'd attended seventeen different schools could be just as clever and cultured as the Old Etonians with whom she mostly associated. The memory was embarrassing, but was the forty-two-year-old really any wiser than the youth who'd memorised the love poems to Lesbia? At least the latter had known what he'd wanted and acted, no matter the subsequently disastrous consequences. His older self had chosen to be cautious where he should have been bold; in recognising too late what he wanted and perhaps even needed, he'd jettisoned what he was increasingly feeling was his one chance of real happiness.

Driving along the motorway, Strike thought how very fitting his first contact with Robin had been. He'd been hurtling out of the office, intent on following Charlotte, from whom he'd broken up mere hours previously and afraid (the memory of the overdose and bus in mind) she might be about to throw herself in front of a Tube train. Instead of catching up with his girlfriend he'd collided with Robin, with such force that he'd knocked her backwards off her feet on the landing and only his fast physical reflexes had stopped her falling down the stairs and possibly breaking her neck. Robin blocking his path back to Charlotte, him nearly killing her in exchange: there was a blunt bit of symbolism, if ever he'd met one…

Her ring finger might still be bare, but Strike was certain it was only a matter of time before that changed. This belief was predicated on his knowledge of Robin. She was the kind of person who stuck things out, even when loyalty might be considered unwise, and Strike could hardly complain about this trait, because he'd benefited from it himself. Nobody who'd had her best interests at heart would have advised her to stick with Strike and the agency in the early days, when she could have been earning far more money with a company that didn't look as though it was going to go bust at any minute. No, Robin was a good and decent person, and good and decent people didn't walk away when things were tough, nor did they walk out on

their romantic partners when they were having crises.

Having resented Murphy for being fit and successful, Strike now deeply begrudged the man his alcoholic lapse and his work troubles.

110

Who can patch union here? What can there be
But everlasting horror 'twixt us two,
Gulfs of estranging blood? Across that chasm
Who can extend their hands?

Matthew Arnold
Merope: A Tragedy

The large, twisted trees lining the road and the stretches of prime farmland were like a landscape seen in a half-forgotten dream. Strike tried to take consolation from the magnificent indifference of nature to all human concerns, but the strategy was so ineffective it was almost a relief to turn up the side road leading to Heberley, and focus his mind on what needed to be done.

The tall wrought-iron gates loomed up before him, set between stone pillars on top of which were carved salmon in tribute to the Legard family arms and, perhaps, the River Tyne, which flowed past the house. Strike got out of the car and approached an intercom, which was new: the old one, he remembered, had been rusty. He pressed the bell, and a woman with an Eastern European accent answered.

'Who is, please?'

'Cartier,' said Strike into the intercom, and by the time he'd got back to his car, the iron gates were slowly opening.

Rhododendrons lined the drive, but it was too early in the year for them to be in flower; instead they formed a dense, glossy dark green guard of honour as he drove up an incline. When the BMW crested the top of the hill, Heberley House came into view in the distance: an enormous rectangular block of reddish ashlar, with long windows and pillars in the

Greek Doric style. Strike still had half a mile to cover, the track running through the deer park, where vast mature trees spread welcome pools of shade on sunny days, and the Legard family, if sober enough, had enjoyed the occasional picnic lunch, which wasn't a matter of scratchy blankets, Tupperware and hard-boiled eggs, as Strike had experienced with Ted and Joan, but involved staff setting up trestle tables with snowy cloths, and carrying silverware across the lawn.

He parked on the gravel forecourt and as he approached the front door it opened to reveal the woman he assumed was a housekeeper: short, thin, light-haired and wearing a black dress. He didn't recognise her, but hadn't expected to. If there had ever been aged family retainers at Heberley House, they'd all peeled away since the arrival of Tara, who was notorious for an inability to hold on to staff who had to interact with her regularly.

'You have necklace?' said the housekeeper curiously, eyeing Strike's empty hands.

'It's locked in my car,' he said, pointing at the BMW. 'I'm not supposed to get it out until Lady Jenson's present.'

This implausible story seemed to satisfy the housekeeper, who turned to lead him into the marble-floored hall, which had changed very little since Strike had last been here. More carved salmon served as finials at the bottom of the wide staircase, and the eighteenth-century chairs he remembered were still set in front of an enormous stone fireplace.

Strike waited until she'd disappeared from sight, then, as stealthily as he could manage, headed firstly towards the drawing room door, which he opened so he could cast a sweeping look over the interior, before crossing the hall to look in on the dining room. He'd just seen what he'd come for when he heard footsteps again, and returned to stand beside the fireplace.

Tara was descending the staircase and talking as she came.

'I thought you must be delivering something from my son, but—'

She stopped mid-sentence, still six stairs from the floor, staring at Strike.

Once as dark and breathtakingly beautiful as her dead daughter, Tara's hair was now dyed blonde. Her face had been lifted, probably more than once, so that she had odd horizontal creases on either side of her mouth where the skin had been stretched upwards. Filler distorted the proportions of her face. She was as thin as she'd always been, wearing her expensive interpretation of country clothing, which in this case meant a silk blouse

and tweed trousers. Had she been able to move her face properly, Strike knew it would have been wearing an expression of fury.

'What the *fuck* are you doing here? *Why did you let him in?*' she demanded of the housekeeper, who'd just returned to the hall, possibly to offer refreshments.

'He said he from Cartier,' said the housekeeper, looking terrified.

'Did you ask to see his ID?'

'No,' said the housekeeper, looking as though she might cry.

'It's not her fault,' said Strike.

'*You* shut up,' snapped Tara. 'In fact, get out. Fucking get out, *now*, or I'll get one of the groundsmen to *drag* you out.'

'Unless you want to see Sacha plastered all over the papers for receiving stolen goods, I'd advise against doing that,' said Strike. 'And before you pretend you don't know what I'm talking about, I've just seen it on the sideboard in the dining room.'

For a few seconds Tara glared at him, then she barked 'coffee!' at the housekeeper, who scuttled away. Tara descended the stairs without looking at Strike, swung around in exactly the same way Charlotte, when drunk, had turned her back on those who were annoying or boring her, and strode into the drawing room. Strike followed and was in time to see Tara take a cigarette out of an ivory box, light it, then drop into a low brocade armchair.

The room had been redecorated at some point in the nine years since Strike had last been in it, when the walls had been of a pale, silvery blue. Now they were dark green and some of the pictures had been rearranged, although the same Augustus John portrait of Sacha Legard's bored-looking great-grandmother hung over the mantelpiece.

'I don't know how you've got the *fucking* balls to walk in here,' sneered Tara.

'Why's that?' said Strike, sitting down without invitation on the sofa.

'You know fucking well why not. *After what you did.*'

'I've done a lot of things,' said Strike, stretching out the leg bearing the prosthesis, which was cramping again, after the long drive. 'You'll have to be more specific.'

'*It's your bloody fault she killed herself!*' shouted Tara.

Strike wasn't remotely surprised that they'd arrived within seconds at this grotesque accusation, which to most people would have made sense

only as the culmination of a vicious row. Tara's tactic in arguments had always been to reach for the most damaging thing she could throw at her opponent before the latter had time to collect their wits. Charlotte had been forever branded with her mother's opening salvos. *I wish I'd never fucking had you. Go overdose again, whining attention-seeker. God, you're a tedious, ugly little shit.*

'So whose fault were the two suicide attempts before I ever met her?' asked Strike.

'*Fuck you!*'

'Eloquent as ever,' said Strike. 'Anyway, back to the sideboard.'

'It's none of your fucking business what's on my sideboard!'

'It's not your sideboard, it's your son's, and he's going to be royally fucked when the press find out where Dino Longcaster's silver ship went, isn't he?'

'Sacha knows it's here and he doesn't care!' said Tara, with what Strike was certain was gross mendacity. If Sacha knew what his mother had done, he'd be extremely nervous about anyone else finding out about it, most of all journalists. 'I read Charlotte's suicide note,' she added loudly. '*I know what you did to her.*'

'The worst I can be accused of with regards to Charlotte is not reconfiguring my entire life around her death wish,' said Strike.

'You were unfaithful, you were—'

'I picked up the fucking pieces until there was no putting her back together any more,' said Strike, 'and I'm looking at the reason she was never going to make old bones.'

'*Bastard,*' said Tara. 'And I mean that *literally*, of course.'

'I'd say I'm a fairly good advert for having an unmarried mother, if you and Charlotte are the control,' said Strike. 'Back to the nef.'

'If you think I'm going to explain *anything* to the thug who as good as killed my daughter—'

'Fine,' said Strike, getting up. 'I'll go to the press, tell them Sacha's got the stolen ship and, trust me, I'll enjoy it.'

'Don't you *dare* – come back here!' shrieked Tara, as Strike made for the door. Before he could reach it, it opened to reveal the frightened-looking housekeeper.

'Get *out,*' Tara shouted at her, 'this is priv—!'

The housekeeper checked, holding her tray. Tara made a noise of exasperation.

‘Bring the coffee in *first*,’ she said. ‘*Then* leave. Come back here!’ she yelled at Strike. ‘Come *back*!’

‘We’ve got nothing else to say to each other,’ said Strike, turning to look at her as the housekeeper set her tray down on the coffee table and poured Tara a cup with a quivering hand.

‘Yes, we have,’ said Tara furiously. ‘Sit down. *Sit down.*’

Strike didn’t move. It was liberating to be able to treat her as he considered she deserved; in the past, he’d always had to remember that Charlotte would pay the price if he permitted himself to lose his temper with Tara, but Charlotte was in Brompton Cemetery, finally beyond suffering, unlike the scrawny flesh and blood woman with the distorted, carefully made-up face and a lipstick-stained cigarette in her claw-like hand.

Having poured Tara’s coffee, the housekeeper scurried out of the room and closed the door while Strike remained standing.

‘Sit down,’ Tara said again. ‘*Sit.*’

‘I’m not a fucking dog,’ said Strike. ‘Are you going to answer my questions?’

‘Yes,’ said Tara impatiently. ‘Sit *down.*’

Before returning to the sofa, Strike helped himself to coffee. Then he said, ‘I’m assuming you didn’t ask Fleetwood to steal the nef. He nicked it, then brought it here because he couldn’t think where else he might be able to offload it, right?’

He took Tara’s silence for assent.

‘How much did you give him for it?’

‘That’s none of your business. You can tell fucking Dino—’

‘He’s not my client,’ said Strike.

‘Don’t lie to me, I’m not stupid, and he hasn’t told you the full story, but you can tell him I’ve got the witnesses. Lottie Hazlerigg and Angus Lyall told me all about it!’

‘All about what?’

‘Dino *cheated*. He *always* coveted that nef, and Peter Fleetwood was so pissed the night he bet it, he was probably seeing two backgammon boards. Lottie and Angus were there and they saw it happen, they know what Dino

did, but nobody wanted to challenge him, because he can turn bloody nasty, as I well know. He dislocated my bloody shoulder when—'

'Yeah, I've heard the story about your shoulder,' said Strike. 'I remember the overturned table and the burns to your leg, I know you found him in bed with a teenager hired to serve at a party. I'm only interested in the nef.'

'I'm telling you about it!' she snapped. 'Dino *always* bullied Peter, treated him as though he was still his fag at Eton, even when I was married to him. So you can go *right* back to that piece of shit and tell him from me —'

'I've just told you, he's not my client. I'm working for his daughter, Decima.'

'Why does she care about the bloody ship?'

'She doesn't. She's only interested in the whereabouts of Rupert Fleetwood. Did Rupert mention Decima when he came to see you?'

'No.'

'So how much was it worth to you, to get one over on Dino?'

'I've just told you, that's none of your bloody busi—'

'It *is* my business, because if you gave Fleetwood fifty grand he'll have been able to hide himself far more efficiently than if you gave him a tenner.'

Tara glared at him, took another drag on her cigarette, then said through a cloud of smoke, 'I gave him six grand. There. Happy?'

'I think you gave him something else, as well.'

'Like what?'

'Like a job abroad, at a Clairmont hotel.'

'I'm not in charge of hiring and firing.'

'I doubt anyone on the board's going to turn down the only surviving Clairmont if they say they want their nephew by marriage given a job in a restaurant or a kitchen. I doubt they'd even protest too much if you leaned on them to offer a brand consultant job to the only other person who knew where the nef had gone.'

'Well,' said Tara, eyes narrowed over her coffee cup, 'aren't *you* clever?'

'The evidence points that way, yeah,' said Strike. 'Which hotel is Fleetwood hiding out in?'

'I don't know,' said Tara. 'I told them to find him something, and they

did. I don’t know where he went. He wrote me a thank you card, though. Nice manners. I don’t remember any thank you letters from *you*.’

‘What the fuck would I thank you for?’ said Strike.

She was old, no longer the beauty who’d enchanted blue bloods and rock stars in the early seventies before marrying the safe bet: Sir Anthony Campbell, with his solid family money behind him, and his castle on Arran, but the way Tara was sparring with him held a spark of her vanished allure. Her fearlessness, her arrogance, her casual cruelty, in combination with her staggering beauty, had once held men captive, but Strike had been inoculated against that faint whisper of dangerous charm through prolonged contact with the daughter who’d so resembled her. Strike and Charlotte had once wondered whether their mothers had ever met; there was a photograph of Tara with Jonny Rokeby, after some concert or other: had he screwed her, too? ‘Maybe we’re brother and sister,’ Charlotte had said, an idea Strike found repulsive rather than exciting.

‘Did Rupert tell you why he wanted to go abroad?’

‘Because Dino was after him, obviously.’

‘Did he tell you he’d been at Sacha’s birthday party?’

Tara took another drag on her cigarette.

‘*He* didn’t, but Sacha told me he’d gatecrashed.’

‘Did Sacha say why?’

‘Presumably because he doesn’t often get to hang out with the beautiful people,’ said Tara.

‘Not good-looking enough for a front-of-house job, then? Dish washing, is he?’

‘I’ve just told you, I don’t know where he is and I don’t know what he’s doing.’

‘OK,’ said Strike, getting to his feet. ‘I won’t trouble you any longer. Mind if I have a slash before I go?’

‘Yes,’ snarled Tara.

‘No need to get up,’ said Strike, as though she hadn’t spoken. ‘I remember where the bog is.’

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Seems as if we'd got to the end of things…

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

Preferring to leave the environs of Heberley House well behind him before he took a break for something to eat, Strike drove south to the city of York. Sitting in his parked BMW, and looking forward to a late pub lunch after he'd got this unpalatable duty out of the way, he phoned Decima Mullins.

When he'd finished giving an account of his interview with Tara, Decima said in a high-pitched voice,

'No – that can't be true. He'd *never* have – he wasn't even in *contact* with Tara – no, she must be lying!'

'She's got the nef,' said Strike, 'and frankly, I feel stupid for not remembering that there was an ex-wife who'd be delighted to piss off Dino Longcaster, isn't strong on ethics and has money to burn. She claims not to know which hotel Rupert's working in, but I think she's telling the truth about him working in one of them. She pulled strings to get him and Tish Benton jobs with the chain. I'm sorry, I know this isn't the answer you were hoping for, but—'

'So you're going to call round all the Clairmont hotels, when he's not even *there*?'

'I think he *is* at one of those hotels,' said Strike, trying to inject sympathy rather than impatience into his voice, 'and no, I'm not going to call them. This ends the case.'

'Wh – you're walking out on me?'

'There's nothing to be done now that you can't do yourself, so it would be wrong to keep billing you. I'm sorry,' he repeated. 'I know you didn't want to believe Rupert's alive, but—'

‘It’s not that – how can you say that?’ she cried. ‘Of *course* I’d rather think he’s alive, but he’d never have left me like this, *never*!’

‘Sometimes we’re mistaken about people, however well we think we know them,’ said Strike, still striving for patience. ‘I’m sorry, but as far as I’m concerned, the job’s done. I wish you luck,’ he concluded lamely, ‘and – better times.’

This call ended, Strike left the BMW and, limping slightly again, set off in search of food. While walking, he called Robin and told her the story of his trip to Heberley.

‘… so it’s over,’ he concluded. ‘The job of identifying William Wright returns to the Met. We’re out.’

Strike wasn’t surprised that a shocked silence followed these words.

‘But why did Rupert leave like that?’ said Robin at last. ‘Why do it so cruelly?’

‘I can only assume the easiest explanation is the right one,’ said Strike. ‘He didn’t want a baby and took the coward’s way out. Anyway, I’m starving and there’s a pub ahead, so I’ll talk to you later.’

The name of the pub, the Old White Swan, reminded Strike unhappily of Ironbridge, but as he didn’t want to have to walk any further he entered to find a pleasant space with white and blue painted walls. He’d just bought himself a pint of alcohol-free beer and ordered fish and chips when his Met contact, George Layborn, called him.

‘Hi,’ said the policeman. ‘I got your email about Wade King.’

‘Ah,’ said Strike, sincerely hoping that this would wrap up the entire silver vault case completely. ‘So…?’

‘He was in France from the sixteenth to the eighteenth of June last year.’

‘France?’ repeated Strike, frowning.

‘Yeah, driving a lorry full of Scotch from Speyside to Cannes.’

‘This is cast iron, is it?’

‘Fully corroborated, yeah.’

‘Shit,’ said Strike. ‘No – I mean, that’s good to know. Cheers, I owe you one.’

He hung up. Layborn’s information, while useful, was unwelcome. Had Wade King been Oz, that would have settled everything, but as it was…

He accidentally dislodged his vape from his pocket in replacing his notebook there; it rolled away under an empty neighbouring table, and as

Strike bent to pick it up again, he thought again of the tube-like object William Wright had dropped, which Mandy and Daz had thought was a doob tube, and which Wright had claimed had been a blood sample, and he wondered, yet again, what it had really been.

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Oh 'tis jesting, dancing, drinking
Spins the heavy world around.
If young hearts were not so clever,
Oh, they would be young for ever:
Think no more; 'tis only thinking
Lays lads underground.

A. E. Housman
XLIX, A Shropshire Lad

So the case was closed. The agency had replaced Decima with the top client on the waiting list, and the mutilated body of the man called William Wright continued to lie unidentified, eyeless and handless in an unknown morgue, and Robin wasn't supposed to care about him, or about dead Sofia Medina or missing Sapphire Neagle, but her mind refused to expel the disconnected facts of the silver vault case, on which it continued to chew uncomfortably, as if on bits of grit. Had Wright really had a pregnant girlfriend? Why had he visited Abused and Accused? Where was the Murdoch silver? What did the eight digits Niall Semple had left for his wife mean? Why had Chloe Griffiths become so aggressive about a bracelet? What were the things that Albie Simpson-White had said Decima was better off not knowing?

Robin knew she had to let it all go. The case was the Met's now and, as if to underline the fact, a police spokesman announced on Thursday that Jason Knowles hadn't been the body in the vault after all. The *Sun* newspaper was the only one to give any prominence to the story, which ran beneath the headline **MASONIC BODY: COPS 'GOT IT WRONG'**.

At Strike's insistence, Robin was continuing to work either in her flat or

at the office. She was starting to feel like Pat's assistant, dealing with paperwork and small bits of research that could be done online. On the other hand, she knew her mental state was as bad as it had ever been. As the days passed, instead of getting better, she seemed to be worse. Unexpected noises, even her phone ringing, startled her; she couldn't sleep for more than a couple of hours at a time, and kept having flashbacks of the man who'd tried to throttle her in the Land Rover. The smallest things made her want to cry: spilled orange juice, a lost button. She was trying her best to hide all of this from everyone around her, including Murphy, certain that telling the truth would lead to a row, or an insistence that she stop work altogether for a while.

Wade King was out on bail, and he knew where to find her. Having loved living alone for the freedom it gave her, Robin now felt unsafe in her flat, which was why she was travelling to and from Denmark Street every day. Her preference would have been for being in the company of people she knew and trusted, at all times.

As she turned into Blackhorse Road on Thursday evening, expecting Murphy for dinner, he called her.

'I'm not going to be able to come over this evening.'

'Oh,' said Robin, angry at herself for wanting to cry again. 'Why?'

'An hour ago I visited a suspect at home who's just turned out to have what looks like two pipe bombs at the bottom of his wardrobe.'

'Shit!'

'Yeah, and the terrorism threat's at "severe", so we've evacuated half the street and we're waiting for the bomb squad.'

'Well, that puts my afternoon docketing receipts into perspective,' said Robin, and Murphy laughed. She was surprised at how relieved she was to have amused him; it felt as though there hadn't been a lot of laughter between them lately.

'Tomorrow night?' he said, and Robin agreed.

Darkness was drawing in. Once parked outside her block of flats, she reached into her bag for the fresh bottle of pepper spray she'd made, her first having been confiscated by the police, then sat where she was for several minutes, trying to muster the courage to cross the dark car park. No matter how much she told herself there was nobody lurking in wait, she didn't seem to be able to convince her subconscious.

‘Come on,’ she told herself firmly, and got out of the car.

She was halfway to the door of the building when she heard male voices, shouting. Flooded with panic, she started to run back towards the Land Rover.

Two men burst out of her building, heading straight for her. She was shaking so badly she dropped her car keys. As she bent to pick them up she heard the snarled words ‘fucking *bitch*’ and then the first man had dashed past her, curly hair silhouetted in the street lamp – *it’s him* – but the second man, who was taller and broader, was slowing; he’d nearly reached her— ‘NO!’ Robin screamed, pulling out her pepper spray.

‘Rob, it’s me,’ said a familiar voice. ‘It’s me!’

‘*Martin?*’ said Robin weakly, leaning back against her car, pepper spray in hand, keys still on the ground. ‘What—?’

‘Who was that guy?’ he said.

Martin was holding a crumpled piece of paper. Robin couldn’t marshal her thoughts. Unable to stop herself, she burst into tears.

‘Rob,’ said her brother, putting his arms around her. ‘The fuck’s going on?’

‘Nothing, nothing,’ she gasped, knowing what a ludicrous response this was. ‘Why are you here? How did you—?’

‘*What’s going on?*’ repeated Martin.

‘I – I got that man arrested, he—’ but she couldn’t tell Martin about the attack, she couldn’t bear her mother, in particular, finding out, ‘—so he’s got it in for me – how did you even—?’

