



london rain

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“In this short span between my fingertips and the smooth edge
and these tense feet cramped to a crystal ledge,
I hold the life of a man.”

Geoffrey Winthrop Young

Pirro

'Hey.'

He looked up from his coffee as a chair scraped and a man sat down beside him, a smile on his handsome face. 'I'm Pirro...'

'Julien,' he replied, taking the outstretched hand.

'Julien? Ah, the apostate,' Pirro said with a wrinkle of his eyes that softened into a welcoming smile. 'This is my place. You like it?'

Julien nodded, lifting his cup. 'Good coffee.'

'That's your bike outside.'

It wasn't a question.

'Yes.'

"79 R65,' Pirro said. 'How does it handle?'

'Like a tractor on steroids, but she'll go all day.'

Pirro grinned mischievously, 'Are we talking about your bike, or a girl you are dreaming about?'

Ten minutes earlier he'd bumped the bike over the curb and rolled it up a ramp outside the cafe. He blipped the throttle, then let the engine die, kicked out the side stand and rested it on a flat stone that, he guessed, was there for that very purpose. He took out the key, took off his helmet and gloves, rolled off his scarf and pushed scarf and gloves into the bowl of the helmet and got off the bike, shrugged his backpack 'til it hung more comfortable and went inside. He found a table by the back wall, dumped his gear, went back to the counter and ordered an americano with cream, double shot. Once settled in, he took out his laptop, an old-school dell with a heavily scuffed keyboard and trackpad, lesions on the screen, and worn patches on specific, well-used keys, and booted it up. Using the wifi password on the wall he went online and opened his mail and then, having checked to see there were no messages for him, he went to Google earth and opened a map of the Yansoon sector of Dubai, stared at it for some time.

The coffee arrived, and it was good.

He used the trackpad to widen out the map, seeing the coast, the Palm Jumeirah, the unfinished 'world' islands, opening the map wider still, getting some perspective, until he could see the entire Persian Gulf, and he marvelled that such opulence and luxury could exist in the middle of a permanent warzone. Around this island of luxury in a sea of sand, a half-dozen countries were engaged in wars of annihilation. He wondered what degree of arrogance it took to believe that none of it would ever encroach on their borders. Then he pondered what level of crises would allow him to enter, do what he had to do, and leave without anyone noticing. Then Pirro sat down at his table and introduced himself.

After a brief, friendly chat, Pirro said, 'Make yourself at home,' his grin wider now, positivity and friendly mischief seemingly an intrinsic part of him, and he turned and shouted something in a foreign tongue to a girl behind the counter. She replied in equally voluble terms, and he shouted something else back at her before turning back to Julien. 'The service here is good,' pointing at Julien's empty mug, 'but not perfect.'

A couple of moments later the waitress appeared with a fresh coffee for Pirro and a top-up for Julien. Pirro snarled something and the girl apologised, that much was clear in any language, picked up Julien's cup and returned with a fresh filled cup. As she walked away Pirro grinned again, his smile seemed to be part of his face. 'I don't speak to all my staff like that, but she's my sister. She's studying at university and works here to earn her keep.'

'What's she studying?' Julien asked.

'Pharmacy.' Pirro leaned a millimetre closer, 'Why you so interested, you want to marry her?' Julien grinned, 'Too young for me. And too beautiful,' he added, because on closer scrutiny she was. Both Pirro and his sister had reddish-brown hair and pale blue eyes, she was as quietly beautiful as he was loud and handsome.

'And too intelligent for any man,' Pirro added, 'The catastrophe of a beautiful woman. Intelligence.'

'This is your place?' Julien said.

'Yes. Cafe here. Custom shop at the back.'

'Can I look at the bikes?'

Pirro finished his coffee with one long slurp, stood, slapped his shoulder again, 'Enjoy your coffee, then go enjoy the beauty of the bikes we build.'

'I will.'

Pirro glanced at the screen of Julien's computer, and without looking back he shouted something at his sister, who shouted something back. He glanced at Julien and raised both palms upwards as though to say See? and then grinned again, 'Got to go, my friend,' he said, rising and leaving Julien to his coffee. Pirro walked towards an open staircase at the rear of the cafe area. Julien glanced up and smiled toward the girl behind the counter, and she threw him a filthy look in return. But ten minutes later she brought him a fresh coffee in another clean cup.

*

It was supposed to be a brief storm.

He said goodnight to his pals and left the pub, the doors of the Artful slamming shut behind him, closing off the light and the warmth and the noise as he stepped into the street, the hard rain muting the sounds and smells so quickly that suddenly all he could see and hear was rain. He turned up his collar. It was only fifty yards from the pub to the derelict he called home but the rain was sheeting so bad he couldn't see his front door. Two minutes maximum, he thought. He didn't feel like running, he was still fatigued, and anyway, he didn't want to revisit the three pints of ale he'd drunk; better to get wet. He stepped from the doorway and into the rain and began walking. As he approached his front door a lightning flash illuminated a figure standing beneath an umbrella. Female. Tall. Slender. He knew who it was.

'Hello Julien,' she said, as he stopped and fished in a pocket for his keys.

He nodded, found the right key, unlocked the postern door, stepped through and shut it behind him, leaving her standing outside. She waited silently for a few moments and when a nearby car flashed its headlamps, once, she glanced across and gave a brief shake of her head. After another minute, the larger door slid open with a dry squeak. He stood there for a moment, then turned away, leaving the door open.

She followed him inside.

'You've lost weight,' she said, holding her umbrella out through the door and giving it a shake before furling it and standing it against the wall. He watched her as she pulled the heavy door shut. He'd forgotten that she was stronger than she looked. She turned and walked past him, towards the single sofa placed in the middle of the large empty warehouse space, with a low table between it and the only chair. She sat down, displaying the perfect posture that was both a display of elegant competence, and a challenge. He shrugged, went to make them both a cup of tea. When the tea was done, he took two cups over and set them on the table.

He sat down on the chair opposite her. 'I'm retired,' he said.

'How long have you been back?' she asked him, ignoring his statement.

He suspected she already knew but he told her anyway, 'Three weeks.'

'You've been decorating,' she said, glancing around at the whitewash that covered half a brick wall.

'There's a lot needs doing,' he said.

When he returned, he'd thrown out all the clothes that had been mouldering in the wardrobe, thrown out all the bedding too, bought new clothes, bought a new mattress, emptied the fridge, then thrown it out and bought a new one. He'd gone into town and bought four gallons of whitewash and a broom with an extendable shank; begun painting the walls, gave up, exhausted, before the first wall was half done. The building had long walls and a high ceiling. He'd bought gloss paint for the remaining woodwork and the unopened tins stood in a corner. He had managed to replace fusebox and the rotting cable that connected the lights and sockets to the grid; it had taken him a week and it had exhausted him.

She gave him a brief, sad smile, as she looked around, as though all this was apparent to her.

'How are you feeling?'

'I'm good. Improving. How are you?'

'Busy.' She paused for a moment, then opened a battered leather satchel that was at her feet, and took out a file, set it on the table between them. 'New government, new opportunities,' she said, as though this was explanation enough.

'What do you want?' he asked.

In response she picked up her cup and sipped her tea, gave a small almost-smile that appeared at the corner of her mouth but faded quickly as it approached her eyes. 'You always did make a good cup of tea,' she said.

He picked up his tea, mirroring her.

'Do you want to look at the file?' she asked, setting down her cup.

He shook his head, keeping his cup in his hand, breaking the pattern. 'No.'

'Why not?'

'We're disbanded.'

She shook her head. 'And now we're reforming. New Home Secretary. Thinks our little mob is a peach: Asymmetric Investigation. He said it sounded like a Netflix series. You can imagine he got very excited when he found out some of the things we've done.'

'I'm retired.'

'No,' she said. 'You're *tired*.' She looked to be about to say something else, but instead picked up the file, opened it and began to read out a series of names in her precise, clear diction. For each name she added an age. For each name she also added a figure of how

much that name earned every week. 'Every week,' she repeated. 'They don't get days off. They're given the mini-pill so they don't get their periods; they don't speak English, most of them.'

'I'm retired,' he repeated.

'You're listless. You need perking up.' She gave him a hard smile. 'This will wake up your system. Give you a boost.'

He said nothing.

She said, 'There are ninety girls in that file. The absolute bastards who run this are earning millions.'

'Why hasn't it been investigated before?'

'It was never high on the agenda.'

'Sex slavery? In London?' he asked.

'No one wants to look under that particular stone. Not good for the image of London as a multicultural success story when some of the cultures are introducing modern slavery as a viable and growing business model.'

'And not paying taxes.'

'Quite,' she said. 'We can't fix what's happened to them up 'til now, and it's going to be difficult to winkle them all out of whichever hellacious den they're being kept. But we can take down the bastards who are running the operation.'

'Then they'll be replaced.'

'And then we'll take them down too. And the others,' she said. 'Because there were always others.'

He stayed silent.

'Some of these girls are children,' she said. 'They are enslaved. They are bought and sold by evil men.'

He gave the briefest of nods, barely a shrug.

She took another sip of tea and looked around. His home was a shell of what had had been. The gym gear had been rolled up and pushed into a corner. The motorbike was gone. The mezzanine bed that was suspended from chains above the kitchen had no mattress. 'I'm waiting for delivery,' he said, noting where she looked. She nodded slowly, distantly. She looked ineffably sad for a moment as she turned back to him. 'Get your shit together, Julien,' she said, quietly. 'You're on the clock, and maudlin, whatever the reason, whatever the *justification*, well, it don't pay the rent.'

She bent down and closed her satchel, then stood up, brushing down invisible specks from her suit, stared at him for a good long moment. She checked her watch and without another word she turned and walked across the concrete floor, up the three concrete steps, picked up her umbrella, opened the postern door and stepped through into the rainstorm, unfurling the umbrella smoothly as she did.

She didn't say goodbye.

He watched her go, thinking she probably didn't get a single raindrop on her suit. The rain wouldn't dare. As the door closed behind her he caught a glimpse of car headlights switching on, heard the faint rumble of an engine. He stood and walked to the door, locked it secure.

He washed up the cups.

'I want to buy your bike.'

Julie looked up to see Pirro standing in front of him. This was his fourth visit in the space of ten days but he hadn't seen the cafe owner since his first visit. 'I'm not planning to sell it at the moment,' he said.

'But you are thinking of selling it in the future?' Pirro sat down. A moment later a waitress, a one he hadn't seen before, brought over two americanos and a jug of cream. Pirro topped both cups with the cream then pushed one towards Julien. 'It's a lovely bike.'

Julien nodded. 'Frazer-built. I've owned it nearly three years.'

'You're ready for a change,' Pirro told him. 'Why wait until the future to sell it? I'll give you a good price.'

'I'd need another bike before I sold this one.'

'Ah, and you've seen one, I'm right?'

He had. A 78 Moto Guzzi 850 T3. He grinned to himself, 'Yes I have,' looking up to catch Pirro's searching smile.

'Tell you what. Let's agree the sale here, now. Then I'll give you a week to go and buy your new bike.'

'A week?'

'Eight days,' Pirro said. 'I'm going on a tour with a couple of my guys from back home. 'Eight days. I get your bike in, get it set for me, and on the tenth day we're off.'

'How long you going away for?'

Pirro shrugged. 'I dunno. Couple of weeks on the road. I might go home and visit the family for a week.' He brightened? 'You want to come?'

'My passport is impounded.'

Pirro slurped down half of his coffee. He set the cup down with relish. 'So what do you do, Julien? Apart from ride an old R65 and have your passport confiscated?'

Julien closed his laptop. 'I climb buildings.'

'What kind of buildings?'

'Tall buildings.'

Pirro eyes lit up. 'Show me which ones, on your computer.'

Instead, Julien stood up, 'Come outside and I'll show you one now.'

They stepped out into the weak afternoon sunshine and Julien pointed. 'That one.'

Pirro shaded his eyes. 'The Shard?' Julien nodded, and Pirro glanced at him. 'Any others?'

'In London? The Shard. Bishopsgate. Canada Square. Leadenhall was fun.' He stopped talking, just stared at the Shard.

'You get paid for that?'

'Paid? No.' He said. 'I have to work to fund my climbing.'

'What do you do to earn these funds?'

Julien shaded his eyes, still staring at the Shard. 'I'm a thief,' he said.

In the darkness he took off his clothes, dropping them onto the floor, climbed the ladder up to the mezzanine and clambered beneath the large new quilt. Having no mattress wasn't too uncomfortable when you got used to it, he told himself, staring up into the darkness of the cavernous room, letting emptiness embrace him. You could get used to anything. The noise of traffic and trains and heavy London rain, the crash of lightning and the rumble of thunder lulling him to sleep.

An hour later he woke with a start. He sat up, looking around the room, confused, couldn't remember where he was, a sudden moment of heart-thumping, breathless, eyes-wide panic. Then he remembered her visit and the details drew him back to where he was now. Silently he swore to himself, sat up, rolled from beneath the quilt and climbed down the steps from the mezzanine. In the darkness he pulled on sweatpants and a hoodie, a pair of flipflops, went to switch on the light above the centre area of the cavernous room. He sat down in the chair and picked up the folder. She was right. He was in a slump and he needed to get out of it.

He opened the folder and saw it divided into sections: a profile of each of the men they'd identified as being key players; a list of the known and previous brothels; names and details of all the girls, including their backgrounds. A lot of the girls were simply listed as 'name and details unknown' because they'd been identified as being there but no one knew who they were or where they were from. There was a section at the back with the financial details – turnover, expenses, profit. This was mostly estimated, as no one knew exactly how much money the girls earned. A single shipment of cash had been uncovered, by accident, when a car carrying it from London across Europe to Bogë had been involved in a fatal accident somewhere on the outskirts of Novo Mesto, and police had discovered two million pounds packed between sweatshirts in a large kitbag. The discovery of this cash had forced the UK authorities to investigate. They'd been reluctant. He wondered if the fatal car crash had been arranged, or if it had indeed been a mere accident. Either way, cash had been found, and this led to the discovery of a pipeline that led to a small bank in northern Albania. The bank didn't even attempt to hide the laundering, they didn't give a fuck where it came from, they took it, dirty as it was. They accepted all deposits, even if it was in the millions, no questions asked. But the bank had been closed down, along with the pipeline, three months ago, so, it was estimated the organisation had three months of profits ready to ship back home, as soon as they could find a safe way of getting it past multiple customs ports and then find a way to launder it. Coronavirus had dismantled Schengen, and it wasn't as easy to drive or fly across Europe as it had been, all talk of zero-borders and wave-throughs had disappeared as soon as nation-states realised that, despite the EU's promises, they alone were responsible for themselves and their own good health.

So, three months profits; a new pipeline yet to be realised; some way of laundering the money now that the friendly bank had been shuttered. And then, the small problem of freeing the girls. And destroying the men who controlled them.

He read on.

An hour later he was showered and dressed, pulling on boots and a coat. He opened the postern and stepped into the street, turned right, pulling up his collar against the remnants of the rainstorm, shivering as the previous night's alcohol left his system. He followed Cable Street, turned right at the end onto Butcher Row and then took a left at St. James Gardens, following the road until he came to Limehouse Basin, where the narrowboats congregated. A fifteen-minute walk. His derelict in Whitechapel was quiet, but there was always the background noise of the railway lines which ran opposite and above his front door. Limehouse was quieter. The water dappled at the walls of the docks but otherwise it was almost silent. He stood in the almost dark and counted the narrowboats until he found the one he wanted. There were no lights on but he knew she'd see him so he stood on the dock, waiting.

Eventually, the painted wooden door at the head of the narrowboat creaked open an inch and a blue-white light leaked out through the gap. No one appeared, but the door didn't close again. He took that as a sign, and stepped on board, pulling the door fully open and stepping down into the main living space, closing it behind him, as per standing instructions. The room was roughly eight feet wide and twenty feet long, and stifling hot, the darkness lit by three screen monitors, screensavers sliding silently across the screens.

'Lincoln,' he said, to the darkest part of the shadows, where he guessed she'd be.

The shadows rippled, then coughed. 'Julien.'

Another cough.

'You alright?'

'A touch of CT,' she said. 'Otherwise fine.' She shuffled forward, becoming semi-visible in the darkness, laptop resting precariously on her knees, and she dragged a quilt back to reveal the bench seat. 'Take off your coat and sit down.'

He hung his coat on a hook on the back of the door and sat down, maintaining a distance between them. She wasn't a people-person. She'd told him when they first met that her idea of personal space was as far away as could be established while remaining in earshot. 'You using again?'

'Was,' she said, 'I was bored. But when I heard we were getting back together I thought it probably wouldn't be boring. I'm off it now'

'How does that feel?'

'Right now? Not very good. Give me two or three days and I might feel better.'

'Can I get you anything?'

He couldn't see her smile in the near darkness but he could see the whites of her teeth for a brief moment. 'No,' she said. 'Did Perfect give you a file?'

'Yes, you?'

'Three days ago. She said she'd give me a head start before she got you involved. Said you'd want to dive straight in and she wanted as much info as possible before you did.'

'We're not getting back together,' he said.

'Yes we are,' she said, and coughed again. 'Look, I'll show you what I've found.' She leaned forward and pressed space bar. The middle screen came to life. 'There are three principle actors in this crew, plus a half dozen lieutenants, then dozens of lesser soldiers and bit-partners, pimps, bouncers, so on. I've made files on each of the main characters.' She opened one of the folders on the screen, opened a document. It contained photographs, phone numbers, addresses.'

'How'd you get their numbers? iPhones are encrypted.'

'All phones are. Even your 3310 needs a code to unlock it.' She looked at him across the darkness. 'Have you ever checked your messages?'

'No.'

He heard her sigh in the darkness. 'This crew prefer Hauwei. They're cheaper; encrypted too, military grade.' He could see her profile in the light from the screen, her hair had a blue/black sheen. The last time he'd seen her, she'd been peroxide blonde. 'You can protect people with passwords,' she said, 'But you can't protect passwords from idiots; some basic human hacking got me the first number, after that I was into them all.'

'They don't use burners?'

'Not yet; they might throw these soon. I'm recording them all in real-time, they're mostly speaking Albanian, so I'm using a smart programme to transcribe the garbage that google translator is coming up with into recognisable, conversational English.'

'And?'

'It all focuses on this site.' She clicked a link and an image of a garage appeared on the screen. 'This is a biker cafe with a custom shop at the back. Lots of people go there, drink coffee, talk motorbikes, buy and sell bike gear, and that provides lots of cover for the bad actors.' She turned to him, 'Like Satriale's, in the Sopranos, but with motorbikes instead of meat.'

'Where is that?' he asked, peering at the screen.

'Newington Causeway. Near the Ministry of Sound.' She clicked another screen and a picture of a man appeared. He had short dark hair and a smooth, smiling face.

'Who's that?'

'Our muscle.'

'Lucas is dead.'

'Meet the new Lucas.'

He stayed silent.

She wrapped the quilt tighter around her shoulders and moved back into the darkness. He stared at the picture of the man with the smiling face. 'Doesn't look tough.'

'But he is. Very. According to Perfect, and she doesn't lie. I've been in contact with him the last couple of days.'

He felt unaccountably possessive of her attention.

She moved closer to him and for the first time, in the light of the computer screens, he could see her face properly. 'How was Shanghai?' she asked, her voice quieter, like it might be a difficult subject for him to talk about. When he didn't reply she added, 'You really got it done?'

'Got something for you,' he said, digging into a pocket in his jeans.

He held out a USB stick and she took it from him, her eyes lighting up as she pushed it into a virus-checker. 'This thing contains more little germs than a smackhead's crotch,' she said after a moment, speaking almost to herself, reading the tiny screen.

'Is that bad?'

'No,' she said. 'If it was clean, I'd be really worried. You used a Chinese computer to copy it from your GoPro? Should have downloaded it direct.'

'I wanted extra copies, it was easier to use a computer.'

'Remember the golden rule. If it's made in China...'

'...it's got bugs,' he completed.

'Right. But remember also...'

'Everything has bugs.'

'Yes. But no worries. I've got a bug killer.' She pressed a button on the virus checker and a red light glowed. After a moment or two it turned green. 'Green for go,' she said, taking out the USB and then picking up a tablet that lay on the table and slotting it in. She waited while it loaded up, opened the file and scanned the thumbnails before clicking on a number of the photographs, her eyes widening, 'Christ these give me vertigo.' She stared at a few more, then took out the USB. 'I'll keep them for later.' She turned back to him. 'So, you did it.'

'Yes.'

'How'd it feel?'

'While I was doing it,' he said, 'It felt normal. Everything felt normal.'