‘It was raining. One of your neighbours let me in. I was sitting on your stairs waiting for you to come home and that fucker showed up and tried to slide this under your door,’ said Martin, holding up the crumpled paper. ‘I said, “who the fuck are you?” and he got aggressive so I got aggressive back, and then he ran.’

‘What’s on the paper?’ said Robin, pulling out of Martin’s arms, but it was clear he didn’t want to show her. ‘Martin, give it to me.’

He held it out reluctantly. The paper had a picture of a gorilla’s face on it.

Martin knew of the significance of gorillas in Robin’s past.

‘How does he know?’ he asked.

‘It’s online,’ said Robin. ‘Look, I’m really pleased to see you, but why

are you here?'

'Carmen's chucked me out.'

'Oh, Mart, I'm sorry,' said Robin.

Under ordinary circumstances, her dominant emotions on finding Martin on her doorstep would have been annoyance and amazement. It was typical of him to turn up unannounced, or rather, nearly two weeks after he'd asked whether he could visit, and without having been told it was convenient. However, she was so grateful he'd been here at this crucial moment, and so delighted to have a guest overnight, she hugged him tightly again.

'It's lovely to see you. Come in and you can tell me everything.'

'You've got a new Land Rover,' said Martin, as they walked back towards her building. 'What happened to the old one?'

'It failed its MOT.'

'You must be making good money these days,' said Martin, glancing back at the car, his tone between envy and admiration.

'It's the business's,' said Robin, 'not mine.'

She loved her brother, but he'd never been shy about asking people in the family for money. Until now, he'd never troubled Robin in this respect, because he'd known she didn't have any to spare.

Martin retrieved his holdall from the stairs where he'd abandoned it and followed Robin into her flat.

'Nice place.'

'Thanks,' said Robin automatically. The gorilla picture was rustling; she looked down at it and realised she was shaking.

Without taking off her coat, Robin walked through to the kitchen to fetch yet another freezer bag and put the gorilla picture inside it. Would the police take this seriously? They still hadn't shown up for the masonic dagger or the rubber gorilla forced into her hand in Harrods.

'Listen,' she said, turning to face Martin with the now protected picture in her hand, 'please – *please* – don't mention this at home. I'm begging you, Martin. I can't take Mum having a go at me on top of everything else I've got going on.'

'You gonna call Ryan?'

'He's got far more important things to worry about than me, this evening,' said Robin, thinking of the pipe bombs. 'Look, there's a bottle of wine in the fridge—'

Her phone rang: Strike.

‘I’ll take this in my bedroom, help yourself to anything you want.’

Still holding the picture of the gorilla’s face, and wearing her coat, Robin went into her bedroom, sat down on the end of her bed and answered her partner’s call.

‘Hi.’

‘Just checking in,’ said Strike. ‘Get home OK?’

‘Yes,’ said Robin shakily. ‘Where are you?’

‘Haringey. Plug and his son are sitting in his van on Carnival Street.’

‘Oh no,’ said Robin angrily. ‘He’s going to involve his *son* in a revenge stabbing?’

‘Looks like it. Barclay and Shah are tailing two more members of the revenge posse and they all seem to be converging in this direction. I think tonight’s the night.’

Robin immediately dismissed the idea of telling Strike that Wade King had come calling. He was trying to foil a possible stabbing: now wasn’t the moment. Strike, however, had detected a note of strain in her voice.

‘You sure everything’s OK?’

‘Yes. My brother Martin’s here. He turned up unexpectedly.’

‘Ah,’ said Strike, pleased to hear this on two counts: Robin had a large man there for protective purposes, and assuming Murphy hadn’t already done so, he’d be unlikely to propose tonight. ‘Well, give him my regards.’

‘I will,’ said Robin. ‘Good luck with Plug. I really hope nobody gets hurt.’

‘Might do Plug some good to get clobbered,’ said Strike, ‘but I’ll do my best to stop anyone hurting the kid.’

Robin hid the sheet of paper she was holding in the same drawer as the dagger and rubber gorilla. She was still shaking. On sudden impulse, she picked up her mobile again and, before she could second-guess herself, called Strike’s therapist half-sister Prudence.

‘Robin!’ said Prudence, on answering. ‘How are you?’

‘Um… not fabulous, to tell you the truth,’ said Robin. ‘I’m really sorry to lay this on you, Prudence, and obviously it can’t be you, personally, but I was wondering whether you could recommend someone to me… a therapist, I mean. For me. But, Prudence – I’m sorry,’ Robin repeated, aware that she was gabbling slightly, ‘it can’t be – I don’t want anyone

who's going to try and talk me out of what I do for a living. I need someone – someone who – I don't know – gets it – someone who's – I can't really explain what I mean—'

'Robin, has something happened?' said Prudence, sounding concerned. 'Something new, I mean?'

'A load of things have happened,' said Robin, 'and I'm… I'm not in great shape. I should probably – after Chapman Farm – but I didn't.'

There was a pause on the other end of the line, and then Prudence said thoughtfully, 'I think I know *exactly* the right person.'

'You do?' said Robin, surprised and hopeful.

'Yes. She's quite unconventional, but her patients love her.'

'OK,' said Robin a little warily, wondering whether 'unconventional' meant crystals and reiki; she seemed to see Strike smirking in her mind's eye. 'In what way—?'

'She can be quite directive,' said Prudence.

'Meaning she tells you what to do?'

'Yes, she has opinions. She also swears a lot.'

'I work with your brother, that won't worry me,' said Robin, and Prudence laughed.

'She's not cheap.'

'That doesn't matter,' said Robin. 'If she's good… I know I need something. I've got to do something,'

'I'll send you her details, although, come to think of it, she might be away at the moment.'

'If she's the right person, I don't mind waiting,' said Robin. 'I think I'll feel better just for knowing I'm doing something about it all… and Prudence, please – please don't tell Strike I called.'

'Of course I won't,' said Prudence, 'but—'

'He knows,' said Robin with difficulty, 'that I'm not in a great place. I'd just rather he didn't know I've roped you into it.'

'It's not "roping", Robin,' said Prudence. 'I'm glad to help.'

After the call had ended, Robin sat for a moment, phone in hand, feeling better simply at the idea of the unknown, sweary therapist. She took off her coat, slung it on her bed, took a deep breath and re-entered the sitting room, where she found her brother sitting on her sofa, pouring wine into a mug.

'I've got glasses,' she said.

‘Couldn’t find any,’ said Martin, which meant, as Robin knew from long experience of her brother, that he couldn’t be bothered to open more than one cupboard. She went to fetch herself a glass, then sat down beside him on the sofa.

‘Why did Carmen chuck you out?’

‘I caught her fucking cheating.’

‘*What?*’

‘Got home last night and her fucking ex-boyfriend was there. “Oh, hiya Martin. Jason was just bringing Dirk a present.”’

Robin didn’t like the way Martin imitated his girlfriend; her ex-husband, too, had always adopted a whining falsetto to impersonate women.

‘He’s married, as well, the fucker.’

‘Were they—?’

‘Nah, they hadn’t got down to it yet.’ Martin glugged half a mug of wine. ‘Or maybe they’d already done it and got dressed again.’

‘Mart, are you *sure*—?’

‘What was he doing there, when I was out?’

‘Well – bringing the baby a present. *Was* there a present?’

‘Yeah,’ said Martin, ‘and I booted it out the window right in front of him.’

Robin groaned inwardly. She knew her brother: incurably hot-headed, impetuous and prone to rages an objective observer would judge to be entirely unjustified. Jealousy had been an issue in quite a few of his previous relationships.

‘How long ago did Carmen and this man split up?’

‘I dunno, six, seven years ago—’ Robin was reminded of Tyler Powell, and the allegation that he’d been jealous enough over a girlfriend he’d had at sixteen to sabotage a car. ‘I told her I didn’t want her seeing the slimy bastard any more and then she goes and has him over when I’m out!’

‘Martin, you haven’t got the right to tell Carmen who she’s allowed to see.’

‘*Why didn’t she tell me he was coming?*’

‘Maybe she didn’t know, maybe he just dropped in because he was passing?’

‘Funny how it happened when I was out.’

‘Or,’ said Robin, bracing herself for an outburst directed at her instead,

‘maybe she didn’t tell you because she knew you’d have a meltdown?’

‘Has she called you?’ demanded Martin.

‘No, of course not. She hasn’t got my number, unless you’ve given it to her.’

‘I said to her, “how do I know Dirk’s not his?”’

‘You didn’t! Martin, for God’s sake…’

He drained his mug and reached for the wine bottle again.

‘Do you *honestly* think,’ said Robin, unaware that she was paraphrasing what Strike had said to Bijou Watkins not so long ago, ‘she’d be having sex with an old boyfriend in your flat, six weeks after she’s given birth?’

‘She’s always fucking talking about him!’ said Martin furiously. ‘Fucking dickhead. Got his own business. Know what it’s called? *Excalibur,*’ said Martin, with so much contempt Robin had to fight not to smile.

‘What kind of business is it?’

‘Skip hire.’

In spite of her best efforts, Robin burst out laughing. It was a release and a relief; she had difficulty stopping.

‘He’s coining it in,’ said Martin bitterly, over Robin’s gasps of laughter. ‘Skips all over Yorkshire, he’s cornered the fucking market. Fucking *Excalibur* – and he puts the sword on everything, the side of the skips and on his fucking employees’ overalls. Surprised he didn’t make Carmen tattoo it on her arse.’

Robin fought her laughter back down and said,

‘I’m sorry – sorry, but you can’t say it’s not funny. “Excalibur Skip Hire”.’

A reluctant grin flickered on Martin’s face, but he said, ‘He’s a fucking twat. Him and Carmen used to play Dungeons & Dragons together and all that fucking shit. I’ve been round his house, with Carmen, he was having a party – showing her what she could’ve had, if they hadn’t split up. Fucking widescreen telly and a home gym. He’s put the fucking logo on all his stuff at home! On fucking *cushions* – he hires out skips for a living and he thinks he’s – who owned Excalibur?’

‘King Arthur,’ said Robin, still fighting a desire to laugh.

‘Him, yeah,’ said Martin, and he downed his second mug of wine. ‘Flexing his fucking biceps at her. Swords on his T-shirts and his fucking

weights. Fucking arsehole.'

'He sounds an idiot,' said Robin.

'He is,' said Martin, who seemed to find some consolation in this comment. 'Yeah.'

But Robin understood why, whatever the man's personal absurdities, he'd aggravate her brother's latent insecurities. Martin had neither savings nor property, and had never stuck with jobs, or indeed anything that required sustained hard work.

'Mart,' said Robin gently, 'are you *sure* you're not imagining this?'

'Why did she chuck me out?' demanded Martin, with characteristic lack of logic.

'Maybe because you kicked your son's present out of the window and accused her of shagging a skip hire-outer who thinks he's King Arthur,' suggested Robin, which surprised a reluctant snort out of her brother.

It was odd to sit here with Martin and realise that he'd chosen to come to her, rather than any other member of the family. Possibly he'd simply flown to the furthest spare bed he thought he could get, but Robin couldn't escape the not particularly flattering suspicion that he saw her as more of a kindred spirit than he'd ever done before, pursuing a strange, intermittently dangerous career of which their mother disapproved, with a failed marriage behind her, and her house-buying on hold, unlike happily married father-of-two Stephen, and Jonathan the graduate, with his conventional new job in brand management. But then Robin remembered a very drunk Martin taking a swing at her ex-husband, on their wedding day, and she laughed again.

'Just remembering you nearly thumping Matthew.'

'Ah,' said Martin, and he grinned properly this time. 'He's a *real* fucking tosser.'

'He is,' Robin agreed. 'Not as big a tosser as the bloke you're worried about, though. Listen… I think you should call Carmen and apologise.'

'I'm not fucking—'

'I *really* don't think she's done anything wrong, Martin.'

Robin knew her brother too well to press him; he was incurably contrarian and would do the right thing in his own time, or not at all. She got up from the sofa.

'I'll make us something to eat.'

She'd just opened her fridge to scan the paltry contents when, struck by

a sudden thought, she returned to the sitting room.

‘Mart, did you just say that Excalibur man put the logo on his *weights*?’

‘Yeah, he puts it on fucking everything,’ said Martin.

‘You can put custom designs on weights?’

‘If you’re the kind of prick who likes that sort of thing. Why?’

‘No reason,’ said Robin. She returned to the kitchen.

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And so it was fated that, one day, after patiently picking round a great piece of rock till it was loosened from its ages-old bed, he felt it tremble under his hand, and leaning his weight against it, it disappeared into space beyond.

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

Robin left Martin asleep on the sofa bed in the sitting room the following morning and headed for the office. There was something she wanted to say to Strike face to face, so she forced herself to drive into town, checking her rear-view mirror constantly, and feeling shaky and exposed during the short walk to Denmark Street.

Arriving shortly after nine, she found Pat already at her desk, and Wardle talking to Strike in the inner office.

‘Didn’t we have three fish in there?’ Robin asked Pat as she hung up her coat, because the large black fish and the smaller gold one appeared to have lost a companion.

‘Travolta died,’ grunted Pat. ‘He says he found him floating when he got in this morning.’

‘Travolta?’

‘Yeah, we had Cormoran, Robin and Travolta. Yours is the only one that hasn’t given any trouble. Makes sense,’ added Pat darkly.

Strike emerged from the inner office, unshaven and looking exhausted.

‘Morning,’ he said to Robin. ‘You missed a real shit show last night. I was just telling Wardle…’

She followed him into the inner office, where Wardle stood, arms folded, leaning against the wall.

‘We intercepted Plug, two mates and his son as they were heading for

the front door of fifteen Carnival Street,' said Strike. 'They jumped to the conclusion we were allied with the dog killer and pulled out knives. Long story short, Shah got stabbed in the leg.'

Robin gasped; the speech she'd been about to make to Strike fled her mind.

'Is he OK?'

'Ish. He was let out of hospital this morning but the wound's deep. Barclay restrained Plug, and I took down his biggest mate, but the third guy scarpered. We managed to persuade Plug's son to stay put, though, poor little bastard. You weren't lying about half his face being chewed off, were you?'

'No,' said Robin. 'I think he's going to be scarred for life – in more ways than one. Where is he now?'

'With his great-uncle and his gran,' said Strike. 'With luck, Plug'll get a long stretch inside and the boy'll now have a fighting chance at a normal life. Anyway, we had to give statements to the police and it's bloody lucky we had plenty of photographic evidence to prove we've been tailing Plug for months, or I think we'd have been done for assault, which, as we know, the Met would bloody love. And we're down one man, maybe permanently.'

'What d'you mean?' said Robin.

'I think there's a possibility we're going to lose Shah to Navabi.'

'What?' said Robin, horrified. 'Dev wouldn't leave!'

'I wouldn't bet on that. He and I had an argument last night while we were waiting for Plug to make his move. He had all Kim's arguments down pat. We shouldn't have taken the silver vault case, we were exploiting Decima, "colluding in covering up her baby", going on jaunts round the country, et cetera. I think old mates at the Met have been telling him he works for a proper wrong 'un. He also thinks I sexually harassed Kim.'

'Wh—?'

'She'll have told him so,' said Strike wearily. 'She and Navabi seem very keen on fucking with me. Have they tried to poach either of *you* yet?'

'No,' said Robin. 'I suppose I should feel offended.'

'*I'll* talk to Shah about bloody Cochran,' said Wardle, scowling. 'I'll tell him *exactly* who she is. I told you before, she caused trouble on every single job she worked. Fucking liability.'

‘That’d be helpful, cheers,’ said Strike, rubbing his eyes, which were stinging with tiredness, ‘and while you’re at it, you can tell Shah the silver vault case continues, and I’m paying for it out of my own pocket.’

‘*What?*’ said Robin, her spirits lifting immeasurably at this news.

‘I’d better go,’ said Wardle. ‘I’m on that cheating civil servant in half an hour.’

When Wardle had closed the dividing door behind him, Strike looked up at Robin said, ‘What’re you looking so happy about?’

‘You mean it? The silver vault case continues?’

‘Yeah, I do.’

‘I’ll contribute financially, too. You can’t bear all the expenses; you won’t have anything left of your inheritance at this rate.’

‘I don’t need it for anything,’ said Strike indifferently.

‘Don’t you ever want to buy a place?’

‘What for? Nothing’d be as convenient as the flat,’ said Strike.

He might have said that if Robin wanted to move in with him, he was more than happy to start house-hunting, but naturally didn’t.

‘Why’re you so pleased we’re keeping it going?’ he asked.

‘Because – don’t yell, all right?’ said Robin.

‘What’s happened?’ said Strike ominously.

‘Nothing, but probably only because Martin was there.’

Robin described the previous evening’s happenings and concluded, ‘I don’t want to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder. I want to end this case, properly.’

‘Did you call the police about King breaking his bail conditions?’ said Strike, exercising maximum control to do as she’d requested, and keep calm.

‘Yes,’ said Robin, ‘and I reminded them I’ve still got two other things he foisted on me, but—’

‘They weren’t interested.’

‘I don’t think it’s lack of interest,’ said Robin. ‘The terrorism threat’s at severe; I can see how a bit of A4 with a gorilla on it isn’t absolutely top priority. Anyway,’ she went on quickly, because she could tell Strike was struggling not to start laying down the law about security and protection, ‘I want to interview Hussein Mohamed.’

‘We’ve been through this. I don’t want you out on the street,’ said Strike,

still struggling to keep his temper. ‘And I’d have thought last night proves —’

‘OK, fine,’ said Robin, ‘one of the others can interview Mohamed; I don’t care, I just want it done.’

‘Why?’

She took a deep breath.

‘All right, you might think this is crazy, but Martin told me last night about this man he knows who put his company logo on the weights in his home gym. He’s a businessman who’s got an obsession with Excalibur and he puts it on everything, apparently.’

‘You think Wright ordered custom weights?’ said Strike, with raised eyebrows.

‘We know Oz and Medina went back to Wright’s flat in the early hours for something even Oz could barely carry, right? You were the one who said it was probably the weights. Well, what if they had something on them, some personal – I don’t know, a motif, a personal slogan—?’

‘Custom weights would be a bloody extravagant purchase for a bloke who only had enough money to live in that shithole,’ said Strike.

‘I know,’ said Robin, ‘but they needn’t have been custom-made, exactly, they could have had – I don’t know, stickers on them, or something. Stickers Medina couldn’t scrape off, and even if she’d managed to do it, the traces might have pointed to something the killer wanted to hide, something that would have identified Wright. Or else the weights were a brand, or a colour, or something, that might have pointed to who Wright was. We know Mandy and Daz never went inside Wright’s room, but Mohamed might have done. I know it’s a really long shot, but Strike, I think we’re a long way ahead of the police. We’ve taken the possibility Wright wasn’t Knowles seriously much longer than they have. I just feel as though—’

There was a knock on the door and Pat entered, looking grumpy.

‘That was Plug’s uncle. He wants you to pretend the boy wasn’t there. Says it’s not his fault, his dad made him.’

‘Fuck’s sake,’ exploded Strike, ‘we’ve already given statements to the police. What next? Does he want Shah to pretend he stabbed himself in the leg?’

‘That’s a “no”, then,’ said Pat, scowling, and she closed the door again.

Strike now lowered his voice.

‘Was she banging on about that bloody fish when you arrived?’

‘Travolta?’

‘What?’

‘It’s what she called it. I’ve just found out.’

‘The fuck’s she naming them for?’

‘People do that, with pets,’ said Robin, amused.

‘I knew it was going to be like this,’ said Strike in exasperation. ‘The look she gave me when I told her it had died, you’d think I’d fucking eaten it… where were we?’

‘Mohamed,’ said Robin. ‘Plus, I got this, late last night, from Chloe Griffiths. Look…’

She handed him her phone and Strike read:

Hi Chloe, this is Robin Ellacott. I’m sorry to contact you again, but I’ve got a few more questions and I think you’re the only person who can answer them. I do understand how difficult this is for you, and I wouldn’t disturb you again if I didn’t think it was important.

What questions?

I’ve spoken to Hugo’s father and he mentioned a big argument you had with Tyler and Anne-Marie about a bracelet.

So?

I’m just a bit confused about

your and Tyler’s relationship.

Haven’t you got FUCKING EYES? Does that look like Tyler on my fucking Instagram?

I wasn’t suggesting Tyler’s interrailing with you.

To this, Chloe had made no reply.

‘Bit aggressive,’ said Strike, handing Robin’s phone back.

‘It is, isn’t it? I know she might just not want to be bothered with it—’

‘*I* don’t want to be fucking bothered with it,’ said Strike, running a hand over his unshaven face, ‘but Rena Liddell called me at seven o’clock this morning. She’s been discharged from hospital and claims she’s fine now she’s back on her clonazepam, though it hasn’t done much for her paranoia, being sectioned. She wants to meet me, but she’s scared “they’re listening in”. We’re going to meet at the Engineer in Camden, where she and Semple had a drink before he disappeared. Ralph Lawrence turning up again is a risk we’ll have to take.’

As Strike hadn’t shouted about Wade King, Robin thought she ought to exercise similar restraint, so rather than query the advisability of further antagonising MI5 she said, ‘So Rena’s the reason you want to keep investigating?’

‘No, I’d decided to carry on before she called. I came in here after I got back from the whole stabbing-and-hospital clusterfuck and I had… maybe not a revelation, but an idea, about the Gibsons delivery and the Oriental Centrepiece, and the more I think about it, the more I think I might be on to something. Blame Tom Waits.’

‘The singer?’ said Robin, confused.

‘Yeah. Listen to this.’

Strike pressed a button on his keyboard, and a tinkling piano began playing.

‘Wait for the chorus,’ said Strike.

… a soldier’s things,

His rifle, his boots full of rocks,
And this one is for bravery
And this one is for me
And everything's a dollar
In this box…

'I… don't understand,' said Robin.

'Come round here,' said Strike, beckoning her to his side of the desk, and he smelled her perfume again as she moved to look at the frozen footage from Ramsays' internal camera on Strike's monitor. While Tom Waits continued to sing, Strike pressed play.

Larry McGee entered the shop, dumped the crates, and left.

Wright took the first crate down to the basement.

The young blonde arrived and engaged Pamela's attention.

Wright took the second crate down to the vault.

He took the third crate downstairs.

Todd entered the shop and helped Wright lift the largest crate downstairs.

Wright returned to the shop floor.

Todd was still in the basement. He remained there for nearly twenty minutes.

Todd reappeared.

The blonde left.

Pamela descended alone to the vault.

Pamela returned to the shop floor, holding items she then placed in a bag.

Wright left, carrying the bag.

Pamela received her text.

Pamela told Todd to stay.

Pamela received a call. She pointed Todd towards the door. He left the shop.

Wright and Todd returned, staggering under the weight of another large crate.

They carried it down to the vault.

Todd came back upstairs and handed Pamela her bag.

Pamela left.

Todd had his coughing fit.

Forty-four minutes passed.

Wright re-emerged from the basement.

He and Todd argued.

Todd left.

Strike pressed pause. Tom Waits continued to sing:

And everything's a dollar in this box…

'D'you see it?' said Strike.

'Nothing I haven't seen every other time I've watched it,' said Robin.

'OK,' said Strike, rewinding, and yet again he played the piece of footage in which Todd and Wright carried the largest crate of the original delivery towards the vault. Todd was moving very slowly, crabwise, and looked in risk of dropping it.

'Are they acting, would you say?' said Strike. 'Pretending it's a lot heavier than it is?'

'No,' said Robin. 'It looks genuinely heavy.'

'But the Oriental Centrepiece isn't inside, is it? Because it's gone to Bullen & Co. Now…'

Strike fast forwarded again and pressed play. Pamela came back upstairs from the vault, holding small items in her arms which she placed into a bag and handed to Wright, who left.

'Pamela took off the lid of the big crate downstairs, right?' Strike said to Robin. 'And instead of the centrepiece, she saw the small items she'd bought for her own business.'

'Right,' said Robin.

'Which she – a woman in her late fifties, with dodgy knees – managed to carry upstairs. So…?'

'Why was the crate so heavy, going downstairs,' said Robin, aghast. '*Why didn't I see that?*'

'Same reason I didn't. Same reason Pamela didn't twig, or Wright himself. Same reason people still fall for the three-cup scam,' said Strike. 'And then I started thinking about that footprint in the blood round the head, and the buggered blind, and that warped door behind the desk. Light would've been visible through the window if the killer had turned it on in the basement…

'This doesn't tell us why,' said Strike, 'and it doesn't tell us who, but it does tell us something important about our killer. That vault was literally

the only place where they've had a realistic chance of taking William Wright by surprise. Necessity. They had literally no other choice.'

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At the silver bell's shrill tinkling,
Quick cold drops of terror sprinkling
On the sudden pavement strewed
With faces of the multitude.

Robert Browning
Christmas-Eve

Martin returned to Yorkshire after a second night at Robin's. Carmen had accepted his apology after what seemed to have been a further twenty-four hours of mutual recriminations, delivered by phone. Robin had been given no option but to listen to Martin's side of the arguments, and even to catch most of Carmen's, so loudly did she scream. In between bouts of arguing with Carmen by phone, Martin had confided in Robin that Dirk slept only an hour at a time, that Carmen's episiotomy scar continued to trouble her and that her nipples had bled so much that she'd had to give up breastfeeding. Robin hadn't wanted these grisly details, but Martin seemed to gain some relief from telling her about them. Robin saw him leave with mixed feelings. His proper place was undoubtedly with his partner and baby, but she'd found his presence reassuring.

Robin continued to alternate between days in the office and at her flat, which, as she'd feared, had started to feel more like a cell. Unfortunately, unless Strike was at the office with her (she didn't like admitting this to herself, but it was the truth) Denmark Street didn't make her feel much safer. That was where the letter 'G' had been painted on the door, and Denmark Street and Charing Cross Road were noisy and busy, making her even jumpier.

When she woke on the twenty-second of March, Robin decided the day

would be spent at her flat, because her business partner was tailing the allegedly unfaithful civil servant. Her front door was double-locked, her alarm on, and a dining room chair propped beneath the handle of the front door. She was trying not to feel envious of Midge, who was currently keeping watch for Hussein Mohamed in Forest Gate. Robin had given Midge a full briefing, telling her that she was especially interested in knowing whether Mohamed had ever seen weights inside Wright's flat, but she wished she could have conducted the interview in person.

She'd made an appointment with the therapist Prudence had recommended, and while she couldn't be seen for another three weeks, Robin felt, as she'd told Prudence, a certain comfort in knowing that she'd be accessing help. She hadn't told anybody else about the appointment, not even Murphy. What that said about the state of her relationship, Robin didn't want to ponder.

After finishing breakfast, Robin sent a new WhatsApp message to Chloe Griffiths, who'd gone silent after her last, angry outburst.

Chloe, I realise you don't want to be questioned about this, but the police have found out Tyler was on the phone from Ironbridge to someone in London when Anne-Marie and Hugo crashed, so he can't have had anything to do with it.

Slightly to Robin's surprise, she received an answer within a few minutes.

So? I never said for sure he did it.

Robin typed,

So why do you think he left Ironbridge?

How do I know? responded Chloe immediately.

Mr Whitehead says you and Tyler were close.

He's talking shit. I told you, Tyler's a creep.

Your dad and Wynn Jones think Tyler went to work in a pub. Did Tyler ever mention that to you?

Yeah, once he said he was thinking of going to work in a pub somewhere else.

Can you remember where?

Wolverhampton, probably. He'd want to be near Molineux Stadium.

That's where Wolves play, right?

Yes.

Sorry for being pedantic, Chloe, but when you first messaged me you told me Tyler 'never wanted to live anywhere else before'.

This time, Chloe didn't answer. Robin was about to put down her phone when it rang.

'Where are you?' said Murphy's panicked voice.

'At home, wh—?'

'Thank Christ. There's a terrorist attack on Westminster Bridge.'

'Oh my God, what's—?'

'Some bloke deliberately ploughed his car into pedestrians. I've got to go, I just wanted to check you were out of the way.'

Murphy hung up. A wave of cold sweat passed down Robin's body. Strike was in Westminster, tailing the civil servant. She called him. He

didn’t pick up.

She sped to the television and turned on Sky News.

The terrorist’s car had mounted the pavement on the bridge and mown down pedestrians, one of whom had fallen over the balustrade into the Thames. He’d driven on, crashing into the perimeter fence of the Palace of Westminster, then fled on foot, armed with a knife, and stabbed an unarmed police officer.

Eyes fixed on the screen, Robin called Strike yet again. No answer.

‘Oh, please God, let him be OK,’ she whispered.

The driver of the car had been shot dead by armed police. The entire attack had spanned eighty-two seconds, but tens of broken and bloody humans had been harmed and possibly killed.

Robin’s mobile rang: Strike.

‘Sorry,’ he said, ‘had my mobile on mute to listen to her talking to a friend.’

‘Where are you?’ said Robin, who could hear sirens and good deal of shouting.

‘St Stephen’s Tavern.’

‘You were right by it!’ said Robin, who knew the pub; they’d been there together.

‘Yeah, and we’re not allowed to leave, there’s armed coppers everywhere,’ said Strike, who was having to raise his voice over the surrounding commotion. ‘I’ll keep you posted, but I’m fine.’

‘Great,’ said Robin faintly.

Her legs were trembling. When Strike had rung off, she dropped down onto her sofa, staring at the television. The act of wanton brutality had ratcheted up her feeling of ever-present danger.

Then an ugly thought flashed through her head. Would she have been as terrified and stricken if it had been Murphy who’d been in Westminster, Murphy whom she hadn’t been able to contact?

Of course I would, she told herself furiously. *Of course.*

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My dreams are of a field afar
And blood and smoke and shot.
There in their graves my comrades are,
In my grave I am not.

A. E. Housman
XXXIX, More Poems

As Strike drove towards Camden at seven o'clock that evening, he listened to the car radio. Four passers-by had been killed by the still-unidentified terrorist who'd ploughed into pedestrians on Westminster Bridge. More than twenty had been injured, some seriously. A woman had been knocked over the balustrade into the Thames and was in a critical condition.

Strike hoped nobody he knew would ever find out what he'd felt and done when he'd heard the screams outside St Stephen's Tavern, glimpsed armed police running and civilians fleeing, then heard the gunshot. Hours later, he remained mortified by the memory of his own instinctive, unthinking reaction.

Cold sweat had drenched his entire body and he'd limped as fast as he could towards the street, barging past panicking drinkers, as though he was still armed and wearing a bullet-proof vest, and had two whole legs, and it was on him, personally, to save London. A running policeman had bellowed at him to get the fuck back inside, and Strike's reason had reasserted itself in a wave of shame; he retreated into the pub, a forty-two-year-old have-a-go hero…

But for a few seconds, the pub and the screams and the drinkers had blurred into non-existence: he'd been back on the yellow dirt road in Afghanistan, in the vehicle that was about to blow up, because he'd shouted

‘brake’ too late. Strike suspected his blood pressure had remained elevated for hours after the terror attack and wasn’t confident it was normal now.

He had no idea what effect the attack would have had on Rena Liddell, who deplored the influx of Islamists into Britain, and who’d made a half-hearted attempt to procure a gun, so she could shoot Muslims. He thought it likely that she wouldn’t turn up for their rendezvous at the Engineer at all. The effect of cataclysmic acts of violence on minds already unbalanced could, as Strike well knew, be catastrophic. He remembered the story told to him by an army medic friend, of a severely injured man who’d been in a state of paranoid psychosis, and appeared to believe he, personally, was causing buildings to blow up in Baghdad, even though he was lying in a hospital bed in Germany.

Strike parked his BMW in Gloucester Avenue, where the Engineer stood. The pub, he noted, was only a couple of hundred yards away from a bridge over Regent’s Canal. The sign over the pub’s door showed the top-hatted Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

Upon entering Strike found a stylish gastropub. The bar was of highly polished wood, the walls were of scarlet and the clientele all looked well groomed. There was no woman with a face tattoo, either inside or in the beer garden. Resolved to make absolutely certain, he returned to the bar.

‘My name’s Cormoran Strike and I was supposed to be meeting someone here. Has any message been left for me? A young blonde woman.’

The young barman looked slightly amused, for which Strike couldn’t blame him. Who left messages to be passed on by human beings, in a world where mobile phones existed? Didn’t this aged idiot realise he’d been stood up? But an older woman behind the bar looked round at Strike’s words.

‘Has she got a tattoo on her face?’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike.

‘It’s her,’ the barmaid told the barman. ‘That filthy one that started shouting.’

‘Oh,’ said the barman, clearly revising his opinion of Strike’s state of delusion, though apparently despising his taste.

‘I don’t think she’s very well,’ said Strike. ‘When was she here?’

‘Hour ago, something like that.’

‘Did she leave a message?’

‘No,’ said the barmaid. ‘She shouted something about a bridge, and then

she left.’

‘Right,’ said Strike. ‘Thanks.’

He left the pub for the street again. What would Rena have done after fleeing the Engineer? Hitchhiked out of London? He looked towards the bridge over the canal; no blonde stood there.

He walked on, and when he spotted steps to his left leading down from the street to Regent’s Canal, he descended them with no very clear idea why he was doing it, except that his own natural impulse when close to a body of water was to go and look at it, but also because he was wondering whether Rena might have gone this way.

He emerged on a stretch of footpath running parallel with the sludge-green, slow-moving canal, so that he was standing between two bridges, one made of brick, for cars and pedestrians, the other of iron, bearing train tracks.

The evening light was fading fast. Shadows from the trees splayed patches of deeper darkness over the sluggish water. A single swan glided slowly towards Strike, its small dark eyes knowing. He watched it drift beneath the iron bridge, its pure white turning dirty grey in the shade, and then he spotted a dark, huddled mass beneath the bridge that he thought might well be human.

A jogger passed Strike, scowling because Strike had forced him to deviate a foot from his self-determined course. He ran past what looked like a pile of rags without glancing at it. This was London: unless people were screaming their distress and belonged to a demographic likely to evoke sympathy, and sometimes not even then, their fellow city-dwellers were too busy to stop and too tired to care. Strike knew this from personal experience. He was too large, too male and too menacing-looking to raise protective impulses in the breasts of passers-by, as he was aware from the universal suspicion with which he’d been treated when he’d fallen and been unable to get up off a city pavement, on the occasion when his hamstring had packed up completely.

Strike approached the figure slowly. It was curled up in the foetal position, silent and unmoving, beside a bulging rucksack. The filthy hands resting on the top of the dirty blonde head were clutched there, covered in self-inked tattoos. It was small; definitely not male.

‘Rena?’ he said quietly.

She looked up. Even in the gloom of the sheltering bridge he could see her complexion was unhealthily pale and spotty. She had an ugly herpes sore on her lower lip, and a blurry tattoo of a tear beneath her right eye.

'I'm Corm—'

From start to finish, that morning's terror attack had lasted eighty-two seconds. This happened far faster, but Strike's reaction was all the quicker for having so recently been near mass murder. He'd seized her thin wrist before his conscious mind knew he'd seen the muzzle of the gun, he pointed it upwards, his other hand prising it from her grasp; she screamed and beat him on the legs with her free fist, her voice echoing around the underbelly of the bridge.

He fended her off, trying not to be rougher than he had to be, his nostrils full of the smell of her; it was as though she hadn't washed in months.

'It's me – Cormoran Strike – you wanted to meet me – fuck's *sake*,' he said, catching hold of the hand doing most of the punching, 'it's me, you've been calling me for weeks!'

The sense of his words seemed to have penetrated: she stopped fighting and he let go of her at once, not wanting to be accused of assault. He looked down at the gun to check whether it was loaded, and saw at once it was a replica, and an unconvincing one at that. Shoving it into his pocket, he held out a hand.

'Get up. You'll catch your death of cold, sitting under here. We can get some food.'

'Fuck off,' she said fiercely. 'Ah'm stayin' here.'

'Why?'

'Ah want tae. Ah've got people aftae me.'

As Strike knew for a fact that Rena was of interest to MI5, he couldn't attribute the belief entirely to Gatesheadery.

'Well, it's good to finally meet you,' he said.

She squinted up at him and he thought she seemed half-intrigued, half-suspicious.

'Are ye really him, are ye? The detective?'

'I am, yeah,' said Strike.

'They told me not tae speak tae ye.'

'I know,' said Strike. 'They think I want to make trouble. I don't. I'm just trying to find out what happened to Niall Semple.'

‘Ah thought you were tryna find mah brother?’

Shit.

He’d seen Rena’s tweet saying that she didn’t believe her brother, Ben, was dead, of course, but he’d hoped the truth might have sunk in over the succeeding two years. This situation, he knew, would require very careful handling, because he had no idea whether the brain-damaged Niall Semple had fed her false hope that her brother was still alive.

‘Let’s go and get something to eat,’ he said, in what was supposed to be an encouraging tone.

‘Naw,’ she said again, still squinting up at him in the semi-darkness, and then, ‘ye were army, weren’tcha? Ah seen online.’

‘I was in the army, yeah,’ said Strike.

‘Ah dunnae believe in armies, Ah dunnae think we should even fuckin’ have them, Ah seen what goes on.’

Long exposure to people in the grip of addictions and mental health issues during Strike’s childhood had taught him that unless you enjoyed rapidly escalating conflict and ugly scenes, calm agreement, wherever possible, was the best policy.

‘Yeah, bad stuff goes on,’ he said. ‘Why don’t we just walk a bit?’

Rena ignored this suggestion. Her blonde hair was in dreadlocks and Strike wouldn’t have been surprised to see insects crawling in it. He didn’t blame her for the physical state she was in, but he wondered what the psychiatric facility had been doing, letting her go, however convenient it was to him that they’d done so.

‘Ah think it was here he meant,’ said Rena, gesturing at the bridge.

‘Who, Niall?’

‘Aye. He said he’d left stuff for me. More stuff. Mebbe hid behind the bricks?’ she said, looking vaguely upwards.

‘Yeah, you told me he gave you something when you met,’ said Strike. ‘What was it?’

‘Ah’m not givin’ it tae ye,’ she said, seized with suspicion again.

‘I’m not after it,’ Strike assured her. ‘I was just interested, because you told me about it.’

‘Ah nivver.’

‘Must’ve imagined that, then,’ he said placatingly. ‘Come on, let’s walk a bit. We can come back here. Aren’t you hungry?’

‘Ye’re not workin’ fer the fuckin’ security service fuckers now, are ye?’

‘No,’ said Strike. ‘They aren’t happy with me. They don’t want me meeting you.’

‘Aye, Ah know *tha’*,’ she said. ‘’Cause o’ what Ah might say.’

‘It’s getting cold. Why don’t we walk a bit?’

She picked disconsolately at her thumbnail for a moment or two, then said, ‘Aye, all righ’.’

She got up and hauled up her rucksack, too.

‘D’you want me to carry that?’ Strike asked as she swung it over her shoulders.

‘Naw… ye’ve only go’ one leg, have ye?’

‘One and a half,’ said Strike, and he raised his right trouser leg to show Rena the metal rod that served as his ankle.

‘Shit,’ she said. ‘Have ye got any fags?’

‘No,’ said Strike, as they set off along the canal bank. ‘I’m vaping these days.’

‘Whut’re they like, them things?’

‘All right,’ he said. ‘Not as good as smoking.’

‘Huh,’ said Rena, in what seemed to be mild amusement.

‘Did you meet Niall in the Engineer?’ Strike asked.

‘Aye.’

‘What did you talk about?’

‘He jus’ told me he was off tae make up fur Ben. Find him.’

‘Really?’ said Strike.

‘Aye. Tha’s why them fuckers dunnae want me tae talk. They left mah bruther over there wi’ no way o’ gettin’ back an’ they don’ wan’ annyone to know it.’

Night was falling rapidly now. Strike wasn’t finding the towpath particularly easy on his right leg.

‘Are you sure you don’t want something to eat?’ he asked.

She looked sideways at him through the gloaming.

‘Aye, all righ’.’ she said.

She seemed to have left her hostility beneath the shadowy bridge, a state of affairs Strike hoped would last. They returned to the steps down which he’d descended and climbed up to the street together, Strike’s knee and hamstring aching, then entered the Engineer.

He thought he saw misgivings on the face of the bar staff when he entered with the very smelly and dirty Rena, but nobody prevented the pair taking a table beside the window in the red-walled room, although a middle-aged couple wrinkled their noses ostentatiously as Rena passed them.

‘Ah cannae remember anything before Ah was six,’ Rena announced once seated, apropos of nothing.

‘Really?’ said Strike. He had long experience of random, disconnected statements from the mentally fragile.

‘Aye,’ said Rena, picking at her fingers again. ‘Tha’s when our parents died.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ said Strike. ‘How did they die?’

‘In an earthquake, in Turkey, when they wuz on holiday. Izmit. ’Cept Ah dunnae think they were mah real parents. Ah can remember a blonde woman, an’ the woman that died wuz dark.’

Strike wondered whether the earthquake story was true. Repeated traumatic losses might well account for Rena’s mental problems, but he was also reminded of a woman he hadn’t thought about in years, whom he’d met as a child in one of the grimmer squats to which his mother had dragged him and Lucy. She’d had broken teeth and a manic glare, and had told anyone who’d listen she was the illegitimate daughter of Princess Margaret and her first paramour, Peter Townsend, that she could prove it with times, dates and her earliest memories, which included a woman in a tiara sobbing over her crib.

They both ordered a drink, Rena requesting a pint of beer.

‘See,’ said Rena, once again without prompting, and ignoring the menu the barmaid had set in front of her, ‘he give me this.’

She groped under her layers of dirty clothing and freed a silver necklace. It bore an odd pendant: a chequerboard square.

‘Niall gave that to you, did he?’ said Strike, eyeing the thing.

‘Aye. He said it wuz magic,’ said Rena. ‘Fur protection. He give it me when we met. An’ he wuz gonnae give me more. He told me. At the bridge.’

‘He was going to give you more silver jewellery?’

‘Aye, yeah, Ah think so. He’s hid it, at the bridge.’

‘At the bridge where I met you?’

‘Aye, Ah think so. Or maybe the one next tae it. Ah dunno.’

‘Did Niall have a briefcase with him when he met you?’

‘Aye,’ said Rena, ‘an’ it was really heavy. Ah think there was more in there.’

‘More silver?’

‘Aye.’

Rena’s beer arrived and she gulped half of it down with relish. Strike wondered how well lager mixed with clonazepam, the drug she’d told him she was on.

‘So Niall told you he was off to get Ben, when he met you?’

‘Aye,’ she said, with a sudden resurgence of anger, ‘’cause no other fucker’s gonnae get him, are they?’

‘Did you and Ben grow up together, after your parents died?’

‘Naw. Ah hadtae go an’ live with mah gran an’ he wen’ with our uncle. Our uncle isnae married, an’ Ben was older. He didnae wanna little girl.’

Strike was reminded immediately of his mother, and her forcible separation from Ted at the age of two. Would Leda’s life have been better had she been able to remain with her brother? Would Rena’s?

‘Ah *think* he’s mah brother,’ said Rena restlessly. ‘Ah *think* he is.’

‘Where were you living, when Niall got in touch with you last year?’ asked Strike. ‘Still with your grandmother?’

He judged her to be in her mid to late twenties, although it was hard to be sure. She might be younger than her lined and hollow face suggested.

‘Naw,’ said Rena, ‘she’s long gone. Ah wiz in a Place.’

The inflection on the word suggested Rena might have been in a psychiatric facility, or perhaps a drug dependency unit.

‘Did Niall tell you how he knew where you were?’

‘Ah think Ben mighta told him,’ said Rena vaguely.

‘So you and Ben kept in touch?’

‘Sometimes. He told me,’ she said, with sudden animation, ‘aboot a battle on mah birthday, nineteenth July, an’ they wouldnae give this big guy who got killed, who was, like, really fuckin’ brave, an’ he wasnae from Britain, he wiz from Fuji or somewhere, Ah dunnaw where, an’ they never give him a proper medal ’cause nobody was s’posed tae know they were there, so that’s the kind of fuckin’ shit they get up tae in the army.’

‘Talaiasi Labalaba,’ said Strike. ‘Battle of Mirbat.’

‘How d’ye know that?’ asked Rena, half-excited, half-unnerved.

‘There’s a statue of him at the SAS base in Hereford,’ said Strike.