'And when you're not doing it?'

'It feels unreal, like I'm staring at the world through a thick glass wall.'

He could see her digesting his reply. 'Did you discover anything?' she asked.

'It breathes,' he said, 'It has lungs. Every two, three minutes, it moves a little. In. Out. In. Out. At dawn it sighs.'

She thought this through for a long moment, her analytical mind searching for ways to process this information. 'Maybe it's the tulip shape,' she said, 'Allows it to twist a little, as well as simple expansion and contraction. Maybe there's room for extra movement.'

'It was alive, Link,' he said. 'It really was. It was sentient. It *knew* I was there and it allowed me to remain. If it hadn't liked me, if I hadn't been honest with it, I think it would have thrown me off.'

She held her breath for a moment, then let it go. He knew she'd ask him more about that some other time. Instead, she asked, 'Was it worth the price you paid?'

'Yes,' he said, after only a moment's hesitation.

There was a long silence, only the movement of the screens diverting to standby punctuating the darkness. Eventually she said, 'I've got something for you,' and turned away from him, then back, with a small box in her hand. He took it from her and slid it into the pocket of his hoodie. She closed down the pictures still left open from the USB. 'So,' she said, 'One more to go.'

'Yes. One more.'

'Until they build a bigger one,' she said, and she could see his slow smile in the glow of the computer screen.

An hour later he was walking home and, for the first time in months, he had a purpose. He had a focus. He felt alive. Perfect was right, he'd been drifting. But now he had a course to steer and, for the first time in months he felt wide awake. When he got back to the derelict, the sky was lightening and the rain had gone, there were hints it might be a lovely Spring morning in London. He stepped through the postern just as the first trains of the day were starting up, closing the door on the noise, and took off his coat, hung it up, putting the small box Lincoln had given him on the shelf by the door. He went to a drawer in his dressing area and took out the watch. He went back to the shelf and switched on the phone that lay there, checked the time, set the watch and wound it up, slipped it onto his wrist. He used the phone to call Perfect and left a message for her. Then he changed from his clothes into an old pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, and he got to work.

He signed the V5 and pushed it across to Pirro, who took it and folded it away. He doubted Pirro would register the bike in his own name, more likely he would leave as is, with Julien still officially the owner, should anything go awry. Pirro slammed shut the safe and handed Julien an envelope, which he pocketed and they left the room and walked down the two flights of stairs to ground level. They both paused to watch a couple having their picture taken in front of one of the display bikes, the girl displaying a generously cut solitaire ring. 'Young love,' Pirro said.

Julien studied the couple, a sullen man in leather jacket and the girl, shark-eyed, with a bad bleach job. He doubted that's what they were experiencing. The girl glanced at Pirro as she left the cafe with her betrothed.

Pirro said to Julien, 'I don't think I paid you enough.'

'You paid enough.'

'Cash, perhaps.' They both walked to the cafe door, watching the couple climb into a waiting Uber. 'I could introduce you to a girl,' Pirro said. 'What kind of girl do you like? Tall, short, slim, curvy...I know lots of girls would like to meet a handsome daredevil like you.'

'I've got a girl,' Julien said.

'Ah.' Pirro's smile dimmed as he studied Julien's face, but then his grin broadened slowly as he realised, '...but she's not your girl. Am I right?'

Julien had to allow a smile in return. How did he know that? 'No,' he admitted, 'She's not mine.'

'Let me tell you a secret,' Pirro said, leaning in. 'The girl you love from afar is never the girl you get. Because the girl you love from afar does not exist. You keep her at a distance, you pine, you have sleepless nights, but you never declare your love, because deep down, you know that the girl, the real girl, isn't the one you're in love with. The girl you're in love with is an ideal, she's a fantasy.' He paused, 'Am I right?'

Julien nodded, Pirro was smart and engaging, perceptive and... he didn't continue his train of thought. 'You're most likely right,' he conceded.

'I can get you a girl,' Pirro said, frowning as he concentrated, 'Small, slender, dark. That's your type, I think.'

Julien wondered if a hundred generations of Balkans selective-breeding had produced Pirro, a man violent enough to run a slave-trading organisation, smart enough to keep away from the law, generous to his friends, and engaging enough to read the minds even of his enemies. Pirro slapped his arm, 'It's done. I know just the girl.' He stood and walked back into the garage area, Julien followed him. His ex-bike stood half naked, the mechanic had already stripped off the large fuel tank and removed both wheels, he wiped his hands and stood back to allow them to inspect the bike.

'I'm fitting semi-slicks,' he told Julien. 'Don't need the off-roaders. Giving the tank a paint job too.' He pointed to a stack of five or six fuel tanks, all waiting for a paint job, it appeared.

As they walked back into the cafe, Pirro put his arm round Julien's shoulder, 'Tell me. What does it feel like to be climbing the side of one of those buildings? To be hanging on the side of a tower of glass?'

'You got your bike back.'

Doctor Madeline Perfect was standing just inside the door watching him as he hung from the ceiling by his fingertips. He glanced down then back up at the ceiling joist from which he hung. He was tempted to swing back and forwards then drop down to the beam end that stuck out of the wall eight feet below him, but he didn't. He could make it, he knew that, but he wasn't practicing acrobatics, he was working on his grip strength, so he reached out and took a grip of the lip of the rusted catnic beam that held up the roof. From there he did a hand over hand until he got to the wall, then he used the cracks in the brickwork to climb down to ground level. He blew concrete dust from his fingertips. There was no need for chalk.

He turned to her, 'It arrived back yesterday morning.'

'And you've used it?'

'Took it for a test drive. Been standing for nearly six months but it started first time.'

'German engineering.'

'Yes.'

'What have you discovered?'

'The business is centred on the Ajax motorbike cafe; all the main players hang out there. They take calls all the time, they meet people out on the street, they take people upstairs. Shady looking people.'

'That all?'

'Weird thing. They have a lot of people celebrate their engagements and weddings.'

'A biker thing?'

'Not all. Some get picked up and dropped off there by Uber. Others arrive on bike, with pillions just to have their pictures taken.'

'It's popular.'

'Yes. In its own right. There's no visible sign of their business, no girls strutting their stuff; just the custom bike stuff and a the cafe in the front yard.'

'I believe you've made a friend.'

'Pirro. He's the boss. Charismatic, perceptive. He wants to buy my bike.'

'And?'

'I quite fancy an change.'

'To what?'

'Something louder.'

She walked from the door to the central seating area, perched on a stool, took out another file from her leather satchel. 'Lincoln created these summaries of the transcripts. She wanted to email them but I knew you wouldn't read them from your phone, and you don't have a printer.' She placed the file on the table.

'Thankyou.'

'The new guy,' he said, limbering up.

'Yes?'

'I'd like to meet him.'

'I think you already have. The Uber driver delivering those brides and fiancés back and forwards from the cafe.'

'That him? He looks even younger than his pictures. Grown out his hair too.'

'Keep me up to date with your plans.'

He bent a little at the knees then jumped to reach for the rope that hung exactly 96 inches from the ground. She watched as he swarmed up the rope without using his legs at all. Arm over arm. When he got to the top he reversed the manoeuvre until he hung by the end of the rope with one arm. Then he twisted and gripped with the other hand too and climbed back up, then down again, this time hanging from the other arm. He saw she was watching him. 'When I was a kid,' he told her, 'I spent a summer living with a family who had the gatehouse in a stately home. They had a little wood in the grounds. Eighty-three trees. I counted them.' He gripped the rope with both hands, pulled his legs up above his head so that he was almost standing upside down, the muscles of his forearms corded with engorged blood vessels as he pulled himself, upside down, towards the ceiling, until his feet touched the concrete.

'And you climbed them,' she said.

Still at the ceiling, he gripped the rope, arms more than a shoulder width apart now, and arranged his body so that it was horizontal from the rope, quivering with the effort. 'All of

them,' he grunted. 'I climbed them until I got to the top, or the branch snapped. Whichever came first.'

'Did you ever fall out?'

'All the time.'

'How old were you?'

He slid down, still parallel with the ground, until he ran out of rope, at which point he left go with his higher hand and swung once, dropped to the floor like a cat. 'I was ten.'

She stood from the stool. 'I'll leave you to the work.'

'I think they keep the profits upstairs,' he said. 'Above the bike cafe.'

'That's what the transcripts suggest.'

He shook out his arms. 'Three months profit.'

'Minimum.'

'That's a fair stash of money,' he said. 'They will have a safe.'

'Undoubtedly.'

He picked up the file and opened it to the first page. 'Who's this?' he asked.

'Anna. But she didn't look like that when dragged her out of the river two nights ago.'

'One of their girls,' he said. It wasn't a question.

'Not the first.'

He flicked through more pages. 'The Uber guy.'

'Simon.'

'I need to speak to him.'

'Use the app. He's waiting.' She reached into her bag, took out a small box. 'Here's a proper phone. Use it.'

He took it from her and she walked to the door, opened it silently, paused and turned back to him. 'All we need is hard evidence. Then we can raid the place properly, with the appropriate paperwork, arrest those fuckers and put them away.'

'So, a call from a concerned burglar.'

'Quite so.' She turned, 'Oh, I've left something for you, it's outside the door.'

She let herself out.

He heard a car engine starting up. The Aston Martin. Glanced at the R65 standing in the corner, guessed Dr. Perfect wouldn't be using German engineering any time soon. He sat down on the comfy chair and opened the folder. Studied it. Then he stood, irritated, went to the door and found a cardboard box. He lifted it, it was heavy and it rattled as he carried it inside.

He emptied the contents onto the table. Padlocks. Deadlocks. Yale locks. Tumblers from safes. Maybe two dozen in all. And a note, written in exquisite calligraphy: *Thought you'd like to practice on these - MP.*

There were no keys.

Pirro's motorbike cafe was in a free-standing, three storey building, built at the side of a railway bridge. To one side there was a market, to the other, fifty yards of curved road that straddled the railway below. The building was double wide, with a central open entrance that led to a courtyard, the building forming part of the railway line wall for thirty yards. It was big enough for a good-sized cafe on the ground floor, complete with a fully working motorbike chop-shop. It was busy, noisy, and the coffee was good. He'd visited a number of times now. He'd been upstairs once, and Lincoln had provided him with a floor plan, plus

details of the CCTV system they had in place. An algorithm she'd created gave a fairly accurate prediction of which of the main players used the place and when, and from this she extrapolated how many of the crew might be on site at any one time.

She was good.

He wondered how many other geniuses were out there, staring at screens, rearranging the world to their satisfaction. She'd uploaded three of the photographs he'd given her to a locked-down newsgroup but already word was getting out that someone had climbed Shanghai Tower and there was much online discussion as to who it might be.

One more to climb, he thought.

What Link couldn't provide were the small physical details such as whether the windows were locked from the inside, what type of lock they used, whether there were small sharp spikes along the ridgeline of the flat roof that would impale fingers and palms, and whether these spikes had been smeared with faeces that would lead to gangrenous wounds. People did strange things to protect their property, and people who ran sex slave gangs weren't known for their sense of proportion.

There were no dogs.

Those who want to protect their property should have dogs. It was a rule, he thought. If he was ever to write a book on how to protect property from people like himself he'd say, first get a dog. A Rottweiler. They're big and powerful with hugely powerful jaws. Or a Malinois, though they'd likely go berserk for lack of exercise and kill their owner. Rottweilers are happy to pace a rooftop, and they're extremely territorial too.

But there were no dogs.

The building was old, the bricks were hungry, the mortar between them loose and falling out, perfect for a swift climb to the roof. Google earth showed it had a roof cabin with a door that led down into the building from the roof, and a drone had shown very recent photographs to show the door was clean and often-used.

'Get evidence,' Perfect had told him.

All they had was vague and circumstantial, the fact that some allegedly bad actors hung around a cafe wasn't grounds for a full-on armed police raid. The Mayor didn't like it, especially when foreign nationals were involved. It suggested that London wasn't amenable to foreign investors. It hinted at institutional racism. The Met recoiled at phrases like that. The Met, Perfect once told him, existed primarily to prove that the Met wasn't racist. So get evidence. Files of information on girls or punters or other illegal activities. Suitcases full of cash. Drugs in substantial quantities. Guns. And if none of that was there, bug the landlines, drop bugs in every room.

Asymmetric Investigation, it was called. The group was called London RAIN. He wasn't sure what the R or the N stood for. The new Home Secretary loved the idea. Though if it ever became public knowledge, he'd no doubt deny all knowledge before the cock crowed thrice.

If he was discovered in the upper floors, searching rooms, in the wee small hours, they'd never find his body, of that he was sure, so he needed to be careful, he needed to plan. Scaling the walls was easy. Getting through the door on the roof not so easy. Moving from room to room might be easy, it might be difficult. There could be alarms, locked doors, people with guns. And the simple fact he didn't know what he was looking for, or which room it might be in.

He put down the folder and went to make a coffee. Thought about texting Link, but it was Sunday and she would be asleep. She slept all weekend. It was a rule of hers. She told him when they first met, 'I wake before six am on a Monday and I'm awake all week. All day, all night, until Friday at 6pm. One hundred and eight hours. Then I go to bed and sleep for sixty hours. Don't ever contact me while I'm sleeping. Don't try and wake me. This is an iron rule. If you want to work with me, I'm available all week. Never at weekends.'

And she never went out, he thought, as he microwaved a glass of milk for his coffee. She lived in perpetual semi-darkness, her houseboat uncomfortably warm. The microwave gave a ping, and he took the glass of milk, poured it into the mug, spooned a mix of coffee grounds and Douwe Egberts instant into the mug and stirred. It occurred to him as he took his first sip that, perhaps, Dr. Madeline Perfect was running an outreach project for delusionals. He wasn't a free climber, Link wasn't a computer genius. Lucas wasn't dead. He turned to look at the new mattress, still covered in polythene wrapping, leaning against the wall. A gift from Perfect, along with bedding, pillows, and a box of books for him to read when he wasn't working. Strange. And his beloved R65 standing in the corner of the room, which she'd had returned to him from whichever police lockdown it had been held in, and which he was going to sell to an East European people smuggler.

Link had promised him she'd fake the CCTV images for the right-hand side of the building. 'You can do that?' he'd asked, thinking it was only a movie trope.

'Anything digital can be altered,' she said.

'Anything?'

'Look,' she pointed at the screen, 'I meant to show you this.' She pulled up an image of a young Chinese man hanging from somewhere near the top of the Shanghai Tower above a headline, in English, which told the reader that Leonard Ng was the first person to free-climb the tower unaided. 'You've changed,' she said dryly, after moment's pause. 'Want me to release the real footage?'

'Let him have his glory.'

'The Chinese Government's glory. I doubt 'Leonard Ng' even knows was a carabiner is. He was chosen for his officially-sanctioned, generically-Chinese, photogenic face.' She turned back to him. 'The programme I'm using is essentially an animation effect; it records fixed images, background, foreground, parked cars, buildings, lampposts and so on, and uses them as a canvas. Then it reads movement, people walking, trees waving in the breeze, passing cars, and it copies them and paints them back onto the fixed background at intervals. It's not perfect, and if anyone is watching the screens they might notice that a car is, say, moving right to left in one screen but not appearing in the other. But unless someone sits and stares at the screen, which I doubt they do for more than five or ten seconds, it should be fine. The animation loop is for ninety seconds. As soon as you're up, let me know and I'll de-restore the effect.'

'K,' he said. 'What about the alarm system?'

She sucked her teeth, irritated.

He didn't inquire further.

He was quietening down, getting into the zone, she could tell. She chose not to restart the conversation, got on with some stuff she was working on, and it was only when she felt the narrowboat shift a little that she looked, and he was gone. She turned back to the screen, work to do.

Back at the derelict, he got prepped for the job. The place wasn't so run-down looking now. He'd tidied up, cleaned up; he'd whitewashed one wall, with three more to go; they could wait. His R65 stood in the corner, his gym kit in the opposite corner; ceiling ropes looped and carefully tied off. Even his bed had a mattress now, which he had to admit, was an improvement, after three weeks without, and the previous four months lying on a stone floor sweating through a variety of illnesses and the possibility of a life sentence in a Chinese prison.

He stripped off his clothes and went to the drawers, took out a black, long-sleeved cotton t-shirt and pulled it on, did the same with a pair of shorts; he preferred nylon, but cotton didn't melt onto the skin if it got set on fire, and he always assumed the worst might happen. Probably wouldn't, but might. Relaxed-cut, stretch-jeans in black, and a dark-red hoody. Red shows black at night but in the lights of a shop-front or beneath a streetlamp he wouldn't look like a pretend ninja. Maroon high-tops for much the same reason. He tied the laces then wrap the laces in tape to ensure nothing popped loose. He didn't want to snag himself on an errant nail and end up hanging sixteen feet above a railway line. Thick leather belt, with pouches for tools: lockpicks; carabiners; zipties; pepperspray; other shit he might need. He peeled off the hoodie then velcroed the phone to a corresponding strip on the right shoulder of his t-shirt. 'You listening?'

'Yup.'

'I'll leave it on.'

He tied a bowline at the end of the rope and fastened it to a carabiner on his belt, folded the rest of the 30 foot over his shoulder, got it snug and tight into his belt at the back, and then pulled the hoodie back on. He went to a mirror. He looked like every other thirtyish man-child in London. From a hook he took a dark green woollen hat, shoved it in his pocket, he rubbed his fingertips together. Thin ribbons of superglue had dried to provide instant callous without removing too much feel. He slotted the package the new Lucas, Simon, had given him. 'Use this wisely,' he'd warned, 'It'll burn at around eleven hundred degrees Celsius. It won't melt steel, but it'll turn the fucker white hot and soft as putty.'

'How long will it burn?'

'You got enough there for maybe five, six minutes of pure burn.'

He hoped he wouldn't have to burn his way into a safe. The contents would be turned to ash before he got it open. Simon had shown him how to wrap a thin coil around a lock, give it five minutes, then yank out entire lock. At which point, in theory, the door would swing open. So all he had to do was get up on the roof unseen. Pick the lock on the roof and get down into the building. Find a room with a safe. Open the safe. Pick the safe or, at the worse, burn it open, extract the contents. Call the cops. Oh, and whichever room the safe was in, he had to somehow make the door unopenable for the ten or fifteen minutes it would take the cavalry to arrive, otherwise the bad guys would destroy any incriminating evidence while they had time. The cops had been asked to prepare, and they'd been asked to arrive with no sirens; lights only. But they hadn't been given an address in advance, which had, apparently, pissed them off no end. But Perfect didn't care about pissing off the cops, or anyone else for that matter. And besides, the Home Secretary was a fan. The cops were less than a minute and a half's drive away, so he needed to put in some space before he called.

He lay half-sleeping, night rain falling onto the skylights above him, a quilt-wrapped warmth around him. From a cracked pane, water dripped slowly, evenly onto the concrete floor, the slow rhythm lulling him deeper when he heard a light tapping at the door.

He ignored it.

The light tapping repeated and he groaned, climbed from beneath his quilt and down the steps. He pulled on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt and hurried as the light knocking repeated a third time.

'Hello?' he said, opening the postern door and looking out into the night. A slight figure stood beneath a pink umbrella, and he saw a car pull away from the curb at the corner of the Artful.

The umbrella lifted and a very pretty girl smiled. 'Julien?'

'Yes.'

She was petite and dark. A slight accent. 'I'm Karolyn,' she said, and when he looked confused, she added, 'Pirro asked me to come and visit you.'

He scratched his head, very aware of how he was dressed, and that he probably needed a shave and a wash. She stepped forward and he moved aside to let her in. She shook the umbrella just inside the door and turned. He switched on the small lamp that stood by the door. She really was very pretty.

'Go and have a shower,' she said. 'I'll be here when you get out.' She took off her coat and hung it over the back of the sofa. Beneath her coat she was wearing a simple black dress that hugged her slender figure. 'Hurry up!' she added, with a warm smile.

There was a knock on the door. 'Who's that?' he asked her as she seemed to know more than him about what was currently happening.

'Wine,' she said. 'Lots of wine. And food.'

'Don't stand there,' he said, a moment too late as a raindrop leaked from the window above, hitting the back of her neck and sliding down her back. She giggled and shivered in surprise.

'Hurry up,' she said again, quieter but with more emphasis, as she went to open the door.

He quickened his pace as he got within fifty yards of Pirro's garage. 'Whenever you're ready,' he whispered to the phone taped to his shoulder and a couple of seconds later the streetlights dimmed, not quite going out but becoming barely more than red-tinged hoops hanging twenty feet above the road. He was running now, and he one-handed himself onto the wall and leaped up towards the heavy coat of ivy that hung from the side of the building, gripping hand over hand, his GSGs pushing him outwards and propelling him upwards at the same time.