He’d just remembered why the username ‘Austin H’ had put the word ‘Fuzz’ into his mind, back in the Goring Bar with Robin. He’d seen it on Truth About Freemasons: *Pretty sure Austin ‘Fuzz’ Hussey (also SAS, Battle of Mirbat) was a mason.*

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‘And many and long must the trials be
Thou shalt victoriously endure,
If that brow is true and those eyes are sure;
Like a jewel-finder’s fierce assay
Of the prize he dug from its mountain-tomb—
Let once the vindicating ray
Leap out amid the anxious gloom,
And steel and fire have done their part
And the prize falls on its finder’s heart…’

Robert Browning
The Flight of the Duchess

Robin was at home, alone. Night had fallen, her curtains were closed, her door double-locked, her alarm on, and the dining room chair was still propped beneath the handle of the front door. The television news was muted and she’d turned on subtitles to find out more about the Westminster Bridge attack. The dead terrorist hadn’t been named, but his physical description suggested he might be a Muslim. She knew it wasn’t doing her anxiety much good, staring at pictures of the carnage, but she didn’t seem able to look away.

Her phone rang, making her jump.

‘Hi,’ said Midge, who sounded triumphant. ‘Got what you wanted off Hussein Mohamed. Poor bastard came home from work early. “It’s a bad day to be a Muslim driving a car in London.” I’m going to send you the audio file now, so you can hear it for yourself.’

‘The weights?’ said Robin, with a surge of anticipation. ‘Did he mention —?’

‘Just listen to it,’ said Midge, sounding very pleased with herself. ‘You won’t be disappointed. Start seven minutes in.’

So Robin hung up and did as she was told, opening the audio file and turning the volume on her phone up to maximum.

‘… don’t recognise any of these photos?’

‘The hall was so dark, you see,’ said a male voice with a Syrian accent. ‘We never saw him very clearly, and with the beard and the glasses…’

‘But you spoke to him?’

‘Me personally, only a couple of times. The first time, he’d offered to help us with Hafsa’s wheelchair. It was difficult, living on the top floor. We said we’d manage – anything to get out of the detention centre. We invited him inside for coffee, but he said he had things to do… he definitely wasn’t the thief?’

‘No,’ said Midge. ‘Why?’

‘Because it seemed to make sense of some things, if he was a thief. He didn’t ever want us to see inside his room. He would wait till we’d gone past, to open the door, even.’

‘He told you his girlfriend was expecting a baby, didn’t he?’

‘Not me, he told my wife one day, when I was out and he was helping her with Hafsa again. He said he hoped for a little girl. She said to him, “most men want a son”. He told her men cause most of the trouble in the world, and he didn’t want to add another one… My wife asked why his girlfriend wasn’t with him, if she was expecting his baby, and he said she’d be arriving soon. He said her family disapproved of him, so it was difficult. We thought, after he was killed, maybe the girlfriend’s family had something to do with it – but maybe that was all a lie, what he told her.’

‘Did you ever speak to him again?’

‘One time only.’

‘What did you talk about?’

‘Lions,’ said Mohamed.

‘*Lions?*’

‘Yes. My wife and I and Hafsa had been out all day. We were expecting a parcel. The man on the bottom floor said he’d seen William taking boxes up to his flat. I wondered whether he was keeping ours for us, so I knocked on his door. He took a while to answer the door. He’d drawn the curtains and there was only a lamp on, so it was dark and he’d done something

strange. He'd thrown a sheet over his weights but it slid off while I was standing there. He went and threw it back over them. I could tell he didn't want me to see them – at the time, I didn't know why. I didn't understand it. But if he'd stolen them, that made sense. Maybe they came from a house he'd burgled?'

'Can you remember anything about the weights?' asked Midge, while Robin's heart rate accelerated almost painfully.

'Yes, they were yellow, with the face of a black lion on them, or maybe a lioness, drawn like a cartoon. I only saw them for a second. He looked at me strangely when he'd covered them again. Guilty, you know? But he knew I'd seen, so I said – to show I didn't care, to be friendly – "ah, the lion is my lucky animal. Hafsa's name means lioness cub". I told him that. And he smiled and said "but don't they call al-Assad the lion of Syria?" which is true, and not something everyone knows, so I said, "but that's not the fault of lions" and he laughed. He gave me my package, and that was all – no,' said Mohammed, 'not all. There was a suit and he was ironing it. He told me he was starting a new job on the Monday. He seemed pleased about it.'

'Did you tell the police about the yellow weights you saw in Wright's room?'

'No. They'll have seen them for themselves, won't they, when they went in there?'

'Did you know two people – a man and a woman – went into William's flat twice, before and after his murder, and removed things?'

'I heard they'd been there, but not that they took anything. The woman on the ground floor asked me if I'd seen them, but I hadn't. They stole, you say? They robbed the flat?'

'Yeah, we think so. Can you remember anything else William said to you or your wife? Like friends, co-workers, anyone else he knew in London?'

'No… except, he told us about a foodbank in… Stone Road, I think it was.'

'Had Wright used it?'

'I think so. He told us he didn't have much money.'

'Stone Road, yeah?'

'Yes. My wife and I went there a few times, after he told us.'

Robin texted her gratitude to Midge, then noticed she'd received a

WhatsApp response from Chloe Griffiths.

No I don’t know why Tyler left, he was hardly talking to me before I went interrailing and my boyfriend was getting angry if I even said hello to him in the street after he gave me that crappy birth flower bracelet thing. Why are you still pestering me? I DON’T KNOW WHERE TYLER POWELL IS AND I DON’T FUCKING CARE.

Robin sent a fresh WhatsApp message.

Out of interest, where were you, the night that Hugo and Anne-Marie crashed?

She had a hunch that Chloe might want to do some thinking before she answered that one.

Robin now looked up Stone Road in Newham, where William Wright had visited a foodbank. They needed just one person who hadn’t been drunk, drugged, or suffering visual problems when viewing Wright by daylight; just one, who’d look at a photograph and say, with conviction, *it was him*…

Mohamed had, understandably, mistaken the name of the street where the foodbank was situated: it was ‘Strone’, not Stone. Robin made a note of this, remembering as she did so Wynn Jones’ smug correction of herself: *on Wellsey Road* – Wesley *Road.*…

Words that were easily mistaken for each other… things that looked as you expected them to look. A sheaf of corn, or a tree. A black lion on a yellow background…

Names… William Wright was a wholesale manufacturer of catering silverware, or an eighteenth-century Scottish botanist, or a famous English football player, or a Freemason who’d drowned in the First World War… the meaning of names…

Struck by a random idea, Robin looked up the meaning of a name on Google.

‘Oh my God,’ she whispered.

With shaking hands, she opened Instagram yet again. She had to be sure, before she contacted Strike. She must be absolutely certain.

An hour passed, and for the first time since she'd been attacked outside the Whiteheads' house, Robin forgot her fear. She neither jumped at small night-time noises, nor did she get up from her table to re-check that the door was locked. It didn't occur to her to cross to the window to stare down into Blackhorse Road, in case Wade King was watching her windows. All she cared about was proving the shocking theory that had leapt out at her, from the meaning of a name.

At last, she reached for the mobile beside her and called her partner's number.

Strike answered almost immediately.

'Where are you?' asked Robin.

'Just left Rena Liddell in a Travelodge,' said Strike. 'I've paid for her to stay there a couple of nights. How're you?'

'Strike, I think I've got something important – *really* important.'

'Funnily enough,' said Strike, who was limping towards to his BMW, 'so have I.'

PART TEN

Here, of a surety, he said to himself, was the silver heart from which the scattered veins had been projected.

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

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Knight of the East, or the Sword…
Most men yield to the stress of the current, and float with it to the shore, or are swept over the rapids; and only here and there the stout, strong heart and vigorous arms struggle on toward ultimate success.

Albert Pike
Morals and Dogma of the
Ancient and Accepted Scottish
Rite of Freemasonry

‘I still think,’ said Strike, ‘we’ll be very lucky to interest the Met with what we’ve got right now.’

He was back at the office, sitting at the partners’ desk, the sky jet black outside the window. He and Robin were still on the call he’d taken on the way to his car, two hours previously. Each had shared everything they’d discovered and deduced, and while both believed that, at long last, they’d isolated the puzzle pieces of William Wright from those of other men and assembled them correctly, their conversation had been going round in circles for a while.

‘I’ve been kicking myself,’ said Robin. ‘I should’ve seen…’

‘We’ve been hunting a needle in a fucking haystack,’ said Strike, ‘but I can’t see what our counterargument is if the police say all we’ve got is guesswork, a couple of fake Instagram accounts and an old ad on eBay… bloody good work finding that, though.’

He was looking at the old advert as he spoke, because Robin had sent it to him by email: second-hand weights, sold by a man in Dagenham in May of the previous year. Robin had already contacted the seller, and been told that a man called Will had purchased them for cash; he’d been delighted

with them, because he hadn't imagined such a set existed.

'I'm nervous about you going it alone again,' said Robin, refusing to be flattered out of her concerns.

'I won't be alone, I'm taking Barclay and Wardle.'

'Going rogue, then. In the sense of getting arrested for breaking and entering again.'

'This'll be different.'

'How?'

'If I'm lucky, I'll get in and out without anyone knowing I was ever there. You're the one who thinks this might be life and death.'

Robin had indeed said this towards the beginning of the call, but two hours of circular discussion later she was feeling rather less optimistic.

'That might've been wishful thinking. I hate saying this, but Sapphire Neagle might be dead. There's been no sign of her in months and we know he's got no qualms about killing people who've outlived their usefulness.'

'Well, if you and Midge are successful at Ramsay Silver tomorrow morning, we'll have solid evidence at least part of our theory's right. Did I tell you Ramsays has been closed up ever since they found out Todd was murdered?'

'No,' said Robin. 'Why?'

'Apparently the assistant walked out, afraid she might be the next employee killed, his wife's in no fit state to return to work and he's barely clinging on at his financial services job. He says he's going to declare bankruptcy.'

'Oh no,' said Robin.

'You've always felt sorrier for him than he deserves,' said Strike. 'I know about the dead son and the ill wife, but the man's an idiot.'

'All right, calm down,' said Robin, in mild surprise at Strike's grouchy tone. 'People make mistakes.'

'Yeah, and I've made plenty, but I'm not sentimental about people who make easily avoidable, repeated fuck-ups and that bloody shop was a fuck-up from the start.'

He heard beeping.

'Got another call?'

'Yes, sorry – I'll have to take this, it's Ryan. I'll—'

'Fine, speak to you tomorrow,' said Strike curtly, and he rang off.

‘Hi,’ Robin said to her boyfriend.

‘Everything OK with you?’ asked Murphy.

‘Great,’ she answered, because what else could she say?

I think, tomorrow, we might be breaking a case the police got badly wrong, but I haven’t been able to tell you how we got there, because that would involve me telling you a whole load of things I’ve been deliberately concealing from you. Also, my work partner’s about to break into a private house again and I haven’t done anything to stop it.

‘What’s going on with you?’ she asked. ‘How’s the pipe bomb guy?’

‘Confirmed as a kid with interpersonal problems,’ said Murphy. ‘Nothing to do with the Westminster attack.’

‘Good,’ said Robin, though she wasn’t sure why. Bombs were bombs. Perhaps it was a relief to think the youth had turned murderous alone, not as part of an organisation. Her sense of foreboding had been increasing throughout her conversation with Strike; Oz had an unknown number of associates.

‘Anyway,’ said Murphy, ‘I’ve been thinking about my birthday.’

It took Robin a few seconds to recalibrate her brain to everyday life. Of course, Murphy’s birthday was fast approaching: she’d need to buy him a present, in addition to those she still hadn’t purchased for her new nephews.

‘I’ve booked the restaurant at the Ritz,’ said Murphy. ‘I was thinking, we don’t push the boat out often enough. I’m giving you plenty of notice so you can get the night off, all right? Because they’ve got my credit card number.’

‘Oh,’ said Robin blankly. ‘OK. I mean – right, I’ll make sure I’ve got it off.’

Fearing she’d been insufficiently enthusiastic, she added,

‘That’ll be lovely, the Ritz.’

But after Murphy had hung up, Robin sat frozen, staring at the Raoul Dufy print hanging above her mantelpiece. It showed a seascape viewed through two open windows, and it added a trace of yearning to her sudden feeling of panic.

Her boyfriend’s preference when eating out had always been gastropubs. Never, in the whole of their relationship, had he suggested going anywhere as fancy as the Ritz. It wasn’t that he was parsimonious: on the contrary, he was a generous tipper, the first to offer to buy a round, but he’d never

shown the slightest inclination for French food, or the kind of restaurant for which you needed to dress up.

Ten miles away, Strike was regretting the tone he'd taken with Robin about Kenneth Ramsay. His strictures on those who did stupid things and were far too easily forgiven by Robin had very little to do with the silver shop owner and everything to do with the lapsed alcoholic whose proposal, he was certain, was approaching fast.

Work usually enabled Strike to forget his personal troubles; he was adept at sectioning off parts of his brain and focusing exclusively on whatever needed to be done, a talent honed in the military. Unfortunately, the tactic wasn't working particularly well these days, because the person on whom he was trying not to dwell was inextricably linked with the job.

Nevertheless, careful planning and preparation were essential if he was going to get away with what he'd be attempting the following day, so, doing his best to push thoughts of Robin and Murphy aside, Strike resumed making a list of the things that needed to be done or procured before he dealt with what would hopefully be the last part of the silver vault job. Having read through everything he'd written so far, Strike added Handcuffs (multiple?), pondered for a while longer, then wrote the word 'priest'. This done, he turned out his desk lamp, picked up his notebook and left for his attic.

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No man omits precaution, quite neglects
Secrecy, safety, schemes not how retreat,
Having schemed he might advance.

Robert Browning
Count Guido Franceschini

‘There’s a reason why we’re startin’ oot at seven a.m., is there?’ yawned Barclay, arriving at the garage where Strike kept his BMW the following morning. Barclay was holding a McDonald’s bag that smelled of bacon. Wardle, who’d arrived a couple of minutes earlier, was drinking a takeaway coffee.

‘Yeah, you two are going to go ahead and scope out the territory,’ said Strike. ‘My face and car have both been seen there, so I won’t be showing myself till after dark. You can drive us as far as the rental,’ he added, handing the car keys to Wardle. ‘Don’t want my leg seizing up if I have to fight.’

‘We can handle him, if it comes to that,’ said Wardle, walking around the car.

‘Neither of you are going to get involved in physical stuff unless it’s absolutely necessary,’ said Strike. ‘If I get caught, it’ll be a pain in the arse, because the police are already fucked off at me and I’ll be back in the news. But if a bloke who’s only just left the Met is caught breaking and entering, or my subcontractor who’s recently been arrested for climbing on roofs is done for assault, we’ll have far too high a percentage of the workforce whose names and mugs have been in the papers.’

‘Ah get car sick in the back,’ said Barclay gloomily, as Strike got into the front passenger seat.

‘You’ll be fine,’ said Strike, ‘unless they’ve shoved prawns in your Egg McMuffin.’

‘Ye can forget borrowin’ mah knuckledusters, if that’s yer attitude,’ said Barclay, drawing his long legs into the car.

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… and again begin the quest!
Here, where the reaper was at work of late…

Matthew Arnold
The Scholar-Gypsy

‘Hi,’ said Midge, joining Robin at the end of Wild Court at a quarter to nine. The dull grey morning was chilly and Midge was wearing a scarf with her leather jacket, while Robin was regretting that she hadn’t put on a sweater. Both women were carrying large holdalls, and Robin smiled as Midge’s clinked.

‘Great minds,’ she said, adjusting her own on her shoulder.

‘Yeah, I brought most of my tool kit.’

They headed together into the alleyway, past the bins and the rear entrance to the Connaught Rooms.

‘How’re things with you?’ asked Robin, who hadn’t had a proper conversation with Midge in weeks.

‘Not bad. Did a bit of rebound shagging last night.’

‘Good for you,’ said Robin, feigning amusement, though ruptured relationships and hurt feelings were the last thing she wanted to think about right now. *I’ve booked the restaurant at the Ritz… I’m giving you plenty of notice…* ‘Who’s the lucky woman?’

‘Name’s Ellen. She’s my second to last ex’s ex.’

‘Ah,’ said Robin.

‘Always thought she was hot. She’s got a fookin’ horrible cat, though.’

‘Really?’

‘It’s only got three legs,’ said Midge.

‘You can’t blame it for that,’ said Robin, thinking of Strike.

‘And only one eye.’

‘Still—’

‘And when it’s unhappy, it shits in the bath.’

Robin started to laugh, then spotted Kenneth Ramsay walking fast towards them, his silver hair ruffled, his jacket hanging even more loosely on him than it had the last time Robin had seen him.

‘This is all very – when I got Mr Strike’s phone call—’

‘Please don’t get your hopes up too much,’ said Robin. ‘We don’t know for sure our theory’s right.’

But she could tell, by Ramsay’s agitated air as he fumbled with the shop keys, that he was praying for a miracle.

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… so, at length, a silver thread
It winds, all noiselessly, thro' the deep wood,
Till thro' a cleft way, thro' the moss and stone,
It joins its parent-river with a shout.

Robert Browning
Pauline

As they drove north, Strike told Barclay and Wardle how he believed William Wright had died, and why. He found it a useful exercise, because their incredulity showed him exactly what he and Robin would need to do if they were to convince the police.

'If that's what happened,' said Wardle, 'it's the most convoluted fucking murder I've ever heard of and I can't believe he brought it off.'

'He didn't,' Strike pointed out, 'or we wouldn't be coming for him, would we? The thing was too complicated by half. Too many moving parts. Well, that and the fact he couldn't resist adding a sex crime into the caper. Never mix business with pleasure.'

'I think you're going to be lucky pinning the whole thing on that footprint,' said Wardle.

'If we're right, there'll be a damn sight more physical evidence than a footprint,' said Strike. 'Though I admit we haven't got any of it yet, and don't know where some of it is.'

They arrived at the car rental in Banbury shortly after nine o'clock. Wardle and Barclay picked up their hired Mitsubishi and continued north, leaving Strike to find somewhere to kill a few hours in the small town. The Old Town Deli and Café provided not only coffee, but an outside table where Strike could consume two flapjacks, vape and read the day's news

off his phone.

Islamic State had now claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack on Westminster Bridge. The driver had been identified as Khalid Masood, a fifty-two-year-old British resident and Muslim convert with a long string of criminal convictions in his past. Strike scrolled down the BBC website in search of distraction. Robin still hadn't rung him, and if his theory about Ramsay Silver was proven wrong, he might yet have to call Barclay and Wardle and tell them to turn back. It was therefore with less interest than he might have taken a few days previously that he saw Dominic Culpepper's name. The journalist had been sacked from his paper, and Strike strongly suspected this was because of the baseless Candy story.

His phone rang. He snatched it up without checking who it was, so was momentarily disconcerted to hear Shah's voice rather than Robin's.

'Hi,' said Shah. 'I, ah… I'm calling to apologise.'

'What for?' said Strike, so preoccupied he couldn't immediately recall what Shah had to feel sorry about.

'For saying what I said, about the silver vault case, and for believing Cochran when she said you'd come on to her. Wardle and I have had a chat, and… yeah. I shouldn't have taken her at face value. And I know you're pressing on to try and find out who killed those people, out of your own pocket, so I… I'm not proud of what I said to you.'

'Fuck it, I've said plenty of stuff I'm not proud of,' said Strike. 'How's the leg?'

'Painful,' said Shah.

'I'll bet it is. Don't worry about money, we can pay you the average monthly fee while you're off.'

'That's bloody decent of you,' said Shah.

'Yeah, well, I'd rather keep you at the agency,' said Strike.

He heard a beeping.

'Shah, I've got to go, that could be Robin.'

He switched calls without waiting for a response.

'Hi,' said Midge's voice. 'We're nearly in. Robin thought you might like a blow-by-blow. She's almost got the back off.'

Robin, who was slightly shorter than Midge, and somewhat thinner, was kneeling inside one of the old cupboards in the Ramsay basement, from which they'd removed all cleaning products. Only her feet were visible as

she used Midge's claw hammer to prise out nails.

'What does it look like?' said Strike. 'Recently tampered with?'

'There are new nails,' said Midge, 'but we still don't know whether the wall's intact behind the board.'

Kenneth Ramsay was sitting on the steep wooden steps leading down into the basement space, his head in his hands.

'Got it,' came Robin's muffled voice, and Strike heard scuffling and thuds.

Dishevelled and dusty, Robin manoeuvred herself backwards out of the cupboard, dragging the board that had been at the back of the cupboard with her.

'Give me your sledgehammer,' she told Midge. 'The bricks have been reassembled but they're loose.'

'Did she just say the bricks are loose?' a very tense Strike asked Midge.

'Yeah,' said Midge, as she passed Robin the sledgehammer. The latter crawled back into the cupboard, only her feet protruding, and Strike heard more muffled thuds.

'What's happening?'

'She's trying to break through the wall.'

Robin had battered the bricks as hard as she could in the cramped space and one of them fell through into the empty space beyond. With a definite clang, it hit something metallic.

'Torch,' she called to Midge, who provided one.

'Did she—?'

'She wanted a torch, I gave her one,' said Midge.

Coughing in a small cloud of dust, her eyes watering, Robin pushed the sledgehammer back out of the cupboard and turned on the torch, so she could see through the hole left by the fallen brick.

The torch's beam fell upon a treasure trove of silver, crammed into the dead space behind the wall. She saw the Oriental Centrepiece, ugly and ornate; the silver mauls and set squares; John Skene's ceremonial dagger and, its silver sails and rigging cast in shadow on the wall behind it, the nef of the *Carolina Merchant*. In a far corner were what looked like balled-up clothes. The shirt was covered with rusty brown stains.

Robin wriggled backwards out of the cupboard and reached up for the phone in Midge's hand.

‘It’s there,’ she told Strike. ‘Looks like all of it. Plus Wright’s clothes.’

‘Shoes?’

‘Can’t see any.’

‘Fuck,’ said Strike.

He’d thought it likely, on the balance of probabilities, that the Murdoch silver had never actually left the shop, but hearing that theory confirmed was an immense relief. Then he heard a loud, echoing wail.

‘The hell’s that?’

‘Er – that was Mr Ramsay,’ said Robin.

The shop owner had flung himself onto all fours to squeeze himself into the cupboard and peer through the hole Robin had made. Now he was sobbing hysterically, only his legs and backside visible.

‘Hang on,’ said Robin, as Ramsay’s echoing wails filled the small space, and she climbed the stairs back up to the shop floor. ‘He’s a bit overwrought,’ she said quietly.

‘I’ll bet he is,’ said Strike.

‘I wonder how long it took Todd to make the hole in the wall,’ said Robin. ‘The mortar was old and crumbly, so I don’t think it would have been that hard. The worst bit would have been him cramming himself into the cupboard to do it.’

‘A problem our friend Oz won’t have had, when shoving all the silver in there,’ said Strike.

‘True… where are you at the moment?’ said Robin, now standing in the dark and dusty shop floor.

‘Banbury, waiting to hear from Barclay and Wardle.’

‘You’re waiting till after dark?’

‘There can’t be witnesses this time,’ said Strike. ‘I’m on very thin ice as it is. Listen, I was thinking about Fleetwood on the way up here. Why don’t you – shit, hang on—’ he said, as his phone began to beep, ‘I’ll call you back.’

He hung up and answered the new call.

‘Hi,’ said his Met contact, George Layborn, in a lugubrious voice. ‘You were right.’

‘You’ve found him?’ said Strike, startled. ‘Already?’

‘Yeah.’

‘That was quick.’

‘There’s a general feeling your tips shouldn’t be disregarded, after Knowles. Family’s being notified this morning.’

‘OK, thanks for letting me know.’

‘Anything else you want to share, while we’re at it?’

‘Not yet,’ said Strike.

‘What are you up to?’ said Layborn, with what Strike was forced to admit was justifiable suspicion.

‘You don’t want to know,’ said Strike.

He hung up and called Robin back.

‘Layborn,’ he said, without preamble. ‘They’ve found Semple’s body.’

‘Oh God.’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike, ‘but it’s closure. Easier than never knowing. Listen, could you persuade Ramsay not to mouth off about his silver being found until I’ve taken care of the rest of business? Explain to him that it’s in his best interests – that otherwise it might look like he was trying to drum up publicity, hiding the silver on the premises himself.’

‘OK,’ said Robin. ‘But please be careful.’

‘I think that’s what’s called “rich”, coming from the woman who once jumped in front of a moving train,’ said Strike. ‘All right, I’ll be careful. That’s Barclay,’ he added, as his phone began to beep again. ‘I’ll keep you posted.’

He hung up on her a second time and accepted Barclay’s call.

‘We’re here,’ said the Glaswegian, ‘but he’s just left, wi’ a van full of other guys. Wardle’s followed ’em. Ah’m still watchin’ the house.’

‘OK,’ said Strike, ‘I’m moving closer.’

He paid for his flapjacks and coffee, visited the café’s bathroom, returned to his car, and set off in the direction of Ironbridge.

121

Upon the face of the jewel you see a representation of the first three recipients of this degree, two of them lowering the third into the subterranean vault.

Albert Pike
Liturgy of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry

Night had fallen by the time Strike decided it was safe for him to re-enter the small town that had seemed so quaintly beautiful by daylight. It had an entirely different aspect now, or perhaps it was what Strike knew about one of its inhabitants that had endowed the broad, black Severn and the gigantic arched bridge with menace. Between the river and the bridge to his left, and the houses that seemed to tumble down the steep hill on his right, he experienced some of the primitive mistrust of ravines and chasms, a sense of being hemmed in and trapped. He thought of the seemingly bottomless al-Hota gorge, the dead who'd been thrown there, and the tales told of what lay in the depths.

The lights of the Swan Taphouse, where he and Robin had argued, twinkled cheerfully up ahead. He took the hairpin bend right into New Road, which they'd climbed on foot, passing the blue plaque commemorating Billy Wright, and a lit window in Dilys's muddy orange cottage, before parking a few doors down from Tyler Powell's old family home.

As he got out of the BMW, a tall figure emerged from the darkness.

'What's going on?' asked Strike.

'Just heard from Wardle; they're still in the pub in Horsehay,' said Barclay. 'Fifteen-minute drive from here. Unless there's someone in there

who’s happy wit’oot any lights, the house is empty.’

‘How many others did he leave with?’

‘There were two up front but probably more in the back o’ the van.’

‘Tried the doorbell?’

‘Aye. Naebody answered.’

‘Right,’ said Strike, checking his coat pockets for his skeleton keys, handcuffs and the heavy fisherman’s priest, ‘I’m going in. If you see any sign of him or the van returning, call me.’

‘An’ if Ah hear ye yellin’ “help”?’

‘Ignore me, obviously.’

Strike set off up the street. The night was crisply cold, the moon a waning crescent hanging sickle-like over the trees on the opposite bank of the Severn. No lights shone inside the Powells’ old house, though the For Sale sign had disappeared: presumably Ivor had at last received an offer that satisfied his greedy expectations.

Strike turned right, and headed down the path leading to Ian Griffiths’ back door. Pulling out his skeleton keys he set to work, hoping there wasn’t going to be a chain or bolt across the inside.

After a couple of minutes, the lock cooperated and the door opened, with a faint creak. Strike stepped over the threshold into the pitch-black hall and closed the door quietly behind him.

A musky, dirty smell that had been absent the last time he’d been here filled his nostrils, although possibly the joss sticks, of which he could still detect a faint trace, had masked it previously. Moving cautiously and quietly, he entered the sitting room and pulled the curtains across the window before switching on his phone’s torch. The beam fell almost at once on the small model of the Manneken Pis. He looked slowly around the room by torchlight. As before, tacky souvenirs were in evidence everywhere. The light’s beam illuminated the poster of Jesus smoking a joint, and caused the Thai elephant to glint before travelling to the plentiful photographs of Chloe, demonstrating what a good father Ian Griffiths was, how proud of his daughter, now travelling abroad with her handsome boyfriend. And there was the picture of the pretty woman wearing a red beaded necklace, arms around the young Chloe. Strike wondered whether she was still alive. For Griffiths, that ruby necklace seemed to be the equivalent of Daesh’s orange execution jumpsuits.

Just as Strike was about to leave the room, he heard the distant ringing of a mobile.

Instantly turning off his torch, he stood stock still, listening.

A clunk overhead that made the light fitting quiver. Someone was in the room directly above him.

He moved stealthily to flatten himself against the wall beside the door into the sitting room, as a male voice became gradually clearer.

‘’S me, Jonesy. ’Oo else would it be? You jus’ called me, you tit – you pissed?’

Someone was coming downstairs, somebody large and heavy, by the sound of them. The hall light went on. Strike slid his phone into the left pocket of his overcoat and extracted Ted’s fisherman’s priest from the other.

‘Yeah, go on… hahaha… no, I was having a kip… wha’?… shitfaced last night, ’s’why… yeah, obviously… babysitting, aren’ I? All right, yeah, I’ll get ’er ready… hahaha… cheers.’

Strike heard footsteps, a faint rustle, followed by a thump. It sounded a lot like the noise Griffiths had claimed had been made by Dilys when she’d left the room, banging into a hall table.

‘You need ta wash,’ he heard the man say. ‘Mickey wants a go, they’re coming back.’

‘I can’t reach the stuff,’ said a girl’s pitiful voice. ‘He tied me up again.’

‘I’ll wan’ something if you make me come down there,’ said the man. ‘Blow job, or you can stay mucky.’

Strike moved as quietly as possible out into the hall, the priest in his fist. Nobody was visible. He rounded a second corner.

Directly ahead, to the left of the stairs and with his back to the detective, stood a man the same size as Strike himself, with a fat neck and short dark hair. He appeared to be preparing to go down through an open trapdoor, beside which lay a bunched-up rug.

Wynn Jones either heard or sensed Strike. He turned his head, but too late: the fisherman’s priest had already begun its descent.

122

… many a man,
Seeking a prey unto his hand,
Hath snatch'd a little fair-hair'd slave…

Matthew Arnold
The Sick King in Bokhara

The blow fell upon Jones' skull with a loud crack and he fell forwards, smacking his forehead on the opposite edge of the rectangular hole in the floor and falling clumsily through it, hitting first a short ladder then, with a resounding thud, the basement floor. Strike moved forwards to see Jones' sizeable body sprawled, unmoving, on concrete. Well aware there was a strong possibility he'd just killed a man, he stepped onto the ladder and, hampered by the heaviness of his overcoat, climbed with some difficulty down into an underground space that smelled much more strongly of the musky smell he'd already detected, now with faecal and urinous overtones.

'Who are you?' said a girl's terrified voice.

She was sitting against the far wall. As Strike's eyes acclimatised to the pitch darkness, he saw a skull-like face and sunken eyes. The pallor of her skin shone, moonlike, in the darkness, and he could see on a cursory glance that she was wearing very little. He pulled off his coat and approached her, stooping so his head didn't hit the very low ceiling, then dropped the coat over her.

'I'm here to help you. Are you tied up?'

'Yeah,' she said, her voice shrill and panicky. '*Who are you?*'

'A detective.'

The basement room looked as though it had been dug out by the owner himself. The concrete floor was uneven and lumpy. There was a toilet in the

corner. A low pipe ran around the bottom of the wall. Two enormous dildos lay on a small wicker table. There was also a washing-up bowl of soapy water with a sponge floating in it.

He bent down to examine the girl's arm, which was both tied and chained to the pipe that ran around the bottom of the cavern wall; it certainly wouldn't be quick work to free her.

'You're Sapphire?' he asked.

'How did you know?'

'We've been looking for you. I'll get you free,' he promised her, 'I just need to check whether that fucker's dead.'

Still stooping, Strike returned to Jones and felt for a pulse in his neck. He found one, but wasn't prepared to bet Jones hadn't broken his neck in the fall. Notwithstanding his receding hairline, the porky Jones looked absurdly young, unconscious.

Strike was certain his phone, which was still in the pocket of the coat covering Sapphire, wouldn't have reception underground.

'I'm just going to get my mobile and go back upst—'

'No – let me go, first! Let me go!' Sapphire cried, her voice rising to a wail.

'I need to call some people who can help free you.'

'*Let me go! LET ME GO!*'

'*Shut up!*'

Strike had heard something above: the unmistakeable sound of the back door opening, followed by a rumble of men's voices.

'*Oh God, no, no, no, get out, he'll kill me—*'

Strike gestured furiously at the girl to be quiet as he crept back towards the opening in the ceiling, rapidly calculating odds. He didn't doubt Wardle or Barclay had tried to warn him that Griffiths and friends were on their way home, and it wasn't their fault he was currently in a concrete chamber underground without phone reception, but that didn't alter the undoubtedly perilous position he and the girl were now in. His glib response to Barclay's 'an' if Ah hear ye yellin' "help"?' was no longer so funny; possibly his colleagues were waiting for a sign or a shout that he required assistance, but as making any noise right now would expose his presence to what sounded like four or five men, one of whom he knew to be a serial killer, Strike chose instead to move into the shadows behind the ladder.

Loud music began to play from the sitting room: Steely Dan.

While the music played…

Any moment now, somebody – possibly the 'Mickey' mentioned by Jones, who 'wanted a go' – was going to turn the corner in the hall and see the open trapdoor and the unconscious Jones. The men's loud conversation mingled with the music.

'Get out of 'ere,' whimpered Sapphire. ''E'll think it's my fault—'

'Be quiet!'

'*'E's killed people!'* Sapphire whispered.

'I know, *be quiet*!'

He needed Wardle and Barclay; if they could at least make the men above believe they were police, he might have a chance— 'The fuck?' said a male voice, directly overhead, and a shadow appeared on Jones' motionless body. 'Jonesy?'

A small, trainered foot on the topmost rung of the ladder. Strike reached through the gap, grabbed the ankle and pulled.

Ian Griffiths fell with a yell Strike hoped would be masked by the music playing upstairs, landing on and then rolling off the unconscious Jones.

Strike barrelled into Griffiths before the latter could stand, slamming him down onto the concrete floor, large right hand over Griffiths' mouth, the other groping for Griffiths' wrist, but too late— Strike felt a burning pain as a blade slashed the side of his head; he was lucky his face hadn't been ripped, but his ear had been sliced— Blood now gushing from his head wound, Strike succeeded in grabbing the wrist of Griffiths' knife-holding hand, then slammed it down on the rough concrete floor, too, until he heard the blade fall out of Griffiths' grasp, while Griffiths tried to shout out as loud as he could with Strike's other hand clamped over his mouth. Strike banged Griffiths' head repeatedly on the floor, trying to dissuade him from struggling— The music playing from the sitting room stopped. Strike heard a pounding on the back door. Then came a shout he recognised as Wardle's.

'Open up, police!'

Strike heard running feet above; a shadow slid over Strike and Griffiths and the trapdoor closed, kicked shut by somebody who didn't seem to have looked below. The three men and the girl were now sealed up together in darkness and Strike heard the rug being slid back over the hatch to hide it.

A loud groan echoed through the cramped space: Jones was coming round. Strike, who guessed Jones was at least twenty years younger than him, didn't fancy his chances against him, given Jones' bulk, a sliced ear that was already making him feel nauseous, a second man to keep at bay, and a knife lying somewhere in the dark.

'The fuck?' came Jones' groggy voice. 'Fuck 'appened?'

Strike was still fighting to keep the struggling Griffiths pinned to the ground, hand over his mouth. He couldn't hear properly out of his left ear, because it was full of blood.

'Fuck 'appened?' repeated Jones, and Strike heard movement; far from being glad Jones hadn't broken his neck, he now wished he had. Griffiths was trying to speak through Strike's hand and producing only a strangled hum.

''Oo's there?' said Jones, sounding fearful. ''S'goin' on?'

Though deadened by the trapdoor and rug, shouting and banging now became audible above. As Barclay and Wardle were outnumbered by more than two to one, Strike doubted he could count on immediate assistance. Taking his hand off Griffiths' mouth, because it didn't much matter if the fucker yelled now, he aimed a punch at the place he knew Griffiths' face to be and heard his yelp of pain. Blood continued to rain down from the knife wound to Strike's ear.

'Wha's going on?' repeated Jones, and Strike felt a large hand grope for his shoulder, which was covered in blood. 'The fuck are you?'

'STRIKE?' came Wardle's voice.

'DOWN HERE,' bellowed Strike.

'Wha?' said the unseen Jones, and Strike heard him stagger to his feet then his cry of pain as his head smacked into the low ceiling.

The trapdoor opened and Strike saw Wardle looking down at him.

'Jesus fucking Christ,' he said in alarm, and Strike realised his left shoulder was drenched in shining scarlet.

'Need assistance,' panted Strike, still sitting on Griffiths.

'Barclay!' yelled Wardle, before dropping into the space without using the ladder.

Had Barclay not slid into the cellar then, Strike doubted things would have gone well for Wardle, because young Jones, though still groggy, appeared to have realised the strangers didn't have his good at heart. His

attempt to rush the ex-policeman was frustrated by the Scot, who, seizing the ladder off its legs, swung it round, narrowly missing Strike's head, and knocked Jones sideways, upending the table on which the dildos were sitting.

'Knife, somewhere,' panted Strike, pinning the struggling Griffiths to the floor.

'Got it,' said Wardle, snatching it up from the floor before going to assist Barclay, who was attempting to cuff Jones' hands behind his back.

'What's happening up there?' asked Strike.

'Three of 'em legged it soon as we got through the door,' panted Wardle. 'We've got the slowest two cuffed, but I don't know if any of them's—'

'This is the main man,' said Strike, still fighting to subdue Griffiths.

'Did ye know yer ear's hangin' off?' Barclay asked Strike.

'You've got a daughter, right?'

'Yeah,' said Barclay, looking understandably perplexed by the non sequitur.

Strike, who had a confused idea that the father of a daughter was the next best thing, in the absence of a woman, nodded towards Sapphire.

'She's tied to that bloody pipe. Can you get her loose?'

'Nae bother,' said Barclay, straightening up as far as was possible, Jones now safely handcuffed and lying on his front. 'Ye're all right, hen,' he told Sapphire, advancing on her. 'We'll have ye oot o' here in no time.'

'Help me get these cunts upstairs,' Strike panted to Wardle, as Griffiths continued to struggle.

123

We intuitively understand what justice is, better than we can depict it. What it is in a given case depends so much on circumstances, that definitions of it are wholly deceitful.

Albert Pike
Morals and Dogma of the
Ancient and Accepted Scottish
Rite of Freemasonry

Griffiths stopped resisting once Wardle had got the handcuffs on him. Strike was pleased to see he'd broken Griffiths' nose, which was spread across his face and bleeding profusely, although nowhere near as copiously as the wound to Strike's left ear, which was causing him excruciating pain. He could feel a weird coldness, as though flesh that had never been exposed to fresh air was meeting it for the first time, and this contrasted unpleasantly with the continuing flow of warm blood.

'You need a hospital,' Wardle told Strike, as they manoeuvred Griffiths up the ladder Barclay had replaced at the hatch. 'Fast.'

'Later,' said Strike.

He wasn't in such agony that he failed to noticed Griffiths' pigeon-toed walk as they dragged him alone, a peculiarity Strike had attributed to Griffiths' trip over his guitar the first time they'd come face to face. This small, extra confirmation of his theory was enough to make Strike determined to see the thing through himself, because he was worried that Ian Griffiths might yet get away with the murder of Tyler Powell. 'Not proven' was the verdict he feared. Even if the killings of Sofia Medina, Jim Todd and Todd's mother could be pinned on Griffiths, even if the man was rightly sentenced to multiple life sentences, that wouldn't be enough for Strike. He wanted justice, even vengeance, for Tyler Powell: a young man

who'd suffered an inordinate amount of bad luck while living, and who most certainly hadn't deserved the fate he'd met at Griffiths' hands. The ingenious, complicated and outlandish nature of his murder might yet prevent a jury believing it could have happened as Strike was certain it had, but Powell had become real to him lately: a little lost, as Robin had said, but brave, resourceful and determined, not the fool people might have thought him; a young man who, Strike believed, had been 'proper good', and whose biggest mistake had been to believe that a man who held out a helping hand was doing so out of kindness.

The sitting room was in disarray. A keyboard had been upended and the poster of the pot-smoking Jesus had been knocked askew. Strike kicked aside the Rastafarian teddy bear lying face down on the carpet. It was a room tailor-made for a man who liked drawing in teenagers and young women, a room that spoke disingenuously of an offbeat charmer who remained young at heart. Strike despised it.

Two men were sitting on the floor, cuffed back to back. One was a scrawny youth whose mouth was hanging open, revealing very bad teeth. The other was a middle-aged man with a heavy beard, who was sobbing.

'Get the other one up here,' Strike told Wardle, as he shoved Griffiths down onto the mandala-covered sofa. 'If he gives you any trouble, Barclay'll help.'

'Strike—'

'*Get fucking Jones, I want him here for the interrogation!*'

'You could fuck up the whole prosecution,' said Wardle in a low voice. 'We've got to call the police *now* so they can see what we saw, and you need a hosp—'

'He could still fucking weasel his way out of the silver vault,' said Strike. 'You said it yourself: the footprint's not enough. *Get fucking Jones!*'

With clear reluctance, Wardle left the room.

'Shut the fuck up,' Strike growled at the sobbing bearded man, who subsided into whimpers.

In addition to being angry at Wardle for having intimated Strike might be endangering their case in front of the captives, Strike was having difficulty hearing, because his left ear was full of blood; he inserted his index finger into it to clear it, which was so painful he nearly threw up. From what he'd just felt, he suspected Barclay hadn't been joking when

he’d said it was hanging off.

Griffiths was sitting silently on the sofa, his nose still swelling and breathing through his mouth. Strike didn’t doubt the man had come to believe himself untouchable, which was why he’d permitted himself so many risks, to gamble for such high stakes, to play with naked flames, and Strike suspected Griffiths hadn’t quite lost faith in his own invincibility, even now, with his nose so discoloured and swollen it was looking increasingly like a beetroot, and drenched in the blood of the man he’d just slashed.

Wardle reappeared with a truculent-looking though still faintly dazed Jones, with his huge red forehead, double chin and mismatched eyes. Wardle forced Jones down onto the floor and cuffed him to the two already sitting there. A large lump was burgeoning on Jones’ forehead, where he’d headbutted the edge of the hole in the floor before falling into the basement.

‘Pretty sure he’s still concussed,’ said Wardle.

‘Skull thick as his, he’ll be fine,’ said Strike.

‘You need—’

‘Can you get me something for this fucking ear?’ asked Strike, keen to get rid of the ex-policeman. Wardle grudgingly left the room again.

Strike dragged the chair in which Dilys had sat months previously into the middle of the room, and dropped into it, which was a relief; his head spun slightly less, sitting. Distant clanging and Barclay’s voice reached the room.

‘Right,’ Strike said to Griffiths. ‘Where’s your daughter, Chloe?’

‘You haven’t got the right to ask us questions,’ said Griffiths in a nasal voice. ‘You’ve broken the law, you broke in, you’ve assaulted us—’

‘That’s not how I remember it,’ said Strike. ‘I knocked on your door, you opened it, some of your friends scarpered, you tried to stab me in the face, which led me to suspect you had a guilty conscience, a theory confirmed when I lifted the trapdoor in your hall. That’s how my friends will remember it, too. You don’t want to take Wardle too seriously. He’s only just left the police. Still got old-fashioned ideas about procedure and not using extreme violence on suspects. *Where’s Chloe?*’

After a brief pause, Griffiths said,

‘Interrailing with her boyfriend.’

‘Is she fuck, that Instagram account of hers is as fake as your Oz one.

You've just pasted her and some random guy in front of landmarks.'

Agony though Strike was in, he took satisfaction in the whitening of Griffiths' face.

'I've done nothing. I've done nothing,' whimpered the bearded man on the floor.

'Shut up,' Strike told him. 'You—' He pointed at the youth with the bad teeth. 'What's your name?'

'Darren Pratt,' the youth whispered.

'And him?' said Strike.

'Wynn Jones.'

'And him?' he asked, pointing at the bearded man.

'Mickey Edwar—'

'Don't *tell* him!' squealed Edwards.