As he crested the roof, the ivy in his left hand snapped and he dropped, holding on with his right hand, scraping his knee as he grabbed for more ivy with his now free hand. Lincoln's voice came over the phone, 'Lights back on in three, two...' He was over the top and onto the roof when the power surged back into the streetlights, blowing a bulb in one of the lamps further down the road. He rolled to a squat, looking towards the roof hut where the access door would lead him down into the building.

'It's not there.'

'Say again.'

'The roof hut is not there.'

'What is there?' Lincoln asked.

He walked across the roof, light-footed, careful. Where the roof-hut had stood there was a fresh square of roofing felt, edged with dried tar. He squatted down again, went to the edge of the roof at the back and looked down. 'There's a window further down the back wall, I might be able to get in.'

He slid over the side of the roof, using a crack in the brickwork as a handhold and risking a foot on the very end of the window ledge, hoping no one was looking out at that very moment. With a blind hand he felt downwards for another grip, found what appeared to be the top of the window frame, probably aluminium, with a raised edge that formed a lock for his fingers. When he had a firm grip of the rim he reached down with his other hand, at the same time folding his support leg so that his knee rested on the window-frame as he lowered his body. He was crouched, fully supported, by the frame now, hoping to find a way in. The window was locked from the inside so he reached into the belt in his back and withdrew a jemmy bar, hooked this between the bottom of the window and the frame itself and popped the window out of the lock.

Quietly he slid open the window and clambered inside, then stepped from a bench onto the floor. He closed the window behind him and went to the door, guessed he was on the wrong side of the c-shaped building, opened the door a crack, saw that it was dark outside and stole down the flight of stairs, intending to cross the passage and then quickly get up the opposite side.

As he approached the opposite flight stairs he heard a noise and turned to see a man stepping out of what was, judging by the flushing sound and the fact the man was mid-zip, a toilet. The man, spotting this stranger in the middle of a locked building hissed loudly at him in some language Julien didn't know. In response, he smiled widely and asked, 'I'm looking for Pirro,' and the man pulled a knife from his pocket and opened it with a single flick of his wrist, but he was confused. Julien's presence was unexpected, quite possibly dangerous, but his expression was friendly and he spoke Pirro's name, though his accent was atrocious, so he hesitated as, still smiling, Julien walked up to him and without hesitating grabbed the man's right sleeve and lapel, effectively isolating the knife, twisted and shoulder barged him against the wall, then smashed his forehead repeatedly against the bridge of the man's nose. The second, third and fourth headbutts tracked the man as he slid down the wall, stunned as, still holding his sleeve and lapel, Julien kicked him below the jaw and he slumped forward unconscious, blood running from a crushed nose, and saliva drooling from a clearly broken jaw.

Leaving the prone figure he went to the nearest door which was padlocked closed, and he took out two long-handled spanners from his pocket, placed the jaws of each inside the ring of the padlock, back to back, and prised them apart, popping the ring off the lock; he was working quickly now, focused on the task, his heart-rate steady, his vision wide and aware, and if he'd had time to pause and reflect he would have described his mental state as being at peace. But he wasn't aware of anything but the weight of the man he'd assaulted as he dragged him in through the now open and set him, snoring softly, in a sitting position. He'd wake in a few minutes, groggy and in pain, more than likely call out for help, but that couldn't be helped; he wasn't about to gag an unconscious man, especially one with a broken nose and jaw who would probably suffocate in minutes if he did. He wasn't a killer. Closing the door behind him he stepped swiftly up the narrow staircase to the top floor, where the access to the roof had recently been blocked, and where the step ladder had been removed. There was a door on either side, but he knew the safe was behind the left-

hand door, which was locked firmly shut behind an expensive-looking deadlock. He heard Lincoln's voice.

'Say again?' he whispered.

'You ok?'

'Yes. On the top floor, picking the lock.'

She said no more and he focused on the task. The lock was built from billet-grade steel and looked like a Banham L2000, more usually used for shutters and garage doors, massive over-protection for a door to a room above a garage, so he felt sure that what lay behind it was worth his while. He took out the leather pouch that contained his lock picks and unrolled it on the floor, chose two picks and set to work. 'Why don't you use an electronic lock pick?' Link had once asked him, 'I could get you a decent one.'

'I prefer the feel of doing it by hand,' he'd told her. 'More precise.' But at this moment he wished he'd followed her suggestion; the lock was reluctant to follow his guidance. Pausing he reached down for a third pick and, holding the other two in the fingers of his left hand he slotted in the third with his right and ran it back and forward until it caught the stray teeth, then turned. The lock opened with a click and he hurriedly put away his picks, rolled up the pouch and pushed it into his pocket along with the big padlock, opened the door and closed it behind him.

Slid the bolt.

The room was quiet, dark but for the light from the streetlamp sneaking through the branches of the London common tree that grew just below the window. He went to the safe and squatted down. 'It's a Rotherhyde GS280,' he whispered.

'On it.'

He waited, listening, wondering if the man in the room below had regained consciousness yet. He studied the lock, knew he'd never be able to pick it, told himself to be patient and went to the window. As he'd noted yesterday, whoever had installed the bars on the window didn't understand how sash windows worked, and had simply screwed steel bars across the window frame, thereby thwarting any attempt to break the window and climb through, rather than screwing the entire frame to the wall, thereby stopping anyone, including himself, from simply lifting the frame as intended. The frame was painted shut, but a decent heave would open it. He wasn't going out that way. He'd go downstairs and walk out through the front, past security, with a smile and a whistle. He'd blag it.

Link spoke. 'Got the serial number?'

'Yes.' He read it out, then repeated it. From the floor below he heard the sound of the man he'd knocked unconscious. The sounds at first indistinct, became clearer, then became cries for help.

'Type this in,' Lincoln said, and began reading out a number. He did so, then, when he was finished, he turned the handle and opened the safe door. Inside, on the top three shelves, were bundles of £50 notes, banded and stacked, and, on the bottom two shelves were eight small velvet bags, each the size of a small grapefruit. On a narrow door shelf were three USBs which he pocketed. He could hear shouts and questions from downstairs.

'Trouble?' Link asked.

He glanced at the windows. 'What time does the Ministry of Sound close?' he asked.

'Eight minutes ago.'

He pocketed one of the velvet bags, then, after a moment's hesitation, a second, as the door to the room banged, then banged again, hard. Someone was trying to get in. Julien took out the incendiary coil and unrolled it, pushed it beneath the remaining six velvet bags, he took hold of the striker strip and twisted, recoiling against the bright light and the intense heat. He slammed shut the safe door. He used the last of the strip to set a fire going on an old sofa by the door. 'Can I reset the...?' he didn't finish the sentence before Link was replying, 'Press number three five times in a row.'

Her did as he was told. The door he'd bolted shut gave an almighty crash, but held, someone was shouting instructions, he guessed there were three, maybe four people outside. He stood and went to the window, jerked it open, breaking the years-old seal of pant, and clambered out into the fresh night air, holding himself thirty feet above the street below, sliding the window shut behind him. The door gave way with a crash as he kicked off from the wall and leaped towards the tree, whose branches reached out towards him. He grabbed, caught hold, the branch bent with his weight and he grabbed at another branch, which held, then snapped, he fell, jackknifed across the next branch, feeling two or three ribs on his right-side pop, and fell again, landing on the pavement next to a group of people who were standing chatting. One of them, a round-face kid with red hair looked round, 'You alright mate?'

He tried to smile, but found it difficult to breathe as he whispered, 'Just slipped.' The red-haired kid helped him up, then looked up as two men peered out of a window from which smoke was already billowing. They were shouting, whether in fear or anger, it wasn't clear. 'Fire,' the kid said, looking up and pulling out his phone. The others in the group saw what was happening and, as one unit, moved away, Julien amongst them, his red hoodie making him look innocuous amongst the group, his being slightly doubled over simply made him look a little drunk as the group moved to the other side of the road. The men had disappeared from the window now as the room they'd vacated glowed from inside with the flames. Julien took the opportunity to walk further along the road, away from the no doubt violent repercussions of the men from the garage. Small groups of people stood and pointed, some filmed, as the window at the top of the building glowed, and in the distance there was the sound of a siren as the fire brigade or the police announced their imminent arrival. Julien stepped further back into the crowds, past the entrance to the Ministry of Sound as the final revellers left the building, until he backed up against a wall, fairly sure he was safe from immediate repercussions. He tried to take a deep breath but the pain in his ribs meant he had to stop short and focus on breathing shallowly until the adrenaline bump receded. He felt for the two velvet bags, which were still there. He checked his gear belt, which was still on beneath his hoodie. He reached beneath the hoodie and fiddled with the cable from the phone until he could hear a signal. 'Link?'

'You ok?'

'Yes. Fell out of a window but I'm good.'

'The place is on fire.'

'You can see?'

'CCTV. Plus I'm hooked into the 999 system.'

'Any casualties?'

Meaning, is there anyone in there who might burn to death?

'I don't think so.' As he watched, the glow of the fire diminished, which was exactly when the fire brigade arrived. Four firemen ran inside, two unhooked a ladder and took a hose up

to the top where they sprayed the room and the contents for a good fifteen minutes. Police arrived and set up a cordon, intent on dispersing the crowd, who moved closer, surrounding the temporary barriers, to watch, leaving Julien exposed on the outside now. He stepped further back into the shadows. Things seemed under control.

'Julien?' It was Link's voice.

'Yes?'

'There's an Uber waiting for you, turn right on Gaunt street, he's in the disabled parking bay.'

'Right.'

As the adrenaline receded he felt suddenly tired, the pain from his ribs overwhelming his energy, enveloping him, his legs becoming heavy. He turned and walked fifty yards, turned right and climbed into the Uber, slammed the door, sat back and closed his eyes. Without a word from the driver, the uber pulled away and head north, out of Southwark and over Tower Bridge.

*

'You caused quite the kerfuffle.'

He turned to see her standing in the doorway. He wondered how she got past the lock. He'd changed it recently, and she didn't have a key. He winced, the pain from turning around reminding him of what he was busy doing, put down the medical tape he was using to seal a large dressing across his cracked ribs and said, 'Come in.'

She closed the door behind her and stepped down to the seating area in the middle of the empty concrete space. She sat down on the chair opposite him, her posture and her attire, as always, immaculate. 'I got your package, by the way, so thank you for that.' He'd passed the USBs and a velvet bag containing diamonds to the Uber driver. Couldn't remember the guy's name. Simon, that was it. She continued, 'The USBs contained files on all their activities. Stupid really, but how else does one to run a business with fifty staff, turning over two million a week?'

'Two million a week?'

'More than we thought, yes. Those diamonds alone were worth almost a million pounds. You probably burned another five million that you left in the safe. He was sending the girls out with their 'fiancés' to buy expensive solitaire diamonds from jewellery shops, some of them worth ten, fifteen, twenty thousand pounds each. The gold they crushed into rough ingots, which we found inside bags of coffee beans in a warehouse they had across town. The diamonds were a mishmash of different carats that we'll let the assay office deal with. They planned to stash in sealed compartments in motorbike fuel tanks.'

'They were planning a road trip to the old country,' he said.

'How patriotic.'

There was a silence. His ribs hurt. He was in no mood for conversation.

She looked around at the Derelict, which was looking slightly less neglected. 'When the ribs heal, do get in touch. I've got more work for you.'

'What happened to Pirro?'

'He did a runner. Wise move, considering. I believe he's made it to Gay Paree, where he's in hiding from his own crew, from his family, and from us. They think he stole from them and they'll probably find him first.'

'Probably?'

'We aren't looking too hard. It won't be pretty. The man you beat up, we arrested him, but not before he told his pals that you, the mysterious thief, were working for Pirro. Apparently, you told him. So, friendly thief, missing bags of jewels and cash, convenient fire, anonymous call to the police...' she turned to him and smiled, her small teeth white and even. They wouldn't dare be crooked, he thought. She shrugged, 'Anyhow, where is it?' she asked.

'Where is what?' he asked.

'You don't really think you'd be allowed to keep it?' she asked him gently.

'It's in the drawer,' he said.

'All of it?'

'I took out three of the stones, currently being appraised.'

'Keep those. Simon will come over for the rest. And thank you for your service.'

'The girls?'

'We have all of their names and addresses. We're speaking to them in turn. They all want to remain in the UK.'

'They get tattoos you know.'

'How so?'

'The girls in the cafe told me, when they get legal permission to remain, they have the date tattooed on their arm, or their neck. They like it here.'

'It *is* civilised here,' she said, glancing down at his bruised ribs, his baggy camo shorts, his battered trainers. She looked around the Derelict one more time, studying something that he couldn't discern. 'Did you like him?'

'Pirro?'

'Pirro, yes. Pirro the slaver. Did you like him?'

'He had charm.' Then he added, 'Yes. I liked him.' He thought of the girl who had arrived at his door and invited herself into his bed. She was small and slim and dark. His type. He was sure that Perfect knew about it.

'Sociopaths often have charm,' she said. 'It's one of their tools.' She arched an eyebrow,

'They employ lots of tools.'

She knew, he thought.

Perfect stood, brushed an invisible speck from her tailored skirt. He suspected it was her way of telling him to clean the place up. 'He's probably already bobbing from a chain attached to a concrete block at the bottom of the Seine.' She raised a finger and dipped it once or twice saying, 'Bob. Bob.'

In reply, he turned back to his wound, picked up the medical tape, unspooled a couple or three inches and used it to stick the dressing to the skin of his ribcage. He heard her leave but didn't look round.

Dirty Weekend.

'Julien,' she said.

'Doctor Perfect,' he replied, keeping his voice neutral.

He was sitting on a short board which hung from a rope the rope, and he was finishing the whitewashing of the walls of the Derelict. There was music playing from a stereo. Satie, Perfect thought, a little clichéd, but pleasant enough. The place was looking cleaner. It was still barely furnished, but he'd swept, dusted, cleaned the frosted windows behind the iron grates. Even the skylight had been cleaned, allowing a thin watery sunlight to illuminate faint dust motes in the air. He was looking fitter too, she saw, and quite content. After using up all the paint on the brush, he played out the rope and lowered himself down to floor level.

Slipping off the rope seat he unhooked the paint tin and placed it onto a bench, placing the wet brush carefully onto a sheet of silver foil laid alongside it. He wiped his hands on paint-stained shorts, looking to Perfect like a guilty schoolboy, except, when she really looked at him, she saw he was a man in his prime: lean, strong, calm; he'd always had the stoic thing, she thought, but sometimes she mistook that for shyness, or dissembling. It wasn't either, she decided, looking at him now.

'Good to see you,' he said. 'Would you like a cup of tea?'

'That would be nice,' she said, her tone a millimetre softer than usual, so that he did an almost double-take before going to the kitchen area and filling the kettle. 'What can I do for you?' he asked as he plugged in the kettle then opened a tin of teabags, rinsing out two mugs, opening the fridge to look for milk that wasn't there, then closing it again. 'More work?'

She wasn't sure the best way to phrase this, so she decided to go straight to the heart of the matter. 'Would you like to come away with me for the weekend?'

He paused, and he reminded her of a gundog she'd owned when she was a girl, who would pause, one paw in the air, when he sniffed game. The kettle clicked off and he poured boiling water into each cup, stirred them in turn for a few moments, still with his back to her. She watched him spoon the teabags out of the cup in turn, pop open the bin with a toe and drop them in. He motioned toward the fridge and was about to speak when she interrupted: 'I have milk,' she said, taking a carton from her satchel.

'Do you have a presentable suit?' she asked him, ten minutes later.

'Not even an unpresentable one.'

'What are your measurements?' she said, then added, 'Actually, don't tell me. You'll be wrong.' She sipped her tea, which wasn't bad. 'Shoes?' She asked. 'I'd say Oxfords. Size ten?' She said, 'I'll get you two suits. One smart, dark blue, one casual, mid grey. Two pairs of shoes, to match.'

'Is this what it's like having a mother and being sent to school?'

She pursed her lips, then forced herself to relax, took another sip of tea which still wasn't bad. 'I'll pick you up tomorrow at half past ten. Pleased be showered and shaved.'

Then she stood, dusted an invisible mote from her skirt, went to the kitchen area and washed out her cup. She let herself out, leaving him sitting with his mug of tea pondering what had just happened.

The next morning at around half nine he heard a knock at the door. He'd showered, and was having a shave, but he put down the razor and went to the door. Simon was waiting there with a wry smile on his face, holding two suit bags. He held them out to Julien who took them and watched Simon go back to the car and open the boot, return with two shoe boxes and a bag. 'Suits,' he said. 'Shoes. Socks and underwear.'

'Thankyou,' he said, taking them.

'Hang them up. If Perfect sees a crease, she'll have me assassinate you.'

'Thanks for the warning,' Julien said.

'We aim to please,' Simon said, winked and went back to the car, leaving Julien standing at the door, his face still half covered with shaving foam, holding a pile of clothing. Simon rolled down the window and leaned across the passenger seat to speak. 'Do you know you're in your underwear?'

Julien ducked back inside, holding his pile of new clothing, and hip-slammed the door shut behind him. He went to a corner of the open space where a clothing rack stood, draped the suits over the top and dropped the bags and shoes boxes beneath the suits, then went to finish his shave.

At half ten he opened the door to see Perfect sitting in a Range Rover waiting for him. The door popped open, and he hefted his travel bag, closed the door of the Derelict and went to the car, climbed in.

'Where are we going?' he asked as she pulled away.

'North.'

'Lapland?,' he asked. 'I've brought my passport on the off-chance.'

She took a breath, curbing her impatience of his humour. 'I had your passport impounded when you returned from your last jaunt so, no, you haven't.' Then she said, 'The North of England. The borders, to be precise.'

'The borders?' he said, fastening his seatbelt, 'I didn't even know that really existed,' he said.

'I thought it was from ancient history.'

'It is,' she said, adding, 'Think of Game of Thrones,' she said. 'But no dragons, and the wall is made of stone and not very high.'

'They've got Wildlings up there?' he asked.

Her eyes crinkled. 'We're going to what was once known as the East March.'

'Lord of the Rings then,' he said, 'Not Game of Thrones.'

'Well,' she said, a smile ghosting across her face, 'We'll be driving through the Shires as we head north.'

'I'll keep a lookout for the riders of Rohan.'

'Rohan was south of the Shire,' she said, and said nothing for ten minutes as she drove them through Hackney, then Islington, heading for the A1. Twenty minutes later they connected with the foot of the M1 and she eased into the traffic and put her foot down. Just past Luton they passed a Police Car, which ignored the fact she was doing 95mph on a 70mph road and didn't give chase. Julien said nothing, guessing her car had special number plates or something.

'How are your pickpocketing skills at the moment?' she asked.

Julien glanced out of the window at the increasing greenery as they sped north; the suburbs were fading. 'They're ok.'

'Burglary?'

'Reasonable.'

'By reasonable,' she said, 'I assume you mean you don't get caught.'

She said no more and they sat in silence as she drove; he noticed that at some point she'd put on sunglasses. He relaxed, rubbed his face, closed his eyes and nodded off.

He woke with a start when the road-rumble and the V8 engine were turned off, and the world went quiet and smooth.

'Wetherby services,' she told him as they got out.

200 miles, he calculated, with no idea how much further they had to go.

'We'll have a break and a chat,' she told him as they got out of the car and walked across to the entrance. As they walked through the automatic doors and approached the eating area, in a stage whisper she said to him, 'I fucking hate service stations,' adding, 'But if I have to use them, I reward myself with black coffee and a chocolate muffin.'

He nodded and headed towards Costa while she walked off, headed towards the Ladies.

'You look smart,' she said when she returned ten minutes later. He wondered if this was a come-on. Or maybe the cue for him to come-on to her. 'I really haven't got a clue what we're doing here,' he said.

They were sitting facing each other across a melamine Costa table. He'd ordered her black coffee and a chocolate muffin, for himself he'd ordered a small latte with a double shot.

'Try asking,' she said.

'Are we going away for the weekend?'

'Yes.'

'Is this weekend what I think it is?'

'No,' was the reply, after a moment's pause. 'It's not. Unless you think we're going to a society eighteenth-birthday party where you are going to steal the birthday girl's priceless emerald necklace.'

He considered this new information for a while; watched her drink the black coffee, check her phone, message a reply to someone, scroll onto the next message. 'That's what I thought it was,' he said, eventually, waiting for her to finish reading and replying to her messages before asking, 'So who's the birthday girl?'