'If you're Mickey, you were definitely about to do something, you cunt,' said Strike, 'and I'd bet both my bollocks you've done it before.'

'Please… *please.*.. I'm married, I've got kids…'

'Then they'd probably do best to move well away from Ironbridge and change their surnames,' said Strike. 'They're not going to have a lot of fun in the playground once I'm done with you. Any of *you* know where Chloe is?' he asked the three men on the floor.

'Interrailin',' said Jones in a low voice. 'Griff just fuckin' told you.'

'You don't have to answer his fucking questions!' said Griffiths.

'They do if they want to keep their teeth,' said Strike, and addressing Pratt again, he said,

'Tyler gave Chloe a bracelet for her birthday, right?'

Pratt glanced at Griffiths and kept silent.

'Scared the shit out of you, that bracelet, didn't it?' Strike said to Griffiths. 'And we both know why Chloe went berserk in the pub when people wouldn't stop banging on about it, don't we? Purple. Violets. We'll be coming back to that.'

Wardle re-entered the room holding what looked like a clean bedsheet, which he held out to Strike. The latter took it and pressed it to the left side of his head, which was only marginally less agonising than sticking his finger in his ear had been.

'Well,' said Strike, addressing the four handcuffed men with the sheet pressed to his head wound and wishing he felt less sick, 'you're all going to

be done for the rape of the girl in the basement: that's a given. The real question is how complicit you are in the other things your friendly neighbourhood pimp has been up to. Were you aware you've been palling around with a killer, as well as a sex trafficker?'

'She ain't trafficked!' snarled Jones, peering malevolently up at Strike. 'She's up for it!'

'Is that right?'

'She's a runaway,' said Griffiths. 'I gave her a place to stay. So she likes sex, so what?'

'Why's she chained to a fucking pipe?'

'*Fifty Shades*,' said Griffiths. 'They like it that way, young girls these days. Ask her. She'll tell you.'

'I thought she was consenting!' sobbed Edwards.

'Ever stick it in Chloe, Mickey?' Strike asked. 'Before she got moved out and Sapphire was moved in?'

'Never,' squealed Edwards.

'Wardle,' said Strike, 'get Barclay to pass you up my skeleton keys out of my coat pocket and go and check the house opposite, see whether there's another girl tied up in there.'

'You need—'

'*Just go and check the bloody house.*'

Wardle left. Strike turned back to the men on the floor.

'I'm about to do you three a favour.'

He didn't believe they knew everything; on the contrary, he suspected Griffiths had told them as little as he could get away with. The one who'd known most about Griffiths had undoubtedly been Todd, which was why Todd had had to die. Nevertheless, Strike was certain Griffiths had used these men, too, drawing them carefully into his sordid, secret, hidden life. Men like Griffiths were good at spotting the willing rapist in others; they knew how to bind associates and cats paws to them, compromising them, making them complicit. That would have been how Griffiths, or his deputy Todd, had used grubby-minded, greedy Larry McGee. A big, empty crate from Gibsons, a couple of swapped labels, McGee lured by the promise, not only of money, but also of sex. Perhaps he'd even been permitted to feel Medina up around the corner, while she was distracting him from what was really going on at the rear of his delivery truck.

But Strike, too, was a good assessor of men; Strike, too, knew how to use people. He judged the sobbing Edwards to be worthless; he knew the type: *I deny everything, I'm innocent!* They'd say it even if blood was dripping from their hands, convinced they could touch hard law-enforcing hearts with carefully feigned pathos. However, the very wiliness of Jones' stare told Strike a strong self-protective instinct lay within. The skinny youth with bad teeth looked terrified, but even he might be turned to good account. Strike thought it safe to assume both gullibility and malleability in a man so inept he was wearing his hoodie inside out.

'I've done nothing,' whispered Edwards again. 'Nothing! I don't understand…'

'I'll help you fucking understand, don't worry about that,' said Strike. 'You two were mates of Tyler's, right?' he said to Pratt and Jones.

'Yeah,' said Jones aggressively. 'So?'

'Let's talk about that highly convenient car crash.'

'Lugs never done nothing to that car!' said Pratt at once.

'I know that, shit-for-brains,' said Strike. 'It was convenient for your mate Griff, not Tyler.'

'Stop answering his fucking questions!' said Griffiths, and, clearly feeling it was best to take his defence into his own hands rather than rely on the others, he said, 'How was it convenient for me? *I'm* the one who stuck up for Tyler when everyone fucking turned—'

'Don't give me that bollocks. Tyler knew you were at the bottom of those rumours. Posted about you on Abused and Accused, didn't he? "My girlfriend's father's spreading rumours about me." He was wise to your fucking Oz gambit, as well. Chloe must've told him. He tried to tell the real Osgood who you were. It's partly down to the bloke you think wouldn't've set the world alight with his brains that you're fucked.'

To Strike's great satisfaction, the remaining colour now drained out of Griffiths' face.

This next part of the interview, Strike knew, was key. What he really needed was one of the men to turn, whether deliberately or accidentally, on Griffiths, because it was here, in a tangle of mistaken loyalties and unprovable connections, that justice for Tyler Powell might yet slip beyond his grasp.

'Did you know,' said Strike, addressing Jones and Pratt while Edwards

continued to quietly sob, ‘that Tyler posted on Abused and Accused, asking for advice?’

‘He’s trying to trap you,’ said the dry-mouthed Griffiths.

‘I’m doing them a favour,’ Strike repeated. ‘I’m showing them you’ve tried to implicate them in murder.’

‘Fuckin’ murder,’ sneered Jones. ‘’Oo’s murdered?’

‘Your friend Tyler,’ said Strike.

‘’E’s workin’ in a pub!’

‘Proof?’ said Strike.

‘In touch wiv ’im, ’i’n I?’

‘Spoken to him? Not just texts?’

‘Yeah!’

‘Be very fucking careful what you claim here,’ said Strike. ‘Because if it was only texts – and all this is checkable – it’ll go better for you in court. Easy to miss an impersonation by text, not so easy when hearing a voice. Think carefully, now. You keep lying about speaking to Tyler post June last year, you’ll be wishing all they’ve got on you’s rape. You’ll be an accessory to murder, colluding with Griffiths to pretend Tyler’s still alive. Didn’t you think it was strange, Tyler asking you from his new number to call his grandmother and pose as him?’

‘That was jus’ a joke—’ began Jones.

‘SHUT THE FUCK UP!’ bellowed Griffiths. ‘He’s fucking *trapping* you, can’t—?’

‘I’m not trapping you,’ said Strike, still talking to Jones. ‘If you believed you were being asked favours by an old mate, having a bit of fun with a daft old lady, that’s a whole different ball game to covering up a killing.’

Strike thought he understood the category of youthful male friendship to which Powell, Pratt and Jones had belonged. Shared schooldays, banter, drink, but no deeper understanding whatsoever, and never any confidences. It didn’t surprise him that all had hidden gigantic secrets from each other; he’d had friendships like those himself. And in any case, Powell would have known that, had he told these two idiots the truth about Griffiths’ hidden home life, he’d risk more than his own life.

There was movement in the doorway behind Strike. He turned his head gingerly, because of the extreme pain in the ear to which he was pressing the bedsheet, and saw Barclay.

‘Only ever seen one other gadgie piss himself,’ said Barclay, surveying the men on the rug with an air of academic interest. Sure enough, whether because he’d drunk too much in the Horsehay pub, or had felt so much panic at the trend of the conversation he couldn’t help himself, Mickey Edwards had just lost control of his bladder. A large wet stain was spreading on the rug and Jones was now sitting in the man’s urine.

‘Fuck’s *sake*, Mick!’ he roared.

‘Strike,’ said Barclay, now looking at the detective’s injury, ‘your fucking ear—’

‘What’s happening with the girl?’

‘Need pliers. When’s the ambulance—?’

‘When I call it. Go see if you can find whisky or brandy – fucking anything strong. Bring the bottle.’

Barclay disappeared again.

‘You’ve been played,’ Strike told Jones, who was now sitting in a puddle of piss, ‘and what you decide to do now could make a difference of ten years to your jail sentence. Your friend Tyler’s dead and he was lured to his death through the Abused and Accused website. I think one of you two recommended that site to him, because he sure as fuck wouldn’t have taken advice from this cunt,’ he said, indicating Griffiths. ‘So, which way round did it go? Did one of you mention Abused and Accused to Tyler, and then tell Griffiths he was posting there? Or did Griffiths recommend it to you, as a place Tyler could go for adv—’

‘Yea—’ began Pratt, but Griffiths suddenly shouted,

‘*Shut it!*’

‘You was helping him,’ said Pratt, evidently in the belief he was assisting Griffiths, and Strike would have grinned but for the fact that grinning would require muscles connected to his bleeding ear.

‘Did Griffiths tell you not to tell Tyler the recommendation came from him?’

‘Y—’

‘*Shut it, for fuck’s sake!*’ howled Griffiths.

‘You’re a smart man, Darren,’ said Strike, and Pratt gaped at him, doubtless because he’d never been told he was clever in his life. ‘Keep telling the truth, and it’ll go far better for you with the police, I promise you that.

‘So,’ said Strike to Griffiths, ‘Tyler posts under the name of his favourite car, Austin “H” for Healey, and he says “my girlfriend’s father’s spreading rumours about me”, because he fucking knew you were behind it all, didn’t he? He might even have suspected you caused the crash. A midget-sized person was caught on camera skulking around the car in Birmingham. Nobody ever seems to have asked themselves whether the intended target of the crash wasn’t Tyler himself, seeing as it was his car and he was supposed to be going to the concert.’

‘You can’t—’

‘You’re right,’ said Strike, ‘I can’t prove it, but it doesn’t matter. Whether or not you tampered with the car, you turned the crash to good account afterwards, didn’t you? You wanted to drive Tyler out of Ironbridge, get him well away from Chloe, and corner him somewhere an undersized little cunt like you might have a chance of getting rid of him. Did Todd ever tell you why he used “Kojak” to draw Tyler in, by the way?’

‘I don’t know who Todd is,’ said sweaty-faced Griffiths.

‘How many short, fat sex offenders have you murdered lately? Kojak. King-Jack. Starting hand at poker. Like you calling yourself Skunk, to chat up Sofia Medina.’

Griffiths’ face was becoming increasingly grey.

‘I don’t—’

‘Skunk Baxter. Guitarist for Steely Dan.’

‘These are just fucking—’

‘Usernames, yeah,’ said Strike, ‘and I admit, on their own, they’re not much, but I’ve got a feeling your hard drive’s going to tell a different story.’

Barclay reappeared, holding pliers in one hand and a bottle of Teacher’s whisky in the other. He handed the latter to Strike.

‘How’re you getting on?’ asked Strike.

‘Nearly there,’ said Barclay.

‘Great. Do me another favour before you go,’ said Strike, letting the bloodstained sheet fall so he could unscrew the bottle of Teacher’s, ‘and search both of them for phones. Not the one who pissed himself,’ he added. ‘The other two.’

Through his undamaged ear, Strike heard the back door open and close. Shortly afterwards, Wardle reappeared in the room.

‘There are no girls tied up opposite.’

‘Didn’t think there would be,’ Strike admitted. He swigged some whisky. It didn’t noticeably ease his pain, but it helped a little, nonetheless.

‘The hell are you drinking for?’ said Wardle.

‘What are you, my fucking wife? Cheers,’ Strike added, as Barclay handed him two mobiles, then left, pliers in hand. ‘Don’t fucking loom over me,’ Strike told Wardle tetchily. ‘Take a seat, if you’re staying.’

Wardle sat down beside Griffiths on the sofa, looking thoroughly disapproving.

‘You look like you’re about to pass out,’ he told Strike.

‘I’m fine,’ said Strike, taking a second, larger swig of whisky. ‘Anyway,’ he continued to Jones and Pratt, ‘Tyler had an EpiPen, right? Because of his peanut allergy?’

‘Yeah,’ said Pratt cautiously.

‘He dropped it in front of witnesses,’ Strike told Griffiths. ‘Lied, tried to cover it up, but they’ll know exactly what it was once they see one.’

Even though he was able to hear out of only one ear, Strike distinctly detected the sound of a distant siren.

‘You called the police?’ he demanded of Wardle.

‘No,’ said Wardle, and, looking confused, he got up again and left the room.

Afraid Wardle was lying, and even more afraid that he wouldn’t be able to finish what he’d started, Strike said to Griffiths:

‘This whole plan was predicated on you being a fucking pygmy, wasn’t it?’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ said Griffiths.

‘You didn’t stand a chance in hell of taking on Powell face to face, so you and Todd cooked up a weaselly little plan, didn’t you? You and him did good business back in the nineties, right? Moving girls between brothels and private houses? Gettin’ to rape and abuse with impunity whenever you fancied it? But you managed to slither off before the ring got busted in Belgium, didn’t you?’

‘I’ve never been to Belgium,’ said Griffiths. ‘Ever.’

‘The internet,’ said Strike, ‘tells a different story.’

But when he put his hand in his trouser pocket for his phone, he remembered that it was still in the coat now covering Sapphire in the basement. He picked up one of the phones in his lap instead, which Barclay

had taken from Pratt and Jones.

‘Whose is this and what’s the code? Don’t make me fucking get up,’ Strike warned them, ‘because I won’t be sitting down again until I’ve knocked you fucking senseless. Code. Now.’

‘Sixty-nine sixty-nine,’ mumbled Wynn Jones.

‘Of course it fucking is,’ muttered Strike, opening the phone and Googling the picture he needed while his ear throbbed so badly he wondered whether he was going to puke. ‘There,’ he said at last, holding out the phone and picture to show Griffiths. ‘That’s you on stage in Belgium, playing your poxy guitar in a cellar club. My partner found this. Funnily enough, your mate Wade King – seen here playing bass – has been trying to scare off the right person all along. Robin’s the one who really broke this case.’

‘That’s not me,’ whispered Griffiths, ‘and I don’t know the man on the b __’

‘It *is* you,’ said Strike. ‘My partner’s done a bit of research, and your poxy pan-European band did a bit of travelling around on the continent in the nineties, didn’t it?’

Wardle now reappeared in the room.

‘There’s something going on, down by the bridge. Police and ambulance are there, I can see the lights from the front windows.’

‘Too busy for us, then,’ said Strike.

‘They fucking won’t be,’ said Wardle with determination. He left the room yet again, and Strike heard the back door slam.

‘He’s like a Mountie,’ he told Griffiths. ‘Always gets his man.’

While Strike was unfamiliar with fainting, he had a dim idea that this swimming sensation might be something a person felt right before they did so, so he didn’t turn his head when he heard more movement behind him.

‘Got her free,’ announced Barclay, moving into Strike’s line of vision, pliers still in hand. ‘She’s in the kitchen, eatin’. Needs it,’ he said, with a menacing look at Griffiths. ‘Any o’ these need roughin’ up? Ah’m in the mood.’

‘Possibly,’ said Strike. ‘We’re still in the information-gathering stage.’

‘Great,’ said Barclay, slapping the pliers into his palm. ‘Where’ve we got tae?’

‘To the way Tyler was lured to Ramsay Silver,’ said Strike, turning back

to Griffiths. ‘Todd advises Tyler to pick a new name and disguise himself, even pretend to be left-handed, to hide from his girlfriend’s dangerous, murdering father, and to get a job nobody would expect him to do, so he can earn enough to keep him and his girlfriend when she runs away, too – but in reality to make it as hard as possible for him to be identified after his death.’

‘I don’t know anything about *any* of this!’ whimpered the bearded man on the floor.

‘Which one’s he?’ Barclay asked Strike.

‘Mickey Edwards.’

Barclay took two strides across the room and kicked Edwards so hard in the side of the head the man was knocked over onto his side, dragging Jones and Pratt with him.

‘She’s fuckin’ told me about you,’ said Barclay, standing over the heap of gasping, spluttering men.

‘You can’t do this,’ shouted a wild-eyed Griffiths from the sofa.

‘Yeah, don’t do it,’ Strike told Barclay, taking another swig of whisky, ‘in front of Wardle.’

‘Where’s he gone?’

‘There’s something happening at the bridge, he’s gone to investigate. Anyway,’ Strike said, his head still swimming as he turned back to Griffiths, ‘you could persuade Tyler to play a part at work, but you couldn’t police him at home, could you? Where did you dump his Wolverhampton Wanderers weights? And his hands, his eyes, his dick and his ears? Petts Wood?’

Griffiths looked greyer than ever, but he said,

‘I don’t know what you’re—’

‘Petts Wood, where you and Medina drove after you’d visited Wright’s room in the early hours of the morning,’ said Strike. ‘If Powell’s ears, or his dick, or his weights, turn up there, that’ll be a sizeable bit of evidence. *That’s* more’n a footprint.’

Strike heard himself slurring, but didn’t think it could be the whisky; he hadn’t had enough. Possibly it was blood loss? His light-headedness was intensifying. He took another large swig of Teacher’s.

‘You enjoyed mutilating that body, didn’t you?’ he said. ‘Masonic misdirection, yeah, but you fucking enjoyed it. Tyler Powell saw you. He

knew what you were. He wanted to get Chloe to safety, so you carved him into pieces. But it was all too ’laborate. Yeah, Ramsays had shit security, an’ a vault with no camera… Medina upstairs, keepin’ Pamela busy… Todd lets you out and you hide – where? Bog? Cupboard? Stay hid till Todd coughs to tell you the coast’s clear. ’N then you sneak up behind Tyler, and you slam him over the back of the head with a fucking maul and keep beating it till you’ve smashed his skull in.’

Strike heard the back door open. Wardle returned to the now crowded room.

‘One of your mates has just thrown himself off the iron bridge,’ he informed the handcuffed men. ‘Didn’t want to take the rap.’

Strike tried to say ‘that’s a coincidence’, but the words wouldn’t come. In any case, nobody in the room would have understood. Edwards burst into tears again.

‘Shut the fuck up,’ snarled Barclay, ‘or Ah’ll fuckin’ make ye.’

‘Someone’s coming up here,’ said Wardle to Strike. ‘Police. I’ve told them we’ve found a kidnapped girl. They’ll be here any minute. We need to get the cuffs off this lot.’

‘Fair ’nough,’ said Strike. He tried to stand, but fell backwards into the seat.

‘Stay where ye are, fer fuck’s sake,’ said Barclay. ‘Ah’m callin’ an ambulance.’

Possibly combining heavy blood loss and neat whisky hadn’t been the very best idea, Strike was prepared to concede that now, but he had to keep talking, because he wanted the man to know *he* knew. While Wardle was busy uncuffing the men on the floor, Strike said,

‘You killed him, and stepped in the blood round his head. And you didn’t notice – too panicky. You needed to get upstairs, with your fake fucking beard, in your suit and glasses, with y’bloodstained trainers in a Ramsays bag, but wearing his shoes, to pretend to be William Wright, and fake him leaving the shop, and head into Covent Garden station.

‘An’ you tripped,’ said Strike, ‘because your tiny fuckin’ feet couldn’t fill his size nines.’

‘Strike, stop fucking talking,’ said Wardle’s impatient voice. ‘Let it go.’

‘You wen’ back t’the shop to mutilate the body. Couldn’ turn on the light… so you didn’ notice that footprint… it had dried… didn’t smudge…

proves killing happened well before the mut'lation… but Todd wouldn' help 'less it looked like the murder h'pened at night…'cause he was done for Belgium, an' you got away scot-free… an' don't you fuckin' tell me you never been to Belgium…'

Strike brandished Jones' mobile at Griffiths.

'That picture… your f'kin gig… see th'blonde in the picture? Thass Reata Lindvall, who died two months later… her daughter dis'ppeared… useful prop, little girl… f'r a man who wants to 'tract young women… an' she grew up an' she was useful, too, wasn' she? In d'ffrent way… "Jolanda" means "violet" or "purple"… Chloe told 'im her real name… when they take 'part your computer… find a Google search on name Jolanda…'

'Where is she? Wha've you done with 'er?'

'He told me she's under the concrete floor,' whispered a childish voice.

Still wearing Strike's overcoat, Sapphire stood, ghost-white, in the doorway.

Griffiths made to run for it, but he'd gone barely three paces when Barclay brought him down with a loud and satisfying bang.

'Hard evidence,' said Strike, opening the contacts on Jones' phone. 'Here we go…'

The number was stored under 'LUGS NEW'. Strike pressed it.

Somewhere in another room, they heard the ringtone: Steely Dan's 'Do It Again'.

In the mornin' you go gunnin'…

'There y'are,' Strike told Jones. 'You've been played. He murdered your mate.'

Strike foolishly assumed standing up might make him feel better. The last thing he saw before his eyes rolled backward in his head and he passed out, was Jesus, smoking a joint.

EPILOGUE

He had found what he had sought with such labours and persistency. What else mattered?

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

124

And he was happy, if to know
Causes of things, and far below
His feet to see the lurid flow
Of terror, and insane distress,
And headlong fate, be happiness.

Matthew Arnold
Memorial Verses: April, 1850

Eleven days after Ian Griffiths and friends had been taken into custody, and Strike and Sapphire Neagle had been driven by ambulance to the Princess Royal Hospital in Telford, Strike donned his only black suit in his attic flat, and drove, again, to Hereford.

He and Robin had been planning to tidy away the last fragment of the silver vault case that very day, but then Jade Semple had called the office and issued Strike with a personal invitation to her husband's funeral. Semple's decayed and waterlogged corpse had been found, as Strike had guessed, at the bottom of Regent's Canal, beneath the railway bridge, weighted to the bed by a briefcase full of bricks to which the body's wrist remained handcuffed.

'Think I should go,' he'd told Robin, though with some regret. He'd fancied another trip with her, even if he'd lost all hope of capitalising on beautiful scenery to derail her impending engagement. 'You've earned the last bit, you can do it alone.'

Strike had no worries about Robin's safety today. Even if Griffiths had trafficking associates in Italy, there'd be no point attacking Robin now that multiple computers and phones were being examined by forensic experts, and a network spanning across the continent was being slowly and

methodically revealed. The full scale of the story hadn't yet seeped into the press. No journalist knew of the connection between the murdered man at Ramsay Silver and the trafficking ring. All that had been reported was that a missing girl had been found at a house in Ironbridge and, a few days later (which had reached several newspaper front pages), that the body of a second young woman had been recovered under the lumpy concrete floor of Griffiths' homemade basement. The corpse hadn't yet been identified, although the agency's Met contact, George Layborn, had confidentially revealed to Strike that the body was that of a young, pregnant female.

The detective agency's involvement in Griffiths' arrest was, so far, unknown to the papers, which Strike imagined suited the police as well as it did him. Nobody had made much of a fuss about skeleton keys this time; nobody close to the case seemed to feel unnecessary force had been used against Griffiths and his fellow rapists. Strike's almost severed ear had helped there, of course. There also seemed tacit agreement that as long as the agency stepped quietly aside, allowing the police to talk blandly of 'sources' and 'tips', and take credit for busting the trafficking ring, any unorthodox or indeed illegal acts committed by Strike, Wardle and Barclay, up to and including several physical assaults, could be overlooked.

Meanwhile, Robertson's scoop on Lord Oliver Branfoot had been published in the *Sunday Telegraph* ('fuckin' lawyers near enough took a fuckin' stool sample off me', as the journalist had informed Strike by phone) and for the previous forty-eight hours, it had appeared there was little other news in the United Kingdom, even including the body found under Griffiths's basement floor. Danny de Leon had cut himself a lucrative tell-all deal with the *Sun*; Branfoot's wife and sons had been followed down the street by shouting reporters, until one young Branfoot took a swing at a cameraman, missed and hit a female journalist in the jaw; the regular host of the quiz show on which Branfoot had made a dozen appearances had issued a 'shocked and disgusted' statement; Branfoot himself, who was rumoured to have hired the most expensive PR agency in London, had disappeared from public view, though he'd issued a statement that neither confirmed nor denied anything, but did so in a tone of dignified injury; Craig Wheaton appeared to have vanished off the face of the earth; and several young women who'd unknowingly been caught on film in Black Prince Road had banded together to hire none other than Andrew Honbold

QC.

It was of this furore that Strike found himself thinking as he stood in the weak April sunlight, standing respectfully at the back of the crowd surrounding the grave into which Niall Scott Semple's earthly remains would be lowered. The churchyard of St Martin's already had its fair share of SAS graves, all with almost identical headstones of pale stone, engraved with the regiment's winged dagger badge.

Strike had been more affected by the discovery of Semple's body than he'd expected or admitted, even to Robin. Compared to the sensation made by Branfoot's wrongdoings, and the discovery of Jolanda's body under the concrete floor, Semple's suicide had occasioned hardly a ripple in the press. The unspoken consensus appeared to be that his death was sad, but the sort of thing you'd expect to happen to a brain-damaged soldier, and then the public moved on, preferring to gloat over Lord Branfoot's gaudy, dirty excesses. To Strike, though, there was something in this ending in murky water, the body lying there unseen and unnoticed, that tugged brutally at the gut, something beyond grief. At least part of the reason he was here, rather than travelling to Italy with Robin, was that he'd seen comments beneath the few, scattered news reports of Semple's death that had angered him: token expressions of regret followed by lengthy diatribes about Britain's foreign policy, and the role the army played in colonial and oppressive enterprises. None of them seemed to wonder whether Semple and his ilk had risked their lives so that more civilians, maybe even themselves or their families, might not be run down by a murderous extremist while crossing a bridge.

Such thoughts were distracting Strike from the vicar's words, though not the throbbing in his left ear. He'd needed microsurgery to reattach it, because it had been almost completely cut off. He had a dim memory of someone saying he might lose the whole thing, and a slightly clearer memory of laughing when a nurse suggested he could still have cosmetic surgery, if he was worried about the appearance.

This wasn't the first time Strike had turned up at a church service injured, but even so, he felt his ear bandage was unreasonably conspicuous. The bruising to his face – nobody had been swift enough to catch him when he'd fainted in Griffiths' sitting room, meaning he'd slammed face first into the floor – hadn't yet faded completely, either, which added to the

impression of a man who'd decided to participate in a cage fight before driving on to the funeral.

The vicar concluded his remarks. Strike was tall enough to see the coffin being lowered, even though three rows of people stood between him and the grave. Jade was sobbing quietly into a handkerchief, flanked by her twin and her mother.

At last, the committal was over. Strike had just set off back to his car when his phone rang. He'd hoped it would be Robin, but it was Wardle. As Strike knew Wardle to be in contact with Iverson, the redhead on the murder investigation team, he took the call.

'They've found the Wolves weights,' said Wardle without preamble. 'And a pair of human hands.'

'Petts Wood?'

'Yeah, yesterday evening. They're still searching.'

An enormous wave of relief washed over Strike at this news. Even as he'd been driving along towards Hereford this morning he'd been plagued with doubts about whether Tyler Powell would be identified, and Griffiths' hand in his death proven.

'Sapphire's talking,' said Wardle, 'a lot. Griffiths picked her up in London, kept her in a shitty room with two other underage girls, regularly visited by Wade King, Todd and assorted others, then moved her north to Ironbridge, where the shit-heels we met took turns.'

'Fuck's sake,' said Strike in disgust. 'Listen, you wouldn't happen to know whether Griffiths forced her to impersonate a couple of young women over the phone, would you?'

'He did, yeah,' said Wardle, who sounded surprised. 'How did you—?'

'Robin realised. She got calls from two girls, a supposed great-niece of Dilys Powell's, and a girl called Zeta we never traced. Both times they were feeding her misinformation about Tyler Powell and trying to find out what we knew. One of those times, the girl got local names wrong.'

'Ah,' said Wardle. 'Well, they've found about six different burner phones so far in Griffiths' house, plus a curly wig and a ruby necklace hidden in a case on top of a wardrobe.'

'Jesus, Iverson's not shy about sharing information, is she?' said Strike, surprised. 'I'd've thought she'd have kept her mouth shut after the way they went after Murphy for helping us.'

‘She, ah… we had a drink last night,’ said Wardle, with a tone of embarrassed constraint that told Strike all he needed to know. Susan Iverson, he guessed, was in the same mood he’d been when he’d accepted Bijou Watkins’ suggestion of a drink over a year previously: in search of ego-salving distraction, her hopes of Murphy irrevocably dashed. Possibly, Strike thought, with a sagging of his spirits, the rebound onto Wardle meant Robin and Murphy were now, at last, definitely engaged. Instead of saying any of this, he asked,

‘Any ID on the body under the floor yet? Anyone contacted Belgium for Jolanda’s DNA?’

‘They’re doing it today, apparently. Oh, and that real music producer bloke, Osgood? They’ve retrieved his deleted emails.’

‘And?’

‘A cousin of Sofia Medina’s contacted him from Spain. Medina had told the girl she and her music producer boyfriend were going to play a joke on someone who’d double-crossed him.’

‘Did said trick involve him hiding a load of silver and robbing a shitty flat?’

‘Apparently,’ said Wardle.

‘Fuck’s sake,’ said Strike again.

‘I hear Quincy Jones is never happier than when breaking into silver shops,’ said Wardle, and, glum though he felt, Strike laughed. It was the first time in a long time he’d heard Wardle make anything close to a joke. Sex definitely cheered a man up… perhaps Strike, like Wardle, should start cutting his losses…

Call ended, he continued towards his BMW until a loud, husky voice called him by name. Turning, he saw Jade Semple, whose hand he’d briefly pressed as he headed into the church.

‘Will you come to the reception?’ she said breathlessly.

‘Yeah, of course,’ said Strike, though he’d far rather not have done.

So he drove to the hotel and joined the mourners flocking like morose crows in a large function room decorated in blue, where there were many circular tables but nowhere near enough chairs. A buffet was laid out along the length of one wall, but nobody was yet eating. Deciding the chairs should be left for the elderly and immediate family, feeling self-conscious and conspicuous because of his bandaged ear and slightly regretting not

having brought painkillers with him, Strike bought himself a low-alcohol beer and headed towards an exterior smoking area, spotting the distinguished-looking Ralph Lawrence in the distance as he did so. The latter gave Strike a slight nod which the detective reciprocated: a gesture appropriate both for their degree of acquaintanceship, and the mixture of dislike and respect Strike suspected both felt for each other.

Once outside, having a good pretext and unable to resist the impulse, Strike called Robin.

'Hi,' he said, when she answered. 'Where are you?'

'In the back of a taxi,' said Robin. 'I should be at the hotel in ten minutes.'

She was currently travelling along a road in Sardinia fringed with palm trees, beneath a clear blue sky. As she'd flown into the capital, Cagliari, she'd felt as though she'd entered the Raoul Dufy print over her mantelpiece: glittering sea, pastel-coloured houses, hot sun on her skin. She knew her interlude on the island would be very short, which made the beauty of the place and the glorious weather bittersweet. At best, this was only a temporary reprieve from the myriad problems that remained behind her in gloomy grey London: she felt strangely as she had in the hospital, after her ectopic pregnancy; the same sense of unreality seemed to lie over everything.

'Is the funeral over?' she asked.

'Just finished,' said Strike. 'Jade wanted me to come to the wake. I'm calling because Wardle just got an update from the murder investigation team.'

'They're still talking to us?' said Robin, in surprise.

'One of them is,' said Strike, choosing not to give details. 'Anyway…'

Robin's reaction, when Strike had finished passing on Iverson's information, wasn't as celebratory as her partner had expected.

'If I'd only twigged sooner,' Robin sighed, staring out at the glittering sea to her left. 'If I'd realised the same girl was calling me…'

'Easy mistake,' said Strike.

'No, I should have known there was something up,' said Robin. 'She said the "Jockey & Horse" instead of the "Horse & Jockey," "Wellsey Road" instead of "Wesley". And I remembered something else last night: the first time she called me, I heard someone writing – it'll have been

Griffiths, telling her what to say, won't it?'

'Probably,' said Strike.

'I should have known,' repeated Robin.

'But Griffiths is completely fucked,' said Strike.

'I know, and I'm glad,' said Robin, 'but I can't stop thinking about Jolanda. What a terrible, terrible life. Abducted by your mother's killer. Forced to play a part for ever. And then, just as you think you might actually be able to break free… and there's Tyler, too… I feel as though we'd sort of got to know him, by the end, without realising it. I think he was a genuinely good person.'

'Me too,' said Strike. 'Maybe not book smart, but he was interested enough in the outside world to know Assad's called the Lion of Syria, and he was a grafter, and he was prepared to run all kinds of risks to get the girl away from Griffiths.'

'I suppose, as Jolanda got older, Griffiths couldn't keep her entirely hidden. He had to let her go to school if he wanted to live in the UK.'

'He was probably counting on the fact that she was too scared of him ever to tell anyone the truth. She'll have been bloody useful in drawing in other young women, too. It's a good pose, devoted single father, widowed young… but he got her pregnant. Hard to explain.'

'You think it was his baby? Not Tyler's?'

'I suppose we'll find out in due course, but yeah, I suspect it was his, and Tyler was prepared to help her raise it.'

Strike had asked himself whether he would have been as generous as Tyler Powell in this regard, without reaching a conclusion.

'Strike, I'm going to have to go, I think I can see the hotel,' said Robin.

'OK,' he said, 'I'll speak to you when you get back.'

He felt he ought not to remain outside, vaping, while the mourners thronged the function room, but as he turned to re-enter the hotel, he saw Ralph Lawrence exiting it. Strike suspected he'd been watching for the detective to end his call and waited, more in curiosity than concern, to hear what Lawrence wanted to say to him this time.

'How are you?' asked the man that Strike was now, reluctantly, prepared to concede was probably MI5.

'Fine,' said Strike. 'You?'

'You did a remarkable thing, finding him.'

‘Lucky guess,’ said Strike indifferently.

‘D’you know why he killed himself that way?’

‘I’ve got a suspicion,’ said Strike. When Lawrence looked quizzical, Strike said,

‘I saw a Daesh video on the dark net. Hooded guy chained to a barbell and chucked off a bridge. It occurred to me that that might have been Ben Liddell.’

Lawrence glanced over his shoulder at the function room, which was still filling with black-clad people, then said in a low voice:

‘Four men from E Squadron were smuggled into a territory British forces aren’t known to be operating in. The aim was to make contact with an anti-Islamic State group and provide them with state-of-the-art comms.

‘The mission went balls up. They were in a small plane, got hit by an anti-aircraft missile. Pilot died instantly, plane was on fire and nosediving; they had to bail at low altitude. Two Regiment guys died on impact with the ground, Semple was seriously injured and barely conscious, but was dragged to cover by Liddell.

‘They had a radio and enough ammo to hold off anyone trying to find them for a few hours, but it was touch and go whether help was going to arrive before they were captured or killed. When the rescue party arrived, they found Semple alone. Liddell had left the shelter to try and get water for Semple. He never came back.

‘MI6 passed the details to us when Semple went missing. They’d found the execution video you watched, but Islamic State don’t seem to have realised the man they caught was SAS, otherwise they’d have made a far bigger deal of it. Liddell will have known the top priority was not to admit to being Regiment. His Arabic was good. God only knows who or what he pretended to be.

‘We wiped every trace of the damn video from the surface net and, as you’ll have seen, Liddell isn’t recognisable on it. Our concern, all along, has been stopping Niall Semple broadcasting his addled version of the mission to the world. When he came out of his coma he was angry and disorientated. Pre-injury, he’d been entrusted with some very sensitive information. This is a brave new world, Mr Strike: in the old days, we were trying to stop journalists getting hold of classified information, but these days, with social media, all Semple needed was an internet connection, and

people working under deep cover would have been put at immediate risk.'

'Does Rena Liddell know how her brother died?'

'Semple might've told her, but she's still not prepared to believe her brother's dead. You were right regarding my concerns about her. I wasn't just worried that Semple might have told her a garbled version of what happened on the mission, I was afraid that he'd shared information we most certainly wouldn't want in the hands of an erratic woman with mental health problems.'

'So what are you going to do, shove her away in another mental health facility?'

'Little though you may believe me,' said Lawrence coolly, 'I do believe in civil liberties – but sometimes national security requires measures that might infringe some dreamer's ideal rule of justice.'

'How old's your grandmother?' asked Strike, and Lawrence looked startled.

'What?'

'You've just quoted Albert Pike,' said Strike. 'There's a passage in *Morals and Dogma* about the general who cuts away a bridge to save the main body of his army, even if it means he sacrifices a battalion. Such actions aren't unjust, Pike says, but "may infringe some dreamer's ideal rule of justice".'

'Ah,' said Lawrence. 'How old's *your* grandmother?'

'They're both dead,' said Strike.

Through the glass door leading back into the function he saw the stirring of the crowd that meant the family had arrived: Jade, in her black dress and coat, her twin beside her, holding her hand.

'We should—'

'Yes,' said Lawrence, and side by side, they returned inside.

Strike had just taken up a standing position on the edge of the room when he spotted Jade wending her way towards him.

'Fanks for coming back,' she said.

'I'm very sorry for your loss,' Strike told her formally.

He could tell Jade was, again, on the verge of tears, but he didn't begrudge her that today. No doubt she was feeling as he had at Ted's funeral, as though an invisible paving stone was weighing on her chest.

'You met 'er, d'in' you?'

‘Rena Liddell? Yes,’ said Strike, and he realised by her tone of voice that she still had her suspicions about her husband’s precise relationship with his late friend’s sister. ‘They weren’t… there was nothing romantic there. He just wanted to make contact with her and give her that silver necklace thing.’

‘That shoulda been *mine*, though,’ wailed Jade, bursting into tears.

Heads turned. Some of the expressions were accusatory: Strike was upsetting the widow.

‘Shall we go outside for a moment?’ said Strike, who didn’t fancy putting on a miserable floor show for the mourners, and he led Jade back into the smoking area. She collapsed into a wooden chair and he sat down beside her while she sobbed. At last, she plunged a hand into her black handbag and pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

‘Not vaping any more?’ Strike asked, watching enviously as she lit up.

‘I’ll probably go back to it,’ said Jade, taking a deep drag of her Marlboro and blowing the smoke at the sky, ‘but I’m allowed a fuckin’ cigarette today, i’n I?’

‘Definitely,’ said Strike.

‘That silver necklace was Niall’s mum’s. ’Is dad bought it years ago, in Oman. Why’d ’e give it to *Rena*, not me?’

‘I think,’ said Strike, ‘to make up for something. Guilt, that he survived when her brother didn’t? And he thought it was protective.’

‘So why’d ’e wanna protect *’er*, not me?’ insisted Jade, mascara streaking her face as she wept.

‘Because he knew she was in trouble and had no family, now that Ben was dead?’ suggested Strike.

Jade wept, her cigarette burned slowly downwards, and Strike wished he could take it from her and finish it. At last, Jade said,

‘You know that code, on the briefcase ’e filled wiv bricks? Know what it was?’

‘No,’ said Strike.

‘My due date, for the baby I lost. So… so it must’ve meant somefing to ’im, mustn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ said Strike. ‘It must… there were only bricks inside the briefcase, I heard?’

‘Bricks an’ stuff ’e’d written, all wrapped up in polyfene, but they told

me nobody could read it. Waterlogged. I dunno if that's true… maybe it was a le'er to me?'

'Maybe,' said Strike.

He personally would have bet that Semple had written what he'd believed to be the truth about his E Squadron mission, whatever that had been. He saw no other reason for him to leave hints behind him as to where he and his information could be found, or for its suppression, waterlogged or not.

'Sometimes you wan' someone so bad, even when you know it's wrong an' it's not gonna work, but you still wan' 'em, y'know?' said Jade, in a choked voice.

'Yeah,' said Strike, and Charlotte smiled sardonically in his mind's eye.

'We weren' no good for each ovver, but we still wan'ed it. Couldn' get out of it. We wasn' compa'ible, I know what ev'ryone said, an' fine, they was righ', but we did – I did love 'im,' she whispered. 'I really did. I always fel' like I couldn' *get at* 'im. Like, if I could just *get into* 'im… but I couldn'.'

Strike thought of the belief he'd long ago abandoned, that he could somehow tinker with Charlotte, and fix her, and make her whole and happy.

'You all right, babe?' said a wary voice behind them.

The man with the ginger moustache Strike had glimpsed in Crieff had come to collect Jade.

'Yeah,' she croaked, getting to her feet again. ''M fine… see ya,' she said to Strike, and Ginger Moustache led her away, with a suspicious glance back at the large man with the bandaged ear.

Strike watched as Jade was absorbed by the crowd. This time, he didn't return to the function room. Once certain that nobody was looking at him through the glass door, he returned to his car.

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When shall I be dead and rid
Of the wrong my father did?
How long, how long, till spade and hearse
Put to sleep my mother's curse?

A. E. Housman
XXVIII: The Welsh Marches, A Shropshire Lad

The Hotel Serenità was even more beautiful in reality than on Instagram: a large building of weathered yellow stone, which had once been a country estate. Having paid the driver, Robin crossed the air-conditioned lobby with an assumed air of confidence, heading straight through it to an exterior area where she could see a few people enjoying lunch. She intended to order a meal, and then start making enquiries of the staff.

But that wasn't necessary. Robin had barely been seated for two minutes when a round-faced, short-necked young man whose blond hair had been bleached nearly white in the Sardinian sun appeared, to offer her a menu written in English, and enquire whether he could get her a drink before she ordered.

'Rupert,' said Robin. Even though she'd expected him to be here, his sudden physical materialisation had come as a shock.

Fleetwood's round face became suddenly slack with what Robin guessed was the culmination of months of dread.

'My name's Robin Ellacott,' she said. 'I'm a private—'

'I know who you are,' he said, in his deep, bass voice. 'Oh Christ – she's not here, is she?'

'Decima?' said Robin. 'No, she's in the UK.'

‘Does she—?’

‘She knows you’re working for a Clairmont hotel, but she doesn’t know which one. I guessed you were here. I knew Tish Benton came here out of season, and I thought she’d probably come to visit you.’

Fleetwood stared at her, frozen to the spot.

‘I’m not here to cause you trouble, Rupert,’ said Robin quietly, because a family at a nearby table were watching the waiter, intrigued by his strange, slack-jawed behaviour. ‘I just want to talk to you. When d’you get a break?’

She thought he wasn’t going to answer, but then, with an air of hopelessness, he muttered, ‘Three.’

‘Could we talk then, please? I promise I won’t contact anyone before then.’

He assented with a miserable nod.

So, at three o’clock, Robin and Rupert Fleetwood met on a shady terrace with a canopy of bright pink bougainvillea that was just coming into flower. Fleetwood brought coffees for both of them with him, but seemed unable to meet Robin’s eye. When she’d thanked him he nodded, then added sugar to his own without looking at her.

‘How is she?’ he said, staring at the surface of the coffee he was stirring.

‘Not great,’ said Robin.

‘I tried to… I called your partner.’

‘I know,’ said Robin.

‘So she’d know I was alive.’

‘Yes,’ said Robin, ‘but that was even more painful to her than the idea you were dead. She couldn’t understand why you’d just have left her like that, especially when she was pregnant.’

Rupert dropped his spoon with a tiny clang that reminded Robin of the brick hitting the Murdoch silver.

‘Did she have an abortion?’ he whispered.

‘No,’ said Robin. ‘You’ve got a son.’

‘Oh God,’ he said, putting his face in his hands.

‘He’s fine,’ said Robin. ‘He was born without problems.’

After a while it became clear that Rupert was crying, not loudly, like Danny de Leon or Murphy, but soundlessly, his shoulders quaking.

‘Rupert,’ said Robin, ‘I think I know why you left.’

‘You can’t,’ came his muffled voice.

‘I think I can,’ said Robin. *The pair of ’em looked like Tweedledum and Tweedledee together – just imagine the moon-faced children.* ‘You found out Decima’s your half-sister.’

He looked up, his tear-stained face aghast.

‘How—?’

‘I read a magazine interview with Cosima and saw she’d taken a DNA test. Then I realised you all look a bit alike,’ said Robin. ‘Dino, Decima and you.’

Rupert wiped his face roughly on his white waiter’s sleeve, but tears were still leaking out of his eyes. He had, Robin thought, a very likeable face; not precisely handsome, but better-looking in person than he’d been in the photo she and Strike had been showing people connected to William Wright.

‘How did you find out?’ she asked.

After wiping his face a second time on his sleeve, Fleetwood reached into the breast pocket of his waistcoat, took out a packet of Marlboro Lights, lit one, and said croakily, ‘Valentine.’