'She's the daughter of the Home Secretary. He was married a little over twenty years ago, got divorced last year and suddenly remarried some trollop a couple of months ago. His daughter didn't take it too well.' She glanced across at him as she drove, foot keeping the speedo needle at a steady 95. 'Imagine being seventeen and your daddy, the most important man in your life, the man who sets the template for how you expect other men to behave for the rest of your life, the man who imprints male behaviour on you, imagine how you feel when he decides to leave mummy for multiple reasons, none of which extend further north than his belt buckle.'

'I can't imagine that scenario,' he said, 'Not having had a full complement of parents.'

'You didn't have *any* parents,' she said.

'None that I know.'

She drove in silence for a few more minutes before asking, 'Do you ever feel like searching for them?'

He shook his head. 'No.'

'I could find them for you.'

He turned to her and she glanced again in his direction. 'I'm sure you could,' he said, 'But, please don't.'

'No?'

'Not ever.' He glanced at his reflection in the door mirror, 'Tell me more about this girl.' Perfect nodded. 'Well, she's eighteen, today. She's called Rosemay, she's very pretty. And she's taken up with some sort of rock musician.'

'That's hardly a reason to steal her jewellery.'

'Daddy didn't want her to have the necklace, but his own mummy decided she should have it. No one is about to judge the Home Sec for his marital peccadillos when the PM's *fecundity* in his own private life puts everyone else in the shade by comparison, but Grand-mama is from the old school and this gift is her way of choosing sides.'

'So why are we stealing it?'

'The feeling is that as soon as the weekend is over she'll gift the damn necklace to her rock star BF and he'll sell it for scrap to some fence in Camden and buy himself a month's worth of heroin.'

'That's a fairly specific 'feeling',' Julien said.

'Well, the Home Secretary does have CCHQ at his disposal.'

'She will notice it gone,' he said.

'Open the glovebox.'

He opened the glovebox, inside which was a small leather pouch. He opened this and took out the contents: a chunky, silver necklace with large emeralds. 'It's a bit ugly,' he said. 'Are you quite sure which side granny is on?'

A smile crinkled at the edge of Perfect's mouth but didn't reach her eyes. 'It is rather *solid* looking,' she said. 'But the emeralds are valuable, and the piece as a whole has tremendous sentimental value to grand-mama.'

'This is a fake,' he said, holding the stones up to the light. He took a deep breath, exhaled, finally understanding the task ahead. 'So I'm not so much stealing as swapping this for the real one.'

This time the almost-smile did reach the corners of her eyes. 'Quite.'

'Mind telling me how?'

'That's why I employ you, Julien. To work out the details and whatnot.'

'And whatnot.'

'Quite.'

An hour or so later they'd got far enough north to leave the M1 behind, following a dual-carriageway for another hour, then a two-lane for forty miles before turning onto a side road that led to what to Julien seemed more like a bridle path than a road. The high-roofed car regularly brushed against branches that hung from trees standing either side of the road and, at one point, squeezing through a gap between two overgrown bushes that scraped both sides of the car at once. There were no signposts and, when he checked the dashboard Satnav he discovered that Google Earth had never sent a car down this route. There were no signposts, and there was apparently no road either.

'Stop fiddling, we're nearly there,' she told him.

Ten minutes late they arrived at a large manor house set in the hollow between three low-hilled valleys, driving over a tiny humpbacked bridge beneath which two small streams met,

emptying into a third that flowed east into the distant hills and valleys. They passed between columns that held open huge open gates, drove along a short gravelled-road.

It wasn't quite a stately home but it was comfortably large enough for a society function, he guessed. Perfect parked the Range Rover around the side of the building and the boot popped open. Julien got out, went to the rear and grabbed both bags out of the back, slamming the boot closed. Perfect grabbed a smaller bag from the back seat, and they walked together around to the front of the building, stepped in through large portico, past open double doors, into the lobby.

The lobby smelled of high polish and old leather, the wall panels dark-brown, and the slightly-dim light came from a large chandelier. There was a large fireplace built into the wall opposite the reception desk, unlit but fully loaded with twists of paper covered by small sticks and crowned with logs, no doubt, ready to be lit before tonight's function began. While Perfect signed them in, Julien looked around, peering through glass doors and along corridors. The manor seemed larger inside than out, with two wings pushing back from the five-bay front. A central staircase split halfway up and led to the upper floors of both wings. 'We're on the left, upstairs,' she told them and they picked up their bags went to find their room. 'We're having a light early dinner, apparently, then there's some sort of party.' They walked together up the wide staircase, turned left, then up another flight and then along a corridor whose floorboards sagged, until they found their room. Or rooms, as he was relieved to discover. Not that Perfect wasn't attractive, she undoubtedly was, and though she'd confirmed that she hadn't meant what he initially thought she'd meant, he was still wary. They found the doors, unlocked and pushed inside. 'Which one do you want?' she asked him as they walked from one adjoining room to the other. He looked out of the window of the second room for a moment or two. 'I'll have the other one,' he said, turning back to her.

'The smaller room,' she noted.

'There are trees outside the window in the other room,' he said. 'I can get in and out, if I need to, without using the stairs.'

'Ever the gentleman,' she murmured, dropped her bag onto her bed and began opening and shutting drawers. He took this as a sign to go back to his own room, where he opened his travel bag and began to unpack his new clothes. A few minutes later he heard the lock in the adjoining door click shut.

An hour later he'd showered, shaved again, and then dressed for the evening in the light grey suit that Perfect had got for him. Beneath the jacket he wore a dark grey t-shirt that he'd packed himself. She wasn't getting him into a dress shirt; he wouldn't wear one of those unless he was attending a wedding or a funeral. But the suit did fit him well; light wool, single-breasted with a single short vent at the rear. He'd packed various tools in his case but for tonight, after inspecting the locks on his and Perfect's doors, simple, old and easily picked, he chose only a single pair of medium-steel picks which he slotted into his wallet alongside his cards, then he took out his Spyderco Dragonfly. It had a dull-grey handle with a two and half-inch serrated hawkbill blade, check it opened and closed one-handed, then secured it inside his belt at the small of his back. He looked at his phone and saw that Perfect had left him a message: Rooms 28/29. Which he guessed were the rooms the girl was using. He laced up the brand-new matt-black Hawkins she'd bought for him. Smart-casual, he thought. Gentleman-thief, perhaps. But not really a gentleman. And barely a thief,

nowadays. He deleted her text, as per, checked himself in the wardrobe mirror, patted his pockets and went downstairs to join the celebrations. Which, judging by the loud music coming from the banquet room, and the people heading towards the restaurant in happy, smiling groups, had already begun. He went into to the bar and ordered himself a blue gin and tonic topped with ground ice, then found himself a chair and table at the far corner where he could see the length of the bar and into the flickering darkness, currently empty of people dancing. He saw people gathering in the lobby, friends and relatives greeting each other, preparing to go for their meal. He'd decided to give it a miss. He knew the room number, figured he could be in and out in five minutes.

'You're new,' she said brightly, sitting down on the stool next to him.

'Fresh out of the box,' he said glancing across at her. She was young and bright-eyed, with pale skin with the merest hint of freckles. Her dress was couture, well-cut, a little old for her. She caught the barman's eye and ordered a double vodka with lemon. 'You want a top-up?' she asked him.

'Not yet. The night is young.'

She almost laughed, 'I didn't know anyone ever said that for real.'

'I can dredge up a cliché when required,' he said.

'I bet you can,' she said.

The barman poured her drink and put it down on the table next to her. She watched him go, then used her fingers to fish out the ice and drop it in empty glass someone. 'I'm Rosemay Pepper,' she said, taking a drink.

'Rosemay Pepper,' he repeated. 'Sounds like a character from a nineteenth century novel about a frontier family conquering the west,' he said with a quiet smile.

She laughed, snorting vodka and lemon juice out through her nose, then laughing more at her lack of decorum. He laughed a little too, took a tissue from his pocket and handed it to her. She took it with a nod, not quite able to speak through the gunge and alcohol blocking various tubes. She cleaned herself up and said, 'Doesn't it just.'

'I'm Julien,' he said.

'Just Julien?'

'Julien Trent.'

'Are you going to dinner Julien? It began ten minutes ago.'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I don't really need to.'

She worked this over in her mind for a few moments then said, 'I have to go. I'm late.'

'And yet here you are,' he said.

'Here I am.' She twisted a little to face him, 'What do you do, Julien Trent?'

'I climb.'

'Climb what, chimney stacks, high society, the greasy pole?'

He nodded, slowly, 'I have climbed a couple of chimney stacks, but the others, no.'

'Buy you're not a sweep?'

'No.'

'You don't say "Cor Blimey Guvna" and tap-dance across the rooftops of London?'

'Not recently,' he admitted.

'You use ropes and hooks and things, to swing about, like a proper climber?'

He shook his head. 'No ropes. No swinging about. Otherwise, yes.'

'No ropes,' she said, processing this. 'You're a daredevil, then.'

'Yup.'

'You climb anything in particular?'

'Buildings mostly.'

'This building?'

He considered the manor for a moment, built of sandstone blocks with deep mortar crevices, and he was tempted to do it just to say he had. 'Not this one, no. Though it is lovely. I mostly climb big buildings.' He turned around in his seat, to properly engage with her, 'What do you do, Rosemay Pepper, apart from fighting off injuns and building log cabins?'

She paused and gave the tiniest smile, 'I think we're done with the western allusions.'

'I've taken it too far?'

'Yes. A bit.'

With his hand he mimicked an aeroplane diving and crashing onto the bar. She pulled a sad face. 'Don't worry, I do go-arounds,' she said, adding, 'I do birthdays too. This weekend at least.'

'Oh, this is your party?'

'Yes.' She leaned forward, whispered conspiratorially, 'If you're a guest, you're supposed to *know* this stuff.'

'I'm a plus one,' he told her.

'Ah, hence the non-attendance at my birthday dinner.' She took another drink, glanced at him as though to say, don't make me laugh this time, and he winked at her and she snorted again, but just a bit.

'You contained that one,' he said.

'No virus spreading with the second mouthful,' she said, daring to glance at him and swallowing before she could giggle again. He wondered if she was already high. He said, 'Happy Birthday, Rosemay Pepper.'

'Thankyou,' she said, a little too brightly.

She *was* high, he decided. Not too much, just a boost to get her going. She ordered a second drink. He picked up his glass and took a sip. 'Pacing yourself?' she said.

'The night...'

'...is young,' she completed his sentence.

As she leaned forward to scoop the ice from this second glass, he said, 'Your chain has slipped,' and he leaned across to catch it.

'Oops,' she said as he caught it, then dropped the heavy chain into the palm of her hand.

'Thankyou,' she said, 'Can't appear at the table improperly dressed,' she said, and twisted to put it back on but wasn't quite able to, so he stood and stepped behind her to fasten it.

'Catch is awkward,' she said.

'It looks old,' he said, clicking the latch together, then sitting back down.

'Old and ugly,' she said.

'I *have* seen prettier chains,' he conceded.

'Worth a fortune though,' she said.

'Who to? An ugly millionaire?' he said as he sat back down. It really was an unattractive piece.

She took another swig of her vodka lemon, her cheeks full as she checked her phone, read a text, swallowed as she stood to go, and burped. 'God, you're seeing me at my worst,' she said.

'It's ok,' he said. 'I'm just a plus one.'

'I must go,' she said.

'Bye then,' he said, and watched as she picked up a clutch bag and almost trotted out of the bar, checking her phone again as she pushed through the doors. He turned the other way and saw waiters pulling aside the doors that divided the bar from the ballroom, readying for the party. In the far corner someone was setting up a disco, column lights already flashing but no sound coming out yet. He stood up from the school leaving his coke, left the bar and went back upstairs to his room. It was threatening to rain and he opened the window, pulled up a chair, and sat looking out into the gathering darkness.

'You're Madeline's man!'

He looked up, so busy peoplewatching he'd been unaware of what was happening right next to him. 'Yes. Julien Trent,' he said, standing to shake hands with the man who'd spoken to him. He recognised the face from somewhere.

Perhaps sensing Julien's confusion, the man said, 'I'm Rosemay's father.'

The Home Secretary.

'Good to meet you,' he said, forcing himself not to add *sir* to the end of his sentence.

'Good to meet you too. Madeline has told me a lot about you and your,' he paused for a millisecond, '*team*.'

Julien smiled. 'We're very happy to work for Doctor Perfect,' he said.

The Home Secretary studied him for a long moment, then nodded, 'With an answer like that, I suspect that you're a better politician than me.' He patted Julien's shoulder in a friendly, almost paternal way, 'I worked with Maddy, you know, years before I went into politics. Rumour is, she got her first job with the ministry because, at her interview, when they asked her why she wanted to work there, she told them she intended to spend her career causing mischief, so it'd probably be better if she worked for them rather than one of their competitors.'

Julien offered a weak smile, unsure of what to say, except that it sounded true. 'Can I get you a drink, Home Secretary?' he asked.

'Call me John, Julien. This is my daughter's eighteenth birthday party, I'm letting my hair down.'

Julien indicated at the security detail standing no more than ten feet away, looking lean and focused and not at all relaxed. 'I'm not sure they got that message.' The Home Secretary glanced back at them and both bodyguards were immediately on alert, until he looked back to Julien. 'I think you might be right.' Then he asked, 'Madeline tell me you were in the Legion D'Etranger?'

'Five years. But that was a while ago.' Julien remembered something, 'You were in Afghanistan, early on?'

The Home Secretary nodded, 'The Pashtun were less treacherous than the crowd I mix with now.' He paused, thinking something through, then said, 'Listen, Julien. Madeline, well, she's *thorough*. And loyal to a fault. I found out the hard way that the best way to deal with her was to never promise anything you couldn't deliver, and never to lie to her. She doesn't forget a lie.'

'I don't intend to, Home Secretary,' Julien said.

'She became head of special projects within five years of her arrival. In charge of people who'd been there decades. She sacked most of them and reinvented the entire enterprise. And so, we have you.'

Julien said nothing.

'My advice is, she's given you her seal of approval. Earn it.'

'Thanks for your advice,' Julien said.

'Good man.' he looked like was going to say something else but turned as a noisy crowd of people barged in through the doors of the bar, 'Well, I have an errand daughter to greet.'

Julien watched him walk over towards the group, in the centre of which was Rosemay, hanging onto the neck of a man in his mid-thirties with rock-musician hair and heroin-thin legs. Rosemay glanced across at Julien and smiled, then looked away with a disdainful air as her father approached.

'Cosy,' came a voice from his shoulder. He turned to see Perfect standing beside him watching the family dynamics unfold. 'The most powerful man in the country, grovelling to a teenage girl and her revenue of motleys.'

'I thought the PM was the man with the power.'

'John has the power,' she said.

They both watched as John Pepper, Home Secretary of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, was given the brushoff by his eighteen-year-old daughter and her disreputable friends. He shrugged and went into the lobby having apparently seen someone who would deign to talk to him.

'He should have kept it in his pants,' Perfect observed.

'Perhaps it was love,' Julien said.

'Actually, I heard that it was,' she said, and as the group walked away laughing, with Rosemay's face pink and emotional, despite her cool disdain.

'Really?'

'I couldn't say. But I do know his ex-wife is a bitch. And here she comes now.' Perfect pasted on a smile even as she spoke, peeled away from Julien and went to speak to the Home Secretary's ex-wife.

'Hello, Plus One,' she said, slumping down on the garden seat beside Julien.

'Hello, Birthday Girl.'

'I'm bored,' she said, giving a yawn followed by a slow cat stretch. 'Cheer me up.'

In reply, Julien looked up at the night-sky.

At nine, someone had mercifully closed the folding doors between the bar and the ballroom, dimming the music and the bad dancing from the disco next door. The bar had soon begun to fill up with middle-aged men, plus a smattering of young, fit bodyguard types so Julien had taken his drink and gone outside, found a bench near the bridge, just above the stream, and sat watching the clear night sky. He turned and asked, 'Where's the rock band?'

'They're getting ready to go,' she said with a pout, and he could almost feel her English rose complexion darkening into an angry blush. 'They have a flight from Newcastle at three in the morning.'

'You aren't going with them?'

'No,' she said, taking his glass from his hand and downing a large gulp. He glanced down at her throat, pale and slender in the moonlight. The necklace wasn't there. She looked prettier without it, he decided.

'So,' Julien said, 'You're eighteen,'

'Guilty.'

'University in the autumn?'

She shrugged. 'I want to go traveling.'

'Go traveling,' he said.

'It's not that easy. Family pressure and all that. Plus, they'd insist I took a bodyguard. You travel,' she added.

'I do.'

'Where is the last place you travelled to?'

'Shanghai.'

'What was it like?'

'It dwarfs London,' he said. 'Lots of shiny, bright, glass buildings. Lots of people. Very busy.'

'How long were you there?'

'Longer than I intended.'

'Will you take me with you? Next time, wherever you go? I want to travel the world,' her tone was playful but there was a hint of need in there too.

'This is the world,' he said, 'And it's beautiful.' He pointed up, 'How often do you see the stars that clear in the sky?'

She looked up, staring into the milky-white streak of eternity that lit up the sky. 'I don't think I've ever seen it before.' She almost whispered, 'It makes me feel tiny.'

'We are tiny,' he said. 'Insignificant.'

'Speak for yourself, old man,' she said, laughing now, lightly punching his arm.

'Ouch,' he said, she had sharp knuckles, 'I *am* an old man.'

'My boyfriend is older than you,' she whispered. 'You're just a boy.' Her voice was becoming sultry and Julien was aware that she'd leaned in closer, her head almost resting on his shoulder, her hand on his arm; he could smell her scent and feel the softness of her body as it almost pushed against him. He wondered if her parents' recent acrimonious divorce was the only cause of her obvious need for company, or if there was some underlying, deeper reason.

'Who's the softcock?' a sneery voice asked, and out of the darkness the rock musician appeared and plonked himself down on the bench beside Rosemay. He stared at Julien, who took a moment to decide whether or not to be offended by this obvious insult, or not. He chose to be offended, but to not react at that moment. 'Julien Trent,' he said, with outstretched hand as Rosemay sat up straighter, pulling away from him. The rock musician ignored his hand and instead took her by the upper arm, saying, 'C'mon, girl,' guiding her, giggling, up and away from the bench, the two of them walking unsteadily towards the manor house, leaving Julien by himself.

He sat for a good long while, staring up at the stars, feeling small and insignificant but peaceful too, because of that. It was only when he heard an engine start up that he looked round and saw a mini-bus loading up the musicians, preparing to leave to catch their 3am flight. He watched them joshing and laughing, saw the boyfriend peel off and walk into the shadows, heard a zip being pulled down. As the man took a piss, Julien decided that now was the moment he would react to the insult. He stood and walked quietly across the

cropped grass and stood behind him, quiet, waiting for him to finish. As the rock musician let out a long sigh and zipped himself up, Julien hit him hard across the ear with a cupped hand, bursting his eardrum, the sudden dizziness and pain dropping him to his knees. Then, deliberately, Julien shin-kicked him across the temple knocking him unconscious. He was about to turn and walk back into the darkness when he paused, turned back and leaned over the prone figure, taking him by the wrist with one hand, grasping him by the index finger in the other, and with a brutal deliberation he snapped the finger back on itself with a crack. He propped the unconscious figure against the wheel of the nearest car, walked circuitously around the carpark and back into the bar to join the throng.

Back in the bar, he found a nice seat for watching people mingle, opposite the double doors to the lobby, facing the bar in one direction and in the ballroom in the other, from where people occasionally emerged like snorkel divers coming up for air. An hour had passed since he'd talked to Rosemay, and he hadn't seen her since, but amongst the comings and goings at the bar and surrounding seats he did see a single woman in her late thirties sitting quietly alone. At one point one of the fit young bodyguard-types went to speak to her but mostly she sat quiet, nursing a drink. Julien went to the bar and ordered his fourth blue gin of the night, asked the barman what the woman was drinking and then took them both drinks over to where she was sitting and sat down beside her. 'I think you and I are the only two people here who don't have company,' he said. She gave him a wary smile, but picked up her drink with a nod of thanks and downed it in one. 'My round,' she said and raised her glass to the barman, gestured for the same again.

'Everyone seems very keen on getting drunk tonight,' he said.

'High society does that to you,' she said. 'I didn't see you at the meal,' she added.

'I'm a plus one. Didn't want to cramp my employer's style.'

'Your boss?'

'Madeline Perfect.'

'Ah.'

'You know her?'

'John's mentioned her once or twice.' The woman seemed to relax a little. 'You're one of her team?'