‘He told you?’

‘Not… definitely,’ said Fleetwood.

Robin waited. Fleetwood smoked for a full minute without speaking, then said, ‘He was really fucking down on me and Decima from the start… one night, he got really pissed at Dino’s and told me Dino had slept with my mother, that they’d had an affair… said he caught them together on a sofa when he was a kid… then… I dunno, he probably panicked that he’d said too much… tried to backtrack, said he was joking, and staggered out of the club…

‘Next day, I rang him up and he told me he just wanted me to stay away from Dessie and he’d only said it to try and scare me off… but…’

Fleetwood took a deep drag on his cigarette, then said, ‘I looked at Dino that afternoon and I could… see it. Him and Dessie and me, all three of us have got round faces and kind of… shortish necks. I always knew I never looked like Peter Fleetwood… I don’t even look like my mum, except she was fair… so… the more I looked at myself in the mirror, the more I knew I looked far more like a Longcaster than a Fleetwood…’

‘Did you tell Decima?’

‘Shit, no,’ said Fleetwood, closing his eyes momentarily. ‘I just… I took one of those DNA tests… and yeah. It linked to the test Cosima took, online… it showed we were half-siblings… which made sense of *so fucking much*. My aunt always hated me… she probably knew I wasn’t related to her at all, but she got lumbered with raising me. And she always fucking *hated* Dino Longcaster… it must’ve been *disgusting* for her, watching me growing up and looking more and more like him.’

‘So you went to Sacha’s party because—?’

‘I wanted to have it out with fucking Valentine,’ said Rupert. He took another lengthy drag on his cigarette, exhaled, then said, ‘I was *so fucking angry*. If he’d warned me and Dessie at the start, it wouldn’t have happened. Or even if he’d said it before she got pregnant… cowardly fucking prick. He didn’t want to upset Dino, that’s what it was. Let sleeping dogs fucking lie… I don’t know why the fuck Cosima was crying. Maybe she thought I was going to make a scandal in the papers or something. Dino fucking hates the press. Or she might’ve thought I’d have some claim on Dino’s estate, knowing her… worried she’d have to take a quarter, not a third…’

‘Who knows the truth?’ asked Robin. ‘Albie? Tish?’

‘Yeah, them,’ said Fleetwood, tears still leaking from the corners of his eyes. ‘Just them. I had to tell someone. I was going nuts… *incest,*’ he said, staring down at the table, and Robin heard the horror and shame she guessed had been eating at him for almost a year.

‘I’ve read that people who’re related but separated can be drawn to each other, when they meet,’ said Robin. ‘They can sense a connection, they can feel it. It isn’t either of your fault.’

‘That’s what Tish and Albie said, but that’s easy to say, when it’s not you… I slept with my *sister*, for fuck’s sake…’

Robin couldn’t think of anything to say to that. It felt strange and incongruous to be sitting amid so much beauty, with the teal sea sparkling in the distance and the bougainvillea all around them, and to discuss an ancient taboo, broken by two people who’d had no idea they were doing so.

‘S’pose you know about the nef, do you?’ muttered Fleetwood.

‘That you stole it and sold it to Lady Jenson? Yes,’ said Robin.

‘It was my mother’s,’ said Fleetwood in a low voice. ‘It belonged to the Legards. I’m still a Legard, nobody can take that away from me. Dino had

no right to it. That's all I'll ever take from him, ever, but he owed me something. He *fucking owed me.*'

'Rupert, Decima's been torturing herself. She thinks you're dead. She thinks it's her fault—'

'I died in the vault of a silver shop,' said Fleetwood, closing his eyes briefly again. 'I know, Albie told me. But I called your partner—'

'She didn't believe it was you. Rupert, it'd be far better – kinder – if you called Decima and explained everything yourself.'

He seemed to be thinking. Robin sipped her coffee considering the fact that, having found him so easily and quickly, she had no reason to postpone her return to London. With the Sardinian sun on her back and the bougainvillea fluttering overhead, she remembered Murphy asking why they'd never taken a foreign trip together and then, inevitably, the platinum and diamond ring he'd hidden in his briefcase. She was certain she had four days left before he offered it to her at the Ritz. Robin had done nothing to prevent the proposal, because she couldn't see how to do so without revealing she'd searched his personal possessions.

'See,' said Fleetwood weakly, from across the table, 'I still love her. I've been really trying not to… but I do.'

'And she still loves you,' said Robin, 'but there's a baby involved now, Rupert. The two of you have got to work something out. You can't hide for ever.'

Rupert ground out his cigarette in the ashtray.

'What's she called him?'

'Lion,' said Robin.

'Oh, Christ,' said Rupert, putting his face in his hands again. 'After bloody White Lion? It meant nothing, he was never my dad…'

'Rupert,' said Robin, 'she went through the birth alone. She's been in hell for months, blaming herself for your death. Please, call her and tell her the truth.'

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My own hope is, a sun will pierce
The thickest cloud earth ever stretched;
That, after Last, returns the First,
Though a wide compass round be fetched;
That what began best, can't end worst,
Nor what God blessed once, prove accurst.

Robert Browning
Apparent Failure

'In a way,' said Decima Mullins, 'I feel as though he *did* die.'

It was late on Friday afternoon and their erstwhile client had requested a final meeting with Strike and Robin, at the office. Decima was better groomed today than either detective had ever seen her; still too thin, but quietly attractive, though with haunted eyes. As she'd already explained, she'd moved back to London with her son and intended to resume work at her restaurant shortly, though part time.

Robin, who theoretically had the day off, had wanted to be present for the meeting and had arrived wearing the dusky pink dress and high heels she'd worn to the Goring. Strike had already glanced at her left hand. It remained ringless.

'If he'd just told me…' Decima said.

'I think,' said Robin, 'he was so horrified by the discovery—'

'But to just run out on me like that… he *knew* I was looking for him, Albie and Tish told him so…'

'I'm not defending him taking off,' said Robin. 'I know he ought to have stayed and been honest.'

'There are times I wish we'd never known,' said Decima miserably. 'It

could've been fine if we'd never found out. What's the use in knowing? He called me again last night, you know. We were on the phone for six hours.'

'*Six?*' said Robin.

'Yes. It's always like that, when we talk; we can't stop talking,' said Decima. 'I was so angry… and then we both cried, and then… after a while, it was almost like it used to be, but I felt as if I was talking to his ghost. But it's over, obviously. I've got to think about him completely differently… we'll never… we can't go back. It's a filthy mess, all of it… he says he wants to come back to London, get a job here and help me with Lion. He wants a proper relationship with him…'

She took a deep breath, and arrived at what Strike had guessed was the point of the meeting.

'Val and Cosima won't tell anyone, they're too ashamed. So—'

'None of our subcontractors know anything about it, and Cormoran and I will never breathe a word,' said Robin. Strike nodded agreement.

'Thank you,' said Decima. 'I don't want Lion to hear any rumours, or find out before we've worked out how to… how to tell him.'

'Do you need to?' asked Strike, and Robin looked at him in surprise; she'd have assumed Strike would think the truth, however unpalatable, was always preferable to a lie, and she couldn't help remembering his angry advice to her: *we aren't fucking social workers*.

'Why does he have to know anything except that his parents wanted him, but the relationship didn't work out?' said Strike. 'He's all right physically, isn't he?'

'Yes,' said Decima, 'he's fine. I suppose we're lucky nobody in the family's got any serious genetic conditions. We're all healthy.'

'This kind of thing probably happened a lot more often than people realised, in the days before everyone could get a DNA test,' said Strike. 'I'd say your son's a damn sight luckier than a lot of children. Parents who love him and are on good terms with each other. Father who wants to be involved in his upbringing. Yeah, I'd say he's an extremely fortunate kid, compared to some.'

Robin noticed a kind of wonder in the look Decima now gave Strike. She appeared deeply struck by this practical view of the situation and Robin felt a wave of fondness for her partner, which immediately occasioned an inner spasm of guilt, because it was Murphy's birthday, and she was due at

dinner in an hour and a half, and she wasn't supposed to melt inwardly at Strike showing unexpected sensitivity and compassion when the man she claimed to love was probably debating right now when exactly he should produce that diamond ring… she realised Decima was talking again and dragged her thoughts back to the present.

'… found out who the dead man in the vault was. And that poor girl's safe.'

'And that's down to you,' said Strike. 'Without you, there'd have been no justice for Tyler Powell, no end of the trafficking ring and Niall Semple's wife still wouldn't know where he was. Bottom line: you were right. William Wright wasn't Jason Knowles.'

Decima smiled. She looked better than she had when she'd entered the office; less drawn and anxious.

'I'd better go,' she said, 'the childminder clocks off at six. Thank you both.'

She shook both their hands and departed. When they'd heard the glass door close in the outer office, Robin said quietly,

'It's awful, isn't it?'

'Could be better,' admitted Strike.

'I think they're going to love each other for ever and never be able to do anything about it.'

Trying to dissemble the feeling of depression Robin's words had just given him, Strike said, 'Want a coffee?'

Robin checked the time on her phone. She still had well over an hour before she was due at the Ritz. Every time she thought about it, she experienced a ripple of panic in her stomach.

'Yes, great,' she said, glad to have a little longer where she could think only about work or, at least, try to.

Pat was still at her computer in the outer office. She always remained to make tea or coffee if a client was present, even if, as today, that meant staying past five o'clock.

'You're off duty,' Strike reminded Pat, as he put on the kettle.

'Gonna finish these accounts now I'm started,' growled the office manager, her e-cigarette waggling in her mouth as she continued to type. 'Won't have to do it Monday.'

'You got a replacement for Travolta,' said Robin, realising the fish tank

had a new occupant, this one speckled in white, black and orange.

‘Yeah,’ said Pat gruffly. ‘It looks too empty with just two.’

‘What’s this one called?’

‘Elton,’ said Pat, and Robin laughed.

When the two detectives had returned to the inner office with coffee, Robin said,

‘I haven’t asked how your ear is.’

‘Seems to be attaching itself back to my head,’ said Strike, ‘which is good, because I’d look a right prick trying to wear sunglasses without it.’

‘Is it still painful?’

‘No,’ said Strike, unsure exactly why he was lying, though he suspected he hadn’t yet lost the habit of trying to appear as fit and physically un-fucked as Murphy. ‘Been wall-to-wall star-crossed lovers, this case, hasn’t it?’ he said, preferring to get off the subject of his own physical decrepitude.

‘It has,’ Robin agreed. ‘Rupert and Decima. The Semples. Pamela Bullen-Driscoll and her husband…’

Strike grinned, but said more seriously,

‘And Tyler and Jolanda… it was that fucking bracelet that screwed them. Griffiths might’ve had his suspicions she was getting too close to Tyler, but the bracelet was the big mistake.’

Robin thought, yet again, of the silver charm bracelet hidden at home in her evening bag.

‘I can’t bear the thought of Tyler going down to London, falling in with all the disguise stuff,’ she said, ‘passing his interview at Ramsay Silver, thinking he’s getting a home ready for Jolanda… trying to find out if it was worth joining the Freemasons, for protection…’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike, ‘I know.’

Like Robin, the silver vault investigation was one of Strike’s least enjoyable ever. There was, of course, satisfaction in knowing that Griffiths and his fellow rapists and traffickers were in custody; he took theoretical pride in having found out where each of their five possible William Wrights had gone, or met their ends, but what he’d primarily feel when looking back over the past few months was bitter regret and endless self-recriminations that had nothing whatsoever to do with the silver vault, and everything to do with Robin.

‘I’d better get going,’ she said reluctantly when she’d finished her

coffee.

Strike accompanied her to the outer office, where Pat was pulling on her coat, receipts evidently dealt with.

‘Have a good weekend,’ she said gruffly.

‘You too, Pat,’ said Robin. ‘Thanks for staying.’

As the door closed behind the office manager, Strike gestured at Robin’s dress.

‘Going somewhere nice?’

‘Yes,’ she said, without looking at him. ‘It’s Ryan’s birthday. We’re going to the Ritz – the restaurant,’ she added quickly, in an attempt to turn both their thoughts away from the bar. ‘Well, I’ll see you Monday.’

The glass door opened and closed again, and Robin had gone.

Strike was suddenly flooded with adrenaline. He might have been back on that yellow dirt track, knowing what was about to happen, because he’d spotted the youth who’d planted the IED running away from the road, dragging a small boy he was determined to pull clear of the imminent explosion. He’d yelled ‘brake’, but too late to avoid calamity.

He was almost certainly too late now. Nevertheless, he wrenched open the glass door.

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No signal crackings, no thin jets or streams from the green immensity beyond.
Just one universal collapse, one chaotic climacteric, begun and ended in the same instant, as the crust of the chamber, no longer supported by the in-pent air, dissolved under the irresistible pressure of the sea.

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

Robin's heels were making so much noise on the metal stairs she didn't realise her partner had followed her until she heard him call her name. Turning, she saw him standing above her on the dingy landing. To her surprise, he said nothing, but just looked at her.

'What?' she said.

Strike descended a couple of steps.

'Don't make the same mistake twice.'

'What?' said Robin, confused.

'Just because Murphy's been decent over – you know – you don't owe him.'

Robin, who felt nothing but astonishment, stared up at him. Then, suddenly, realisation hit her.

'You *know*?'

'Know what?' said Strike.

'That Ryan's going to propose.'

'So *you* know?' he said, descending another step, trying to read her expression.

'How—?'

'He told Iverson. She told Wardle.'

Robin suddenly felt a powerful, inexplicable urge to cry. She hated the idea that people, especially Strike, knew the proposal was about to happen; it added almost unbearable pressure, when she had less than an hour in which to decide what on earth she was going to say when Murphy reached for the ring box in his pocket.

'I've got to go,' she said, and turned to leave.

'Robin.'

'What?' she said, yet again.

'You need to – I want to say something.'

Strike descended one more step, so that they stood only two apart, and the blood was pounding in his ears, exactly as it had the morning he'd found out Charlotte was dead. The seconds ticked past, until, almost aggressively, he said,

'I'm in love with you.'

Robin neither moved nor spoke, but somewhere inside she felt a cold eruption, and couldn't have told whether it was shock, pleasure or pain, and nothing occurred to her except to say for the fourth time, 'What?'

'I'm in love with you,' Strike repeated.

Robin's expression was entirely blank, her face a little paler than usual, but unreadable. The silence stretched on, and Robin simply stared. She couldn't believe what she'd just heard, but the conclusion she'd reached over the last few, excruciatingly painful months finally decided her to say in a clipped voice,

'I know exactly what you're doing.' It was taking every ounce of her self-possession not to break down. 'You're scared I'll leave the agency if I marry—'

'Bullshit, that's not—'

'Then why say this tonight? Because you think you're about to lose me,' she said, before he could answer. 'Well, you needn't worry, I'm not going any—'

'This isn't about the agency. It isn't,' he insisted, before she could contradict him. '*I'll* leave this fucking agency before you do. I've been trying to find the right time to say it for months. This wasn't the plan,' he said, gesturing at the dingy stairwell. 'I was going to say it in the Lake District, and then on Sark—'

'I don't believe you,' said Robin, with difficulty, because her throat

seemed to have swollen. She didn't know whether this was out of anger – at Strike, at herself, at Murphy – or because of the terrible twisting pain in her heart. 'If you genuinely – if this was real – I've got to go,' she repeated, and she began to hurry down the stairs, leaving Strike where he stood.

He listened to her footsteps and debated following her, and was still standing there, undecided, when he heard her coming back up the stairs, and when she rounded the corner of the stairs she looked flushed and angry, but Strike, who believed a woman who had no feelings for him deeper than friendship would have been slamming the street door at this moment, suddenly knew hope.

'You've had ages,' said Robin, who was now shivering with anger. '*Years.* I was single. I was free. Every single time we got – even slightly close to – you pushed me away and went off screwing other women.'

'Not lately,' said Strike.

'No, because it was safe to push the boundaries, now I'm with Ryan!'

'You think I've been pissing around for my own amusement, do you?'

'Maybe,' said Robin, tears of fury now brightening her eyes. 'Telling me *Charlotte* thought you were in love with me – what was I supposed to say to that? You've just been trying to make up your mind what you want – you've had *years*,' she said, her voice rising, 'and you said *nothing*!'

'I was scared of fucking it up, fucking everything up—'

'The agency, it's always—'

'It wasn't just the agency, it was this, *us*, the friendship—'

'Well, I'm still your friend, so you needn't—'

'I don't want to be your fucking friend,' said Strike, his own voice rising now, 'that's what I'm fucking telling you. I'm in love with you. Everyone else can see it, why can't you?'

'And you expect me to just throw away a two-year relationship, so I can be the latest woman you get bored with after a couple of months, do you?' said Robin, her voice echoing around the stairwell.

'It's been seven years and I've never been bored. You think I'd be saying this if I just wanted a fuck? I'm not asking you to cheat, I don't want an affair. I want to be with you. Permanently. Marry me.'

Strike hadn't expected to hear himself say that. Robin let out something between a laugh and a gasp.

'You're – you're insane,' she said, numb with shock. 'You're literally –

you've lost your mind. We've never so much as—'

'Easily remedied.'

Strike descended the stairs, and had placed his hands on her upper arms and pulled her towards him when she placed a fist on his chest and pushed him away.

'No!' she said, trembling at the contact, and angry at herself for doing so. 'I'm not that person – I won't do to Ryan what Matthew did to me!'

'I had to tell you,' said Strike. 'You had to know.'

Robin struggled to find something to say and failed. At last, she turned and hurried downstairs, her heels clattering on the metal, and this time Strike heard her reach the hall, the sound of the street door opening, then slamming behind her.

He stood for a full minute, hoping to hear it open again, but it didn't.

Fuck.

He turned and, heaving himself along with the aid of the banister, climbed the stairs back towards the second floor, then came to a sudden halt. Pat was standing on the landing.

'I needed the loo,' she said defensively.

If Strike had wondered whether his and Robin's voices had carried through the bathroom door, he didn't have to wait long for the answer.

'Don't worry,' she growled. 'I won't gossip.'

Unable to think of anything to say, Strike walked past Pat into the office and dropped down into her chair. It was a few seconds before he sensed he wasn't alone and looked up. Pat had followed him.

''Course, he's very good-looking, Murphy,' she said, in her gravelly baritone.

'There's the shot in the arm I needed,' said Strike bitterly.

'But she hasn't seemed happy lately. Not happy at home.'

Strike didn't say anything.

'You don't propose like that, shouting at a woman on the stairs, because her boyfriend's about to ask,' said Pat.

'I didn't mean – it just came out.'

'Well, don't go telling *her* that,' said Pat sharply. 'Bad enough, without backtracking.'

Strike emitted a low groan and put his head in his hands. If he'd been looking at her, Strike might have seen a slight softening of Pat's simian

face.

‘You can’t expect her to say it back tonight, can you?’

‘Why not?’

‘For a clever man, you can’t half be thick,’ said Pat, exasperated. ‘What’s she supposed to do, when her boyfriend’s waiting for her round the corner with a ring in his pocket? Anyway, you’ve messed her around, haven’t you?’

‘How’ve I—?’

‘You waited till another man wants to marry her before saying anything. ’Course she thinks you’re saying it to stop her going off.’

‘I didn’t plan it this way.’

‘Need a new plan, then, don’t you?’ said Pat bracingly. ‘I’ve got to go. I’ve got people coming over for bridge.’

She turned and departed, closing the door behind her. Strike was left looking at the glass panel, on which was etched *Strike and Ellacott Detective Agency.*

This wasn’t like waking up in hospital minus half his leg, nor was it like finding out that Charlotte had killed herself. This time, he was no mere victim of fate: he himself had voluntarily brought about the seismic and possibly catastrophic change. Staring at the door, it occurred to him that while he’d always considered himself master of his own destiny, he’d really been good at rolling with punches he’d been forced to take. Three times, in his entire life, he’d made a conscious, unforced, life-changing decision he could blame on nobody and nothing else.

The first time, he’d crossed a crowded room as a student at Oxford, drunk and expecting a rebuff, to talk to the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. The second, he’d started this detective agency, braving humiliation and financial ruin to do it. Tonight was the third. He’d finally, and perhaps too late, found something he wanted more than solitude and safety, and he supposed all he could do now was wait to find out whether Robin Ellacott decided whether she wanted it, too.

The phone on the desk in front of him began to ring. Strike let the answering service get it. As he dragged his vape pen from his pocket, he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. The black fish called Cormoran was again flailing helplessly at the top of the tank.

‘Stupid arsehole,’ he snarled. ‘You’ve done it to your fucking self.’

The phone stopped ringing. Strike sat in the silence for another minute, vaping, then pushed himself into a standing position, ear and knee both throbbing. In the absence of anything else he could do to improve his present situation, he set off for the attic to fetch the empty margarine tub, and some peas.

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RAISING READERS

Books Build Bright Futures

Thank you for reading this book and for being a reader of books in general. As an author, I am so grateful to share being part of a community of readers with you, and I hope you will join me in passing our love of books on to the next generation of readers.

Did you know that reading for enjoyment is the single biggest predictor of a child's future happiness and success?

More than family circumstances, parents' educational background, or income, reading impacts a child's future academic performance, emotional well-being, communication skills, economic security, ambition, and happiness.

Studies show that kids reading for enjoyment in the US is in rapid decline:

- In 2012, 53% of 9-year-olds read almost every day. Just 10 years later, in 2022, the number had fallen to 39%.
- In 2012, 27% of 13-year-olds read for fun daily. By 2023, that number was just 14%.

Together, we can commit to **Raising Readers** and change this trend. How?

- Read to children in your life daily.
- Model reading as a fun activity.
- Reduce screen time.
- Start a family, school, or community book club.
- Visit bookstores and libraries regularly.
- Listen to audiobooks.
- Read the book before you see the movie.
- Encourage your child to read aloud to a pet or stuffed animal.
- Give books as gifts.
- Donate books to families and communities in need.

BOB1217

Books build bright futures, and **Raising Readers** is our shared responsibility.

For more information, visit **JoinRaisingReaders.com**

Sources: National Endowment for the Arts, National Assessment of Educational Progress, WorldBookDay.org, Nielsen BookData's 2023 "Understanding the Children's Book Consumer"

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