Pillow talk, Julien thought, realising who he was speaking to.

'And you're...'

'I'm the harlot,' she said, the slightest of arch smiles ghosting her face.

'Pleased to meet you. I'm the thief.'

'Aren't we the pair,' she said, the smile inching towards her violet blue eyes, looking up as the waiter brought their drinks, then back to Julien. 'and what are you intending to steal tonight?'

'I'd steal you, if I could,' he said, frankly, 'but I'd probably end up in the tower.'

'And what if I'm not for stealing?'

He nodded, 'I heard it was a love match.'

'It's true,' she said. 'I'm afflicted by love. Otherwise I might be looking for a thief to run away with,' and she held him in her gaze for a moment longer than necessary. Julien thought it possible that the Home Secretary didn't deserve her as much as he did. He looked up as she did and saw one of the Home Secretary's bodyguards approaching. He leaned in and whispered something and she nodded, turned to Julien, 'Well, I must go. Thankyou for the

drink.' Julien stood as she did and she leaned in close to his ear and whispered, 'Goodbye, thief.'

'Goodbye...' he replied, not knowing how to end that phrase.

She leaned even closer and whispered '*Harlot,*' and then she was gone.

He sat back down, deciding whether or not to have a final drink. He'd spent much of the preceding hours just watching people, and the few interactions he'd had with the women here had made lights flicker in the darker parts of his soul.

No more drinks, he decided.

'I see you've chosen sides,' a voice said and he turned to see Perfect standing beside him.

He nodded and said, 'I like her.'

'I do too. She's smart and very attractive. His ex-wife will spend the next five years destroying her.'

'How?'

'Scorched earth. She'll make so many demands on his time, she'll insert so much unwanted drama and turmoil into his life, that true love, or whatever it's called, will wither on the vine.'

'You make relationships sound so fulfilling.'

Perfect stared at him and he realised she was almost as tall as he was. 'What they had wasn't a marriage, it was an undeclared war and only one side knew that hostilities had been declared. He never understood. I think he just thought that was what marriage was. Pain. Unhappiness. Loneliness. But then he met someone who actually liked him. Quite tragic really.' She smiled, so hard and weary and brittle that he actually wondered where she'd learned the hard lessons. He knew nothing about her personal life, whether she was single, married, or something in between. He didn't know if she had children. Didn't know where she lived. She patted his forearm, the first time he'd ever known her to instigate physical contact between them. 'Don't listen to me, Julien. True love is a real thing, happy couples do exist; Cinderella and Prince Charming do live happily ever after.'

'Do you really believe that?' he asked.

She nodded. 'Sometimes, yes, I do.'

*

He found the breakfast room empty.

It was just after seven.

He'd woken early and showered, dressed in a t-shirt, worn but clean jeans and his favourite scuffed desert boots, and quietly gone down for breakfast before he woke his neighbour. Choosing a seat by the window that let in bright morning sunshine and a view of the rolling hills, he'd ordered a full English with extra bacon and eggs, pouring himself a bowl of cereal while he waited. He didn't often eat in hotels, didn't usually eat breakfast at all, but when he did, he made sure he ate his fill. He was on his second coffee before anyone else arrived, some society female who pointedly ignored him and ordered fruit juice and lightly buttered toast. She was joined by a man who ordered toast and black coffee, and both spent the first moments of their day together by burying themselves in their phones. Some minutes later two more couples arrived, then a pair of youngsters he remembered seeing the night before; they'd been dancing, occasionally sneaking out giggling into the carpark for surreptitious totes on a blifter. By eight, the breakfast room was two-thirds full and he'd

eaten as much as he could manage. After his fourth coffee, the waitress left a full pot of on the table and he drank this at leisure, reaching over for a tablet sitting on a rack and opening it to read the day's news.

'Are you informed?' Perfect said as she sat down opposite him a few minutes later.

He shook his head, looking up from the screen. 'How come every celeb feels the need to raise funds for charity while dressed in their underwear? They can't all think it suits them.'

'I don't know,' she replied. 'Perhaps scantily clad charity-fundraising is their USP?'

'I get the underwear,' he said, 'They want to appear physically attractive. I've been out with some girls, and when you look at them, they're not looking back at you, they're looking at you looking at them, I understand the desire to be desired, but I'm not sure I understand the need to be seen to be charitable.'

'It's the cornerstone of Judaeo-Christian culture.'

'Virtue-signalling?'

She nodded, 'I believe reference was made to that exact thing in the Sermon on the Mount.'

She caught the waitress' eye and ordered a breakfast of poached eggs and Earl Grey tea.

'You know, I think that's the most conversation you've ever volunteered,' she said. 'I must take you away for sordid weekends more often.' She waited until the tea was delivered in a pot, poured herself a cup and took a sip. She continued, 'Charities provide employment for the children of the rich,' she said. 'Used to be that your eldest son got the loot, the second and third joined the army or the clergy. Daughters made suitable marriages. Now they all work for NGOs and appear down the right-hand column of the Daily Mail.' Amused, she watched him scan the news stories for another minute or so before musing, 'I wonder where the birthday girl has got to?'

'Probably upset her boyfriend didn't stay,' he said. Just then the poached eggs arrived and she set to eating her breakfast. Julien was replete so he excused himself and went outside to find the bench seat by the brook.

Perfect glanced in her mirror, indicated and pressed her foot on the accelerator, smoothly overtaking a large, wallowing truck. She asked, 'What did you think of her, the Pepper child?' 'She's needy,' he said. 'A bit lost.'

'Isn't everyone at that age?'

'She'll probably sleep with a sea of men,' he said. 'Then she'll hit thirty, embittered, marry a minor politician and she'll make him unhappy for fifteen miserable years, before he runs off with someone who actually likes him.'

'Poetic licence aside, that sounds like the story of her parents' marriage.'

'Maybe she'll get lucky. Meet someone who is kind but doesn't put up with her shit.'

'Do you think she will?'

He shrugged.

'She's off to university in the autumn.'

'That will most likely ruin her,' he said with finality.

'Aren't you the grump today,' she said.

He said nothing.

'You got the necklace.' It wasn't a question.

He thought of John Pepper warning him not to let her down. 'Yes.'

'How did you do it, if I may ask?'

'I didn't sneak into her bedroom while she lay in the arms of her middle-aged boyfriend, if that's what you think.'

'You disappoint me. I imagined some cat-burglar activity at the very least.'

'I got it before the party began. She was in the bar. We talked, I swapped them while she was downing her second vodka.'

Perfect said nothing for a long moment. 'So we had to endure that entire hellacious family charade, when you already had the necklace?'

He nodded.

'If you'd deigned to tell me, we could have cut out the fucking middle man and driven straight back to London last night. I could have woken up in my own bed this morning, instead of getting a crick in my neck from that godawful mattress.'

He said nothing.

'In future, keep me informed,' she said quietly, her voice steel. Then, 'Where is it?'

'In the glovebox.'

'You sure you've got the right one?'

'It's got my teeth marks in the silver.'

She smiled at this. 'Pass me my sunglasses,' she said. 'We'll stop off at Alnwick and get a couple of large coffees.'

'Then straight home? Don't pass go.'

'Exactly.'

As they drove, Perfect glanced across at him a couple of times. 'You're unhappy.'

He frowned in the sunlight that seemed to be hitting him directly in the hangover. 'The girl seems unhappy enough without me stealing one of her birthday gifts.'

'You do remember what you did for a living when we first met?' she said, eyes steady on the road ahead. Then she said, 'I get that you don't like stealing family heirlooms from nice girls, but she wasn't going to keep it.'

'I thought we did stuff that was important?'

Perfect turned on the radio, flicked through the channels until she got to classical music station, lowered the volume until it was barely audible. 'We've done a favour for the Home Secretary and possibly future Prime Minister. That is important.'

'Did he know what we were planning?'

'Not in detail. I told him we'd fix it.'

'And we did.'

'Yes, we did.'

'Why you?' he said.

'Why me indeed?' Perfect said.

Lyrids

The game lasted all night.

Around five in the morning Julien told the table he'd be leaving at six. He was £8,000 up. At five past six, as the hand folded and the winner took the pot, Julien had lost £300, he decided he was done. 'I have to go,' he told the guys.

'You can't go.'

It was the new guy.

Julien neatly stacked the chips into the holder and went to rise.

'You. Can't. Go.'

The new guy again.

Terns looked at Julien, then the new guy, 'He gave us fair notice, Peach.'

Peach, the new guy, ignored him and stared at Julien. 'You're not leaving the fucking table. I'm six thou down.'

'Play better,' Julien said, standing up, pulling his jacket from the back of the chair.

'Fucking cheat,' Peach hissed quietly.

'Chill, man,' James said quickly. 'Game's still on. We're a man down; only increases your chance of winning.'

Julien paused as he pulled on his jacket and looked across at Peach. 'How much you got?'

Peach glanced at his chips. He'd come with a lot, lost a chunk of it, but still had a few thou left. 'Enough.'

'Heads up. You and me.'

'Forget it Jools,' Terns said, 'He didn't mean it.'

Julien ignored Terns and sat back down.

'Take off your coat,' Peach said, glitter in his eyes.

'Don't need to. This will only take ten minutes.' He looked at the others on the table. 'Would you mind all sitting out. Feel free to scrutinise the players for any,' and he paused for a moment, before finishing, '*cheating*.'

The others gave a collective sigh, like it was something they could do without, both the accusations and Julien's response, a couple pushed back their chairs, reached for drinks.

Julien sat and waited while everyone got settled into spectator mode. When all was organised, Terns took a fresh deck from a pack on aside table, handed it to Peach, who unpeeled the cellophane and took the pack from the case. He shuffled the deck, fluidly, like he'd practiced shuffling a deck of cards a lot. He dealt. Julien pushed forward a thousand in chips.

'Game hasn't started,' Peach said.

'Yes, it has,' Julien told him.

Julien rolled over and checked his watch. Just after noon. He'd woken from a dream of tumbling cards and crumbling clifftops. He'd been asleep for almost five hours, not quite long enough, but just long enough. He rose, dragging himself from the comfort of his bed, and staggered, bleary-eyed down the wooden steps and across the concrete floor towards the bathroom. Fifteen minutes later he emerged naked and damp, leaving wet footprints in a fading line from the bathroom to the drawers where he kept his clothes. He dressed, stuffed yesterday's clothes into his laundry bag, which he stacked by the door. He picked up

his keys and wallet, shoved them into his pocket while he searched for his boots, found them and pulled them on, then pulled on his black cowhide biker jacket, the leather so stiff that he could leave it standing in a corner by the bike. He unlocked the bike and rolled it over to the door, left it on its stand while he slid back the big door, then he wheeled the bike out onto the road, went back inside for the rest of his stuff. Back outside again, he slid shut the door and locked it securely. He went to the bike and straddled it, kicked away the stand, slotted in the key and turned it.

The bike, his new bike, after he'd sold the Frazer-built R650 to Pirro, guttered reluctantly to life and he twisted the throttle, leaning down to increase the choke, letting it rumble freely for a minute or so. He pulled on his helmet, slotted in his sunglasses and, glancing over his shoulder, popped the bike into first, let the clutch out while giving it some gas, pulling away smoothly, dropping off the path and onto the road with a soft thump, riding for two hundred yards then turning right, then right again as he passed Dock Street.

He turned off the choke as he rode, following the torturous one-way system, taking a left, then after a minute, another left at St. George's in the East, heading north now, taking two short lefts, finally pulling up outside a grotty looking shop window above a halal butchers. OSX motorbike clothing, the sign said. He got off the bike thinking he could have walked there quicker but he always felt that if you went to a bike shop you should travel there on two wheels.

'Afternoon,' the guy behind the counter said, glancing up from his magazine at the sound of the doorbell.

Julien nodded, 'Helmets?'

The man pointed towards the back room and Julien followed his direction until he found himself in a room, not much bigger than a cubby-hole where there were shelves stacked with helmets. He did a quick scan and choose a AV-84 in creme, size small, then picked up a scarf from an open box. Back in the main room he chose a pair of Fly 3, soft leather gloves, also size small, and he took it all to counter, paid, stuffed the gloves and scarf into his jacket pocket and carried the helmet down the stairs and outside to his bike, where he strapped it to the pillion rail at the back. He got back onto the bike and took the quick route back to the Derelict. He left the bike outside, a heavy chain securing it to a ring set deep into the wall, two more locks that stopped the wheels from turning, should an enterprising thief manage to break the wall-chain. Julien was a thief and he knew everything was stealable, that all locks did was deter opportunist thieves, which was most of them. Few thieves did what he did, which was to plan and execute carefully targeted thefts. Or had done, he corrected himself. Since working for Perfect it had been made clear to him that that sort of lifestyle was no longer acceptable. Back inside he stacked the new stuff on top of the drawers and took off his jacket, took a map from a rack on the wall and sat down to study it. Julien was happy to make use of all available technology but he did like to use maps where he could. If he could get a picture in his head of where he needed to go, he didn't need satnav, which saved him from driving into the odd wall or riverbed as some bikers, more devoted to electronic maps than he, were wont to do. He unfolded the map and studied the route he was planning to take.

At four he cooked himself a meal of beans on toast, washed and dressed, packed his bag and left the derelict, strapping the new helmet on the back of the bike. The first part of the journey was the same but at St. George's he kept straight, turning off to avoid the

Limehouse tunnel and taking a meandering route until he got to the basin itself. He rolled the bike down a flight of four steps onto the wharf and pulled up opposite a narrowboat. He turned off the engine and waited. It was growing darker as the late spring day waned. Eventually, the cabin door opened a crack and he saw light spilling out from inside. He locked up the bike and picked up his bag and the spare helmet, climbed on board and into the cabin, closing the door behind him. 'Hey,' he said, quietly, the interior of the cabin lit, as always, by multiple standby screens.

'Hey.'

He studied the tone in her voice. 'You good?'

'I'm good.'

'Brought you a helmet. Gloves and stuff.'

'You suddenly got money to throw about?'

'Won it at a card game.'

There was silence, her form a shadow against the dark, heard a long zip pull. 'Ok, I'm ready to go.'

'You sure?'

'Show me the helmet.'

He passed it to shadowy hands that took it and placed it onto a shadowy form. 'Fits.'

'Tighten the straps,' he said, 'Don't want it sliding off.'

He heard her doing stuff. She said, 'Gloves?'

'Put them on last, you got a coat?'

'Wearing it.'

'You're all ready.'

'I said.'

'Come on then.'

Outside, after she locked the boat and clambered up the steps to where he stood, she shivered and then stretched like a cat. 'New bike?'

'Like it?' he said, checking that her coat was fastened snug, helping her on with the helmet, checking the straps were tight but not choking, shaped her neckscarf to ensure it covered her throat.

'It's your bike,' she said, 'I trust your taste in bikes, so, yes.'

He handed her the gloves.

'These are nice,' she said. 'Soft.'

He stood over the bike, 'Get on,' and she did, slotting in behind him, moving up close. He hoped she remembered what he had shown her last time, to move when he did, not to attempt to stay upright on the curves, to hold onto the pillion bars... then he realised she'd do what she did, no matter what he told her, pressed the start button on the bike, leaned down and adjusted the choke. She was quiet behind him as he kicked the stand up and pushed the gear pedal into first, throttled it and pulled away smoothly. He glanced in his mirror at her face, saw her eyes were closed and steered the bike away from the docks, towards the main road.

He followed the embankment until he neared Fulham then turned right, cutting off the loop of the river, riding between high Georgian terraces until he reached Cromwell Street, taking a left onto the Great West Road, Hogarth Lane and then to the M4 where he opened the throttle and let the bike have her legs. As they headed towards the suburbs he heard a noise and glanced back at Lincoln who appeared to be laughing, her eyes lightly closed. He felt her

shift her hands from the pillion rails and slot them into the pockets of his jacket, leaning in close to him, her head resting against his back. He smiled too. They rode on, passing through Slough, the late afternoon sky darkening. Again he glanced at her in the mirror and saw the streetlamps reflected in her visor. He turned off the motorway at the Theale junction, turning right and riding beneath the motorway, it was dark now, and he was glad he'd replaced the weak headlamp for something that worked. Italian bikes were lovely for lots of reasons, but riding English roads at night was not one of them. They passed through Tidmarsh and then Pangbourne, the roads becoming narrower and more winding, ancient paths that hugged the contours of the land. He slowed the bike a little as they turned down another lane, trees hanging close on each side, coming to a tiny village, passing a pub called The Bull, bearing left, the ground rising beneath them, passing an old schoolhouse, the road rising steeply now, until they took a right and then they were on a dirt track lit only by his halogen headlamp, slowing down to twenty, fifteen, ten miles an hour, he focused on not letting the bike skid sideways in the mud, they continued for another mile until he slowed the bike to a stop by a gated footpath that led off the lane. He pushed out the kickstand, feeling strange as her hands withdrew from his pockets, as she clambered from the pillion seat. He waited until she was off then he got off too, taking out the key and zipping it into a pocket.

'We here?' she asked, her voice small.

He picked his rucksack from the back rail, 'Come on.'

They lay together on an old blanket, both of them staring up at the night sky, she was snuggled into his shoulder. 'I see another one,' she said suddenly, as a meteor streaked across the sky.

'That was a big one,' he said, and then she shrieked as an even bigger one followed, its path crossed by a series of three smaller meteors, each streak of light quickly fading to black. After a while they paused their Lyrid-watching to break open the flask and enjoy a hot coffee. She did a 180-degree shuffle on her bottom and lay back down, this time her head pointing down the hill and her feet up. 'It feels better this way,' she told him, so he switched his position too, lying with his head pointing down the hill watching shooting stars next to Lincoln, he felt weightless. He felt like he was floating in the void of the cosmos. Eternity. It was a perfect night, the sky was clear, the milky way clear in his peripheral vision, beneath him the ground was dry and firm, around him the air was still and cool. He was filled with calm and happiness, and the faintest tang of grief for wanting what could never be. He felt Lincoln's small, cool hand reach for his, and she held tight as they lay together and watched the Lyrids, shooting stars in the night sky.

Rosemay

Grace turned over to face him. 'Hey,' she said quietly, 'Wake up.'

He opened his eyes, still sleepy-headed, and saw her face close to his, and he kissed her. It was the sort of instinctive response that made him so attractive, she thought. That and his good looks, his air of mystery and almost-impending chaos, and his body, which could have been carved from wood, his smell of musk... she rolled her eyes at her own weakness. 'Hey,' she said, again, 'We need to talk.'

He rubbed his eyes and sat up. The bed was on a mezzanine supported on one side by the wall and the other by chains suspended from a roof beam. She drew herself up on one elbow. 'I have to go back,' she told him simply.

He looked at her for a long moment, took a deep breath. 'I need coffee,' he said, clambering over her and scaling down the ladder and walking naked to the kitchen area, filling the kettle and switching it on. He made them a coffee each and brought it back to the mezz bed, climbing the ladder with one hand, holding both cups in the other. Not spilling any.

She took her cup. He made good coffee, even when it was out of a jar. Strong and creamy. There wasn't much in his fridge apart from a half-empty pint of cream for his coffee and some butter. All that was in the cupboards was a loaf of bread for toast, a quarter pound of strong cheddar, packet soup. She didn't know how he earned a living, what he did, what skills he might have, or how he came to live in an empty and seemingly derelict warehouse in Whitechapel.

'I have to go home,' she told him after a while.

'K,' he said.

'That's it?' she asked.

'Stay,' he said.

'I can't. I need to go back.'

He nodded. Drank his coffee. He was infuriatingly unreadable. 'Do you even care?' she asked.

'Why are you going back?' he asked.

She put down her coffee cup, mostly empty. 'It has been the most wonderful time, but this is just a portal. I can't live here, I can't *hide* here. I have to go home and face him.'

In reply he climbed over her and took both their cups back down the ladder to the kitchen area, washed them in the sink. She followed him down, 'I need a shower,' she told him as she passed him, walking across the cold floor.

'Have you ever thought about getting a water heater for your shower?' she asked, pulling on her blouse, and when he went to reply she added, 'One that *works*?'

He sat on the sofa in the central area of the room and watched her as she dressed, the act of putting on clothes making her seem more distant; they'd spent nearly three weeks mostly in bed, wearing very little. When, finally, she was fully dressed, she picked up her tote bag. It was heavy with used clothing. When she'd needed fresh clothes she'd simply bought new. If nothing else came from this, she thought, she had two or three new outfits. 'What do you think I should tell him when he asks me where I've been for a month. Why I wasn't at home when he called, why I never answered the phone?'

'Tell him this,' he said.

'This would be hurtful; I've been untrue. He doesn't need to know.'

'Not knowing will be worse.'

She shook her head. 'He'll want a lie. He'll want to think I did a flit to some hotel in Paris or Bonn, and spent my time shopping and being pensive.'

'I'd believe it, if you told me.'

She nodded, mind elsewhere, the noise of traffic and railway and the city outside impinging on her, becoming apparent to her in a way they hadn't before. She pulled on her shoes, checked her purse. She stood up, pushed her skirt straight and took a deep breath, smiled at him. 'Well,' she said.

'Well.'

'If I leave now I can be home for ten. I won't call him of course, I'll wait for him to phone me.'

'Of course.'

In the light streaming down through the skylight she looked both hard and vulnerable, and impatient too, as though the moment had revealed in her something hitherto disguised. She picked up her purse, shouldered her tote and he walked her to the door. 'It's been lovely,' she said turning to him and kissing him gently on the mouth, just once. 'I'm exhausted!'

He unlocked the door and opened it. 'But it's over.'

She nodded, eyes sad as she turned and stepped through the portico, 'Don't worry, I'm sure you'll find a replacement.' He followed her eyes as she turned and glared at something.

Someone.

'And here she is,' she said in the false, bright song-song tone of someone telling a child about baby bear discovering Goldilocks sleeping in his bed.

'Hello,' a voice said and he leaned through the door and screwed his eyes against the bright late-July sunshine. Rosemay Pepper was sitting on a large rucksack. 'I knocked but,' and she raised an eyebrow towards the other woman, 'You must have been busy.'

'Grace, this is Rosemay,' he said, explaining the who, but wondering about the what. 'She's my, erm, niece.'

'Ward,' Rosemay said at the same time.

They watched Grace pick up her tote bag, turn and, without a word, walk away. Nothing was said for the time it took an entire train to leave the station fifty paces away. Finally, Rosemay said, 'She seemed nice.'

Julien nodded. 'She did.'

'You do realise that you're naked,' she added.

In reply he closed the door, leaving Rosemay sitting on her rucksack.

Ten minutes later she was standing in the centre of the derelict, looking around. 'Auntie Mads said you were strange.'

'Auntie Mads. Do you mean Perfect?'

'Is that what you call her?'

'I thought it was what everyone called her.'

'She's my godmother. '

'She believes in god?'

'I think god believes in her.'

He smiled at this. 'Want some breakfast?'

'Have you been working up an *appetite*, Plus One?'

He tucked-in his a t-shirt, fastened up a pair of jeans, before re-opening the door and letting her in. He pulled on a pair of sneakers.'

'No socks?'

He shook his head.

'You could do with a comb,' she said. 'And a shower.'

'I wasn't expecting company,' he said, standing on one leg, tying each lace in turn. Finished, he looked up. 'Can I ask...?'

In reply she took a letter from a pocket, held it out to him. 'This is for you from,' she paused, 'Perfect.'

He took it and opened it. Read it.

Julien,

Please look after Rosemay for the summer. She is precious to me.

MP

ps Don't break her.

There was nothing else.

He went to the cupboard and took out a phone, dialled her number from memory. Got her voicemail. Hung up. He ran his fingers through his hair, agitated, thinking, it does need a comb, then looked across to where Rosemay was still standing, watching him. She looked young and fresh and painfully vulnerable. 'Good news?' she asked, eyes bright. He glanced around as if looking for an escape, but there was none, though he stared longingly for a moment at the portico door. Then he took a long calming breath, and exhaled slowly, turning back to Rosemay. 'Welcome to London,' he said, finally.

*

'We need to think of a programme,' he said, returning from the jukebox as music began to play.

'A what?' she asked, picking up her drink.

'A programme. I can show you the sights. Take you round the tourist places.'

'You do realise what my dad does for a living? And where we live?'

'Where do you live?'

'Kingston, actually,' she admitted, blushing.

'So you're not quite the full Cockerney.'

'If I was I'd have eight kids and be wearing a hijab.'

He scratched his chin, suddenly feeling old and unshaven sitting next to this teenage girl as she emptied her glass. 'Want another drink?'

'Are we getting drunk?' she asked him. 'Is this our first date?'

He stood, went to the bar.

'Seems like it,' she said to herself with a smile on her face.

An hour later they'd worked out a plan. She'd never actually done the touristy things so they'd agreed on The Tower, the Eye, St. Paul's, a number of museums, and if they found a couple of sunny days, Green Park and Kensington Park.

'I've done Camden Market,' she said.

'Of course you have.'

'Don't sneer,' she said. 'It was shit. Full of smackhead wannabes, living the dream.' She used her fingers put these last three words in inverted commas.

He nodded. Camden was indeed a shithole. He'd lived there for a short while when he was a kid, not much younger than she was now.

'What're you thinking?'

'Remembering when I was your age.'

'That was centuries ago.'

'Just about.' They were on their third drink. The Artful was almost empty and they had a corner table. 'We'll need to get you a bed,' he said.

'I like yours.'

'You can't have it.'

'I'm not sleeping on some crappy single bed on that grungy concrete floor. We can share.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'No. We can't.'

'Why not? It's massive.'

'I don't share beds with girls.'

'You were sharing a bed when I arrived this morning.'

He finished his drink. 'We weren't *sharing* a bed.' This time he used his fingers to make inverted commas.

'You're gross.'

'I'm not your besty,' he said, shortly. 'I don't do sleepovers or pyjama parties.'

She stared at him. 'I'm not sure if you're being nasty or if you've watched too many 80s movies.'

'Sorry,' he said, realising that he was being mean, because he was out of his depth. 'Anyway, I snore.'

'My boyfriend was older than you. He snored, farted and talked in his sleep.'

'I'm not your boyfriend.'

She raised a single eyebrow. 'No, you're not.' She smiled, emptied her glass again. 'Get me another drink please.'

When he returned she said, 'And on the topic of my *ex* boyfriend, you and I need to have a serious conversation at some point.'

'What about?'

'You know,' she said, leaning closer. 'You *bastard*.'

He did know.

Which is how he woke the next morning with her beside him, in his bed. And how they spent the summer sleeping together, in the most chaste fashion, mostly. It occurred to him, as he made them a breakfast coffee before their trip to The Tower, and not for the first time, that women were better negotiators than men.

It was raining as they queued to get into the Tower, she was holding an umbrella over both of them, she'd bought it minutes earlier for an extortionate price. She studied him for a moment. 'Are you hungover?'

He nodded.

'I am, too.'

The queue inched forward. 'I'm sure seeing suits of armour and instruments of torture will make us feel lots better.'

'Don't forget the crown jewels.'

'Should we steal 'em,' she asked, mischievously.

He looked thoughtful. 'It'd be a tough job.'

'I was only joking. No one steals the crown jewels.'

'Captain Blood did.'

'He was caught before he could get away.'

'He was pardoned and rewarded.'

She studied him. 'Is that what you'd like? To be a scoundrel and then get pardoned?'

He gave her a nudge, 'We're next,' and took out his wallet to pay the entry fee.

'Look at these,' she whispered a half hour of wandering and pondering later.

The Crown Jewels.

They'd wandered around the tower, looking at various artefacts, but the centrepiece was the jewels that were displayed in the Jewel House. Crown, sceptre, a variety of rings, chains and tiaras in separate glass cases. 'They're bomb-proof,' she read from a card, 'And there are 100 CCTV cameras about the place.'

'There are more,' he said. 'And there are security devices they won't tell you about.'

'Like what?' she asked, interested.

'Pressure pads and rocker pads, so if you even try to move them an alarm will sound. Plus there'll be undercover cops in here.'

'Really?' she looked around. 'Which ones?'

'The ones we don't expect,' he said following her roving gaze.

'Will they be armed?'

'Yes.'

'Better not rob it, then.'

'Not today,' he said. They continued to study the jewels beneath the bomb-proof glass. 'Why did Perfect suggest you stayed with me?' he asked.

'She didn't. I asked to stay with you. She was against it.'

'Perfect never loses an argument.'

'She said you were a pirate. You lacked a core value system, because of your childhood.'

'She said that?'

'Daddy said you were ideal.' He said it'd be like Roman Holiday, but without the scooters and the romance.' She looked up at him, 'Perfect said you could be trusted in that regard.'

'And the fountain at Trevi,' he said as they left the Jewel House. 'We won't see throw any coins into the fountain.'

'Well, I'm not a princess.'

'You pretty much are,' he said.

'Do you think?' She smiled to herself, seeming to like the idea.

He frowned, 'I think my hangover is kicking in.'

'You alright?' she asked, suddenly concerned.

'Let's get a coffee and a sandwich.'

'Ha!' she said as they quickly crossed the rainswept yard to the tearooms. 'I outdrank you.'

'No you didn't,' he said. 'You're young. You recover quicker.'

She shook her head. 'Loser.'

'Snorer,' he replied.

'No I'm not!' she said, indignant, pushing through the doors into the warmth of the cafe, heading to the counter, 'Get us a table.'

He found an empty table at the back, by the window, they'd be able to look out at the rain and the courtyard, and she returned a few minutes later with a large pot of tea and a pile of sandwiches. He looked down at the sandwiches.

'I wasn't sure what you liked,' she said, 'So I got one of everything. We can get a doggy bag for the others and eat them later.'

He picked up a cheese pickle sandwich and took a bite, enjoying the flavours and the soft bread. Then he followed that with the tea she'd carefully poured into his cup.

'Feel better?' she asked and he nodded, mouth too full with the second bite to speak, his eyes twinkling with pleasure.

*

She woke to the sound of banging and sawing and the smell of fresh-cut wood. Bleary-eyed she leaned over the edge of the mezzanine and looked down. 'What're you doing?'

'Putting some support posts beneath the bed.'

She looked above her to the heavy chains that supported the bed. She'd just assumed it was safe but now she wasn't so sure. 'Should I get down?'

He looked up again, wiping sweat from his eyes. 'It's fastened to the wall with six eight-inch bolts, and the chains are linked to the girder. You should be ok.'

Which made her wonder why he was installing posts beneath the bed. She rolled back onto the mattress he'd bought for her and stared up at the ceiling, feeling any residue of sleep departing, chased away by the noise from below. The mezz as she called it, was big enough for two double mattresses, but he'd ordered her a single. It was comfortable though, and there was enough space between their mattresses to stand a coffee cup or a book or a wine bottle. She took his pillow and lay them on top of hers and sat up against them, picked up her novel and began to read. After a while the banging stopped and she saw Julien's head appear. 'Fancy making us a coffee?' he asked with a grin.

'I need a shower,' she said.

'I can wait,' and his head disappeared again.

Throwing down her book she clambered her way across and down the mezz and walked barefoot across the concrete floor, grabbing a clean towel and fresh underwear from the single cupboard on the way to the bathroom, which was a single cubicle that contained a cold-water sink and an equally cold-water shower. She used the toilet first then stepped into the bathroom next door, deciding that the lesser of the two evils would be to stand and wash herself in the sink, that way she could moderate the level of pain that came from the freezing cold water. Ten minutes later she left the bathroom. He was standing in the kitchen area, holding a mug of coffee. Beside him on the counter was her mug. 'How is the water ice cold when it's July outside?'

'August,' he said.

'Is it?'

'First of August today.'

'Kick and a punch,' she said. She noticed that even though she was standing beside him in only her underwear he didn't give any indication of actually 'seeing' her. The few times she'd been in this sort of situation the men, or boys, it was usually boys, couldn't help but take the odd hungry glance at her almost naked form. The fact he didn't appear to see her in a state of undress made her feel very undressed. 'I'll put on my clothes,' she said.

He nodded, staring at the wooden legs he'd installed beneath the mezz. 'I should paint them the same colour as the platform.'

She looked at the platform, 'Steel grey?'

He nodded.

'I think I'll go shopping,' she said as she pulled on her jeans, then a t-shirt. 'I need some more clothes.' All she had were what had fit into her rucksack when she'd arrived here. She fastened the laces on her pink Green Flash. 'I'll be a couple of hours.'

'K,' he said.

She paused, looking up at him. He looked at her. 'What,' he said.

'You do know I'm a girl, right?'

He nodded, a twinkle in his eyes. 'I worked that out.'

She exhaled, irritated, stood and picked up her purse, shoving her phone into her jeans pocket. 'See you in a bit,' she said.

'Yeah,' he said.

She returned a few hours later laden with shopping. Julian was sprawled on the sofa working on his computer and he glanced up smiled. Rosemay dropped her bags in the floor, she wanted to tell him about what she'd bought and why she'd chosen those particular items, but she wasn't sure he'd be receptive.

'What you doing?' she asked.

'Research,' he said.

She went and sat on the new chair, the one he'd had delivered three days after she arrived. It was beside the sofa and she watched him scrolling through lists of names and numbers.

'What're those?' she asked.

'Locks,' he said, looking up again. 'It's a manufacturer's spreadsheet. These locks are bespoke and each one has a factory-setting number, like on a phone, and the customer is supposed to change that when they get the lock installed.'

'But they don't.'

He shook his head. 'Not usually.'

'Are you a thief?' she asked.

He pulled a face, almost a look of disappointment, not looking at her. 'I used to be. That's how I bought this,' he said, looking around at the derelict.

'How did you start being a thief?' she asked.

'I loved to climb buildings when I was a kid. One night I was halfway up a drainpipe attached to a big house in Holloway when I saw these men in a kitchen cutting cocaine. They had a bag full of cash on the sink beside the window.'

'Why were you halfway up a drainpipe?'

'I was homeless. Sleeping on the roof.'

'Go on.'

'I stayed really quiet for about half an hour, just hanging there. Eventually the men left the room. I lifted the sash and stole the cash.'

'Ah,' he said. 'A poetic thief. And the drugs?'

He nodded. 'Those too.'

'I bet they weren't happy.'

'I heard some shooting,' he said.

'From up on the roof?'

He smiled again. He really did have a nice smile, she thought. He said, 'I decided to sleep on a different rooftop after that.'

He went back to his screen, tapping in numbers. His laptop looked very old, battered, the screen held in place by some masking tape, but as she watched him switch between sites she could see it was fast. 'You don't use google,' she observed.

'I do for maps,' he said, 'but for everything else I use Sonar,' and when she raised her eyebrows in question he added, 'It's a proprietary search engine and VPN.'

She stood and went to make them both a coffee while he continued his online work. When she returned and placed his mug on the table beside him he looked up, closed the computer and sat up. 'Thanks,' he said.

'That's a bespoke computer,' she said. 'Daddy uses one. But yours looks really old.'

'You like computers?'

She nodded. 'People like computers for games and shopping. I like them for the way they're built.'

'Well, this has the old system up front,' He said, 'So if you switch it on it looks like an old Dell from fifteen years ago, but if you key in a password it'll take you to the proper machine, which is just behind it.' He demonstrated by switching it off, opening it to the old system the booting up the new. 'This is the *real* machine,' he said, and paused to take a drink of his coffee, closed his eyes in bliss, opened them and smiled at her holding up the mug. 'This is nice,' he told her, before completing his previous sentence, 'And the real machine is *swift*.'

'Swift isn't a techie word,' she said.

'It's a word my techie uses when she talks about really good computers.'

'She?'

He looked at the shopping bags. 'Show me what you've bought,' he said, seeming genuinely interested, and she stood and went for her bags. It wasn't until a day or two later that she realised he'd ducked the question.

They were sitting in the Artful having a late lunch when she asked him, 'What's the tattoo on your arm?'

'You're all questions.'

'Try being all answers.'

He sighed, looked at his left shoulder and pulled up the sleeve of his t-shirt, revealing the bottom part of a design on his shoulder. 'It's a winged arm with a sword. Represents Archangel Michael, the warrior angel. God's enforcer.' He looked up from his arm as she leaned in closer, pulled up his sleeve so that the entire design was revealed. 'What do the letters stand for?' she asked.

'REP. It's French, it means Regiment Etranger de Parachutistes. Foreign legion. I was in for five years.'

He rolled down his sleeve.

'It's a lovely design,' she said.

He nodded, 'Some of the guys got the dragon badge, but I like the arm and sword.'

'You were in the foreign legion?'

'Yes. Joined at seventeen.'

'Do they let you join at seventeen?'

'They let you lie at seventeen,' he said. 'False name, fake age. They check your passport, but I said I didn't have one. It was the EU so we could travel without a passport back then.' She sat back, picked up her sandwich and took a bite, chewed then swallowed. 'What was it like?'

'The Legion? It was good fun.'

'Good fun?'

'I was seventeen. I'd been living on the streets for five years, so being in a barracks, having three meals a day, free clothing...'

'A uniform,' she interrupted.

'It was free,' he said again, 'and I had a comfortable bed.'

'Where were you based? Paris?'

He shook his head, waited while she finished off her sandwich, went to the bar and ordered another round of drinks. He sat down and handed her a glass. 'It was Corsica, after basic training, though we spent most of our time in the middle east and 'Stan.' He looked thoughtful for a moment, 'I like Corsica. I was tempted to apply for French citizenship and buy an apartment in Port Vecchio, just me, a bar job and a scooter.'

'A scooter?' she repeated, a scornful note in her voice.

'Yeah,' he nodded, 'That's when I knew the plan wasn't going to work out.' He mouthed the word '*Scooter*' and gave a theatrical shiver.

'So you came home. And resumed your life of crime. Then you met Auntie Mads.'

'Pretty much. I got a mortgage on this place after I joined the legion, it was easier to launder the money I'd stashed through my Legion bank account, made it all legit. Then, when I left, I burgled a stately home owned by an Oligarch, I had enough to pay off the money owed.'

'You stole from an oligarch?'

'A small oligarch.'

'A smalligarch?'

He gave her a genuine smile. 'I was expecting maybe a pearl necklace or a gold cigarette case but I found over a half-million in a football kitbag.'

'That's all you found, huh?'

'Yeah. I took it, hid it for a couple of months, siphoned it through my Legion account, then paid this place off.'

'Who do you think owned the money?'

'Me,' he said.

He checked his phone.

'Message?'

He nodded, reading the text a second time.

'Who is it?' she asked.

'Just a girl.'

He put down his phone and picked up his drink.

'That is the strangest phone I've ever seen,' she said. 'It looks like a blacksmith tried to copy a Samsung from a sketch made by a blind man. Did your techie make that for you too?'

He nodded. They both looked up as a crowd of people entered the bar, laughing and shoving each other. Someone changed the music. In a stage whisper she said, 'There goes the neighbourhood,' picking up her glass for another swig, and he sat back, a smile on his face.

He waited until the noise had levelled off a little and asked her, 'What are you going to do at university?'

'Mum is a surgeon but she says her career is too demanding. She wants me to study something creative, intellectual, like Art History'

'Art has a history?'

She nodded.

'They study that at university?'

'Yes. We've had art as long as we've had history. The earliest cave dwellers painted pictures on the cave walls.'

'I didn't know you could study the history of art. What else do they do the history of?'

'Everything, I guess. Houses. Textiles. Motorcars. Glass.'

'The history of glass?'

She nodded.

The music on the jukebox changed. She listened for a moment, 'This is your era.'

'Thanks.' He thought for a moment, 'What do you want to do?'

'Study, or do?'

'What would be your choice, if it was up to you?' he clarified.

'Honestly?' She pushed closer to him, almost snuggling, 'I'd live with you, be your girl, get by on the profits of your criminal enterprises, bear your criminal children...' she paused, to see the effect of her words, and when she saw his expression she punched him on the arm, laughing, 'Do you believe everything I tell you?'

He laughed too. 'So, no history of glass?'

'Well, no. That is true.'

'So what *will* you do?'

'I really don't know,' she said truthfully.

'I read somewhere that if you want to know what someone will do when they're older, look at what their parents do.'

'So, Home Secretary or Surgeon.'

'So they say.'

'Was your dad a thief?'

He smiled a little, 'He might have been.' He turned to his glass, his face looked a little sad in profile, she thought. She looked out through the gaps between the frosted glass at the traffic passing by for a long while. When he didn't say any more she said, 'It's raining.'

His phone buzzed again and this time he ignored it. She stared at it for a while then said to him, 'If it's a girl, and she wants to see you, then I'm cramping your style.'

'You're not cramping your style,' he told her.

'I'm sleeping in your bed and eating your porridge.'

His phone buzzed again.

'Mama bear says phone home.'

'Ok, Goldilocks,' he said, picking it up, standing and leaving her there while he went outside to talk. When he returned there were two fresh glasses on the table.

That night, as they lay quietly on their mattresses he said, 'I have to go away for a few days. You'll be ok here by yourself?'

'Are you meeting your lady friend?'

'Work,' he said to the darkness.

'Stealing work or climbing work?'

'Probably some combination of the two.'

'I'll be fine.'

'Goodnight Rosemay.'

'Goodnight, Plus One.'

And the next morning when she woke he was gone.

*

After making herself a light breakfast she went out and bought some cleaning products and began to spruce up the Derelict. It took her two days to completely scour the place of dust and grime but when she was done she took a shower, she felt like she'd got to know the place. The third day she went food shopping and loaded up the cupboard and fridge-freezer with supplies.

The fifth day, she returned from a trip to Oxford Street, closed the door to the noise coming from the railway station across the road; it dimmed to almost silence. The Derelict had walls almost a foot thick, built in a time when substance equalled permanence. The place was almost sound-proof. She went to the kitchen area and began unloading the fresh groceries she'd bought.

'Hi.'

She shrieked and almost jumped into the air with shock, turning, she launched a slap at his face, which he caught, just, 'Hey, hey, it's me.'

'Christ, Julien!' she almost shouted, pulling away, her face flushed.

'You been shopping?' he asked and waited while she composed herself, looked at his feet, and when he asked her what she was looking for she said, 'I was wondering what you wear that makes you so silent.'

He was barefoot.

'I'll make you a cup of tea,' he said, easing past her.

She watched as he filled the kettle and placed it onto the element. 'Are you injured?' she asked after a moment.

He glanced down at his side, 'I fell.'

'You fell? I thought you were some amazing climber.'

'Even monkeys sometimes fall out of trees,' he said, dropping a teabag into each cup. He waited for the kettle to boil. 'Take a seat,' he said, motioning with his head, and she went and sat down on the sofa in the centre of the space. A minute later he came over with two cups of tea, sat down gingerly on the chair on the opposite side of the table to the sofa.

'Thankyou,' she said taking a drink with relish. He made good tea. She sat back on the sofa and studied him. He winced as he leaned forward to place his cup on the table. 'Ribs?' she asked?

'Short ribs, here,' he patted his right side tenderly.

'Both of them?'

She sat forward, concerned. 'Take off your t-shirt.'

He did, awkwardly, using his left arm. His right midsection was bruised purple and blue, a large dressing, well-taped, secured from spine to belly keeping everything in place. 'Christ. How painful is that?'

'Very.'

'You fell? What did you land on?'

'A baseball bat,' he said.

She stood and walked around the table, sat down beside him and took his chin in her hand and lifted his face to study it. 'Just checking your liver is still working,' she said in answer to his next question. Then she took his hands in turn and checked both sets of knuckles, which bore no blemishes. 'You should see the other guy,' he said. She finished his sentence, 'Not a mark on him,' and he smiled. He had beautiful eyes, she thought. No, it was his gaze, which was open and friendly. Welcoming. His face was nice, she'd give him an eight. His body, she'd give him a ten, resolving to take up climbing, if this was how lean and muscular you became. 'Put your t-shirt back on,' she told him. She walked over to the kitchen and filled a glass with water. 'You have painkillers?'

'Codeine. In the top drawer.'

'When did you take them last?'

'Two years ago.'

She popped two tablets from the silver-foil and took them and the water over to him. 'Have you eaten?'

'Not today.'

'Drink. Eat.'

She watched him as he did. Then she went over to the single bookshelf he had, against the back wall below the window, and picked up a book that lay half-open on the top shelf. She walked back to him, 'Sit still, give your body time to heal. Read this.'

'What is it?' he asked, glancing at the cover.

'It's your book.'

He shook his head, 'Been here since I moved in.'

'It was lying open.'

'I move the bookshelf every now and vacuum behind it. I must have dropped it, and put it back on top.'

'Read it.'

He studied the front. Then he read the blurb on the back. 'It's a chick-lit book,' he said. He shrugged to himself, winced, then turned to the first page and began reading, quietly.

An hour later she was cleaning one of the wooden chairs that were stacked in the far corner of the Derelict. Satisfied, she took it into the shower and returned without it. She looked to see him watching, 'You have no bath, so take a long shower.' He was about to say something when she interrupted, 'I bought a new switch for the shower heater. Take alternative long hot with short blasts of cold.'

'Why the cold?' he asked.

'Repayment for making me take cold showers for the past three weeks.'

'Ok,' he said.

'Got any more dressings?' she asked, and when he looked sheepish and said nothing she shook her head. 'I'll pop and get some fresh ones,' she told him.

She returned from shopping with a heavy bag: fresh dressings, painkillers, a rack of Guinness in glass bottles that she's heard helped people recover their strength. He was sitting on the sofa, zoned out, two codeine on an empty stomach will do that, she thought. She took off one bottle and put the rest in the fridge, cleaned the glass on that stood on the drainer, popped the bottle lid and poured half into the glass. She went over and placed it on the table. 'Drink this.'

'I don't like Guinness,' he said.

'It likes you. Drink.'

He picked up the glass and emptied half the glass.

'When you've finished it, go to bed, you look like shit, and not just your ribs.'

He nodded, refilled the glass from the bottle.

She went to the kitchen area, took out a couple of pans, and began cooking a meal. At some point she turned to look at him and he wasn't there, he'd already climbed the wooden ladder to the mezz. She could just make out his feet at the edge. She listened for his breathing, which was slow and steady. She poured two tins of beans into a pan, then a jar of chopped tomatoes, began to peel cloves of garlic and slice them up. Before she'd even considered what she was doing an hour had passed and she had been rewarded with a full pan of hot, spicy, garlic infused beans. It wasn't anything exceptional but it had lots of protein and when she tasted it she was rewarded with mouth-watering moreish flavours so that she had to fight hard not to eat half of it from the pan there and then.

She heard a noise and looked up.

Nothing.

She heard a noise again and realised it was the door, so she went to answer it.

It was a woman.

'Hi,' she said.

'Is he in?' She was small and quick with badly bleached hair. She made Rosemay feel over-large.

'Yes. He's not well.'

'Are you his nurse?' the woman asked, pushing past her and into the Derelict.

'Come in,' Rosemay said, closing the door and watching as the woman went to the mezz and clambered up the ladders. She looked over the top and stared at him before climbing back down, going over and plonking herself down on the sofa. 'What's wrong with him?' she asked.

'Got injured in a fall.'

'He was supposed to call me. Who're you?'

'I'm his ward,' she said after a moment's thought.

'His what?'

'He's looking after me. For the summer.'

'He's babysitting you?'

'Sort of.'

'Is that your mattress next to his?'

'Yes.'

'Cute. What'd he do in the fall?'

'Busted his side.' She didn't mention the bat. 'He's taken some strong painkillers, he's sleeping them off.'

'I'm Zoey,' the blond woman said.

'Rosemay.'

'Rose. May.'

Rosemay nodded.

'He was supposed to call me.'

'I'll tell him to call you when he wakes.'

'Will you?' Zoey's expression was suddenly vulnerable. She was quick, Rosemay thought, and it was a way of appearing tough. 'Do you mind if I smoke?' she asked, taking out a cigarette packet.

'Yes, actually.'

Zoey shrugged as though this was the expected, though still disappointing answer and shoved the packet back into her purse.

Rosemay took out her phone, 'Give me your number.'

'He's got it written down, somewhere.'

I bet he has, Rosemay thought.

The blonde stood, 'Tell him to call me,' she said. 'Zoey,' she added.

'I know.'

'Babysitting.'

'Kind of.'

She smiled, some sort of knowing, with a faint tinge of bitterness. 'Sounds like him.' Then she left. Rosemay walked her to the door and saw that she was taking the cigarettes back out even as stepped out through the portico door. It was raining. Zoey shook her head as she walked away into the rain, drawing deep on her lit cigarette.

Rosemay would have borrowed an umbrella and opened it first, before lighting a cigarette.

Zoey didn't seem to care as she walked away into the rainswept street. What had just happened?, Rosemay thought, closing the door to the rain and the cold. She went to the drawers and took out a sweatshirt, turned to a noise and saw Julien leaning over the mezz, hair askew.

'She gone?'

'Coward,' Rosemay said, looking up.

'I've known Zoey since we were kids,' he said, pronouncing her name Zoo-ey, 'But she's hard work and I'm tired.'

'Call her,' Rosemay said, her heart softening momentarily towards the brash, vulnerable Zoey walking through the rain, drawing deep on a cigarette.

'I will,' he said. His head disappeared again.

'Am I cramping your style?' she asked later, as they ate the bean stew.

He paused from chewing. 'Zoey?' and shook his head, 'No. We grew up together. Sort of. She went one way and I went another but we've always kept in touch.' He cleaned his plate with a slice of buttered bread. 'Nice stew.'

'She's a bit clattery,' Rosemay said.

He smiled to himself, 'She is that.'

'I like her.'

'No you don't. You think she's vulnerable. Beneath that slightly chaotic, *clattery* exterior is an extremely calculating person. She's nails.'

'That's her thing? The swiftness, the impatience?'

'You wouldn't believe how many people fall for it.'

'Did you?'

'Yes. When I was thirteen.'

'And now.'

'Now? She's a penance.'

'That's a little sneery,' she said. 'A little bit smug.'

'I don't mean it that way,' he said, standing. 'I have a love for her that goes back to us both being small and sharing a lack of family. But it's like loving a feral cat. You want to stroke it but you know you're going to get scratched.'

'You talk like she *is* family.'

'For a long time she was all I had.'

'And then?'

'The Legion. Then Perfect adopted me.'

'And now you have me,' she said.

'Do I?' His eyes crinkled into a smile. 'I'm not sure the Home Secretary would approve.'

'He'd be glad I was with someone who didn't...'

He caught her eye. 'Don't think I don't want to, Farm Girl, but I'm,' he paused, 'Well...'

'My last boyfriend was older than you,' she said.

'You told me.'

She put down her plate. 'He had concussion, you know. He needed reconstructive surgery on his hand. He'll never play guitar again.'

'He couldn't play guitar before.'

'Would you like to tell me what happened?' she was angry now, a swift transition to an old wound. 'Or better still, don't. I know why you did it. He insulted you.'

He picked up her plate. 'Finished?'

She turned away from him as he took the plates to the sink. She heard him washing up. She heard him scrubbing the pan.

After a while he brought her a cup of tea, asked her, 'Is this our first row?'

'Yes,' she said, looking sullen.

'A barmaid?'

They were sitting in Green Park, Rosemay had an ice cream cone that was threatening to melt on her skirt. She nodded. He couldn't see her eyes through her sunglasses.

'At the Artful?'

'I started last Friday. Just for two weekends, 'til the regular girl returns.' She went over to the waste bin and threw in the cone, licking her fingers as she sat back down. 'You were away. I was bored.'

He nodded, eyes closed now, basking in the sunshine.

'How're your ribs?'

'Sore,' he said.

'Sunshine is good. Vitamin D.'

'I'm trying.'

'Take off your t-shirt and let the sun at your lily-white skin,' she said.

He sighed and did what she said, revealing a lean, well-defined torso and a bruised side mostly covered by the dressing she'd put on him this morning. 'It's too hot. I'll get sunburnt.'

'I'll time you. Fifteen minutes. And take deep breaths, even if it's painful. If you don't give your lungs a workout, you'll get pneumonia.'

'Who taught you medicine?'

'Stop whinging.' She said, staring forward across the park from behind dark lenses. After a while she said, 'That statue.'

'Diana?'

'The goddess of the hunt,' she said. 'And her dogs. It's a rubbish piece of work.'

'Hark the art historian.'

'Hark?' she repeated. 'What are you, Shakespearian?' she glanced across at him, sitting with his eyes closed in the sunshine. 'It makes her look small and puny. She was a huntress. She was relentless, pitiless, she hunted and killed. She'd be tough and muscular, she'd have strong legs, and arms and shoulders like a bodybuilder; she was an Olympian.' She snorted, 'That thing doesn't do her justice, it makes her look like a child, weak and smooth.'

'You're on a rant,' he said, eyes still closed.

'Sugar anger.'

'You just ate an ice cream cone.' He opened one eye. 'Should we go for lunch?'

'Not yet.' She looked at her watch. 'In an hour. Let's enjoy the sun.'

He took a slow deep breath. 'Anyway, she wouldn't have been heavily muscled. She was a hunter, used a bow. She'd be lean and wiry, not heavy.'

He pulled on his t-shirt and stood, she stood too, straightened her skirt and top, and they walked out of Green Park and along Piccadilly, taking a right turn along St. James and then another right along Park Place until they entered a small courtyard. Rosemay read the sign, 'The Overseas Club. Very exclusive.'

They walked past the doorman and up the steps, into a dark lobby of polished wood, leather upholstery and discreet lighting. Julien went to the counter and signed in. 'How'd they let you join this club?' she asked, then answered her own question, 'Of course. Aunt Mads. Perfect.'

He raised the slightest of smiles as they walked through the restaurant towards the garden, where a waiter showed them to a table. 'I thought we'd drink some wine, enjoy England in August.'

Her eyes lit up. 'I can't imagine anything more wonderful than sitting at a garden table in a private club in London in August.'

He studied her, 'Are you being a touch sarcastic, Rosemay?'

'I'm being sincere. This place is lovely. And the company is,' she paused, 'Most acceptable.'

At that moment, the waiter brought them a wine list and they chose a decent summer red.

Julien gave her an appraising look. 'You're not the girl I thought you were.'

She raised her eyebrows a little, 'You mean I'm not a spoiled, out-of-touch, posh girl?'

'Well, you're all that,' he conceded, and she reached across and slapped his arm playfully, but he continued, 'But you're quick. And you're capable.'

She sat back. 'I will take those as positive attributes.'

'And you're beautiful.'

'Really?' she blushed, for once, lost for words.

'I didn't realise at first,' he said. 'But you are.' He sat back, eyes resting on her, a pleased look on his face. 'And it's been a pleasure to have you stay with me.'

A mischievous look spread across her face. 'Is this preamble a nice way to tell me you're throwing me out?'

He laughed as the waiter brought the wine, uncorked it. Julien motioned for Rosemay to test the wine, she took a sip, nodded and the waiter poured, leaving them with a full glass each and a half bottle between them on the table. She said, 'I really wouldn't know a good wine from a bad.'

He looked around the tables, glanced up at the sky, then back to Rosemay. 'Neither would I.'

'What were you looking at?'

'The things that make this wine good.' He lifted his glass and drank a third, placing the glass back down on the table. 'The surroundings. The weather. You.'

She took another drink. 'Should we eat?'

'Not yet.'

'Are you trying to get me drunk, Mr. Trent?'

'If that's all I was trying to do I'd take you to the Artful and watch you drink four pints of lager.'

'What then?'

'I'm showing you London. I'm enjoying being with a beautiful woman in a private club.'

'Very James Bond.'

'Very,' he said.

She settled. He saw her do it. A sort of softening of her posture, a shiver as she sat back in her chair, a pleasant expression that drifted across her face. Her mind opening to options and thoughts and possibilities.

'Which Bond girl am I?' she asked.

'Vesper Lynd,' he said without hesitation.

'The girl he loves. He thinks he doesn't but he does really.'

He nodded. 'Yes.'

'But she dies.'

'Try not to do that,' he said, pouring them both a second glass of red.

'He's incapable of loving someone who is real,' she said. 'The girl must be an icon. A beloved memory, then he can adore her without having let down his guard.'

He nodded.

'It's not me,' she said. 'You're fond of me but I'm not your Vesper. I'm your Tiffany Case.'

This time he smiled, 'You are the only girl I've ever known who knows the James Bond movies.'

'Novels,' she corrected. 'Daddy is a fan. I think before he became Home Secretary he thought MI6 was full of James Bonds. And then he discovered it sort of is.'

'Doctor Perfect.'

She nodded. 'So who is *your* Vesper, Julien?'

'Let's drink wine,' he said, 'Whoever you are, Miss Case, Miss Ryder, Miss *Draco*. The day is young.' And this reminder of the first time they met made her laugh out loud.

'Hey,' she said, suddenly, midway through their second bottle of wine. The couples and groups at other tables had changed some, but the sun still shone and bees buzzed amongst the flowers.

'What?'

'I just remembered,' and she reached down for her bag, stuffed beneath the table. She withdrew a buff envelope, 'It has my name on it,' she said proudly, 'Redirected from home. I should have got it last week.'

'What is it?' he asked.

'Exam results,' she said. 'Should I open it and find out how I did?'

He frowned, 'Are you nervous?'

She smiled brightly, 'I'm a very intelligent girl.'

'Go one then.'

She peeled back the glued tab and took out a sheet, scanned it quickly, her frown deepening, and his heart sunk a little, but then she smiled, and replaced the sheet back in the envelope and replaced that in her bag. 'Straight As,' she said.

The look of satisfaction on her face told him something, though he wasn't sure what. 'You expected all As?'

'Of course.'

'I thought you spent your time hanging around with rock musicians.'

'I studied while he was onstage, or asleep, or drunk or drugged, which was most of the time.

I'm not *stupid*!' She put the sheet back in the envelope and slid it back into her bag. She sat back. 'I think we should celebrate.'

'As opposed to what?' he asked, nodding towards the empty and half-empty bottle of wine.

'I'll think of something.'

He poured them both a refill, emptying the bottle. 'Let's fill our glasses to celebrate Rosemay Pepper winning her exams.'

'You don't *win*!' she said, laughing. You study, you take the examination and you get a grade.'

'Seems like winning to me,' he said. He raised his glass and she did the same, and both smiled. She studied him carefully over the top of her glass and he noticed, 'What?'

'You ever taken an exam?'

'Not at school. Stopped going when I was thirteen. Took tests in the legion.'

'But you are literate and stuff?' She looked worried.

'I can do my capital letters and everything M'Lady,' he said with a comic-book cockney accent and a wide-eyed, guileless expression, causing her to giggle. 'So what's your plan?' he asked when she'd recovered, 'Now the exam board has agreed with you that you're very intelligent.'

'Medical school in September.'

'Doctor Pepper.'

She laughed again, so quickly she splashed her wine on the table and then choked on what was left in her mouth. A waiter was in attendance, handing her a pack of tissues, very quickly. Too quickly. Julien leaned forward when she was cleaned up, 'I get the feeling they'd like us to go.'

'We can't upset the Overseas Club,' she whispered conspiratorially, leaning forward too,

'We'll get blackballed.'

And then, mid-table, mid-conversation, they were too close. They kissed. It was tiny, brief, and mutual. She sat back, 'Oo-er, Plus One,' she whispered, 'That wasn't supposed to happen.'

He looked taken aback too. 'It wasn't, was it.'

He thought of Perfect's note: *don't break her*. She'd been fully aware of the dangers of asking him to babysit an attractive eighteen-year-old whose parents were going through an acrimonious divorce.

'Don't look too stunned,' she said. 'I might think you didn't like it.'

'It was lovely,' he said. 'Shall we go?'

She put on a worried look, 'Spilling wine, snogging at the table, we'd better had.'

He asked for the bill and paid. Then they left the Overseas Club and walked back along towards Piccadilly. The wine and the sunshine was getting to them both. 'I feel a bit woozy,' she said.

'Me too. It's nice.'

'You don't strike me as someone who "let's go" very often, Plus One.'

He grinned. She had him vectored in. 'Should I "let go" Rosemay Pepper?'

She looked thoughtful, 'Probably not a successful long-term plan for a free climber. But maybe just this once.'

He wrapped his arm round her waist and dragged her in close as they walked, and she gave a small shriek, followed by laughter. 'I've got something to show you when we get home,' he said.

'You going to show me your etchings, Plus One?'

He grinned again, being with her was very easy, he thought. 'Yes,' he said. 'In a way.'

The derelict felt cold after a day spent in sunshine, and she shivered. He put his arm around her and she leaned in and held him tight. 'So what have you got to show me,' she whispered, her mouth close to his ear. He leaned back to shove the door closed as she went to kiss him, 'Oops,' she said, with a giggle, and he peeled away and went to fetch a box that had arrived by courier a couple of days earlier. 'I meant to ask you what that was,' she said, as he took a small folding knife from his pocket and slit the tape that held it shut. She watched as he opened the lid and took out what appeared to be a very large pair of spectacles. 'VR?' 'Yes,' he said, coming back to her. 'You wanted to know what I experience when I'm climbing, so I got Link, my techie friend, to upload some footage to these. You can see what I see.'

She pushed the glasses to one side, leaned in and kissed him softly on the mouth. 'I'm drunk,' she said. 'But don't let that stop you taking advantage of me.'

He was a little drunk too. 'Try them on,' he said, slipping the headset onto her head and over eyes.

'I can't see,' she whispered.

'Press the button on the left side,' he told her.

She reached up and pushed the button. 'After a moment she whispered, 'I can see sky.'

'Look down.'

A pause. 'Whoaa,' she said, 'What the fuck?'

'That's the view from the Shanghai Tower I was about fifty yards from the top, so my feet were about six hundred and twenty-five metres from the ground.'

She gave a little shriek, whether of excitement or fear, he couldn't tell. 'Fuck!' she said, her voice too loud. 'It's terrifying.'

'Look up,' he told her, and she did. 'That's where I was climbing up to.'

'There's nothing to hold onto.'

'I know. I had to jump across. Look to the left.' She glanced left, he could see she was nervous even though her eyes were covered by the eye shields. She looked down, then up, then to the side. 'Don't look around too much, he told her, 'You'll get vertigo,' but, as he watched her head jerk back and forward, up and down, he could tell she was in a tailspin.

'Julien,' she said, 'It's too high. I'm scared!'

'You'll be fine, stop looking up and down, look straight ahead.'

'I can't stop.' She was glancing left and right, up and down, her body language registering real fear. He reached for the button to switch off the VR, thinking that maybe after drinking a bottle of wine each, it was the wrong time to show her what it looked like hanging from a glass tower two-thousand feet above the ground. Even beneath the eye shields, her face had gone pale, lips were tinged with blue. He pressed the off button even as she tore off the

headset, retching. Leaning forward, one hand supporting herself against his ribcage, and puked all over his shoes.

*

'Coffee?'

She woke with a thick head, 'What time is it?'

'Almost ten.'

'Shit,' she hated sleeping late. She sat up and immediately wished she hadn't as her head began thumping. Rolling from beneath her quilt she clambered quickly down the stepladders, somehow managing to pass Julien, and ran barefoot across the concrete floor of the derelict and into the toilet.

He heard her puking into the toilet bowl and went over to the kitchen area and half-filled a glass with ice, then cracked open a can of coke he took from the fridge and topped up the glass. He waited until the puking noises ended, he heard the noise of running water, and then, a few moments passed before she emerged and walked unsteadily across the floor and sat down heavily on the sofa. He walked over to her and put the glass down on the table. After sitting, head back, eyes closed, for a long while, she opened her eyes and sat up. Then she picked up the glass and drank greedily. He left her to her glass of coke and went over to the kitchen area and put two slices of bread into the toaster, filled the kettle and switched it on.

'The puke plan diet,' she said. 'If nothing else, I feel slim.'

He smiled a little, 'Not sustainable in the long run,' he said.

'I knew some girls at school who would argue otherwise.' She picked up the slice of toast and took a tentative bite. She looked up at him, 'Did I embarrass myself last night?'

'No.'

'What a lightweight,' she said. 'Less than two bottles of red and I'm puking all night.'

'It might have been the VR.'

She paled, 'Don't even *mention* those to me, I can't bear to think of it.' She shuddered. 'I've got the horrors.'

'Finish your toast and tea. Go back to bed,' he said. 'I'll bring you another coke.'

Julien,' she said quietly, 'Did we...?'

'No,' he said, equally as quietly.

'Did I try...'

'You behaved impeccably,' he said.

'And so did you,' she said.

'We were both above reproach.'

She pulled a sad smile, 'I'm not sure whether that makes me happy. Being chaste isn't all it's cracked up to be.'

'Having you puke on my shoes isn't the greatest aphrodisiac,' he told her with a touch of smile in his voice.

'Oh Christ,' she muttered to herself, looking down at the floor, her skin flushing red.

'Back to bed,' he said, his voice brighter, purposeful. 'Sleep it off.'

'Dear Christ,' she said, 'I am so fucking *mortified*,' and without looking at him, she took herself off to the mezz, climbed the ladders and slid onto bed. He heard her voice shout, 'On

your shoes?' from beneath the quilt, and then she groaned, turned over and he heard not another sound until she woke some hours later.

Around midday she rose from beneath her quilt and looked down to where he sat, messaging someone on his phone. He glanced up and smiled, 'Want a late breakfast?'

'Are you cooking?' she asked, her mouth thick with the taste of hangover and bile.

'Or we can go out.'

'No drinking,' she whispered, falling back onto her mattress where she lay for some minutes before rising again, clambering down the ladders, grabbing her clothes bag and making towards the shower. She felt unaccountable angry. The wooden ladders up to the mezz bed and the concrete floor or the Derelict didn't seem to cool when you were in bare feet and still vaguely hungover. She emerged from the shower fifteen minutes later to the smell of breakfast. He was heaping scrambled egg onto toast. 'Hungry?' he asked.

'I am now,' she said, leaning in close to the smell of breakfast, her mood clearing. She was aware that he smelled nice too, a mix of soap and coffee.

'Sit down and I'll bring it over,' he told her and she went over to the sofa and sat down. He brought her a tray containing a heaped plate of scrambled eggs on toast and a mug of coffee.

'This is unexpected,' she said.

'I don't cook much, but scrambled eggs are my speciality.' The eggs were lightly dusted in black pepper. 'Eat.'

She ate. He joined her a moment later with a large mug of coffee. 'Not eating?' she asked between mouthfuls.

'Had mine earlier.'

He sat and watched her as she ate her breakfast. When she was halfway through she paused and said, 'Last night.'

'What about it?'

'No, that was my *last* night. My last night here.'

'Oh?'

'I need to go home and get prepared for uni. It begins in a fortnight.'

'Ok.'

She ate the rest of her eggs, then the toast, then washed it down with the coffee. 'I should have said earlier. Short notice.'

'You only just got your grades, it's all good.'

'You sure?'

'Yes.' He smiled again. 'It's been fun, having you here, doing the tourist stuff, seeing the sights.'

She said, 'It's been lovely, Plus One. *You've* been lovely.' She put down her knife and fork, her gaze gentle and thoughtful. 'I know I'm just eighteen, and you're thirty. But in twelve years I'll be thirty and you'll, you'll be in your prime. Twelve years is a lot now but...'

'You're going to university for six years.'

'Only three miles away. We could be a couple.'

'We could. But your life will change, you'll need to focus on other things.'

'And Aunt Mads would kill you.'

'Possibly. But I'd risk her anger.'

Would you?'

'Yes, I would.' He stayed quiet for a long moment. Finally he said, 'You have a whole new life ahead of you,' he said, 'A different life - new people, new experiences, new horizons, and you don't need me holding you back.'

'You wouldn't hold me back.'

He nodded. 'Yes, I would.'

'Would I hold you back, Plus One?'

He smiled, it was slow arriving but it was sincere. 'I travel, but you would never get in my way. Anyway,' his expression became a little more serious, 'You have a key for the Derelict, birthday-girl. Keep it. You can crash any time, what's mine is yours.'

'Thankyou.'

'Try not to bring too many hooray friends though,' he said.

'You don't like hooray friends?'

'I'm not keen on crowds.'

'Ok.' She stood. 'I thought I could pack and then maybe we could go out for a couple of hours. I'll get a train this afternoon.'

'Sounds like a plan.'

'Med school,' she said.

'Saving lives,' he said. 'Not a bad career choice.'

'But no romance for us,' she said.

He shook his head, 'Sadly no.' There was an ease between them, he thought and wondered, and not for the first time, if a certain level of unhappiness was a precondition for romantic love.

'Really?' there was a faint suggestion of pleading in her voice.

'You're smart, funny, and gorgeous,' he said. 'But sadly, you're not meant for me.'

'No more bad girl,' she said with a sigh. 'It never suited me, to be honest.' She stood and went over to where her clothes were neatly stacked on a shelf and began picking them up and refolding them, stacking them in two piles. 'Who was that on the phone?' she asked.

'Work,' he said.

The Civil Servant

Climbing at night.

Dead air. Weather-dusted glass. Snug in a pocket of shade, making his way up the narrow glass-walled cleft.

The glass was secured granite-tight to the superstructure and only by wedging his foot into the gap between panes and then twisting it was he able to keep a secure a hold. Dawn was an hour away but the sky in the east was already fading from black to midnight blue, and now it was fading to pale blue at the edges; the building was revealing itself. He could see much clearer now that the route-plan was wrong, he was supposed to be able to work around the viewing platform using a narrow gap between the panes of glass, but the gap had been sealed for around four feet from the bottom. Leaving him with no handholds, just sheer, poured concrete, and that he was faced with a climb-back of nearly three hundred feet to a window that he knew was left unlocked, and the chance to try again another time, or a risky fingertip traverse of fifty feet to the short ledge, from which he could belly up twenty feet of sloped decorative stonework and regain his path. There was no way he'd climb back down, he knew that much about himself, and the glass panes were on a cant of around 5 degrees off vertical, which would take some of the weight from his wrists and allow him to use what was left of the grippy soles of his soft climbing shoes to get some purchase.

Except that at this point the gap between the windows widened to the point where he could no longer wedge in a foot, and the glass was smoothly embedded into the aluminium frame and the fingertip gap was three feet above his arms. So it was climbdown or jump four feet, and hope to jam a couple of fingers into the gap long enough to get a decent grip. He rated his chances at fifty/fifty. Not good odds, but there was no way he was climbing back down. The sun would be on the glass in less than forty minutes and it would begin to expand. The foot-sized gaps would shrink as the building expanded, and he'd slide, then fall. He paused to catch his breath, calm his heartrate. Four feet upwards is a reasonable jump, but from a dead-start, and from a precarious foothold, it was tough. He decided to go for it, now, pushed off, his feet scrabbling against the rough concrete that tore at the soles of his shoes, his arms stretching upwards, his fingers reaching, reaching...

He placed the freshly-made cup of tea on the table in front of her. She looked up and said, 'I read something once, a phrase: "In the shadow of silence." it reminds me of you.'

He frowned, half smiled, 'Is that a compliment?'

'Observation.' She looked around. 'Your charge has gone?'

'She left last week.'

She pursed her lips. He could see the faintest lines around the edges of her mouth. 'You've applied for a new passport. You're planning on going abroad again.'

'Yes.' He didn't see any point in lying. She had eyes everywhere.

'You're going to climb that building.' She reached for her tea and took a sip.

'No one has climbed it,' he said.

'Alain Robert climbed it in '11.'

'Spiderman used ropes,' he said, thinking, she'd done her homework.

'If you try without ropes, you'll die,' she said. 'And because I know you'll do it anyway, and because I don't want you rotting in a Saudi prison or glossing Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Boulevard with your blood and spinal fluid, I've cancelled your passport.'

'You have?'

'And put you on the priority watchlist, here, and in Saudi. So don't try sneaking out of the country.'

He closed his laptop.

'Let's celebrate,' she told him.

'Celebrate what?'

'The home secretary's daughter begins medical school in a week. And you didn't break her.'

'She's tougher than she looks.'

She looked at him pityingly, 'Oh Julien, you really are rather dense.' Then she took a calming breath, 'But admittedly very useful, as well as dashing and handsome.'

'You offering me another weekend away?' he grinned.

'Do be quiet,' she said, taking a file from her briefcase. 'I have work for you. Lincoln has been brought up to date and she's arranged the details. Simon is fully read-in and on standby if you need him.'

'For what?'

'Anything.'

'Anything,' he repeated, savouring the word.

'All you have to do is get in and collect a small thing.'

'Collect,' he said

'Yes.'

'A small thing.'

'Yes.' She handed him the file. 'It's all in here.'

'Timeline?' he asked.

'Before Thursday.'

'It's Monday. So that means either Tomorrow or Wednesday, which is cutting it short.'

She looked around the Derelict. 'That's why you get the big bucks.'

He sat alone at a table towards the back of the room, he could see the entire band, the stage, the bar and the patrons.

It wasn't busy.

But the band were excellent, not so much jazz, as advertised, more a driving funk, and instead of the usual litany of soloists taking their turn, the band played as one unit, occasionally one would take a step forward and blow up some chaos, but mostly it was groove. Big groove. A groove that was driven by the rhythm section, a big black guy on drums and a slender mixed-race girl playing a bass guitar that seemed a size too large for her, her hands stretching impossibly as she ran up and down the fretboard, digging deep into the pocket created by the drummer.

As another song ended, he went to the bar for second drink, catching the bass player's eye on the way, she gave him a slight smile of half attention as she focused down on her instrument. He ordered a long red wine and a gin and tonic with extra ice, placing the G&T on a table by the bass amp as he returned to his own table. He checked his watch, quarter to ten.

At twenty past ten he left the basement, walked upstairs to Pizza Express and climbed into the Uber that was waiting for him. Simon glanced in the driver's mirror. 'We good?' He nodded. Simon pushed the lever into drive and they set off, taking a meandering route across town, a grey route, supplied by Perfect, that avoided almost every CCTV camera. In a country with more CCTV than any country on earth except North Korea, no route was completely black, but grey was good enough. Simon pulled up to a stop outside the Queens Arms. They hadn't spoken at all during the drive. Julien wasn't yet ready to get chatty. He pulled on a dark red baseball cap, zipped his reefer jacket as he got out and walked away without a sound.

He walked along Queen's Gate Mews, former stables for the horses of rich folk in the big houses opposite, now converted to multi-million pound cottages in exclusive streets. He crossed the narrow lane as he approached the right-turn, stepping one-two onto a plant pot and then a wheelie-bin, and then he was pushing himself over the wall, rolling across the flat roof, and rising to a smart stroll towards the rear wall of the building, hitting the drainpipe and swarming up in two, three steps, leaning across and placing one foot on the sloping, slate-tile roof, then three paces up the edge 'til he got to the sash window. He paused, counted to three, then slid open the window. Perfect had told him the building was empty, the occupier at some state function, the rear window unlocked. He slid through the window and rolled to a stand, finding himself in a small washroom. He paused to listen, looked back to see if anyone was looking up at the route he had taken into this building. A route that had taken him twelve seconds, including the pause at the window. After waiting in the dark quietly, listening to the house, he decided he couldn't hear any movement, so he quietly opened the door and stepped out onto the half-landing. Light streamed in from the streetlamp outside. He walked the short staircase to the second floor.

The first room was empty. Bare wood boards, no furniture, dusty lace curtains hanging limp at the window. The second room no better. Bare boards and an old sofa covered in a sheet. He lifted the sheet, moved the cushions, nothing. He wasn't about to slide his fingertips into the depths of the sofa to search.

Not yet.

There were four rooms on this floor. All empty. These buildings were valued in the tens of millions and, he suspected, many of them were standing empty just like this one, quietly accumulating value for people who didn't need the money. He left the fourth and final room, and climbed the stairs to the third floor, taking care not to slide his fingertips along the bannister. He was wearing latex gloves, but the less physical evidence the better. Rather make it look like the item had been mislaid than make a burglary the obvious conclusion. There were three doors on this floor and a staircase to the fourth floor. He opened the door of the first room and entered. This one was furnished, carpeted, there were paintings on the wall. He wondered briefly if the owner was having the floors below decorated, then he paused to stare at a man sitting at the chair by the desk who was pointing a gun at him. It was a Sig P226 pistol. Government-issue, usually calibre 9mm, though it wasn't unknown for it to be .40 or even .357, which was a particularly nasty calibre. But whatever the calibre, he didn't want to find out how any of them felt.

'Hello,' the man said.

'Hello,' he said.

'Would you like to sit down?' the man motioned towards a chair. He didn't want to sit down, any attempt to move quickly would be hampered by the large chair that offered a soft,

comfortable embrace, but he was too far to dive for the door, or the gun. 'I'm asking nicely,' the man said, 'But it isn't a request.'

He sat down.

The chair was indeed soft and comfortable. He settled back. From here he couldn't escape a bullet, so he thought he'd see what happened next. He had nothing to say at this point, so he stayed quiet as the man studied him.

'Are you with the Russians?' the man asked.

'No.'

'But you're an assassin.'

He shook his head, 'Thief.'

The man absorbed this. 'You didn't expect me to be here.'

'Bad intel.'

The man studied him. He had sharp, intelligent eyes and a firm grasp of the pistol, though he wasn't ex-army. A spook, he thought. The man was obviously thinking along similar lines.

'You're from over the river.'

It wasn't a question.

Julien didn't respond.

'So am I, originally. Until things went tits-up.'

'They will do that,' Julien said.

'You know about it?'

'No. But I know about tits-up. That's why I'm sitting here and you have the gun.'

The man smiled. 'You know what you're after?'

'Yes. A hard drive.'

The man put the gun on the desk. Six inches from his hands. Twelve feet from Julien. The man looked at him, 'Are you tempted?'

'Not even a little bit.'

'A burglar.'

Julien nodded.

'Ex-army?'

'Legion.'

'Aah. A cosmopolitan thief.'

'Corsica and Afghanistan. Not quite the social influencer.'

'But you work out of the Lego building.'

'Peripatetic,' Julien said.

'An educated thief,' the man observed. Then his eyes lit up a little, 'You're with one of Perfect's mobs.'

'One of them?' Julien asked.

'She has a few, you know. Did you think you were special?'

'I did, a bit.'

'She has that effect,' the man said. 'Waifs and strays with skills. That's her MO. Put 'em together and put 'em to work. 'Til they're no more use, of course.'

'Of course,' Julien said.

'Do you like music?' the man said, abruptly.

'I was just at Pizza Express.'

'Indeed? Good, was it?'

'The band were excellent. The crowd, disappointing.'

The man nodded, leaned over and pressed a button on his phone. From a sound system somewhere came the quiet opening bars of an old jazz piece.

'Equinox,' Julien said. 'Coltrane.'

'You like it?'

'It's a spiritual.'

'You *are* an educated,' the man said.

Julien felt the man needed someone to talk to. 'I'm dating a musician,' he began but the man looked away, staring into the darkness beyond the table lamp. There were a few moment's silence and it seemed to Julien that the man was thinking something through. Eventually he looked back at Julien. 'It's in the drawer over there,' and he pointed at a dresser against the far wall.

Julien stood, tentatively, then went to the dresser, slipped open a drawer and took out a black hard-drive in a cellophane bag. He turned to the man who nodded towards the door. 'Take it and go,' he said. 'It's of no further use to me.'

'What are you going to do?' Julien asked.

'I've got the gun,' the man said. 'I ask the questions.'

Julien made to leave and the man spoke again. 'Madeline Perfect,' he said, his voice quiet and even. 'Don't trust her, thief. You're on a wheel right now, and you'll keep rolling and you'll think everything is fine, but then the wheel will turn too far and you'll find yourself beneath the water. And Madeline Perfect will *not* be there to pull you out.'

'What about you?' Julien asked.

'Too late for me,' the man said and waved the gun towards the door, dismissing Julien, then looked away into the darkness.

Julien closed the door behind him and walked quickly down the three flights of stairs to the main hall, opened the heavy front door and stepped out between white marble pillars and down marble steps onto Queen's Gate Terrace. He pulled out his cap and tugged it low on his head, avoided glancing up at the white terrace that reared above him, turned right and walked towards the junction with Gloucester Road. He paused outside of Partridges and took out his phone, called Simon, who arrived five minutes later.

He climbed in.

'What happened?' Simon asked, spooked by this change of pick-up point.

'Nothing,' Julien said.

'You get it?'

He nodded, leaned forward and passed the hard-drive to Simon, who slotted it beneath his seat.

Simon nodded and pulled away into the traffic. 'All good?' he asked.

'All good,' Julien said. 'Drop me back at Pizza Express, will you?'

'You a music fan?' Simon said, and turned on the radio.

'Got a date,' Julien said as the car drove them through London, tracing a route with a dearth of CCTV cameras. Rain spotted the window as they crossed Piccadilly Circus, passing St. Anne's, taking a left along Dean Street.

By the time the car stopped the rain was heavy. He threw the baseball cap onto the back seat, unzipped his reefer and took it off. Beneath the coat he was wearing a dark jersey sweater and a white t-shirt. Along with his dark jeans and Converse he looked like every other thirty-ish male within two square miles, to a passer-by he might probably be a

photographer or a video designer or a literary agent, not a free-climbing thief who worked for a quasi-governmental organisation.

He got out and shut the door of the Uber, watched as Simon's car pulled away and turned right towards Soho Square and into the night. Standing in the rain outside of Pizza Express he could hear the faint noise of music coming from below. If he was lucky they'd be staying on, doing a third, late set, maybe some kind of jam that would go on into the night. Running his hand through damp hair he opened the door and pushed inside, showed the ink stamp on his wrist to the girl at the top of the stairs, walked down and into the venue, which was no more full than it had been earlier. He walked to his still-empty table and sat down. A moment later a waitress brought him a tall red wine and he glanced at the bass player, who looked his way mid-groove and smiled a little.

He closed his eyes. Relaxed.

Let go.

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